

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume One, Number One - *Why Žižek?*

Sympathy for the Inhuman

Glyn Daly, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Northampton

Of course Žižek is all too aware of the danger wherein the 'elevation to status of symbolic authority has to be paid for by the death, murder even, of its empirical bearer' (Žižek in Wright & Wright 1999: vii). This is a danger whereby praise itself leads to a kind of premature burial and in which the object figure inevitably becomes one of the living dead. I see the importance of this journal in precisely the opposite terms: that is to contend with Žižek as a living voice that, in the Lacanian sense, continues to disturb and upset the basic premises and conventions of the prevailing socio-cultural milieu. And here perhaps the stress should be placed not only on *Žižek* studies but also on *Žižek studies* in that it provides not only a forum for critical engagement with Žižekian interventions but also a forum for opening up new fields of inquiry.

So why Žižek? Is he not simply too pyrotechnical to be taken seriously? Or even 'worse', is he not too much of a showman-charlatan who self-consciously courts notoriety through formulaic inversions and iniquities? To some extent there is a grain of truth in these charges. Given the increasingly constrained and aseptic character of our social reality then the very nature of Žižek's interventions must necessarily come across as a set of obscene intrusions into 'our' world. His philosophy *is* a kind of shock-art but it certainly does not devolve into a simple Dadaism or oppositionalism.

Reading his first English work as a postgraduate, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), I was struck as much, if not even more, by the style and tone of the book as by its content. Flying in the face of academic protocol it was refreshingly irreverent in combining high theory with scandalous cultural insights and a knowing disregard for the etiquette of political correctness. This type of intellectual carnality was not what I had come to expect

from post-structuralism. But was Žižek a post-structuralist? In the preface to the book Ernesto Laclau implied that he shared broad affinity with this tradition and that any differences were of a relatively minor kind (viz. different emphases in the reading of Hegel). In the actual text, however, it was clear that Žižek was opposed to some of the central premises of post-structuralism. So while most of us were playing catch-up as far as post-structuralism and deconstruction were concerned, here was someone who was already presenting a set of basic challenges to the latter. The effect was rather unsettling.

To some extent the book caught an underlying mood of change in the late eighties/early nineties. Coinciding with the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the old political landscapes were shifting and re-forming in unpredictable ways. The New Right was largely in retreat and the official Left (New Labour, the various European 'Third Way' parties etc.) were beginning to forge an historic compromise based on the pragmatic ('ideology-free') management of global market capitalism. Yet the more critical forms of intellectual life had reached a certain impasse: while on the one hand there existed the rather passion-less theory of the postmoderns, on the other there was the somewhat theory-less passion of the traditional left. Žižek, by contrast, appeared to represent something different: a passionate theoretical engagement with philosophical and contemporary problems that provided a real sense of urgency. But the question remained as to exactly how different his type of approach was. Indeed Žižek's own stylistic innovations, though undeniably impressive, were sometimes counter-productive in creating a kind of wood-obscured-by-trees problem as far as the substance of his thought was concerned.

Initially I viewed Žižek as someone who had interesting things to say about the theory of ideology and identification (especially as regards the notion of the subject) but whose main contribution was largely in terms of supporting material to the type of primary perspective being developed by Laclau and Mouffe, and others, in respect of the themes of impossibility, negativity, antagonism and so on. Žižek represented the application of these themes to a wider field of cultural engagement. Brilliant as his analyses were they nonetheless appeared to me to be of a largely secondary, though important, order. For my doctorate at Manchester I was trying to develop an anti-economistic approach to the economy with reference to the now half-forgotten debates around the idea of disorganized capitalism. This was already an uphill struggle as, at the time, Manchester was an extremely conservative environment as regards theoretical inquiry ('a little theory goes a long way' as my supervisor used to say – repeatedly). In this context my use of Žižek was chiefly in terms of lending further credence to the idea that identities that could not be fixed at the level of the economy or anywhere else. And this seemed to fit with the idea that Žižek should be seen essentially as a post-structuralist-with-attitude: to be filed under 'interesting Lacanian variety'.

In any case perhaps the *Sublime Object* was a one-hit-wonder and perhaps the rude Balkanite would simply fade away and leave us all in peace. The second volume, *For They Not What They Do* (1991), rather passed me by. I suspect that this was partly because I did not want to peer under the rather comfortable bed of postgraduate life that I had made for myself then, and partly because the submission of my thesis was imminent and I had no intention of undertaking any further theoretical revisions. The repeated Freudian failure to remember to pick up the new book also meant that I could stick with the idea that *The Sublime Object* was merely a spectacular and interesting display which like an electric storm was pleasing if looked at from a distance. It was not until the third volume, *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), that the real force of Žižek's ideas began to hit home and to undermine the foundations of the general deconstructionist perspective that I had been putting together over some years. There was not anything like the same number of jokes or cultural ruminations. This was something 'serious' and to be taken seriously. Once the dust of his initial intrusion had settled down it was now clearer to see where he was coming from and the type of distinctive analytic engagement he was trying to develop as regards topics like nationalism and racism, the limits of discourse analysis, the role of enjoyment and so on. As far as the early postmarxist sponsorship was concerned (the first two of Žižek's books were published in Laclau and Mouffe's *Phronesis* series), this volume represented something of a souring of the honeymoon period and a growing divergence in theoretical and political direction.

In a rather unexpected twist on Marx's insight into the way in which ideas can take on a material force, this volume also impacted on me at a personal level: my enthusiastic reading of the latter precipitated the irrevocable breakdown of a long-standing relationship (there may have been other factors involved but let's not spoil the story). In particular it was the whole idea of *jouissance* – i.e. a perverse libidinal investment in, and satisfaction from, suffering and sacrifice – that became a T-bone of contention not only for my inamorata but for her entire retinue. In a more litigious society I might be inclined to sue Žižek for damages ('actual traumatic stress' or some such). But why was there such a toxic shock reaction to what was chiefly an academic interest? What real transgression had I committed? Of course there were the usual bromides concerning implicit (even complicit) betrayal: 'psychoanalysis is the acceptable face/theoretical endorsement of the repression of women' etc. Charges of this nature were relatively superficial and easy to counter. But, in the language of Yoda, there appeared to be a much deeper disturbance in the force of multi-culturalist political culture.

In the case of fascism what psychoanalysis reveals is an obscene enjoyment in the acts of sacrifice and duty vis-à-vis the state: the individual who submerges him/herself in the collective and foregoes personal pleasures in order to derive a deeper form of enjoyment.

With today's (Western) multi-culturalism we tend to get an inverted form of this process. Instead of becoming a functionary of the state, the typical multi-culturalist agent is someone who affirms themselves as a victim of the state in order to acquire the status of significant 'Other' – a paradigmatic clamour for distinctive being. The basis of this type of multi-culturalist experience is precisely an enjoyment through victimhood; an enjoyment that must remain hidden, off-stage. So by even talking about these matters at a general level I was already moving towards an imaginary position where it would become possible to perceive and identify this obscene enjoyment. This was the unknowing transgression that secured my expulsion.

Along similar lines my innate gaucheness was responsible for further discomposure among some good friends in Helsinki. With some justification, Finnish culture prides itself on being out-looking and cosmopolitan (virtually everyone seems to have or to know someone who has connections with the United Nations and/or adjacent organisations). As if by illustration of this my friends told me about a couple who were in the process of adopting a baby from Colombia and that what was particularly good about this was that they were intending to keep the child in contact with its cultural roots. Not quite believing this I made some sort of tasteless comment about babies and Colombian coffee vouchers which did not go down very well. But there were two aspects that struck me particularly.

The first was the use of the idea of cultural roots as if it designated something authentic. In our postmodern times where all is masquerade, constructed and so on, this has a clear fantasmatic investment: 'we know very well that there is no such thing as an authentic identity but nonetheless we believe in it'. On the other hand this very authenticism serves simultaneously to underscore an essential distancing from the Other. Such identities should be preserved in this way precisely on the grounds that they cannot be like 'us'. This is what is fake about contemporary multi-culturalism. The privileged sites of the latter (and ultimately the US) are 'beyond' any simple ethnic determination and consequently can function as 'universal witness' to all cultures: its very openness results from a basic closure. Integral here is the fantasy regarding the Other's gaze: i.e. the fantasy of how the Other perceives 'us' as an inimitable optimum, tolerant, capable of benign expansion and accommodation but unique and elusive. Again this is a covert fantasy; one that should remain hidden especially in light of all the altruistic good that is being achieved through multi-culturalism

The second aspect concerns the way in which the fantasmatic shapes and conditions the political sphere. Thus the politically acceptable response to overseas adoption was an undertaking to secure what was viewed as culturally appropriate for the child (to do otherwise would be to commit the sin of cultural imperialism). In this political economy of left and right possibilities what is presupposed is that babies *can* be brought from Colombia

(etc) to countries like Finland but certainly not the other way round. To speak of the conditions that make this possible – poverty, global imbalances of power and so on – becomes in itself vulgar and offensive. It is simply better not to mention these things where such a sensitive topic is concerned: we don't make the rules; we can only do the best that we can; it *is* sad that people may not be resourced to fully look after children but on the plus side we can find cumbia music, salsa, the texts of Garcia Marquez and so forth in countries like Finland (and Britain, France, Germany...). So what is disavowed is the marginalisation behind the marginalisation: cultural marginalization is a bad thing but let's not engage with, or even address, the global forms of social exclusion upon which today's cosmopolitanism secretly depends.

With multi-culturalism all is apparently open, permissive, differential, respectful (etc) and yet for all that it is something that relies even more deeply on a strict regime of taboo and prohibition. It relies, in other words, on a submerged world of codes and rules of political and socio-cultural encounter and if we do not implicitly accept the latter then we risk expulsion. In a way, the contemporary paradigm is one that obliges 'us' to be fetishists. On the one hand we are all *au fait* with contextuality and de-centredness and so on, but on the other we are compelled to take seriously the idea of socio-cultural authenticity in order to be able to participate fully in the symbolic order. This goes some way towards explaining a certain American paradox. While American society is highly diverse and secularized it is nonetheless supplemented by the more or less official taboo as regards atheism. America is, in this sense, Jehovah's Witness. It is charged with the task of bringing, in Bush's words, God's gift of democracy to the world. Thus it is not so much 'In God We Trust' (as the dollar motto has it), but rather that God trusts America as His/Her authentic agent on earth.

What I find so compelling in Žižek's work is his consistent demonstration of the ways in which the symbolic order tends to rely upon a set of implicit and guarded obscenities. In particular it is the way in which political practice is sustained by a libidinal economy of enjoyment, prohibition, tacit codes and so on. The same can also be said of the converse: that in the libidinal economy we can find an essential political functioning. And this is true in a quite literal sense of sexual drive and the pornographic. Here I differ somewhat with Kay (2003) and her interpretation of Žižek's discussion of a well known pornographic image: a 'spit roast' where a woman is on her back anonymously reduced to vagina, mouth and throat while two men, anonymously reduced to penises, are working on the aforementioned in a thoroughly impersonal way. Inverting Deleuze, Žižek uses this as an example of a representation of organs without bodies. While Kay finds this reference shocking she nonetheless sees it as acceptable insofar as it is 'performing theoretical work' (2003: 101). However I would argue that this needs to be looked at in more direct and literal terms as demonstrating the way in which the inhuman flows in and through us as a thoroughly

inherent and untameable dimension. In this context, what the pornographic bears witness to is the traumatic fact that all bodies comprise (relatively) independent 'alien' organs – the minimal pulsations of life – that embody drive in excess of any symbolic unity or human holism. The very 'unnaturalness' of the image underscores the Lacanian insight that there is no sexual relationship (which is precisely why sex as sex occurs – otherwise it would simply be an empty biological process).

Yet if the sexual relationship is impossible it is precisely on this basis that we experience a certain relationship with impossibility as such. We touch and are touched by the inhuman in the act(s) of sex. In this direct and immediate sense we experience ourselves as creatures rooted in the impossible-Real. On this basis, improvising on the well-known D. H. Lawrence aphorism, it is an experience of the impossible stepping through our loins. Through sexual encounter we simultaneously engage with the symbolic unity of the body (we 'make love') and with the organs that reflect an elementary existential autonomy beyond any such unity.

The human condition is one that reflects a traumatic irreconcilability between the body and its organs. At the same time this irreconcilability is also the very source of human freedom. It is this primordial alienation that allows for the radical transformation and recomposition of the body as a symbolic order (in different contexts/relationships we are different types of body). The pornographic speaks to a basic autonomy that is shattering of symbolic integrity and closure. In this precise sense we might say that the pornographic is the political. The intimate and the cosmic are interwoven in such a way that the alien excess functions as an inherent background (like dark matter) to what is in the symbolic order more than that order.

Here we see an inversion of the Durkheimian problematic. Whereas Durkheim saw the breakdown of organic solidarity as anomic – something to be avoided at all costs – this approach affirms the opposite: a fundamental solidarity with the anomic and indeed the inhuman. It is an approach based on the realization that the body politic is itself an artificial composite of capricious organs that can always re-form onto new possibilities and configurations. In today's attempts to construct a global body-politic the alien is feared and marginalized as so much pathological distortion, criminality, archaic residue (the 'clash of civilizations' etc.). In this context the cinematic representation of the visionary is rarely a hero/heroine and all too often a psychopath/terrorist. The alien aspect is further stifled through a constant bombardment of choices (press this number, click here etc) precisely as a way of closing down the possibilities of more radical forms of choosing and/or refusal. This is perfectly encapsulated in the famous monologue from *Trainspotting* delivered by the Ewan McGregor character Renton:

Choose life...Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television, choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance...I chose not to choose life. I chose something else.

Contemporary culture is one that tries to elevate the 'choose life' over the 'I chose not to choose life'. In other words what it continuously tries to prevent is choices about *modalities* of choosing. There is no choice in *this* matter. It brooks no refusal. The culture of choice is one of disabling radical choosing.

Žižek's psychopolitical perspective is one that accords the inhuman its full dignity and, in a sense, argues for a new type of sovereignty for the latter. The truly human social order is one that paradoxically must come to terms with the inherent dimension of alien excess. It should not seek to repress or contain it (or re-channel it in obscene ways), but should be affirmed as the basis of a new type of political sensibility: one that utilizes excess in order to reach for, and indeed grasp, the impossible.

Yet the very ambitiousness of such a project is one that inevitably gives rise to numerous theoretical and political questions. The importance of this journal lays not only with advancing and refining these questions but also with taking up the latter as a basis for new types of research in unforeseen directions. In this way we might say that the journal represents a collective of organs without a pre-given, or idealized, Žižekian body. So far from being murdered or prematurely interred the response of this journal must be far crueler. For his abominable intrusions Žižek must be relentlessly prosecuted as one of the eternally unforgiven.

References:

Kay, S. (2003), Žižek: A Critical Introduction, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wright, E. & E. Wright (1999), The Žižek Reader, Oxford: Blackwell.