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ŽIŽEK, MY NEIGHBOUR - regarding Jodi Dean's *Žižek's Politics*

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In one of his earlier interviews, Slavoj Žižek made what at first glance might be considered a rather surprising admission: 'I would be happiest if I could be a monk in my cell, with nothing to do but write my *Summa Lacaniana*.'¹ For a philosopher so obviously engaged, whose ingestion of contemporary culture and political developments comes through in his thought at every point, would not such a retreat into the cloistered serenity of the monastery be almost insufferable? But what this remark touches upon is a particular quality in his work that often goes unnoticed: that it is formulaic, even mechanical, in the way it progresses. The screen of imminent engagements with some hot topic – Deleuze, Hitchcock, Lenin, Kieslowski, Christianity, Iraq, or whatever – should thus not distract from the fact that Žižek's writing is deeply solipsistic and unperturbed by external phenomena. The means, of course, is that whatever book Žižek happens to be writing, he is, ultimately, always writing the *same book*. And that his declared topics do little more than momentarily arrest his thought, allowing it to coagulate, before dissolving into its frantic discursions once again.

In this respect, Žižek's now enormous body of writing closely resembles those sprawling mediaeval theological tracts, such as Aquinas' *Summa*, for whom the demand

to be relevant, to 'have something to say' to the current situation, was inconsequential compared to pursuit of 'the Thing itself'. A most telling instance of this one-eyed pursuit comes from the similarly prolific Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, who, writing in 1933, declared:

I endeavour to carry on theology, and only theology, now as previously, and as if nothing had happened ... something like the chanting of the hours by the Benedictines near by in the *Maria Laach*, which goes on undoubtedly without break or interruption, pursuing the even tenor of its way even in the Third *Reich*.²

But just as Barth's defiant restatement of the dogmatic tradition constituted one of the most effective protests against the idolatry of National Socialism, so too it is at the very point of Žižek's theoretical withdrawal from, and even indifference toward, the demand to *respond* to certain exigencies that we discover his importance for politics – and indeed, for political theology – today.

In other words, we ought, perhaps, to seek out Žižek's 'politics' at the level of the *form* of his work, its very enormity, and not merely in the compilation of his various political statements, nor, as Fredric Jameson put it recently,³ in the identification of the 'larger concepts', or even a 'system', from amid the endless pages of writing. In either case, the presumption is that one must first strip away all those obstructive formal elements; while, in fact, without these obstructions, *there are no larger concepts to be found*. His concepts cannot be distilled off from their expression, from the eccentricities of his style. For example, there is a particular trait, which, not coincidentally, Žižek shares with the Marquis de Sade:⁴ both men are entirely incapable of concluding their books. As soon as one begins to reach the end of a sequence, it immediately reopens and starts again. But how might this formal openness obtain any political or even philosophical consequence? An answer is suggested by Žižek himself in one of his earliest analyses of Theodor Adorno's style. Querying why, at the very moment that one might expect a precise theoretical or even prescriptive conclusion, Adorno's essays are punctuated with references to some hackneyed Marxist truism, Žižek says:

Far from attesting to Adorno's theoretical weakness, [these vulgar truisms] present the way thought's constitutive limit is inscribed within the thought itself; that is to say, such a 'vulgar-sociological' reference [citing Jameson] 'gestures towards an outside of thinking ... The function of the impure, extrinsic reference

is less to interpret, then, than to rebuke interpretation as such and to include within the thought the reminder that it is itself inevitably the result of a system that escapes it and which it perpetuates.¹⁵

In other words, these extraneous elements are a kind of internal manifestation of the *limit* of thinking, an index of the real object of analysis – that point to which thought is incessantly drawn, but not permitted to cross. And so it is that the encounter with this limit serves to draw thought onward, as though by the blind gravitational pull of a foreign body. This, for Žižek, is the point at which Adorno's thought is most dialectical, which is to say, Hegelian.

Such moments, though of an entirely different variety, also occur throughout Žižek's work. In place of smooth transitions from one section or line-of-thought to another, one regularly finds some abruptly inserted question, raising another possibility whose exposition is conspicuously absent. Take the following: 'What if the domain of politics is inherently "sterile," a theatre of shadows, but nonetheless crucial in transforming reality.'¹⁶ The formal effect of this sort of question⁷ is that none of Žižek's thought-lines ever conclude, and so his books more and more resemble one of Sade's orgies, where each body (or, in Žižek's case, thought-line) is open to every other body, each disconnecting and reconnecting in ever morphing and often bizarre permutations.

But just as Sade's books are ultimately addressed to God, so too the theological dimension of Capital is the fundamental determinant of Žižek's work, the inert mass around which his entire conceptual apparatus orbits. The planetary metaphor here is not, in fact, entirely inappropriate. For as Jacques Lacan put it, the Real – the immutable is-ness of reality as such – is, like the stars, always-in-the-same-position (*toujours à la même place*).⁸ When Žižek states unequivocally that Capital is Real, he is making a serious claim about the ontology of our global situation: the specific nature of Capital demands an appropriate form of philosophico-political activity. Direct intervention inevitably gets folded back into the existing economic order, such that even the harbinger of the demise of global Capital – the threat of ecological cataclysm – can be transubstantiated into an expression of Capital itself.⁹ The only proper activity now is to think Capital, not as it actually exists, but *theologically*, at the level of its substance. This theological withdrawal, of course, repeats Marx's criticism that all economists 'share the error of examining surplus-value not as such, in its pure form, but in the particular forms of profit and rent.'¹⁰

It is thus possible for Žižek's theological solipsism and his compulsive engagements with cultural products of all kinds to coincide, because there is no thinking of Capital apart from its various manifestations. By fastening onto these manifestations – which may be so benign a philosopher as Spinoza, or some explosive social upheaval, like the Parisian riots in November 2005 – and yet leaving them formally unconnected with one another apart from their bare juxtaposition, Žižek is in effect giving shape to Capital *as such*. Capital here acts upon Žižek's thinking much like his description of the function of an 'attractor' in mathematics:

All positive lines or points in its sphere of attraction only approach it in an endless fashion, never reaching its form – the existence of this form is purely virtual, being nothing more than the shape toward which lines and points tend. However, precisely as such, the virtual is the Real of this field: the immovable focal point around which all elements circulate.¹¹

So, those political or would-be-revolutionary questions that are constantly put to Žižek – demands for an alternate political program, for the next move in the struggle against the global dominance of 'Empire' – are but poor substitutes for the *one* question that matters: What do *thinking* and *writing*, as opposed to prescription and action, mean for Žižek?¹² To skirt this question is to miss the political consequence of Žižek's work, which is, without doubt, the most ambitious attempt since Marx to think Capital in terms of its inherent dynamics. As Žižek has stated recently, in response to those Leftist liberals who bemoan their inability to see any alternative to the omnipotence of global capitalism, the task now 'is not to see the outside [of the economic order], but to see in the first place (to grasp the nature of today's capitalism).'¹³ Similarly, the failure of Marxism, as a political form, was that it organized itself to oppose a particular economic moment – Capital in its limited, industrial manifestation – and thus was entirely unprepared for its metamorphosis into the current global, virtual or late-capitalist form. If Marx was the one to analyze (indeed, to theologize) industrial capitalism, then Žižek is the theologian of late- or virtual-capitalism.

From this perspective, it is difficult not to be perplexed by the reaction of someone like Ernesto Laclau, who has defied Žižek to 'abandon the theological terrain' and honour his 'elementary intellectual and political duty' to disclose his alternative to liberal democracy, on the one hand, and global capitalism, on the other.¹⁴ Žižek's consistent failure (something he readily admits) to provide any political program stems

from his unwavering fidelity to the 'theological terrain' of Capital itself. But if Laclau's criticism, that Žižek has failed to disclose a political alternative, essentially misses the theological character of his work, then Jodi Dean's claim that he already *has* produced just such a program is no less erroneous. Her most recent book, straightforwardly entitled *Žižek's Politics*, is an attempt to lay out the 'specific, systematic, approach to political theory' that Dean claims is manifest in Žižek's writing. The tone of the book clearly targets those for whom the conspiratorial polemics of Michael Moore and Naomi Klein have failed to open the promised revolutionary vistas, but who have no interest in abandoning the self-gratifying logic of conspiracy itself. In other words, the book is written for the American Left. Time and again, Dean banks on goodwill, even solidarity, from her audience – a pact sealed with the required number of anti-Bushisms and a willingness to reveal uncomfortable personal details, often giving the impression that one is reading a blog rather than serious political theory. She is thus allowed to (mis)apply Žižek's trenchant analysis of the ideological fantasy operative within fascism to the current White House administration:

In direct opposition to Žižek's emphasis on those outcast from the social order, Bush's politics (like, unfortunately, nearly all mainstream party politics in the United States) are rooted in the most privileged members of society. This is why Bush's politics are postpolitical: they are designed to make sure nothing changes, that corporations remain powerful, for example, or that nothing threatens the interests of oil and energy companies.¹⁵

It can safely be said that Žižek's work has nothing to do with this sort of populist liberal sentiment, but that's not what is most absurd about this passage. Dean alludes here ('Bush's politics ... are designed to make sure nothing changes') to one of Žižek's most perceptive dialectical tools: his identification of forms of seemingly avant-gardist activity, whose true if unacknowledged intent is to maintain the status quo. However, Žižek's application of this tool is invariably against the feigned earnestness of Leftist pseudo-radicals, whose calls for resistance and free debate mask their tenured conservatism. Žižek's own contempt for the hypocrisy of 'Western academic Leftists' is unrelenting: 'Let's talk as much as possible about the necessity of radical change in order to make sure that nothing will really change!'¹⁶ The fact that Dean is unable to recognize that she is implicated in Žižek's criticism of the Left cannot but cause some concern about the actual status of his immense popularity in North America. Martin Scorsese recently

reminded us of Freud's judgment that the Irish are immune to the efficiency of psychoanalysis. Perhaps we are now witnessing the same immunity on the other side of the Atlantic.

It is at this point that the gap that separates Žižek's *Politics* from Žižek's politics is most evident. In her desire to present a Žižek whose ideas are 'useful to political theorists trying to break out of the present political impasse',¹⁷ Dean avoids the rigorous theological and political concepts that comprise Žižek's importance today. A perfect example of this self-serving utility is her application of the primal moment of one's entry into the symbolic order, the *forced choice*. Remember that, for Lacan, the subject's original choice is between the dense immediacy of vegetative existence, the nigh on psychotic universe of naked Being, and his immersion in the world of language, his subjective constitution by means of social-symbolic linkages.¹⁸ Here is Dean's version:

When American identity is construed in terms of supporting a war, say, one who is against the war may find herself trapped, unable to place herself as both American and antiwar. She will likely be told to 'go home', as if there were some other place for her. (Shouts of 'go home', I should add, were frequent during protests I participated in against the U.S. invasion of Iraq. At the time, they seemed quite strange. Now they seem to me to be markers of precisely this kind of forced choice.)¹⁹

So what would it look like to refuse American identity – with its determinants of patriotism, military bravado and religious conservatism – and opt for the uncertainty of 'being' instead? Once again, Dean:

So, does one accept the given order or jump into the abyss (which, in my example, may not actually be an abyss but more a morass of discussion, debate and the challenge of imagining another America and another world)?²⁰

Not only is Žižek's own account of the rightness (or otherwise) of the Iraq war opposed to the 'intellectual stupidity' of bland Leftist pacifism, but moreover he patiently opens up the real subjective consequences of military intervention.

Where, then, do we stand with reasons *pro et contra* the war? Abstract pacifism is intellectually stupid and morally wrong – one must oppose a threat ... Of

course there is something hypocritical about objections to the war ... *But*, although this is true, the war is wrong – and it is *who does it* that makes it wrong. The reproach should thus be: *who are you to do this?* It is not war versus peace, it is rather the correct ‘gut feeling’ that there is something terribly wrong with *this* war, that something will irreversibly change because of it.²¹

In the end, what makes Žižek's *Politics* so disappointing is not just its inappropriate autobiographical confessions (from Dean's self-analysis of her penchant for tabloids, to her pleading accounts of participation in anti-war marches); it is the way that Dean accepts the conditions of the ‘present political impasse’ by unapologetically reducing Žižek's thought to the demands of American political theory. She effectively allows that the incestuous political terrain of the United States is immediately universalizable, or global in its very idiocy. The truly radical gesture would have been to refuse this impasse altogether, dismiss it as being illusory, rather than reduplicating its coordinates through her impotent protests. This book thus only serves to underscore the yawning gap that exists between the bland theoretical tastes of American Leftism and the revival of serious political theology now everywhere (else) apparent.

Žižek has identified many examples of the distinctive products of global capitalism, which have had their substance – their unique, even malignant, qualities – removed: Diet Coke, decaffeinated coffee, virtual sex, and so on. Žižek's *Politics* is just another in this series. By transposing Žižek's work into the banal idiom of the American Left, it has been emptied of its substance and deprived of its power.

- 1 Robert S. Boyton, 'Enjoy Your Žižek!', *Lingua Franca* (October 1998), p. 50.
- 2 Karl Barth, *Theological Existence To-day: A Plea for Theological Freedom*, trans. R.B. Hoyle, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933, p. 9.
- 3 Fredric Jameson, 'First Impressions', *London Review of Books* (7 September 2006).
- 4 Sade's theological assumptions were not missed by Pierre Klossowski. His *Sade mon prochain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), in this respect, remains as vital and important as ever.
- 5 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 85.
- 6 Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 32; and, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, p. 315.
- 7 Other such questions can, of course, readily be found: 'What if ... one should precisely "throw out the baby with the dirty bathwater" and renounce the very notion of erratic affective productivity as the libidinal support of revolutionary activity?' (*Organs without Bodies*, p. 185); or, 'How, then, are we to revolutionize an order whose very principle is constant self-revolutionizing? Perhaps, this is *the* question today.' (*Organs without Bodies*, p. 213) And finally, perhaps most enigmatically: 'Is not our task – the properly *Christological* one – to change the modality of our being-stuck in a mode that allows, solicits even, the activity of sublimation?' (*The Parallax View*, p. 123)
- 8 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre II: Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse, 1954-55*, dir. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978, p. 278.
- 9 The editorial in the May 2006 issue of *Vanity Fair* put it best: 'Green is the new black'.
- 10 Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, ed. S. Ryazanskaya, trans. E. Burns, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963, vol. I, p. 40.
- 11 Žižek, *Organs without Bodies*, pp. 3-4.
- 12 Appropriately, this is a variation on the question Klossowski put to Sade.
- 13 Slavoj Žižek, 'Badiou: Notes from an Ongoing Debate', *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1.2 (2007), p. 9.
- 14 Ernesto Laclau, 'Constructing Universality', in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London: Verso, 2000, p. 289.
- 15 Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 126-7.
- 16 Slavoj Žižek, 'The Prospects of Radical Politics Today', in *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings, vol. II*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, London: Continuum, 2006, p.239.

- ¹⁷ Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, p. xxi.
- ¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse, 1964*, dir. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973, pp. 236-7.
- ¹⁹ Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, p. 20.
- ²⁰ Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, p. 21.
- ²¹ Slavoj Žižek, 'The Iraq War – Where is the True Danger?', in *The Universal Exception*, p. 294.