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Review

First as Tragedy, Then as Farce

Slavoj Žižek. London and New York: Verso, 2009. 158 pp.

Edward Sankowski*

Slavoj Žižek is a prolific, original, and formidable philosopher. His publishing habits are so productive that any discussion of a particular book is bound to be only a very partial consideration of his work and views as a whole. This applies to the present discussion of *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. The title, of course, is taken from Marx. One relevant classical passage is from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” Žižek’s book is said by its author to deal with 9/11, (along with the subsequent war on terror), and “the financial meltdown of 2008” (1). Žižek sees these as linked features of a continuing crisis. However, the book also expresses a call on the author’s part in light of his account of the ongoing crises in global capitalism for a re-evaluation and continuation of Marx’s project through praxis. Crisis is in his view “inevitable” and also an opportunity. Despite his talk of “communist praxis,” Žižek nonetheless writes of the need not so much to act at once (certainly not impulsively and out of anger), so much as first to re-think the contemporary situation (11). Nonetheless, he also apparently joins others in cautioning that we cannot expect to act in full knowledge, that “a true act is never a strategic intervention in a transparent situation of which we have full knowledge; on the contrary, the true act fills in the gap in

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our knowledge” (151–52). This aspect of the book with its references to a recovery and novel contemporary extension of Marxist communism seems rather tentative and incomplete. Perhaps that is to be expected in light of history. Indeed, what a Žižekian praxis could plausibly be in Eastern or Western Europe, in Russia, in China, in Nepal, in Iran, in Latin America, in the USA is obviously very variable from case to case.

A point to note is that Žižek seems to presuppose enormous insight in great philosophers such as Hegel and Marx, by whose insights we should in his view at least in part evaluate ourselves. There are surprisingly perhaps elements of Platonism in his views about the content of great older philosophers. He also draws on work by a variety of later authors such as Walter Benjamin and the contemporary Alain Badiou, apparently a friend of Žižek’s. In the course of his exposition, Žižek provides many suggestive and striking observations about and interpretations of contemporary history and ongoing events, current thinkers, and of contemporary political figures. The importance of the Haitian Revolution against colonialism and its implications for how to think about the French Revolution, the legacy of 1968, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the building of new walls, gated communities for the super-rich (who live in fear), the Bolivian politics of Evo Morales, the Venezuelan politics of Hugo Chavez, the meanings of Berlusconi and of Obama, contemporary Iran, the French intellectual and political scene: there is no shortage of more specific topics and concrete, opinionated commentary here, with information and interpretations drawn from many quarters. The overt structure of the book falls into two chapters, “It’s Ideology, Stupid!” and “The Communist Hypothesis.” But to some extent, the book is throughout not so much divided into two distinct phases of a project first exposing and anatomizing false consciousness and then constructing in detail an alternative conception. Much more so, this book is throughout an illustration of an authorial stance that combines at times journalistic approaches with simultaneously philosophical interpretation of contemporary events and their historical background. This characterization of aspects of his work as “journalistic” is here not an insult but describes a methodology that is of interest beyond even Žižek’s particular topics and orientation in this book.

Žižek is generally willing to venture into the study of popular culture, and especially movies, a topic about which he has written at length elsewhere. Much in Žižek’s critique of “post-modern liberal capitalist” ideology here is critique of media representations. Besides studying the media situation, he has also used new media to

approach his subjects, posting texts and videos on the internet, appearing in a DVD about movies. The written style in this book is often intriguing, rarely lurid, but in the main expressive of one type of humanistic and radical left ethical-political sensibility. The text occasionally contains lapses into obscurity and jargon that may sometimes yield insights if properly decoded. Žižek's prominent influences include not only Hegel, and Marx and Engels, but also more recent French philosophy and psychoanalysis: Michel Foucault (though more as a writer to be critiqued), and those Žižek would view as major influences and allies, including Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou, et al.) Žižek criticizes the fraudulent aspects of some liberal democratic elections (but seems favorably disposed to the election and some achievements of Obama, about whom he remains ambivalent). Thus: "There is no reason to despise democratic elections; the point is only to insist that they are not *per se* an indication of Truth- on the contrary, as a rule, they tend to reflect the predominant doxa determined by the hegemonic ideology" (137). He writes apparently admiringly of some exercises in authoritarian party control of political processes as in his remarks about part of Yugoslav history, and even more regrettably in his allusions in this book and elsewhere to some political terror and revolutionary violence, and in his expression of a supposed need today for "a good dose" of "the 'Jacobin-Leninist' paradigm of centralized dictatorial power" (90,125). Is this frankness and/or sneer at elements of "the postmodern Left," and/or a willingness to take political responsibility; or much more negatively, is it definite evidence of some moral crudeness at best, or a fateful moral and political flaw at worst?

Žižek wants to discover an escape route from what he depicts as the dysfunctional mainly global-capitalist system as it now manifests itself, but he seems at times over-hastily to treat the escape route as necessarily reviving "communism" in his specific sense. At other times, however, Žižek hints at the need for construction of a new political vocabulary (110). There is perhaps sometimes a tendency here for him to retain a rather dichotomous Cold War outlook, to view the ongoing events as presenting a choice between capitalism (both real capitalism and its utopian ideological self-image) and a communism that might be re-constructed. This is so, even as he would of course acknowledge that the circumstances have changed, as in his closing remarks about former leftists (the featured example is an Eastern European by origin) who once turned anti-communist, and Žižek's suggestion that it is time to go the other direction. This topic may have a special resonance for him as a Slovenian by origin who is a cosmopolitan

political intellectual. He perhaps at times dismisses supposedly less pure left-oriented politics as mere socialism or liberalism rather than a supposedly finer and more promising fulfillment of Marx that Žižek himself projects. In other places, he claims leftism is the only way to preserve what is genuine in the core liberal democratic values. In a discourse the gist of which is already to be found in other writers, he depicts liberalism as parasitic on non-liberal value systems, and as having a tendency to undermine itself (76–77). This is not the only place that Žižek somewhat aligns himself as the sort of leftist he is with values one might have thought “conservative” in some respects.

To speak briefly not primarily about Žižek’s text, but about related matters, we live in a world in which heretofore highly exclusionary and mutually intolerant ideologies and political systems are sometimes blending, their representatives making deals with one another, morphing into one another, but still are ready to take offense at one another, or more drastically to resort to violent action (whether ad hoc military strike, police action, or war) given the right trigger and a plausible target. A fairly far right but still relatively conventional U.S. politician (Governor Rick Perry from Texas, currently a possible and highly-touted presidential candidate) has welcomed investment by China in Texas. Multi-national corporations partner with Chinese firms, and the Chinese and U.S. governments discuss with fanfare the need for co-operation, even as there is some snippy diplomacy and occasionally scary military signals sent. There are many ties that bind China and the U.S., although China is a country ruled by the Chinese Communist Party and lives publically by its associated value systems. One point about these observations is that the world is now full of situations in which political orientations once and even now considered totally unacceptable by some politically active persons within one country are treated by those same persons with respect and even admiration as they function in another country. The “dangerous” (according to the *New Republic*) Žižek himself has somewhat been mainstreamed by admiring references in *The New Republic* and publication in *The New York Times*. Žižek has been praised in *The New Yorker* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, referenced in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. U.S. universities currently (and justifiably) seek extensive ties with China, and yet many of the political concepts dominant in China would still be considered blasphemous or forbidden in most of U.S. society. In Eastern and Western Europe, Žižek’s interventions would have an unpredictable impact, interesting to follow but difficult to anticipate. His

unsympathetic views about the Catholic Church will play to mixed reviews in Italy or Latin America.

This book, while sophisticated, is a useful entry point for suitably prepared readers for learning about a loosely knit range of writers, some but not all of whom share Žižek's general outlook, or at least write about topics he takes seriously. This book connects brief critical discussions of Plato, Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" and "The Conflict of Faculties" with reflections about leftism and popular culture. Žižek's intellectual range is wide, his views well worth examination, reflection, response. Some Anglo-American philosophers will be repelled by Žižek's occasional obscurity, argumentative peculiarities, and the traditions and contemporary debates in which he is primarily immersed. However, such philosophers will miss out on expanding their approach to important issues, on joining in debates worth joining, and on better comprehending the globalization of their subject.