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How to Read Žižek by Adam Kotsko

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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, a philosopher and psychoanalyst from Slovenia, is one of the few academics to have achieved a degree of genuine popularity among general readers. He regularly lectures to overflow crowds, is the subject of a documentary film (called simply *Žižek!*), and surely counts as one of the world's most visible advocates of left-wing ideas. When Žižek first broke into the English-speaking academic scene, however, few would likely have predicted such success. For one thing, his research focused on an unpromising topic: the long-neglected field of “ideology critique,” a staple of Marxist cultural criticism that had fallen into eclipse as Marxism became less central to Western intellectual life in the second half of the twentieth century.

“Ideology” is one of those philosophical terms that has entered into everyday speech with an impoverished meaning. Much as “deconstruction” means little more than “detailed analysis” in popular usage, so “ideology” tends to refer to a body of beliefs, most often with overtones of inflexibility or fanaticism. But as Žižek argued in his 1989 book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, ideology is not to be found in our conscious opinions or convictions but, as Marx suggested, in our everyday practices. Explicit opinions are important, but they serve as symptoms to be interpreted rather than statements to be taken at face value.

Racism, for example. Žižek recommends that we look for symptomatic contradictions, as when the anti-Semite claims that the Jews are both arch-capitalist exploiters *and* Bolshevik subversives, that they are both excessively tied to their overly particular tradition *and* deracinated cosmopolitans undercutting national traditions. In the Jim Crow South, blacks were presented simultaneously as childlike innocents needing the guidance of whites *and* as brutal sexual predators. In contemporary America, Mexican immigrants are viewed at once as layabouts burdening our social welfare system *and* as relentless workaholics who are stealing all our jobs.

These contradictions don't show that ideology is “irrational” — the problem is exactly the opposite, that there are *too many* reasons supporting their views. Žižek argues that these piled-up rationalizations demonstrate that something else is going on.

A similar sense that something else is going on always strikes me when I read a review of Žižek's work in the mainstream media. (A recent example is [John Gray's review of two of Žižek's books](#) in the *New York Review of Books*, to which Žižek has [responded](#).) Now academics are always ill-used in the mainstream press, particularly if they deal in abstract concepts and refer to a lot of European philosophers. Yet there's something special about the treatment of Žižek. In what has become a kind of ritual, the reader of a review of Žižek's work always learns that Žižek is simultaneously hugely politically dangerous *and* a clown with no political program whatsoever, that he is an apologist for the worst excesses of twentieth-century Communism *and* a total right-wing reactionary, both a world-famous left-wing intellectual *and* an anti-Semite to rival Hitler himself.

The goal is not so much to give an account of Žižek's arguments and weigh their merits as to inoculate readers against Žižek's ideas so they feel comfortable dismissing them. To find left-wing thinkers and

movements simultaneously laughable and dangerous, disorganized and totalitarian, overly idealistic and driven by a lust for power is to suggest: *there is no alternative*. Rather than simply knocking around a poor, misunderstood academic in the public square, it is an attempt to shut down debate on the basic structure of our society. The rolling disaster of contemporary capitalism — war, crisis, hyper-exploitation of workers, looming environmental catastrophe — demands that we think boldly and creatively to develop some kind of livable alternative. Žižek can help.

The biggest obstacle facing the reader of Žižek's work is not the academic trappings — the technical terms, the references to other thinkers — but a writing style that defies convention. Broadly speaking, the general expectation of argumentative writing is that it will lay out a more or less straightforward chain of reasons supporting a clear central claim. Even though we acknowledge that this format is almost never encountered in its pure form, it still remains a kind of ideal. In Žižek's writing, though, it's difficult to pick out anything like a "thesis statement," and the argument most often proceeds via intuitive leaps rather than tight chains of reasoning. This is true even of pieces that are more or less totally non-academic, and it is doubtless one of the reasons his work is so often misunderstood. One thing I hope to show here, though, is that his method fits with his goals and with the kinds of phenomena he is trying to get at. Although Žižek's work can be difficult to get into at first, he is one of the most engaging and thought-provoking writers working in philosophy today, with a unique ability to get people excited about philosophy and critical theory. He is, in short, a gateway drug, and I'm the pusher.

I.

Already in this brief discussion of ideology, one of the most consistent features of Žižek's work shines through: his fascination with contradictions and reversals. Žižek will frequently present what he views as a commonly accepted belief, then turn around and ask, "But is not the exact opposite the case?!" And then, as one continues reading, it often begins to seem as though the forcefully asserted opposite view is not quite Žižek's own; it too gets called into question, with the surprising result that the first naïve view begins to look somehow less naïve.

The initial reversal can sometimes look alarmingly like a cheap, Christopher Hitchens-style contrarianism, particularly since Žižek's political writings often start with a mainstream liberal view and then assert one that sounds much more right-wing. Yet the point is not simply to "provoke" liberals or to play devil's advocate. Rather, these reversals are part of a strategy to keep the thought in motion. Instead of proposing a solution or finding a resting place, Žižek relentlessly seeks out further conflicts and contradictions, carrying out what Marx called "the ruthless criticism of everything existing." The goal is not to arrive at a settled view, but to achieve greater clarity about what is really at issue, about what is really at stake in a given debate.

And what is always at stake is a *conflict*, because for Žižek, society is always riven with conflict and contradiction. That's why ideology produces mutually conflicting answers — it's responding to an underlying reality that is inherently contradictory, a struggle so deep and irreconcilable that it can't directly be put into words. Nothing is a complete and harmonious whole, from quarks all the way up to the most abstract philosophical ideal. Nothing is inherently stable, but only temporarily stabilized. It's not that there are first positions that then come into conflict — all our positions amount to a kind of "fall-out" of our attempts to manage this ultimately unmanageable conflict.

Remaining faithful to the Marxist tradition, Žižek believes that the most apt name for the conflict at the

heart of modern society is “class struggle.” The “struggle” is not between two pre-existing classes — the working class and the capitalist or owner class — that happen to enter into some kind of conflict. These two classes are the “fallout” of capitalism, which is itself conflictual in nature: people “worked” before capitalism, but the working class as a massive population of landless laborers who must sell their labor power to survive only came about as a result of capitalist development. Similarly, there were rich people before capitalism, but not a class of people who sought to extract profits from this “free” labor power. The conflict is the system, the system the conflict.

“Class struggle” is important for Žižek because it produces two completely incompatible and conflictual views of the world — the difference between the exploited and the exploiter is more than a difference of opinion, it is a completely different framework. Reasonable people from “both sides” cannot come together and hash out a compromise that takes everyone’s interests into account. The “middle ground” is an unbridgeable chasm, and ideology represents our attempts to paper over and ignore that chasm.

So when people in the U.S. produce the vision of the Mexican immigrant as the workaholic welfare queen, what is *really* at stake can’t be a conflict between cultures, because for Žižek that would imply pre-existing, more or less stable or homogeneous cultures that first exist and then subsequently happen to come into conflict. Nor can it be about the Mexicans who come to America and disturb the balance of our local culture, because that balance didn’t exist in the first place. No, the conflict is inherent in capitalist exploitation. The Mexicans aren’t taking “our” jobs — the owners are doing whatever they can to suppress wages, with no interest in who they pay.

II.

The example of immigration demonstrates that conflict is never truly eliminated, but can be shifted. The task of the critic is to shift the conflict *back* to its proper place. Since straightforward argument presupposes a shared frame of reference, it is not a suitable tool for carrying out the kind of frame-shifting that Žižek is trying to achieve. More indirect methods are necessary.

One of Žižek’s primary tactics for shifting the frame of reference is overidentification. This strategy grows out of his experience under the Communist regime in Yugoslavia. Observing his country’s political life, Žižek came to a paradoxical realization: the fact that no one “really” bought into the official socialist ideology was not an obstacle for the rulers — cynical distance was part of their strategy for maintaining control. In this situation, Žižek proposed, the best way to resist was to take the ruling ideology at its word, naïvely demanding that the leaders fulfill the promise of their ideals.

The political situation in the contemporary West is not as straightforward, but Žižek continues to carry out a version of this strategy of overidentification in his political writings. His diagnosis of the basic political situation is found in his 1993 book *Tarrying With the Negative*, where he claims that mainstream liberal political leaders are fundamentally complicit with right-wing nationalism, using it as a tool in their attempt to maintain the capitalist status quo. On the one hand, right-wing outbursts and movements serve as helpful distractions, diverting people’s energy away from the real problem (people who might otherwise be rioting against bank bailouts are demanding to see Obama’s birth certificate, or arguing that birthers are crazy). On the other hand, they serve as an ever-present threat, as in the demands for the Greek electorate to approve of the E.U.-I.M.F. program, lest fascism overrun the land. One can see both sides of this dynamic in the Democratic Party’s political strategy: on the one hand, they must continually make unfortunate concessions to the political right out of a supposed “realism,”

but on the other hand, they present themselves as the only thing standing between us and the unmitigated horror of a Tea Party government.

In this situation, where liberals are continually conceding that the right wing is expressing “legitimate concerns,” Žižek says essentially: yes, they are expressing legitimate concerns, *but not the ones they think they’re expressing*. To return to the immigration example, Žižek would proceed by agreeing that right-wing outbursts should be taken seriously — not as signs of the need for a more homogeneous culture, or for preserving American jobs, or for keeping foreigners from overwhelming the welfare state, but as symptoms of the disruptive contradictions of capitalism. Similarly, when liberals acknowledge that conservatives have a point about the need to preserve “the European tradition” or “the Christian heritage,” Žižek agrees that they do indeed have a point: we absolutely need to preserve the European tradition of radical revolution and the Christian heritage of radical equality! He shifts the conflict from one between liberals and conservatives to the one at the heart of the cultural tradition itself.

This strategy of overidentification — which can be summarized in the vertiginous formula, “Yes, of course I agree completely, *but aren’t you actually completely wrong?!*” — may be difficult to follow, but it produces jolting shifts that could not easily be produced any other way.

III.

In his more academic texts, Žižek rarely states his own view directly, but routes it through the great thinkers of contradiction: above all, the German Idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel and the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan — two thinkers who proceed through dialogue and whose own views are notoriously difficult to decipher. This coupling of Lacan and Hegel is absolutely crucial for him. In fact, in the introduction to his latest major work, *Less Than Nothing*, he claims that for him and his close intellectual comrades, “whatever we were doing, the underlying axiom was that reading Hegel through Lacan (and vice versa) was our unsurpassable horizon.” Other thinkers are also extremely important to him — most notably Marx, another great thinker of contradiction who worked primarily in the mode of critique — but none so much as these two.

Yet it should be emphasized that this combination is in many ways counterintuitive, if only because Lacan is himself very distrustful of Hegel’s philosophy, and most so in the very works that are central for Žižek. This is far from the only example of a counterintuitive pairing in Žižek’s work — one of his earliest books is entitled *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Lacan: But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, dedicated to explaining Lacan’s psychoanalytic concepts through Hitchcock’s films. Similarly, he can pair Kant with *Blade Runner* or Schelling with *Lassie Come Home*. He can explain Hegel by means of an obscene joke, and he can end a book on the subversive potential of Christianity with a meditation on a cheap candy with a toy in the middle (the “Kinder Egg”). He calls these “short-circuits,” unexpected pairings that produce striking insights. The goal is not to show how the two fields are “actually” connected in a previously unseen way. “The reader should not simply have learned something new,” he says. “The point is, rather, to make him or her aware of another — disturbing — side of something he or she knew all the time.” The same could be said of Žižek’s work as a whole: the point isn’t so much to learn about a topic as to be jolted into a new (and yes, disturbing) perspective on the familiar.

IV.

Like Marx's, Žižek's "ruthless critique of everything existing" doesn't critique "both sides" in a conflict equally. *Contradictions are always asymmetrical*. In the conflict between the capitalists and the workers, for example, it isn't a matter of two different, equally limited viewpoints. In the ultimate short-circuit, the particular position of the workers represents the "truth" of the entire situation — the worker *embodies* the contradiction of capitalism. Similarly, the relationship between men and women in our male-dominated society cannot be accounted for in terms of stable complementary roles for the two sexes — in another short-circuit, the woman's position directly reveals the central contradiction around which the entire society is structured.

In short, for Žižek, one *must* take sides in order to have access to the truth. Truth is not "universal" in the traditional sense of applying equally in every situation — each situation has its own truth. In *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek explains this dynamic in terms of the relationship between the universal and the particular, a topic that has bedeviled philosophers for centuries. Whereas we might normally view a "universal" as an unattainable ideal like justice or democracy that we must always strive to approximate in our particular circumstances, Žižek takes the opposite view: particular societies aren't inadequate compared to the universal, but rather the very idea of the universal arises out of the inherent inadequacies of every particular system. In other words, the truly universal dimension is not the noble ideal, but the complaint — what unites us is not our devotion to high ideals and deep human values, but the fact that the world sucks, everywhere.

Žižek does not hold out the utopian hope of eliminating all conflict — in fact, he believes our supposedly "post-ideological" era is blinded by the truly utopian hope that all genuine conflicts might be resolved, allowing the system of liberal-democratic capitalism to go on more or less forever. What Žižek hopes for, in tracking down the contradiction at the heart of our society and identifying with the class that embodies it, is not that the world will no longer suck, but that it will no longer suck in *this particular way*, that we will no longer be stuck in *this particular* vicious cycle, that we can somehow find a way to stop frantically grasping at rationalizations for our self-destructive fixations and do something else — in short, to jolt us into the realization that there *is* an alternative.

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Recommended Reads:

- ["Flesh World: On the New Uncanny": On The Memory of Place by Dvlan Trigg](#)
- ["Whatever Being": Julia Reinhard Lupton on Blog Theory by Jodi Dean](#)
- [The Philosophy & Critical Theory page](#)

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