

ŽIŽEK: AMBIVALENCE AND OSCILLATION

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Abstract.

Writing by the Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalytic researcher Slavoj Žižek has assumed immense importance in cultural and political theory in the last ten years, and his combination of ideas from Hegelian phenomenology, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist politics has provided new ways of thinking about the relationship between ideology, subjectivity and revolutionary change. This article reviews the way that Žižek juggles different theoretical elements in his work, and serves as a brief introduction to a body of writing that is confusing and contradictory. Two points are highlighted. First, that the theoretical elements (Hegel, Lacan and Marx) are used by Žižek in a quite idiosyncratic manner, and we need to notice how he moulds them for his own purposes. Second, that there is an intimate connection between the “political” project that Žižek is elaborating and radical (perhaps even more radical) artistic practices in Slovenia.

INTRODUCTION.

Let us start with a true story. In the middle of a crisis and crackdown in Slovenia toward the end of the 1980s Slavoj Žižek telephones an academic colleague in Britain late at night. This is before Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia and when the League of Slovene Communists was making some last desperate attempts to maintain power. The crackdown was directed at the opposition movement, in which Žižek and the artistic political grouping *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, were active. So, Žižek is on the phone during this political crisis in an agitated state. He tells his colleague how bad things are, that there is a total clampdown on the opposition. His colleague is sympathetic. Žižek goes on to tell him that things are even worse than that, for in every workplace a “commissar” has been appointed to monitor and control dissident activity. His colleague is very sympathetic, even slightly alarmed by the picture Žižek is painting. And it is even worse than that, Žižek says, for even in the universities, in every department a commissar has been appointed to keep order. His colleague in Britain exclaims that this is indeed dreadful. And, Žižek then informs him that there is only one good thing in the midst of all this. What is that, his colleague asks. In my department, Žižek says, “I am the commissar”.

GRIPPING AND ESCAPING.

Žižek was born after the second world war in Slovenia, was part of the opposition movement to the Tito regime and within that opposition movement he lectured and wrote about Marxist political theory, Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In the late 1980s he became known to an English-speaking audience, with a string of books starting with **The sublime object of ideology** (Žižek, 1989). He is still based in the University in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, but you will find him popping up everywhere.

There are two key issues that make him worth reading. One is how we are caught; how we are caught by dominant conventions of artistic practice, how we are caught by ideology so we find ourselves thinking and feeling in line with it, and how we are caught by fantasy so that we are enjoying at an unconscious level the stuff that is so poisonous for us. The other key issue he addresses is how we can escape; how it is possible to produce creative innovative work, how it is possible to be revolutionary, how it possible to engage in transformative personal change. Now Žižek does not address these two issues in a direct formulaic way. He doesn't offer a guide to being an artist, a political strategy or some kind of self-help advice. But he does provoke questions about how we are caught and how we might escape, and at its best his writing is insightful and funny. It veers from analysis of popular culture to quite difficult theory, and it homes in on exactly that point of connection, that point of tension between where we are gripped by something and where we can break from it.

Žižek's work is closely bound up with the activities of the Slovenian opposition movement to the Tito regime in the 1980, an opposition movement that was heavily influenced by a peculiar explosive mixture of punk and post-structuralist philosophy. One striking element of this movement was the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK). The NSK (whose core members are mostly graduates of fine art from Ljubljana) threw themselves into a project to reconstruct Slovene culture, but in such a way as to make explicit that it this culture (like all "national cultures") was only a fabrication, constructed out of diverse elements. Even the German term Neue Slowenische Kunst marks the "borrowed" nature of this national art movement, and the band Laibach, one of the most well-known components of NSK outside Slovenia, takes its name from the German name for Ljubljana. The three main components of NSK are Laibach, a theatre group Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung, and a five-man art collective IRWIN. NSK are one important influence on the way that Žižek writes about how we are caught and how we might escape.

An artistic, political and personal strategy for dealing with that grip of conventions, the grip of ideology and fantasy is crystallised in one key concept in Žižek's writing and a key concept in the work of NSK, that of "overidentification". NSK and Žižek noticed something crucial about the way the ideological apparatus worked in Yugoslavia, that it required the phenomenon of "dissidence" as a kind of buffer zone between individuals and the state. The knowing cynical distance from the ruling ideology, the fact that everyone knew it was a sham, actually enabled it to function all the better. People could grumble about how voting never changed anything, that you could never believe what politicians said, that conforming with the regulations was bureaucratic nonsense, but this did not stop them from going along with things and even being happier to do so when they knew they had no real part in it. Overidentification, on the other hand, takes the system at its word and plays so close to it that it cannot bear your participation. In that way you are more dangerous. One of the component groups of NSK got an award in 1987 for their poster celebrating the day of youth and Tito's birthday. But this turned into the "poster scandal" when it was discovered that they had submitted an old Nazi

poster, and then the strategy of overidentification become politically charged. Another example Žižek has given (and whether you believe it or not is another matter) is from elections in the 1980s when the opposition published a newspaper on the eve of the poll with a headline that predicted a victory for the League of Slovene Communists. Žižek and colleagues were brought in to be questioned, but they had done nothing wrong, merely drawn attention to the fact that it was of course inconceivable that the Communists would not win an election.

When Žižek analyses something it is as if, for that moment of analysis, he overidentifies with it. Or rather, that we must also overidentify with it, taking it extremely seriously to explode it from within, to unravel how the artistic conventions in terms of its formal construction, the ideological motifs as its explicit and implicit semiotic structure and the fantasy elements that tie us to it as something enjoyable function together. You could say that Žižek homes in on the point of ambivalence, the point where you feel torn in different directions at the same time. Overidentification works because it draws attention to the way the overt message in art, ideology and day-dreaming is supplemented by an obscene element, the hidden reverse of the message that contains the illicit charge of enjoyment. When overidentification brings that double-sided ambivalent aspect of the message to the light it can be a more subversive strategy than simple avoidance. So, for example, when you listen to Laibach or view an IRWIN exhibition or attend a performance or Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung you may simultaneously be fascinated and disturbed. One way of separating out and dealing with that ambivalence is to force yourself to make a decision as to which bits are “progressive” and which bits are “reactionary” (Arns, 2003). Žižek’s best writing uses a combination of political theory, philosophy and psychoanalysis to show how that ambivalence functions.

This means that you can read Žižek now to get the good news, but you also need to know about the downside, which is where attention to that ambivalent zone between being caught and being able to escape is resolved a little too easily in his writing. This is where an attention to ambivalence turns into an oscillation.

POLITICAL OSCILLATION.

In the story about being appointed commissar during the crisis in Slovenia we have one compass point – something symptomatic we might say – as a way to read Žižek. He oscillates between the most extreme and outrageous refusal of law and order and the most craven and obedient embrace of it. You can see that oscillation between refusal and embrace of structures of power played out in relation to each of the components of his work, in relation to his use of psychoanalysis, philosophy and politics. Sometimes that oscillation is hidden, and you have to do a little work to detect the way he is stretching ideas a bit one way or the other, sliding backwards and forwards between wanting to obstinately set himself against something or to just as avidly attach himself to a system of thought or a structure of power. It is in that precise sense that he is a consummate Stalinist. He loves to say this in interviews to annoy Western liberals. He is a Stalinist in the classic sense of veering backwards and forwards between – let us put this in 1930s terms when this Stalinist oscillation was most disastrous – ultraleftism and popular frontism.

Remember that the Communist Parties in the 1930s guided by Stalin at one moment responded to the rise of fascism by labelling the social democrats “social fascists”,

refused to make any alliance with them and claimed that the Nazis would be a flash in the pan, “after Hitler us” was one slogan. And at another moment the Stalinists set up broad alliances that would include any and every liberal or conservative who was queasy about fascist tactics, dissolving themselves into these alliances as popular fronts that labelled anyone who was pointing to the intimate link between fascism and capitalism in crisis as troublemakers. At one moment against the state and any organisation that they did not control, and at another moment acting as the police for all organisations, including the state.

Perhaps Žižek was not the commissar in his department. Perhaps he was exaggerating the whole thing for effect. In a way, that is beside the point. And this is the first thing you need to grasp if you want to read Žižek. You need to grasp that if you want to avoid being totally exasperated and throwing the books across the room in rage and disappointment. Truth and fiction are arranged in his writing very differently from the way you would expect them to be, and this warning applies not only to his use of political theory, but also to philosophy and psychoanalysis. Let us turn to the role of psychoanalysis in general and Lacan in particular in Žižek’s work next.

PSYCHOANALYTIC OSCILLATION.

Psychoanalytically speaking, and drawing on the work of Lacan, we could put it like this. The hysteric finds a way of speaking the truth through lies. Implausible accusations, complaints, dissimulation, symbolic representation by which there is conversion of repressed thoughts into bits of the body, these lies are the ways in which the hysteric is able to communicate something that has been repressed to others. And in psychoanalysis the stories, metaphors, fantastic constructions addressed to the analyst may eventually be the way that the hysteric speaks the truth. In the midst of the lies they realise that they are speaking about themselves in the only way that is possible for them to do so. For Lacan language itself is always a medium which blocks and distorts communication, so how could it be otherwise. The hysteric is speaking the truth in the only way they can. In this sense Žižek conveys in the anecdote about being commissar something of the contradictory truth of the situation and his position, simultaneously victim of the crackdown and complicit in it. You see the oscillation between the two positions he adopts in his theory expressed for a moment in this position.

On the other hand, the obsessional neurotic – and for Freud obsessional neurosis is a “dialect” of hysteria – configures this relation between truth and lies in a completely different way. There is a brief discussion of this difference in one of Žižek’s little essays on NSK (Žižek, 1994). You could think of classic hysteria as a strategy which locks things up in the body, taking them out of the circuit of communication and turning things that cannot be spoken into bodily symptoms (paralysed arms, coughs, headaches and so on). As a dialect of hysteria, on the other hand, the more stereotypically masculine obsessional neurosis locks things up in the head, so that there is a self-defeating strategy of endless calculations about relationships, rumination about problems, hesitation about what should be done etc. And while the hysteric finds a way of speaking the truth through lies, for the obsessional neurotic things are precisely the reverse. The obsessional pedantically refers to “facts” all the time, enumerates reasons why this or that option is not possible, and so speaks the empirical truth in order to tell lies.

It is not possible to get very far in psychoanalysis unless the analysand – the patient who comes for analysis – is “hystericised”; that is, unless there is a shift from the obsessional strategy of using reference to empirically true facts to tell lies – repeated enactments of obstacles (“there is no way I can change for this or that reason” and so on) to addressing the meaning of the symptom – to the hysterical questioning and self-questioning that finds a clearing through the tangles of lies that surround them in order that they may speak the truth about their predicament and what they themselves are doing to keep themselves tangled up in it. Now, even though Žižek delights in telling anyone who cares to listen that he is a pure obsessional, there is also an oscillation at work here. For what he is also doing is engaging in hysterical complaint, and sometimes he even recognises that he is implicated in the things he is complaining about. In this sense, Žižek complaining about the state crackdown expresses his position, and you can indeed read it as a joke. A joke is one way of telling a lie in order to tell the truth. And Žižek’s books are full of jokes. On the other hand, he does not always recognise the part he plays in what he complains about.

When I visited him in Ljubljana in September 2003 to talk about the draft manuscript of my book (Parker, 2004) he spent quite some time complaining about this or that person who he said hated him and who took money from the state. One thing worth knowing when you see all this Slovene stuff and the fantastic innovative interventions by various components of NSK is that although Žižek is the best-known Slovenian outside Slovenia he is actually quite marginal inside Slovenia. There are other writers mixing Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxist political theory and Hegelian philosophy who are more popular than Žižek inside Slovenia. One figure that was mentioned by other people I spoke to there was Rastko Močnik, with whom Žižek had worked closely in the 1980s. They split for messy reasons that I can’t go into now. On the last day that I met up with Žižek he turned round to me on the stairwell of the new apartment block where he now lives, part of a complex where the diplomats and ministers live, and said, “and you know who really hates me, Rastko Močnik, and do you know what, he gets money from the state, lots of money, and lives in one of these expensive apartments”. I was too taken aback to point out that he, Žižek, did also live in one of these expensive apartments.

PHILOSOPHICAL OSCILLATION.

But also, in his complaint there is a question about whether or not it is right to take money from the State, and in Žižek’s work there is an oscillation between rejection of the state and an embrace of the State. And you can see in his work a mirroring of this oscillation across the domains of politics, psychoanalysis and philosophy. I have already drawn attention to the oscillation in his political stance, and here the signifier “Stalinist” is fairly accurate. You can also see the oscillation at work in the domain of psychoanalysis, where there is one moment hysterical rejection and accusation directed at the Other, and at the next moment an obsessional compliance and attempt to be part of the groups that seem to you to have power. Sometimes in the psychoanalytic domain you see this oscillation expressed in Žižek’s work even more dramatically when there is at one moment an emphasis on the importance of the symbolic order and accession to the symbolic order as a way of avoiding psychosis, and on the other hand, a kind of romanticising of an individual “act” which would touch the real and shatter the symbolic coordinates of a situation. In Lacanian terms, that kind of “act” would actually be seen as something psychotic rather than hysteric. You will find a brief discussion and defence of that notion in one of Žižek’s essays on Laibach (Žižek, 1994).

And you can see that oscillation at work in the domain of philosophy, in the way he reads and uses Hegel. For example, at one moment there is an attention in Žižek's writing to the motif of "negativity" in Hegel. Žižek's Hegel is at this moment a revolutionary figure, repudiating power. Hegel is sometimes portrayed as the philosopher of the Prussian state, warranting the state as the culmination of the dialectical evolution of world spirit. In Žižek's version of Hegel most of the time there is no closure at the end of a dialectical process; there is always something that refuses the system, a nightmarish irrational point of negativity, and that negativity is also the sparking point of something new. But at another moment Žižek makes exactly the same decision Hegel himself made with respect to the opposition between "civil society" and the state. For Hegel, the state was a historically progressive unifying force, the place within which reasoned debate could happen, and the realm of "civil society" – irrational, backward, prejudiced – might need to be opposed.

You can see that Hegelian formula being deployed by Žižek in one of his essays that is theoretical warrant for one of the most important political projects of NSK following the independence of Slovenia in 1991. NSK responded to this independence by parodying the paraphernalia of the new state by transforming NSK into "NSK State in Time". It is a "State in Time" because it rests upon the accumulation of the idiosyncratic experiences of its citizens over time rather than the systematising of a collective identity in a particular geographical space. The first "embassy" was set up in Moscow in 1992, and consulates have been set up in many countries around the world since as temporary installations in places as diverse as art exhibitions to hotel rooms to kitchens. NSK issues its own passports to citizens of the "first global state in the universe" at roving passport offices and on the internet (www.nskstate.com). Žižek provides a theoretical gloss on this NSK initiative in one of his little essays on the movement (Žižek, 1993b). In Europe in the 1990s, Žižek says, the signifier "Bosnia" draws attention to the disintegration of the State, and while the state is disappearing there is an explosion of ethnic hatreds, gang warfare and lawlessness. While the old Left saw the State as being an oppressive limiting institution, what we learn from Bosnia is that the State was also the guarantee against complete social breakdown. What NSK State in Time provides is some kind of symbolic structure but one that is not limited to national frontiers. Now ok I am happy to sign up to that and I have my NSK State passport, but there is an ambiguity, an oscillation once again, in Žižek's own argument in favour of the State. At one moment there is total refusal and at another moment an embrace of the State. At one moment this can be fairly benign, radical even, but at another moment – as when Žižek argues in favour of Slovene membership of NATO, in favour of NATO bombing of Serbia, in favour of the death penalty – it is more problematic.

IDEOLOGICAL AMBIVALENCE.

I just want to make one comment more about NSK here. It seems to me that there is a disturbing progressive political intervention here, that out of the belly of East European Stalinism this is a movement that actually tackles the ideological grip that Stalinism had. It isn't something the non-Stalinist Left, have really been able to deal with. Even entirely correct revolutionary Marxist (Trotskyist) political-economic analysis of how the Russian revolution degenerated and the bureaucracy crystallised does not give leverage against totalitarianism at the level of fantasy. The NSK strategy of overidentification is a way of intervening at this level, in a way that tackles the connection between artistic

representation, ideology and fantasy. The intervention would not be progressive if it was not also disturbing. And when I ask NSK activists, the IRWIN artist group for example, what the political project is, they locate it in socialist anti-fascist politics. So, when Žižek writes an article in defence of NSK with a title like “Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?” (Žižek, 1993a), we have to ask why he begs the question. It is I think a quite mischievous and misleading way of posing the question of what Laibach and NSK are doing. Again you see ambivalence in Žižek’s work, here at a political level, and this time not terribly helpful. This time it is ambivalence that does not only open things up, as ideology critique, but closes them down so the oscillation between progressive and reactionary aspects is concealed, actually to operate in his work ideologically. It is also worth noting another element of this kind of equivocation, which is where he develops very interesting analysis of the way anti-semitism functions in European culture but then embraces the idea of “Europe” and celebrates Christianity as the new beginning, as something that broke from Judaism and is a world historical advance. Here again, you have some of the more unpleasant aspects of Hegelian world history being deployed.

There are different components of NSK State, and this is theorised by NSK activists as follows; IRWIN are the State artists, Laibach are the politicians, and Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung are the Church. And then, we might want to ask who the police and security apparatus would be in this state. One of Žižek’s favourite anecdotes is that after he narrowly failed to win election to the collective presidency of Slovenia after the secession from Yugoslavia he was offered a ministerial post, perhaps concerned with art or culture. He refused, saying that if he were to take such a position he would settle for nothing less than ministry of the interior or head of the secret police. We have to ask whether taking up such a position in the state apparatus would still be “overidentification” and whether NSK State in Time is really the kind of “Suprematist organism” that needs a secret police (Arns, 2003).

READ ŽIŽEK!

What I do in my book is to show how you can read Žižek (Parker, 2004). Not by identifying one theoretical position, for there is no such single fixed theoretical position in his work, but by mapping out the terrain of his writing. This includes an attention to the way he uses Lacan to read Hegel and the way he puts that reading to work in the domain of politics, politics that looks Marxist to many of us in the West, but is not Marxist at all. To put it simply I claim that he does not so much mix Marx, Hegel and Lacan, but that he is really only interested in Hegel as such, and it is certain peculiar elements of Hegel that he wants to focus on. He uses Lacan in a particular way to pick up those elements. So, you need to know what Lacan is for Žižek, how he reads Hegel and how he uses those ideas for certain political purposes. And those political issues cannot be understood without some account of the formation and disintegration of the Yugoslav state apparatus, the particular way that the opposition movement in Slovenia started with punk, and a particular angle on power and transformation that we get from the NSK practices of which he is an intimate part. And, really, notwithstanding the problems with his work, he is worth reading and worth engaging with because by identifying the problems we can, I think, get somewhere in thinking about connections between artistic practice, personal change and political transformation that we could not get without him.

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