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Review of *The Universal Exception*

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The Universal Exception

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Eds Rex Butler and Scott Stephens

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Eileen Chang, a twentieth-century Shanghainese writer, once said, ‘I like the skepticism I had toward everything when I was four.’ The first time I came across this I thought it was simply a genius showing off her own genius. Later that day for some reason the statement came back to my mind, and only then did I get its ingenuity: its profounder meaning is, of course—being universally skeptical at four means you are a genius; being universally skeptical at forty means you are a psychotic. Certainly, if Hegel is right, and philosophy does begin only at fifty, universal skepticism would barely be, if even, the first step of it all.

Slavoj Žižek, who is one of my professors at the European Graduate School, at 59 years of age, is in every sense of the word, a *force*, tirelessly questioning, unsettling and overturning everything, including himself. I typically do not prefer anthologies, which nonetheless can be rewarding on the basis of a few criteria against which I will assess this particular one. But before one can assess an *anthology* of an author, one should obviously first get a sense of this author’s

contribution *as a whole*. Thus, I wish ultimately to gather, *anthologize*, here all of Žižek's gifts, or ideas, under one, basic heading: love of reversal. It is in this fashion that *The Universal Exception* should be read. This edition of Slavoj Žižek's work, the second volume of the series chronicling his two-decade publishing career (the first volume being *Interrogating the Real*, 2005), gathers mostly his mid-1990s to 21st-century more or less 'ethico-political' (author's 'Preface to the Paperback Edition', vii) papers from disparate sources (journals, books, other collections). A central passage in his 'Heiner Müller Out of Joint,' originally published in 2003 and collected here, almost captures the whole of Žižek's approach: '...[R]evolution proper is to be opposed to carnivalesque reversal as temporary respite, the exception stabilizing the hold of power' (51). Žižek seems here somewhat discontented with himself, or more explicitly, with the duo of doubt and speculation that pushes us into the eternal philosophy, which is the inerasable shadow—for want of a single better word, I called 'skepticism', if any of the original Greek meaning can be maintained—throwing indeed all Western modern theoretical traditions into relief, as the stain through which they can be discerned and focused. Philosophical thought becomes the shuddering proximity of man to himself: it is *guilt*. Žižek asserts: '[T]he lesson of the trial and execution of Socrates is that *Socrates was guilty as charged*' (57, original emphasis). As Hamlet opines, 'And thus the native hue of resolution/Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;/And enterprises of great pith and moment,/With this regard, their currents turn awry,/And lose the name of action (III.i.92-6). For Žižek and us, what is at stake in the trial is precisely that 'name of action': 'And this brings us to the key question: how are we to construct a social space within which revolution can stabilize itself?' (51).

Reading Žižek politically, following the purpose of this book, which anthologizes some of his ostensibly political pieces, is, to my mind, a little too alliterative. One is immediately already drawn into the rhythm, the vortex of his Piscean force—within the amalgamation of his resources, his logical and theoretical bounds and leaps, vigor and panache—which in the end, in a way, nonetheless cancels itself out: 'I can do nothing (the Augustinian moment) although everything depends on me...' ('Phallus and Fetish,' 70; originally published in 1996). This is a profoundly ethical—and thereby unethical—gesture. In this sense the idea, or the image, of the 'universal exception' is a very simple one: in the end theory refers to, conjures up, nothing, an abyss, its singular Hadean center of force—a positioning of thinking as a kind of anti-metaphor. The editors Rex Butler (whose book on Jean Baudrillard was said by Baudrillard himself to be the only book that began to understand him) and Scott Stephens write succinctly under 'Truth' in the book's glossary: '...Truth in Žižek is always *engaged*. It does not erect a division between the Universal and the Exception that speaks of it, but seeks to cross all boundaries in ceaselessly turning upon itself' (350, original emphasis). Thus we get, too, under the term 'Act' the following definition: '[T]he ultimate act of any revolution is its imposing of a new order' (328). Act is always *Nachträglichkeit*. Still, as Žižek himself is aware, the problem is how one is to account for the *actuality* of an act: Auschwitz, Guantanamo, Nanking, real traumas, any 'axiom of choice', and indeed any

'philosophical decision' in the first instance—in short: what about *Wirklichkeit*? Where reversal is not the moment of origin, how can there be a transversal line intersecting all our lines of thought, across fantasy, for example? Either one has the vision and spirit to carry something out, or one does not; ultimately, there is no point to fiddling. When will Žižek be confident enough to share with us not only a concept (parallax, universal exception)—too much and too little—but a whole, unified plan? He writes again in 'The Prospects of Radical Politics Today' (originally 2005): '[T]he first task today is precisely *not* to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly and change things...but to question the...coordinates' (238). The author's question in the afterword to the collection sums up the conditions of agency well, and binds the current seeming crash course of Western civilization: 'Where do we stand today?' (304). As in archery, aim and loose are one motion. Perhaps now the only indelible *traction* we have is the totality and cacophony of some of the things, people and happenings—the 'details' ('Editor's Introduction: Slavoj Žižek's "Third Way"', 9) that we see him and ourselves keep finding, relishing, and returning to—in this actual world, perhaps with *nothing* except the 'enthusiastic urge to invent new rules for quotidian existence: How does one get married? What are the new rules for courting? How does one celebrate a birthday? How is one to be buried? It is precisely with regard to *this* dimension that revolution proper is to be opposed to carnivalesque reversal...' (50-1). And only with such an understanding of that 'nothing'.

Again as to the anthological edition itself—in keeping with returning to the concrete—two criteria on which it should be evaluated are its selection of primary materials, and its secondary additions, that is, the editors' implicit or explicit commentaries on the author's work—in short here, whether they live up to their own definition of an 'act'. For the first criterion, given the profusion of Žižek's output and the difficulties of obtaining some of his harder-to-find essays or versions thereof, *The Universal Exception* is a most welcome addition. Several other readers and canonizing introductions to Žižek's work already exist, and appropriately, many of Žižek's compositions are themselves anthologies or collections of his own previous writings. The expressed goal of Butler and Stephens' anthology is to demonstrate Žižek's 'real conceptual rigour' (351). So, the second and more important question is, especially considering the book's broad, thematic sections ('The Absent Second Way,' 'Really Existing Capitalism'), as well as the interesting, brief lexicography at the end, whether a new order, a fresh vista on Žižek's work, emerges out of this arrangement? I have a little reservation on this point. For instance, it would be quite useful to see a developmental analysis of his work instead (or, *in addition*), that is, whether and how Žižek's thinking has changed or shifted over the past twenty years: in emphasizing the continuity of his theory, the editors should also, again, not forget the discontinuous aspect, the very spirit of creativity, surprise, of what Jean Baudrillard, again, would call a 'counter-gift,'—of the *actual* for and against any and all theoretical *force*—that is the élan of the Žižek corpus.