

Review

Repeating Žižek

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294pp.

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It has become a genre protocol for reviews of Slavoj Žižek's books to comment critically—and, too often, dismissively—on his tremendous output. His newest books, of which there seem to be several each year, not only echo previous ones, but also reproduce whole passages verbatim. Terry Eagleton has called Žižek “one of the great self-plagiarisers of our time, constantly thieving stuff from his own publications” (Eagleton 2014). While I have contributed to this genre protocol in a past review, I have come to regard Žižek's furious publishing pace as, in part, a strategy to make a living as a radical intellectual under capitalism—a contradictory endeavor that cannot but leave its mark on the books. If that is a “vulgar” materialist explanation, then so be it, for the vulgar materialism lies on the side of the book market itself, which is eager to capitalize on Žižek's celebrity. Žižek himself has acknowledged that he does not value all of his books equally; in the collection under review, for example, his entry in the contributors' notes lists only eight as his “main works” (290).

In any case, the more important and philosophically substantive question is whether all of these books have produced a more or less coherent *system*. In his review of *The Parallax View*, a book that Žižek himself presented as a work of systemization—but that may no longer carry such weight, as one contributor to the current volume argues (see below)—Fredric Jameson noted that if all of Žižek's books are read in sequence, “the larger concepts begin to emerge from the mist” (Jameson 2006). What are these larger concepts? What sort of system might they form? And does it make sense to speak

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of a system in regard to such a self-consciously *dialectical* thinker? For is the dialectic not the ultimate *anti*-system, or, as Žižek might put it, “non-all”? Did Lacan not deem his work “antiphilosophy” in order to stop it from becoming a philosophical worldview, as Bruno Bosteels reminds us in his contribution to the collection under review?

Editor Agon Hamza opens *Repeating Žižek* by assuring the reader that the essays to come are neither the clarifications of pupils nor the defenses of disciples. Rather, Hamza builds on Žižek’s arguments about the dialectic of novelty and repetition in thinkers like Benjamin and Deleuze—“*the New can ONLY emerge through repetition*” (Žižek 2012a: 11)—and aims at “an effective ‘betrayal’ of Žižek through *repeating* his ultimate act” (2). Hamza claims not only that repetition requires “formalization,” but that formalization is “the *only* way for [Žižek’s] philosophy to resist both its time and its (what is wrongly described as) interventionist character” (2–3). It is an intriguing proposition that Hamza admits is “rather bombastic” (3), and that contradicts a later chapter that valorizes Žižek’s interventions as a cultural analyst, but it nonetheless serves as a suggestive point of departure or “strong misreading” for the volume.

The fixed stars in the ensuing journey are the three terms that Žižek has described as constituting the Borromean knot of his thinking: philosophy, psychoanalysis, and politics. (Put differently: Hegel, Lacan, Marx.) The three terms provide the headings for the collection’s first three sections, plus a fourth section on religion. The structure itself suggests a specific formalization of Žižek, given that the first two sections on philosophy and psychoanalysis are generously represented with six and five essays, respectively, while the last two on politics and religion, containing three and two essays, respectively, appear tacked on as afterthoughts. Readers who are familiar with Žižek’s writings may want to repeat him here, too, and ask if politics, and especially religion, function as supplements whose relative exclusion is necessary to maintain the appearance of the system’s coherence.

I’m not sure if this counts as formalization, since the concept is never fully explained, but the opening section on philosophy does privilege the theme of the “non-all.” Adrian Johnston opens the section with one of the more rigorous and substantive chapters in the collection. (After all, Johnston is an authority on Žižek and has written excellent books on his ontology [2008] and political philosophy [2009].) Like several other essays that follow, Johnston’s contribution is occasioned by the publication of Žižek’s massive *Less Than Nothing* (2012), of which Johnston wants to provide an

“immanent critical assessment” (or at least the basis of one) (7). This leads Johnston into a dense examination of being and appearance in German Idealism that highlights Hegel’s (and Žižek’s) development of a “monistic ontology of lone immanence” that inscribes the “discord, incoherence, and volatility” of appearance into being itself (29). Johnston represents Žižek’s philosophical project in *Less Than Nothing* as an attempt to combine post-Fichtean German Idealism and psychoanalytic, Marxist, and scientific materialisms in order to explain “the rise of subjectivity out of the ‘incomplete’ ontology” (Žižek 2012b: 906).

If Johnston tracks the ways Žižek repeats German Idealism, Frank Ruda asks in his chapter title “How to Repeat Plato?” Ruda notes that Žižek reads the circuitous argumentation of Plato’s *Parmenides* as proof that “nothing fully exists, reality is a confused mess about which nothing consistent can be said” (Žižek 2012b: 53). Similar to Johnston, Ruda presents Žižek as a Platonist of the Non-All, an idealist without idealism, that is, without recourse to a transcendently guaranteed reality (54). The non-all continues to serve as a touchstone in Samo Tomšič’s chapter on the relationship between critique and speculation in Žižek’s synthesis of Hegel, psychoanalysis, and the Marxist critique of political economy. “The sign of materialism, which is not simply a (precritical) materialism of matter or (antispeculative) empiricism,” Tomšič states, “lies in the departure from the non-all” (60). (Perhaps this is why Marx’s *Capital* remained incomplete.) In a chapter that I found a bit too jargon-laden even for a Žižek book, Katja Kolšek argues for the importance of anamorphism, the shifting of perspective, in Žižek’s philosophy. Here the inconsistency or “gap” in being is figured by the Lacanian concept of the gaze. The gaze returns in Oxana Timofeeva’s chapter on Žižek’s critique of Derrida’s deconstruction of animality in “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” in which Derrida reflects on his shame at being seen naked by his cat. Žižek’s own example comes from a photograph of a cat that has been mutilated by lab experiments, a cat in whose gaze Timofeeva finds a mirror of the nothingness of the human: “What we see in the gaze of the animal is the dark of the night, which we are, and no God” (109).

The chapter that I find the most enlightening in this section is Benjamin Noys’s “Žižek’s Reading Machine,” which connects the theme of the non-all to the problem with which I began this review, namely, Žižek’s seemingly infinite output. In contrast to my own vulgar materialist view, Noys offers a philosophical one. If being is non-all, then thought properly registers this incompleteness through its own incessant shortcomings,

that is, in its failure to “say it all.” While Žižek’s critics portray him as a voracious “totalitarian” thinker who endeavors to “psychoanalyze our whole world,” as a more sympathetic interlocutor, Alain Badiou, puts it (Miller 2005), Noys makes a compelling case for reversing the image. We should read Žižek not as the creator of a total, encyclopedic, airtight system, but rather as a “writer of beginnings” (80). “The sense of completion or saturation that sometimes seems to surround his work is the lure par excellence” (80), for Žižek’s “machinic” productivity, his drive to begin again and again in yet another book or essay, reveals the *lack* at the core of being, and thus at the core of Žižek’s project. Žižek keeps coming back for more because, as Lacan says, the encounter with the Real is a *missed* encounter (1978: 53).

Although all of the essays in the “philosophy” section incorporate elements of Žižek’s reading of Lacan, thus begging the question of whether the section can truly be “formalized” in distinction from psychoanalysis, Bruno Bosteels’s chapter in the “psychoanalysis” section offers a kind of justification for the separation by proposing to read Lacan’s work not only as a rejection of philosophical systems as such, but as the barrier that blocks the agreement of Žižek’s and Badiou’s philosophies (which, despite each author’s sympathy for the other’s work, stand in quite distinct relations to institutional philosophy). Indeed, this section of the collection suggests that there might be something special about psychoanalysis, since it is the aspect of Žižek’s thought that is most clearly formalized in *Repeating Žižek*.

Two privileged modes of formalization in Lacan are the matheme and the Borromean knot. Henrik Jøker Bjerre and Brian Benjamin Hansen draw on Lacan’s theory of the four discourses and propose a specifically Žižekian matheme, “the discourse of the wild analyst”:

$$\frac{a \rightarrow S2}{S1 \ \$}$$

In contrast to the reservations of critics like Mathew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, who underscore the many differences between psychoanalysis as a clinical practice and as a cultural politics (2010: 182–85), Bjerre and Hansen’s matheme legitimates Žižek’s discourse as a *culturally* situated analytical practice, that is, a discourse in which enjoyment/ *jouissance* (a) is addressed not to the subject, as in Lacan’s discourse of the

analyst, “but to the culture at large—knowledge, S2—where the wild analyst intervenes with a message about desire that culture (not the individual subject) did not know that it already secretly knew” (153). In the only chapter in the collection that engages with popular culture, Fabio Vighi enacts Žižek’s “wild analysis” in his reading of Woody Allen’s film *Blue Jasmine*, which represents the dangers of subjects’ *not* recognizing their desire for a postcapitalist system, instead remaining stuck in capitalist fantasy. However, Gabriel Tupinambá’s Borromean diagrams of the “theoretical space” (160) of Žižek’s thought point in a different direction. Tupinambá comes closer than anyone else in *Repeating Žižek* to explicating the volume’s own structure of articulation among philosophy, psychoanalysis, and politics (while still symptomatically sidelining religion). He offers two conditions of this articulation: the first “prohibits one-to-one conversions between fields of thought—it is a decision concerning *noncomplementarity*: there can be no relation between Freud and Marx without a detour through Hegel, nor a study of Hegel’s relation to Marx without a consideration of Freud, and so on.” The second condition of “*immanent transition*” reads as follows:

If the consistency of Hegelian philosophy relies on its articulation with both Marx and Lacan, then a rigorous philosophical investigation *will eventually lead us, without ever crossing any limiting border, into politics and psychoanalysis*. Accordingly, political thinking, *on account of the inconsistency of politics itself*, might require us to bring into play psychoanalytic or philosophical ideas, just as psychoanalysis might have to go outside itself, into fields of thought it explicitly opposes, in order to encounter its own consistency. (161–62)

Thus, relating any two of the three key terms requires the mediation of the third, while the internal inconsistency of any one term requires the mediation of the other two. For these reasons Tupinambá, who is after all a practicing analyst, can claim that the political import of psychoanalysis lies not in the conversion of psychoanalysis into another sort of discourse, such as ideology critique, but in the immanently political struggle of psychoanalysis itself to “grasp the point that holds together the psychoanalytic procedure in all its dimensions simultaneously,” namely, the dimensions of clinic, concept, and institution (172).

The true wildcard in the deck is Catherine Malabou’s chapter. Unlike the various forms of repetition and betrayal in the preceding essays, Malabou’s chapter is a

more straightforward critique of Lacan's and Žižek's privileging of the concept of the Real as an "originary trauma" (118), a trauma that "has always already been there" (118), and thus a trauma whose explanatory power is always prior to and greater than any "empirical or material shock or wound" (113). Malabou's critique reminds me of Ernst Bloch's rejection of psychoanalysis on the grounds that it cannot theorize the future, given its privileging of the subject's past and unconscious memory. But whereas Bloch moved beyond psychoanalysis for the sake of thinking utopian anticipation, Malabou's grimmer point is that Freud and Lacan cannot conceptualize the new in the form of the contingent, the sudden, and the accidental, and thus cannot properly account for the shocks that define the "new wounded" (the title of one of her books [2012] that Žižek has critiqued, her response to which is the occasion for the chapter under review here). The brain wound of the Parkinson's or Alzheimer's patient is not secondary to a more primordial psychic trauma, but *cuts off* the subject from memory in a way that Malabou regards as analogous to the shock felt by victims of a terrorist attack. Malabou's arguments, if valid, are a stronger "betrayal" of Žižek because they require the abandonment of a certain primacy of Lacanian concepts, and a reckoning with what she calls, in the most disparaging statement in the whole collection, "Žižek's traumatic fear of being forever separated from Lacan" (125).

If Tupinambá's mapping of the "theoretical space" of Žižek's thought is accurate, then I would expect Marx to receive significant attention in the third section on politics, since Marx should be the necessary mediation between Hegel and Lacan as well as the sign of their immanent inconsistency. Gavin Walker thus starts the "politics" section with the right question: "What...requires the Marxian project to be given a crucial status alongside two other instances [in Žižek's thought]: the Hegelian logic and the Lacanian intervention in the psychoanalytic field?" (195). While the brevity of the section implies that Marxism does *not* have this "crucial status" next to Hegel and Lacan, all three chapters in the section basically develop variations on the same answer: Marx is necessary for Žižek to think radical political agency (class struggle) and the possibility of political revolution (communism), two categories that imply a certain political deficiency in Hegel and Lacan as stand-alone discourses. Walker revisits and recodes the concept of the non-all that is so prominent in the "philosophy" section as the condition of possibility for the emergence of radical political subjectivity: "politics only emerges insofar as we ourselves are reduced to the specific and singular partial 'shit,' this non-whole or non-all

(*pas-tout*) ‘shit,’ the ‘almost-nothing’ of labor power—the ‘disposable excremental objects’ of capital’s inner workings” (210). Geoff Pfeifer covers similar theoretical territory and reaches similar conclusions, but through a shifting of focus to Marx’s notion of real abstraction. If Walker presents a Marxist politics of the non-all, and Pfeifer a politics of real abstraction, Hamza, now in the role of contributor, issues a “Plea for Žižekian Politics” that emphasizes the importance of theory over hasty action and schematizes Žižek’s ideas about communism.

But in the final section on religion, Adam Kotsko’s chapter gives me the impression that Žižek’s Christianity might perform even greater political work than his Marxism. For only here does the collection deal with what might be called the precondition of Žižek’s Marxism and communism, that is, his move beyond the post-Marxist “radical democracy” of his early work, which was informed by what another scholar has termed “Lacanian anti-utopianism” (Balasopoulos 2012). According to Kotsko, Žižek turned to a serious study of Christianity around the late 1990s in order to overcome the Lacanian skepticism toward revolution: “his previous work had made the structure of ideology, governed by a meaningless master-signifier, seem like an ineluctable feature of human experience—such that any revolution would wind up replacing one master with another” (244). On the one hand, Kotsko shows that Žižek made great strides toward theorizing the possibility of a nonideological post-revolutionary society through his engagement with Christianity; on the other hand, Kotsko’s periodization of this aspect of Žižek’s work suggests that it reached a watershed with *The Parallax View*, which *Less Than Nothing* seems destined to replace. Perhaps this is why the religion section in *Repeating Žižek* is so brief. Christianity was a detour, a vanishing mediator on the way to *Less Than Nothing*, in which Christianity plays a marginal role. Perhaps we should repeat the “middle” as opposed to “late” Žižek, or else repeat his thinking on Christianity in the context of retrieving the emancipatory kernel of Islam, as Sead Zimeri suggests in the section’s final chapter.

I will leave it to the reader to decide how Žižek’s typically non sequitur afterword on Shakespeare, Beckett, C.S. Lewis, and the “minimal event” might be read as a “repetition” of *Repeating Žižek* itself. In another typically Žižekian move, he has also written a response to another review of the collection, which can probably serve as a better, or at least more traditional, closing statement (Žižek [no date]).

This ending, or non-ending, to the volume raises a final question about the very project of formalizing Žižek. I have to wonder if this project would have required a monograph, not an essay collection. The very form of the essay collection itself, with its multiple authors and perspectives, cannot but impede the process of systematization, at least insofar as this requires a higher degree of coherence. As a reviewer, I find myself in the place of the Master Signifier or ideological “quilting point” that is supposed to add up or “stitch” all the fragments into a semblance of totality. Yet perhaps for this very reason the essay collection *is* the best form, for its dialectic of fragmentation and coherence, of multiple voices and thematic unity, may be the best way to stage the dialectical, non-totalizable form of Žižek’s thinking. To put it dialectically: only failure can succeed. Only the necessity of failing and starting over again can formally register Žižek’s attempt to think, and miss, the Real. In this sense, the best review of *Repeating Žižek* is to call it a failure (along with the review itself).

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