

Philosophy Insights

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The Subject of Politics

Slavoj Žižek's Political Philosophy

Henrik Jøker Bjerre & Carsten Bagge Laustsen

*“... ideology is
already at work in
everything we experi-
ence as ‘reality’...”*

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This edition published by *Humanities-Ebooks, LLP*,
Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

ISBN 978-1-84760-169-8 Pdf

ISBN 978-1-84760-170-4 Kindle

Contents

A Note on the Authors	7
Acknowledgements	8
Introduction	9
Chapter 1. Lacanian interventions: Psychoanalysis as a theory of society	16
<i>The unconscious</i>	16
<i>Back to Lacan</i>	21
<i>Discourse analysis or critique of ideology</i>	24
<i>You remind me of Emmanuel Ravelli!</i>	26
Chapter 2. The ideological fantasm: Žižek's sociology	32
<i>We know very well...</i>	34
<i>The mirror stage as critique of ideology</i>	42
<i>Fetishism as a political form</i>	46
<i>The two sides of the social bond</i>	49
Chapter 3. A world out of joint: Žižek's diagnosis of contemporary society	54
<i>The fall of the Father</i>	55
<i>Nationalism and ethnic conflicts</i>	61
<i>Multiculturalism and racism</i>	65
<i>Terrorism and 11 September</i>	71

Chapter 4. The revolutionary subject: Žižek's ethical and political horizon	77
<i>I think not, therefore I am</i>	79
<i>The Proletarian</i>	86
<i>It is the economy, stupid!</i>	93
<i>Postmodernism as the new ideological superstructure of capitalism</i>	96
<i>St. Paul on the barricade</i>	99
<i>Communism, of course!</i>	102
Chapter 5. Did somebody say totalitarianism?	
Žižek's critics.	106
<i>The rebellion against the father</i>	107
<i>Passions of the real</i>	110
<i>The useful idiot</i>	117
Bibliography	120

A Note on the Authors

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Stuart Pethick for a much appreciated proof reading of the manuscript and Mark Addis and Richard Grivil at HEB for their patience and good advice.

Introduction

Professor James Miller once remarked on Slavoj Žižek's effect on American academia that, 'He was like Diogenes the Cynic parachuted into the American academy' (Mead 2003: 2). Like Diogenes in ancient Greece, who lived in a barrel and openly displayed his disrespect for any public authority, Žižek sometimes causes a stir because of his provocative statements and unorthodox approaches to the classics of philosophy. He is a philosopher, political thinker, psychoanalyst and sociologist. He is one of the most requested intellectuals in the world, not least because of his poignant and often surprising diagnoses of contemporary society and his very entertaining style. By analysing everything from differences in the construction of toilets in different cultures to mainstream Hollywood productions, and from Hegel's logics to the latest landmarks in neuroscience, Žižek has created a unique ability to keep his audience spellbound.

The enjoyment in reading or listening to Žižek, however, is double-edged. Often you are having an excellent time, while at the same time being told that you are petty bourgeois, narrow minded, racist, evil, or perverted. This somewhat sadomasochistic relation to his audience and readers has turned Žižek into something as rare as an academic superstar. He is a rare showman and constantly surprises by turning a problem upside down ('I agree with you, but my point would be much more radical and *exactly* the opposite'), he draws on endless jokes and examples, and he both writes and talks in an almost manic fashion. 'I discovered, when I was in analysis, that if I stopped talking, the analyst would ask me very unpleasant questions', as he explained at a conference in Sweden in 2002. 'Therefore, I usually continue without pause'.

Slavoj Žižek was born in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on 21 March 1949. He grew up in Tito's Yugoslavia, and received his education from the University of Ljubljana, where he graduated with an MA in philo-

sophy in 1975 with a thesis on post-structuralist French thinkers, after having already published his first book during his education. In spite of his obvious talent, however, he had to settle for an outsider position from the beginning. Because of his charismatic and somewhat rebellious style and his explicit interest in French philosophy, the Yugoslavian authorities were simply uncomfortable with letting him teach, and after serving military duty he had to seek refuge in the Institute of Sociology, via the influence of some friends. In retrospect, however, Žižek has described his difficulties in the years from 1975 to 1979 as a stroke of luck: ‘I think that if I were to have got a job at that point, I would now be a poor stupid unknown professor in Ljubljana, probably dabbling in a little bit of Derrida, a little bit of Heidegger, a little bit of Marxism and so on’ (Daly/ Žižek 2004: 32–33).

The difficult conditions and the opportunity to continue his work at the sociological institute also forced Žižek to engage more systematically with other areas of thought, such as the sociological and political. Having delivered his Ph.D. thesis in 1981, he moved to Paris to investigate the philosophical and psychoanalytical milieu around Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. Lacan died in 1981, but Žižek nonetheless obtained a very direct training in psychoanalysis through Lacan’s son-in-law, Jacques-Alain Miller. Under his supervision, Žižek wrote his second dissertation, this time within psychoanalysis.

After returning to Slovenia, he participated actively in the Slovenian opposition in the years leading up to independence in 1990. A number of philosophers, including Mladen Dolar, Miran Božovič, Renata Salecl, Rado Riha and Jelica Šumič-Riha, participated in both political debates and groundbreaking philosophical initiatives through the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis (ANALECTA) in Ljubljana. The circle had a broad intellectual appeal and ties to other fields, like the somewhat enigmatic rock band *Laibach* (the German word for Ljubljana), who exhibited the nationalist overtones of the time in grotesque forms. Žižek ran as a candidate for the presidential elections in 1990 and made an unusual and lively philosophical impact on several of the debates during the campaign. Together with a handful of younger researchers, this group is still today sometimes referred to as

'the Slovenian School', although it is far from forming any consistent unity. A common field of interest can be identified, however, in classic, and especially German, philosophy, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Marxist critique of ideology. Referring to the 'Slovenian School' should nonetheless be taken with a grain of salt, since very few of its 'masters' are doing any actual teaching today, and since significant philosophical and political divergence has occurred among them. In his book on the war in Iraq, Žižek tellingly narrows down his loyalty to 'the two other members of my party *troika*' – Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič (Žižek 2004).

As it should already be clear, it is impossible to place Žižek's thinking unambiguously in one category. The fact that he is an analyst of contemporary society, however, is not up for debate. Regardless of the theme he is writing on or talking about, he is always contributing to the understanding of the modern world, and not least its (lacking) politics. Žižek belongs to the group of theoreticians who refuse to accept the dogma of much of the 1980s and 1990s about the death of the 'grand narratives' and the accompanying celebration of the end of history and the final victory of liberal capitalist democracy. For Žižek, the idea of having overcome ideology once and for all is the very epitome of an ideological conviction, and he sees every reason to insist without compromise on a politico-philosophical engagement, especially in our supposedly 'post-political' times. By employing Lacanian psychoanalysis in the diagnosis of contemporary society, he seeks to identify the unacknowledged underside of the liberal political discourse that is reigning in most of the Western world.

Even though one could, with some right, say that 'everything is addressed at once' in Žižek's work, it is possible to extract two main interests: firstly, a strictly philosophical endeavour (which is also politically relevant) to investigate traditional problems like being, subjectivity, and act. Secondly, a more directly political and sociological analysis, a critical thinking with a particular emphasis on articulating the unconscious workings of contemporary political and everyday life, and thereby ideally assisting us in dismantling ingrown ideological convictions that we are not even aware of having.

The philosophical line in Žižek's work could also be characterised

as a rereading of classical German philosophy. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) are constant points of reference, and Žižek’s methodological approach to them is explicitly Lacanian. By employing a theoretical framework from Lacan’s psychoanalytic work, an opportunity arises to rearticulate some fundamental insights into classic philosophy in contemporary terms. These ‘Lacanian interventions’ have their role model in Lacan’s own analysis of the Cartesian ego, which is also a focal point for Žižek’s work (not least in *The Ticklish Subject* from 1999), although Descartes is rarely treated as systematically as the German classics. Like Lacan’s, Žižek’s readings are intended to articulate unactualised potential in classic philosophical texts, often by bringing out what the authors didn’t realise they were saying. Returning to or ‘repeating’ Descartes, therefore, does not mean putting forward a theory of subjectivity that is based directly on Descartes’ own understanding of the *cogito*, but to show the aspects of his thinking that the tradition has not granted sufficient attention, as well as the aspects or consequences which he *himself* did not grant enough attention. The philosophy of subjectivity that emerged from the Cartesian *cogito* and was reinvigorated and radically reinterpreted in Kant’s philosophy and in German Idealism, is of particular interest to Žižek, and with it concepts like freedom, act, belief and existence. The analysis of the ground problems in the philosophy of subjectivity is supposed to create the theoretical foundation of the revolutionary subject.

Because he consistently investigates and claims the fundamental importance of the problems of the philosophy of subjectivity, Žižek could be said to be a traditional, and in some sense even a conservative, philosopher. The widespread critique of metaphysics throughout the latter half of the twentieth century in particular has, according to Žižek, thrown out the baby with the dirty water: in the break with the tradition of metaphysics, as it was carried out in, for example, structuralism, psychoanalysis, and the neo-positivist analytical philosophy of language, philosophy has convinced itself to have overcome metaphysical questions in their traditional forms. For Žižek, metaphysics is still produced from such a self-understanding, but it

is a bad or unreflective metaphysics. In place of this he sees psychoanalysis as a privileged means to identify more precise metaphysical points in philosophy's allegedly post-metaphysical age. The linguistic and psychoanalytic turns in philosophy since the early part of the twentieth century did not mark the final departure of traditional metaphysical problems; on the contrary, Žižek sees the contemporary situation in philosophy as an opportunity to finally restate the classical problems in their truly radical dimension.

In much the same way one could say that Žižek's opposition to the idea of the end of history and the final victory of the capitalist world-order springs from a (theoretical) conviction that it is precisely after having *traversed* this fantasy that we have the possibility of thinking an entirely new, political project. The post-political situation that has occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and especially the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes, does not therefore mean that we must abandon the radical leftist (or even communist) agenda, on the contrary: the critique of globalised capitalism should enable a universalist, global engagement in favour of a politics that is socialist in a sense that is yet to be seen. The parallel to the more strictly philosophical engagement should thus be clear: 'overcoming' metaphysics/politics makes possible the *renewal* of metaphysics/politics in a sharper version.

Žižek is aggressively opposed to lukewarm ideas of a social democratic third way (à la Blair/Giddens), multiculturalist liberalism, Western Buddhism and so on, i.e. different variants of the resignation of critical thinking: instead of fighting for a global restructuring and political renewal, we are fighting for the recognition of cultural and religious rights, respect for individual autonomy and identity, conservation of parts of the welfare society, environmental lobbyism on behalf of endangered species, and so on. If anyone seeks more than this, or merely insists on the possibility of thinking another possible societal order, a growing tendency has emerged to reject them without any other argument than the postulate of an inherent necessity of disaster in such thinking:

the moment one shows the slightest inclination to engage in political projects that aim seriously to challenge the existing

order, the answer is immediately: ‘Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag!’ (Žižek 2001a: 3–4)

If Žižek is a ‘Diogenes parachuted down’, then this also goes for his attitude towards this general academic prohibition of thinking – a prohibition which he often challenges by provoking his audiences at lectures and conferences, but which he also examines in his works by investigating the limits of how far a contemporary political project should actually be ready to go. In questions such as the length to which one should support revolutionary movements, military interventions, the death penalty and so on, Žižek typically turns the problem upside down: if we do not take it on ourselves to rethink the most fundamental political questions, we will be reinforcing a tendency that has grown markedly since 1989 – and indeed since 2001 – where the ‘prohibition of thinking’ has co-existed with very real assaults, exploitation and war.

In common with the two lines in his thinking, Žižek refuses to accept the end of thinking in any sense, be it metaphysically or politically. The reader and the audience are instead offered a contribution to a kind of literary psychoanalysis: by traversing our age in all its manifold aspects, comparing it directly to the cultural and philosophical inheritance and thereby bringing forward new interpretations of the tradition as well as new perspectives on the situation of the contemporary human being, Žižek wants to point beyond the reality we are living and that which is the most difficult to see past. Psychoanalytically expressed, the purpose is to traverse the fantasy and reach *la passe*: the transformation from the analysed subject to the acting, analysing, creating subject.

In this book, we will introduce Žižek’s analysis of contemporary society by means of the following procedure. First, in chapter one, we will elaborate on the relation between psychoanalysis and political thinking. How can it be justified at all to apply a scientific discourse (the scientific status of which is even constantly put in doubt), explicitly developed for the analysis of concrete pathologies in individuals, to the analysis of societal problems? In chapter two, psychoanalysis is put to work in the analysis of the fantasmatic character of ideology: how does Žižek’s critique of ideology differ from

earlier types of critique, and what role does Lacan play in this? In chapter three, we will look more directly at contemporary society and describe Žižek's diagnosis of four central themes, while in chapter four we will address the potential for breaking with the suppressing and pacifying collective pathologies that we seem to be suffering from. In other words, we shall attempt in short form to frame what could be called Žižek's (psycho-) analytical project: the movement from the interpellated, ideological subject to the creative, revolutionary, acting subject. In a final chapter, we will highlight some of the main criticisms of Žižek that have been articulated during the past 5–10 years in particular.