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ŽIŽEK'S FLAWED "MAGNUM OPUS"

A review of Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006. 430pp. \$24.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0262240513.

WHETHER OR NOT IT TURNS OUT TO BE the "magnum opus" that he has been promising for several years, *The Parallax View* will almost certainly mark a turning point in Slavoj Žižek's work—for better or for worse. Starting in 1989 and continuing until the end of the 1990s, Žižek published a sizable book almost every year, in addition to some edited volumes and short political pamphlets. Since then, his output has only increased, embracing a variety of shorter books intended as "interventions" in ongoing academic debates, various other edited volumes, a seemingly countless number of articles in the popular press, and many well-received speaking engagements, all contributing to his current status as an "academic rock star"—a status solidified by the recent documentary film *Žižek!* [exclamation mark in original]. During this second period, however, the quality of his work declined, with most of his book-length projects giving the impression of being successive drafts—most notably his three heavily overlapping books on Christianity—and many of his articles being compilations of jokes and arguments from previous works.

Thus many of Žižek's most faithful readers—myself included—had begun to wonder if his real intellectual contribution would turn out to have been achieved during that initial period of the nineties. Although his thought underwent significant shifts over the course of the decade, his initial project in those years could conveniently be summarized as a renewal of ideology critique by way of an application of the insights of German idealism (primarily Hegel), as read through Lacanian psychoanalysis. Žižek provided the broad outlines of this project in his first English book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*,¹ which combines an elaboration of his reading of Hegel with his first major effort toward explicating the underlying logic of Lacan's thought in a straightforward style. In

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989).

addition to those substantive concerns, which would continue to reappear in later works, the most notable traits of Žižek's distinctive style are already much in evidence—high-energy, digressive, full of jokes and a wide range of references to both popular and high culture, all the traits that make him such a compelling and entertaining lecturer, as well as an often disorganized writer.

This initial phase of Žižek's work was solidified in what is perhaps his most impressive and rigorous book to date, *Tarrying With the Negative*.² In *Sublime Object*, he had already argued that the three prongs of his project—"an introduction to some of the fundamental concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis," "to accomplish a kind of 'return to Hegel,'" and "to contribute to the theory of ideology" through the deployment of Lacanian concepts—are "deeply connected,"³ and in *Tarrying*, he both raises the stakes and narrows the focus. First, he argues that it is Lacan who most rigorously carries forward the project of transcendental philosophy as achieved in German idealism. Second, he turns his attention not simply to ideology broadly considered, but to nationalism in particular. The result is a rigorous and deeply contemporary theory of nationalism—and a compelling case for reading Lacan as a continuing development of the basic concerns of German Idealism.⁴

The connecting point here is the theory of subjectivity. For Žižek, the attention to and development of the theory of subjectivity represents the trait that decisively sets Lacan's thought apart from the broad sweep of 20th century European philosophy.⁵ In *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek argues that the major schools of Western thought, even in the face of their broad diversity, are all unified by their insistence that the Cartesian subject be disowned. In opposition to this, Žižek positions his book as "the philosophical manifesto of Cartesian subjectivity," and sets himself the task of critiquing three major schools—post-Heideggerian thought, French Marxism, and postmodern identitarian thought—based on their refusal to develop a theory of subjectivity. He then offers his own constructive approach to each school's impasses, with an eye toward developing a theory of

² Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

³ *Sublime Object*, pg. 7.

⁴ This latter point is further elaborated in Žižek's underappreciated book on Schelling, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (New York: Verso, 1996).

⁵ Žižek is not alone in seeing subjectivity as central to Lacan's thought. See, for example, Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), which serves as an accessible and rigorous introduction to Lacan's thought from a philosophical point of view. In addition, Fink's book on the actual practice of Lacanian psychoanalysis, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), is invaluable as a way of getting a handle on the basic outlines of Lacan's diagnostic categories.

revolutionary subjectivity.⁶ The result is an impressive global assessment of the state of contemporary European philosophy and its primary American tributaries. It also serves as something like an equivalent to Derrida's *Writing and Difference* for the current generation in terms of introducing a variety of previously obscure figures to a broad audience⁷—most notably Alain Badiou, who comes to be a major dialogue partner for Žižek's later work. In particular, Badiou's book *Saint Paul* appears to have provided the initial impetus for Žižek's recent interest in Christianity.⁸

While *The Ticklish Subject* is undoubtedly one of Žižek's great achievements, it also foreshadows many of the major vices of his later work. The engagement with trends in academia, opposing them with his Lacano-Hegelian position, will come to be Žižek's calling card in the years to follow—but instead of the rigor that characterizes *The Ticklish Subject*, many of the later books come to seem like an attempt to push forward a Žižekian “take” on every academic trend that comes along. And so one finds *On Belief* (arguably his very worst book), with its “take” on the religious turn in the humanities and social sciences; *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, with its “take” on the Paul trend; and *Organs Without Bodies*, with its “take” on the resurgent interest in Deleuze in the wake of Hardt and Negri's work.⁹ The problem with these works is two-fold. First, they do not reflect a very rigorous engagement with their topics, either in terms of scholarship or in terms of compelling new readings. On Christianity, this problem is somewhat ameliorated by the development of his position over the course of three books, but on Deleuze, it leads to a rather cursory treatment of only a small portion of Deleuze's work, with the rest of the book being given to materials whose relation to Deleuze is often tenuous at best. Second, as “interventions” into the academic scene, they presuppose familiarity with Žižek's basic position—which places unreasonable demands on the reader, since, as noted, it is based on a non-standard reading of Hegel and on Lacan, whose thought even the most devoted students of European philosophy often find to be utterly opaque.

The appearance of these lackluster works coincides with Žižek's increasing visibility as a political commentator. Following the popularity of his essay on

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), pp. 1-2.

⁷ I owe this analogy to Jared Woodard (private e-mail correspondence).

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), and *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

9/11, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*,¹⁰ Žižek turned to a series of quite interesting analyses of the Iraq War.¹¹ Subsequently, in parallel with his academic writing, he apparently set himself the task of publishing a Žižekian "take" on virtually every major news story, in venues ranging from *In These Times* to *Foreign Policy* and *The New York Times*—articles whose quality has been decidedly mixed. Thus, just when he has come to the attention of an audience outside the narrow circle of those academics with a serious interest in contemporary European philosophy—and indeed outside academia altogether—Žižek's most recent works (which also have the virtue of relatively being short) are both largely unconvincing as ways of addressing their topics and wholly inadequate as an introduction to the basic outline of his thought. The result of this confluence of two unfortunate trends has been predictable: their curiosity piqued by his notoriety, potential readers pick up one of his books and almost inevitably conclude, "This guy cannot be serious."¹²

A similar response from a reader of *The Parallax View*, however, is unlikely. The difference between *The Parallax View* and Žižek's other work since *The Ticklish Subject* is palpable—already within the first fifty pages, Žižek's claim that this is his magnum opus takes on a definite plausibility. Yet the question remains: exactly what kind of magnum opus? Is it merely a definitive statement of something that has already been, in principle, established and stated elsewhere? Or does it represent a significant development—even a renewal—of his project? These are not mutually exclusive categories, since some type of consolidation, or at least recapitulation, of previous work is a necessary step for further development. At the same time, consolidation alone is of limited value. At best, it could represent something like "Žižek's Guide to Žižek," but such a title would presuppose the continuing importance and vitality of what Žižek is up to, something that his work of recent years has called into question. By this point, Žižek's long-time readers are faced with the same question as those who are just now becoming acquainted with him through his popular writings: Is it worth my time to read more Žižek?

Just as the reasons for asking the question will vary, so will the answers. For those who are new to Žižek's work, *The Parallax View* provides a good introduction to Žižek's style of thought—not simply as a good example of it, but as a good explanation, perhaps the best explanation Žižek has yet offered.

¹⁰ First published on the Internet (<http://www.lacan.com/desertsymf.htm>), then in expanded book form as *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (New York: Verso, 2002).

¹¹ Many of these are available online (<http://www.lacan.com/iraq.htm>), or else in the collection *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (New York: Verso, 2005).

¹² See, for example, John Holbo, "Žižek and Trilling," *Philosophy and Literature* 24.2 (2004): 430-440, which is primarily a critique of *On Belief*.

Crucial here is the metaphor of "an insurmountable *parallax gap*, the confrontation between two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible" (4).¹³ He offers a good summary of his use of the term early on in the book:

The standard definition of parallax is: the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply "subjective," due to the fact that the same object which exists "out there" is seen from two different stances, or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently "mediated," so that an "epistemological" shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an "ontological" shift in the object itself. Or—to put it in Lacanese—the subject's gaze is always-already inscribed into the perceived object itself, in the guise of its "blind spot," that which is "in the object more than the object itself," the point from which the object itself returns the gaze (16).

Admittedly, this metaphor of parallax may prove to be distracting to some, since it does not correspond to the use of the term within the hard sciences. It seems to me, however, that this objection carries little force because Žižek is fully conscious of his non-standard usage and because the term "parallax" itself is ultimately dispensable, serving as little more than an economical way to get his readers up to speed on his complex interweaving of Hegel and Lacan. In the introduction, this basic metaphor is combined with an overview of his answer to the question, "What is philosophy?"—so that one could hardly ask for a clearer statement of Žižek's philosophical goals and methods.

On the one hand, then, it is clear that Žižek intends *The Parallax View* as a kind of consolidation of his work so far. On the other hand, it is equally clear that Žižek intends it as a decisive step forward in terms of scope. His way of talking about his ambition in this book is initially to refer to it as "the rehabilitation of the philosophy of *dialectical materialism*," whose decline he takes to have been a major factor in the decline of Marxist movements (4). The stake of this move to dialectical materialism lies not so much in a change of his Lacano-Hegelian perspective as in a claimed broadening of the sphere in which it is effective. To put it somewhat schematically, this has been the trajectory of his philosophy all along. As a first step, the early works up to *Tarrying With the Negative* establish his approach's applicability to ideology critique. The next phase, up to *The Ticklish Subject*, applies the same theoretical apparatus to the deeper question of the structures of human subjectivity that cause ideology to arise. In the current phase, he takes the next logical step of turning toward the fundamental

¹³ All parenthetical references in the text refer to *The Parallax View*. All italics in quotations from Žižek are, of course, in the original.

structures of reality that cause human subjectivity—and most importantly, human freedom—to arise.

In order for an ontology of freedom to be convincingly materialist, obviously it must deal with science. While he has a few references to quantum physics,¹⁴ Žižek's primary interest here is cognitive science. There are many reasons for this, most obvious being its proximity to Žižek's psychoanalytic concerns. More importantly, however, if the problem for dialectical materialism "is not how to overcome the external opposition of thought and being by deploying their practico-dialectical mediation, but *how, within the flat order of positive being, the very gap between thought and being, the negativity of thought, emerges*" (6), then the natural place to turn is the science that investigates the site where that emergence occurs: the brain itself. Žižek's analysis of cognitive science is thus appropriately central to the project of *The Parallax View*, both conceptually and in terms of Zizek's organizational scheme. Not being a student of cognitive science, I cannot assess the degree to which Žižek adequately portrays the state of the field or the positions of individual thinkers. On the assumption that his account is broadly trustworthy, though, he offers what seems to me to be a compelling case for how a dialectical approach can help cognitive scientists to develop theories that adequately account for their results while doing justice to the experience of human freedom.

Although less central to his explicit project in this book, Žižek's continued interest in Christianity is likely of more interest to scholars of religion, particularly the places where that interest is expressed and developed. For example, in his introductory remarks on the nature of philosophy, Žižek argues that philosophy can only be practiced in abstraction from ethnic roots and that therefore philosophers "should act like Saint Paul," who recognized that "in the proper space of the Christian absolute Truth, 'there is neither Jew nor Greek'" (9). Even more important is the placement of his more substantial treatment of Christianity—namely, within the first section, in which promises to treat "*ontological difference* itself as the ultimate parallax which conditions our very access to reality" (10). There, nearly an entire chapter is taken up with a materialist reading of Kierkegaard. First, Žižek notes that "for Kierkegaard, God's infallibility is also a negatively determined concept: its true meaning is that *man is always wrong*," such that giving up everything for God is strictly homologous to the psychoanalytic concept of "the radical (self-relating) loss/renunciation of the very fantasmatic core of being: first, I sacrifice all I have for the Cause-Thing which is more to me than my life; what I then get in

¹⁴ Following up on his somewhat tentative essay "Quantum Physics with Lacan," in *The Indivisible Remainder*, ch. 3.

exchange for this sacrifice is *the loss of this Cause-Thing itself*" (80).

It might seem that this is more a matter of ethics than of ontology. Yet here we are dealing not with concrete ethical norms but with the preliminary move necessary to found them, such that Kierkegaard becomes a theoretician of "the conditions of possibility of leading a meaningful life" (86). The transcendental conditions of ethical engagement are, however, indissolubly tied up with "our very access to reality" insofar as we remember "the Pauline notion of struggling universality," namely, the contention that "*universal Truth is accessible only from a partial engaged subjective position*" (35). As with the matter of ethnic roots, a concept from Paul proves to be decisive in explicating the subjective position of the philosopher. While some might suspect that he is merely using Paul as a convenient illustration, something more is at stake here. For Žižek, thinking through these theological questions, apparently particularly the Incarnation and the Cross, is a fundamental step in the development of a materialist philosophy—or, in Žižek's striking formulation: "we should assert the *literal* truth of Lacan's statement according to which theologians are the only true materialists" (103).¹⁵

If the central section on cognitive science represents a decisive step forward and the first section on Christianity represents an important clarification and development, Žižek's final section on politics represents a significant disappointment. A very high proportion of the materials in this section first appeared elsewhere—for example, much of the discussion of Stalin has already been treated, sometimes in the same words, in other books (most recently *Organs Without Bodies*), and most egregiously, a significant chunk of the final chapter is made up of a compilation of various political essays written for popular presses. Other sections of *The Parallax View* are not innocent of this vice, which has been one of the most persistent annoyances about his recent work,¹⁶ but the high concentration of repetition in the closing section goes beyond any reasonable limits. One might say that the lesson here is that one should simply wait for the next big book to avoid this problem, but even this doesn't work: some of the offending passages in earlier chapters come from *The Ticklish Subject*. It would perhaps be tempting to write off this behavior as simple laziness, but what if this tendency toward repetition is inherent to his Hegelian approach? And what does that mean for the future of his project now that he has expanded it to the most

¹⁵ I have edited this quotation, which originally had "theologit" as opposed to "theologian." The word "theologit" also appears in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, with reference to Rudolph Bultmann (107), so it seems most likely that this is a simple mistake.

¹⁶ *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* includes a chapter on Chesterton that reappears virtually unedited in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. *The Puppet and the Dwarf* duplicates certain passages from *The Fragile Absolute* (New York: Verso, 2000). *On Belief* includes an identical passage twice *within the same chapter* (pp. 26 and 52). The list could go on.

fundamental possible level?

So on the one hand, *The Parallax View* represents a significant expansion of Žižek's intellectual project into new territory (most notably into an extended engagement with cognitive science) and a clarification of the increasingly important place of Christianity in his thought, while on the other hand it is also characterized by the wholesale repetition of already well-worn jokes and argumentative set-pieces and by his typically rambling style, which can be invigorating at its best and frustrating at its worst. One might say, then, that this is his most comprehensive book, a magnum opus that shows forth clearly the ambitions, the achievements, and the inherent deadlocks of Žižek's intellectual project.

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