

## BOOK REVIEW

Slavoj Žižek. *On Belief* (Thinking in Action Series, Routledge, 2001)

Much of late twentieth century Western philosophy is driven by a certain anxiety concerning the project of the enlightenment. This can be seen beginning with the famous work of Horkheimer and Adorno and extending through French poststructuralism, and postmodern thought.

This anxiety is related to what is perceived as the oppressiveness of instrumental rationality, of the hegemonic system, the violence of representation and reification, and the domination by the principle of capitalist exchange. In each case it is human history which is the subject of domination, and each writer creates formulas for the emancipation, salvation, or redemption of human history.

This touches of course on the mythical and theological basis which lies beneath much secular Western philosophy. Slowly this basis is becoming conscious as evidenced by more recent writings. We can see this in Derrida's *Spectres on Marx*, where he touches upon the "messianic", to Ernesto Laclau's *Emancipations*, where he tries to secularize theological ideas of salvation. Slavoj Žižek here retreads this same ground with an eye toward this age of virtual reality, media culture and the late capitalist flow of desires.

Žižek's approach has always been grounded in a mixture of Marxism, German Idealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. He is very similar to the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard who writes in the same cheeky, provocative style. He is immensely popular in the West and has written on a wide range of topics from Schelling to film studies. I have chosen this work – *On Belief* – because of its relevance to the theme of this journal, and because it addresses theological issues of interest to readers outside of the West.

Žižek begins by introducing his formula of salvation/redemption which will guide his reflections on contemporary culture. He advances a model which he finds in both Lenin and what he calls "authentic fundamentalism."

It 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 initiating a political project that would undermine the totality of the global liberal-capitalist world order, and, furthermore, a project that would unabashedly assert itself as acting on behalf of truth, as intervening in the present global situation from the standpoint of repressed truth. ((p. 4-5)

Here •i•ek sees no redemptive potential in “multiculturalism”, third way politics, or a politics of negotiation and compromise, approaches which continue in his mind, to repress truth. On the other hand, the Leninist like the fundamentalist “is not afraid to *pass the act*, to assume all the consequences, unpleasant as they may be, of realizing his political project.”

True redemption, in other words, is thwarted the ideologies we prop up the present oppressive symbolic order. In the first chapter, he compares the adaptation of humanity to the digital world of late capitalism to a kind of gnosticism. Rather than maintain our connection to the earth, it adapts to the alienation of the contemporary age by practicing a kind of detachment. •i•ek connects this with the popularity of Buddhism in the West.

It enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware how worthless this spectacle is – what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw. (p. 15)

Those who wish to preserve otherness are similar to the inauthentic fundamentalists who express hatred of the other. They wish the other to remain the other, or see in the other a kind of redemption. Using the example of Tibet, he stresses that the Western traveler who ventures out into the East to find enlightenment, does not find enlightenment in the external other, but in themselves. While the liberal thinker wishes to preserve otherness, this is not where Redemption is to be found. It is to be found in the individual unconscious.

This brings him to Lacan who he returns to in almost all of his writings. It is in Lacan that the deficiencies of both Marx and Freudian psychoanalysis are overcome. To simplify, Lacan’s theory of the unconscious is seen as a solution because the contradictions of history emerge within

the unconscious as gaps and imperfections. Just as Adorno emphasized the inability of the subject to fully dominate objective reality, or the “priority of the objective”. •i•ek, following Lacan, will stress that the seat of this objective reality which resists appropriation is within the unconscious.

Lacan, on the contrary, elaborates the concept of what Adorno deployed as dialectical paradoxes: the concept of the “barred” subject who exists only through its own impossibility; the concept of the Real as the inherent, not external limitation of reality. (p. 89)

The subject is inherently flawed. But the consciousness of this imperfection allows for the subject’s redemption, its reconciliation with the Real. This is what he also sees in Christianity.

This divine self-abandonment, this impenetrability of God to Himself, thus signals God’s fundamental imperfection. And it is only within this horizon that the properly Christian Love can emerge, a Love beyond Mercy... In contrast to the pagan celebration of the Divine (or human) Perfection, the ultimate secret of the Christian love is, perhaps, the loving attachment of the Other’s imperfection. It is this lack in/of the Other that opens up the space for the “good news” brought by Christianity. (p. 146-147)

And so Belief is the decision to embrace the real which appears in the present symbolic order as an imperfection. It is the act of faith which is decisive and redeeming here. Here he quotes the later writings of Schelling.

The deed once accomplished, sinks immediately into the unfathomable depth, thereby acquiring its lasting character. It is the same with the will which, one posited at the beginning and led into the outside, immediately has to sink into the unconscious. This is the only way the beginning, the beginning that does not cease to be one, the truly eternal beginning, is possible. (p. 147)

If the *beginning* is consciously retrieved, it is not the beginning. It is what •i•ek calls a “passive decision,” a letting oneself be chosen in the act of one’s decision.

One can see what •i•ek wants here: the redemption of the Real hidden in the unconscious, a true revolution which usurps the logic of late

capitalism which obscures the Real, and a break from the ethical categories which postpone this revolution. Here he aligns Lenin and Kierkegaard's "religious suspension of the ethical." (p. 149) The ethics of negotiation is always a failure. True redemption involves the suspension of the ethical, through an act or decision of belief.

Yet this analysis, while being perceptive concerning the failure of liberalism to curb the excesses of capitalism, also brings one extremely close to the proto-neoconservative Carl Schmitt. It is Schmitt who sees each religious faith as being mutually exclusive. And it is Schmitt's political theology which sees the necessity for one faith to clash violently with another. It provides the theoretical framework and justification for the clash of civilizations and those who profit from it.

This strange convergence with political theology is especially disturbing in the East, which has traditionally taken a more tolerant attitude to the diversity of religious beliefs and metaphysical approaches. This sheds light on the limitations of the Western idea of salvation and links it to the particularly Western intellectual struggle for "ultimate truth."

But we also need to take issue with Žižek's crude understanding of Buddhism and what he calls paganism. The Buddhism he describes as taking root in the West bears no resemblance to Buddhism in the East. What he seems to be describing is a kind of sophism which is taking root in Western culture which 'spiritualizes' itself by an appeal to writers like Sun Tzu, or new age popularizers of Eastern spirituality.

To assert the superiority of the Christian idea of sacrifice is also suspect. In his psychoanalytic interpretation of so-called pagan sacrifice, he sees sacrifice according to the exchange principle, "I offer to the Other something precious to me in order to get back from the Other something even more vital to me." A higher form which expects nothing in return, nevertheless operates with the purpose to "ascertain that there IS some Other out there who is able to reply (or not) to our sacrificial entreaties." The highest form, following Lacan, is an attempt to fill the lack present in the Other. This is why he considers "empty sacrifice to be the Christian gesture par excellence." (p. 69) Christ would be the imaginary real compared to the "Real Real" (I might add, that this is how Adorno understood the function of the work of art.)

Yet this is to misunderstand sacrifice outside of the Judeo-Christian

tradition. A better interpretation might be that so-called pagan cultures recognize that the center of gravity is not in the culture or the individual, but in something which comes prior to themselves. They recognize themselves as being a part of a larger body. Sacrifice then is not an appeasing, an attempt to fill a lack, or the attempt to maintain the existence of a god. On the contrary, it would be a return of excess. It would be a return of accumulated jouissance. In this sense, Lacan is seen as the particularly Western or individualist thinker, whose theory falters outside of its own rarified environment.

Which brings us to a very important point: the subject in the East and in Africa is a part of a community with traditional ties to the land and to the past. They possess their own temporalities and spatialities based upon their own mythologies. Very often they possess an eclectic multiplicity of religious beliefs. When they participate in the temporalities and spatialities of global capitalism, it is only a partial participation. The non-Western subject is divided, they exist in multiple worlds. This division cannot be approached through Lacan or Žižek. It cannot be the basis for the discovery of the Real since the Real is not located in the gaps of the unconscious. The real is itself partially preserved in the older traditional practices. The gaps preserve the Real from contamination by materialism, individualism and consumerism.

Outside of the framework of Western thought, the desire to preserve otherness is not a kind of fetishizing as Žižek would contend. It is the simple respect for a diversity of culture and religion which has always been present outside of the West.

We can allow writers like Žižek and Baudrillard their anxieties and indulgences, and perhaps learn important lessons from them. Yet what we see in them is often the prismatic reflections of someone locked in their closed hermetic worlds searching for a way out.

Reviewed by **J.T.Giordano**