

The Sublime Object of Slavoj Žižek

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Myers, Tony. *Slavoj Žižek*. London: Routledge, 2003 (pp 166). ISBN 0415262658.

Kay, Sarah. *Žižek: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003 (pp 205). ISBN 0745622089.

Parker, Ian. *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pluto Press, 2004 (pp 179). ISBN 0745320716.

Sharpe, Matthew. *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real*. Hants, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2004 (pp 281). ISBN 0754639185.

Boucher, Geoff, Jason Glynos and Matthew Sharpe, eds. *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*. Hants, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2005 (pp 286). ISBN 0754651924.

Slavoj Žižek is irrepressible. He continues to produce at least two books a year in English and may well have just published what will become his *magnum opus*, *The Parallax View* (MIT Press, 2006). The secondary literature on Žižek has also now begun to emerge at an astonishing rate. As I was reading for this review, another monograph appeared, Jodi Dean's *Žižek's Politics* (Routledge, 2006), and at least two more volumes of critical essays are in press to my knowledge. This is not to mention the launch of an international journal of Žižek studies and the release of a documentary *Žižek!* (Astra Taylor, 2005), which, with no apparent sense of irony, gives Žižek the full rock star treatment. If there is a thread that draws together these introductions, including Dean's monograph that I will not discuss further here, and the volume of critical essays, with the exception of Ian Parker's book, it is that Žižek's extraordinarily seductive synthesis of Lacanianism, Hegelianism and Marxism - filtered through the lens of popular culture - is

pressed into the service of a coherent and consistent political project. As Sarah Kay puts it on the opening page of her introduction, “At the core of Žižek’s work is a vigorous reactivation of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the service of a project at once political and philosophical” (1). It is also this very question of Žižek’s politics that all the critics under review (with the exception of Tony Myers) find most problematic about his work and therefore I will focus upon this thread in my own assessment.

Žižek - *sui generis*

Myers’s volume for the Routledge Critical Thinkers series is aimed explicitly at the undergraduate market and provides a first step into the work of the particular theorist rather than an exhaustive study. The RCT volumes all have the same format, with a “why study this thinker?” introduction followed by a series of chapters on “Key Ideas.” Myers’s book addresses Žižek’s influences (Hegel, Marx and Lacan), the notion of the subject, postmodernity, ideology, sexual difference and fantasy. In such a restricted format as this, one can always find areas that one thinks should have been included or expanded and other areas that should have been dropped. For example, Žižek is presented here as some kind of postmodern thinker drawing on the work of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, whereas he is extremely critical of the work of both and has spent an inordinate amount of time writing against the notion of postmodernity. If Žižek draws anything from the present “postmodern” conjuncture, it is the idea of cynical reason, but this is mentioned only in passing in the chapter on postmodernism. In saying this, however, one needs to read these volumes in the light of their intended market and Myers covers most of his chosen ground fluently and accessibly, introducing such difficult concepts as Hegel’s notion of the subject as the “night of the world” and Lacan’s theory of sexuation.

The RCT volumes include a section of further reading which students can follow up if interested. Myers rather disappointingly only includes Žižek’s own work in this section and none of the critical material that was available at the time of publication. There is something symptomatic about this concerning the reception of Žižek in the Anglo-American academy and the way his work is now being deployed. Žižek tends to be read (and here Parker is the exception again) in a very decontextualized way; he is read only insofar as he engages with the present concerns of US and Western European intellectuals, for example, his interest in US popular culture or his polemics against identity politics. In terms of his own intellectual formation

and politics, critics take Žižek at his own word and, more detrimentally, as the final word on the recent politics of Eastern Europe. Myers repeats these errors, especially the personalizing and individualizing of what is always fundamentally a collective history. Thus we read about Žižek's failure to get an academic job in the early 1970s because "the authorities were concerned that the charismatic teaching of Žižek might improperly influence students with his dissident thinking" (7). It was certainly the case that Žižek did not get an academic job in the early 70s, but many other intellectuals, artists, film-makers and academics also did not get jobs or lost their positions and had to leave Yugoslavia following the clampdown after the Croatian Spring of 1971. Žižek was part of a student and intellectual movement in the late 60s that challenged the very foundations of the federal republic with calls for greater democracy and liberalization, and the state backlash against this movement would sow the seeds for the subsequent conflicts and wars of succession in Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 90s.

Does this matter? Only if we are interested in Žižek's politics as a form of "praxis" (Myers's choice of word) and not just as a theoretical and philosophical intervention. If, as Kay argues, the impetus behind Žižek's writing is political, in the sense that he wants to make the world a better place, then it is important to understand where these politics went wrong. That is to say, it is important to understand how the student and new social movements in Yugoslavia in the 1970s degenerated into the virulent nationalisms of the 1980s and the subsequent extreme rightwing politics that dominate so much of the former Yugoslav space today. Parker's is the only introduction currently under review that begins this process of locating Žižek's work in its historical and social context and from which the contours of Žižek's politics emerge more clearly. It is, at best, insufficient to criticize unreconstructed Marxists like Teresa Ebert and myself for being critical of Žižek's politics because of "the personal difficulties [Žižek] has incurred as the result of his political stand in Slovenia (which, he has pointed out, cost him most of his friends, destroyed his intellectual profile there and caused him to be incorrectly vilified as a nationalist abroad)" (Myers 122). At worst, this reproduces the most reactionary aspects of capitalist ideology that seeks to reduce political activity to individualism and heroic acts of defiance. If there is a politics to Žižek's work, then let us at least do him the justice of taking it seriously. This means interrogating the sources of that politics, not just Althusser but also, for instance, Gyorgy Konrad's conception of "antipolitics" that influenced so much of the late 70s punk scene in Yugoslavia, and how it played out in practice. How, for example, could a pacifist journalist

writing for *Mladina*, the youth journal with which Žižek was associated, who was imprisoned for writing against the militarism of the Yugoslav state, become the first defense minister in the newly independent Slovene state, arguing for the necessity of a strong Slovene military force, and then subsequently become the leader of a far right nationalist party? These seem to me to be important questions to ask about the implications of Žižek's politics. Surely the time has come in "Žižek studies," if such a thing is desirable (which I doubt) to stop personalizing all these narratives and see intellectual labor as also a collective project.

This is the area where Myers is weakest. The reading of Marx here is superficial, with Althusser's definition of ideology being attributed directly to Žižek (20). Žižek's contribution to a Marxian understanding of ideology has been the structuring role of fantasy, not the idea that it works through the subject. On the basis of this introduction, one would think that radical politics began with Žižek. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of reading Žižek *sui generis* is to be found at the end of Kay's book in the "Glossary of Žižekian Terms." All of these terms (with the exception of two from Hegel) are Lacanian terms. We can also see this tendency in Matthew Sharpe's book, which attributes Lacan's insight into the function of language and the big Other directly to Žižek (61); he also presents the psychoanalytic understanding of original fantasy (as a fantasy of origins) as if it were Žižek's own contribution (154).¹ Žižek is sometimes careless in acknowledging his sources, and it would be helpful if his expositors were more careful in this respect. Žižek is a brilliant reader of Hegel and Lacan, but he is not an original thinker like Lacan, who formulated his own terminology, or Hegel, who developed his own philosophical system. He has created a startling hybrid of Hegelianism and Lacanese, but the terms and concepts he deploys remain largely Lacan's. What is now coming increasingly under scrutiny is the precise nature of Žižek's relationship to contemporary Lacanianism.

In *Traversing the Fantasy*, both Yannis Stavrakakis and Russell Grigg highlight the problematic nature of Žižek's relationship to Lacan through his conception of the act. Both agree that this is based on a misreading of Sophocles's play *Antigone* and Lacan's subsequent seminar on ethics. Stavrakakis and Grigg argue that Žižek's notion of the act increasingly reveals Žižek's distance from "orthodox" Lacanianism, as Lacan himself re-

1. See in this respect Laplanche and Pontalis's seminal essay "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality."

placed the notion of an ethics of desire, from *Seminar VII* onwards, with the ethics of the drive. Žižek's response to this is that he knows full well the later texts of Lacan, but this does not change his view of the act. From an "orthodox" Lacanian perspective this is a completely contradictory position to hold. Geoff Boucher's contribution to *Traversing the Fantasy* suggests that many of the theoretical dilemmas in Žižek's work derive from a misreading of Lacan's "graph of desire," going all the way back to *The Sublime Object of Ideology* itself. Again Žižek's response to these criticisms in his reply, "*Concesso non Dato*," at the end of the volume is that Boucher is reading Lacan incorrectly and not him. What is clear from these exchanges, however, is that although Žižek has probably done more than any other theorist in recent years to reorient our reading of Lacan from the earlier "structuralist" texts to the late Lacan and his emphasis on the real, the influence of Žižek's Lacan within the academy, as well as the Lacanians' Lacan, is now a highly contested terrain. Indeed, as Kay points out, while Žižek is often viewed as the great popularizer of Lacanian psychoanalysis, through such early texts as *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (1991) and *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (1992), he actually returns to a very limited number of reference points and seminars out of Lacan's total oeuvre. As Stavrakakis, Grigg, Boucher and Parker all argue, it would be a mistake to start reading Žižek in place of Lacan.

The Politics of the Act

Kay's introduction is a much more thorough and rigorous study, and her elucidation of the influence of German idealism on Žižek's thinking is by far the best of any of the introductions under consideration. Kay reads Žižek's proliferation of texts and constant return to the same themes and intellectual antagonists as a continual process of self-clarification and self-correction. So, for example, Žižek's long running exchange with Judith Butler has facilitated a refinement of the notions of castration and the fundamental fantasy, and his more recent endorsement of the work of Alain Badiou has allowed him once again to clarify what he means by the political "act." The problem with reading Žižek this way is that it suggests a more coherent and consistent project than is perhaps the case. It suggests, for example, that behind all the jokes and digressions there is a coherent theoretical system being elaborated, if only one reads carefully enough. Parker is right, I think, to argue that this is a fundamental misreading of Žižek (114-15), a misreading that most of us have been making for years. Žižek is an intellectual provo-

cateur and incisive critic of the ideology of advanced capitalism, but I am not convinced that he makes a coherent analysis of the contemporary world order or of how we might respond to that system today.

The tendency to read Žižek as elaborating a consistent position also has implications for how we read his politics. One of the constant categories of Žižek's political writing, notes Kay, has been the notion of "the act" as "a violent disruption of the *status quo* that might make it possible to puncture the prevailing ideology and effect political change" (6). Kay's study is at its best when it traces such notions of the act not just to Lacan but through Kierkegaard (the act as repetition) and Schelling (from where Žižek derives his conception of human freedom), but it also reveals the weakness of such an approach. The category of the act is neither indexed nor used as a sub-heading in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*; indeed the notion of "the act" only began to emerge as a central concept of Žižek's political thinking from 1992 onwards.² In both *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek promotes the political strategies of overidentification and traversing the fantasy. As a more explicit and radical avowal of his position regarding Marxism emerges in the 90s, the notion of the act takes on an ever more prominent position and the idea of traversing the fantasy disappears completely. As Kay notes, however, Žižek's politics of the act is deeply problematic; the two examples of a political act that he most frequently uses are suicide and terror, and these are hardly useful rallying calls for the renewal of the Left. Indeed, as Stavrakakis points out, the "tragic-heroic paradigm" Žižek draws out of *Antigone* is "completely unsuitable as a model for transformative ethico-political action" (173).

For Parker, the notion of the act is an index of Žižek's distance not only from Lacanianism but also from Marxism. Indeed, while Kay is critical of Žižek's politics of the act, which results in an uncertain "balance between desperation and responsibility" (155), she concludes her introduction with a positive reading of Žižek's writing as exemplary of a political *act* (157). It is only Parker who nails the issue: "Radical though it is, Žižek's characterization of that end-point [of analysis] in some eruption of the truth of the subject in a 'psychoanalytic act' is so overblown as to be useless as a model of social change" (74). For Parker, the problems revolve around two sets of issues: first, the link between femininity and violence that is frequently associated with the act in Žižek's writing, and second, the representation of psychoanalysis through "[t]he imagery of utter abjection [which leaves] indi-

2. See *Enjoy Your Symptom* 31-46.

vidual subjects with no way out” (80). As Parker observes, this is not a great advertisement for psychoanalysis and also bears very little relationship to Lacan’s own conception of the act. A politics of the act is simply the desperation of an ultraleftist politics that can conceive of no other way out of the present situation.

We can all agree today, at least those of us who still like to see ourselves on the radical and progressive side of politics, where I would locate Žižek, on the horrors and destruction of neo-liberal capitalism and the need to think beyond the limits of the global market. The issue is not whether or not we need “an act” to change all this but what kind of politics might emerge from this act. It might just be that what we need today is more political *activity*, of the kind that Žižek stigmatizes for not challenging the horizons of the present. Marxists would agree with Žižek that there can be no blueprint for the future - utopia for us is a radical impulse, a signifier of discontent and dissatisfaction with the present, not a space of full presence - and we would agree on the need to think beyond the horizon of the market. But if there is to be a radically new vision of the future, this will come out of political *activity*, not through rhetorical fiat.

Traversing the Social-Ideological Fantasy

In her analysis of the act, Kay concludes that “the earlier work on ideology, with its prospect of traversing the political fantasy, may be more [politically] effective” (155), a position I find myself increasingly in agreement with. This is also where Sharpe takes his starting point from. Sharpe’s book is the most restricted of the introductions under review, in the sense that he does not seek to provide an overview of Žižek’s oeuvre but rather to draw out the strands of a coherent social theory based on what Sharpe calls Žižek’s expanded concept of ideology.³ One of Sharpe’s central criticisms

3. Sharpe’s book is published in the Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Philosophy series which, according to the blurb on the back, “aims to bring high quality research monograph publishing back into focus for authors.” On the evidence of this volume, this is a rather scandalous misrepresentation of the facts; this is a Ph.D. thesis published with little or no rewriting or proof reading. The number of typos and grammatical mistakes are too numerous to list and the use of italics is often a complete mess (see 218, 224). A number of quotations from Žižek and Lacan are incorrect or contain typos (for some examples see 55, 66, 83, 190, 191, 202) and, perhaps most extraordinarily for a Ph.D. on Žižek, the title of *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* is given incorrectly throughout, *For They Know Not What They Do* is incorrectly cit-

of Žižek is his hesitation to actually say what he means, and the same could be said for this book. Despite continually indicating that he will move beyond description of Žižek's theory to its critique, Sharpe only really gets down to this in the final chapter. Sharpe's thesis is that Žižek is working within the same problematic as, and a situation not dissimilar to, that of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, but offers us a way out of the aporias that have dogged Western Marxism ever since. Indeed, Sharpe even goes so far at one point as to compare Žižek's position on contemporary capitalism to that of Marcuse in the 1960s, especially *One Dimensional Man*. This is an interesting take on Žižek, given his own critique of both Adorno and Marcuse in *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (1994) and the distance he wishes to place between his own position and that of the official Frankfurt School opposition associated with the praxis group in the former Yugoslavia. As Kay notes, Žižek shares with Adorno a similar taste in European "high" culture and disdain for popular culture (something his "fans" seem to have missed), but beyond this the similarities probably end. Parker is also clear on the difference between Žižek and the Frankfurt School. Unlike the Frankfurt School's Hegelian reading of Freud, Žižek reads Hegel and Freud from the vantage point of Lacan and this produces an entirely different notion of the subject (59). Adorno's reading of Freud was thoroughly biological and one of the virtues of Lacan's "return to Freud" has been to restore the radicalism of the Freudian unconscious, through the notions of desire, fantasy and the real. One could also note that the economic situation that shaped Marcuse's 1960s text is very different from the triumphant neo-liberalism that we face today.

For Sharpe, Žižek's Marxist credentials are secured not so much through his critique of critical theory as through his coupling of that critique with an emancipatory narrative (23-24). The problem for Sharpe is that when he comes to delineate that emancipatory narrative, he has certain problems identifying it, as according to him, Žižek does not provide us with an economic analysis of capitalism through which we can identify today's working class (203). Although Žižek continually invokes the need to overthrow capitalism, he has no strategy or consistent vision for doing so (217); Žižek cannot envisage a future after capitalism, as he has no normative ethical position (240). If Sharpe is correct in these assertions, then one could

ed (126) as well as being correctly and incorrectly cited on the same page (63), Alenka Zupančič is cited as the editor of *Ethics of the Real* rather than the author and Anthony Elliott receives various spellings of his name and is not in the reference list.

legitimately ask in what possible sense can Žižek provide the way out of the aporias of Western Marxism? We have only to look back through the history of critical theory and Western Marxism to find detailed analyses of the changing structure of social class, alternative strategies for challenging capitalism and arguments around the ethical and normative assumptions behind Marxism. If these intellectual resources are already to hand, then why should we turn to a theory that lacks them? Žižek's contribution to Western Marxism, it seems to me, is his Lacanianism (the constitutive role of lack) and the fundamental role that fantasy plays in ideological formations, and it is here that Sharpe's book is at its weakest.

Of all the books under review here, Sharpe's is the most uneasy with psychoanalysis and this may account for the absence of one of the key elements of Žižek's theory of ideology, the idea of the "social-ideological fantasy," which does not receive a mention at all and there is also no sustained discussion of "lack." Although, as mentioned above, the idea of traversing the fantasy now seems to have fallen by the wayside, to be replaced by an emphasis on *jouissance*, surplus-pleasure and enjoyment, it was the idea of the fundamental structuring role of fantasy as the support of symbolic reality that facilitated Žižek's resuscitation of the moribund concept of ideology in the late 80s. As he famously put it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, ideology is not simply a function of the symbolic, but the symbolic, social reality itself is inherently ideological: "the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion" (32). Ideology, therefore, is not an illusion masking the true state of things (false consciousness) but social reality itself is ideological through and through, and it is fantasy that sustains our relationship to an inherently conflictual and antagonistic reality. The issue of fantasy arises just over half way through Sharpe's book, but this is in relation to the subject of fantasy, and the relationship between fantasy and ideology is never adequately addressed. This is surely a missed opportunity, as much of Žižek's best work, and where his ideas have their strongest purchase, is in the analysis of the fantasy structures of advanced capitalism.

Arrested Dialectics

According to Sharpe, the overriding problem with Žižek's social theory is its Kantianism and the priority he accords to the Kantian antinomy over and

above a dialectical understanding of contradiction. For all of Žižek's avowed Hegelianism he is really a Kantian at heart and the whole critique of contemporary capitalism collapses into the stasis of the Kantian antinomies. At the end of the day Žižek's social theory is too metaphysical, as he turns to philosophy and psychoanalysis to ground his political theory; in short, "Žižek wants to 'save the revolution with an ontology'" (215). One can almost hear Žižek's response, as one reads these pages: "Did I not write a book entitled *Tarrying with the Negative*?" "Have I not argued from *The Sublime Object* onwards that antagonism is constitutive?" "Has not my whole endeavor been to rescue the Hegelian dialectic, the labor of the negative, from the misrepresentations of post-structuralism and deconstruction?" Helpfully for us, Sharpe includes this chapter as his contribution to *Traversing the Fantasy* and we do not need to speculate on Žižek's response. In his reply to Sharpe, Žižek argues that Hegel radicalizes the Kantian antinomy in the sense that "the final Hegelian reversal is rather a redoubling of the antinomic gap, its displacement into the 'thing itself'" ("*Concesso non Dato*" 244). Thus "it is Hegel who 'deontologises' Kant, introducing a gap into the very texture of reality" (244). Second, Sharpe takes his suggestions concerning the antinomy and contradiction from Jameson's *The Seeds of Time* (1994) but, as Žižek notes, it is precisely Jameson's point that "today's concrete social reality is antinomic in the sense that it does not allow us to delineate a clear project of the dissolution of its antagonisms" (245). Or, as Jameson himself puts it, "The age is clearly enough more propitious for the antinomy than the contradiction" (2). For Jameson, as for Žižek, there is no simple distinction between the Kantian antinomy and dialectical contradiction. Indeed,

rather than positing a situation in which we have to choose between these two categories . . . it might be worthwhile using them concurrently and against one other, insofar as each is uniquely equipped to problematize the other in its most vital implications. The pair do not themselves form an opposition . . . rather, they stand as each other's bad conscience, and as a breath of suspicion that clings to the concept itself. To wonder whether an antinomy is not really a contradiction in disguise; to harbor the nagging thought that what we took to be a contradiction was really little more than an antinomy - these pointed reciprocal doubts can do the mind no harm and may even do it some good. (4)

The ability to think through this complex relationship between the antinomy and the contradiction has been one of the most valuable aspects of Žižek's

work over the past decade and a half, and it seems strange that Sharpe should miss the target of his critique so widely in this respect.

Possibly the most incisive critique of Žižek's dialectic remains Peter Dews's very early piece in *Radical Philosophy* (1995), where he argued that Žižek's reading of Hegel's "spirit is a bone" is essentially one-sided. Žižek tends to stress the negation of the dialectic but not the negation of the negation. In *Traversing the Fantasy* Dews performs a similar exercise on Žižek's reading of Schelling. Žižek turns to Schelling, argues Dews, to address certain problems inherent in the Lacanian subject, namely that Lacan's notion of "being" seems to presuppose that being belongs primarily to the inertly given. Žižek highlights how the very idea of a decentred subject is not as recent a discovery as we might think and can be traced all the way back to German idealism. From this perspective he emphasizes the presence of notions of the gap, separation and alienation in Schelling's work. Dews does not deny the presence of these motifs in Schelling's work, but insists that they are accompanied by "some ontological - or perhaps better: pre-ontological - affinity between spirit and nature, subject and signifier" ("The Eclipse of Coincidence" 203). "Schelling's fundamental philosophical struggle," writes Dews, "was to hold this complex vision of plenitude and negativity, of essential conflict and potential reconciliation, together" (207). Žižek emphasizes only one side of this struggle and, for Dews at least, this explains the underlying pessimism of Žižek's politics. Unfortunately Žižek does not include his response to Dews here (as he does not with Stavrakakis), as both the article and his reply were published elsewhere.⁴

Traversing the Fantasy explicitly brings together critical responses to Žižek's work, and I have already mentioned some of the stronger pieces in the volume. Robert Pfaller gives an excellent introduction to Žižek's concept of ideology, which is a useful antidote to Sharpe's book, but it is not exactly critical, as Žižek himself points out. Like all edited volumes, this one is uneven. Robert Paul Resch's contribution, "What if God Was One of Us - Žižek's Ontology" is as bizarre a reading of Lacan as I have ever come across. To quote just one sentence: "Because the human brain (the Lacanian RSI) is the embodiment of the subject, it is impossible for this brain (RSI) to grasp its own act of cognition and achieve full self-presence or self-consciousness" (91). This is not a recognizable version of Lacanian psychoanalysis in any sense that I understand it. While I am more sympathetic to Sarah Herbold's contri-

4. See Žižek's "From Proto-Reality to the Act" and "What Some Would Call" respectively.

bution on Žižek's gendering of cultural analysis - popular culture feminine/high culture masculine - I do think she misses her target. Like Žižek, I have never come across the "abyss of nonsignificance . . . figured as a vagina" (130) in his work and feel that this is a caricature of his position. Herbold's is one of a number of essays here that offers us alternative readings to Žižek's own film analysis; others include Robert Miklitsch on film *noir* and Ian Buchanan on Hitchcock. While such readings are interesting in themselves, they do not displace Žižek's own readings or take full account of what he is doing with film and cultural analysis generally. As Kay notes, Žižek is putting culture at the service of theory and not the other way round (50), and it is here that culture plays a crucial role as an object mediating the relationship between the subject and the real. From a Lacanian perspective, "The object acts as a necessary screen between the subject and the real. Through the positioning of objects, a sense of reality is maintained" (58). Ultimately, it is the work of culture to explore this precarious imbalance between the subject and the real and preserve us from the worst excesses of the real.

The Politics of Style

Finally, let me conclude by saying something about the opening essay in the volume, Justin Clemens's "The Politics of Style," as this is where the majority of commentators locate the "truth" of Žižek's project and his politics. I have already mentioned that for Kay Žižek's style is exemplary of a political act and for Myers his style enacts the fundamental axiom that "the truth is always elsewhere" (6). Clemens claims that many of the dilemmas identified by Žižek's critics, the inconsistency in his work, the cutting and pasting from one work to another and the sheer quantity of books that he turns out, the focus on the content of works rather than their form, the factual and interpretative errors that he makes, can all be accounted for in terms of style. As Clemens points out, the sheer breadth of Žižek's work is only matched by its equally compulsive repetition of the same; the repetition of stock phrases and words, of jokes and examples and above all the repetition of themes. What is truly distinct about Žižek's style, however, is its rapidity of change, a rapidity that seeks to match the pace of change in a post-modern world as well as enact the development of his own thought processes, as he attempts to revise, rectify and clarify his positions. According to Clemens, this rectification is usually equivocal, hence the continual reproach against Žižek that he oscillates between positions and never clearly says what he means. What is most interesting regarding Clemens's argument

here is his assertion that this equivocation is the result of Žižek's inability to read lyric poetry: "It is not that Žižek just doesn't do such close readings; my belief is that he *absolutely cannot do so*. Poetry is an object he cannot look directly at; indeed, it appears only as an anamorphic stain in his texts" (16). In this sense, Žižek's work is, paradoxically, completely dependent on poetry, its absent center, and constrained by the discourse of the University. This is an interesting take on Žižek's style and Clemens is certainly right in identifying the absence of lyric poetry from his endless range of exempla, but it is probably a mistake, I think, to try and identify one single factor, or absence, as the source of all subsequent equivocations. This has more to do, I believe, with the attempt to hold together such disparate discourses and then filter them all through Lacan. As if to prove Clemens's point, Žižek's reply to a separate collection of critical essays currently in press, takes its examples from lyric poetry.

Acting Out, or, Why we all Love to Hate Žižek

For Parker, Žižek's style is a form of "acting out," as opposed to an "act": "Acting out . . . is always staged for the Other - a display of hysterical challenge that accuses and refuses. So, when [Žižek] accuses and refuses his readers he also does so as someone who knows something more than ourselves about what we enjoy" (127). And that is precisely why we like it so much. Parker's text is the only one that really engages with Žižek in a style comparable to his object of study: polemical, digressive and politically motivated. Unlike most of Žižek's critics and expositors, Parker is both a Marxist and a Lacanian analyst and in this sense he comes from a similar position to Žižek himself, sharing a similar concern with challenging the complacency of liberal academia and the neo-liberal economic orthodoxy that nothing can change. Parker's book is also, however, the most *critical* introduction under review. For instance, he is the only critic who insists, correctly I believe, that Žižek is "not a Marxist at all" (2). What we have with Žižek is only the appearance of Marxism with no substantive content and this "is a dismal conclusion to what was supposedly to be a radical theoretical intervention in political practice" (104). Similarly, Parker argues that Žižek is now something of a fellow traveler of Millerian Stalinism but is not a radical Lacanian in the sense that Lacan himself was.

As is most probably clear from the proceeding arguments, I find Parker's introduction the best, in the sense that it is the most politically engaged,

as well as the most effective in locating Žižek's work within its socio-historical, as opposed to purely philosophical, context. As I have indicated, I think there is much more work to be done here regarding the early punk scene in the former Yugoslavia beyond Laibach and the NSK, as well as work on the student and new social movements. Also it seems to me that any real understanding of Žižek's politics must engage with the debates around civil society and the state that were played out as Yugoslavia disintegrated. It is only in this sense, through his opposition to civil society, that we can fully grasp Žižek's self-avowed Stalinism. Parker indicates the importance of this opposition (32-33) but does not follow it through. So let me conclude by highlighting my differences from Parker's position, which can be grouped around two central issues: the representation of Yugoslav history and the radicalism of psychoanalysis.

Parker's representation of Tito's "socialist" state is one of Stalinism with a human face; behind the façade of socialist self management and "brotherhood and unity" we find a Stalinist regime as bad as anything in the Soviet Union. Thus, "the signifier 'socialism' rested on practices that required the absence of anything actually approaching socialism [and] . . . evacuated of the content that Western leftists usually summon up when they appeal to socialism" (17). While Yugoslavia was hardly an example of socialist paradise, its function as a signifier was much more complex than this. One might want to make comparisons with the contemporary status of Cuba as a signifier; much of the radical left continues to support Cuba in its struggle against US imperialism and the support it provides for progressive regimes across Latin America, but we are not under any illusions that this is socialism as we would want it. At the time, Yugoslav self-management was an important alternative to both capitalism and Soviet central planning; Parker is right that it proved to be disastrous for the federal republic, but as a signifier it is important for the left that attempted to think about alternative economic relations and not just identities. Similarly, the formation of the non-aligned movement, of which Tito was a founder, and the work of the praxis group, trying to retrieve Marxist theory from the dogma of Stalinist orthodoxy, were important moments in the history of anti-colonialist struggle and the development of Western Marxism respectively.

The second area where I differ from Parker is in his reading of psychoanalytic politics. For Parker, Lacan is a revolutionary; I disagree. Psychoanalysis has a long history of engagement with radical left politics from Wilhelm Reich through the Frankfurt School to the Freudian left of the

1960s and to the Lacanian-inspired psycho-politics of the 1970s and 80s, of which Žižek is the most prominent example today. Psychoanalysis has an equally strong strain of conservatism and reaction, running all the way back to Freud, which usually surfaces sooner or later in those radical thinkers who utilize psychoanalytic ideas. So, for example, the Lacanian position on gay and lesbian relationships is as bad as any other psychoanalytic school. As Parker points out, psychoanalysis has a pretty appalling history in relation to sexual politics and Žižek is no exception here. The Lacanian/Žižekian position on postmodernity as the decline of the paternal metaphor is also a conservative lament that we can trace back through the history of the Freudian left. As Kay puts it, at times Žižek “reads like a crusty old codger. The left isn’t what it used to be, and the world is going to the dogs, are his unceasing complaints as he sounds off at the political apathy and moral self-righteousness of modern Western academics” (148). Lacanian psychoanalysis unquestionably played an important political role in the 1970s and 80s, especially through the work of Lacanian feminists, but today, as the Lacanian school retreats into “orthodoxy,” its radicalism is increasingly suspect. It is perhaps worth recalling here Lacan’s own view of revolutionary politics made to the students of Vincennes in 1968: “I would tell you that the aspiration to revolution has but one conceivable issue, the discourse of the master. That is what experience has proved. What you, as revolutionaries, aspire to is a Master. You will have one” (*Television* 126). With such views as these, the possibility of radical politics emanating from Lacanianism is limited indeed.

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