

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Ten, Number Two

**Book review: Absolute Recoil. Towards  
A New Foundation of Dialectical  
Materialism  
Zizek, S. (2014). (London/New York:  
Verso)**

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*“I came not to bring peace but a sword” (Matthew 10:34)*

Zizek's *Absolute Recoil* is, in one reading, an extended mediation on the difficulties of this biblical passage. Of course Zizek nowhere mentions this passage nor this difficulty, yet in reading Zizek, in my short-circuited engagement, this insight came to light as I encountered his concluding words: “The position of Wisdom is that the Void brings ultimate peace, a state in which all differences are obliterated: the position of dialectical materialism is that there is no peace, even in the Void.”(415).

My starting point is a claim that Zizek is perhaps the leading radical theologian of this new century, precisely because he is not a theologian but one who engages with theology and then expands on from that engagement. It is

Zizek who most consistently reminds us that to think philosophically is also to think theologically- most often against theology and its institutional expressions and limitations. More so, Zizek argues for a theology that is the expression of dialectical materialism - and in doing so exposes how dialectical materialism is itself in the wake of the rupture event of Christianity.

These are, I admit strong claims, and I acknowledge not the orthodox reading of this text and/or of Zizek. Yet Zizek is, as the existence of this journal demonstrates, in himself and his thought, a rupture event often situated against any attempt to position him as big Other to our selves. This distinction is laid out *in* – not *on* - the opening pages wherein Zizek states this book “contains chapters *in* - not *on* - dialectical materialism: dialectical materialism is not the book’s topic; it is, rather, practiced, within these pages.” (1). In a similar claim of reading, *Absolute Recoil* contains chapters *in* - not *on* - radical theology: radical theology is not the book’s topic; it is, rather, practiced, [and I would add read *in* - and *out of* -] within these pages.”

But first, why absolute recoil? What does, what can this term mean? Here Zizek is very clear, this book is Hegelian, in what we can term a reading *in* - not *on* - Hegel’s singular use of the expression *absoluter Genenstoss* “ to designate the speculative coincidence of opposites in the movement by which a thing emerges out of its own loss.”(1). From this Zizek steadily, discursively, develops a claim of dialectical materialism as “ the only true philosophical inheritor of what Hegel designates as the speculative attitude of the thought towards objectivity.” (4) Absolute recoil is expressed and exposed as that which is absolutely immanent as gap or discord which introduces dynamism into the self-determined, self-sublated mediation.

Zizek’s dialectical materialism occurs against the various existing forms of materialism: reductionist neo-Darwinist, the new-wave atheism of Hitchens and Dawkins, the Foucauldian-derived “discursive materialism” and the Deleuzian “new materialism.”(5). What is offered in contrast, via both German idealism and Badiou, is ‘materialism without materialism’ which should, for those who are aware of such ‘without’ positing, echoes both Bonhoeffer’s call for a religionless Christianity and Derrida’s religionless religion, where the ‘without’ is an echo of the “-less”, that is the gap between what is (taken to be) and what could be. This is therefore the possibility of ‘the true’ being open and

available to us, in absolute recoil, if we undertake dialectical materialism. Zizek's reference to idealism, as that which opens up the possibility, can perhaps extend on this in a theological digression. Because we as humanity are so immanent and finite we are in relation to the abyss of divine transcendent otherness. Therefore humanity and divine otherness exist in dialectical absolute recoil that results in the Christian claim of the overcoming of this in the event of the incarnation and the death of God expressed in the cry from the cross. To undertake absolute recoil is to also engage centrally with the issues of the Real and what, via Alexandre Koyre and Lacan, is a notion of the impossible Real: "something that never happens in reality but which has nonetheless to be postulated in order to account for what goes on in reality." (11)

As one who works primarily in radical theology here I cannot help but to hear echoes of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth who undertook what is termed dialectical theology. More so, in my materialist reading of Barth and the dialectical theology of his *Romerbrief* or commentary on the Letter to the Romans, written in – not on - the Krisis years following World War One we can state Barth talked of the 'impossible possible' as that which, in the world of post-war Krisis was the only expectation that could be seen as legitimate. What was humanly impossible was negated by what was possible by rupture of God. Today, the impossible possible is that which occurs not by rupture of god but rather, in a materialist re-reading, from the logic of the rupture of god as universal event. In Barth the totalitarian voices of both ideology and religion are critiqued and found wanting. In opposition to the claims of this world exists the impossible possibility of the act of the unknown God. In a Zizekian-derived dialectical reading, the Real is what is left after God has died, and God is a textual signifier in dialectical materialism for the impossible possible of the impossible Real. The Hegelian gap into which the Thing (the Absolute) has been transposed is that "gap that separates our subjectivity from it"(16). The impossible possible is also another way of thinking about the autonomous act for "[a]n act is autonomous not when it applies a pre-existing norm but when it creates a norm in the very act of applying it." [21] This also occurs, despite there being no big Other, still within "the thick texture of symbolic coordinates." [21] Furthermore, just as the Lacanian Real is

characterized by ambiguity because everything is subjectively mediated and therefore the subject is not first but rather “emerges through the self-alienation of the Substance”[29], this means there is the “substantial pre-subjective Real” that we do not have direct access to but which we also “cannot get rid of.” [29] As Žižek argues from Hegel, Substance needs to be conceived also as subject and central to this is an immanent gap.

Hegel however does need to be pushed to be more idealist, for a true materialism has to push idealism to its limit, which is as Žižek notes “the greatest paradox of contemporary materialism” (31). This paradox, this pushing, is what results in absolute recoil and is what allows the impossible possible to be expressed out of its own loss.

This loss is central to Žižek’s reading of Hegelian dialectics in that first must occur a loss in attaining the goal and what is intended as reconciliation turns into its opposite. Then we must recognize the failure as a paradoxical success which allows true reconciliation to occur. This Hegelian dialectical process can be applied to the Marxist revolutions of the Twentieth century. The post-Marxist needs to recognize that only in the failure of state Marxism could and can Marxism accomplish what it wishes to. The failure is therefore necessary as the precondition for success and the reconciliation itself must fail to allow the absolute recoil event to emerge. Therefore the capitalist success and Marxist failure of Chinese state capitalism is itself not the event of absolute recoil but rather reconciliation that turns into its opposite: capitalism as state Marxism, Marxism as free-market capitalism. Does China exist as the failure of both Marxism and capitalism; the possibility of the absolute recoil of both and from which, perhaps, the impossible possible will emerge? To which, in my reading, a further question arises. Is every reading of Žižek itself the failure that allows its own overcoming?

If this is how we need to approach Marxism, we need to approach neo-Liberalism within the framework of the Master. The paradox of neo-Liberalism is that in its advocacy of freedom and its claim for us to all live as individuals without a Master, we actually are less free in our claiming of supposed freedom. For a “Master is a vanishing mediator who gives you back to yourself, who delivers you to the abyss of your freedom” [45]. Christ is therefore a vanishing mediator who impels or disturbs us into freedom, in “confronting him, we

become aware of our own freedom”[47]; neo-Liberalism with its illusion of freedom and absence of the Master makes us steadily less and less free.

Zizek’s materialist theory of subjectivity interestingly invokes belief, god and the questions of acting *as if* wherein belief supplements “an immanent split, within knowledge itself”[52]. He also argues for a protestant approach that, in wrestling with predestination, means we have to renounce part of the divine goodness. [69]. Here we see again the link of absolute recoil to Christianity, and especially to the Protestant reimagining as arises from Luther- and I would add, Calvin. There is a central failure in Protestantism that allows the space for absolute recoil, a central failure that arises from the central failure of Christianity itself if viewed as a religion. For god stoped being god and became expressed as the most humble of what it is not and could not save itself. It was abandoned and died and in this failed, but the absolute recoil of this event is where the impossible possible emerges. But what has all of this to do with materialism? The answer becomes clear when Zizek states, out of Badiou and Frank Ruda that “materialism’s problem is how to explain the rise of an eternal Idea out of the activity of a people caught in a finite historical situation.”[73]. Materialist idealism, positioned against what is termed vulgar democratic materialism, incorporates the idealist legacy and is both “ *a materialism without matter*” and “*materialism with an Idea*, the assertion of the eternal Idea outside the space of idealism.”[73]

Zizek’s radical theology emerges from within this absolute recoil, positioning a theology that is always political “confronting us with the question of our social commitment”[81] and the sub-species of sloth of *acedia*, “the despair at not being able to *get hold* of it”[81]; that is, the object of desire. Christianity is where we confront *acedia* for we can never get hold of god, for god has stoped being god, and neither can we get hold of Christ, for he is not present and was present only as failure. This does mean however that the *acedia* of and within Christianity is where absolute recoil occurs. For emerging from this failure, this lack, this not being able *to get hold* of, emerges that assertion of the eternal Idea outside the space of idealism; that which Barth terms ‘the impossible possible.’ This begins with the *acedia* of god, with god betraying himself, which as Zizek notes, only happens in Christianity. Furthermore, creation itself occurs out of divine boredom. The overcoming of

boredom is the condition for creation. This takes us to the core of subjectivity: there is the *nihil*, the anticipatory “empty” universal subject out of which, in boredom we can argue, in the boredom of the void of anticipation, emerges the universal form of subjectivity. This is the Hegelian reversal of the revolutionary consciousness of the revolutionary subject.

That there are different narratives of and in Christianity, narratives of and in a gap, means that there emerges out of Christianity - and in dialectical materialism - our *acedic* understanding that the Real lies in the gap between narrative, as absolute recoil for the gap itself, represented and encountered as the failure that recoils on itself, where in “the Real is the gap in reality, making it non-All”. [106] The eternal idea that is asserted outside the space of ideal is located in the symbolic, that is, “the Real is not beyond the symbolic, it is the impossibility inscribed at its very heart” [108] - which is that impossible possible *acedic* event we find in both Christianity and dialectical materialism. In taking this line further, when we consider the *objet a* (the supplementary element which ‘sutures’ the entire field of every relation between a frame and its content [109]) that simultaneously both disturbs the frame of reality and is the frame itself through which reality is perceived, is this not what could be called disruptive wherein the *objet a* is the impossible possible and so Christ can merge as *objet a*? And then, today, in modernity we find ourselves on the other side of the break of modernity wherein to pretend it hasn’t happened results in the expression of kitsch - whether in art, philosophy or theology. Is not fundamentalism a type of kitsch and so too the continuation of idealism and metaphysics? Therefore absolute recoil occurs when we encounter the failure of kitsch that, in itself as the boredom of the *nihil* of kitsch, allows for the creative event to occur.

This centrality of the creative act is what Žižek positions against the Buddhist void and what he terms “a weird overlapping between Heidegger and Buddhism” [118] and a discerned similarity regarding suffering arising from excessive attachment to worldly entities. [118] Against this striving - in Buddhism and discerned in Heidegger- for eternal peace, Žižek takes the line of Lacan that it is only in the “getting stuck”, the excessive attachment, that there opens the space for humanity to experience itself as mortal. The Fall is what has occurred already, and it is the Fall into stuckedness and therefore

being human. The withdrawal from this stuckedness, put bluntly the withdrawal from being human into nirvana can only occur if stuckedness is experienced and in fact is chosen. Stuckedness is therefore part of absolute recoil. This means that the choice of the void over stuckedness, of peace over non-peace [or 'the sword'] is exactly what stops us from being human and is the rejection of dialectical materialism. This results in a sustained engagement with the Fall by Zizek, wherein the "the true Event is the Fall itself" [126]; that is, the event as rupture, the Fall as *objet a*, whereby God falls from himself into his own creation. This is the singular event of Christianity, that which situates Christianity against all other religions: the overcoming of the gap between God and creation that can only be undertaken by God which is - for students of Barth - the content of revelation and so positions Christianity against all religions in which the gap between can be undertaken by act of humanity. Is this linking of Barth and Zizek so strange given they both operate as dialectical? Therein we turn to Paul's distinction between law and love, a distinction Zizek notes is only truly possible when one is in the position, the situation, the event *objet a* of love. Theologically this is the position of grace, a grace only experienced materially for in Christianity humanity cannot and does not experience the transcendent. And Zizek takes us further wherein the Fall is itself identical with redemption, for in the Fall what is opened up is what is lost in it. Absolute recoil is therefore a theological event that is simultaneously a material event. It is event not as retreat into void or peace, but event into the world and engagement.

From Hegel Zizek reminds us that Paradise is a regression into animal life while the Fall is the fall into being human, into the stuckedness of being human. Stuckedness, as a fall undertaken by God into material creation is theological notes Zizek; this means God is not the beginning, rather "the Fall itself creates that from which it is a fall"[131]. Reading further, out of Benjamin and the Kabbala, we arrive at a position whereby the original itself is always a fragment of what has been broken; that is, the whole is always broken. Furthermore, to attempt to go back to what is claimed to be whole is to make it- that which we do- kitsch and this holds not only for religion and theology but also for philosophic thought. We think in and of fragments and therefore engage - with Hegel, with Zizek for example - as and of fragments. The whole

is therefore a kitsch reconstruction out of fragments and an attempt at closure. Against this, translation as the expression and experience of the fragment of the whole is the act of absolute recoil wherein we search, now, for the Real. Breaking is therefore the instance, in Christianity, in radical Christianity, of divine creativity. In this the breaking of the body of Christ, the utter brokenness of death as true, human, abandoned death is where the radical divine creativity of the impossible possible occurs. There is not a fuller Fall than the fall of God into human death, a death we understand via the Seven Last Words of Christ (146) which as fragments without a whole interpret each other. We could say they operate as internal hermeneutics, as a series of short circuits. These Last Words, in their brokenness, in their failures and absolute recoil are the objet a wherein God and humanity supplement each other, both broken, whereby Christianity is the revelation of Brokenness from which emerges the Real. To understand the claim of God as *the ultimate broken vessel* [147-148] and the Trinity as the expression of this is to perceive Christianity as both absolute recoil and the expression of it.

The Event becomes a focus for Žižek's investigation, and the question arises of what is an Event within the Hegalian view of static things? That is, what changes are static totalities, meaning "things become what they always already are." [187] From this we can see that the failure of what is claimed to be an Event signals it was never a true Event; yet, in absolute recoil, this failure is actually what allows the true Event to emerge. But what does this mean for the failure of capitalism to fail post the global financial crisis? Does this mean it is actually a true event that has become that static totality? The failure of state communism can be seen to allow the true Event of communism to emerge; but capitalism's seemingly inherent ability to not fail raises central questions. Perhaps another way to view it is that capitalism is an on-going series of dynamic failures from which emerges the ability of capitalism to continue. If we think of capitalism as a series of narratives that retell capitalism not as failure but as reimagined narratives of continual success we can perceive how this might occur. What emerges is not the truly New that emerges from a transformative recounting for there is no space opened up for the possibility of acting in a new way (195). Rather, capitalism narrates itself in a repudiation of absolute recoil, narrates itself in a state of self-denial that does



not seek the truly New that emerges from failure but rather the continuation of the static totality with its own internal consuming dynamic. As we are reminded by Zizek, “it is not only knowledge that is socially constructed but also ignorance”(209) and the self-denial of capitalism is precisely this form of socially constructed ignorance. Capitalism is therefore perhaps the desublimated body left when the *objet a* is subtracted from it- but a zombie body that does not know it is dead and, importantly, we (the Other) do not know either which is why capitalism is alive even though it should be dead. For only when capitalism as Event fails is there the space for the new to emerge. Just as it was only when God died that the new event of Christianity was able to emerge from that failure. For just as God collapsed when he knew of his own inexistence, capitalism can only collapse when it becomes aware that it does not exist. So we find ourselves today as subjects of the god of capitalism that exists because it does not know of its inexistence.

How then do we get round this? Via Zizek we can see a way through by considering the twisted identity of God wherein the Word, truly alone, emerges from the failure of God and the abyss of inexistence. Christianity proclaims a universality based not on cultural forms but rather from universality that emerges downwards from the totality of humanity to its various instable and inconsistent particularities. The universal - like God - does not emerge prior to its *kenosis* (it's self-emptying) and it is in the *kenosis* whereby the death of individual particular sets free the Holy Spirit and God sublates “ into a virtual fiction sustained only by the collective of the believers.” (262). Yet in this individual particular God confronts God as God's own other; this is the twisted space of identity, the Hegalian negation of negation, whereupon in Christ man and God meet as other of themselves - and this is the universality of Christianity. Might not therefore a state capitalism be the event point of a twisted relationship wherein capitalism and its own other, communism, meet in a twisted relationship as other to themselves. But do we want state capitalism posited as the universal or is this actually the absolute recoil whereupon the failure of both capitalism and communism will occur allowing a new universal event to emerge? Therefore do we need to rescue Marxism from state

capitalism to allow the Real as impossible necessity - the impossible necessity of communism- to occur?

Zizek reminds us that the way out of the Fall into sin is via "*the full consummation of the Fall*, the death of God. "[348] The sacrifice of God who dies frees us by displaying the lack - the inexistence - of the big Other which means "*there is no one to sacrifice to (or for).*"(349) It is only when we acknowledge the death of capitalism that we will recognize that we no longer have to sacrifice to (or for) it. What we sacrifice to is the non-existent corpse of the big Other that has taken the place of the absent big Other of God. What we are in search of is therefore what has already occurred in Christianity: the awareness there never was an original unity and harmonious state. What is needed is the overlap with its own loss, when it recoils from itself and so disappears in its sign. (379) What is required is the emancipatory act that seeks to act not from supposed unity to overcome antagonism but rather takes the antagonism as that which allows the positing of the overcoming unity. For as Zizek has reminded us, it is not the fall from unity that we work within but rather we work towards the impossible possible of the One. Our choice is therefore like the running joke in the text from Lubitsch's film *Ninotchka* of asking for coffee without cream and being told that there is no cream but we can have a coffee without milk. This is a joke about *objet a* and what is in itself not One but a One plus something. (404). The '*without*' becomes the object cause (of desire), the excessive element, that which we lack. It is the *without*, the *objet a* that enables us to be subject and what if this *objet a* is Zizek argues, the production of the signifier of the barred Other...the symbolic Event at its most radical? (412) Christ can be perceived as the barred Other of both God and man and as such is the universal symbolic Event at its most radical, a symbolic event that does not retreat into the obliteration of difference but rather the expression of dialectical materialism in which there is no peace. This is why Zizek, via Hegel, is our theologian of the death of God and so demonstrates why theology - or at least radical theology- sits at the centre of our thought and at the centre of our absolute recoil to capitalism.