

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, META-THEORY AND THE RETURN TO POLITICS

Book review

Žižek, S (2002) **Welcome to the desert of the real**. London: Verso.
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Against the backdrop of the 2001 September 11 World Trade Centre attack, Slavoj Žižek does what he does best: improvises a series of provocative philosophical speculations that bring together an abiding set of radical political concerns and a series of recurring theoretical motifs. The Palestinian struggle is one such political preoccupation, as is the growing wave of Right-wing support in Western Europe. The lingering after-effects of war in Eastern Europe, and the ongoing persistence of Holocaust debates likewise play their part. Žižek's book cuts its wit with an acerbic brand of critique, and, like much of his previous work, it maintains a sense of the manic, of Žižek thinking out aloud, at a dizzying pace, which, at times, we can only hope to match. The conjunctions of intricate theoretical arguments, pairings off of Adorno with Lacan, Arendt with Badiou, the conversions of theoretical positions across Benjamin, Butler, Hegel, Freud, and others, is genuinely stimulating, but it is also worrying. At times one cannot help but wonder whether the subtleties of certain of the arguments alluded to are ultimately the casualties of Žižek's polemical intent.

Žižek certainly deserves far more sustained critical attention in this regard, that is, in terms of how rapidly he moves from one theoretical register to another, in a way seemingly dismissive of the epistemological questions begged by such a rapid chopping and changing. It should be admitted that his skills of paraphrase - like the virtuosity of his intellectual mix-and-match - are not best attacked as a case of simple misreading. Simply put, his florid theoretical speculations *do* ultimately yield genuinely critical insights, even if the conjunction between theories is a little too easily assumed. In this respect it seems that Žižek's work at present occupies a kind of intellectual "state of grace". It is as if the Left has not as yet properly assimilated his charge on its accepted wisdom, as if the intellectual community as a whole has yet to formulate a robust enough critique with which to adequately respond to him.

The target of Žižek's critique (and this it shares with his previous title **Revolution at the gates**) is the contemporary Left, and more to the point, the perceived inability of this Left to muster any real politics of change. One feels a contradiction at hand here - the

meta-theoretician complaining about the lack of political action. Admittedly though, the split of politics and theory in Žižek is not quite that simple. Žižek's exercise is not simply that of applying a seemingly endless repertoire of theoretical figures to political problematics (although this is characteristic). Such applications are also managed as a way of suggesting political strategy. In this respect Žižek's critical voice is often close to prescriptive. His tone here verges on a kind of seductive authoritarianism that evokes something of the figure, or more appropriately perhaps, *the style*, of Lenin (as valorized by Žižek here and elsewhere). This tone also evokes, in what would seem an act of self-conscious irony, something of the charm, something of the "ideological pull", the interpolative subtlety of power which features as possibly *the* recurring concern of all Žižek's books.

To focus more directly on the arguments presented in the book - Žižek wastes little time in asserting the idea of a kind of ideological censorship as endemic to liberal democracy: "We feel free because we lack the language to articulate out unfreedom" (p2). Furthermore, he is dogmatic, even if articulately so, that the current "liberal democratic consensus" of the Western world - the situation of a "post-politics" as he later refers to it - allows for only nominal deviation between options. The choice, offered us by the "war in terror" between "democracy" or "fundamentalism", for example, is not a choice at all, especially if the only posed alternative to the latter is the US's liberal democracy. These are terms, claims Žižek, that are far less separate than they appear. Global capitalism, he argues, is, in a very real sense "fundamentalist". The US's much vaunted concerns over human rights and global democracy - here seemingly recapitulating Chomsky - are by far secondary to its interests in oil reserves. Hence the situation where the "American way of life" is best preserved by preserving undemocratic regimes in certain parts of the world, because, quite simply, a democratic awakening could well give rise to *anti-American attitudes*. In a more off-hand style: "Every feature attributed by the US to the threatening fundamentalist 'other', is already present within the heart of the USA" (p43).

Complimenting the terms of this argument, Žižek suggests that the Taliban represents less a regression into ultra-fundamentalism, a deep traditionalist tendency, than it represents the outcome of a set of international politics, not the least of which was the support of the US itself. Similarly, in the case of Afghanistan, what we have is "far from an ancient realm outside the scope of modernization" - on the contrary, "the very existence of Afghanistan is the result of the interplay of foreign powers" (p55). As a result, the only way to really grasp what happened on September 11, for Žižek, is by locating it within the context of the antagonisms of global capitalism, as the "inherent tension between capitalism and its own excess". Simply put, the war against terrorism is not our struggle, "but a struggle internal to the capitalist universe" (p55). Granted, if the point here is to suggest a return to Marxist and even Leninist forms of analysis, Žižek seems quite simply right, no arguments there. But do we not here risk the old fallacy of the meta-narrative; are all our political ills, our wars, our sympathized (or engaged) struggles over territory, representational value, ideology, and so on, reducible, once again, to the old enemy of Capitalism? Žižek here seems to be lacking exactly that elusive and complex quality that made his earlier texts so compelling: the multiple theoretical combinations he had used, not only to mount interesting forms of critique, but to "think" its objects, to give some real conceptual depth to the psychic workings of

ideology and power. Žižek here seems willing, perhaps as a result of his knee-jerk reaction against neo-liberal post-modernism, to be reductive in his analytic frameworks.

Žižek seems more fleet-foot of late with psychoanalytic rather than Marxist forms of critique. One of the book's most challenging postulates, for example, is the idea – given to us by psychoanalysis – that instead of the old warning not to *mistake fiction for reality* (i.e. “the postmodern doxa according to which “reality” is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction we misperceive as a substantial autonomous entity” (p19)) what we should be aware of is not mistaking *reality for fiction*. That is, “we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of [what is real]...the real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalise it”(p19). The critical task then is less that of stripping away what is fictitious of the real, but of making apparent *what is real within the fictitious*. So, in contrast to Barthes notion of the “effect of the real”, by which he refers to how the text makes us accept its fictional products as real, we should be astute enough to realize that the real – that is “the real” inasmuch as it exists around the nucleus of the traumatic encounter – may produce “effects of the text”, and hence ultimately exist only as semblance. Or, as Žižek himself puts it: “More difficult than to denounce/unmask (what appears as) reality as fiction is to recognize the part of fiction in “real” reality” (p19).

This is mind-numbingly paradoxical stuff, and as usual it is being put to work to try and outsmart that most intricate of creatures – political ideology. This is one of the means through which Žižek reverses one of the popular “critical” narratives that have abounded around 9/11 – it is not the case that this event represents a terrifying incursion of the real, a potential kind of ideological corrective that would end America's “holiday from history”. Precisely because there is something real to this event, because there *is* a traumatic, excessive basis to it, we will be unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and must experience it as a kind of nightmarish apparition. The “passion for the real” then, that breaking out of ideology, that violent confrontation with an unmasked reality, which Žižek, following Badiou, reads as characteristic of the 20th century, is fundamentally misguided; it itself is *a passion of the semblance*. Rather than the ultimate real concealed beneath multiple layers of imaginary/symbolic veils, “the very idea that beneath the deceptive appearances, there lies hidden some ultimate real thing...is the ultimate appearance ... this real thing is a fantasmatic spectre whose presence guarantees the consistency of our symbolic edifice, thus enabling us to avoid confronting its constitutive inconsistency (‘antagonism’)” (pp31-32). This then is not a case of unlocking the blind-spot of an ideological system, rather it is the way in which its “constitutive inconsistency” is ever more furiously protected, “knitted back” into the fabric of social experience. Put differently, one of the conditions of possibility for effective ideological functioning (one supposes) is that it produces myths of its limitations, myths of its own threatened rupture.

Towards the same ideology-unravelling ends Žižek takes aim at the security of binaries, suggesting that lines of division are often set at the wrong co-ordinates, and intentionally so, so as to conceal a set of unfortunate truths. Hence his proclamation that the line of division of contemporary politics is no longer between the Left and the Right, but rather between the global field of “moderate” post-politics and extreme Right repoliticization. It is this apparent dilemma that leads Žižek to thinking through some worrying postulates. Liberal politics, he claims, is the party of the Non-Event, the

“liberal-democratic centre’s function is to guarantee that nothing will really happen in politics” (p151). More cutting yet: the Left has been reduced to a “reactive force”, its central role is opposing the Right’s populist initiatives. It is against this that he poses a nostalgia for the Rightest “willingness to act”, to set the pace, to determine the problematic of political struggle. More alarmingly yet – and here Žižek’s Leninist leanings come strongly to the fore – he wonders whether what we need is less “the Fascist with a human face” that “the freedom fighter with an inhuman face?” (p82). Binary categorizations are ideologically functional in another way also – such bald inside-outside distinctions often function to conceal a variety of internal inconsistencies. Hence Žižek’s argument that the true opposition today is not between the First and Third Worlds, but rather between the “American global empire and its colonies” (p146). For Žižek, European modernity is not as easily assimilated to the American “multiculturalist global empire”. It is precisely in view of this fact that he suggests that the real political and ideological catastrophe of 9/11 was that of Europe; the total lack of an autonomous European initiative to do anything but tow the American politico-ideological line. Žižek’s extended point is that Europe should assemble itself as an autonomous force, *as a counterpoint to the world supremacy of USA*. Here we find the theorist doing what theorists of this sort typically fail to, that is, combining his critical acumen with a concrete political directive. And if Žižek’s work does now seem to risk becoming formulaic, a self-repeating system of pastiche (and one can imagine the confrontation now, a situation made possible by the very self-consciousness with Žižek courts his intellectual heritage, Žižek admonishing his eager followers, “You may be Žižekians, but / am a Lacanian!”), then his salvation would seem to lie in the increasing forcefulness of his politics.

It may now be the case that Žižek has come to trust theory too much. Worse yet, it may be the case that Žižek is becoming increasingly routine, *stylised*, in his application of theory to politics. If the interchange between these two domains has become a matter of complacency, then Slavoj Žižek may be facing up to his limitations as a critical thinker. If, on the other hand, such a versatile set of theoretical tools comes to crystallize around a concrete political programme, then we would be confronting Žižek in a role seemingly forgotten to modernity, we would, in other words, be facing up to *Žižek the ideologue*.