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Review of Žižek: *Paper Revolutionary, A Franciscan Response*

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On its back cover, Marko Zlomislić's book claims to offer a critique of Žižek's work from a Franciscan perspective, drawing especially on the late medieval notion of haecceity or 'individual thisness'. But one does not have to read far into this book to realise that Zlomislić is a lot more interested in insulting Žižek than he is in actually engaging with his thought. Zlomislić's work is sadly lacking in substance, and fails to convince not only because its explication is marred by an over-use of exaggerated *ad hominem*s, but because Zlomislić has a limited understanding of the basic parameters of Žižek's philosophy. The result is a poorly-structured and largely incoherent attack at a straw-man-Žižek that would fail to inform or persuade any reader with even a basic grasp of Žižek's work.

A narrow-minded division structures Zlomislić's book: on the one side, there are political systems and philosophers who value the haecceity of the individual (Derrida, Kierkegaard, Christianity, Democracy) and on the other there are political systems and philosophies which endorse dehumanization and wholesale bloodshed (Hegel, Lacan, Communism, and, of course, Žižek). Zlomislić says that while he agrees with the spirit of Žižek's criticisms against capitalism and the suffering and exploitation it causes, he is very much opposed to what he sees as Žižek's apparent communist solution: 'the reality of his solution is monstrous and filled with terror. One can criticize capitalism and the many problems that it has created without leaping into the loving arms of Lenin, Stalin, or Mao, as Žižek does.' (14). The better, alternative solution is one based on the Franciscan notion of haecceity which refers to the irreducible singularity of each human life: 'What we are cannot be predicted, circumscribed, set in stone. It is unforeseeable. It cannot be anticipated. It is a pure singularity that is exceptional, irreplaceable, incalculable' (113). To this concept of haecceity, he contrasts Žižek's Hegelio-Lacanian notions of the individual as an effect of symbolic structures which in turn are effects of larger historical forces. This conception of the human being, as far as Zlomislić is concerned, fails to value the absolute singularity and irreplaceability of the person. As a result of this denial of haecceity, Žižek's politics – along with any form of communism – can only lead to the horror and terror of the gulag.

The central problem with Zlomislić's argument is that it does not take into account how Žižek defines and uses the term communism. To Žižek, this term does not refer to an endorsement of a totalitarian political order or an endorsement of all the actions of actual communist governments, but rather names a politics grounded in seeking emancipation for those groups who are excluded by a given social order. Take Žižek's own definition of this term from *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*:

It is thus crucial to insist on the communist-egalitarian emancipatory Idea, and insist on it in a very precise Marxian sense: there are social groups which, on account of their lacking a determinate place in the "private" order of the social hierarchy, stand directly for universality; they are what Ranciere calls the "part of no-part" of the social body. All truly emancipatory politics is generated by the short-circuit between the universality of the "public use of reason" and the universality of the "part of no-part" – this was already the communist dream of the young Marx: to bring together the universality of philosophy with the universality of the proletariat. (2009: 99)

There is nothing in this definition of communism that commits Žižek to approving the tragic horrors of communist regimes, like those of Mao and Stalin. Nor does it mean that Žižek's politics involves the denial of the haecceity of individuals. It is true that Žižek's politics relies on the conception of the subject as a void of negativity, but far from leading to a politics of dismissal of the dignity of particular individuals, this conception of the subject underpins a radical universality: every person is equal insofar as his or her concrete social identity fails to exhaust his or her being:

Universality inscribes itself into a particular identity as its inability to fully become itself: I am a universal subject insofar as I cannot realize myself in my particular identity – this is why the modern universal subject is by definition “out of joint,” lacking its proper place in the social edifice.
(Žižek 2012: 362)

It is this conception of universalism that grounds a politics that involves identifying with the part-of-no-part, or the symptomal excess, of a given social situation or structure. This conception of universalism is surely compatible with an ethic of haecceity: insofar as everyone is worth the same, can we not appreciate, even celebrate, the properly Real uniqueness of each individual? Zlomislić fails to demonstrate exactly how his politics differs from Žižek's conception of communism, because he has not engaged with Žižek's use of this term, but has rather relied on a very simplistic and dismissive conception of communism as necessarily involving totalitarian political regimes and human rights abuses.

This lack of any real engagement with Žižek's thought in Zlomislić's book is complemented by the over-abundance of invective that constitutes the greater part of the work. There are all the usual criticisms we find in the work of a Žižek-basher: Žižek is two-faced hypocrite who professes to be a communist while he profits from the very capitalist system he criticizes (2-3); Žižek is a joke, ‘a comedian pretending to be an impenetrable political theorist/revolutionary pretending to be a comedian, pretending to be a Hegelian who has read Derrida and Kierkegaard very badly’ (84); Žižek is a coward who hid in his study while his city was destroyed by an invading army (40) and who was missing when the Yugoslav Army was inflicting terror on the people of Slovenia (67); Žižek is a ‘paper revolutionary’ who ‘bowed down before the village idiot known as Titoism’ and only published when it was safe (63); and finally, Žižek is a philosopher whose claims are ‘preposterous, vacuous and foolish’ (89), and whose work is comparable to excrement (37), bullshit (119), a camera on top of

a dildo (50), a 'preface that greets us at the gulag entrance' (53) and, most strangely, as 'a series of unsuccessful spasms incapable of achieving full satisfaction' (51). As this representative sample of insults demonstrates, Zlomislić has made no real attempt to read Žižek in a charitable way.

Rather, the text could be described as a confused rant of an hysteric. Zlomislić's propensity to sidestep careful argument and explication to land another cheap blow on communism and anyone who would think of advocating it becomes increasingly disappointing as the work continues. Not only are the arguments poor, but they are so confusedly put forward that it is often difficult to determine the substance of Zlomislić's point. As an example, take the following paragraph from Chapter 10 of this book:

What Žižek's message fails to observe and this is symptomatic of his prodigious misreadings (of Christianity and Derrida) is that the message of Christ is not the message of Coke Zero. Think of Jesus on the cross being offered Vinegar-Zero (Drink it and your crucifixion pain will be numbed). Of course, Jesus refuses. Alain-Miller is right to claim that Coke claims it is IT though it never actually is it. Christ claims he is IT. He claims to be the Real Thing. Believe at your own risk. Žižek is correct to claim that with Coke the more you drink, the thirstier you get. Christ says the opposite. "Jesus replied, 'I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again. Those who believe in me will never thirst'" (John 6:35). Žižek gets Christ wrong because he relies on Lacan for his theological insights. The Chinese Government is harvesting organs from Fulan Gong prisoners. There is torture at Gitmo. Jack Bauer endorses the "truth-serum" of a Glock on 24. Morality is an after-thought. The rest of the time there is state-sponsored murder in the name of progress. Tragedy does not begin with Homer. It begins with the bubbling up of the cosmic soup from which we arose. (92)

The above extract is a fair sample of the style of Zlomislić's work. Not only does Zlomislić skip from topic to topic without indicating how these ideas relate to each other, but his tone is also confused: it is difficult to tell where Zlomislić is being sincere, and where he is being ironic. As a case in point, consider the sentence 'Believe at your own risk' in the passage above. Is this an endorsement for adopting belief in Christ as 'IT', or is it a sarcastic mocking of those who would see believing in Christ as dangerous? This lack of cohesion or development of ideas makes it difficult to discern the substance of Zlomislić's criticism of Žižek in this passage. The point that Žižek is supposed to have made is missing (but it seems to be that Žižek interprets the message of Christ as the message of Coke Zero? But where? What

does this mean?) and the content of what the reader can fairly assume is Zlomislić's reply to Žižek is obscured by a list of fairly random references and perfunctory claims (but it seems to be that Žižek does not believe sufficiently in an incarnated Christ and so must endorse torture, organ harvesting and murder?).

Zlomislić's arguments are not only confused, but they also repeatedly demonstrate fundamental misunderstandings of Žižek's thought. Take the example of Zlomislić's discussion Žižek's parallax ontology, or his dialectical materialism. Anyone with even a basic grasp of Žižek's philosophy appreciates that the defining feature of Žižek's materialism is the thesis that reality is non-all - rendered incomplete by the constitutive involvement of the subject. According to this version of materialism, the only thing that we can never see, or never access, and which accounts for the parallax structure of being, is the part the subject plays in the constitution of this reality: in simple terms, I can never see myself from the position from which I am looking. Zlomislić dismisses this metaphysics out of hand with the claim: 'Of course I can see reality.'

Žižek asserts "our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted." Direct access to the thing is possible. The only thing that prevents direct access is excessive theorizing. Žižek claims that the real is "the thing which eludes our grasp and the distorting screen which makes us miss the Thing." Perhaps this holds for a disciple of Lacan but others are not limited by the gap that Žižek constructs. (38)

Such a riposte demonstrates a profound lack of understanding of Žižek's position. The gap that can never be filled in reality for Lacan and for Žižek is the inscription of the subject as point of apperception in that reality, and there is no construction of reality without this blind-spot. The subject is a structural feature of reality, not an item of faith held by a small band of Lacanians. This seems completely lost on Zlomislić who sees it as obviously the case that it is possible to see the whole of reality:

I clarify this point with a personal example. When I witnessed the exhumation of corpses from the mass grave near the city of Vukovar that was destroyed by the Yugoslavian and Serbian Army, what I saw as not an *objet petit-a* but the noumenon itself. While Žižek wants to place belief in a "fantasmatic core inaccessible to my conscious experience" this core is already present in my conscious experience. It is already within my life-world. It makes itself seen even as I attempt to tear out my eyes. (36-37)

We will pass over Zlomislić's ridiculous claim that he has perceived the 'noumenon itself' – which is simply a contradictory use of that term – and examine Zlomislić's argument, which seems to be that because it is possible to witness events which are horrific, terrifying and traumatic, Žižek's claim that any construction of reality is non-all - because it involves a blind-spot in the form of the inscription of the subject in this reality - is shown to be incorrect. But how is this the case? Žižek's dialectical materialism is completely consistent with perspective that one can experience trauma. To convincingly respond to Žižek on this point, Zlomislić would need to demonstrate how it is possible to have a reality that does not involve some point of subjective inscription – something that Zlomislić fails to do because he does not seem to have grasped the basic features of Žižek's ontology.

Zlomislić not only gets Žižek's philosophy wrong, he also misreads arguments that Žižek has made in his work on contemporary political issues. Take for instance his account of what Žižek has said regarding the refugee crisis. First, he argues that Žižek sees refugees as a sub-human disease sweeping through Europe, and that, because Žižek states that reactions to this influx of refugees into Europe are similar to reactions to news that one has terminal illness, Žižek does not see the refugees as human at all:

Here Žižek is reaching for analogies that make no sense but in a deep way reveal his position toward the Other. The refugees (sic) who "flow" into Europe are like cancer. Refugees are de-humanized when they are described as a flow, an influx, a flood, a wave, and a stream that threatens Europe's "legitimate" body with danger. (121)

So when Žižek says: 'Refuges (sic) are the price we pay for a globalized economy in which commodities – but not people – are permitted to circulate freely', Zlomislić argues that what Žižek means by this is not that global capitalism – because of its exploitative structures – leads to increases in the number of refugees, but rather that we have to accept the reality of refugees because it is obvious that global capitalism is a *good thing*: 'Notice how Žižek the master Lacanian-Hegelian-Stalinist theoretician of *Kung-Fu Panda*, Soviet jokes, and Hitchcock, embraces the very Capitalism he seeks to overturn.' (122). In the next section, Žižek is ironically criticized for the very practice that he in turn has criticized in all of his works: the tendency of global capitalism to dehumanize people:

Human life is calculated in terms of cost, benefit and price rather than personal value. The claim is that refugees are a drain on the already withering capitalist system that sees bankers, and industrialists fatten up like the hoarding farmers in Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox*, while the unfortunate masses get herded into refugee camps and wash up dead on Europe's pristine beaches. But hey, life is not fair. (122)

There are only two possible explanations for such a ridiculous reading of Žižek's position on the refugee crisis: either Zlomislić has fundamentally misunderstood Žižek, or he is intentionally misrepresenting Žižek to make his own case stronger.

On page 99, Zlomislić aptly captures my own reaction to his book: 'Here I rub my eyes in disbelief. I wonder how such writing passes through the peer review process?' As a considered critique of Žižek's work, Zlomislić's book is seriously lacking in any substance or significance. This is a shame, as I am sure that there is potential for an interesting dialogue between the tradition Zlomislić advocates and Žižek's revolutionary politics. Unfortunately, rather than seriously engage with Žižek, Zlomislić has opted for shallow insults, cheap attempts at emotional manipulation and obvious exaggeration. The work has limited value as a piece of scholarship on Žižek and is so poorly constructed that there is only one use it could serve a student or scholar of continental philosophy: an example of how *not* to engage in philosophical exposition.

References

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