

THE DIMINISHING REMAINDER

Parker, I (2004) **Slavoj Žižek: A critical introduction**. London & Sterling, VA: Pluto Press. ISBN 0-7453-2071-6 pbk. Pages viii + 171.

Derek Hook
Institute of Social Psychology
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
WC2A 2AE
d.w.hook@lse.ac.uk

The task of writing an introduction to the work of Slavoj Žižek brings with it a unique set of challenges. One such challenge lies with the fact that Žižek is a thinker less concerned with devising an original set of concepts than toying with an elusive Hegelian-Marxist-Lacanian assemblage of ideas. As such, it is often less an introduction to Žižek that we need than an introduction to the formidable edifice of ideas that forms the foundation of his various critical speculations. That said, there has been no shortage of ostensibly “critical” introductions to Žižek. At least two have preceded Parker’s treatment; these titles provide the immediate benchmarks against which his text should be assessed.

Kay’s (2003) **Žižek: A critical introduction** succeeds admirably in connecting Žižek’s cultural and political criticism to the vocabulary of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and manages to do so without surrendering the complexity of the material. Her consideration of Žižek’s politics is, unfortunately, toothless by comparison. **Slavoj Žižek** by Tony Myers (2003) provides the quick-fix; a succession of rapid illuminations that helps one grasp Žižek in a series of “eureka” moments which, alas, dissipate all too quickly in the lack of a more sustained engagement.

The first obvious difference between Parker’s text and these two earlier books is that Parker provides a thorough historical contextualization – in the form of a discussion of the rise and decomposition of the Yugoslav state – of the conditions of (im)possibility from which Žižek’s thought emerges. (In speaking of “conditions of impossibility” Parker intends to draw our attention to the fact that concepts are sometimes utilized precisely so as to render points of apparent historical impossibility comprehensible). The problem with this attempt at contextualization is twofold. The compression of analysis required to put Žižek’s political thought in dialogue with the formation of Slovenia is, firstly, difficult to adequately accommodate in 25 pages. Secondly, the historical contexts that feature as the backcloth of Žižek’s theorizing are sometimes described with reference to psychoanalytic motifs (repression, the symptom), a fact that detracts somewhat from the objective of contextualizing theory. Now, although Parker is clearly aware of relevant

debates in this respect - charges of the *under-contextualization* of theory versus charges of the *under-theorization* of context – the problem here lies with his attempting a little of both strategies within a single chapter.

Where Parker certainly does improve upon Key and Myers is in the extent to which he is willing to adopt a resolutely antagonistic stance to Žižek's thought. This is notably the case with regard to Žižek's utilization of Marxism, which, as Parker does well to demonstrate, in fact falls well short of many of the basic tenets of Marxism, something missed by Kay and Myers alike. Parker usefully collates a series of the most biting critiques of Žižek, including Judith Butler's claim that Žižek installs a heterosexual matrix at the structure of culture and Teresa Ebert's argument that Žižek transforms a materialist ideology critique into a Hegelian idealism that ultimately dissolves class struggle. To these he adds some of his own criticisms. He points to Žižek's frequent reliance upon (and under acknowledgement of) Joan Copjec's writings, and makes clear, following the lead of Ernesto Laclau, that Žižek's thought is not actually organized around a truly *political* reflection, but is instead a *psychoanalytic* discourse that draws its examples from the politico-ideological field. The insufficiency of Žižek's Marxism is deftly handled: Žižek's attempt to connect Marxism and Christianity is contrasted to Marx's call to abolish religion; the implications of reframing Marxism within an all-encompassing Hegelianism are shown up as damagingly depoliticizing; Žižek's pathologization of Marxist politics as "something obsessional and futile ... a hysterical complaint" (2004:103) is called into question. Žižek's over-eager extrapolation of clinical concepts beyond the domain of practical psychoanalysis is also questioned - "the clinical content of Lacan's work is stripped out and replaced with abstract formulations about the nature of the subject" (2004:117). Crucial here is Parker's well-warranted attack on how Žižek's deploys the Lacanian notion of "the act" – the catastrophic action of the subject that destroys their symbolic co-ordinates - in increasingly inappropriate and gratuitous ways. Ernesto Laclau, furthermore, is again brought into the fray to oppose Žižek's contention that capitalism may be equated to the Lacanian real (a category error given that capitalism operates as part of *the symbolic*).

Perhaps the weakest of Parker's general critiques lies with his suspicions of Žižek's recent turn to the philosophy of Christianity, which is thought to be "freighted" with a series of anti-Semitic values. As well-intentioned as such criticism is, Parker is not always able to marshal convincingly enough the evidence his critique requires. Take for example his claim that Žižek's historical counter-position of Judaic Law (as the rule of an omnipotent terrifying God), to Christian Love (as the offer of redemption under the guidance of Christ as shepherd), "is actually simply a repetition of one of the stories Catholic children are told over and over again about the Jews in Sunday school" (2004:120).

Parker's enthusiasm for Žižek's work is sometimes concealed by the need to engender criticism; in this his book is again to be differentiated from the more reverent and didactic approaches of Myers and Kay. This impacts upon which of Žižek's writings are foregrounded in the text; there is less of **The sublime object of ideology** than one might expect – a book, one suspects, much beloved by Parker - and a great deal more of Žižek's outline on six forms of politics as contained in an article Žižek published in **Critical Inquiry** in 1998. This is a choice motivated no doubt by the latitude it offers Parker to play out Žižek's weaknesses as theorist of social change. Does such a treatment allow a proportionate focus on all of Žižek's diverse texts? No; but it does

enable a way with which we may start unravelling the more questionable assumptions of Žižek's political writings.

We have then an assiduously critical book, one which is to be complimented both for the breadth of its reading and the thoroughness with which it tracks Žižek's intellectual and political biography to date. (The meticulousness that Parker brings to annotating the central arguments of his text, to tracking associated figures within the Slovene Lacanian School, and to tracing Žižek's many obscure web publications, itself warrants mentioning). The book's shortcoming is as an *introductory* text. For the non-initiate, a sense of giddiness is to be expected from the compression necessitated by the short rapid-fire chapters on Hegel, Lacan, Marx. Each of these exhibits a condensed staggering of conceptual motifs, an approach that can be rewarding in sheer intellectual density, but that by no means yields an immediately accessible text. Parker's acuteness of summary, along with the galloping pace of the succession of ideas needed to ground an account of Žižek's "raw materials of thought", sometimes results in a seemingly cryptic surface (which, in the chapter on psychoanalysis, may be part of the point), which has the potential to frustrate the newcomer.

On second reading however, much of the ostensibly cryptic surface seems to give way, and the carefulness of Parker's interventions in the material becomes apparent. He is often successful in wrenching oft-revisited theoretical ideas out of the complacency of their typical stylizations (many routine Lacanianisms, "the direction of the treatment", "there is no sexual relationship", "there is no Other of the Other" and so on, benefit from such a treatment). Parker succeeds in bringing these notions together as a flow of concepts that resists the usual segmentation of ideas that introductory texts often fall prone to. Žižek here sometimes slips out of the narrative, and something like Parker's enjoyment in the challenges of the conceptual terrain rises to the surface. This seems particularly so in reference to the difficulty and pleasure of marking out the structurations of Lacanian practice in the third chapter of the book; a "jouissance" – if this is not to make light of the concept - of Parker's labours at reformulation, and of the reader's efforts at grasping challenging material anew. One cannot help but suspect here that Parker's book is at its best when Žižek is left waiting in the wings, displaced, in other words, from the mastery of his own texts. What Parker ultimately delivers is a book that is frequently something quite other than Žižek, and that may in fact be the best critical guide to Žižek we can hope for.

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