

Thomas Brockelman

Žižek and Heidegger

The Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism



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Žižek and Heidegger

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Preface

Le Style Žižek and the question of finitude

Beginning from style?

In the last years of Martin Heidegger's life and the first years after his death the power of the philosopher's future legacy emerged through the phenomenon of the "pious Heideggerian." Serious Heidegger readers would mimic the style and tone of the master, speaking of the "fourfold" difficulty of interpreting his texts or producing forced gerundives as philosophical concepts (the "thinking of the thought," etc.). And there was certainly no shortage of "earthy" tones in philosophical writing to honor the Swabian master's peasant rhetoric. Indeed, it was really only with the gradual emergence in international circles of what has been called the "French" Heidegger, the Heidegger of post-structuralism and particularly of Foucault and Derrida, that Heideggerian "piety" began to fade. My point here is that this fading corresponded precisely with the emergence of a meaningful *criticism* of Heidegger's work, that it was only when Heidegger could be properly "read" that possibilities beyond summary dismissal or abject discipleship began to emerge. Just as had been the case a century and a half early in the Germany of Hegel and his followers, so also now reception of an important thinker demanded a *double* event – a first "blow" to record the *fact* that something important was happening/had happened; the second to unravel the nature of that occurrence.

Plus ça change . . . of course, Slavoj Žižek is today very much alive (and still burying potential commentators in a mountain of writings produced at a faster clip than many of us can *read* them) and the issue with Žižek is not so much that everyone wants to *sound like* Žižek (though, hey, why not? He certainly writes better than Heidegger did!), but, still, today we find an almost obsessive emphasis upon his *style* marking the difficulty of *critically interpreting* his work. Indeed, three important books on Žižek, Tony Myers' *Žižek*, Ian Parker's *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* and Rex Butler's *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* all *start from* the question of *Žižek's style*, and for all three, to one degree or another, this beginning point accompanies (and perhaps underlies) an argument about the incoherence of Žižek's positions or his

work as a whole.¹ Even Butler, who is a sympathetic and careful reader, argues that Žižek “ultimately believes in nothing except the ‘inherent correctness of theory itself,’” and also that, seen in a certain light, he “has nothing to say” (Butler 2005, p. 3, 123).

On the other hand, for Parker, Žižek’s style doesn’t so much open a path of interpretation as challenge the very possibility of forging such a direction. We are, he claims, too “easily sidetracked or swept along by his anecdotes or jokes,” a tendency to bewitchment that distracts us from the fact that his “interventions around different issues are inconsistent and his theoretical position is contradictory” (Parker 2004, p. 2). For Parker, the trick of reading Žižek is not to be “seduced” by the Žižek “reading machine,” by its production of this powerful illusion that there is a “treasure” hidden in Žižek’s writing, awaiting the busy hermeneut willing to uncover it. We must resist the temptation to find a “true Žižek,” beneath the dance of many veils into which he offers to draw us.

Though he is the least sympathetic to Žižek of all his “introducers,” I would also like to suggest that Parker is also, in a sense, the best of those who begin from style; for he is most honest about where we end up if we make this the starting point of our investigations. That is, through this window we can only see Žižek’s inconsistencies and shifts – which do, of course, exist and make up a part of the “picture” – but we miss the passionate cause that binds both the path of his development and the system of exceptions within it. Furthermore, Parker simply carries to an extreme the *judgment* that naturally follows from the “stylistic” starting point. He really speaks for a broad consensus in the academic world that admits it’s *important* to write about Žižek (thus, the steady stream of books and journal articles on his work) but important, also, to dismiss him.²

An interesting fact of contemporary publishing-economics reinforces this tendency to assert Žižek’s incoherence, namely the call for “introductions to” contemporary thinkers and, particularly, to thinkers in the fledgling discipline of Cultural Studies where, for reasons having to do with the institutional history of Philosophy in the Anglophone world, Žižek has largely been housed. The literary form of the “Introductory” text produces certain demands which reinforce the “incoherence” accusation, namely for a structure which emphasizes either the various scholarly disciplines and debates in which the writer (Žižek) has participated or the chronological sequence of his writings. Thus, introductions to Žižek (Myers, Kay, Parker, even Butler) all segregate the Slovenian thinker’s work into convenient topics (Žižek and Lacan, Žižek and theology, Žižek and political theory, etc., etc.). Given his remarkable intellectual range, it’s not surprising that such

an approach should suggest the impossibility of reducing Žižek to any limited context.³

At least in its form, *Žižek and Heidegger: The Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism* is *not* an introduction to Žižek. In tracing Žižek's thought, I've discovered, rather, a single narrative within which at least much of what Žižek writes makes sense, a unified *context* for understanding his work, even if – profoundly aporetic in its nature – it doesn't provide us anything like what we look for in a traditional philosophical system. Indeed, the remarkable thing that emerges when one examines Žižek's work through the lens of such a reading is how profoundly *irrelevant* the various discourses and disciplines that he crosses over time are for his thought. In this sense, Žižek is very much a philosopher, even in the most frightening and Platonic sense. At the same time, of course, my "core sample" of Žižek's work reveals an equally terrifying "trans-disciplinarity" at work, one implying a simple *irrelevance* of the provincial disciplines and discourses that it crosses: Žižek's is a philosophy for a cynical age, for an age enmeshed in what I call (see Chapter 3) the paranoid fundamental fantasy and the perverse reality it constructs. From my viewpoint, we should take the rush to hold Žižek in an "introductory" format (with its prejudice for disciplinary pluralization) as just that, a symptomatic effort at containment of a thought which is threatening and anxiety-producing in what it reveals about *us*.

No doubt, my book, in refusing a reduction of Žižek to style (though occasionally I discuss this style), will be taken as retrograde – as a reactionary effort to win back Žižek's *oeuvre* for a traditional disciplinary perspective, and, what's more, for the *worst* such discipline: Philosophy. I have little doubt that many representatives of *new* orthodoxies within the postmodern academy will want nothing to do with my Žižek. But, so I would argue, these same interests also dismiss Žižek or, worse, attempt to contain his thought within the pretty postmodern cage of a play of signifiers, a kind of "glass bead game" of cultural theory. But, as Žižek is fond of saying, the real venture of critique is the willingness to put forward some theses, to take the risk of *saying something*, even if it proves wrong or needs later revision. Here it might be worth remembering his attempt at the beginning of *Tarrying with the Negative* to defend Lacan against postmodern nominalism:

Lacan, however, is not part of this "postmodern theory": in this respect, his position is homologous to that of Plato or Kant. The perception of Lacan as "anti-essentialist" or "deconstructionist" falls prey to the same illusion as that of perceiving Plato as just one among the sophists. Plato accepts from the sophists their logic of discursive argumentation,