Rootless Futures: Power, Desire, and the Gaps in Slavoj Zizek's *Hegel in a Wired Brain*

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In *Hegel in a Wired Brain*, contemporary philosopher Slavoj Zizek (2020) explores Hegelian philosophies of consciousness, language, and history and places them within the context of the "wired brain", or the direct link between our consciousness and our digital machines. He takes a speculative and techno-futurist approach to explore this emerging link and unpacks the psychological implications of a future where direct brain-to-brain contact, or "neuralink", is possible. Using philosophy (namely Hegelian theory, while also referencing Lacan, Freud, and Deleuze, as well as his contemporary peers like Todd MacFowan and Jean-Pierre Dupuy), he (2020) explores the opportunities and limitations of brain-to-brain communication, following this thread to the final frontier of technological Singularity,

> the idea that, by way of directly sharing my thoughts and experiences with others (a machine which reads my mental processes can also transpose it to another mind), a domain of global shared mental experience will emerge which will function as a new form of divinity – my thoughts will be directly immersed in a global Thought of the universe itself. (p. 13)

Zizek is a Slovenian philosopher of the Marxist tradition and has historically worked in Hegelianism, following Hegel's main theme of consciousness shaping and determining reality. While Zizek's suppositional approach in this text is largely effective as it allows him to fully explore this premise from an individual to systemic level, he misses several opportunities to strengthen his ideas through connections to feminist texts and present-day technopolitical realities.

Zizek is most overtly political in the first chapter of the text, "The Digital Police State: Fichte's Revenge on Hegel". He posits that the rise of technocracy is creating a more and more

powerful state, effectively leading to the obsolescence of liberalism. Zizek is interested in contradictions, and eloquently unpacks the state as both a failed project and stronger than ever. In his reading, he (2020) understands the state as we typically define it (our elected governing body) as "what Hegel aims at by his notion of "concrete universality": the enchainment of failures. Multiple forms of state arise because state is in itself an inconsistent/antagonist notion" (p. 8). The state rises and falls and rises again because it is trying to accomplish an impossible task – unite a diversity of identities, languages, and cultures under some understanding of belonging. Zizek critiques Zionism as a way to illuminate this point, writing

> Anti-semitism reproaches the Jews for being rootless, and it is as if Zionism tried to correct this failure by belatedly providing Jews with roots…What if, at the most radical level, "we are all Jews", what if being rootless is the primordial state of being-human, and our roots are a secondary phenomenon, an attempt to obfuscate our constitutive rootlessness? (p.9)

This question of roots feels central in our current political moment, as a genocide continues in Gaza and an increasingly anti-immigration sentiment rises in the United States and beyond. What does it mean for a land to be ours? What does it mean for the state to protect us? This "reproach for rootlessness" is at the core of political struggle but as Zizek illuminates, the roots we identify in ourselves are an illusion – an isolating reality to face. This feeling of isolation has psychological and spiritual implications, and we find ourselves in a moment of feeling more alone than ever. The state has largely abandoned us and left us angry, so the state must also provide us with a scapegoat – and neuralink provides an opportunity to identify and spread this enemy at a large scale. Trying to unite a diversity of perspectives becomes easier: the state can use technology to not only unify us in the face of rootlessness, but also to control us. Zizek

unpacks this prospect through referencing Shoshanna Zuboff's definition of surveillance capitalism and speaking to technocratic authorities that continue to gain control.

This form of digital surveillance, Zizek argues, is the new state that we see with unprecedented levels of power. He (2020) writes that "today's digital control is not experienced as an external limitation of our freedom…the most dangerous threat to freedom does not come from an openly authoritarian power; it takes place when our non-freedom itself is experienced as freedom" (p. 29). Zizek argues that the current understanding of the wired brain allows us to view ourselves as separate from our machines and make our own informed decisions, but these machines are already being used to control us through the illusion of freedom. He speaks most often of Singularity as a possibility for the future, arguing that although our machines and our brains are currently deeply intertwined, the prospect of universal thought has not fully been realized. It is true that there are probably new frontiers of a collective internet that we have yet to experience, but Zizek's argument would be strengthened through a more concrete acknowledgment of global consciousness today. He largely doesn't discuss the idea of digital echo chambers as forms of global consciousness which are paramount to how control is currently expressed in digital spaces. In the case of the United States, Donald Trump's political campaign has utilized political echo chambers to spread fear-mongering and disinformation about groups like illegal immigrants and transgender individuals (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Many people's political realities have become less about their actual lives and more about the reality they see online. Zizek (2020) grounds us in Hegel's understanding that "there is no reality in-itself beyond phenomena, which does not mean that all there is is the interplay of phenomena" (pp. 2-3). He explains how reality is continually ruptured by the emergence of the wired brain, but what about the realities that are being created within the digital space?

Within this conversation, Zizek's perspective would be supported by an exploration into what reality people are perceiving on the internet currently. The day after the 2024 US presidential election, X user @farzyness tweeted "As it turns out, X is not a bubble. It is signal" (@farzyness, 2024). The tweet was viewed over 78 million times and prompted replies such as @ThunderFootRod's tweet "I truly was wondering if X was a bubble or an echo chamber but it's looking like it's the voice of reason" (@ThunderFootRod, 2024). Hegel argues that there is no reality beyond phenomena, but when reality is shared among people on a digital platform, they are tapping into a collective that can have an impact on phenomena. The occurrence of something like Trump getting elected reinforces the belief system and, rather than inviting in different realities, allows "truth" to be revealed. Zizek (2020) asserts that today, when we read Hegel's speculations about the absolute Idea (Hegel's philosophy on approaching truth through contextualizing history and experience), "something tells us that…we simply cannot any longer think like that" (p.3). The 'something' Zizek is referring to is the mass authoritarianism that is able to be facilitated via our digital machines. X owner Elon Musk has made no secret of his clear political leanings, pouring over seventy-five million dollars into Trump's presidential campaign, while simultaneously making it more difficult than ever to research his platform (Bond & Allyn, 2024), and there is valid concern for this kind of figure to be mediating our political conversations. Zizek making a more direct link between the tech oligarchs he is mentioning and the actual users of these platforms would've allowed for a more nuanced conversation about approaching Singularity in the present moment. It is worth noting that Zizek's text was published in 2020, and the internet and political ecosphere has obviously changed in the four years since then. But further exploration into contemporary examples in Zizek's time period would have likely revealed similar themes – as we see in the most recent US election, cycles of

history are repeating themselves on shorter and shorter time frames. Likely, the examples Zizek would've been working with at that time would have revealed a similar understanding of control through digital platforms.

Beyond exploring the implications of the wired brain at the macro level, he additionally looks to the micro through the lens of sex, sexuality, and the self. In chapter two of the text, "The Idea of a Wired Brain and its Limitations", Zizek starts to explore the cultural movement from the erotic to the pornographic, and how neuralink complicates this by imagining sexuality without communication. Zizek (2020) writes that

> what we find in human sexuality is the obverse of simplification which gives birth to a surplus: an unnecessary complication which prevents direct access to a goal. Human sexuality comes in a variety of perverted forms and procedures which not only cannot be reduced to different ways to reach the same goal of procreation but often run directly against this goal. (p. 40)

He returns time and time again to the idea of desire being defined by our lack, and in the context of neuralink, this lack is essentially eliminated. What does it mean for sexuality when we don't have to communicate our desire? This is what Zizek is interested in – and he posits that the wired brain may not be able to harness this ineffable quality; we ourselves aren't even able to truly understand it. Zizek asserts that the self does not exist as a consistent entity, but rather, the self is a culmination of narratives that we are trying to make sense of into one identity – the "true nature" of this is intangible and undefinable. However, Zizek (2020) also writes that "the prospect of the thorough digitalization of our daily lives…opens up the realistic possibility of an external machine that will know ourselves, biologically and psychically, much better than we

know ourselves" (p. 23). Zizek's contradictions again define his argument. He (2020) writes that both sexuality and modernity are defined by incongruities upon incongruities, pulling from Todd MacGowan's reading of "Hegel's definition of progress: the movement from more easily resolved contradictions to more intractable ones" (p. 179). We cannot easily define our desire, because it is often at odds with itself. In the case of an external machine knowing us better than we know ourselves, one only has to look to our technological oligarchy to find this evidence. But how well can anyone truly know us? If the idea of the "true self" or "true desire" will always evade definition, how can a digital machine determine this?

With Zizek's readings of desire, he again finds himself with gaps in his inquiry. His explorations are fascinating and important, especially on a foundational level, but they beg to be expanded upon. Zizek's study into gendered cyborg and post-human studies is not uncharted territory: feminist scholars like Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles have been exploring what it means to be human/woman/other for the past forty years, and Zizek misses an opportunity by not pulling this theory into his arguments. His extensive reference list includes three women and no women of color. This is not a scolding of Zizek, not an urging to check off boxes for diversity within his analysis, but rather, a genuine belief that his ideas would be elevated through the inclusion of feminist and queer contemporary voices. In Anne-Jorunn Berg and Merete Lie's paper "Feminism and Constructivism: Do Artefacts Have Gender?", their discussion of the intersection of feminist and technology studies suggests that the overlapping of these fields lie in their socially constructed nature, that feminism and constructivism are both concerned with the need to "blur the boundaries of categories normally kept apart" (Berg & Lie, 1995). They highlight that technologies, like artifacts, can carry gendered meanings, reflecting dominant societal roles and power dynamics. This conversation of constructivism and gender would've

added a fascinating level of complexity to Zizek's argument. Neuralink proposes that it can know our desires before we do, but this desire is not in a vacuum, and an exploration of gender politics and technological construction would aid in revealing this. What's more, queer readings have historically challenged hegemonic narratives of desire, arguing that queerness challenges normative spatial and cultural orientations through celebrating the "perverse" (Ahmed, 2006). A more concrete synthesis with queer theorists would support Zizek's claims on the limits of neuralink even further.

In Zizek's conclusion, he (2020) writes about the Lacanian claim of "la femme n'existe pas", or that the woman does not exist, and this is just one case where Zizek writes of femininity without ever referencing feminist inquiry. Zizek (2020) is skillful in using the past as a mirror to the present, and he uses Hegelian understandings of history to support this, asserting that "for (Hegel), with every historical epoch, the universal notion of history also changes…there is no single universal notion of historicity since this notion is itself caught in the process of historical change" (p. 171). But in his process, Zizek finds himself reinforcing past notions of history through a viewpoint that refuses to be more than just white and male. It is true that history will also always be caught in historical change, but one can strive for a more pluralist view of our current moment amidst this chaos.

The heart of Zizek's argument truly is a pluralist one, which is why more diverse literature would've only made his argument stronger. He is using examples at the political level as well as at the individual to demonstrate how these conditions are extremely multidimensional and undeniably linked. His focus on Hegelian contradictions demonstrates that the prospect of an entirely uniting experience of consciousness threatens "not only our self-experience of free human individuals, but our very status as free human individuals" (Zizek, 2020, pp. 12-13). As

technology is continually employed to reinforce normative dogma we find ourselves controlled and influenced in increasingly innocuous ways. But as Donna Haraway (1989) argues in *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,*

> From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet…From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people [are] not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. (p. 154)

Haraway's argument throughout her text for multiplicity and affinity over fixed identity speaks to the contradictions Zizek offers. But Zizek's omission of contemporary narratives, specifically feminist ones, limits his exploration of global consciousness and the lived realities shaped by digital platforms.

In addressing the paradoxes of modernity, Zizek reminds us that our understanding of self, society, and history is perpetually evolving. Yet, his work demonstrates that the pursuit of a pluralist truth cannot be achieved without embracing diverse perspectives. In the age of digital surveillance and echo chambers, the questions he raises—about freedom, desire, and collective thought—are urgent and essential. To truly confront the implications of a wired brain, we must expand the conversation to include those historically excluded from its narrative. Only then can we navigate this emerging reality with the critical awareness it demands.

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