

Book Review

First As Tragedy Then As Farce

by Slavoj Žižek, London, United Kingdom: Verso Press, 2009. \$12.95 U.S paper. ISBN 978-1-84467-2. Pages 1-157

Reviewed by: Aaron Henry¹

The best way into this review is to start with Slavoj Žižek's opening premise of *First As Tragedy Than As Farce*: Liberalism has died twice in the 21st century. Following 9/11, the retrenchment of democratic rights, the construction of new models of containment and exclusion marked the death of liberalisms promised "liberal-democratic political utopia". The 2008 economic meltdown further revealed that prosperity, contrary to the claims of neoliberal ideologues, could not be delivered through free market mechanisms. As such, using "the ongoing crisis as a starting point" (5) Žižek asks the following: how does ideology function to maintain capitalism as the only option when the inherent irrationality and authoritarian tendencies in the system have been unmasked by liberalisms failures as political and economic ideology? Žižek's diagnosis is this: the death of liberal ideology leaves us with no other belief, no other imagination of our social bonds other than the non-ideological. This non-ideology maintains or exists in capitalist society through a very cynical functioning, "we only imagine that we do not really believe in our ideology"- which makes it all the more pervasive (3). As such, perception, action and, therein what is politically possible, are now structured by the other of ideology- non-ideology; and, thus, non-ideology is itself the ruling ideology.

The logical question that follows is how does an ideology that is constituted by the fact that we imagine that we do not really believe in it, function and how does it function differently from its twin-form, ideology? The entire first half the book is devoted to this question. At a glance, this non-ideology is in many ways more of less consistent with how 'ideology' functions regularly in Marxist thought (i.e. it normalizes the status quo by positing that existing institutions and relations are directly analogous to human nature or de-historicizes the existence of the

1 Aaron Henry is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada).

established order) The departure, however, is in the specific role non-ideology and the suppression of the possibility of alternatives within a given historical moment. Ideology suppresses the “possibility immanent to the situation”: it does this not by fighting actual political opponents but by closing down the “possibility (the utopian revolutionary-emancipatory potential) which is immanent to the situation” (27). Žižek argues that in the 2008 economic crisis this suppression was made through a number of interventions ranging from Pope Benedict’s claim “that all is vanity” to Jacques Alain-Miller’s assertion that things must be terrible but eventually trust in the monetary system would be restored- by an all ‘knowing subject’ (28).

It is tempting to level the critique that the suppression of immanent possibilities is not unique to our current moment of capitalist society. After-all, Voltaire’s *Candide* character Professor Pangloss’s declaration that “this is the best of all possible worlds” seems to be jib at this very function of ideology. There is a subtle difference though. The idea of the current order being the best of all possible world’s and the idea that things are ‘bad but are the least bad’ do both serve to suppress the possibility of an alternative. However, where the former functions through a utopian optimism- there is nothing better than capitalism- the latter operates through a disavowal of its own cynicism of the existing order (i.e the existing order of relations are broken, miserable and destructive and we no longer believe in this order; and yet things will only be worse without it). Žižek is, arguably, quite convincing here about this shift to cynical suppression of alternatives. After-all was this not the sort of reflex-action behind the financial bail-outs contained within the sentiment, ‘the global economy is broken but what can we really do but save it?’

The argument gets somewhat reductive, however, as Žižek traces the function of cynicism of non-ideology into working class and liberal bourgeois forms of consciousness, in the forms of fundamental populism and permissive cynicism, respectively. Žižek argues that the bourgeois liberal (largely in the form of social democrat) clings to the ‘symptom’ of the repressed truth of the existing order whereas the working class subject fetishizes some other relation in place of the direct truth of its relations. Put concisely, Žižek argues that permissive-cynicism functions insofar as the subject is not aware of the content that belies the form of its initial claim (68). The liberal, for instance, may claim, “I believe everyone has equal opportunity” but they make this claim as something guaranteed by the political sphere; and, thus, the subject here

overlooks the unjust social relations that actually underpin the political sphere they articulate their belief of 'equality' through (see Marx's "On the Jewish Question"). In this sense, the political sphere, operates within this form of consciousness as the content (the materiality of the right to equal opportunity) when in fact it is nothing more than the symptom (one could use the word abstraction) of actual existing social relations that are in fact unequal. Populist-fundamentalism, in contrast, operates through a fetishization of something in place of the immediate antagonistic relations one confronts (e.g. when Canadians say they worry about immigrants taking all of the jobs, the immigrant is standing in place of capital, de-industrialization and outsourcing etc).

For Žižek, the point of this comparison of the different class relations attached to symptom and fetishism seems to be this: the permissive-cynical subject is the easier of the class positions to mobilize because the form of the subject's ideological belief (i.e. equality) can be recognized to be rooted in its content (i.e. unequal relations) and as such the subject can simply integrate the content further into the form (i.e. we will not be equal politically until we transform our economic relations therefore, let's change economic relations). Conversely, the populist fundamentalist must be told that what they take as the truth of their relations is in itself untrue (e.g. your 'enemy' is not the immigrant but capital). The paradox is that the opposing class position (liberal bourgeois thinkers) is easier to demystify and mobilize than those who 'the left' is actually supposed to support, workers and the down-trodden (68). In this sense, Žižek attempts here, using Lacanian psychoanalysis, an indirect answer to the infamous question that has occupied marxism since the 20th century: why has there not been a working class revolution? I think there are two questions though that arise with Žižek's explanation.

First, and most importantly, I think the idea that fundamental populism can be simply characterized as a movement that puts the fetishized object in place of the real relations it encounters misses the mark on why the 'second death of liberalism', the opening premise of the book, is potentially so dangerous. The death of liberalism has created the opportunity for social forces, previously discredited or marginalized in liberal society, to provide a new narrative on the economy. In particular, take the British National Party (BNP) in the England, this is a perfect example of a fundamentalist-populist force insofar as the BNP pledges to defend working class England from immigrants and 'islamization' and, thus, obscures real exploitative social relations in English society. However, this movement has also critiqued, no doubt with anti-semitic under-

tones, the bailouts to the big banks and the power of London's financial sector. The point being, Žižek's analysis seems to suggest fundamental-populism simply functions by putting false objects in place of actual relations, the problem though, as Gramsci noted long ago, is that right wing ideology does not simply displace 'true' relations with 'false' relations; rather, it combines them so that one cannot tell one from the other; and, as such, common sense, the mainstay of fascist ideology, always contains some kernel of good sense; thus, common sense contains some form of truth (Gramsci, 2007, 329). In this sense, the problem with fundamental populism is not merely that one displaces the truth of relations with fetishisms but that real relations can be represented (i.e. big bail outs, the privilege of finance capital over labour) and articulated alongside false objects. Arguably, with the death of liberalism is not only that of cynicism but that one now has a situation where a dissatisfaction with the actual relations in liberalism is not only possible to articulate but can be articulated by social forces that liberalism as an ideology previously maligned or discredited; such movements do not displace discontent with real relations with false objects, they merge them.

Second, if we buy Žižek's analysis of fundamental-populism and the cynical permissive subject, we are left with the following question: if the working class is locked in its own modes of populist fetishisms and increasingly we are trapped within the political and economic systems of capitalist society precisely because we imagine we do not believe in them, and thus continually reaffirm them in our actions, how are we to overthrow the system? While Žižek does directly confront the paradox he has constructed around the difficulty of mobilizing the working class his answer is "fidelity to the communist idea" (97).

In particular, for Žižek the communist idea is understood here as eternal idea (one that pivots around the ending the injustice relations between the included and excluded) that needs to be reinvented in each historical period. Žižek argues that in our present day we have four main antagonisms which despite being integral to the reproduction of capital are at the same-time the sites of possible disruption to its functioning: ecological catastrophe, "private property in relation to so-called intellectual property", the science of bio-genetics and "new forms of apartheid, new walls and slums" (91). For Žižek, the relations between excluded and included are fundamentally different from the other antagonisms in that the latter are issues of human survival that can be resolved "through authoritarian measures which will simply intensify existing social hierarchies, divisions and exclusions" (98). As such,

the relation of exclusion and inclusion will not just be unresolved by the measures but the relation itself will become the dominant mode of social control. The antagonism of exclusion and inclusion, in contrast, is a relation of justice or rather the injustice of the human condition in its current form; and, as such, because the relation is a question of justice rather than the survival of the species, it is the only antagonism “that justifies the use of the term communism” (96).

As such, Žižek makes the case that we should in fact be wary of ‘progressive’ political projects that attempt to overcome these antagonisms from a vantage point that does not take the relation of the injustice of exclusion and inclusion as its fundamental starting point. In this regards, Žižek targets the ‘progressive’ environmental movements that treat the environment as something akin to the Christian tale of the fall from Eden, with simply the industrial revolution sitting in the place of original sin as the event in which we lost our “roots to mother earth”, a relationship that must be restored through a deification of nature and the disavowal of modern technology (97). In addition to this he also casts doubt on the Maoist perspective as these approaches have a tendency to “attack the modern subjectivity” as it is understood in Western political thought and society. While these may seem like disparate progressive movements to target, they are united, for Žižek, by the fact that both movements actually destroy the possibility of the communist ideal insofar as the former seeks to abolish the technical productive forces wrought by the industrial revolution, while the latter calls into question the very notions of freedom capable of harnessing the technological forces of capitalism for a project of human emancipation. In this sense, neither project has the capacity to come to terms with the social conditions produced by capitalist society let alone to posit how very possibilities inherent to these conditions could be used to establish an order outside capital. This critique is made quite apparent in Žižek’s discussion of the Hegelian mode of subtraction from the situation as the mode of praxis the ‘left’ must adopt.

In particular, subtraction here is meant to operate simultaneously on three dimensions: withdrawal from a situation in such a way that the relations sustaining the situation itself are exposed so as to see their points of contact (the minimal difference between them) and thus, in exposing these relations, to disintegrate the situation itself (129). Such a process is stillborn without the modern subjectivity insofar as the modern subjectivity posits the critical distance between itself as a reasoning being and the relations of the existing order (Benjamin’s notion

of the 'stilled present²). In other words, to withdraw from the situation, which is in itself to presuppose the possibility of critical distance from the situation itself, is to see the situation as something external to one's own social being. As such, then, subtraction from the situation, a process that requires the critical reflection of the modern subjectivity, reveals the fundamental antagonism of included/excluded, which alone presents the context to reinvent communism in our historical period.

So in the end what are we to make of all this? While Žižek weaves together Starbuck's ads, hotel policy on smoking and export processing zones into an impressive analysis of ideology, one cannot help that the question of the nature of ideology in *First As Tragedy Then As Farce* is only partially examined. Indeed, while Žižek uses psychoanalysis to try to come to terms with the consciousness of the subject in capitalist society, at times, given that Žižek has introduced his concept of non-ideology in his previous works, it is hard pinpoint what is unique about ideology in capitalist society following the economic death of liberalism. Moreover, the discussion of the working class as a subject that has fallen under the sway of fundamental-populism simply fetishizing false objects is one dimensional and, subsequently, overlooks the complex relations between truth and false objects, the power of the latter arguably needs to be considered in terms of the degree to which ideology allows it to reconcile, rather than displace, itself to the former. In this sense, Žižek delivers an important analysis of ideology in capitalist society, whether this analysis comes to grips with our current situation, however, is another question.

REFERENCES:

Benjamin, Walter. (1968). "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. (Ed.), *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.

Gramsci, Antonio. (2007). "Philosophy, Common Sense, Language and Folklore." In David Forgacs (Ed.), *The Antonio Gramsci Reader, selected writings 1916-1935*. New York: Lawrance and Wishart.

2 As Benjamin states in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, "A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop" (1968, p. 265).