

Matthew Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real*, Ashgate: Aldershot, 2004, pp. xvii + 273, hardback, £50.00.

The cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek has pointed out that despite the post-structuralists' propensity to evade any formal theoretical exposition of their ideas, adopting instead a variety of rhetorical or poetical devices, their theory can nonetheless be clearly articulated: every text, including that which constitutes the subject, is caught up in a constant process of dissemination. Matthew Sharpe employs a similar tact against Žižek. While the tenor of Žižek's *oeuvre* has become increasingly frantic and diffuse, leading some to accuse him of being nothing more than a 'chatty if erratic cultural commentator', Sharpe argues that Žižek's work contains a 'theoretically informed response to the contemporary political situation' (p. 2). Indeed it is the brilliance of Sharpe's work that it draws together the disparate threads of Žižek's prolific output to present the most comprehensive account of his political theory to date.

Sharpe's exposition centres on Žižek's concept of ideology, contextualising it within the theoretical tradition of Marx, Althusser, and Lacan, as well as Žižek's past experience of self-managing socialism in Slovenia. According to Žižek, the problem with Marx's theory is its assumption that once the conditions of exploitation are unmasked, people will rise up to challenge the injustice. Today, however, we are confronted with a deep and pervasive cynicism to the extent that people *know* there are exploitative forces at work (multinational companies etc.), yet continue to support those institutions. Thus, ideology does not just mask a given reality; it must work at the level of pre-reflexive belief. For this reason, like Althusser, Žižek finds theoretical support in the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: 'Ideology captures subjects primarily at the level of their unconscious beliefs' and is reproduced through

‘repetitive ritual behaviour’ (p. 157) and the operations of the symbolic.

The difference between Althusser and Žižek is the degree to which the latter develops the notion of ideology through the wealth of Lacan’s ideas such as fantasy, the logic of the not-all, subjectivity, and *jouissance*. Again, it is Sharpe’s strength that brings clarity to the expositions, in particular the role of *jouissance*: ideology is concerned less with meaning than libidinal ties or ‘regimes of enjoyment’ (p. 31). The crucial point here is that these ties operate as an obscene supplement to the law. For example, drawing on Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, Žižek points out that Nazis were not forced to participate in the genocide, but given the choice and excused if they declined. What compelled them, he suggests, was that the Holocaust operated as a ‘kind of obscene dirty secret’ (p. 73), i.e. it was not publicly acknowledged. And it is as the obscene underside of law that enjoyment draws the subject in. As Sharpe explains, this theme is developed by Žižek to suggest precisely what is at stake in racism: what one fears in the other is not some positive entity as such, but this obscene supplementary enjoyment that underpins the Other, e.g. ‘the smell of “their” food, “their” noisy songs and dances’ (p. 181).

Sharpe argues that a problem arises because Žižek’s concept of ideology becomes a catch-all category, and for this reason Žižek employs the Lacanian category of the real (*réel*). The real is that which is given up as condition of entrance into language, and subsequently manifests as trauma or an inherent antagonism that prevents a system from closure. For example, class struggle is the real of capitalist hegemony and should constitute the index of political struggle instead of identity politics. At its purest, ideology is that which tries to obfuscate the real.

Despite an admiration for Žižek, Sharpe maintains a critical distance. His contention centres on Žižek’s inability to relate descriptive analysis to prescriptive action, a failing he locates in Žižek’s employment of Lacanian ontology: by embracing the real as a principle category to illuminate the finitude of capitalist hegemony,

Žižek 'denies the possibility of any futural reconciliation of the social whole', leaving the reader with the knowledge of one's own 'tragical finitude' (p. 255). Moreover, defining class struggle in terms of the real removes it from its historical context and turns it into an unbreachable metaphysical category. So, whereas Marxist dialectics produced a theoretically informed practice: socialise the means of production, organise the working class etc., Žižek knowingly leaves the reader with the type of irresolvable conflict that marked Kantian antinomies: ideology tries to obfuscate the real; the real ensures against closure.

Given that Sharpe's contention rests with Lacan's ontology, this work would have benefited from a deeper engagement with Lacan. For example, it would help to have an understanding of the initial context in which Lacan's ideas developed: the clinic. Seen from here, Lacan's categories are thoroughly prescriptive, precisely because one has the aggression of the analysand or transference to work with. The problem arises when analysis becomes a form of social-psychology because one cannot develop transference with society as a whole. This is why Žižek's work can appear opportunistic, simply 'getting-off' on culture. Thus I would contend the issue is not that Lacanian ontology precludes action, but that contexts need to be taken into account. Furthermore, what is one to make of Sharpe's dream of a 'social whole'? Is this not a defence employed by the subject against the ambiguity of the Other, i.e. an imaginary identification which belies the fragmented nature of subjectivity?

Nonetheless, Sharpe recognises that Žižek comes close to a concrete prescription in his theological turn. Žižek interprets the effect of *agape* as the 'ruptuous moment of the transformative act' (p. 250) that cuts through libidinal ties and constitutes a founding event. At its most radical, *agape* becomes the paradigm for the political intervention into capitalist hegemony. However, for Sharpe, invoking the religious is not without problems because one can 'easily collapse into a perverse identification [...] with the mechanisms of prohibition

themselves, rather than a passage beyond law' (p. 250). This negative view of the religious as a source of political action is echoed elsewhere in the work when the theological is invoked as a pejorative term, a 'semi-metaphysical' category, a position from which one should not make procrastinations upon the political (p. 213). Again, a deeper understanding of Lacan may have helped here. As Žižek points out in his generous forward to this work, Lacan's point is that an act always requires a certain risk, a 'leap of faith' (p. xii). Moreover, given the anti-religious rhetoric of much Marxism, Žižek's invocation of theology becomes performative of the act, i.e. it ruptures the secular framework of much leftist/marxist politics.

The wealth of secondary material on Žižek now appearing brings a welcome opportunity to assess his significance. With the demise of the traditional politics of left and right, capitalist hegemony increasingly seems to squeeze out visionary alternatives. Sharpe's work gives clear voice to the descriptive potential of Žižek's theory, and while falling short of offering any alternatives, helps the reader assess the value of Žižek's starting point. That this work refuses the obscurantist style associated with the name of Lacan and Žižek, coupled with a short forward by Žižek, make this an indispensable partner to the ongoing debate on leftist politics.

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