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Review Essay

Žižek's Hegel

Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism

Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 2012. 1038pp.

Gavin Hyman^{*}

Followers of Slavoj Žižek's work had long been awaiting his "big book on Hegel." In interviews and other appearances, he made no secret of the fact that this work was in progress and, furthermore, that he considered it to be a labour of love, his magnum opus, and, in a sense, a culmination. Big the book certainly is—1010 pages of text to be precise. If such a book were to be written by any other author, readers would doubtless have waited considerably longer to receive it. But so prolific is this author that the waiting has been minimal, and many readers will doubtless take longer to read the book in its entirety than Žižek took to write it.

1010 pages on Hegel? Yes and No. What is perhaps most striking in a book purportedly about Hegel is the amount of time the author spends discussing other things. In that sense, it is much more than simply a book about Hegel, and the amount of ground covered along the way is astonishing. At the same time, however, Žižek would no doubt claim that he is in fact talking about Hegel even when he is ostensibly not doing so. Indeed, this, in many ways, may be taken to illustrate one of the central claims of the

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book. For Žižek's motivating conviction throughout is that the shadow of Hegel is ubiquitous and inescapable. Whether discussing philosophy, cultural theory, theology or politics, the key that unlocks the doors of insight is repeatedly found to be constituted by Hegelian dialectics. According to Žižek, Hegel casts shafts of insight on all manner of aspects of our contemporary condition if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear. There is a fervent missionary zeal that motivates every page of this book, namely (as Žižek's comment on the dust jacket has it), "the time of Hegel still lies ahead—his century will be the twenty-first." This conviction is latently and sometimes manifestly present on every page, whether Žižek is talking directly about Hegel or about someone or something else.

In making this claim, Žižek is well aware that he is promoting what many consider to be a lost cause. For many writers, if Hegel defined a century, it was the nineteenth, and certainly not the twenty-first. But Žižek reminds us of G. K. Chesterton's comment that "the lost causes are exactly those which might have saved the world" (1010). If there are many who consider Hegel's cause to be a lost one in the twenty-first century, there are two such groups in particular that Žižek seeks to confront. Not only do both groups believe that Hegel's time has passed, but they make this judgement on the basis of what Žižek believes to be faulty readings of Hegel. Looking at these groups and identifying what he takes to be problematic about their interpretations will, therefore, assist us in our task of identifying what is particularly distinctive about Žižek's own reading of Hegel.

First, there are what may broadly be characterised as the "postmodernists"—a group that has long appeared as the bogeyman in Žižek's now considerable oeuvre. Indeed, at times, the virulent anti-postmodern rhetoric has served to obscure those places at which he seems to hover close to his otherwise avowed enemies. Nonetheless, there are real differences between them, perhaps the most prominent of which is their divergent readings of Hegel. Admittedly, Žižek spends less time in this book discussing postmodernist thinkers as such, perhaps partly because he has done this so often before. But it is these thinkers who have done more than most to peddle the view of Hegel that Žižek is most concerned to reject. This is the cliché Hegel, the thinker of totalisation, the voracious unifier who consumes difference and otherness, or for whom difference is always penultimate, always ultimately subsumed into a higher unity. This is the Hegel who serves as postmodernism's antithetical foil, although it need hardly be said, of

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course, that it is not only postmodernists who have so characterised his thought; such a reading is deep-seated and all-pervasive. As Gillian Rose long ago pointed out in her book *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981), the philosophical radicalism of Hegel was such that few of his contemporaries were able to perceive it. The result was that Hegel was interpreted through the very philosophical categories and structures he was attempting to overcome, and the consequent misunderstandings have persisted for many years. Žižek's motivating concern in this book is to uncover this philosophical radicalism from the domesticating accretions of the intervening years.

The second group of Hegelian readers Žižek seeks to rebut is that of his fellow materialists. For him, Hegelianism in no way compromises thoroughgoing materialism; on the contrary, it is only through Hegel that one can be a true materialist at all. This flies in the face of much conventional materialist wisdom, according to which Hegel is the arch-idealist, a spiritualist, a purveyor of a teleology guided and determined by a mysterious force, at once rational and transcendent—Spirit, whose phenomenology Hegel painstakingly sought to trace. But, as with the “totalising” Hegel, this “spiritual” Hegel is, for Žižek, a travesty, a retrospective projection that traps him in the very dichotomies and modes of thought that he was so valiantly attempting to escape. In this respect, some of the most interesting passages in the book are those where Žižek specifies his precise divergences from his fellow materialists. Alain Badiou, for instance, is a philosopher frequently associated with Žižek, and with some justification; there is certainly a great deal, not least politically, on which they converge. But while both lay claim to the “materialist” epithet, there is much at stake in their diverging interpretations of it.

For Badiou, at the heart of his materialism lies the conviction that prior to the emergence of a World (of appearing) lies the multiplicity of being, to which mathematics as general ontology bears witness. But with respect to this, Žižek seeks to ask two fundamental questions. First, how are we to account for the emergence of a consistent World out of this sheer multiplicity? How “do we pass from the totally ‘flat’ and incommensurable or de-focalized Real to a focused World, to a field constituted through a transcendental measure?” (808). And secondly, how do we account for the emergence of Truths (a procedure which, as any reader of Badiou will know, is central to his outlook), that can cut across different worlds? That these questions remain ultimately unanswerable, according to Žižek, reflects the fundamental deadlock intrinsic to Badiou's thought. Finally, for Žižek, Badiou is “all too Kantian with his opposition of ‘mere

animal life' and the miracle of Event" (826). This Kantian element consists of an envisaging of these two elements as static opposites, such that a dynamic relationship between them is impossible to unfold.

For example, in Badiou's explication of the relationship between a World and a Truth-Event, he insists (as one would expect of a rigorous materialist) that a Truth-Event itself is "nothing but a part of a given situation, nothing but a *fragment of being*" (Badiou, quoted on 822) and, as such, is certainly not transcendent in any kind of idealist sense. But, at the same time, a Truth-Event is not *reducible* to being/World; it is, as Badiou insists, "eternal." But how are we to account for this apparent contradiction? For Žižek, this cannot be done without positing an antagonism or inconsistency at the level of being itself, as was perceived long ago by Schelling and Hegel, who "try to account for the emergence of appearing with reference to some kind of tension or antagonism or contradiction in the preceding order of being. This route, however, is excluded a priori by Badiou, since his axiom is that 'being as being is absolutely homogenous: a mathematically thinkable pure multiplicity'" (809). In so far as being is understood thus, both the emergence of a coherent World and also the emergence of a Truth-Event become, for Žižek, inexplicable. It is thus only a return to Hegel that would rescue Badiou from this materialist impasse.

The other fellow materialist with whom Žižek engages at length is Quentin Meillassoux. Meillassoux's work has been much discussed in recent years, especially since the publication of his *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (2008). The central issue that Meillassoux seeks to address is, in Žižek's words, "the 'naïve' question of the existence and cognizability of reality in its independence from our (human) mind ... how can transcendental philosophy (for which all reality is subjectively constituted) account for statements about natural processes which occurred prior to the rise of humanity, from the beginning of our universe (the Big Bang) to fossils from the early stages of life on earth?" (625). Although Žižek ultimately dissents from Meillassoux's line of analysis, he is nonetheless deeply appreciative of it. Noting that the crux point of *After Finitude* is to assert the mutual implication of the contingency of necessity and the necessity of contingency, he observes that "the beauty and strength of Meillassoux's argument is that the conclusion he draws from [the] unconditional assertion of contingency is not some kind of universalized agnostic relativism, but, on the contrary, the assertion of the cognitive accessibility of reality-in-itself, the way it is

independently of human existence ... Meillassoux's aim is no less than to demonstrate—*after* Kant, taking into account the Kantian revolution—the possibility of the cognition of the noumenal In-itself" (629).

It is perhaps not surprising that Žižek writes so appreciatively of Meillassoux for there is indeed a great deal of common ground between them, beyond the simple assertion of their shared materialism. For instance, what Žižek calls the speculative crux of Meillassoux's argument is the "passage from (or reversal of) epistemological limitation to (or into) positive ontological feature" (635). That is to say, "the very fact that we can think the possibility of the absolute contingency of reality, the possibility of its being-other, of the radical gap between the way reality appears to us and the way it is in itself, entails its actuality, that is, entails that reality in itself is radically contingent" (ibid.). This move is, of course, close to Žižek's own, for he has repeatedly insisted that the plurality of perspectives on the Real does not constitute an obstacle blocking our access to the Real, but is an articulation or exemplification of the Real itself. The incommensurable perspectives are themselves indicators of the incommensurability, the gap, split or antagonism that is constitutive of reality. But if this is so, then of what does the difference between Žižek and Meillassoux consist?

Žižek's key criticism of Meillassoux, as with Badiou, seems to be that he still remains caught up in a Kantian opposition, and this in spite of his sophisticated and nuanced attempt to move *beyond* Kant. In his attempt to articulate an objective reality independent of the subjective observer, Meillassoux remains in the domain of a Kantian opposition between subject and object. For Žižek, the key problem with this is to miss the way in which subject and object are mutually *implicated*: the subject is inextricably part of the objectivity it is trying to articulate, and the real challenge is not to articulate objectivity independently of subjectivity, but to account for the way in which the subject can account for reality while simultaneously being a part of it. As Žižek puts it, "The critical implication with regard to Meillassoux is that the true problem is not to think pre-subjective reality, but to think how something like a subject could have emerged within it; without this (properly Hegelian) gesture, any objectivism will remain correlationist in a hidden way—its image of 'reality in itself' remains correlated (even if in a negative way) with subjectivity" (642). With regard to this, he makes reference to Niels Bohr who liked to repeat that "at the level of the physics of micro-particles, there is no 'objective' measurement, no access to objective reality, not because we (our mind) constitutes [sic]

reality, but because we are part of the reality which we measure, and thus lack an ‘objective distance’ towards it” (643). As Žižek goes on to elaborate, “The problem is not ‘Can we penetrate the veil of subjectively constituted phenomena to Things-in-themselves?’ but ‘How do phenomena themselves arise within the flat stupidity of reality which just is; how does reality redouble itself and start to appear to itself?’” (ibid). It is this last question that both Hegel and Lacan equip us to begin to think through: “for the problem is not ‘how to reach objective reality which is independent of (its correlation to) subjectivity’; but how subjectivity is already inscribed into reality—to quote Lacan again, not only is the picture in my eye, but I am also in the picture” (ibid.).

We thus begin to get a sense of what it is that distinguishes Žižek’s materialism from both Badiou’s and Meillassoux’s. Both of them are unable to account for what might be termed reflexivity, and Žižek, consequently, perceives both to reach an irresolvable deadlock, the escape from which can be found only through a return to Hegel. Indeed, this is a pattern repeated time and again throughout the book with respect to diverse thinkers and forms of thought. Problems, antinomies and deadlocks are exposed, all of which appear to reinforce the necessity of a return to Hegel, who alone is able to provide a way through. But who or what is this Hegel, a return to whom Žižek repeatedly deems to be necessary? This is in many ways a difficult question to answer, and one might say that the book taken as a whole is Žižek’s attempt to answer it. Nonetheless, one can perhaps identify certain features of this necessary Hegel, most of which serve to distinguish it from the cliché reading of Hegel that has held sway for so long. Indeed, some of these features have already emerged, albeit negatively, in the objections of the postmodernists and materialists to what they perceive to be Hegel’s thought, as just discussed. But it is time now to identify these features more positively.

First, as we have already intimated in the above discussions, there is the necessity to account for the phenomenon of reflexivity, as emerging from and between the mutual encounter between subject and object. Žižek gives a concise survey of what he means by this in the context of a discussion of the ontology of quantum physics: for Hegel rejected a position “which first posits a gap between the knowing subject and the object-to-be-known, and then deals with the (self-created) problem of how to bridge this gap. In other words [Hegel] combine[s] a false modesty (we are just finite subjects confronting an opaque transcendent reality) with the arrogance of invoking a meta-language (the subject can somehow step outside of its own limitations to compare its

limited perspective with reality itself). And the solution to both is basically the same: to include the subject in the ‘self-movement’ of the object-to-be-known. The Hegelian name for this inclusion is reflexivity” (931). Thus, it is not that a self-constituted subject seeks to “reflect” reality, but, rather, that through reflection, both subject and object emerge, or are constituted, or become themselves. But, as Žižek is always quick to insist, “this is not a question of spiritualism, but of knowledge itself being grounded in material practices” (932).

This brings us, secondly, to Žižek’s conviction that Hegel is ultimately a materialist and a thinker of contingency. But, critically, he is not only this, but, uniquely, he is able to demonstrate how the “spiritual” and the teleological is able to emerge out of the material and the contingent themselves. It is because Hegel bears witness to the unavoidability of transcendence and a purposive teleology that he has so often been misunderstood and misinterpreted as being a purveyor of a mystical spiritualism and of a world history determined by the purposive guiding hand of the Absolute or *Geist*. But for Žižek, this is to miss Hegel’s unique intervention, which is to show how “transcendence” and “teleology” are not simply illusory; they are (in a sense) “real,” but they emerge out of the retrospective loops of the material and contingent themselves. This is because there is an inherent antagonism in reality, which means that the material and the contingent are never fully themselves. Internally split, they retrospectively “produce” the transcendent and teleological, which while not themselves fully ontologically constituted, nevertheless cannot simply be dismissed as being “illusory” or “unreal”: “the point of Hegelian dialectical analysis is not to reduce the chaotic flow of events to a deeper necessity, but to unearth the contingency of the rise of necessity itself—this is what it means to grasp things ‘in their becoming’” (575). Indeed, this logic applies not only to concepts of “transcendence” and teleology, but also to the Absolute itself. When Hegel insists that the Absolute is the “result of itself,” Žižek understands this to mean that “there is no Absolute which externalizes or particularizes itself and then unites itself with its alienated Otherness: the Absolute emerges out of this process of alienation; that is, as the result of its own activity, the Absolute ‘is’ nothing but its ‘return to itself’” (291). Those philosophies that simply *assert* idealism and those that simply *deny* it are alike incomplete; what Hegel shows is that a simple move from thesis to antithesis will always be insufficient.

And so, finally, to the third distinguishing feature of Žižek's Hegel: the dialectic. As will be clear from what has just been said, this is not a dialectic *determined* by the guiding hand of the Absolute. Rather, each "position" in the dialectical process is an attempt to cover up the inherent split or gap in reality itself. But the real will always resist, fight back and protest against such "mending," a resistance that fuels the move from thesis to antithesis. Where Žižek dissents from the cliché reading of the Hegelian dialectic is in his insistence that there are no real syntheses in Hegel's thought (see, for instance, 303). To be sure, there is a movement to a "third," but this third does not simply synthesise the two previous positions; rather, it would be more accurate to say that there is a "return" to the thesis, albeit in such a way that the thesis has been decisively transformed through the dialectical detour through the antithesis. But the point is not that this third position somehow "resolves" the contradiction or antagonism; rather, it is that this contradiction or antagonism is revealed precisely in this tripartite movement, an interminable movement that never finally ends. As he puts it, the key aspect of the dialectical process is that "the 'sameness' to which the process returns after alienation is not 'substantially the same' as the initial sameness, it is another Sameness which totalizes the dispersed moments. This is why alienation or negation is irreducible: what happens in the 'negation of the negation' is the accomplishment of negation; in it, the immediate starting point is definitively lost. So there is no single Absolute Subject to cunningly play the game of self-alienation with itself—this subject emerges, is constituted, *through* alienation" (889).

We can see, then, that Žižek's reading of Hegel dissents from the standard reading in almost every important respect; indeed, not only dissents from it, but actually inverts it. Against the "spiritualist" Hegel, Žižek asserts a materialist Hegel; against the teleological Hegel, he insists on a contingent Hegel; against the totalising Hegel, he posits a thinker of incompleteness, incommensurability and brokenness. In sum, Žižek presents us with a Hegel who, far from being the epitome of modern philosophy and its titanic aspirations, is actually its inversion. More than this, Žižek presents a Hegel who outflanks *both* modern philosophy *and* its materialist reversal. As he puts it, philosophy posits "the One (*logos*, the higher principle) generating the totality of being out of itself; this is why philosophy endeavours to contain the lower element, to reduce it to a moment in the self-deployment of the higher level" (840). In contrast, materialism reverses this process so that the higher element is generated "out of the lower (*logos* from the

interaction of bodies, the One from the multiple...)" (ibid.). In contrast to both, Žižek posits the "unprecedented originality of Hegel. On a first approach (according to the official *doxa*), Hegel's thought is the ultimate example of the One overcoming its self-division through the Three (the 'synthesis' by means of which the One re-appropriates its alienated Otherness). It is thus true that 'Hegel proposes a position of the three which is necessarily engendered by the two' [Badiou]; however, it is precisely through this engendering that Hegel affirms a Two which is no longer the pre-philosophical mythical Two, the Two of a symmetrical polarity, but the Two of the non-coincidence of the One with itself" (ibid.).

Furthermore, Hegel's thought is conceived by Žižek to be the "moment of passage" between philosophy and anti-philosophy. While philosophy asserts the sovereignty of the One that is able to totalize the multiplicity, anti-philosophy insists on the irreducible nature of the multiplicity, such that it always exceeds and escapes the mastery of the One. But, confronted with this passage, the challenge confronting us is not simply to endorse either its starting point or its outcome. Rather, the task is to understand the nature and significance of the shift itself: "For Hegel, totalization-in-One always fails, the One is always already in excess with regard to itself, is itself the subversion of what it purports to achieve, and it is this tension internal to the One, this Two-ness which makes the One One and simultaneously dislocates it, which is the motor of the 'dialectical process.' In other words, Hegel effectively asserts that there is no Real external to the network of notional representations (which is why he is regularly read as an 'absolute idealist'). However, the Real does not disappear here in the global self-relating play of symbolic representations; it returns with a vengeance as the immanent gap, the obstacle, on account of which representations can never totalize themselves, on account of which they are 'non-All'" (852).

The nagging question with which we are immediately confronted is: "Is Žižek right?" Was Hegel indeed saying what Žižek claims him to have been saying? Have so many subsequent commentators been so badly mistaken? Or is Žižek reading into Hegel's texts his own creative insights? Readers approaching this book in the hope that it will "prove" Žižek's reading right and the cliché reading wrong through a careful exposition of the primary texts will be disappointed. Žižek would perhaps see such an exercise as being as arid as it is futile, for no reading of Hegel's texts will simply "show" one reading right and another wrong. This is not simply to make a hackneyed point about

the indeterminacy of authorial intention or the unavoidable ambiguity of interpretative ambiguity. Rather, wherever thinkers decisively attempt to change the coordinates of an entire field of thought (Wittgenstein and Heidegger are perhaps more commonly acknowledged to be doing this than is Hegel), they are always at risk of being read in terms of the very coordinates they are seeking to overthrow. And when texts are read in this way, it is difficult definitively to “show” such readings to be wrong, although attempts may certainly be made to question their adequacy. And Žižek does at least do this. At one point, he quotes at length Daniel Lindquist, a “scathing critic” who seeks to demonstrate “how badly Žižek mishandles Hegel.” Žižek confronts his critic directly and seeks to show precisely what it is that the “standard” readings of Hegel miss (286–92). At this point, there is little left to do but immerse oneself in Hegel’s texts and reach one’s own conclusions. At any rate, what can perhaps be said is that Hegel’s writings (at least to the extent to which the present reviewer can claim to be familiar with them), do not obviously “resist” Žižek’s readings of them; on the contrary, they often appear in a new and revealing light, as we begin, through those very readings, to see things in Hegel’s texts that we had not previously suspected.

But there is a second critical point to be made in relation to this question, namely, that Žižek does not claim to be *simply* repeating Hegel; rather, he claims to be repeating him precisely in going *beyond* him. In this respect, there is explicit acknowledgement that his own thought is going decisively beyond Hegel’s own, unequivocally beyond what might strictly be warranted by Hegel’s texts; chapter 7, indeed, is entitled “The Limits of Hegel.” *But*, critically, the manner in which Žižek moves beyond Hegel’s thought is not arbitrary, nor even unrelated to that thought itself. Rather, Žižek claims to be going beyond Hegel’s thought in a strictly Hegelian way, with the paradoxical result that Žižek’s reading of Hegel can be claimed to be more Hegelian than was Hegel himself. This point is, of course, entirely consistent with Žižek’s reading of the Hegelian dialectic, as just discussed. According to this logic, the true substance of a philosopher’s thought only becomes evident in retrospect, once we have passed through its dialectical negation. Thus it is that we are only now in a position to perceive the true radicalism of Hegel’s thought, the complex nature of which was perhaps not even evident to Hegel himself. It is in light of this that we should understand the claim quoted at the outset, namely, “the time of Hegel still lies ahead—his century will be the twenty-first.”

It has to be said that Žižek's claim here is not without precedent. As we have noted, Gillian Rose was another recent apologist for the contemporary relevance of Hegel. Rose's admirers have often suggested that she was writing before her time; that only now, as we are witnessing something like the eclipse of postmodernism, will her work finally be able to find the wide readership it deserved, as the question of what might come "after" postmodernism takes on a new urgency. Žižek nowhere mentions Rose in this book, but as long ago as *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991), he evidently saw in her—not least through her interpretation of Hegel—a kindred spirit. With Rose no longer able to continue her project, at precisely the time when it might have been most appreciated, Žižek has been able to take up her mantle. But he is not the only one who may claim to be doing so. Another thinker who both repeatedly emphasises his indebtedness to Rose, and also asserts the contemporary relevance of Hegel, is Rowan Williams. Like Žižek, he too has been concerned to rescue Hegel from facile charges that he is guilty of "totalisation" and of peddling an outdated teleology. Unlike Žižek, however, he has also been concerned to emphasise how many of Hegel's themes are given a theological point of reference, and he seeks to understand Hegel's thought within the context of a resolutely theological ontology. This divergence between Žižek and Williams—set against a backdrop of what I perceive to be a considerable convergence in their respective readings of Hegel—raises again the old question of the relationship of Hegel to theism and atheism.

In his recent Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh, Williams addressed questions pertaining specifically to language and representation. In this context, he suggested that a theistic ontology is one that resists "final" explanations because the plenitude of the divine is such that it resists being captured by any one particular representation of it. Reality itself, as a manifestation of the divine intelligence is likewise excessive to any attempt comprehensively to master or control it. As Williams commented:

There is anything because infinite intelligence is able to confine itself into limited intelligible clusters. But since each limited structure is inseparable from the limitless life that brings it into being, that structure is always going to resist final capture in terms of some basic explanation. There will always be more to be said about it because the life it crystallizes is a life that is not in itself bounded. There will

always be relations between it and other presences in the finite universe that need to be uncovered and represented. And to make sense of the idea of a life that unceasingly generates more and more levels of representability, more and more to be imagined and spoken, [there] needs [to be] some opening out onto the horizon of what we could call intelligible abundance, an inexhaustible life that is itself unboundedly open to diversity of representation, and at the same time supremely resistant to representation. (Williams 2013)

Without explicit invocation of his name, the resonances of Hegel here are obvious. So too are the echoes of central themes in Žižek's thought. But whereas for Williams, the plurality of perspectives is an effect of the overflowing plenitude of the divine, for Žižek, it is an effect of the incommensurability or antagonism at the heart of reality itself. But could this very difference between divine plenitude and reality-as-split not itself be viewed as an instance of what Žižek has elsewhere called the "parallax gap"? In other words, we might say that this difference is not one that presents itself to be 'resolved' in one way or the other, but is rather itself a manifestation of the very thing that both Williams and Žižek are seeking, variously, to express. Could it be, then, that the opposition between materialism and theology, between theism and atheism, is itself the supreme manifestation of the "parallax gap," the core Hegelian insight? Certainly not for Žižek, for whom Hegel's radicalism, as we have seen, lies precisely in his materialism and his atheism. But we should perhaps hesitate before ceding to Žižek the final word on Hegel in this respect. And we should further acknowledge that this is a hesitation born precisely out of Žižek's own invaluable exposure of Hegel's suspicion of all final reconciliations and all final words.

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