

Matthew Sharpe. *A Little Piece of the Real*.

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Slavoj Žižek is the most influential interdisciplinary thinker to have emerged in recent times. Yet despite the importance of his intervention into contemporary theory, reception of his work has so far been limited to some lucid introductions. Perhaps because of the astonishing breadth of knowledge displayed in Žižek's writings, and the sometimes hermetic density of his style, many commentators have just rounded up the usual suspects – Laclau, Hegel, Lacan, then ethics and politics – and left it at that. But with the crucial preliminary reconnaissance of the terrain now well underway, the time has come for a deeper exploration of Žižek's work.

Matthew Sharpe's analysis of Žižek is not another introduction. To the contrary: it is a sustained critical engagement that places Žižek's heterogeneous texts under the microscope of an immanent critique that is informed by an understanding of Western Marxism and German idealism. Although he never rushes himself – the book contains plenty of careful exposition – Sharpe probes and sifts with a healthy impatience for the moments in Žižek that he describes as "journalistic and *ad hoc* analyses". Throughout, the work is animated by a drive towards clarity: weighing theoretical hypotheses, judging arguments and evidence, and carefully examining claims. Instead of accepting Žižek's sometimes contradictory self-representations and ever-changing theoretical positions as an aleatory series of localised interventions, Sharpe insists on scrutinising arguments for the social theory of contemporary capitalism that Žižek needs in order to justify his political stance.

What makes this all the more significant is that Sharpe's analysis is far from hostile. Motivated by a declared political solidarity with Žižek's efforts to reconstruct radical theory, Sharpe takes Žižek's claim to elaborate a re-

invigorated Marxism very seriously indeed. His interpretation is positioned in opposition to (for instance) Ernesto Laclau's claim that Žižek does not really produce a political theory, but rather a psychoanalytic discourse which draws upon the politico-ideological field for examples. By contrast with the depoliticising interpretation, Sharpe locates Žižek's project within the lineage of Western Marxism. Predictably, he examines the Althusserian heritage and its post-Althusserian sequel, but more intriguingly, he contends that Žižek encounters the same problems as the first generation of the Frankfurt School. One of the most interesting aspects of this discussion is the comparison between Marcuse and Žižek, which suggests that the latter reinvents many of the problems of the former. Like Marcuse, Sharpe contends, once Žižek links contemporary depoliticisation to the success of ideology in securing the smooth social reproduction of a reified total system, the consequence is a dilemma – either the cynical refusal of political engagement, or an ultraleft voluntarism that rejects liberal democracy.

Sharpe divides Žižek's work into three complementary components: a psychoanalytically informed theory of ideology; a descriptive theory of capitalism centred on social reproduction; and, a prescriptive political response that seeks to revive the fortunes of Marxism. Descriptively, Sharpe understands Žižek's theory of capitalism as centred on the importance of ideology for social reproduction. While the crucial theoretical resource for Žižek's theory is Althusser, Sharpe highlights his debt to the problematic of ideology springing from classical Marxism. The key challenge for Žižek is to expand the concept of ideology to explain the enlightened cynicism characteristic of the subjectivity of "post-ideological" capitalism, without voiding the critical implications of the term in an anthropologically neutral generality. Sharpe proposes that Žižek accounts for cynical distance as the modality of contemporary mystification through two conceptual modifications to the Marxist theory of ideology. In the first shift, Žižek substitutes an Althusserian understanding of ideology as a set of meaningless, ritualised practices for the classical conception of "false consciousness". But this lands Žižek with Althusser's neutral description of ideology as an "imaginary relation to the real conditions of existence". In the second shift, however, Žižek proposes that the ballast of ideology is unconscious, because social identity is guaranteed through an unconscious belief in the omnipotence of the Other. From Žižek's Lacanian perspective, this reverses Althusser's neutral conception of ideology into a critical position once again, since the belief in the omnipotence of the Other is a mystification. The Other – the unified totality of ethical life, history conceptualised as a series of necessary stages, and so forth – "does not exist," except in the unconscious fantasy. Unconscious and meaningless, contemporary ideologies

are immune to enlightenment critique and can only be traversed by means of psychoanalytic politics. The centrepiece of such a politics is a reactivation of the traumatic kernel of a socio-symbolic field, the social antagonism that is correlative to the “non-existence of the Other,” and which ideological fantasy serves to conceal. The risk, as Sharpe observes, is that this inflates ideology into something coextensive with the entire social formation, leaving nothing external to it that might ground a *critical* perspective.

For Žižek, however, the outside of ideology is the Real. Characteristically, Žižek claims that “the function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic real kernel”. In one of the best parts of the book, then, Sharpe sifts and dissects the possible referents of this term in Žižek’s work, concluding that he wants to align “the kernel of the Real” simultaneously with libidinal enjoyment and with class struggle. On the side of the libidinal discontents of ideology, Sharpe acknowledges the rhetorical and moral force of Žižek’s argument that liberal capitalism is responsible for its “inherent transgressions,” such as racism and fundamentalism. But this is scarcely an emancipatory opportunity, and on the side of class struggle, Žižek’s grasp of political economy is weak. Sharpe demonstrates that many of Žižek’s efforts to politicise the economy are nothing more than leftwing journalism and cannot be theoretically integrated into the account of how ideology structures social reality. Žižek hopes to square the circle through a revival of the concept of “commodity fetishism,” as that locus in which political economy and capitalist ideology are united. It is here that Sharpe produces a master stroke, demonstrating that it is precisely the rapturous embrace of commodity fetishism, as linked to the capitalist economy conceptualised as a seamless totality, that lands Žižek in Marcuse’s dilemma.

Provocatively, Sharpe suggests that Žižek is insufficiently dialectical. His theory depends on the category of incompleteness, not inconsistency, which entails an embrace of antinomy rather than contradiction. Unlike Marx, then, Žižek does not regard capitalism as a system riven by class contradictions, but as an incomplete field whose constitutive outside is social antagonism. The consequence is that despite Žižek’s invocation of class struggle as the “Real of capitalism,” this takes on a very different theoretical value from the internal contradiction of capitalism that it is for historical materialism. As a kernel that remains the same despite the multiplicity of ideological permutations, social antagonism decompletes capitalism from the outside. This means that it is never present as such, appearing only through substitutes – race, gender and ethnicity, for instance. While this enables Žižek to transform empirical evidence against class struggle into evidence for its effectiveness “in the Real,” the political costs

are high: in this schema, radical transformations necessarily originate outside the system. Politically, this is reminiscent of Marcuse, who also insisted that capitalism is a seamless (that is, consistent) system perturbed only at the margins, by means of radically anti-systemic (and therefore also, anti-political) movements. “Because Žižek does not adduce any such category as the Hegelian notion of contradiction, which would allow him to (claim to) discern tendencies within the current hegemony that might lead to a revolutionary change of it, it seems difficult to envisage anything politically redemptive coming from his theoretical endeavours,” Sharpe suggests (216). Žižek’s invocation of “class struggle” as the Real of a social antagonism that decompletes the seamless totality is unconvincing, then, for it lacks empirical application and theoretical dynamism.

Instead of regarding capitalism as contradictory, Sharpe argues, Žižek considers it to be antinomic. Sharpe observes that on this basis, Žižek cannot elude the political versions of the two sides of Kant’s third antinomy, namely, decisionist voluntarism or quietistic determinism. Sharpe shows how this results in a series of mutually exclusive formulations, so that Žižek can be interpreted as both a radical democrat and an opponent of liberal parliamentarism, as a theorist of democratisation and as a supporter of the Leninist vanguard, and as a Kantian formalist and a Hegelian anti-formalist. As Sharpe proposes, although Žižek needs a political theory to provide the “outside” of ideology that would lend this term critical purchase, he does so not so much by means of a social theory of contemporary capitalism, as through the elaboration of a politicised version of the Lacanian subject.

Žižek’s resort to ontology to generate a redemptive politics is philosophically interesting, Sharpe reasons, but politically inadequate. The detour through ontology, then, designed to “save the revolution,” ends by effacing the revolutionaries, leaving only a desperate hunt for anti-systematic tendencies in the wasteland of an antinomic, but nonetheless uncontested, multinational capitalism. While there is a bitter truth in all of this for today’s Left, Žižek’s position is best interpreted as more of a symptom of the conjuncture than a solution to it. Nonetheless, Sharpe concludes, Žižek is not to be dismissed. It is not only that Žižek asks all of the important questions. By highlighting the incompleteness of Žižek’s political theory, while saluting the reconstruction of the theory of ideology by means of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Sharpe seeks to delineate the scope of Žižek’s position rather than to negate his contribution. Sharpe still wants his piece of the real, then, but he’ll take it with a pinch of salt.