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Book Review

Matthew Sharpe and Geoff M. Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. 240 pp. $34.00. ISBN 978-0-74863-804-8 (pbk).

Reviewed by: Marika Rose, Durham University
c.m.rose@durham.ac.uk

Slavoj Žižek is a key contemporary theorist, important both for his growing prominence in left-wing political thought and for his engagement with Christian theology and thinkers such as John Milbank. This book offers a welcome overview and critique of his political thought, successfully holding together both accessibility and critical insight. It is divided into two parts, reflecting Sharpe and Boucher's central thesis that there are two (distinct but overlapping) phases in Žižek's political thought, from the early Žižek (democratic) to the latter Žižek (revolutionary vanguard), with an "interchapter" on Schelling whom they consider to be the catalyst for the shift. In line with its generally positive assessment of the earlier Žižek and its overwhelmingly negative account of the later, the book's first part focuses on what Žižek's thought has to offer; the second, on a critique of Žižek's weaknesses.

Part 1 explores Žižek's three key contributions to contemporary political theory: his theory of ideology, his account of the subject, and his typology of political regimes—each of which constitutes a Lacanian reread of contemporary political ideas. First, the book argues that Žižek's account of ideology centres on the way ideology taps into subjects' unconscious enjoyment, promising the (impossible) fulfilment of their deepest unconscious desires. Sharpe and Boucher argue that this unconscious libidinal investment in ideological regimes is, for Žižek, the key obstacle to any radical political programme. Second, Žižek rehabilitates, via Lacan, the Cartesian subject. The authors argue that, for Žižek, postmodern critiques of the Enlightenment are fundamentally wrongheaded because they equate the Cartesian subject with the ego, whereas, on Žižek's reading, it is closer to the unconscious: a constitutive lack which causes the subject to perceive its own systems of meaning to be "other" to itself. Third, Sharpe and Boucher argue, Žižek uses Lacan's discussion of the logics of desire to propose a new typology of political regimes based on the nature of

their hold on subjects' unconscious desires. Crucially, this allows Žižek to reject the equation of Stalinism and fascism as varieties of "totalitarianism," which for Žižek has become a means of writing off any truly radical political movement.

The "interchapter" explores Žižek's encounter with Schelling's theogony, which, it is claimed, prompts a decisive shift in Žižek's thought away from radical democracy towards revolutionary vanguardism. The authors argue that Žižek offers a Lacanian reading of Schelling's account of the relationship between God and the world which results in a theological account of the subject-as-God, in which the subject creates not only themselves but the entire world they inhabit.

Part 2 traces Sharpe and Boucher's critique of the fall-out from this Schellingian turn through an examination of three key themes: Žižek's psychoanalytic diagnosis of late-capitalism, his notion of the act, and his political theology. The book identifies an uncertainty in Žižek's thought over whether to diagnose global capitalism as perverted or psychotic, arguing that Žižek oscillates between blaming contemporary ills on the decline of paternal authority and suggesting that multiculturalism leads inevitably to societal disintegration. Both accounts are problematic, bringing Žižek uncomfortably close to neo-conservativism.

Sharpe and Boucher praise Žižek's description of the "liberal blackmail" by which all critiques of the status quo are labelled "totalitarian," but argue persuasively that Žižek himself remains stuck in this logic. Increasingly, they argue, Žižek's model for true political change is a radical act which totally rewrites the symbolic order, and he begins to advocate the brutal imposition of an entirely new order by a revolutionary vanguard. Can he, they ask, really claim to have escaped the liberal division of the world into capitalists and totalitarians?

Finally, Sharpe and Boucher address Žižek's use of theology. They suggest that, for Žižek, theology is a valuable resource because it addresses the central problem of human sociality: the encounter with the neighbour in whom we confront the brutal aggression at the core of our own selves. This pessimistic anthropology, they suggest, leads Žižek to advocate a Hobbesian authoritarian government. They also argue that the political conservativism of the "orthodox" theologians Žižek favours (Kierkegaard, Chesterton, C. S. Lewis) shapes Žižek's political solutions, bringing him troublingly close to right-wing thinker Carl Schmitt's formulation of Christian love as the "emergency suspension of the law in the name of an ethical teleology."

It is odd that the authors emphasize Žižek's fascination with "orthodoxy," given his eclectic theological tastes and his fascination with (the unorthodox) Schelling. This emphasis is especially problematic in the

context of the overall thrust of Sharpe and Boucher's argument, which suggests that Žižek's key problem is his transposition of the subject into the metaphysical place usually occupied by God, rendering him unable to think politics in terms of interaction between distinct subjects, and unable to imagine an communal ethics. Not only is this emphatically not an orthodox political theology, but it suggests that Žižek's problem is precisely his atheistic reading of Christianity: a theological failure underlies his political contradictions.

The book ends by arguing that Žižek is unfaithful to his own authorities: Lenin, Hegel, and Lacan. Despite "the power, or even the genius, of many of Žižek's analyses" (299), his political Lacanianism falls victim to "theoretical overstretch" (231). Žižek places too much emphasis on metacultural analysis, and too little on the specificity of the various lives lived within global capitalism.

Overall, *Žižek and Politics* portrays a Žižek increasingly inhabiting a reactionary, conservative position; unwilling to compromise, nihilistic in his assessment of human nature and political possibilities; and unable to move beyond criticism into constructive politics. It is a pity that so little attention is paid to Žižek's own understanding of the political function of his work: what of Adrian Johnston's argument that Žižek sets out not to offer solutions but, like a good Lacanian analyst, to provoke his readers to take responsibility for themselves? All in all, though, this is a valuable book: lucid, even-handed, and insightful. It highlights both the importance of Žižek's thought and the need for greater theological engagement with his work.