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Review

Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism

Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso Books, 2014. 416pp.

Robert Sinnerbrink*

Slavoj Žižek continues his idiosyncratic critique of global capitalism, democratic culture, and neoliberal ideology in his latest 400+ page tome, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of dialectical Materialism*, which promises to provide, much like his *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso, 2012), a resolutely idealist “new foundation” for dialectical materialism. This is a promise that Žižek has made for some years now, since what we might call his “system” turn became manifest in the publication of a series of major books (*In Defense of Lost Causes* [Verso, 2008]; *Living in the End Times, Less than Nothing* [Verso, 2010]; and now *Absolute Recoil*) that at once synthesize, repeat, elaborate, and interconnect diverse reflections on a bewildering variety of philosophical themes, cultural events, and political debates. These reflections often first appear in online journal publications or op-ed pieces, and in shorter, more coherent, pamphlet-book form (*First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* [Verso, 2009], *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* [Picador, 2008], and *Event: A Philosophical Journey through a Concept* [Penguin, 2014]). As readers of Žižek will know, there is a shameless recycling, reiterating, and recasting of ideas from these shorter pieces within the longer

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books, which have what we might describe as musical “theme and variation” structure, with recurring themes that return in different contexts, subtly altered or reintegrated into different lines of thought. This is rather different from the more traditional model of a sequentially organized, teleologically directed, logical argument. It is one of the reasons for the perplexity many critics feel when confronted by his books, as compared with the more conventional “essayistic” style of his shorter works.

One way to approach *Absolute Recoil* would be to see it as the third of a “Hegelian-Lacanian” trilogy (comprising *Living in the End Times* and *Less than Nothing*) that presents Žižek’s critical meditations on the ideological paradoxes of global capitalism and develops his ambitious claims to be providing a neo-Hegelian (and neo-Lacanian) speculative theory of the dialectical relations between subjectivity, culture, and ideology. In these recent books, however (and in his shorter ones), Žižek has ventured into more recognizably “political philosophy” terrain, offering diagnostic outlines of the challenges and threats confronting global capitalism, as well as sketching ways in which contemporary theory (not to mention politics) might respond critically to our shared social-political predicaments confronting a global economic system and its various cultural-ideological “supplements.” At the same time, his aim has always been ‘theoretical’ in the sense of critically exposing the dialectical operations of ideology and the manner in which it reveals the underlying materialist dynamics of global capitalism and hegemonic rule of neoliberal democratic politics. Readers looking for more progress down this path “from ideology to politics,” however, may be disappointed or puzzled by *Absolute Recoil*, which is perhaps Žižek’s most philosophically dense and obscure text to date (which is saying something). As for his gestures towards a more concrete political philosophy—such as can be found in *In Defense of Lost Causes* and *Living in the End Times*—these are surprisingly absent from *Absolute Recoil*, which recoils further into unabashedly “metaphysical” forms of Hegelian speculative dialectics and abstruse neo-Lacanian ruminations on the role of negativity in materialist theories of subjectivity.

Inadequate as it may be, I shall hazard a “summary” of the basic lines of thought that more or less structure Žižek’s formidable tome. His stated aim is to provide a “new foundation” for dialectical materialism based upon a selective philosophical reactualisation of Hegel’s speculative dialectical logic: in particular, by elevating Hegel’s “speculative notion of absolute recoil into a universal ontological principle” (4). The latter term (‘absolute recoil’) appears in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* and refers to the

manner in which categories belonging to the “logic of reflection” (roughly, those defined by oppositional determinations and relations of identity, difference, opposition, and contradiction) undermine or “deconstruct” themselves when taken to their logical limit; but in doing so, they also generate a movement towards more complex conceptual determinations of speculative logic that can integrate universal, particular, and individual into relational categories within what Hegel calls the “logic of the Concept”—the mode of speculative-dialectical thought adequate, Hegel claims, for thinking “the Absolute.” Žižek develops this idea from the “axiom” that a renewed form of “dialectical materialism” is the true philosophical inheritor of what Hegel called the “speculative attitude towards objectivity” (that which attempts to think the whole in its complex “contradictory” dynamics of relational transformation as captured by a speculative dialectical “logic”). According to Žižek, all of the “new materialisms” that have appeared in Continental philosophy in recent years—neo-Althusserian political philosophy (Badiou), the growing influence of scientific naturalism, and Deleuzian “neo-vitalist” materialism—fail in this philosophical goal; hence what is required is a return to, and renewal of, the project of speculative dialectics, in order to provide a philosophical foundation for a metaphysical form of neo-Marxist dialectics adequate to the complexities of global capitalism and its hegemonic forms of liberal-democratic ideology.

Žižek proposes to undertake this task in three steps: 1) elaborating the contemporary consequences of the turn from Kant’s transcendental philosophy to Hegel’s speculative dialectics (attempting to think the Whole or “the Absolute” in today’s globalized world and in light of contemporary philosophy, science, and culture); 2) exploring the possibilities of this neo-Hegelian dialectics and the manner in which it operates via “absolute reflection” or the “coincidence of opposites” (elaborated in concrete terms via a plethora of contemporary cultural-ideological examples); and 3) venturing a further “speculative” move beyond Hegelian dialectics, exploring the implications of Hegel’s notorious “negation of the negation” and Lacan’s logic of the “non-all.” In doing so, Žižek aims to open up an obscure metaphysical materialism of the “less than nothing” (a *dentology*, from the Greek *den* meaning “less than zero”) that would presumably supply the “new foundation” for a renovated dialectical materialism. Flouting the Sokal and Bricmont warning against Continental philosophers’ predilection for the “creative” exploration of scientific theory in the service of cultural critique, Žižek

includes a number of what we might call “experimental” passages of philosophical speculation linking quantum physics and cognitive neuroscience with the thought of Hegel, Lacan, and contemporary philosophical materialisms. If this weren’t enough, Žižek also includes two artistic-cultural “Interludes” on Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* (as a musical staging of “feminine hysteria”) and Lubitsch’s comedies (as a cinematic dialectical “poet of cynical wisdom”) both of which are described as “artistic exemplifications of the book’s conceptual content” (5)—interludes that come as a welcome relief from the density of Žižek’s (obsessively reiterated) reflections on capitalism, subjectivity, and ideology.

In part I, “Towards a Materialist Theory of Subjectivity,” Žižek defends the German idealist movement from Kantian transcendental idealism to Hegelian speculative or absolute idealism. He criticizes the prevailing “non-metaphysical” deflationary readings of Hegel (Kantian, naturalist, and pragmatist approaches) as avoiding the truly dialectical-speculative core of Hegel’s thought: namely, the concept of negativity and the “logical” dialectical implications of the “negation of the negation” (understood as a kind of conceptual version of the Freudian “death drive”). As in Žižek’s previous work, this speculative, non-dialectically recoverable core of negativity is linked in different ways with Lacan’s account of the Real, and thus with the traumatic, non-symbolizable, yet profoundly “structuring” role of negativity in the formation of subjectivity. Once again, Žižek understands the subject in Hegelian-Lacanian terms as a self-relating or absolute negativity, a case of Hegelian “absolute recoil” or, put more plainly, “a thing emerging through its very loss” (150). It is through this tortuously dense passage of thinking that Žižek proposes to reanimate a conception of the unconscious and thereby underline its importance for understanding the ideological operations of art, culture, politics, and ideology.

Part II, “The Hegelian Event,” features meditations on the philosophy of the “event” (Badiou, for example) linked to speculations on the “abyssal” nature of human freedom. Žižek emphasizes repeatedly the importance of philosophical “ruptures” in thought that uncover the traumatic, unconscious core of “negativity” at the heart of human subjectivity (Hegel’s “night of the world,” a passage frequently cited in Žižek’s work). Wagner meets Freud via Lacan in Žižek’s striking reflections on the Lacanian theme of the conflicted, “impossible” character of human sexuality (summarized in Lacan’s quip that “there is no sexual relation”). This is followed by provocative

meditations on the contemporary fascination with theology (whether via deconstruction or “political theology”), recast via Hegel’s speculative conception of God. The latter theological discussion is coupled with intriguing remarks on Badiou’s account of the difference between hedonistic “democratic” and dialectical materialism, bolstered with sporadic references to quantum physics, which Žižek uses to defend his speculative account of Hegelian negativity in philosophical, if not “scientific,” terms. Whatever one makes of these conceptual acrobatics, the relationship between this speculative-metaphysical “foundation” of a renewed dialectical materialism and how the latter might offer a radical response to the impasses of global capitalism—with its threat to the environment, its rampant dislocation of cultures and subjectivities, and its relentless neutralization of political resistance—become harder to discern with every page.

Part III, “Hegel Beyond Hegel,” displays this difficulty explicitly, for in the last part of the book Žižek embarks on an exceedingly dense exploration of the possibilities of negativity understood not only as a principle of speculative dialectics but also as a way of thinking the materialist ontology of the “void.” Žižek’s highly speculative conception of the *den* or “less than nothing,” moreover, is proposed as a way of illuminating some of the more obscure, traumatic, “abyssal” dimensions of subjectivity that, again, echoes Freudian-Lacanian conceptions of the death drive. This neo-Hegelian dialectical logic of negativity is given a “deconstructivist” spin via the notion of “downward synthesis,” which replaces the “standard” idealist account of the progressive character of Hegelian dialectics (negating and incorporating otherness in the service of a “higher synthesis” or conceptual unity). Indeed, Žižek’s non-totalizable dialectic of negativity is not only a philosophical principle but is supposed to articulate the “deep” sources of resistance dormant in the depths of subjectivity. Having persisted to this point of the book, a diligent reader might be left somewhat baffled by how Žižek’s arcane talk of a negativity that is “less than nothing” might offer a philosophical foundation for new forms of materialist politics and cultural resistance.

To be sure, as with Žižek’s previous books, arresting critical observations on the vicissitudes of contemporary ideology are interwoven with densely theoretical passages on arcane philosophical topics. Unlike his previous books, however, there are few of the diagnostic discussions of the impasses or “deadlocks” of global capitalism today, none of the more programmatic statements about the possible sites of cultural-political resistance, and few polemical engagements with selected philosophical interlocutors (excepting his

remarks on Badiou, as an exponent of a post-Althusserian, militant materialism). This is further underlined by the fact that the book eschews Žižek's recent flirtation with advocating radical forms of Leftist politics in response to the "illiberal" tendencies of liberal democracies, his claim that we should reject the "forced choice" between the prevailing liberal-democratic "depoliticization" of economic-political conflicts and non-Western "fundamentalist" forms of terroristic political violence. Instead, Žižek's retreat into High Theory appears much more evident in *Absolute Recoil*. In its promise to provide a speculative "foundation" for dialectical materialism—a mode of thought enacted throughout the chapters in the book, Žižek claims—*Absolute Recoil* appears more like a sophisticated, yet compulsive-repetitive retreat into "idealist" philosophical speculation than an exercise in "materialist" cultural-political critique.