

REVIEW ESSAY

Conditions of Possibility

Jameson, Žižek and the Persistence of the Dialectic

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Fredric Jameson. 2009. *Valences of the Dialectic*. London and New York: Verso. ISBN 978-1-85984-877-7. Cloth: 62.50 CAD. Pages: 625.

Slavoj Žižek. 2009. *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London and New York: Verso. ISBN 978-1-84467-428-2. Paperback: 16.00 CAD. Pages: 157.

Many contemporary cultural and social theorists, like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, deny the importance of the dialectic for critical theory and socialist studies. The two provocative books reviewed here take the opposite position.

Valences is a collection of previously published articles, with the exception of the new first and last chapters, centring on the topic of the dialectic in cultural and political theory. In the introductory chapter, Jameson argues that dogmatism and empiricism, which he describes as 'ideologies of everyday life' are 'natural enemies' of dialectical thinking, since both emphasize timelessness and filter out contradiction. In contrast, dialectical thinking is interested in how ideas or concepts change and transform, so challenging all conceptions of stasis and certainty. Further, Jameson claims that the contradiction between dialectic and non-dialectical thought is itself dialectical and that, moreover, any attempt to resolve this contradiction bares the influence of non-dialectical thought. Jameson deals with this dilemma by 'deconstructing' each side of the alternative. It is through this breakdown of the problem that he comes to divide the dialectic into three 'forms': 'The Dialectic', 'a dialectic' and 'the dialectical'.

Jameson identifies 'The Dialectic' as a philosophical *system* in Marxism. Dialectical materialism is the philosophical form of Marxism, referred to in the West as orthodox or vulgar Marxism and often misleadingly associated with Stalinism. The various western Marxisms

distinguished themselves from dialectical materialism (i.e., Stalinism) by a turn to 'historical materialism.' In both cases, however, Marxism is turned into a system.

In contrast to this view of Marxism and of 'The Dialectic' as a *system*, Jameson asserts the importance of *theory*. Theory 'is to be grasped as the perpetual and impossible attempt to dereify the language of thought and to preempt all the systems and ideologies which inevitably result from the establishment of this or that fixed terminology' (9). Like psychoanalysis, Marxism is a unity-of-theory-and-practice, which sets out how systemic closures may be transcended. The concepts developed in the unity-of-theory-and-practice are always specific to the situation and cannot, therefore, 'be completed by philosophy but only by practice' (11). This unity-of-theory-and-practice stays true to the dialectical movement which inscribes temporality into the situation: the way things appear 'now' may appear differently in the movement of practice, which 'resets the coordinates' of the possible. Dialectical thinking allows us to perceive a condition of possibility out of a condition of impossibility, and it is *praxis* which extracts the former from the latter. From a strictly dialectical perspective, we can assess historical inevitability only after the fact – hence, dialectics are the politics of the possible.

Jameson further argues that 'The Dialectic' indicates group affiliation, acting as an equivalent to the term 'Marxism': both function to group people together as 'Marxists', in the same way that avoiding such terms is a way of taking political distance from such affiliations. Using the term may suggest a cult-like religious identification with Marxism. Failing to do so may mean rejecting not 'just' the language but also the political possibilities it represents. Thus, Jameson proposes a third solution: to use a language 'whose inner logic is precisely the suspension of the name and the holding open of the place for possibility' (12). For Jameson, this is the language of Utopia. Dialectical utopian language avoids concepts like 'radical democracy' that have the potential to be appropriated in manipulative ways by the ruling ideology, a danger shared with any non-dialectical concept. At the same time, a dialectical approach to utopian language means considering terms other than Marxism and 'The Dialectic', while remaining conscious of the risk that going beyond such terms will simultaneously mean losing their originality and radical implications.

After this exploration of 'The Dialectic', Jameson considers dialectics as an indefinite article – 'a dialectic' – finding a plurality of 'local' dialectics. In contrast to 'The Dialectic,' local dialectics are better understood as abstract patterns without unity, thus avoiding the

philosophical or ideological presuppositions of dogmatic thinking that colour 'The Dialectic' as a philosophical system. In this section, Jameson makes a significant assertion regarding the traditional understanding of the dialectic as a movement from thesis to anti-thesis to synthesis. He argues that *any* position can be the starting point of a dialectic which then moves by way of an encounter with its negative. However, the final moment is not some unity between the two prior moments – the immature reference to synthesis: it is rather an obliteration of the opposition itself – the moment of *Aufhebung*, or 'sublation,' in Hegel. Class struggle, for example, can only be eliminated by the sublation of 'class' into some new concept. Another example Jameson invokes comes from Lukács, for whom 'realism' is the missing term in the opposition between symbolism and naturalism in literature. In both cases, the 'bad opposites' are identified by way of a shared flaw which is not a 'synthesis' in the popular conception of dialectics, but the invention of a new term that dissolves the negative opposition. The negative terms share nothing until we add the third term. This element of 'mediation' demonstrates the way in which dialectics transforms negativity into positivity or a condition of impossibility into a one of possibility.

In the last version of dialectic – 'dialectical' – Jameson considers the 'dialectical' as a method, via comparison between Adorno and Žižek. In his view, these two are the most brilliant dialecticians in the history of philosophy. Adorno's 'negative dialectics' is not a separate species of dialectics but part of a paradox whose ultimate consequence is that it is no longer be possible to say or do anything at all; in this, 'negative dialectics' and 'deconstruction' resemble each other. Adorno is correctly suspicious of all non-dialectical positive statements, including Enlightenment ideals, fearing that any such statements ultimately become fixed, atemporal masking ideologies. For example, 'modernist' art, which sought to free itself from the strictures of the classical artistic tradition, became an equally rigid set of rules that had to be followed. Yet, if Jameson urges us to share Adorno's suspicion of 'positivities', he nonetheless suggests that we must go beyond it -- following Adorno's purely negative dialectic only reinforces the politically defeatist 'cynical reason' of the present moment.

Against the political paralysis a purely negative dialectic implies, Jameson prefers Žižek's dialectic, with its possibilities of the Absolute. Žižek rejects the crude Hegelian tripartite: thesis – anti-thesis – synthesis, but retains a tripartite movement. This is the movement from: 1) stupid first impression; to, 2) ingenious correction in the name of some underlying reality or 'essence'; to, 3) a return to the reality of the

appearance in the first impression. It was the appearance which was true after all, echoing the Hegelian thesis that the 'supersensible is appearance *qua* appearance': what we first assume is an appearance masking some essence (the reality *behind* the illusion), turns out to conceal the essence of appearance itself (the reality *in* illusion). There is no essence behind appearance; it is the appearance itself which makes it seem as though something is being hidden. We come to discover that the truth is in the appearance after all, and not in some non-existent 'essence.' At the end of the process we come back to the same place, but with a new perspective. This is precisely the method that Jameson follows in his thinking on the dialectic. In the end we come back to the stupid first impression of 'The Dialectic' and the tension between system and method. But for Jameson, it is as a unity-of-theory-and-practice that this return to the stupid first impression of the dialectic allows us to continue working within its parameters.

Žižek's new book, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* repeats Marx's famous opening remarks in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.' Žižek uses these lines to comment on the bookends of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The decade, Žižek notes, began with the tragedy of the September 11th, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City, and ended with the farce of the economic credit crisis. Both, he claims, assert an end to the Fukuyamaist 'happy 90s,' the supposed 'end of history' and the beginning of the new era of capitalist globalization. The first implied an end to the supposed reign of liberal democracy in politics, and the second signalled an end to the flourishing neoliberal economy.

The book begins with typical Žižekian observations on everything from the financial crisis, to contemporary fundamentalist-radicalism, and the politics in the Middle East. Žižek continues a line of argument from his previous book, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (Verso, 2008), wherein he argues not for some kind of objective analysis, but rather, for an engaged, partial, subjective analysis of Truth. In this latest book, he claims that to understand crises it is important to assume an engaged subjective position. In fact, it is in the antagonism between subject positions that we find the kernel of the class struggle, today. For example, regarding the financial crisis, so long as we remain within the capitalist order, there is a degree of truth in the claim that the middle and lower classes will prosper so long as Wall Street remains intact: 'kicking at Wall Street really *will* hit ordinary

workers' (15). A proletarian class position is required to see through this ideological mystification.

The farce of the crises, for Žižek, is not so much that they occurred. The farce has much more to do with the inability of the Left to propose any alternative during the ruling order's time of weakness. Žižek suggests that we reverse Marx's thesis eleven on Feurbach, which in the original formulation reads: 'the philosophers have only thought about the world, the point is to change it'. On the contrary, Žižek argues that the Left's task today is to start thinking about how to effectively change the world rather than continuing to ineffectively act out with a kind of pseudo-activity which, for Žižek, amounts to doing everything so that nothing will really change.

A major contribution of the book is Žižek's return to the idea of communism. Žižek suggests that we ask, not whether or not the communist idea is still pertinent today, or whether or not there is still anything useful in it. Rather, we should ask how our contemporary problems appear from the perspective of the communist idea. With this, Žižek seems to oscillate between 'communism' as a regulative idea – something for which he criticizes Badiou (about which more below) – and as a practical solution to contemporary antagonisms. It might be worth noting that the term 'communism,' for Žižek, seems to have the same function as that of the party for Lenin, or realism for Lukács: it is a positive term which mediates the opposing negativities in the contradiction.

Badiou argues that the 'communist hypothesis' is an eternal ideal, an Idea to be re-invented in each new era (Badiou, 2009). Žižek rejects this approach, warning against the idea of the 'communist hypothesis' as a Kantian 'regulative ideal.' Instead, Žižek emphasizes the importance of understanding the 'communist hypothesis' in real, material terms. 'Communism,' he claims, is not an Ideal, but a movement – a claim that seems to contradict the presuppositions in the opening pages. To this end, he notes four particular antagonisms within the existing capitalist order which are strong enough to prevent the indefinite reproduction of capital: the threat of ecological crisis; the inappropriateness of the notion of private property in the domain of 'intellectual property'; the social and ethical implications in technological and scientific developments, particularly in biogenetics; and, newly emerging forms of apartheid and the erection of walls and slums that divide populations between the 'included' and 'excluded.'

Yet, Žižek notes that there is a qualitative difference between the first three antagonisms and the final antagonism between the included and

excluded. The first three are all examples of dynamics around what Hardt and Negri refer to as the 'commons,' and it is these which, according to Žižek justifies interest in 'communism'. Yet, the enclosures of intellectual property, nature, technology and science, are structured along the lines of inclusion and exclusion, which continues various processes of proletarianization, so that the first three antagonisms explain the fourth, overdetermining factor. But is this notion of the proletarianized excluded the same as the revolutionary subject for Žižek?

For Žižek, this movement still needs organization among the three fractions of the 'working class' to become a truly revolutionary subject. Part of the problem stems from the increasing global division of labour – or, more precisely, among labourers. The labour process is increasingly split and separated (sometimes by entire continents) between intellectual, planning, and managing labour; the labour of material production; and, the provision of material resources (often by way of enclosures, thus creating walls and slums for the excluded). Each of these spheres of production relates to three different fractions of the working class: intellectual labourers, manual labourers (the 'old' working class), and the 'outcasts' (the unemployed, slum dwellers, as well as those living in the 'interstices of public space,' as Žižek puts it).

Each working class fraction has their own ways of life and ideology: the intellectual 'class' participates in an enlightened hedonism and liberal multiculturalism; the traditional working class engages in populist-fundamentalism; and, then there are the extreme lifestyles of the outcasts. The fact that these fractions (not 'classes' in the sociological sense) of the 'working class' never come into contact with each other speaks to the increasing separation between people in 'public space.' Postmodern society is marked by this increasing separation of people from each other in spaces of everyday life, so that the division between these three fractions, separated by negativities and difference, appears to result from different forms of spatial partitioning.

'Identity politics' has come to fill in the gap left by the disintegration of social life and public space. However, identity politics assumes a different meaning in each fraction: multiculturalism for the intellectual 'class'; populist fundamentalism for the 'working class'; and, 'semi-illegal groupings,' such as gangs and religious sects, for the outcasts. Moreover, each fraction 'play(s) off of each other': the intellectual class harbours cultural prejudices against the so-called 'redneck,' often racist and sexist, working class; the working class harbours a populist 'hatred' towards the intellectuals and outcasts; and, the outcasts are 'antagonistic

to society as such.' In these conditions, the need for the proletarians of the world to unite is more pertinent than ever. So much so that, as Žižek contends, their unity is already their victory.

In his analyses of the commons and the contemporary, post-industrial, division of labour, Žižek practices the form of dialectical thinking Jameson proposes, starting from 'the stupid first impression' of the division between the 'classes' and then returning to their unity as the solution to the conflict. The other three antagonisms cannot be solved apart from this working class unity and will only 'wither away' with the resolution of the conflict between the included and the excluded.

As readers, however, we must ask ourselves: is 'communism' still *the* term which proposes the solution? Has the meaning of 'communism' been so transformed by the events of the twentieth century that it can no longer function as the name for the solution to the class struggle? Or, does it still open up a certain space for the transformation of existing conditions of domination and exploitation? Is the language of 'Utopia,' as Jameson suggests, a better alternative? This is *the* question that must occupy the efforts of the Left today: the re-invention of The Dialectic is central to the re-invention of politics.

References

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