

REVIEW ARTICLE

Mission: Impossible—Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh University Press, 2010
Robert Sinnerbrink

THE CURIOUS CASE OF SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Slovenian psychoanalyst, political philosopher, and intellectual provocateur Slavoj Žižek is perhaps the most controversial yet popular public intellectual in the world. To cite some well-known media clichés, he has been variously described as an “intellectual celebrity,”¹ “academic rock-star,”² as the “Elvis of Cultural Theory,”³ even “the most despicable philosopher in the West.”⁴ As Terry Eagleton quipped recently, adding to the growing list of media monikers, Žižek is a cross between “guru and gadfly, sage and showman.”⁵ More than a conventional public intellectual, Žižek is probably the foremost exponent of what we might call ‘performance philosophy’ (along the lines of ‘performance art’): the ‘live’ performance of philosophy, not only on the page, screen, or blog but also in packed seminars, public events, and a variety of internet sources, such as YouTube and social network media. Žižek’s cultural novelty lies in his combining of radicality and accessibility through the strategic use of interviews and public performances as popular media vehicles for the dissemination of his thought.⁶

Holding doctorates in both psychoanalysis and philosophy, this erstwhile political dissident in Tito’s Yugoslavia is now a major figure in contemporary intellectual culture, enjoying the rare and peculiar honour of having an academic journal (the *International Journal of Žižek Studies*) dedicated to his work (intriguingly, the IJZS is a fully refereed academic journal to which Žižek contributes his own work!).⁷ He describes himself as a Marxist, even a communist, yet has managed to garner a following not only in the alternative US media (he is a darling of the public TV political talk show, “Democracy Now”) but even, bizarrely enough, in mainstream American media, hardly recognised for its progressive, diverse, or radical points of view (he writes columns for *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and has been interviewed on various US and UK television talk-shows). There are also a number of films featuring Žižek: Astra Taylor’s *Žižek!* (2005), Sophie Fiennes’ *Perverter’s Guide to the Cinema* (2006), and the philosophical art documentary *Examined Life* (2008), also directed by Astra Taylor, which stars Žižek, resplendent in worker’s fluorescent vest and yellow hardhat, expounding his views on capitalism, ecology, and revolution while traipsing through a New York City garbage dump.

Despite his extraordinary public impact, the academic reception of Žižek has been more cautious and circumspect. To be sure, the international journal dedicated to his work features some excellent theoretical analyses, more critical than celebratory, of Žižek's impossibly voluminous oeuvre. Since the early 2000s, moreover, an increasing number of studies of Žižek's work have been published, for example by Sarah Kay, Tony Myers, Ian Parker, Matthew Sharpe, Rex Butler, Marcus Pound, and Jodi Dean.⁸ In recent years, further critical theoretical studies have appeared, which have tended to take a more analytical or critical approach.⁹ Despite Žižek's evident fame and "intellectual celebrity," however, such critical scholarly work has been slow to gain institutional recognition. As anyone who has researched Žižek's writing can attest, there is a striking disparity between the public/media and academic/institutional reception of his work.¹⁰ The curious lack of dialogue between Žižek scholars, moreover, is itself a phenomenon calling for reflection. Indeed, the case of Žižek—as the prolific author of books of theory and the pop-intellectual media persona—presents us with an interesting example of how academic theory and media practice interact today. Depending on one's perspective, the case of Žižek suggests how (academic) theory is being superseded or circumvented by (media) practice today; alternatively, how academic philosophy—as 'professional' career path rather than cultural-political vocation—remains, given the accelerating dissemination of ideas via new media vectors, among the more technologically conservative and institutionally hidebound of humanities disciplines.

FACE/OFF: ŽIŽEK AND POLITICS

Whatever the case, it is encouraging to see a growing number of theoretical studies of Žižek's work now appearing in a variety of genres. The two co-authors of *Žižek and Politics*, Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, were among the earliest to contribute to this field: Sharpe's *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real* (from 2004) is a fascinating reconstruction of Žižek's Lacanian theory of subjectivity and ideology critique from the viewpoint of contemporary critical theory; Boucher's *The Charmed Circle of Ideology: A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek* (from 2006) was the subject of a recent critical exchange (between the author and his critics) on the online journal *Global Discourse*.¹¹ These two books are among the best available critical studies of Žižek's work, for they move adroitly beyond dutiful explication or celebratory exposition in favour of more critical, independent analyses that test Žižek's claims against those of the theorists he deploys and the socio-political phenomena he addresses. Eschewing the prevailing clichés of moralising denunciation or over-identified devotion, Sharpe and Boucher engage instead in genuinely immanent philosophical critique, treating Žižek seriously as a philosopher and theorist, rather than as a cult personality or cultural-ideological symptom.

Despite its introductory intent, *Žižek and Politics* develops a powerful immanent critique that strives to comprehend Žižek's project as a whole, examining its internal logic, theoretical commitments, and argumentative inconsistencies, showing through analysis and criticism the key points at which there are important shifts in Žižek's philosophical development. It is the latter that represents the most original contribution made by *Žižek and Politics*: Boucher and Sharpe's claim that one can explain *theoretically* the recent shift in Žižek's political thinking towards a retrieval of the Leftist revolutionary tradition as a response to the immanent crises afflicting global capitalism (environmental, economic, biogenetic, and social). Like the wonderful line in Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* (1980), Sharpe and Boucher, too, say to Žižek: "We enjoy your books, particularly the early, funny ones!" Indeed, they endorse the more Hegelian-Lacanian democratic texts, classics such as *The Discreet Object of Ideology* (1989), *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991), and *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), while sharply criticising the more recent Marxist, neo-communist texts: Žižek's *The Parallax View* (2006), *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008), and *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009).

We should add to this list Žižek's most recent tome (*Living in the End Times*, 432 pages), published in mid-2010, which features on its cover, as though to chime with Sharpe and Boucher's critique of Žižek's (political) romanticism, a version of Caspar David Friedrich's well-known romantic image of sublimity, *The Sea of Ice* (1824). In this remarkable volume, Žižek argues (or presents variations on various themes) that recent ideological, cultural, political, and intellectual responses to the recent Global Financial Crisis exhibit all the symptoms of a collective form of mourning, passing through states of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance,

a condition of ideological, economic, and political instability and flux that might yet open up the possibility of radical social-political transformation. Indeed it is against this theoretical and political shift in response to global economic and geopolitical developments since 2001 that we need to situate Žižek's more recent work as well as that of his critics.

Žižek and Politics is refreshingly clear and candid about its mission: to provide an accessible but philosophically informed introduction to Žižek's thought that is also a critical appraisal of his project and of the kind of politics Žižek has come to endorse. It combines admirable clarity with forceful argumentation, a lively and engaging style with serious critical analysis in its exposition and appraisal of Žižek's eclectic theoretical and political positions (his idiosyncratic versions of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Hegelian dialectics, Marxist theory, cultural-ideology critique, ambivalent attitude towards democracy, and provocative case for a "neo-communist" politics).

Drawing on a hermeneutic device familiar from studies of Heidegger (Heidegger I versus Heidegger II), Sharpe and Boucher contrast two Žižeks: one democratic, the other authoritarian, one committed to radical democracy, the other flirting with a violent revolutionary vanguardism. This contrast between Žižek1, the unorthodox Hegelian-Lacanian theorist of subjectivity and radical democracy, and Žižek2, the pseudo-radical apologist for violent revolutionary politics, structures their critical interpretation of Žižek's perplexing oeuvre. Žižek1, the good Žižek, is offbeat heir to the radical Enlightenment tradition stretching from Hegelian idealism to Freudian psychoanalysis and German critical theory. This Žižek (author of *Sublime Object of Ideology*, *For They Know Not What They Do*, and *Tarrying with the Negative*) develops a powerful Hegelian-Lacanian theory of ideology, is a brilliant cultural critic of contemporary forms of ideology (in popular culture, film, media), and an eloquent advocate of radical democratic politics.

From around 1996-97 onwards, however, Žižek1, for reasons that remain obscure, comes under the spell of the dark speculative metaphysics and romanticism of early 19th Century German thinker F.W.J. Schelling (arch rival of Hegel). This is evident in Žižek's major publications from this period, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* and his long essay on Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom/The Ages of the World*.¹² Thanks to his dalliance with Schelling's "irrationalist" metaphysics (often taken to anticipate Heidegger as well as psychoanalysis), Žižek1 mutates into Žižek2, who moves away from the radical democratic Enlightenment heritage and embraces instead a pessimistic, "Hobbesian" vision of human beings as inherently aggressive and antagonistic, as driven more by the Freudian death drive than any higher moral or political ideals.¹³ Žižek2 abandons the Enlightenment commitment to radical democracy and embraces instead a decisionistic, authoritarian form of politics with questionable connections with the Leninist-Jacobin tradition, one that has little room for democratic debate or human rights, and so cannot represent a viable political alternative to either neoliberal or social democracy. While maintaining an "official" position as radical but reasonable Left-wing cultural critic (as evidenced, for example, in Žižek's newspaper opinion pieces), Žižek2's "esoteric" position involves, on the contrary, a dangerous reversion to "divine" revolutionary political violence and questionable defence of the role of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" that has marred much of the Leftist revolutionary tradition. With impressive argumentative clarity Sharpe and Boucher thus seek to demonstrate the *theoretical* roots of Žižek's shift from radical democratic to authoritarian revolutionary politics, sounding a cautionary note concerning the curious phenomenon of Žižek's simultaneously rising media popularity and growing political radicalism.

As advocates of Enlightenment rationalism, Sharpe and Boucher are clear with their readers about their theoretical intentions and political concerns. They make their case through argumentative rather than rhetorical means, through textual evidence and conceptual analyses (rather than jokes, digressions, or striking asides). For this they are to be applauded, as they are for inviting readers to make up their own minds about the plausibility of their critique of Žižek. This kind of intellectual honesty is refreshing in today's market-driven, commercialised world of academic publishing. It is philosophical critical theory in the best sense of the term.

 GOODBYE LENIN! THREE QUESTIONS FOR ŽIŽEK AND POLITICS

In this spirit of open inquiry, let me conclude by offering three questions that a critical reader of *Žižek and Politics* might pose (questions already anticipated in the book's concluding chapter):

1. *Žižek1 versus Žižek2*

Sharpe and Boucher argue that Žižek's late 1990s adoption of a Schellingian "metaphysical" version of the subject (the subject of the drives) is responsible for the theoretical shift from Žižek1 and Žižek2, and hence explains Žižek's turn from democratic to revolutionary politics after 1999-2001.¹⁴ Sharpe and Boucher work through this claim in great detail via a complex critical analysis of Žižek's interpretation of the Lacanian "graph of desire." One could argue, however, that there are important historical, political, and ideological factors that should also be cited here. For instance, the geopolitical shift after 2001 towards more "authoritarian" versions of liberal democracy embracing neo-conservative forms of ideology, the open use and advocacy of violence to "promote" or export liberal democracy to non-democratic parts of the globe (military-backed "humanitarian" interventions, a permanent state of exception declared with the so-called "War on Terror," the misleading pretexts provided for the invasion of Iraq, and so on). And furthermore, the increasing destruction of any utopian and political imaginary in Western democracies, which only entrenches the "either/or" moral-blackmail position proffered to theorists today (either liberal democracy or totalitarian terror). It is important to acknowledge the explicitly *political* factors, in addition to purely theoretical issues, that have contributed to Žižek's shift in political rhetoric from a promotion of radical democracy to a retrieval of revolutionary politics.¹⁵

2. *The "Leftist Fool" versus "Rightist Knave" problem*

Žižek identifies this as one of the basic elements of philosophical and ideological critique in our current political context. The "Leftist fool" can freely critique liberal democracy, human rights, global capitalism, and so on, provided that this theoretical provocation remains largely symbolic, performative, or without "real" political effects (Derrida, for example, on 'infinite right of hospitality' to be extended towards all asylum seekers). The "Rightist knave," on the other hand, rejects all such utopian provocations as trivial and untenable in light of real-world politics where governments must do "whatever it takes"—including compromising or suspending democratic norms and institutional rights and liberties—in order to protect the conditions (material, economic, and political) securing and enabling our "Western"/ American (neoliberal capitalist) way of life. Both Žižek1 and Žižek2, one could argue, remain Leftist fools, and hence can play the critical game of philosophical-ideological provocation against an assumed background of social-cultural privilege. Sharpe and Boucher, however, claim that Žižek2 has become what we might describe as a *Leftist Knave*, who argues that we will now need to work the dark side (authoritarian politics) in order to confront the immanent crises of global capitalism (itself hardly liberal in political or ideological terms). Žižek's texts, however, arguably remain too heterogeneous, eclectic, and ambiguous for this kind of division and opposition between a Žižek1 and Žižek2, both of which "positions" are more concerned with refusing and problematising what Žižek calls the liberal-democratic moral blackmail (either existing democracy or indefinite terror) than with promoting a particular concrete political program or vision of a democratic future. That Žižek continues to make remarks endorsing a democratic ethos and basic pragmatism about contemporary politics is not simply a matter of rhetorical camouflage designed to beguile the unenlightened, but an indication and confirmation of the basic "Leftist Fool"—or critic of ideology—position that he continues to advocate, to which he has recently added a much stronger advocacy of the need to rethink—philosophically and politically—the idea of communism.

3. *Žižek's recourse to "religious" or "theological" discourse within contemporary political philosophy*

To my mind, Žižek belongs to that ambiguous line of thinkers that are pro-Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment at once (Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, Benjamin, Foucault, Agamben, and so on). Such thinkers draw as readily on cultural conservatives (in Žižek's case, G.K. Chesterton, Heidegger, or Carl Schmitt) as on

Leftist radicals like Marx and Lenin, or, for that matter, Rancière and Badiou. Presumably Žižek's fascinating "atheist" appropriation of religious and theological discourse—as part of a renewed critical account of political theology—is motivated by the recognition that neoliberal democracy cannot function properly—maintain the basic faith and trust in social institutions, cultural norms, economic markets, and political processes—without an affectively charged ideological supplement of shared social-cultural beliefs (religious fundamentalism, paranoid nationalism, fear of Muslim Others, belief in personal freedom, "market fundamentalism" anxiety over asylum seekers, anti-State antagonism, religious-conservative populism, and on). Sharpe and Boucher, however, claim that Žižek's embrace of theological motifs is damning evidence of his political romanticism and reactionary conservatism. But what if it is an attempt, rather, to reclaim the motivating and normative power of religion for emancipatory and progressive purposes? What if Žižek's claim is that the Left needs to reappropriate religious thinking in order to counteract the devastatingly successful ideological appropriation of religion by the conservative Right? Here Benjamin's parable of the chess-playing automaton (historical materialism) secretly controlled and assisted by a hunchback dwarf (religion and theology) becomes strikingly relevant. Žižek's radical political turn, his embrace of "theological" motifs, and his qualified endorsement of a messianic revolutionary potential within a situation of growing global crises—economic, technological, bioethical, and environmental—all evince his enlisting of "counter-Enlightenment" forces to be pressed into the service of a radical critique of global capitalism. Together, these strands of Žižek's often chaotic critique comprise an argument for retrieving and reimagining the ideological and political-economic possibilities of a post-global capitalist form of life.

These questions are offered in a spirit of critical debate, precisely because this book is a major contribution to our critical appraisal of this controversial thinker. At the same time, the paradox raised by the case of Žižek still remains: how to further the critical reception of a philosopher who combines communism with comedy, philosophical provocation with media celebrity? *Žižek and Politics* takes such questions seriously, shows how one might respond to them, and thus represents an important advance in the critical reception of Žižek's work, deftly neutralising the intellectual celebrity that both solicits and stymies our philosophical attention.

NOTES

1. Rebecca Mead, "The Marx Brother: How a Philosopher from Slovenia Became an International Star", *New Yorker*, 79(10) (5 May), 2003.
2. Eugene Mc Carraher, "All Things New. *The Fragile Absolute. Or Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting For*, By Slavoj Žižek, Verso" [Book Review] *In These Times*, June 26, 2000. <http://www.inthesetimes.com/issue/24/15/mccarraher2415.html>
3. Scott McLemee, "Žižek Watch," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 6, 2004).
4. Adam Kirsch, "The Deadly Jester: Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London: Verso; Violence, Slavoj Žižek, Picador" [Book Review]. *The New Republic*, December 2, 2008. <http://www.tnr.com/article/books/the-deadly-jester?page=0.0>
5. Terry Eagleton, "The Phenomenal Slavoj Žižek", *The Times Literary Supplement*. April 23, 2008. <http://isbrt.ruc.edu.cn/pol04/Article/UploadFiles/200804/20080423235645940.pdf>
6. See, for example, the 50 minute performance documentary piece, "Living in the End Times, According to Slavoj Žižek" (VPRO International, backlight.vpro.nl), which features Žižek being bombarded with a series of media/video images and social commentary relating to "the important social issues of 2010" (the global economic crises, ecology, Afghanistan, the crisis in democracy, and so on), to which he then gives his "improvised" responses. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gw8LPn4ira0>.
7. See <http://Žižekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/index>.
8. See Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Polity Press, 2003); Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (Routledge Critical Thinkers), (London: Routledge, 2003); Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Matthew Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (New York/London: Continuum, 2005); Marcus Pound, *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids Michigan, 2005); Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (London: Routledge, 2006).
9. See, for example, Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007); Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics. Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (New York/London: Continuum, 2010). See also the essay collections by Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (eds.), *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); and by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (eds.), *The Truth of Žižek* (New York/London: Continuum, 2007).
10. See Paul A. Taylor, *Žižek and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).
11. Geoff Boucher, *The Charmed Circle of Ideology: A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2006). See Stuart Sims, Paul Reynolds, Robert Sinnerbrink, Reviews of *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* by Geoff Boucher with Author's Reply, *Global Discourse*, Issue II, 2010 <http://global-discourse.com/contents/the-charmed-circle-of-ideology-by-geoff-boucher/>
12. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996) and Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
13. Strictly speaking, however, it seems inconsistent to articulate Žižek's embrace of a pessimistic psychoanalytic model of subjectivity emphasising the Freudian death drive as somehow fused with a rational egoist/instrumental self-preservation model of subjectivity as deployed by Hobbes.
14. We might identify the shift from Žižek1 to Žižek2 as becoming explicit in Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999) as well as his three-way dialogue with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000). The polemical pamphlets that have appeared post-September 11, 2001—from *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002) to *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008)—mark an even more significant shift in Žižek's political thinking in response to the "authoritarian" turn in neoliberal democracies.
15. For an interesting discussion of this issue see Rex Butler's and Scott Stephens' 'Editor's Introduction: Slavoj Žižek's "Third Way" in R. Butler and S. Stephens (eds.) *Slavoj Žižek: The Universal Exception* (London: Continuum, 2006), 1-11.