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***The Ticklish Subject* Book Review**

Žižek, Slavoj. 1999. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*
London:Verso.

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μάχεσθαι χρὴ τὸν δῆμον ὑπὲρ τοῦ νόμου ὡς περ τείχεος

The people must fight for its law as for its walls.

(Heraclitus *Fragments*)

Over a decade has now passed since the publication of this book: At the time, the book did not lead itself to immediate comprehension and its gravity in relation to the fight against the global paralysis of emancipatory politics was unknown. Secondary criticism has appeared in various forms and Žižek has responded at length by revising, clarifying and refuting much of it. *The Ticklish Subject* claims (on the back cover) to unearth a subversive core in the spectre of the Cartesian subject; finding a philosophical point of reference in it for a genuine emancipatory politics. After reading the entire book closely, this synopsis

seems slightly incorrect and perhaps even misleading. The publishers blurb oversimplifies Žižek's project; it is a far more elegant, humble and refined gaze into the absent centre of political ontology. There is very little emancipatory politics, if any at all. There is some sense of a partial liberation from the current global political climate, but this is not akin to Badiou's *Being and Event* where capitalo-parliamentarism is critiqued, rather its function is to look at the paradoxical role of the parallax object tickling the ticklish subject. This has a significant debt to Hegel, who previously mediated subject and object, so that a shift in the political subject's perspective reflects a shift in the object's ontology.

This shift of the subject's gaze and partial liberation, is at times, theoretically narcissistic, as the only act of emancipation is the development in knowledge in itself, regardless of its praxis. Alas, this is not the only book which is misleadingly categorised in the Marxist tradition for marketing purposes. Published a few years prior to *The Ticklish Subject*, was Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*. This also was not a straight-forward book on Marx - but also rather an affirmation of the desire for emancipation, unearthing the limits of contemporary academic Marxism.

The essay collection *The Truth of Žižek* could also to a certain extent be charged with false advertising. The contributors are not concerned with the actual truth of Žižek, but rather on defending ideas (like post-modernism for example) from Žižek's critique. *The Truth of Žižek* is among a relatively small field of criticism on Žižek. Underneath and between substantial paragraphs of polemic vitriol, many illuminating challenges appear, for example Critchley asserts that Žižek (in praxis) amounts to little more than 'vague apocalyptic allusions to violence.' Indeed the thrilling debate between Critchley and Žižek has developed extensively since the publication of this book and continues today in several newspapers and periodicals. *The Ticklish Subject* is a single-authored text (in comparison) and should precede any reading of *The Truth of Žižek*.

In the 2005 documentary *Žižek*, directed by Astra Taylor, Žižek claims *The Ticklish Subject* to be one of the most important and serious books he has ever written. Despite the text being single authored, it shares the diverse mix of manifold themes that we encounter in *The Truth of Žižek* and parallax shifts of perspective. Both books are not easily accessible to the general public, as the majority of the reference material covered is of a highly theoretical postgraduate nature.

A limitation of *The Ticklish Subject* is that the political and social ontology is buried under a lot of excessive Lacanese (psychoanalytical) and Hegelian (philosophical)

referential material. This sometimes obscures rather than elucidates Žižek's argumentation. The irony of this, is that while Žižek confronts Derridean deconstructionists and obscurantists, he at times, does so with the same elusive, obscure terminology that he attacks his critics for using. His rebuttals are often so complex that they sometimes paradoxically supplement, instead of refute, his opponents.

The grandiose promise of political emancipation (on the back cover) is not convincingly delivered by Žižek during the course of this book, however this is more a criticism of the publisher rather than Žižek. There are intermittent flashes of fulfilling the project, but there is no systematic or consistent hypothesis. There is no solid system or structure to be found in much of this text, such as one might find in Badiou's *Being and Event*. This not a negative observation, it merely highlights that contrary to Badiou, ontology, the science of being qua being, can be something other than purely mathematical logic.

The key to Žižek's argumentation is the contemporary relevance of the *split subject*. This runs in tandem with the notion of the symbolic order covering *a priori* the act. I will unpack this convoluted sentence: The symbolic order is borrowed by Žižek from Lacanian terminology. The act is meant here in the way Badiou conceives it. *The Ticklish Subject* amalgamates the materialism of Schelling with the aforementioned Lacan and Descartes. What ties these radically different thinkers together is the axis of the act as expounded by Badiou. To clarify, Žižek summarizes Badiou through the idea that the *official* symbolic order covers or *represses* the Truth-Event. To simplify, revolution is often making the void visible in the prevailing order, but this only happens usually as a consequence of the act. This crux of *The Ticklish Subject* should be accredited to Badiou. It takes Žižek over a hundred pages to reach this perception and up until this point there is a distinct lack in any sight of concrete emancipatory politics. Much of what Žižek writes prior to this paraphrase of Badiou is maybe superfluous, if the task at hand is political rather than philosophical. This does not mean that the introductory chapters are not of the utmost psychoanalytical and philosophical importance. Contrary to my argument, the first chapter on Heidegger as a reader of Kant does have some pertinent political interrogation in its pages. However, there are some minor flaws in this chapter which perhaps need addressing or a little revision. Žižek claims that Heidegger misread Kant and that this misreading sheds new light on Heidegger's Nazism. I disagree that Heidegger misread Kant, I think this is an oversimplification and almost a distortion by Žižek. Heidegger obviously lacked a Lacanian conception of the cogito, but this is just a gap in Heidegger's reading not a glaring mistake.

This highlights an incompatibility between Heidegger traversing the horizon of modern Cartesian subjectivity and Žižek's transcendental, materialistic subjectivity. This does not highlight any error in Heidegger's reading. Heidegger did not not read Kant through psychoanalytical principles, but that does not indicate that Kant exceeded Heidegger's intellectual grasp. Žižek does not convince me on this matter. I do not have a bias towards Heidegger (as a result of the reservations of Adorno, Irigaray and Lyotard towards his edifice) but his acute analysis in texts such as *Kant and the problem of Metaphysics* is sharper and more sustained than what Žižek offers here in *The Ticklish Subject* or in his *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Heidegger traces Kantian ontology back to its Greek origins, whereas Žižek's ontology starts far later with Kant's critical turn itself. My perspective is that Heidegger and Žižek read Kant differently for their own separate projects, neither errs substantially, they just approach Kant with different preliminary prejudices. Heidegger's *Kant and the problem of Metaphysics* is perhaps more of a guide to reading his own *Being and Time* than it is to Kant's *Critique of pure Reason*; like *The Ticklish Subject* is more of a guide to Žižek's personal ontology, as opposed to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This is perhaps authorial textual narcissism or indeed reinscribing their philosophies into their own images. What we have are not mistakes on the part of Heidegger or Žižek, but a parallax gap or a minimal difference between them to use Žižekian terminology.

Being and Time starts with a quote from Plato. Maybe Žižek should have started *The Ticklish Subject* in a similar fashion. Instead Žižek opts to start with Heidegger and his deadlock with Derrida. A critic who has also noticed the absence of Plato in Žižek is Kisner:

Though Žižek does not call attention to it, we can see this opposition in Plato's *Euthyphro* when the young Euthyphro brings his father before a court of law to prosecute him for causing the death of a servant through negligence, thereby renouncing his familial obligations in favour of a universality of justice before the law. Hegel's own well-known example is that of the Antigone, who takes the opposite path of renouncing civic obligation in favour of familial duty. (Kisner 2008: 3)

Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides all based tragedies on the story of Antigone. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta. Žižek does eventually discuss tragedy, but not until page 154 of *The Ticklish Subject* via Lacan. The figure of Oedipus at Colonus is the example given, but this approach perhaps should have nearer the start of the book, maybe closer to the introduction of Plato's *Timaeus* on page 54. Sophocles' *Antigone* could also

be brought in at this early stage, instead of its appearance on page 263. My reason for this rearrangement is that Žižek concludes the book with a chapter on the relevance of Oedipus today, or to be more specific the Oedipal mode of subjectivization. This is a well-trodden path in continental philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari schizoanalysed the contemporary relevance of Oedipus in *L'Anti-Oedipe* back in 1972, long before Žižek. Perhaps a slightly stronger starting point would have been in Ancient Greece - to give the book a better chronological structure. Maybe Plato's *Republic* under the psychoanalytical knife would have made better a introduction for the chronological cohesion of the book. Instead Žižek begins thematically, with the failure of Heidegger's philosophical edifice and its roots in his Nazi engagement.

Let us take as our starting point Nietzsche's critique of Wagner: this critique was appropriated by Heidegger as the paradigmatic rejection of all critiques of subjectivism that remain within the horizon of Cartesian subjectivity. (Žižek 1999: 11)

Žižek is correct, but only too a certain extent. In 1888, Nietzsche does treat Wagner as a paradigmatic pathology. The medical idiom is correct in this psychoanalysis. Wagner is denounced as a neurotic, hysterical sickness. What Žižek misses, is that in the preface to *The Case of Wagner: A Musicians' Problem*,¹ Nietzsche acknowledges Wagner as a symptom of his own sickness. Wagner is Nietzsche's surrogate father figure. Here Nietzsche adapts Horace's maxim (from the *Satires*) *ridentem dicere verum, quid vetat*², which is very appropriate to Žižek as he is both loved and vilified for his constant use of jokes in both his lectures and books. What is also of importance in this Nietzschean preface, is that a parallel can be drawn towards Heidegger as being almost a surrogate father-figure to Žižek. In this first chapter of *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek renounces Heidegger. Alas, Žižek admits starting off his philosophical career as a Heideggerian. This echoes Deleuze and Guattari's observation that 'it is not always easy to be Heideggerian' in *What Is Philosophy?*

As for Žižek's early enquiry into the Cartesian cogito, Nietzsche developed a critique of it (earlier in 1886) which can be found in aphorism 17 of *Beyond Good and Evil*. Perhaps Žižek could have mentioned this. Apart from these slight weaknesses, the chapter does have a critical brilliance. On the next page, Žižek states about Heidegger that:

on the other hand, his insistence that he is not convinced that democracy is the political form which best suits the essence of technology none the less suggests that there is *another* political form which best suits this ontological essence better –

for some time, Heidegger thought he had found it in the Fascist 'total mobilization' (Žižek 1999: 12)

Epochal, ontological truths can be traced back to Ancient Greece. Žižek underestimates the importance of the Greeks to Heidegger. Heidegger's search for ontic political systems can not be understood properly without at least some consideration of Thucydides, Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea* and Plato's *Parmenides*. Žižek dwells on how Heidegger saw the separation of the ontic and the ontological without paying attention to these original sources of Heidegger. Instead Žižek focuses on Heidegger being trapped by Nazism. Although Žižek is attacking Heidegger in this chapter, unwittingly he is defending him through claiming that Heidegger was almost naïve for being a pursuer of ontological truth in his epoch. Perhaps Žižek is somewhat deluded from what Adorno called the jargon of authenticity. I disagree with Žižek, I do not think that Heidegger accidentally fell into an ideological trap. Heidegger knew explicitly what he was doing. Heidegger wrote eloquently on totalitarianism. Nazism was part of his historico-ontological essence, despite of his rejection of the Rosenbergian world view. Žižek does not mention the Rosenbergian world view, which is constitutive of Nazi ideology. Žižek is more preoccupied with how *Being and Time* leads back to transcendental subjectivism. This gap in Žižek's scholarship³ is due to a focus on how radical subjectivity is announced in the Kantian transcendental imagination. The Kantian Copernican revolution and its relation to totalitarianism is only given a superficial treatment by Žižek. The deeper interrogation lies in a defence of the modern subject of Descartes; this is against the reduction of subjectivity to its particular, historical attributes. The existentialism of Heidegger is a convenient tool for this, as the noumenal beyond appears to the subject within its finite temporality. It is plausible, that again, Žižek's understanding of the Kantian transcendental synthesis of imagination reveals more about Žižek's ontology than Kant's. In psychoanalytic terms, the inaccessible *an sich* kernel of subjectivity in Kant (barred by reflective mediation) is not the noumenal Real, but rather the fundamental fantasy. The synthesis of imagination fails for Žižek because of an imbalance between apprehension comprehension, rather than through the intrusion of the noumenal dimension of the moral law. Maybe this is Žižekian theoretical narcissism *par excellence*. From my humble perspective, it bears very little relevance to political emancipation as it does not hold much significance outside of psychoanalysis.

For many thinkers, it is Derridean spectrality, not phenomenal or noumenal ideas which are of greater importance. To clarify, what remains of reality after fantasy has been extracted, and how fantasy subsequently haunts reality is what Žižek could of have

developed. This alongside the ontological incompleteness of reality itself is where Žižek could have interrogated Heidegger. A few years later Žižek did partially undertake this task in Chapter 5: *From Surplus-Value To Surplus-Power of The Parallax View*.⁴ This might have made a slightly better transition to the next section of the book where Žižek suggests that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* main thesis is that there is no absolute subject.

After the weaker opening chapter, *The Ticklish Subject* improves. The transition from Kantian epistemology to Hegelian ontology is done on a pathological level and shows Žižek at his most cogent. He clearly identifies three main versions of the relationship between the universal and its particulars: Descartes Cartesian *cogito*, the standard Marxist reading and Laclau's empty Universal. Here the book may not be at its most innovative, but it is at its most lucid. Žižek dispels many misconceptions about Hegel, for example on page 113, he states that Hegelian concrete universality has nothing to do with organic totality. It is in this reading of German Idealism where *The Ticklish Subject's* greatest strength lies.

The paradoxical nature of the Hegelian absolute is closer to the deconstruction of de Man and Derrida than Žižek cares to admit however. The next chapter is called *Political Subjectivization and its Vicissitudes*. Despite this Freudian sounding title, Žižek embarks on deconstructions despite his vehement anti-postmodern stance. This raises the question of intentionalism. This chapter speaks with greater authority than Žižek's purposes. I do not suggest that there is nothing outside of the text, but that this chapter includes deconstructions such as: 'Is not Badiou the anti-communitarian communitarian? Is not Balibar the anti-Habermasian Habermasian? Is not Rancière the anti-Lyotardian Lyotardian? (Žižek 1999: 172)

It is almost as if Žižek comes full circle and exhibits purposiveness without a purpose! Or as Denis Dutton succinctly puts it in *Why Intentionalism Won't Go Away*: 'his point as consistent as it is with Kant's dictum of the work of art as possessing purposiveness without a purpose, is well taken.' Ironically, Žižek is the anti-Derridean Derridean, but perhaps Žižek had already entertained this idea and it was somewhat intended. Žižek's Hegelian Idealism slips, as these questions attack Dutton who is actually on Žižek's Idealistic side. Here the anti-Derridean Derridean comes a full circle. This is reminiscent of what Derrida describes in *Ulysses Gramophone* (on page 262) as the great circular return, the circumnavigation of Ulysses - in the Hegelian sense of phenomenology of mind.⁵

This close reading of Joyce by Derrida is exactly what Žižek is doing to Badiou, Balibar and Rancière. Žižek's intention is to help academia leave the post-modern phase, however the shared reference material maybe knots elements of Žižek and Derrida together: The spectre of Hegel circumnavigating them both. Another connection linking them together is their anticipations of Professorships to study their work. This was also true of Nietzsche and Joyce. Closure is thus impossible. They all watched over their respective archives, foretelling its posthumous destiny. There is a poignant moment in the 2002 documentary film about and starring Derrida - where he gazes at the archive of his full works, as if contemplating his mortality. Derrida is very much alive in our academic criticism industry and perhaps unwittingly in the unconscious of Žižek. The next, perhaps more personal chapter is on Žižek's friend Judith Butler. Despite the appearance of cold, constructive criticism, this reads like a warmer piece of autobiography. Žižek takes issue with Butler's reading of Freud and he does so in an articulate manner. E.D Hirsch's *In Defense of the Author* offers the claim that 'Kant insisted that not even Plato knew what he meant, and that he, Kant, could understand some of Plato's writings even better than Plato himself.' I am not suggesting that Butler does not know what she means, but rather that in some respects Žižek understands some Freudian subject matter better than she does.⁶ From a feminist perspective, Žižek does rely on Hegel and Heidegger too much and should be reprimanded for expounded their phallogocentric prejudices. Another feminist concern, is that Heidegger's forgetting of the maternal-feminine means that his concept of *physis* can be understood as another *technē*. This is at the core of the philosophy of Luce Irigaray and Helen Fielding but largely absent from Žižek's discussion of Butler.

In so far as the political act *par excellence* is revolution, maybe this chapter is a slight digression in *The Ticklish Subject*. Žižek again becomes embroiled in a substantial amount of theoretical narcissism. This almost seems to be a feature of his excessive academic *jouissance*. Žižek concludes *The Ticklish Subject* with the following: 'Lacan's maxim "Do not compromise your desire!" fully endorses the pragmatic paradox of ordering you to be free: it exhorts you to dare.' (Žižek 1999: 392)

This encapsulates a limitation of this book. Desire lead Žižek to write this book, perhaps for some utopian political emancipation. In Lacanese, *petits objets a'* caused a disjuncture between his desire for transcendental materialistic subjectivity and the actuality of its development. *The Ticklish Subject* is the product of this disjuncture. It is arguable that all Žižek succeeds in doing is leaving open a space for the faculty of desire. Maybe this is an ethical space which allows new vocabulary to be introduced into the

unconscious. 'The unconscious is structured like a language' (Lacan 1998: 48). This is deceptively liberating if Žižek is taken at face value. On the contrary, my perspective is that this reminds one of the dependence of reality on fantasy. The spectre of reflexivity (as found in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) haunts the desire for emancipation. To clarify, the frame of fantasy is always included as part of the frame of reality. The emancipatory political fantasy is acknowledged as the grammar and syntax of the unconscious. The relationship between desire and fantasy is not negated but allowed (in a pre-emptive move by Žižek) to be free.

Like Beckett and Joyce, interpretation is taken into consideration in advance.⁸ The interpretation of Žižek in *The Truth of Žižek*, comprises mostly of vitriol. There is negligible hagiography, but on the rare occasions there is a juncture between hagiography and vitriol we are provided with a more neutral analysis. This does not mean the vitriol is not fertile or apt. It is just less elegant in tone when one questions the style.⁹ Critchley opens the proceedings with a Heideggerian approach to Žižek's *Parallax View*, but this foreword seems a little too personal for a neutral academic. The first essay, *The Writing Cure: Slavoj Žižek, Analyst of Modernity* has a vague conclusion, although I agree with its implicit thesis, it requires clarification and a more explicit exposition. The second essay, *The Tao of Žižek* is less complex than its predecessor but is superior in its lucidity. This particular essay could have been enhanced by a reading of Derrida's *Aporias*. Bowman misses the debate about the aporia working between the tradition of critique and the idea of critique itself. I will unpack this idea. Derrida addresses this aporia via Heidegger – who regarded death as the onto-phenomenological limit of *Dasein*.¹⁰ Bowman suggests (on page 40) that capitalism is the limit of Žižekian thought. This is a reductive analysis of Žižek, as it excludes the Lacanian principle that Žižek often repeats that the *Real* resists symbolization absolutely. To clarify with Derrida: 'The ultimate aporia is the impossibility of the aporia as such' (Derrida 1993: 78). The death of capitalism is not the limit of Žižek's thought, capitalism resists symbolization absolutely, there is an aporia in this limit as such. It is in this Derridean reading of Heidegger that the fracture appears in the border/limit or edge of Žižek's thought. In my reversal contra Bowman, Derrida defends Žižek instead of attacking him. This is a common misreading of Žižek's understanding of global capitalism, which more recently has occurred in the reception of his *Living In The End Times* (2010).

The essay of most relevance to *The Ticklish Subject* in *The Truth of Žižek* is perhaps *Acting on the Act: On Slavoj Žižek's political ontology*. It is the Machiavelli section of this essay which perhaps needs the most substantial revision. Any alteration could take

consideration of the following passage from the second chapter *Syntax as Skin* of Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*:

Machiavelli wrote: You must know that there are two ways of contesting, the one by law, the other by force; the first is the method proper to men, the second to beasts; but because the first is the method proper to men, the second to beasts; the first is frequently not sufficient, it necessary to have recourse to the second. Therefore it is necessary for the prince to avail himself of the beast and the man [...] At the centre of the labyrinth which serves as a tail piece in Nietzsche *et le cercle vicieux*, we will find not the minotaur, stupid beast with his monotonous appetite, but a centaur, a monster more intelligent than the most intelligent of men, the image of the marvellous dissimulation of signs into one another, supreme wisdom which includes the stupidity of bestiality. (Lyotard 1974: 780)

The Truth of Žižek is a collection of essays that contest Žižek by force, using methods slightly more akin to beasts than Prince-like scholars. This was a necessary exercise, thus their tone should not disarm the reader. Žižek's concluding essay wanders through the labyrinth of the preceding criticism and he emerges out of it as the supreme Centaur. Žižek quotes himself at length (on topics such as Lukàs' *History and Class Consciousness*) and reveals himself not to be the Minotaur of the previous essays caricaturisation of him. The concluding essay by Žižek could stand alone as a text in itself, like a piece of autobiography. 'The autobiography and the political are interconnected' (Heddon 2008: 20). Žižek's (in progress) autobiography is a *groundless* ground shot through with tensions and instability; forming his political ontology which comprises of both supreme wisdom and bestial taste. This taste is a mere question of style, it lacks the refined tone of Merleau-Ponty's *The World of Perception* for example, which is probably an influence of Descartes' prince like prose. I am not sure how much of this is lost in translation by Oliver Davis in my edition; but the polished nuances and cool, calm tone are retained. Perhaps controversy and superficial (bestial even) shock tactics sell more books and conference tickets to provide many philosophers a better living. Fundamentally *The Ticklish Subject* is a political text: however the times when philosophers such as Lyotard intervened in contemporary events, or the suggestions they would make for the improvement of political issues, were considered in government legislation, are no more. This is the absent centre of political ontology. For marketing reasons, publishers will not admit to this. It does not correlate well with advertising a public intellectual. Perhaps the oxymoronic irony of the private political thoughts of the public intellectual is on Descartes' tombstone: *Bene vixit qui bene latuit*.¹¹

- 1 The preface starts with *ridendo dicere severum*, Latin for 'through what is laughable say what is sombre.'
- 2 Latin: What forbids us to tell the truth, laughing? Horace *Satires*, I. 24.
- 3 Žižek elsewhere in Part III of *The Parallax View*, which is called *The Lunar Parallax: Towards A Politics Of Subtraction*, almost fills this gap entirely with an acute and illuminating reading of Heidegger's texts *On the Way to Language* and *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*.
- 4 Ontic errance and ontological truth is the framework of that discussion of Heidegger; in particular the parallax gap between the ontological and the ontic.
- 5 This is not to be confused with *Ulysses' realpolitik* in the first chapter of *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008)
- 6 Respect and admiration for Butler's ingenuity in her *Gender Trouble* (1990) is shown in *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (1993)
- 7 The unattainable object of desire. Lacan always insisted in it being untranslated so it looks like an algebraic sign.
- 8 Alain Badiou's *On Beckett* (2003) reminds us in the introduction that: 'despite however much he seems to pre-empt us - the singularity and intellectual weight of his work is such as to demand an explicitly *philosophical* response.'
- 9 Barbara Harlow translates *Question of Style* thus: 'In the question of style there is always the weight or *examen* of some pointed object. At times this object might only be a quill or a stylus. But it could just as easily be a stiletto, or even a rapier.' (Derrida 1979: 37)
- 10 German: Being-there.
- 11 Latin: He lived well, who hid well

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