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## **Meta-Dialectics and the Balancing Acts of Žižekianism: A Response to Fabio Vighi**

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I greatly appreciate Fabio Vighi's thoughtful and thought-provoking review of *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*. In fact, considering just how insightful and persuasive his remarks are, I find very little in his text with which I disagree. However, I do feel it necessary to clarify and underscore several of the lines of thought contained in my latest book.

To begin with, I certainly do not call for "abandoning the political potential of dialectics tout court." A critical observation I advance with respect to Badiou is that a tendency favoring a sweeping repudiation of dialectical models is a key factor contributing to the political problems I argue plague his post-1988 philosophical system (in this connection, I invoke the Schelling of the 1809 *Freiheitschrift*, a text dear to Žižek's heart, as well as Hegel and Marx). That is to say, one of my complaints regarding the Badiouian theory of the event (as elaborated starting in *Being and Event*) is that the anti-dialectical aspects of certain features of the being-event distinction contribute to the danger of (inadvertently) supporting a passive *attentisme*, a sort of insidious quietism and/or tailism. In this same vein, I deliberately signal my sympathy with Žižek's criticisms of Badiou to the effect that the latter too hastily discounts the socio-economic

dimensions of political life (including class) so central to the dialectical account of historical processes in Marx's writings and classical Marxism overall.

The dialectics I reject—in this, I'm in complete agreement with Benjamin, Badiou, and Žižek, among others—is specifically a vulgarized version of both Hegel's and Marx's visions of history. As is well-known, such a pseudo-dialectics posits a mechanical teleology guaranteeing with absolute certainty the eventual arrival of an “end of history” according to underlying laws purportedly as iron-clad and inviolable as those supposedly governing the material universe of non-human nature. In the present context, I'll put aside the disputed question of the complex inter-relationships between contingency and necessity in Hegelian philosophy; Žižek repeatedly and regularly addresses this issue, and I too discuss it at length in my previous book, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Northwestern University Press, 2008). Marx himself, in his 1877 “Letter to Mikhailovsky,” already warns against his historical materialist analyses of political economy being dogmatically turned into a rigid ahistorical philosophy of history. Unfortunately, both the economism of the Second International (argued against not only by Benjamin, but by Gramsci and many subsequent theorists of the radical Left) and Stalin's 1938 bible *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (one of the main targets of attack in Benjamin's “Theses on the Philosophy of History”) promote precisely this crude and mortifying *apriorization* of Marxist historical dialectics. The different disastrous political consequences with which such theoretical bastardizations of Marxism and its dialectics are associated are too familiar to require being listed again here.

In light of the above, I enthusiastically endorse Badiou's and Žižek's struggles to think through the dynamics of politically momentous changes past, present, and future without complacent reliance upon dated and speciously dialectical narratives of the fated victory of the revolutionary Left. However, as I am at pains to point out, Badiou and Žižek, in this shared struggle of theirs, are forced to engage in several delicate balancing acts in order to avoid falling into the defeatist resignation of accepting that the established reality of globalization is now an unsurpassable socio-historical horizon. From my perspective, Badiou and Žižek err, for instance, when they present excessively de-dialecticized versions of events and/or acts, thereby coming to flirt with the *à venir* and all its dead-ends and traps. My hope is that the type of ideology critique I recommend practicing in this new book, developed through a critical appropriation of Badiou's and Žižek's ideas, will allow for striking a balance in which an optimistic and politically empowering dialectical appreciation of how events/acts might be able immanently and deliberately to be precipitated out of the given *status quo* doesn't entail a

corresponding commitment to a frozen utopian forecast overconfident in the glorious historical destiny of the exploited.

Vighi's primary line of criticism in his review pertains to the theory-practice distinction. He suggests that, at least as far as Žižek is concerned, "the old dilemma of the gap between theory and practice" is rendered, in its standard form, an obsolete problem. Instead, with reference to Žižek's contributions to the field of politics, Vighi appeals to an intra-theoretical practice of theory itself as a liberating gesture of socio-political emancipation. But, at the same time, Vighi also admits that the surpassing of the traditional distinction between theory and practice involves "something... often unacknowledged by Žižek himself." Similarly, in "Chapter Three, Section Fifteen" ("Inventing a New Politics: The Act Between Theory and Practice") of *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, I observe that, although Lacanian discourse theory especially provides ample justifications for short-circuiting the theory-practice dichotomy so as to present reflective theoretical labors as immediately being materially efficacious practical interventions (whether actually or potentially), Žižek generally refrains from explicitly making such a move so as to portray his own intellectual endeavors as already fully being the militant political interventions he strongly believes we desperately need today.

Moreover, in this same section of my book, I ask a question that cries out to be posed at this juncture: Why does Žižek abstain from consistently collapsing the theory-practice divide in the fashion highlighted by Vighi? My answer centers on the Lacanian notion of "lying in the guise of truth" also employed frequently in Žižek's examinations of ideological phenomena. On the one hand, both Žižek and I concur with Vighi that the theoretical and the practical are not dimensions invariably remaining neatly and cleanly separate from one another; what Vighi says regarding "practicing theory" as intra-theoretical practice indeed is true (at least sometimes, although I think this very much depends on circumstances). But, on the other hand, one of the risks of overtly affirming this truth as true is that it all too easily can tip over quickly into the bad faith of a "lie" rationalizing and sustaining the unproductive inactivity of the kind of "pure theory" that uncharitably could be described as nothing more than pointless intellectual masturbation, decadent academic self-indulgence. In my view, the threat of this truth being thus converted into an opposite is part of what explains Žižek's reluctance to noisily acknowledge it and is something which I warn of in my book.

Vighi mentions Marcuse and "creative sublimation" in the context of discussing the theory-practice relationship. In response, I can't help but reach for another of Marcuse's concepts, one of his key contributions to analyses of ideology and socio-political processes with echoes in the writings of Foucault as well as Žižek, namely, repressive desublimation (whereas

Marcuse's utopian imaginings of the post-capitalist future now seem symptomatic of the quaint, overly optimistic fantasies of 1960s hippy hedonism, the concept of repressive desublimation continues to be a highly relevant insight into power dynamics in the societies of consumerist capitalism). Marcuse cautions that apparent libidinal liberations can really be or turn into new structures of control, oppression, and suppression. I caution that apparent breakthroughs bridging the gap between theory and practice can really be or turn into new intra-theoretical limits within which theoretical practices (to borrow a phrase from Althusser) remain just that, inwardly circumscribed spheres without real windows consequently opening out onto other practices.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to draw attention to a notion proposed in the preface to *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*. Therein, I speak of what I call "meta-dialectics." The basic idea, inspired by some of Badiou's remarks regarding dialectics, is that we should refrain from locking ourselves into fixed formalizations of the theory-practice *rapport*. Various strands of Marxism, with their understandable and justified problematizations of oppositions between these two levels (oppositions pre-dating Marx's unprecedented strain of materialism), might give the impression that either: one, the theoretical and the practical are always-already concretely intertwined so as to be *de facto* materially indistinguishable; or, two, Marxist political agents are eternally under obligation with respect to an ethico-moral injunction (akin to a categorical imperative) to collapse and nullify the difference between theory and practice. Given the volatile complexities of our myriad concrete situations (in Lenin's terms), I am convinced that it's both philosophically accurate and politically expedient for us to dismiss any one-sided abstract schematization of the theory-practice distinction that would tie our hands and immobilize our minds. In place of such schematizations, I propose, articulated in a Hegelian style, that we must reconceive of the distinction between the dialectical and the non/anti-dialectical as a distinction internal to the dialectical itself. Our current conjunctures demand that we be tactically nimble enough to shift along the full spectrum between, on one end, a dialectical becoming-indistinct of theory and practice and, on the other end, a non/anti-dialectical peeling apart of theory from practice or vice versa. Put in terms of Catherine Malabou's incredibly valuable philosophical concept of "plasticity"—she constructs and develops this concept on the basis of a combination of Hegel's philosophical anthropology, Marxist materialism, and the neurosciences—one of many unavoidable but difficult political balancing acts involves being "plastic" *qua* a fragile synthesis of flexibility and firmness. Particularly in the political present in which the Left finds itself, a pressing challenge within and between theory and practice is

simultaneously how to be flexible without being malleable and how to be firm without being brittle.