



ŽIŽEK NOW

Current Perspectives in Žižek Studies

Edited by Jamil Khader and Molly Anne Rothenberg

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Žižek Now

*Current Perspectives in
Žižek Studies*

**EDITED BY
JAMIL KHADER AND MOLLY ANNE ROTHENBERG**

polity

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Part One
Introduction
**Žižek Now or Never: Ideological
Critique and the Nothingness of
Being**

Jamil Khader

Arguably the most prolific and widely read philosopher of our time, Slavoj Žižek has made significant interventions in many disciplines of the human and natural sciences. Appropriating Lacanian psychoanalysis as a privileged conceptual fulcrum to reload German idealism (Hegel) through Marxism and, more recently, Christianity, Žižek has written extensively (and in several languages) on a dizzying array of topics that include global capitalism, psychoanalysis, opera, totalitarianism, cognitive science, racism, human rights, religion, new media, popular culture, cinema, love, ethics, environmentalism, New Age philosophy, and politics. His interdisciplinary *oeuvre* juxtaposes diverse fields and disciplines in many surprising ways, regularly springing unexpected twists and reversals on the reader. He not only subjects these disciplines to an ideological metacritique of the nature of knowledge itself, but also engages these disciplines through a parallax view, the “confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible” (Žižek 2006: 4). For Žižek, rubbing these disciplines against each other does not produce a totalizing synthesis of opposites but rather allows for articulating the gaps within

and between these fields through the Hegelian method of negative dialectics that clears a space for elaborating new responses to the underlying antagonism.

Who is this Žižek? What is his work all about? What are the broader theoretical trajectories that frame his work? How can his popular appeal as a philosopher and public intellectual be explained? Slavoj Žižek was born on March 21, 1949 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the northernmost republic in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and grew up under the rule of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, who served as president from 1953 to 1980. Although he was a founding member of the Cominform, Tito defied Soviet hegemony and developed an independent path to socialism, while also suppressing particularistic national sentiments in the name of a unified Yugoslavia. The relative cultural freedom in Tito's "second Yugoslavia" has been credited with having an everlasting impact on Žižek's intellectual development and career, allowing him to define his position on the margins of dominant national culture, in critical distance from and resistance to the party line and its institutions or any other mainstream orthodoxy.¹ In this semi-liberal environment, Žižek developed an obsession with and an appreciation for Western cultural commodities, particularly Hollywood films and detective fiction written in English, over and against cultural and literary products in his own country, which he considered to be either Communist or nationalist propaganda. Nonetheless, as Ian Parker notes in his contribution to this volume, living in "the times of lies" that characterized the regime left its indelible mark on Žižek's thought, which was "intimately linked to sarcastic and then increasingly open opposition, a politics of ideology critique that was smart enough not to believe that it spoke in the name of any unmediated authentic reality under the surface." After abandoning his teenage idea of directing films, as he says in a recent interview with the *Telegraph*,

Žižek realized by the age of seventeen that he wanted to be a philosopher. He thus obtained an undergraduate degree in philosophy and sociology in 1971, and a Master of Arts in philosophy in 1975 from the University of Ljubljana, writing a 400-page thesis on French structuralism, which the authorities deemed to be ideologically suspicious, costing him a teaching position he was promised at the university. In fact, as Žižek recalls in a conversation with Glyn Daly, he “had to write a special supplement because the first version was rejected for not being Marxist enough” (Daly 2004: 31).

For the next two years, Žižek served in the Yugoslav army and translated German philosophy to support his wife and son, until 1977, when he took up a “humiliating job,” as he states in the film *Žižek!*, at the Central Committee of the League of Slovene Communists. In these years, Žižek founded, with Mladen Dolar and Renata Salecl, who became his second wife, the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis in Ljubljana, served on the editorial board of a journal called *Problemi*, and published a book series called *Analecta*. In 1979 Žižek took a job as Researcher at the University of Ljubljana’s Institute for Sociology, where he “had the freedom to develop [his] own ideas” in philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis and earned his first Doctor of Arts degree in philosophy in 1981, writing his dissertation on German Idealism. In the same year, he traveled to Paris for the first time where he met Lacan’s son-in-law, Jacques-Alain Miller, who invited Žižek and Dolar to attend an exclusive thirty-student seminar on Lacan at the *École de la Cause Freudienne*, analyzed him, and secured a teaching fellowship for him as visiting professor at the Department of Psychoanalysis at the *Université Paris-VIII*. Four years later, Žižek successfully defended his second doctoral dissertation, a Lacanian reading of Hegel, Marx, and Kripke, with Miller, but the latter refused to publish Žižek’s

dissertation in his own publishing house, forcing Žižek to publish it outside mainstream Lacanian circles.

Meanwhile, Žižek became more involved in the oppositional democratic politics back in Slovenia, writing for the radical youth magazine *Mladina*, publicly resigning from the Communist party in protest at the trial of journalists associated with that magazine, cofounding the Liberal Democratic Party, and running as its candidate in the first multi-party presidential elections in the country in 1990, but narrowly missing office. He served as the Ambassador of Science for the republic of Slovenia in 1991, and continues to serve as an informal advisor to the Slovenian government. Žižek is currently a Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana, the International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities in London, a returning faculty member of the European Graduate School, and since 1991 he has also held visiting positions at different universities in the US and the UK. He also serves on the editorial board of the *Analecta* series in Slovenia, and helped establish two series, *Wo es war* for Norton, and *SIC* for Duke University Press, in German and English.

Žižek burst onto the intellectual scene in Western Europe and North America in 1989 with the publication of his first book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in a series edited by the Argentinean philosopher Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In his psychoanalytic examination of human agency and ideology, Žižek combined his pioneering reading of Freud and Marx with his Lacanian analysis of ideological fantasy, his encyclopedic knowledge of popular culture, his non-standard approach to Hegel, and his Hegelian reading of Christianity. The effects of this dazzlingly eclectic text were unprecedented, and the fact that Žižek was at the time a virtually unknown author, at least among English-speaking audiences, added to the intriguing appeal of the book

among the general public. Moreover, Laclau's preface to the book almost instantly secured Žižek's international reputation within leftist circles worldwide. Indeed, the book resonated deeply with many readers around the world who were committed to the possibility of reinvigorating both the radical core of revolutionary politics and the relevance of philosophy for politically engaged readers.

Since the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989, Žižek has published over fifty books, edited several collections, and published numerous articles. He has also written books in German, French, and Slovene, and many of his works have also been translated into twenty different languages. Žižek's increasingly expanding *oeuvre* can be divided into four main categories. First, introductions to Lacan through popular culture and everyday examples, as seen in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jaques Lacan through Popular Culture* (1991); *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (1992); and more recently *How to Read Lacan* (2006). Second, theoretical works that intertwine philosophy and psychoanalysis to develop a critique of ideological fantasy and a political theory of agency and subjectivity: this category includes books such as *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989); *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1991); *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (1993); *The Metastasis of Enjoyment* (1994); *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (1996); *The Abyss of Freedom* (1997); *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997); *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (1999); *The Fright of Real Tears* (2001); *On Belief* (2001); *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism* (2001); *Organs without Bodies* (2004); *The Parallax View* (2006); and *Living in the End Times* (2010). Third, writings that address current political and social events such as *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five*

Essays on September 11 and Related Dates (2002); *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (2004); *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008); *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008); and *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009). And fourth, works that appropriate the radical atheist core of Christianity including: *The Fragile Absolute* (2000); *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003); and *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009). His most recent tome is titled, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012), in which he presents his own unique interpretation of Hegel and calls for the return to a Hegelianism that exceeds Hegel's accomplishments and repeats, to paraphrase his typical phrase, what in Hegel that is more than Hegel himself.

This prolific output, its political undercurrents and advocacy of anti-capitalist struggle, has put Žižek in the spotlight of international media. He has thus been the subject of a documentary called *Žižek! The Movie* (2005) by Astra Taylor; he was also featured, together with seven other professors at American universities, in her film, *Examined Life*. There are also two films featuring formal presentations by Žižek - *The Reality of the Virtual* (2004) by Ben Wright and *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) by Sophie Fiennes. Žižek has also been a regular guest on Al Jazeera TV in English and the BBC, and he has maintained a tireless speaking schedule around the world. No wonder, then, that critics have dubbed him the "giant of Ljubljana" and the "most formidable philosophical mind of his generation" (Harpham 2003: 504) and that he is usually referred to in the popular media as the "Elvis Presley of cultural theory" and an "intellectual rock star."

But his increasingly expanding work, international fame, and charismatic presence have also been the source of consternation and concern for Žižek. For one, his tendency to use humor in his lectures has endeared him to the public outside the realm of academic audiences; but it also gives

some critics reason to trivialize and dismiss his work as entertainment, with some even going so far as to describe him as a “comedian.”² Žižek himself laments in Taylor’s *Žižek!: The Movie* how for some “making me popular is a defense against taking me seriously.” Furthermore, because of the speed with which he writes and publishes, almost a monograph per year, and as a result of his idiosyncratic recursive writing style, some critics have expressed concerns that Žižek’s work is unsystematic, repetitive, and contradictory. These critics miss the point, for as Ian Parker argues in this volume that despite his appropriation of Lacan to reload Hegel through Marxism, Žižek insists that such a theoretical elaboration “should be open, negative, and indeterminate.” Laclau’s preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, moreover, inadvertently helped to define, for better or worse, some of the popular myths about Žižek’s writings among the general readership. About the book itself, for example, Laclau writes:

It is certainly not a book in the classical sense; that is to say, a systematic structure in which an argument is developed according to a pre-determined plan. Nor is it a collection of essays, each of which constitutes a finished product and whose ‘unity’ with the rest is merely the result of its thematic discussion of a common problem. It is rather a series of theoretical interventions which shed mutual light on each other, not in terms of the progression of an argument, but in terms of what we could call the reiteration of the latter in different discursive contexts. (*Žižek* 1989: xii)

The fact that Žižek continues to revisit and elaborate on the main issues he raised in his first book in English testifies precisely to the systematic nature of his work. Furthermore, Žižek’s engagement with fleeting political and social events cannot be properly understood without situating his arguments in the context of the general trajectories and

presuppositions of his theoretical writings. Indeed, Žižek's philosophical edifice, which he has been building and refining book by book, in dialogue and debate with many intellectuals, critics, and philosophers from all over the world, remains narrowly focused in its theoretical framework and concerns.

Although his work has been the subject of many volumes of searching criticism and commentary, to date there has been no assessment of its value for the development of the human and natural sciences. Addressing this lack, *Žižek Now* seeks to explore the utility and far-ranging implications of Žižek's thought to various disciplines and provide an evaluation of the difference his work makes or promises to make in different fields. The volume offers chapters on quantum physics and Žižek's transcendentalist materialist theory of the subject, Hegel's absolute, materialist Christianity, postcolonial violence, eco-politics, ceremonial acts, and the postcolonial revolutionary subject. The contributors chart broad trajectories in Žižek's work, showcasing the innovations that his work has inaugurated, mapping continuities and departures in it, and relating it to broader theoretical trends in these fields. While some of these authors use his theoretical framework as a tool for engaging his work in its own terms (McGowan, Bosteels, and Ramey), others assess Žižek's position on a recurrent theme in his *oeuvre* either in the context of the current debates in these fields or in dialogue with prominent thinkers in them (Johnston and Conley). Some find in Žižek's work an opportunity to intervene in a field that he does not address (Vogt and Khader). Rather than re-presenting his work as the lone voice in the desert of academe, therefore, this volume engages his work in relation to the hegemonic trends of the postmodern zeitgeist, be it the universalized historicism of cultural studies, the evolutionism of cognitive science, or the hermeneutics of suspicion of literary theory.

Following this Introduction, in the second chapter of Part One of this volume, the renowned Žižekian critic Ian Parker overviews the three major theoretical trends, within which Žižek frames his work namely, Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Hegelian dialectics. Although Parker takes issues with Žižek's polemical style, he considers him a "thinker for our times" whose interventions gain special urgency under contemporary conditions of the global capitalist crisis and concomitant forms of global "psychologization," a concept Parker borrows from the recent work of Jan De Vos, who uses it to name the various technologies, by which every aspect of our thoughts and experiences is adapted, co-opted, and reintegrated within capitalist rationality (De Vos 2011). In Parker's view, Žižek utilizes the internal fissures within the three theoretical currents of his work as well as the contradictions among them to make possible not only "another world," but also "another subject," a project that must necessarily stay incomplete. Parker thus argues that Žižek's *oeuvre* remains concerned from beginning to end with the "conditions of impossibility," of negativity and nothingness at the core of social field that not only frustrate any desire for unity or wholeness, but whose contradictions will also "at some point explode and change the symbolic coordinates within which we choose and act." Exploring the ramifications of this nothingness to Žižek's work, Parker concludes by discussing five targets of Žižek's ideological critique - psychologistic assumptions about the integrity of the self, the exhortation to achieve liberation by de-repressing libidinal energy, the calls for an authentic community, the search for the hidden but true meaning, and the celebration of the free play of narrative. His discussion provides a succinct summary of the major themes and issues that the other contributions to this volume elaborate on in their critical engagement with Žižek's multifaceted work.

In Part Two of this collection, Todd McGowan, Bruno Bosteels, and Josh Ramey establish the grounds for understanding Žižek's critical theory of dialectical materialism. Utilizing Žižek's theoretical framework as a tool for engaging his work in its own terms, McGowan, Bosteels, and Ramey provide the starting point for the critical examination of Žižek's appropriation of Lacan to reactualize German Idealism, Marxism, and Christianity, and for assessing the revolutionary potential - and limitations - of Žižek's thought for philosophy, religion, and politics. Todd McGowan takes his start in Žižek's dialectical materialism as grounded in German idealism, but he focuses especially on the "dialectical" dimension of Žižek's thought which is uniquely predicated on Hegel's "hidden political core" as the basis for formulating an anti-utopian emancipatory politics. Hegel's absolute, in particular, allows McGowan to highlight Žižek's complete identification of political struggle with the recognition of the fundamental antagonism as it reveals itself under conditions of global capitalism. The absolute provides Žižek with an insight into "antagonism without escape," since the absolute makes it clear that "there is no possible reconciliation without the acknowledgment of a fundamental self-division that no amount of struggle can ever overcome." McGowan thus examines Žižek's retroversive reading of Hegel as a critic of Marx, for it is only through Hegel, as Žižek sees it, that we can discern "what is in Marx (the revolutionary potential) more than Marx." In particular, the Hegelian theorization of antagonism as the rejection of the oneness of being underwrites Žižek's Hegelian critique of Marx's fatal conviction that the means of production themselves are self-identical, when in fact they are not. In Žižek's hands, moreover, Hegel's absolute radicalizes Marx's revolutionary philosophy, by offering a basis for the politicization of the subject, since political revolution constitutes a "new way of seeing that foregrounds the ubiquity of antagonism and thus of

subjectivity.” According to Žižek, in short, the political act forces the subject to confront this irreducible antagonism and refuses any attempt at overcoming the structural fact of the antagonism. This is the only way that neo-liberal democracy can be subjectivized, by lashing out at ourselves and at our faith in democracy as the end of history, to allow for the radical interrogation of global capitalism. Hegel, McGowan concludes, “enables Žižek to retain violence (and thus antagonism) within his politics without succumbing to the logic of the gulag.”

Bruno Bosteels engages Žižek’s writings on religion, interrogating the political limitations of Žižek’s materialist defense of Christianity’s perverse atheist core – that there is no big Other that can determine the ‘objective meaning’ of our actions – as a legacy worth fighting for and retrieving in its organized form before it had congealed into an institutionalized ideology. The problem with Žižek’s materialist defense of Christianity, Bosteels argues, is that it remains confined within a proper philosophical matrix through the triangulation of Hegel and Lacan by way of Christianity. Žižek’s Lacano-Hegelianism, Bosteels charges, “remain strictly speaking at the level of a structural or transcendental discussion of the conditions of possibility of subjectivity as such.” What remains missing in Žižek’s materialist defense of Christianity is a genealogical or historical materialist investigation that places the “politics of the subject in a permanent tension field between theory and history.” To begin filling in this gap in Žižek, Bosteels examines the ways in which his perverse-materialist reading of Christianity revises, and perverts, Marx’s and Freud’s critiques of religion which are, nonetheless, not a match for the perverse core of Christianity. For Žižek, according to Bosteels, Marx “disavows the fact of human finitude in the name of an absolute subject-object of history,” while Freud “acknowledges and names this traumatic dimension of

finitude,” only to send us “back to a cosmic-pagan battle of life and death, Eros and Thanatos.” As an alternative to Žižek’s limited philosophical approach, moreover, Bosteels suggests the development of a historical and genealogical agenda, along the lines of the genealogical work of the Argentine Freudo-Marxist León Rozitchner, which can clear a space for exposing the extent to which theorization of political subjectivity remains embedded and inscribed within Christian theology. Through a close reading of Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, Bosteels contends, Rozitchner did not only demonstrate that capitalism would not have developed the way it did without Christianity, but that he also “continues to expand the historical overdeterminations of the subject in the long run.” This is the only way, he suggests, that the subject’s real transformation can be rendered possible.

In the last chapter of Part Two, Joshua Ramey takes up a specific dimension of Žižek’s political philosophy namely, the potential of liturgical-ceremonial forms in sustaining freedom and authentic revolutionary acts. Drawing on the particular modality of virtual temporality that Gilles Deleuze refers to as the “pure past,” Ramey articulates how Žižek proposes “the free Act does not so much open a totally new present as retroactively alter the nature of the past, ‘retroversively’ determining which pasts now matter, or what in the past is now determinative.” It is only after the fact, that is, that a truly free Act can be discerned. Although for Žižek the rediscovery of contingency in the past leads to the reconfiguration of history, Ramey still detects an ambiguity in Žižek’s understanding of freedom in relation to the ability of the subject to realize her participation in the unfolding of free acts. To activate or realize freedom, therefore, Žižek argues for the importance of liturgical-ceremonial gestures for authentic revolutionary acts as “an encounter with the ‘zero-level’ of sense.” Ramey thus notes

that for Žižek “ritual and ceremonial acts seem to offer an immanent model of *continuity* between the transcendental sources of freedom and the shape of concrete historical acts,” for the repetition of certain formalities, which cannot simply be wholly arbitrary, realizes the truth of a political movement. Hence, Ramey points out, Žižek has recently affirmed the power of liturgical-ceremonial acts to serve as an authentic dimension of communist culture, foregrounding the ability of liturgical gestures to politicize enjoyment as the “ceremonialization of everyday life.” While it is impossible to guarantee a “stable relationship to virtual potencies of emancipation, love or justice,” Ramey contends, the source of the revolutionary act and the substance of all ceremony for Žižek can be located in the “fecundity of the virtual itself.”

In Part Three of this book, Adrian Johnston, Verena Andermatt Conley, Erik Vogt, and Jamil Khader highlight specific provocations in Žižek’s work that prove fruitful for guiding us to unexpected areas of inquiry in the context of current debates in quantum physics, media studies, ecological studies, and postcolonial studies. The renowned Žižek critic Adrian Johnston examines Žižek’s appropriation of quantum physics, in order to reassess his materialist deployments of natural science and to disprove that any theory of the free subject has to offer a thoroughly materialist account. While Johnston believes it is important for Žižek to ground his ontology partially in scientific theory, he criticizes Žižek for failing to offer a cogent transcendentalist materialist theory of the subject, since Žižek is insufficiently careful in moving between the scientific and the ontological. He thus questions Žižek’s recourse to quantum physics on general philosophical grounds, stating that the “theoretical form of his extensions of quantum physics as a universal economy *qua* ubiquitous, all-encompassing structural nexus (one capable of covering

human subjects, among many other bigger-than-sub-atomic things) is in unsustainable tension with the ontological content he claims to find divulged within this same branch of physics (i.e., being itself as detotalized and inconsistent).” In other words, Žižek risks turning quantum physics into the One-All of a big Other in stark violation of his own ontology. In fidelity to what he refers to as a “Žižekian ontology of an Other-less, barred Real of non-All/not-One material being,” Johnston offers an alternative account of subjectivity grounded in biological emergentism, coupled with a Cartwrightian “nomological pluralism.”

Verena Andermatt Conley considers the radical as well as the conservative dimensions of Žižek’s “eco-chic,” questioning Žižek’s attitude toward nature and his reliance on outdated rhetorical oppositions in his critique of New Ageism. While she criticizes Žižek for his selective appropriation of ecological debates and for his vague deployment of the term political ecology, Conley finds Žižek’s focus on political ecology compelling, since he addresses problems of nature alongside with those of the “part of no part,” or the excluded from the global capitalist system by way of an elaboration of the idea of revolutionary-egalitarian justice. She writes, “Considering ecology in the context of the new emancipatory subject, Žižek holds that *contra* the present ideological mystification of ecology – in effect *contra* the limited lessons of a balanced, harmonious nature that many of its new-age adepts impose with righteous sanctimony – a candid view of an ecology that works *against itself* can come about only when we first think the immense emancipatory potential of the urban slum dwellers.” The value of Žižek’s contribution to environmental studies can thus be attributed not only to his recognition of the world’s massive ecological catastrophes, but more importantly to his theorization of the ecology as a collective experience, “even as a rehabilitation