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SUBTRACTIVE THEOLOGY: WHY SHOULD A MARXIST LEARN TO COUNT TO ZERO?

A review of Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2003. 171 pp. \$18.95 (paper).

THERE ARE TWO WAYS OF READING SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK. The first option consists of reading through at a consistent pace, pausing to laugh at the jokes or note the adroit analyses of popular culture. In this mode one will usually close the back cover of his books with a clear sense of having witnessed something truly original, but with only the foggiest idea of what he was really on about. Žižek's extended examples and invocations of Lacan are never boring, but having reached the end there is always the nagging feeling that somehow those middle chapters had to have been relevant to the official topic of the book. The other option, which would normally consist of a Wittgensteinian slow reading, here is replaced by the necessity of rereading, or even of multiple readings. *The Puppet and the Dwarf* is worth the second effort.

This book marks Žižek's third engagement with Christianity in four years, and thankfully, the argument presented here is his clearest yet. Even before the publication of *The Fragile Absolute* (2000), Žižek was already asking what it would mean for Marxism and Christianity to help each other out of their contemporary impasses.¹ *The Fragile Absolute* introduced the notion of "shooting at oneself," derived partially from Christian theology and employed almost as prescriptive revolutionary practice. *On Belief* (2001), on the other hand, recalled the figure of Lenin's October Revolution as a rebuke of the pedestrian and noncommittal nature of contemporary religious life. *The Puppet and the Dwarf* amounts to an attempt to think these two provocations together. As an index of clarity, we may also note the increasing importance of the thought of Alain Badiou: as his work on the eventual nature of truth becomes more central to Žižek's argument in each book, so does the force of the argument seem less

¹ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), ch. 3.

scattered, until, as we shall see below, we reach the present text, which can almost be read as a popularization of Badiou's project.

A somewhat methodical analysis is necessary if we are to hazard any guesses as to how Žižek develops his thesis. The meaning of the title, for example, will not be evident without consideration of two important passages. The first, the opening paragraph, makes clear the setting in which Žižek's argument will be staged:

Today, when the historical materialist analysis is receding, practiced as it were under cover, rarely called by its proper name, while the theological dimension is given a new lease on life in the guise of the “postsecular” Messianic turn of deconstruction, the time has come to reverse Walter Benjamin’s first thesis on the philosophy of history: “The puppet called ‘theology’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the service of historical materialism, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.” (3)

Benjamin's first thesis involves the example of a seemingly automatic chess-playing puppet who bests all comers and who is actually controlled by an expert player, a hunchback (the dwarf of Žižek's title) who hides under the table.² That theology is now the puppet rather than the expert dwarf attests to Žižek's view that in an age where liberal-democratic capitalism seems to be “the only game in town,” the surging popularity of post-secular philosophy and of vague spirituality in general may have opened an avenue for the reassertion of a vibrant Marxism. But although the underlying materialist project is a controlling factor, this reversal of Benjamin is not as one-sided as it may seem:

My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible only to a materialist approach – and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience. (6)

This bold claim is admittedly part of Žižek's style, which typically includes bombastic preambles, hyperactive – and occasionally off-topic – parsings of Lacan and Hegel, and poignant, if sudden, conclusions. This means that the next five chapters are not a detailed explication of what a non-ontotheological Christian post-Soviet Marxism would look like. However, the following pages do suggest some of the necessary and sufficient conditions for such a position. This is the redeeming quality of Žižek's work.

² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253.

In the first chapter, Žižek advances the Kierkegaardian nature of the Act as such. When he takes as a foil the acquiescent ideology of Western Buddhism, one suspects a re-hash of what is now familiar territory (the emphasis on inner peace and holistic ecology really just makes one a more effective cog in the capitalist machine as he already argued in *On Belief*), but instead Žižek accomplishes an excellent repetition (also in the Kierkegaardian sense). He opposes the commodified Western version of Buddhism to the militaristic “authentic” Zen exemplified in Japanese industrial and military expansion during the first half of the twentieth century. The Buddhist emphasis on passive detachment, which advances peace and understanding, advances them too well: in militaristic Zen, ultimate peace is brought about by reconciling incompatible things through war, and the fundamental dualism of the false world of appearances and the transcendent Void translates to a de-subjectivizing understanding in which, “if external reality is ultimately just an ephemeral appearance, then even the most horrifying crimes eventually *do not matter.*” (32)

How, then, is Christian love different? Rather than being forced, “unfortunately,” to resort to violence to establish nonviolent harmony (which continues to be the perennial justification for our military adventurism), “authentic revolutionary liberation is much more directly identified with violence. [...] Freedom is not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs this balance.” (31) “The Buddhist stance is ultimately one of Indifference, of quenching all passions that strive to establish differences; while Christian love is a violent passion to introduce a Difference, a gap in the order of being,” (33) which is to say that freedom as a fidelity to a truth requires much more than the standard ethical platitudes. In fact, “as Kierkegaard put it apropos of Abraham, when he is ordered to slaughter Isaac, his predicament ‘is an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation.’” (19)

Chapter 2, “The ‘Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy,’” describes the ethical-as-temptation from the standpoint of desire. Via an appropriation of G. K. Chesterton’s increasingly relevant Orthodoxy, this chapter is essentially a continuation of Žižek’s critique of postmodern capitalist social excess. Or rather it is a critique of this society in which transgression is imposed by the collective superego, in which excess is the norm. As he puts it, there is little that is more sterile and boring than the incessant creation of new artistic transgressions (performance art involving excrement or masturbation) or new hybrid forms of sexuality. In this cultural climate where cohabitation is the norm, Žižek asks, what if “straight marriage is ‘the most dark and daring of all transgressions’”? (36)

The desire of the pre-modern subject depends on what Chesterton calls the “Doctrine of Conditional Joy,” which designates the imposition of an arbitrary limitation on access to the object of desire. It is this condition that makes joy possible by making clear how miraculous it is to have any access to the desired object at all. The modern loss of this transcendental obstacle (Žižek locates this in Kant) and freedom’s attendant self-assertion paradoxically result in the total loss of freedom and collapse of subjectivity: when there is no limit to run up against, freedom has nowhere to go and becomes still. Conditional joy, which keeps reality magical, is, however, the structure of what Žižek calls “the perverse core of Christianity”: for example, the notion that God introduced sin into the world to create the opportunity to save the world by sacrificing Christ. “Perversion is a double strategy to counteract this nonexistence: an (ultimately deeply conservative, nostalgic) attempt to install the Law artificially, in the desperate hope that we will then take this self-posed limitation ‘seriously’”; (53) Žižek’s real target, then, is not permissive capitalist America, or hypocritical “critical” academics – which are easy targets anyway – but the false version of (what usually counts as) Christianity.

Thought solely in the context of the Old Testament, Christ clearly becomes the extreme culmination of the sacrificial order, the victim of a perverse God. (80) This is not, of course, the only understanding of Christ. To arrive at another determination, Žižek posits that there are two approaches to the Lacanian Real: the sacred/sacrificial order of purification, and subtraction. We have already encountered an example of purification: what militaristic Zen has in common with Aztec human sacrifice and Chinook potlatch is that these all conform to the Bataillean notion of general economy – expenditure without return.³ Purification then is a kind of disposal of the excess, and we can see how an understanding of Christ as the supreme fatted calf would seem rather vicious. What then is subtraction?

Here is where the other dwarf – St. Paul – comes in.⁴ According to Žižek, “the key to St. Paul’s theology is repetition”, (81) which means that when Paul portrays Christ as the redemptive repetition of Adam, we should understand Christ’s iteration as announcing that the Fall is actually “already a Salvation which we misrecognize as a Fall.” (87) This need not be as heterodox as it sounds: Žižek’s point is that, to arrive at the uniquely Christian message which Paul announces, universality has to be asserted in its negativity, as exclusive of

³ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. I., trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

⁴ The non-canonical writings of a Pauline devotee describe him as “a man small in size, with a bald head and crooked legs.” Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, 6th ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), vol. 2, 237-265.

all particular content—that is to say, not as an all-encompassing container, but as the destructive force which undermines every particular content. (87)

The other name of this negativity, this emptying, is subtraction. The crucified ‘fool-king,’ separated from the Father, abandoned by his friends, and certainly not the political voice of his people, Christ on Golgotha could not have been but an uninspiring empty signifier for most of those present. But it is this Fall, this “unplugging,” that is in itself the arrival of something new.

When Žižek discusses this subtraction in the context of the Christian passage from Law to love (chapter 4), he demonstrates the utter necessity of understanding Christ’s completion of the Law as a repetition, and not a mere overcoming: when Christianity loses the rootless, universalist ... mediation of the Jewish law, it loses the specific Christian dimension of Love itself, reducing Love to the pagan ‘cosmic feeling’ of oneness with the universe. It is only reference to the Jewish Law that sustains the specific Christian notion of Love that needs a distance, that thrives on differences, and that has nothing to do with any kind of erasure of borders and immersion in Oneness. (119-120)

Between the ethnic specificity of Judaic Law and the Oneness of the neo-Platonic heresies lies a feature unique to Christianity, that of universalism. This uniqueness is also present in the Christian approach to textuality. (chapter 5) In contrast to the Jewish divine obscurity and the Gnostic hidden message, Christian texts offer a divinity who comes as a homeless subversive, and that is all: there is no secret knowledge to be gleaned (Gnosticism) or to be infinitely reformulated in systematic play (the Talmudic style).

The assertion of the Christian subtraction as the foundation of universalism brings us nearer to the promised aim of the book, for Paul’s repetition of Christ’s emptying invites not only new concepts, but new forms of life. In contrast to the ethnic particularity of Judaism, “the key dimension of Paul’s gesture is thus his break with any form of communitarianism: his universe is no longer that of the multitude of groups that want to ‘find their voice’...but that of a fighting collective grounded in the reference to an unconditional universalism.” (130) This appropriation of a Pauline militancy sits in stark contrast to that other contemporary revival of religion in philosophy, the Levinasian form of deconstruction. Žižek rebukes Levinas’ ethical metaphysics, especially as adopted in Derrida’s ‘jewgreek’ version, on two counts. First, for proto-Gnosticism, then for infinite (Talmudic) vacillation:

The ultimate idolatry is not the idolizing of the mask, of the image, itself, but the belief that there is some hidden positive content beyond the mask. And no

amount of ‘deconstruction’ helps here: the ultimate form of idolatry is the deconstructive purifying of the Other, so that all that remains of the Other is its place, the pure form of Otherness as the Messianic Promise. (138-9)

Christianity takes the neighbor to be not the impenetrable other but the one who partakes of the same, of the new life in Christ which, again, is a collective without prerequisite. In contrast to Derrida’s infinitely postponed *a venir*, Christianity asserts that the Messiah has already come. It is not that Levinas and Derrida made a grand mistake, Žižek says: their reduction to the pure messianic form was the necessary first step. And Christianity’s achievement is not the “full realization of the promise” but an even further subtraction, the claim that the Event has happened, “yet the gap (the gap which sustained the messianic promise) remains.” (141) This gap means that the hard work has just begun, since “the true Openness is not that of undecideability, but that of living in the aftermath of the Event, of drawing out the consequences—of what? Precisely of the new space opened up by the Event.” (137)

At this point, before we reveal the answer for which Marxism and Christianity depend on each other, we must note Žižek’s increasing dependence not on Hegel, Kant, or even Lacan, all of whom have been with him from the beginning, but on the French philosopher Alain Badiou. Badiou also has written a book on St. Paul, and Žižek introduced that work – and Badiou’s thought in general – before English translations of any of his texts were even available.⁵ More so than in any of Žižek’s prior treatments of Christianity, when Badiou is not being directly invoked, he lingers always in the background of this text. The most obvious shift is a rhetorical one: Žižek has long been employing terms and concepts which were commensurable with Badiou’s philosophy, and in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* he borrows directly from the latter’s lexicon. We may wonder to what extent Žižek’s adoption is really a reformulation: after all, Badiou’s philosophical arguments are always supported by mathematical axioms, and Žižek’s Paul has little obvious relation to set theory. But Badiou is himself well aware of the practical necessities of appropriation and translation when he says, “Philosophy privileges no language, not even the one it is written in.”⁶ So Žižek’s use of Badiouian terms is not precluded by the absence of an homage paid to mathematics, and the primacy of Event, the necessity of subtraction, and the call for fidelity are not merely peripheral trappings. They form here the substantive core of the argument.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). For Žižek’s introduction, see *The Ticklish Subject*, chs. 3 & 4.

⁶ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*, trans. Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2003), 2.

Of special significance is the question of whether Žižek has abandoned his earlier objections. In *The Ticklish Subject*, he critiques Badiou's opposition of the Truth-Event to the death drive, claiming that Badiou's refusal to maintain a link between Death and Resurrection (especially in the example of Christ) weakens his position. Reading Lacan against Badiou, he writes:

For Lacan, the uncanny domain beyond the Order of Being is what he calls the domain 'between the two deaths', the pre-ontological domain of monstrous spectral apparitions, the domain that is 'immortal', yet not in the Badiouian sense of the immortality of participating in Truth, but in the sense of what Lacan calls lamella, of the monstrous 'undead' object-libido.⁷

Regardless of what we think about Žižek's criticism (it would require a separate essay to lay things out properly), we must note that this argument is absent from the present book. Žižek adopts Badiou's reading on the meaning of Life and Death in Paul – they are no longer physical conditions or states in the afterlife, but subjective positions referring to the total engagement in fidelity to a truth-event or to the lack thereof – without exception, with no mention of even any minor distinctions. (94) It should be acknowledged that Žižek is not normally one to avoid even the most abstruse digression – especially if it relates to a question of Lacanian interpretation – so the argument from silence may be valid here. Additionally, he defends Badiou's Pauline militant against a contrary reading advocated by Giorgio Agamben, who finds in the epistle to the Romans a Hegelian sublation, "where the Law is retained through its very suspension." (112)

This brings us to the conclusion: what exactly is this new engagement of the Pauline militant, the vital lesson that Christianity has for Marxism (and ultimately vice versa)? The answer is the loss of the big Other. "Contrary to all appearances, this is what happens in psychoanalysis: the treatment is over when the patient accepts the nonexistence of the big Other." (170) Marxism needs the formal structure of the Pauline militant, which includes undeterred belief, a universal message and the loss of both the flaccid and totalitarian forms of messianism. Insistence on the *avenir* produced two notable failures in the history of Soviet Marxism that, while directly opposed, share the same initial bearing. The Menshevik insistence on waiting for the "right moment," which Lenin fought, translated to the permanent inaction of the European social democracies and their eventual capitulation to multinational capital, which we are now witnessing. On the other hand, the Stalinist atrocity depended not on the opposite assertion that "now is the right moment," but on the retort that, whatever crimes may be necessary now, "History will exonerate us." What these

failures share is the continued search for support from some otherworldly or future source.

Just as the Marxism needed here is not the wretched post-Marxism of postcolonial studies ("by doing this feminist reading of Edith Wharton, I will performatively open a liberating space for all the women of the oppressed global South"), the Christianity Žižek calls for is precisely not Derridean "religion without religion." In the claim that "the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible...only to a materialist approach," (6) the exclusive 'only' means that without passing through the immanent analysis of materialism the unique universalist essence of Christianity will be continually lost. For Christianity too has pitfalls to avoid: the Gnostic claim to special knowledge – in all its contemporary forms – recalls the ethnic specificity of pre-Diasporic Judaism, and in its own way entails the totalitarian specter of a fully-disclosed proprietary system. The Levinasian/Derridean development, which mirrors the way in which rabbinic (Talmudic) Judaism empties itself of a fixed content, nevertheless retains the religious form of infinite deferral and thereby precludes itself from announcing the arrival of the truth-event. Žižek concludes the book on this point:

The gap here is irreducible: either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form, but loses the essence. That is the ultimate heroic gesture that awaits Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself – like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge. (171)⁸

That dialectical materialism and Christianity are "accessible only to" each other and must pass through each other is considerably bolder a claim than some readers will choose to accept. There are two interpretive strategies one might use to mitigate the impact of this book, and neither is justified. On the one hand, Žižek is a frequent defender of cultural studies, and one may be tempted to ascribe to him the caricature of flashy, self-deceptive, and ineffectual pseudo-scholarship which seems to unfairly plague the discipline. Don't. His position on this or that point may be disputable, but there is no suggestion of disingenuity here. We can even wonder whether much of his accrued popularity has less to do with his juxtaposing style or his references to *The Matrix* than with the fact that this man really seems to mean it. Second, and this would be the more attentive annulment, the "answer" of letting go of/losing the big Other is not a purely

⁷ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 154.

⁸ This, again, is not as unorthodox as it sounds. Even someone like Barth, for example, has made such claims: "The activity of the community is related to the Gospel only insofar as it is no more than a crater formed by the explosion of a shell and seeks to be no more than a void in which the Gospel reveals itself." Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 36.

defensive measure, as though Comrade Paul must remain preoccupied with restraining himself. On the contrary, the major problem of contemporary politics is a preoccupation with Evil, and an inability to think the Good. Both Badiou and Žižek have been making this point continually.⁹ In this sense, losing the big Other is the necessary response to modern times, without which no emancipatory politics would be possible: only by giving up on the possibility of pre-approved action, heavenly validation, or historical justification and fully assuming the risk of attempting the Good can one ever accomplish anything. The real paradox, then, is that this willingness to abandon one's holiness and become ethically vulnerable in a true Kierkegaardian teleological suspension has the potential to fulfill the Levinasian ethical injunction far better than any other contemporary form. This is the truth of subtractive theology: that receptivity to the emptying power of a truth-event is the first authentically faithful and revolutionary act.

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⁹ See Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 9, and Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (New York: Verso, 2001), 167.