

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Four, Number Four

Translation Review Essay: “Autour de Slavoj Žižek: Psychanalyse, Marxisme, Idealisme Allemand.” (Benoît Guillette, Université du Québec à Montréal)

By Jonathan Ferguson, King’s College, London.

Abstract:

In Volume 4, issue 4 of the International Journal of Žižek Studies (IJZS), Benoît Guillette reviewed a book edited by Raoul Moati: “*Autour de Slavoj Žižek: Psychanalyse, Marxisme, Idealisme Allemand.*” This is a translation of Guillette’s book review, from French into English.

For the first time in French, several authors have been assembled in one volume to discuss the thought of Slavoj Žižek. More specifically, the seven authors in this book engage with Žižek in order to assess his attempts to revive (in response to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan), the main concepts of Marx, Hegel and Kant.

This book contains two sequences of essays: the first deals with the relationship of Marx to Žižek and the second addresses the relationship of Žižek to Hegel and Kant. Each sequence begins with a text from Žižek that has been translated from English into French and previously unpublished in French. Both texts themselves comprise nearly a third of the book and are of considerable interest. With regards to Marx, Žižek defends above all the idea that Communism cannot be a subjective reappropriation of an alienated substantial content; in particular, of the means and materials of production. Relying on the idea of the obstructed Lacanian subject, Žižek shows that the Subject can emerge only through its failure to fully actualise itself within a signifying chain.

In his essay, Lorenzo Chiesa reflects upon his difficulty in accepting that Žižek places so much emphasis on Hegel's reflections on Christianity. Chiesa finds that Marx, as early as in his writings in the 1840s, showed that analysis of political economy eliminates the need to discuss religious issues. According to Chiesa, Žižek has had to distort these writings of the young Marx in order to save the Hegelian philosophy of religion. Also, according to Chiesa, Žižek, in his book *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce!* has proven himself capable of presenting his ideas on the emancipation of humanity by developing the theme of the general proletarianisation of humanity, and without having to appeal to (Christian) religion. Finally, Chiesa recommends that Žižek follow more closely the thought of Alain Badiou.

Franck Fischbach, in his text, makes clear his inability to take Žižek seriously when, in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce!*, Žižek discusses the risks to which capitalism exposes itself as it separates human beings from the objective conditions of their work. According to Žižek, it is when these subjects are separated from this content, that they become capable of (revolutionary) action. Fischbach, *contra* Žižek, concludes his argument by stating that he has not the patience, in the face of the suffering of humanity, to wait for such actions. The three texts immediately following Fischbach (those of Rabaté, Žižek and Moati) succeed, in my opinion, in parrying the blow from Fischbach. In "not being fooled" by Žižek, Fischbach perhaps ends up "erring."¹

Jean-Michel Rabaté lists and explains the main passages in which Lacan talked about Marx. First, in the turmoil of the events of May 68, Lacan introduced his concept of “surplus-enjoyment” and shows that structuralism is not called into question by this turmoil. In 1969, Lacan produced his theory of the four discourses and indicates that the Leninist bureaucracy is similar to the discourse of the university, which latter is not unrelated to the search for a master. Finally, in 1970, the Lacanian critique of Marxism reaches its apogee. After noting that the humour Marx injects into his exposition of the operation of surplus-value is the same kind of humour that the capitalists themselves possess, Lacan states that Marx was not able to displace the capitalist discourse in order to subvert it and to avoid becoming one of its victims.

At the beginning of the second part of the book, Žižek presents a text in which he carefully distinguishes his understanding of the Hegelian philosophy of understanding from that of Gerard Lebrun. Incidentally, he provides, I think, a very good response not only to the text of Fischbach, but also to the texts of Chiesa and Rabaté. Here, Žižek discusses the reason for conflict in Hegel and concludes that, for Hegel, war is a necessity, and arises from the Subject, from the latter’s abstract-universal negativity. However, in Hegel, this conflict takes place in an environment where external obstacles (enemies) and temporality are necessary illusions, i.e. conditions of possibility in the guise of conditions of impossibility. The conflict is resolved into reconciliation, but this reconciliation must appear as an extremely violent act; and time is resolved into eternity, but this resolution must appear as a contingent temporal event.

Then Raoul Moati explains the meaning, for Žižek, of the expression

“Understanding the Substance as Subject.” Here, one sees a marrying of Hegel and Lacan: the proposition whereby which Hegel presents the Substance as marked by intrinsic antagonism; that is, always mediated by the negativity intrinsic to the Subject, which is equivalent to what Lacan theorized as the “traversal of fantasy.” If the substance appears ontologically consistent, if the “big Other” seems to exist, it is because the Subject is a “vanishing mediator.” The action of the subject consists in postulating its premises; to retrospectively cause necessity to arise out of contingency. This action only succeeds if Subject makes itself invisible, makes itself “vanish.” To conceive of Substance as Subject consists of traversing or rendering inoperable the (ideological) fantasy that makes this Subject invisible. Thus, what we seek as human beings is created by the very same process as our quest itself; and this is the big question: can we initiate this process without an illusion of structural order?

The two texts that follow, those of Geneviève Morel and Franz Kaltenbeck, have important elements in common. They argue that Žižek focuses only on the Cartesian Lacan and the mirror stage, failing to take into account the later Lacan; the Lacan of the *sinthome*. Hence, Morel and Kaltenbeck reject the Žižek interpretation of the “night of the world” in Hegel. Morel rejects the parallel established by Žižek between the dark screen at the cinema (before the beginning of a film screening) and the Hegelian description of the “night of the world.” Kaltenbeck also rejects the parallel Žižek attempts to draw between the “night of the world” and the Kantian imagination. Morel and Kaltenbeck base their arguments mainly on the first chapter of the book *The Ticklish Subject*. This where the weakness in both their essays lies because, in my opinion, the last chapter of that book is more comprehensive than the first chapter

Although Geneviève Morel describes well the ability of Žižek to expose Hollywood ideology, she thinks he is himself acts as an ideologue when he writes about Hegel. According to her, the disparate style of Žižek and the “slip” he performed in describing David Lynch movies are symptoms betraying an ideological desire on the part of Žižek; a desire to suture the gap between Hegel and Lacan, and thus to reject part of Lacanian psychoanalysis. For his part, Franz Kaltenbeck expound his reasons for rejecting the associations Žižek has attempted to make between transcendental imagination of Kant, the freedom of the Subject and the “night of the world” of Hegel. Kaltenbeck says that when Hegel expounds his “night of the world”, he speaks of a Real unrelated to the imagination; according to Kaltenbeck, as far as the Real is concerned, there can be no question of the imagination.

The final text of *Autour de Slavoj Žižek* can be read as a defense of Žižek against Kaltenbeck; because it deals primarily with the link between the Real and the theme of Lacan’s “*Kant avec Sade*.” This text by Ronan Calan is the only text in the book which does not express any criticism of the work of Žižek. It provides the guiding principle for understanding all the writings of Žižek on the great revolutionaries (Robespierre, Mao, etc). According to Calan, what Žižek believes all these individuals have in common is the fact that they echo Kant's categorical imperative. Thanks to Lacan, Žižek has mastered the “terroristic potential” of Kantian morality, a potential that arises from Kantian morality’s pure formalism (empty of any imaginary content as well as any content whatsoever from the symbolic “big Other”); a potential that, furthermore, also arises from the universal singular of Kantian morality. This morality, the categorical imperative, aims for an impossible beyond the pleasure principle. That is to say, it aims to keep desire open, in order to protect it from any fantastic (pacifying) schema.

Kantian law, as explained by Calan, has the unique property of releasing us from the superego's obligation to enjoy² and maximize our pleasures; which latter is an obligation essential to the functioning of capitalism.

Autour de Slavoj Žižek is a book that will certainly stimulate people who have already read a few books of Žižek. Regardless of the differences between the theses supported in the book, it is very valuable to be able, in French, to finally confront the seven authors' own understandings of the complex ideas of Žižek.

Translator's Notes

1. This sentence appears to pun on the title of Lacan's Seminar XXI, *Les non-dupes errent*; translatable as "those who are not duped are erring," i.e. "mistaken" or "wandering."

2. *Jouir* , etymologically related to *jouissance*.

References

Raoul Moati (directeur), *Autour de Slavoj Žižek: Psychanalyse, Marxisme, Idéalisme Allemand*, Presses Universitaires de France (collection Actuel Marx Confrontation), Paris, 2010, 219 pages.

Slavoj Žižek, *Après la tragédie, la farce! Ou comment l'histoire se répète*, Flammarion, Paris, 2010, 243 pages.

Slavoj Žižek, *Le Sujet qui fâche: Le centre absent de l'ontologie politique*. Flammarion, Paris, 2007, 541 pages.