



# Slavoj Žižek, an idealist Trojan horse

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The philosopher Slavoj Žižek is a global phenomenon on the left, Simon Hardy examines some of his ideas

In the last fifteen years Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has risen to prominence across Europe and beyond as one of the leading left intellectuals currently alive. As a prolific writer he has produced a mountain of books, many of them enjoyed because of their brisk prose style and wit, and his much vaunted capacity to go from an analysis of classical opera to *Capital* and then to the films of Alfred Hitchcock in a few pages.

Žižek is one of the pioneers of a sort of renaissance in Marxist academia – a breath of fresh air in an otherwise quite stale climate of the modern university. He is not afraid to make outrageous points, to (ironically) cheer Stalin and slaughter a few of the lefts holy cows, all the while declaring that it is essential to return to Lenin and Marx if we are to reorientate the radical left.

However, despite his popularity on the left, from a Marxist point of view it is necessary to conclude that whatever Žižek's benefits for the intellectual left, ultimately he adds more confusion than clarity. The most serious problem with his intellectual project is its attempts to reintegrate classical German idealism in with a sort of vulgarised Marxism, interpreted through a Hegelian-Lacanian 'reading'. Such an endeavour can only be bad news, cutting away the witty prose and the enjoyable references to modern culture, in the final analysis, Žižek's project is the equivalent of a Cuckoo in the nest.

Of course if we accept that Žižek is simply a 'left-wing' philosopher with a passing interest in Marxism and Leninism then perhaps we can leave the question there – but Žižek precisely tries to ingratiate himself with the far left, speaking at various conferences and events, including ones that claim to be advocating a communist (revolutionary) agenda. He describes himself, amongst others things, as a Marxist, even as a Leninist. It is necessary to interrogate these claims, to simply accept them at face value is to allow Trojan Horses to come into the midst of the revolutionary left,

## Žižek as a Marxist

The most striking thing which sets Žižek apart from Marxists in terms of his style and work is that it totally lacks the systematic and methodical practice of scientific socialism. *Capital* may be a dryer read than *In Defence of Lost Causes*, but it is certainly a more serious book in terms of how Marx approached his subject matter. Žižek's books are like a blunderbuss shot of ideas, and crawling through the hundreds of separate concepts and ideas in each book to get to the core is hard going. This is not simply an academic question of writing styles, it reflects Žižek's own attitude to the form and content of concepts within political and philosophical ideas, that is in a sense disconnected from the actuality of class struggle. If everything is seen through an idealistic prism, and then synthesised through modern cultural references, the relevance of the actual struggle of ordinary peoples lives is often lost in the wordcount.

Žižek's referencing of Marx is sporadic, buried amongst (usually more common) references to the like of Alain Badiou (A French Maoist that Žižek likened to Hegel!), Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hegel Lacan, Schelling and Kierkegaard. He takes something from each, at times insightful, more often tangential or esoteric, but certainly not always from the materialist branch of philosophy.

Indeed he is perhaps most famous for his pioneering work on popularising Lacan. Let's first of all establish where

exactly Lacan fits into the post-Marxist world. Lacan, who rejected Marxism in favour of his own brand of psychoanalysis, was an inspiration for Althusser, who is the founder of modern structuralism. The problem with structuralism is that it relegates the living spirit of Marxism and its social analysis to a dead weight, with no real concept of agency or contingency. The politically active subject, capable of revolutionary action, is simply absent from Althusser. The working class is so dominated by something called the Ideological State Apparatus that it is constantly frustrated from forming a coherent revolutionary consciousness and emancipating itself.] This philosophy neatly dovetails into the major post war Left intellectual trend to relegate the working class to a subordinate position, to declare it 'no longer revolutionary', a course that people like Herbert Marcuse and Jurgen Habermas followed. Of course Althusser and Žižek would no doubt swear faith in the working class, but their preferred model of society and how consciousness develops does not help them make the case for working class self emancipation.

Instead only intellectuals were really free from this ideological domination. Althusser, himself a French intellectual in the thoroughly Stalinised Communist party, privileged the role of intellectuals in political action, denigrating the working class to hopelessly passive objects of oppression. Althusser believed that subjects only become subjects through the mediation of ideology, the interpellation (hailing) of a subject by ideology gives the subject content and meaning. In that sense we are all products of an ideological stranglehold on our consciousness and even sub consciousness.

Lacan developed a system of psychoanalysis which Žižek attempts to integrate into his political viewpoint. Lacan used the terms Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real to describe the three orders of human consciousness. Starting from Freud he added a particularly post structuralist twist, the obsession with language which dominated so much of the post war intellectual left in France. Of course language is an interesting field of study, but it is wrong to put it front and centre in the way that Lacan and subsequently (though for different reasons) Habermas does. For Marxists the starting point of investigation is the socio-economic terrain, and from that the corresponding class forces, politics, laws, etc. Language is a crucial part of humanities development as conscious beings, but it always ultimately reflects the socio-economic basis of the society in which it is used.

The concept of the Real for Lacan is crucial, it operates outside of language, we cannot know it, it is not synonymous with reality, but has its own essential attributes. This is very similar to the Kantian category of the noumena, the *ding an sich* (thing in itself) the related essence of phenomena in the real world, but a world of essentials we cannot know.

Hegel importantly broke this down. He argued that although the world is full of appearances which exist separate from the essences, we can know the essence through rational investigation. Marx agreed with this, and integrated the concepts of essence and appearance into Capital, for instance in his theory of commodity fetishism.

By going back to Lacan, Žižek argues that there is a world we cannot know, something which can only take on a metaphysical character since it is unverifiable through even a modicum of empirical analysis. For Lacan (and Žižek) the Real is precisely outside the symbolic order of language and cannot be known, a materialist would reply - what use is it for then?

Even the concept of class struggle, central to Marxism, is dealt with using Lacan or Laclau as a primary source against Marx. As Robinson and Tormey point out Žižek denies the existence of a capitalist class in actuality, so he accepts class struggle but only as antagonism and conflict. Of course these are features of the class struggle, but without linking them to the socio-economic core of where classes come from and what they do, Žižek uses class struggle as simply a 'thing which occurs', mediated through a triad of classes which corresponds to Lacan's Three Orders. So the dispossessed so called under class is the Real, the working class becomes the Imaginary order and the ruling class is the Symbolic order.

Žižek's political economy is weak, so his call for class struggle politics comes across as an almost shallow plea for something-to-happen, especially as we shall see, because his theorisation of the proletariat is almost nonexistent.

## **Idealist philosophy**

Žižek has spilt a lot of ink on books which purport to provide a new reading of Kant and Schelling. Two of the primary ones are the Parallax view and the indivisible remainder, both books which deal with Kantian antinomies (Parallax view) and Schelling's Weltalter (World Formula), and tries to find what is good in them. The problem for Marxists is that both philosophers have an antagonistic relationship to Materialism, Marxism and class struggle politics. Schelling is a devout naturalist idealist and anti materialist who was also a philosophical opponent of Hegel. Kant is the founder of modern German idealism, whose criticism by Hegel was picked up by Karl Marx who rejected most of Kant's ideas (though Marx did credit Kant with reintroducing the Dialectic as a concept in philosophy during the Enlightenment.)

So why take this course? As Žižek himself admitted his 'ultimate focus is Hegel and Schelling', that is the Idealist branch of German philosophy which Marx and Engels criticised and moved away from. Attempts to reintegrate such ideas into a Marxist world-view always lead to disaster, as the neo-Kantian revival in German social democracy a hundred years ago showed. Even Lacan, the French Structuralist intervention 'is relegated to the role of a machine, as in the 'Lacan machine reading Hegel reading [Marx, or Lenin, or the Matrix or Mozart, etc]'. Of course a certain intellectual flexibility can help throw new perspectives on things, but Žižek errs towards a hypertrophic and eclectic method which has few fixed co-ordinates for genuine critical application.

Žižek argues that Hegel is in fact only really understandable through the intermediate position of Schelling, because Hegel's Idea is self-generating and eternal Schelling moderates it and opens a gap through which contingency and immanence can emerge. Schelling is necessary since he provides a theory not so much of becoming but of beginning.

Of course it is essential to add to Hegel's method, indeed more than add, we must synthesise it into a materialist whole, as Marx did, otherwise we are stranded in the early bourgeois philosophy of rationalism instead of scientific socialism. Žižek's argument is interesting, but from a Marxist point of view it begs the question 'why go there?' If Žižek is trying to say that The Kant-Hegel-Marx movement (each critiquing the other until the final escape from idealism with Marx) is wrong, that in fact it is Kant-Hegel-Schelling-Hegel (since Schelling is important to bring Hegel into a correct line and resolve contradictions lodged within his system, so we must go through Schelling to get back to Hegel), then we already begin to see the problem for Žižek claiming to be a 'communist' or at least a scientific socialist.

Žižek's The Parallax View, regarded by its author as his 'magnum opus' acts in fact as a defence and retrenchment of Kojin Karatani's book Transcritique, which sets out to reformulate both Hegel and Marx as Kantians, that is that they never achieved escape velocity from German Idealism and in fact were pulled backwards in time (both chronologically and philosophically) to Kant. In essence, Karatani and Žižek both argue that it is not the synthesis of dialectics (or rather the *aufhebung*) which is central to Marx's methodology, but in fact the parallax view, that is 'the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible.'

Žižek promises to rehabilitate dialectical materialism using the new model of parallax views as opposed to the dialectical movement. Žižek argues that it is precisely the gap between the antinomies which is the dialectical space, the tension and gap is the actual point of genuine knowledge, and we must accept that there is an irreducible antagonism at the core of it. The possibility of synthesis, whilst not ruled out *per se*, is relegated to a secondary question. It is possible to read this methodology as being very close to Stalin's own view of dialectics, where he argues it is simply conflict and contradiction, not negation (and sublation).

So again we return to the concept of antagonism as inherent within the system but incommensurable with a political project to overcome it. Socialism rather than being the synthesis of working class struggle, boiling over qualitatively into a revolutionary overthrowing of the existing social order, seems a long way off from where Žižek ends up standing, despite the fact that he claims fidelity to Communism as an 'Idea'.

Dialectical analysis points to socialism as the natural next step post capitalism by analysing the already existing society and seeing how it precisely could be overcome and sublated into a new order of things. Žižek points in the opposite direction, away from a genuine emancipation and towards a space of (permanent?) 'tension'.

**Lenin and Trotsky: signifiers and utopians**

Žižek's recent publishing project on the question of violence further reveals what he is trying to do. Publishing works by Robespierre, Lenin and Trotsky, with the intention of placing the revolutionary Act back into political life, Žižek interestingly picks *Terrorism and Communism* by Trotsky as his book of choice. Why is this? *Terrorism and Communism* has a somewhat controversial reputation amongst revolutionary socialists, it is Trotsky at his most Jacobin. Written at the height of the Russian civil war as Trotsky was commanding the Red Army, the pamphlet seeks to defend the use of revolutionary violence against the criticism of Karl Kautsky. Whilst it should be read as a historical work and a polemic against pacifism and the most counter revolutionary form of reformism, it does contain phrases and policies that are rooted in the environment of a civil war, and therefore pull no punches about democracy, the role of the army and violence in defending a workers' state.

Reading the book it is easy to see where the Stalinists get their concepts of the dictatorship of the proletariat from, rather than seeing undemocratic practices as a necessary retreat from the essence of the programme, caused by the objective factors at the time, the Stalinists in fact exploited some of the conjunctural arguments Trotsky had made and extrapolated them into an entire system of rule. Žižek even cheekily points to the rumour that after Stalin's death amongst his papers was a heavily annotated and well read copy of the book, with many ticks next to some of the most authoritarian sections!

For Žižek, without a theory of the working class, a concept of the proletariat, he can only reduce revolutionary violence to an Act, one which does not require the working class at all. Here we can see the germs of Stalinism ? and it is worth reminding ourselves that Žižek often jokes about being a Stalinist. As Ian Parker has argued however, Žižek pretends to pretend to be a Stalinist, and of course as Lacan said there is always some truth in a joke.

Indeed, in his essay, *Repeating Lenin*, the core of his argument is that in the post modern condition, where politics 'proper' is frustrated by identity politics, pseudo multiculturalism and a post political human rights discourse, Lenin signifies someone willing to Act. But what act? Žižek actually believes the most important aspect of Lenin to reclaim is his ability to reformulate Marxism in the wake of some traumatic political event which dislocates the previous co-ordinates and leaves them, in a Lacanian sense, as a floating signifier. It is Lenin, pitched by Žižek as a sort of infallible great man/leader, who resets the co-ordinates and bends the situation to his advantage.

So Žižek formulates it as follows: 'Lenin' is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite on the contrary, to put it in Kierkegaard's terms, THE Lenin which we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old coordinates proved useless, and who was thus compelled to REINVENT Marxism ? recall his acerbic remark apropos of some new problem: 'About this, Marx and Engels said not a word.' The idea is not to return to Lenin, but to REPEAT him in the Kierkegaardian sense: to retrieve the same impulse in today's constellation. The return to Lenin aims neither at nostalgically reenacting the 'good old revolutionary times,' nor at the opportunistic-pragmatic adjustment of the old program to 'new conditions,' but at repeating, in the present world-wide conditions, the Leninist gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism and colonialism, more precisely: after the politico-ideological collapse of the long era of progressivism in the catastrophe of 1914... What Lenin did for 1914, we should do for 1990. 'Lenin' stands for the compelling FREEDOM to suspend the stale existing (post)ideological coordinates, the debilitating Denkverbot (forbidden thoughts) in which we live ? it simply means that we are allowed to think again.?

Lenin as a thinking-space? Something must be wrong here.

Žižek concludes his re-imagining of Lenin as follows 'Consequently, to REPEAT Lenin does NOT mean a RETURN to Lenin ? to repeat Lenin is to accept that 'Lenin is dead,' that his particular solution failed, even failed monstrously, but that there was a utopian spark in it worth saving.?

Lenin is therefore resurrected not as Lenin the revolutionary, but as a symbol of something else, a kind of energetic political spirit, a utopian, and ultimately an idealist (or in Žižek's case, an Ideal with no actual reality for today).

Since Lenin's project was a working class revolution, arguing for a repeat of Lenin without a proletariat as

revolutionary subject is an empty distortion, actually a cry for freedom of thought but used in a Hegelian way by Žižek.

What does Žižek say about the working class? In the same essay Žižek launches a direct attack on the concept of the proletarian crisis of leadership. In brief, this is the argument put forward by Trotsky in the 1930s that the working class is capable of struggle against capitalism, but is held back by its leadership, trade union officials, social democratic party leaders, MPs and so on, who continually divert struggle into safe parliamentary channels, or organise protest strikes which 'never go too far'. A conceptualisation of the extent and depth of the crisis of leadership is crucial for revolutionary strategy today, and can help us overcome some of the modern angst of the left in the advanced liberal democracies, why aren't there more strikes? Why isn't there a greater degree of class consciousness? Etc.

Žižek attacks this idea arguing that the standard Left schema is to 'identify some working class movement which allegedly displayed a true revolutionary or, at least, Socialist potential, but was first exploited and then betrayed by the procapitalist and/or nationalist forces. This way, one can continue to dream that Revolution is round the corner: all we need is the authentic leadership which would be able to organize the workers' revolutionary potentials. If one is to believe them, Solidarnosc was originally a worker's democratic-socialist movement, later 'betrayed' by being its leadership which was corrupted by the Church and the CIA... This mysterious working class whose revolutionary thrust is repeatedly thwarted by the treacherous nationalist and/or liberal politicians is one of the two fetishes of most of the remaining Trotskyites.'

He goes on to describe what he considers other remaining 'fetish', the belief that if Trotsky and Lenin had joined forces against Stalin in 1922 then the emerging bureaucracy would have been defeated.

His argument against the crisis of leadership analysis is that for Žižek 'the 'authentic' working class simply does not exist.' What does he mean by this? Of course it is true that the industrial working class does not exist in the western countries to the same extent as it did in 1920 or the 1930s, that there is a shift to service sector economics or banking and finance and a subsequent change in the form of working class existence.

This is true at all times, the working class in Britain of Marx's time was not the working class in Britain of 1917 or 1987. This is simply an argument for continually updating strategy and tactics and relating to new sectors of workers as they come into struggle - it is also an argument for internationalism since the industrial working class now exists in countries like China. So if all that is true then by arguing that the authentic working class does not exist, there must in fact exist an inauthentic working class, that is, not a working class as we know it, or even not a working class.

### **No guide for action**

If we start from Marx's famous dictum that the philosophers have only interpreted the world the point however is to change it, then we should start by looking at what is Žižek's guide to action. Now not every philosophical idea or theory must be directly applicable to revolutionary or emancipatory action of some kind, but Žižek has come out with a few proposals which we should probably take a look at.

One of Žižek's better arguments concerns the current dominant discourse in international relations concerning 'humanitarian intervention.' He rightly attacks this as a post political excuse for imperialism. He positions the argument over humanitarianism as being one of 'urgency', that is, the demand that we have to act, and act quickly to prevent genocide, human rights violations etc. This closes down the space for debate and discussion, allowing the status quo (imperialism) to set the agenda and neutralise opposition. Whilst all this is true, his solution exposes the radical weakness of his entire project, from an emancipatory point of view. Maybe it is designed in typical Žižekian way to 'shock', but what he proposes is precisely to 'do nothing.' This allows time to think, to consider reflectively alternative courses of action.

Žižek himself cannot propose anything, since he has not genuine concept of the revolutionary working class of a genuine political subjectivity to counter act imperialism. As socialists we oppose imperialist intervention, and call for the arming of those affected by potential genocide (Darfur for instance) to defend themselves.

Žižek in another work argues that "I am therefore tempted to reverse Marx's theses 11: the first task today is precisely not to succumb to the temptation to act... but to question the hegemonic ideological co-ordinates." But for those of us who have already questioned the hegemonic ideological co-ordinates and already, developed a strategy for action, should we wait?

A notion of revolutionary 'Action, but with no proletariat to speak of leads one down the road of revolutionary terrorism, or as Žižek himself once called for 'Linksfaschismus' (Left fascism) (if this radical choice is decried by bleeding heart liberals then so be it!), that is the violence inflicted on society by another, some kind of authoritarian who dared to Act. This follows from Sharpe's criticism of Žižek, that, following in the footsteps of Marcuse, Žižek connects the current depoliticisation (post politics) with a structurally overpowering ideology which can lead either towards cynicism or voluntarist ultra leftism.

A good example comes from Revolution at the Gates, his edited book of Lenins writings of 1917 Žižek, argues that a truly shocking act on a demonstration when faced with the police is for 'the individuals to start beating each other up.' Thanks for the advice comrade!

## Conclusion

Certainly Žižek is a very interesting thinker when it comes to cinematic and cultural analysis, and in this terrain he is certainly worth reading and thinking about. Some of the concepts that he employs, for instance in his 'Perverts Guide to cinema' are extraordinarily perceptive, and allow for radical readings of films which provide entirely new insights.

However when he steps out of this realm he adds not so much insight, as confusion and offers a dangerous path for those who wish to follow him uncritically. It is a testimony to the general weakness of Marxist theory today, especially when it comes to philosophy, that someone like Žižek can be feted as such a great inspiration and a step forward. Instead of a return to the idealistic Hegel as a source for inspiration, socialists need to be focussing on putting the case positively for the actuality of the revolution in the here and now, for the centrality of the working class as the subject-object of revolutionary struggle against all existing social conditions.

Post war Marxism was a bitter retreat from the gains of 1902-1922, away from revolutionary programme and concepts into a swamp of eclecticism, structuralism and eventually nearly fatally wounded by post-modernism. It was both a product of and a contribution towards the general political decline of the left, confusion of the left intelligentsia and subsequently a retreat from strategic questions of revolutionary politics. Žižek claims to contribute to a revival of communism and a renewed debate on these issues. Certainly he provokes debate, but he is in fact a Trojan horse, smuggling in idealist and anti revolutionary concepts into the left.

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