



Book Reviews

Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction

Ian Parker

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Ian Parker's 'critical introduction' of Žižek is one of two books with much the same title to appear in the United Kingdom in the last couple of years. If we compare the texts, Sarah Kay's book (*Žižek A Critical Introduction*: Cambridge: Polity, 2003) emerges as by far the more traditional secondary source and really the better *introduction* to Žižek's work — if one means by that an effort to give the beginner an insight into just what Žižek is driving at. On the other hand, Parker shines in providing a coherent *critical* framework for approaching Žižek, a task at which Kay fails. After undergoing *Parker's* 'critical introduction,' the reader is certainly immunized against today's epidemic of blind infatuation for all things Žižek. Still, Parker's, though a good and challenging book, well researched and accurate in its indictment of Žižek as a 'committed' intellectual, suffers from an exaggerated mistrust of its subject.

The need for protection — Parker warns against 'getting drawn in' by Žižek's style — shapes the very meaning of 'introduce' here, which comes to mean something like 'contextualize' *rather than* 'understand' (p. 4). Thus, eschewing the temptation to pursue the hidden 'treasure' of what Žižek means with his elusive and manic series of texts, Parker gives us connected essays noting the choices Žižek has made in relationship to various traditions and interlocutors. We pass from a useful chapter outlining the intellectual context of Žižek's work in Slovenia to a survey of the French context in which Žižek's Hegel-interpretation emerged, to a discussion of Žižek in relationship to the Lacanian world, to a chapter on Žižek's involvement in efforts to re-think Marx's legacy in the 'post-Marxist' era, to, finally, a chapter on Žižek in relationship to Cultural Studies. Actually, the last consideration is abbreviated, and the final essay quickly turns from Žižek as cultural thinker to a summary of Parker's critical position in the form of an incisive interpretation of Žižek's work as a kind 'reading machine.'

The overview presented in 'Culture — Acting Out' caps a successful argument that Žižek's work is *useless* — or, at least, far less useful to Žižek's own social and political projects than his readers often assume. The tone of Parker's criticism of Žižek heats up from mild in the Hegel discussion to dismissive by the final chapters. In each case, the approach imposed by Žižek's intellectual montage-effect (e.g. wherein Hegel is read through Lacan) strips something away from the material



specificity of the field it interprets: with Lacan, Parker (himself a Lacanian analyst) focuses on the loss of Lacan's own complex clinical insight in Žižek's Hegelian appropriation of psychoanalysis. With Marxism, Žižek's simplified Lacan fundamentally betrays the *praxis* at the basis of the Marxist theoretical project. At the heart of these criticisms is Parker's insight that, since Žižek's 'Marxism' is largely a place-holder for his suspicion of the apparent and ideological coherence of symbolic systems, his position reduces to applause for 'a desperate' and isolated "act" of individual refusal' of such coherence (p. 104). Parker rightly insists that such a view is not only alien but antithetical to Marxism, since it overlooks the way in which 'to become a Marxist' is 'to find a system in which there are others who believe' and 'participate in the ritualized reproduction of those beliefs' (p. 122).

Perhaps it is because of this notion of a system — as something *in which* one might have faith — that Parker takes himself to have automatically proved the *incoherence* of Žižek's work in demonstrating the problematic status of Žižek's thought as basis for collective practice (p. 116). In any case, no argument beyond uselessness is offered for this far-reaching conclusion. But it is not necessarily the case that, just because Žižek's thought doesn't allow a collective and stable set of resistant practices or even because it tends to elide important elements of various discursive practices, it is either incoherent or wrong.

In other words, Parker defines 'systematic coherence' in a way that *a priori* excludes the kind of coherence Žižek's work might achieve — a unity that surely enough (Parker is right in this) cannot produce a system of belief.¹ Perhaps such circularity explains why *Slavoj Žižek: a Critical Introduction* must so consistently eschew the rather elementary gesture of 'introduction,' that is, overall explanation. Why won't Parker *read* Žižek choosing instead to inoculate readers against him? The extreme set of precautions against seduction that determine Parker's strategy is precisely worked out so as to obscure the one possibility that Parker refuses to entertain — that we might *think through* Žižek without being 'converted' by him, that we might remain critical while acknowledging a coherent intellectual project. In other words, we are still waiting for a 'critical introduction' to Žižek.

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Note

1 To be fair to Parker, Žižek *himself* wants to be treated as a 'committed thinker,' one for whom the *effects* of thought take priority over any insights; so taking Žižek seriously may involve discounting precisely his own self-image. In this light, Parker's sharpest criticism of Žižek may emerge already in his chapter on Žižek as Lacanian, where Parker notes that Žižek 'continually fudges and displaces' the question about the status of *knowledge* in his work (p. 65).