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## **‘Preface to Slovene Edition’ of Ian Parker's *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction***

(Pluto Press, London, 2004. 171 pp.)

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### **PREFACE TO SLOVENE EDITION**

The English manuscript for this book was sent to press in 2003, since which time the political and theoretical terrain upon which our protagonist speaks, seizes ground from the forces of reaction, has shifted. New forms of nationalism, religious fundamentalism, therapeutic sentiment, neo-liberalism and intellectual recuperation afflict those who speak out and those who seek to work through and enact radical ideas. All the more so now, in times when we are called upon to think positively, it is necessary to operate from within spaces of negativity that can again, always again, be opened up.

If anything exemplifies the dictum that truth appears through error – the lesson of negativity that Slavoj Žižek retrieves from the heart of the most suffocating ideological systems of thought – it is this book. Through the first false steps the book took five years ago, in formulations that pretended to provide a constructive ‘introduction’ and ‘critique’ of Žižek’s writing, we might arrive now, if not at the truth as such then at something closer to the politics of truth. Only by treating the book as a limited, tendentious misrepresentation of an evolving corpus of work, a snapshot that

vainly promises to spell out what is really meant, can what is truly deceptive about it be grasped.

The book works its way toward a thesis which seems to unfold naturally enough after we have been told to mistrust what Žižek claims to be doing with any of the three main conceptual frameworks it addresses. This thesis is that Žižek is really reading Hegel through Lacan, producing a version of Hegel inflected through a reading of Lacan, and that this reading is then applied by him to a series of cultural forms that are assumed by him to be structured by Marxism, applied to a reality already organised as if Marxism as a worldview provides the underlying taken-for-granted coordinates. So, what does the author of this thesis, Ian Parker, himself assume in order to produce such a critique? At least that the picture of Hegel presented by his target is partial, that the aspects of Lacan selected are misleading and that the Marxism is surreptitiously reified; and that we should actually know something that Žižek does not about these matters.

Worse, the author smuggles in a series of spurious assumptions about the nature of and interconnections between theoretical systems; that there are determinate origins to the ideas he discovers and brings to light of day, that there are hidden depths to be excavated to reveal what is going on, and that we need to produce an accurate reading against which what is deemed incorrect can be assessed. These assumptions about origins, depth and reading pertain not merely to the specific thesis that we are led to as the organising principle of the book, they are also mistaken assumptions that we need to beware of throughout it. And, as we track these errors now, we should take care not to be satisfied with finding the simple opposite of each of them; instead, we need to refuse the coordinates they impose as a grid on Žižek and on his work since the book was published. This is an opportunity to look forward, beyond this book to what Žižek has been up to since it was published, and to look back at what is now all more obviously a partial judgement masquerading as a definitive verdict.

With respect to the supposed 'origins' of the work, we find that motif appearing in different forms in each of the five main chapters. Right from the outset, the apparent development of a theoretical system is staged in Slovenia, and in the contradictory relationship between civil society, dissident movements and punk that challenged the Yugoslav state. The moral that it is not a theoretical system at all is supposed to damn Žižek, this on the grounds that the political systems in question – 'Stalinist', we are told – were already rickety, doomed to collapse. To begin the book in such a way is precisely, for all the talk of 'conditions of possibility' and 'conditions of impossibility' that litter the chapter, to fall into the trap of contextualising, and so

then spinning a story of intellectual origins against the background of this context. There are hints at oppositional practices that disrupt such a story, and which insist on the perpetually retroactive reframing of the history of this national context, but these are in most cases submerged in a narrative of disintegration and then burgeoning nostalgia for old socialism.

There is a brief discussion of the disputes over the putative influence Žižek had on the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) strategy of overidentification and his adoption and theoretical elaboration of that strategy from their actually-existing practice, but there is no detailed discussion of his defence of the group from *Sublime Object of Ideology* onward and in many other public texts on, for example, the 'Enlightenment in Laibach'. (The post-punk band Laibach has also moved on, twisting the paradoxical anti-nationalism of NSK State in Time further into the hearts of all good patriots with the 2006 anthem album *Volk*, videos from which now proliferate around the globe on YouTube.) Žižek has, in 2005, published in his MIT Press 'Short Circuits' series an exhaustive account by Alexei Monroe in *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK*, and contributed a foreword to that book in which he shows again how, in NSK-State practices, the invisible obscene melody line of ideology can be materialised and addressed.

The process by which an authentic Slovene art and the grounding for this and any independent nation are assembled from external resources, borrowed and patched together from the outside, has been a leitmotiv in his work, and it breaks both from stories of 'context' and from the logic of original self-identical contents that operate as if concepts derived from the past explain the re-emergence of those self-same concepts in the present. In the second chapter on Hegel, in contrast, there seems to be an attempt to trace the actual Heideggerian framing Žižek employs and this framing is used to explain why it might be that Christianity has come to be privileged as a conceptual resource. An origin story that is already recruited by the author in his own mendacious framing of Žižek's work is projected into that work in order to detect and expose a supposedly romanticising and nostalgic impulse.

Žižek's tactical engagement with Christianity, through which its ideologically-material practice of transcendent self-division and redemption can be rearticulated, is thus wilfully misread. The lesson of a series of texts, from the 2003 *The Puppet and the Dwarf* – in which the subtitle '*The Perverse Core of Christianity*' should at least have cued us in to its critical edge – to his contributions to *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, to *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* in 2005 and to *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy* in 2008, for example, becomes clearer. That is; unlike queasy liberal present-day dissidents who dislike religious debate and steer

clear of it to leave the theologians to their own devices, it is precisely the most powerful forms of ideology that should be embraced so that the contradictoriness, lack of self-identity and impossibility of their actual function can be taken to breaking point.

The origin of psychoanalysis in clinical practice is mobilised in chapter three to mischaracterise Žižek yet again, and now to condemn him for failing to be true to an original site of inquiry to which he has no particular personal allegiance, and has shown us many times not to be the 'original' site of this theoretical practice at all. The spectre of a quasi-Stalinist Millerian international is summoned up as if Žižek's allegiance to this tradition is all the more suspect because he views Jacques-Alain Miller's intervention as a political project rather than a therapeutic one. The accusation that there is the exaggeration of the impact of a psychoanalytic 'act' in his writing is given rhetorical force in the book precisely because such an exaggeration presupposes that the authentic site against which it should be measured is that of the clinic.

In this self-confirming loop lies a chain of assumptions – with psychoanalysis turned into a system of knowledge which is then used to evaluate particular non-analysts – that must systematically avoid any real engagement with explicitly non-linear anti-developmental extra-clinical psychoanalysis; that kind of psychoanalysis is what was already worked through in Žižek's early writing, and later elaborated in edited texts such as his 2006 *Lacan: The Silent Partners*. The political role of Lacanian psychoanalysis, political interventions in Lacanian debates and an articulation of psychoanalysis with Marxist theory and practice is thus betrayed.

A particular line on the history of Marxism as an ideological form in the workers' states is spun out in interminable sub-Trotskyist sectarian detail to localise Žižek as a particular kind of (non-)Marxist. Political functions of enunciation – a lesson that the author of this critical introduction should have learnt from Lacan – are reduced to statements that Žižek has made about what his own aims are, and these are then taken on good coin and cashed in to show us exactly what Žižek is; as if he has his origins in the decomposition of Stalinist bureaucratic state-managed fake-socialism, as if because he declares on occasion that he is a Stalinist we must draw the horrified conclusion that he really is a Stalinist.

The republication with commentaries by him of revolutionary texts in 2007 could be called as evidence, but as a series – Mao's *On Practice and Contradiction*, Trotsky's *Terrorism and Communism*, and Robespierre's *Virtue and Terror* – they actually sabotage any attempt to detect what the actual starting point and trajectory of his political work is. As with the trope of 'perversion' at the core of Christianity, his

attention to the Stalinism that haunts the actual state-craft of the Marxist tradition in the twentieth century is designed to provoke a different kind of repetition of political interventions. This 'introduction' to Žižek fails to grasp that it is a repetition that must be undertaken anew in twenty-first century political-economic conditions, and our author instead insists on finding an inconsistency between the real meaning of repetition and the way it is deployed by Žižek. It is clear, for example, that the call for a retrieval of Lenin – a repetition that was not at all designed to be a return – at a symposium in Essen, Germany in 2001 was a risky adventure, an act for which Žižek has necessarily and heroically paid a price, and it is this non-idealised but politically-effective Lenin that has provided a compass from then on until at least the publication of *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth* in 2007.

And, the aim of this endeavour to strip away the veils of misunderstanding that prevent a definitive explanation of what Žižek is up to is finally, it seems in the final chapter, to seize on the faults of this particular figure as individual subject of the book. Despite the fleeting reference to a wider group of theorists in Slovenia – those that Žižek has continued to write with and provide English-language publication outlets for in recent years – the origin trap finally snaps shut around this 'critical' account when it is reduced to a criticism of one specific named writer.

Here, every lesson in Žižek's own work, from his earliest published book in English on the commodity form and its homologous relationship with the symptom onwards, is obscured, and this single product of the intellectual commodity system – the figure of Žižek himself – is abstracted and fetishised. The role of the 'gaze of the West' upon this one Eastern European barbarian is introduced to account for how this figure is enframed, but this device is then used to let the author of this book off the hook, to make it seem as if he makes no particular value judgement of his own about a theoretician who is accused of hysterical 'acting out' for a Western audience. (One might just as well speculate about the author's own obsessional tabulation of each and every suspicious move made by Žižek.) But the trick is that this gaze is itself, in the course of the chapter, reduplicated into the object of the gaze so that we are left at the end with the erroneous impression that we do actually now understand more about our object of inquiry, this subject.

The problems accumulate as the concern with origins – itself an unwitting and often disavowed aspect of the book – serves to lure us into a search for depths in Žižek's writing, or even, it would seem at times, in the man himself. Notice, for example, how particular events are set up in the narrative of the decomposition of Yugoslavia so that one key individual figure then arrives on the scene, appears centre-stage as theoretician and then as a political player and then as quasi-

nationalist enthusiast for the bombing of Serbia who covers his tracks by circulating different versions of his analysis to different audiences. Is it not precisely such sophistry through the course of the book – the turning of its victim-subject into a malign agent – that should be interrogated?

The individualisation of the narrative is then in place so that an assemblage of theoretical debates can be reduced to the supposed choices that Žižek has made to select or exclude ideas from a series of named individuals. Then it makes perfect sense for a series of writers from the history of philosophy and political theory to be reviewed so that Žižek's fidelity to each of them can be assessed, and so that he is made to stand out as an individual who has defined himself against them. The narrative also neatly encloses and confirms comparisons between Žižek and contemporary theorists – the alliance and discussions with Alain Badiou stand out as one instance that has become more significant in the last five years – so that the particular isolated contribution of each can be pitted against the other.

This kind of individualised reading plagues the discussion of Hegel, and the attempt to divine some hidden intentions that would enable us to make sense of philosophical choices then even gives rise to the implication that there is some form of anti-Semitism lurking in the background of Žižek's characterisation of the relationship between still culturally-potent theological traditions arising from Judaism and Christianity. Quasi-Hegelian juggling of anthropological-historical phases of Western thought, a linear conception of history which Žižek quite explicitly opposes, is rehearsed in order to arrive at the charge that Žižek prioritises Christianity.

This reductive approach to what Žižek really means, perhaps even the insinuation that he is some kind of secret anti-Semite himself, is problematic then, and now, in the light of his 2008 *Violence*, more implausible still. The *Violence* book turns around the relationship between Christians and Jews to make some disturbing claims about the priority that now might be given to Judaism, all the more disturbing to those who thought they knew what Žižek was up to or who thought that resolving what he was really up to would help determine whether his work was useful or not. Again, the framing of that recent text as comprising 'six sideways glances' at violence should alert us to the impossibility of arriving at authorial intention that will conform to what we imagine to be a theoretical choice of any kind.

Against ideological framing of human rights and the Western notion of 'choices' that we require those we benevolently aim to rescue from backward traditions to make, Žižek makes the point in *Violence* that when the West aims to rescue poor veiled women from Islamic fundamentalism, there is a hidden ideological assumption that it is the 'choice' that the woman makes that will make her free. This

'choice', even if she chooses to wear the veil, already inscribes her in a Western frame of individualist human 'rights'. And perhaps the same could be said about readings of Žižek that demand that he be legible to us as an individual subject who is clear about the conceptual 'choices' he has made so that we can understand what he is doing, and treat him as one of us.

The motif of origin combined with that of depth turns Žižek into a commodity with a value that is assumed to inhere in it, inside him, as if there was some hidden use value which should be extracted and enjoyed. Žižek's own attempts to sabotage such an assumption – theoretically elaborated in studies of the commodity form from his earliest writings and in a series of political commentaries which are explicitly written and signed by him, positioning himself as a Marxist, and increasingly now as a dialectical materialist – are then used to scorn him.

Intense theoretical activity of the last five years has been combined with an overidentification with the academic and media apparatus that focuses on the thinker rather than the ideas. Žižek has often commented on this, pointing out that the focus on him as an individual is designed to shift attention away from his arguments. Documentaries (such as the 2005 *Manufacturing Reality: Slavoj Žižek and the Reality of the Virtual* and the 2005 *Žižek!*) therefore give rise to a double-effect. At the one moment, he appears to play the game, participating as the subject of the documentary. And then, at the next, the ludicrous juxtaposition of scenes in which he refuses to let the film-maker and audience in behind the performance produces an effect which is almost as alarming as that engineered by the NSK-State politicians Laibach. Perhaps, we conclude, there is no other hidden depth that would reassure the viewer that this is merely staged by an intelligence that is as reasonable as they are. Perhaps, as he churns out all this contradictory material, he really means it. Perhaps when this author of this 'critical introduction', tries to get to the point behind the performance, he misses it.

Each of the errors we have tracked in the book is compounded when the author warms to his appointed task of telling us how we should read, and warning us how we should not read, Žižek. So, the lesson from one of the early texts, *Looking Awry*, is noticed and then quickly forgotten. Instead of working with the internally-contradictory nature of theoretical texts and the range of mutually incompatible interpretations that can be elaborated around them as a function of different audience positions, there is an attempt to fix on the actually-existing fixed point of Žižek's work and explicate it so that its meaning is, we are led to believe, crystal clear. The fantasy of a clear view of what Žižek really means is then chained to a moral evaluation of how the reader must understand him. The book tries to protect the reader, to tell the



reader what is really going on, but now the line of the book must itself be put into question so that the reader can decide for themselves.

The lesson Žižek spells out in early texts is taken up and read back into a range of theoretical questions and political phenomena in his 2006 *The Parallax View*, and here some new conceptual resources are articulated with long-standing preoccupations with the impossibility of finding one correct reading of any text. Here Žižek spells out even more explicitly the argument that we must look awry, approach our objects of inquiry with sideways glances. The oft-cited case example from Lévi-Strauss – the divided account of the structure of the Winnebago village by its different groups – is taken forward with the notion of ‘parallax’. Here, an engagement with the work of the Japanese Marxist Karatani (whose reading of Kant employs the conceptual device of ‘parallax’ to grasp the antinomical relationship between politics and the economy) is the opportunity for a reworking of Žižek’s insistence that things cannot ever be read just as they are. Our reading of a phenomenon is always already mediated by a divided antagonistic interested position.

This question of reading – an argument against one ‘correct reading’ – has been tackled again and again by Žižek in such texts as his 2006 *How to Read Lacan* as well as in new editions of his now classic volumes on film. The work on film has also been taken forward in the 2006 documentary *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, already screened on television around the world and now available on DVD.

The notion of ‘parallax’ and of antagonistic competing conceptions of reality is then put to work by Žižek in the political realm, and in interventions that connect his discussions of Christianity – an ideological rather than morally-prescriptive phenomenon, remember – with Christian fundamentalist fantasies of Israel that have become increasingly potent in the United States. In these political interventions, Žižek disturbs the coordinates through which we think we understand contemporary events, and refuses to console us, to reassure us that there is an easy commonsensical answer to confessional conflicts.

When the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel called on Žižek to withdraw from the Jerusalem International Film Festival in July 2006, he was steadfast in his refusal to follow the old anti-Semitic line of, as he puts it, ‘boycotting the Jew’. Instead, he responded by declaring that he would attend as a guest of the director Udi Aloni rather than of the festival itself, this to be able to participate in further discussion of Aloni’s 2002 film *Local Angel: Theological Political Fragments* (and the DVD includes interviews about the film with Žižek as well as with Badiou). Žižek’s practical political proposal in debates around the film and the screening at the festival was that Jerusalem be given up, given up by Arabs and

Jews (and by Christians too, for that matter), and turned into a non-confessional space.

In this book about Žižek, ambiguous, playful and thought-provoking interventions are too-often reduced to moral evaluations and prescriptions for how he must be read. The increasingly desperate attempts to warn the reader about the false interpretations they might make of Žižek's work culminate in the final chapter where there is a description of what is presented as the core of the text – indeed of all of the different texts Žižek has written deceitfully treated as one gigantic seemingly internally-consistent text – that operates as a prescription for how he must be read. It is against this background that Žižek is fetishised, and treated as any other commodity, a commodity we should know has no intrinsic value but which we continue to exchange with the other commodities as if it does contain some secret.

Paradoxically, it has been in the apparently most fetishised representations of Žižek that the impossibility of providing a correct reading has been played out most explicitly, productively, subversively. The launch of the online open-access *International Journal of Žižek Studies* in 2007 plays your man at his own game; detailed scholarly exegeses of concepts and applications of his work jostle alongside the sale of Ž-branded clothing and crockery. He says he has never looked at the website, that it is something traumatic for him, and it does indeed condense and enact exactly what he has been trying to tell us about surfaces of ideological inscription and their fantasmatic underside of inhuman enjoyment. It is only by dissolving him into a system of celebrity commodity exchange that he can be read as he is and as he is not, both. The journal devoted to him and his works revels in the contradictoriness of its object and the antics of acolytes, which is the diametric opposite of a panoptic 'critical introduction' to what he says, why he says it and where he comes from. That is why this book fails to capture and define theoretical origins, depth and correct reading, and must fail if we are to come closer to getting Žižek.

**Ian Parker, March 2008**