

## Reading Žižek to the Letter: Review of Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda (Eds.): *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism*

Brian R. Gilbert, DePaul University

Agon Hamza & Frank Ruda (Eds.)  
*Slavoj Žižek & Dialectical Materialism*  
Palgrave MacMillan  
ISBN 978-1-137-54542-8 (HC)  
\$100.00 (USD)

Toward the end of *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism*, author and editor Agon Hamza writes, “The only way to radicalize Marx is to uncompromisingly subject him to Hegel’s system” (172). For those already familiar with Žižek, the clearest intellectual trajectory for this encounter is, of course, his reactualization of dialectical materialism—i.e. the “radical attempt to ground subjectivity qua subjectivity into objectivity—not merely find the hidden ‘objective reality’ of thought” (164). In most Marxist versions of Hegelian dialectics, a contradiction exists between the demands of capital and the abuses of labor. By critically reflecting on this fundamental contradiction, it becomes possible to identify the antagonism at the root of the subject’s over-determination. Žižek (2014a), however, turns away from upward spiraling negation and synthesis of the standard teleological reading of Hegelian dialectics. Instead, Žižek describes a

“downward synthesis” (1) wherein there is “no positive synthetic result” (336), only a downward spiraling negativity “by which a thing emerges out of its own loss” (1).

Against this background, the authors of this volume undertake “a critical and systematic investigation of the concept dialectical materialism developed in the work of Slavoj Žižek” (Hamza & Ruda 2015: 1). While Žižek’s basic theoretical space is to articulate the compossibility of three proper names—Lacan, Hegel, and Marx (Tupinambá 2015)—those looking to Žižekian theory specifically for new articulations of Marxist dialectical materialism are likely to be disappointed. While Žižek’s dialectics do involve materialist dimensions insofar as a dialectical relation between universal necessity and particular contingencies inform his critique of capitalist ideology, his theory is constructed against a metaphysics of inconsistency through which reality is decidedly unstable. Materialism, as such, is to be understood not only in the traditional Marxist sense of “priority of being over consciousness ... but also [as] the immanent materiality of the ideal order itself” (Žižek 2014a: 55-6).

Bearing this in mind, how does one move forward? As Ernesto Laclau notes in his preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Žižek 1989), “This is not a book in the classical sense” (xii); more precisely, Žižek’s own methodological presentations of dialectical materialism are exercises in dialectical materialism more than they are texts on the topic (Hamza 2015). Likewise, this book is wonderfully Žižekian in its demonstration of similar methodological trajectories lacking distinction between the method and object; as Hamza notes, “The method and object are mediated,” (163) signifying the relevancy of dialectical materialism as a universal principle of ontological import. Readers already comfortable with Žižek’s theoretical matrix will undoubtedly find this collection a specialized intervention focusing on theoretical and methodological usefulness that both subsumes and eludes it. However, despite this paradoxical practicality, this text is not an orienting entry point into the topic. As is often the case with Žižek’s own work, the essays are often dense and presume more than a passing familiarity with Continental philosophy. Newcomers to Žižekian theory work might consider Lacan’s advice: “To read does not obligate one to understand. First it is necessary to read ... one should avoid understanding too quickly” (in Ulmer 1985: 196). However, once readers are acquainted with the major themes of Žižek’s work and the

particular terrain of his formulation of dialectical materialism, the volume will undoubtedly constitute a brilliant addition to the tradition.

The framing of text is perhaps most successful in its avoidance of the fetishization of thought that often plagues books about a particular thinker and/or intellectual trajectory. Specifically, the authors provide a book about Žižek that sets itself apart from the seemingly endless hoard of “critical” introductions and theoretical anthologies. Each essay is both a complication and extension of Žižek’s own philosophical mapping, a point succinctly articulated by the editors:

[N]one of the contributors engage in a simple defense of Žižek’s work, none in a simple rejection. All of them work with his work, and work through his work, and all of them do commit to the principle that his thought must be taken absolutely seriously, so seriously that one needs to investigate, discuss, criticize, and elaborate upon the most crucial conceptual and systematic dimensions it implies (Hamza & Ruda 2015: 2).

For example, readers of Žižek will recognize his ever-present specter attempting the reactualization of German Idealism—particularly Hegel—qua Lacan. However, Tupinambá asks us to consider the compossibility of his privileged itinerary; is it possible for a movement from Lacan to Hegel to exist simultaneously as a movement from Hegel to Marx? The problem, he notes, is that there is a missing vector in the triadic scheme—a return from Marx to Lacan. Such a return is the engagement of “psychoanalysis from the standpoint of dialectical materialism, in so far as it names the result of the process which led Žižek from a Lacanian Hegelianism to a Hegelian Marxism” (133-4). As an example of the previous sentiment, Tupinambá’s (2015) schematic forces us to ask, “What must dialectical materialism be if psychoanalysis is possible” (132)? Similarly, how does Žižek’s dialectical materialism traverse impasses capable of bringing about a rethinking and actualization of dialectics itself?

Because of the far-reaching thematic structure of the volume, there is something inherently precarious about attempting to capture the depth and nuance of this type of collection in the liminal space of a literary review. Consequently, the aim of this analysis is to provide a tentative topography of how the thematic structure of this collection fits within Žižek’s “shadowy form” of dialectical materialism that is “not a preconfigured ...

system of thought” but seems to only “[appear] because one moves toward renewing its foundation” (Ruda 2015: 149). There is, in this endeavor, a certain ridiculousness, according to Ruda, “relative to the performative contradiction of the theory itself, as it seems to be a system which does not exist other than when it is being practiced” (149)—i.e., it is at once more than something and less than nothing. Žižek’s dialectics, in this way, is an ostensible subject propagated by an ineffaceable trauma.

Read within this frame, there exists an implicit thread of non-being and antagonism that emphasizes the “impasses” and “revolutioniz[es] character for contemporary philosophical thought” (Hamza & Ruda 2015: 2). Methodologically, then, Žižek’s downward synthesis is not effacing but instead preserves the difference. Therefore, “synthesis”—properly understood—posits the difference in the form of a dialectical non-identity, or “reflexive asymmetry,” in symbolic reality (Žižek 2008). Therefore, the reader should engage this text from a theoretical position of its own impossibility—staring into the abyss that is the gap between its own subjectivity and reality itself—an ontological status of negativity. Žižek’s Lacanian reactualization of Hegel in this way emphasizes the radical finitude of consciousness, knowledge, and reality whereby dialectical thinking highlights the impossibility of isolating things from their symbolic representations. In other words, dialectical materialism “transposes back into nature ... the very gap that separates subjectivity from objective reality” (Ruda 2015:153).

But what would become of the subject if, as Voelker (2015) asks, the structure was returned to the relation between Kant and Hegel, or rather Hegel and Kant, insofar as Hegel “deontologizes” (60) the Kantian limitation within the realm of the phenomena? In this movement, Voelker carries with the gap that is the very texture of the subject’s reality, a gap that “occurs to be the utmost of reality, the real, upon which we start” (59). Hegel works through the Kantian thing-in-itself, inscribed as a limitation in the world, that is the cause of phenomena but not a phenomenon itself or, within phenomena, is “the negative definition of the Thing concerning the Thing itself, since this Thing is nothing but the void of absolute negativity” (60). By returning to Žižek’s constellation of German idealism—i.e., Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel—the reader is forced to consider what becomes of the subject if the truth is to be found on the level of the

distortion of the concept or the antagonistic split that separates subjectivity from the In-itself of the subjective self? Further, while the subjective constitution of reality—the split that separates the subject from the In-itself—is fully admitted, what if this very split is transposed back into reality?

Consequently, Žižek's (2014a) description of reality as "inconsistent, antagonistic, [and] never at peace with itself" logically references the primordial antagonism at the heart of the subject such that there is "no peace even in the Void" (1). As readers grapple with this gap, Žižek's dialectical movement recoils to break Hegelianism away from Kantian "remnants" (Hamza 2015: 167), opening the paradoxical character of his "ontological substratum" (Hajdini 2015: 86) that creates a temporal vector schematizing his resuscitation of dialectical materialism itself. Such a temporality implies a double reading—a "path forward from Lacan to Hegel" that is both "signifier and doctrine of the Real"—forcing the reader to consider "both the dialectical and the materialist character of dialectical materialism" (86). However, because the fundamental insight of Žižek's dialectic has always already been that any identity is displaced from itself, it is necessary to consider the fetishistic sequencing of the dialectical movement— "I know well, but all the same (I believe that...)." In this sense, the operations of the fetishists' imagination produce an imaginary sense of wholeness that prevents an encounter with the Real, paradoxically returning the subjects to the shadow in which they already dwell, and Hegel's "opaque body cast[s] the shadow situated behind [their] back" (86).

Because of this positioning, it is necessary to continually reassess how to avoid this repetitious impasse. This returns us to the nature of reality and the understanding that there is no unambiguous way to separate our understanding of reality from reality itself. Reality in this sense is dialectical; there is no pure self-identity; opposites are never harmoniously reconciled in any higher "synthesis." Instead, their difference is posited as such in the form of an inconsistent totality, and no thing, event, or property simply is what it is; what a thing is—its very existence—involves what it is not. For Marques (2015), such "strange loops" are reiterative of "entangled hierarchies where closed loops of containment occur" (114). While Marques' explicit intent is to draw a direct parallel with biology, his theorization provides a paradigmatic curvature linking

self-relating negativity qua the Hegelian notion of freedom such that reductive materialism is untenable. The subject's freedom thus "demands a kind of excess of the effect over its cause" (114) which [the subject] retroactively determine[s] the causes allowed to determine [him or herself] (Žižek 2004).

Ultimately, the task of dialectical materialism is to explain "the rise of an eternal idea out of the activity of people caught in a finite historical situation" (Žižek 2014a :72) and to determine the structure of reality "so that subjectivity can emerge in it" (19). But, given this foundation, why is Hegel (together with Lacan) the foundation of Žižek's philosophical system? Hamza, on this point, provides the reader with a critical insight into the entirety of this philosophical endeavor:

Žižek does not simply return to Hegel. His return has the form of repetition, a repetition which is not repeating the same, but rather a repetition of the Hegelian gesture. Why does Žižek need to repeat Hegel in order to rethink dialectical materialism? Or, why does every materialism worthy of a name return to (and repeat) Hegel? The "return to Hegel" is necessary for the field of possibility for thinking. (168)

Žižek's Hegel, in breaking away from Kant, runs counter the image of Hegel as a thinker of the theoretical finite (Hamza 2015), instead developing a trajectory of "openings" and "new beginnings" (McGowan 2015: 44). By abjectly disrupting the standard account of Hegelian dialectics culminating in a teleological synthesis, Žižek rethinks the dialectic method itself through a sustained uncovering of the contradiction granting absolute priority to it. According to McGowan, such a theory "does not function as a transcendental a priori truth" but rather "emerges from the attempt to think through each position that Hegel confronts" (46). It is this position that Žižek addresses in *Absolute Recoil* (2014a): "The idea that Hegel simply closes his system with the mirage of total knowledge about everything there is to know, somehow bringing the entire universe to its completion is wrong; what Hegel calls *Absolute Knowledge* is his name for a radical experience of self-limitation" (1). The difficulty, however, is in "enacting the contradiction through one's thought while maintaining a consistent theoretical position" (McGowan 2015: 47).

Again, the reader is left in a paradoxical position, left to question how the

conscious subject can obtain satisfaction through an object without obtaining the object. To return to the subject of fetishistic disavowal, by questioning the relationship between the object and the status of negation, “can the Hegelian move of the ‘negation of negation’ account for the rise of an object which is ‘less than nothing’... (Hajdini 2015: 87)? Of course, the problem remains; even if the subject is able to account for the preceding, can he or she ever be assured the “act” will break the horizon established by the big Other, thus reconfiguring reality? In the end, the only way forward is to return again. It is within the act itself that the subjective, ontological, and dialectical implications coalesce into a looping structure such that Žižek’s dialectic “is always-already a dialectic that works retroactively”—not just as an act proper that strategically intervenes into a situation (bound by its conditions) but in the retroactive creation of its conditions (Hamza 2015: 166).

While I have tried to address a theoretical core of the text, I have provided, at best, a shell of its relation to Žižek’s unique expression of dialectical materialism. The problem is that each authorial decision appears to dismiss vast arrays of theoretical examples and paradigmatic tangents that will unequivocally influence the terrain of Žižekian thought. For example, while the proceeding framing of dialectical materialism has necessarily provided a sustained reading of Hegel, what if the stumbling block is not Hegel but Lacan (Pluth 2015)? What if, as Johnston argues, in Žižek’s effacing of Engelsian–Leninist dialectics, his own materialist negotiations move into “disturbing proximity” (4) of the pseudomaterialism he denounces? Even in the writing of this review, relational ambiguities strain for acceptance because readers of this journal will undoubtedly question my decision to review a text on Žižek without offering a commentary on the essay he contributed to the collection itself. Žižek’s (2015) critique of object-orientated ideology would undoubtedly add depth to this framework through his description of the subject’s attempt to grasp the In-itself by way of “tearing away appearances and trying to isolate ‘objective reality’ as it is ‘out there,’ independent[t] of the subject” (191). But just as the “In-itself inscribes itself precisely into the subjective excess ... that opens up a hole in reality,” (191) this text is always already comprised of Žižek’s cognitive dissonance.

Thus, when considering the totality of this collection, *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical*

*Materialism* is, as was advertised, “a performative plea for reading [Žižek] as seriously as any true philosopher should be read: to the letter” (Hamza & Ruda 2015: 2). Within its pages, readers are tasked with re-interpreting a version of dialectical materialism that deviates from Marxist traditions into inverted positions of “transcendental fuckedupness” (Ruda 2015: 153), when reason revolts against itself and an immanent turning of the ground occurs against itself. As Hamza questions, “What does it mean to go to one’s ground?” (164) Žižek’s dialectic, a methodology that is an analysis of the methodology itself, develops a logic of reflection such that “there is nothing before the loss” (164); thus, through the act of negation, the thing itself is posited backwards or sublates itself in its own becoming. To go to one’s ground, readers must break from the ontological horizon established by the big Other and withdraw from their preconfigured reality, thereby constituting “the opening for a new field of experimentations” (Hamza 2015: 173). In this precise way, the text best expresses how “Žižek’s dialectic is always already a dialectic that works retroactively” (166).

In conclusion, the lines of thought developed throughout this text map a formidable tome of Žižekian theory by further reactualizing the philosophical interior of Hegel’s speculative attitude toward objectivity. Consequently, it seems appropriate to venture into the recognizable terrain of the political by sketching ways in which contemporary philosophy qua dialectical materialism might respond critically to the ambiguity inherent in the basic political choices we confront today (Žižek 2014b). In the end, the authors force the reader to confront his or her own contingency. By pushing idealism to its limit (Ruda 2015), every meaningful assertion of reality begins to seem lacking, necessitating a negative foundation, which is the ontological. The subject’s gesture—beyond which there is nothing—corresponds to the finite materiality of reality such that it becomes possible to glimpse the political consequences of integrating the abstract universal of negativity. Groundless subjectivity thus is crucial to any radical political intervention, and it is only within the fear of nothingness that the subject finds the freedom to continually exercise the imagination.

As Žižek has argued, when discussing Rosa Luxemburg, just as the revolutionary structure has a peculiar temporal structure, so too does the political trajectory of dialectical materialism. In writing a highly ambitious systematic investigation

of Žižek's dialectical materialism the authors have succeeded in upholding some purpose of the reader's emancipation that is peculiar to the modern project. The volume, as such, is an articulation between subject and negation (or the thing and its loss) whereby "the first fundamental political gesture" consists of maintaining the "negative freedom of the subject" (Safatle 2015: 72). In opening a space for an antagonistic kind of popular authority and organization, the gesture allows the subject's inscription in the field of political recognition and generates the social conditions for collective resistance capable of fracturing the repetitious cycle that shapes the symbolic universe. It is within negativity of the subject that radical emancipatory potential emerges as the revolutionary act itself.

**References:**

Žižek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso: London

Žižek, S. (2004) *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*, Routledge: New York

Žižek, S. (2008) *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Verso: London

Žižek, S. (2014a) *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, Verso: London

Žižek, S. (2014b) *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*, London: Allen Lane