Matthew Sharpe. *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2004. 273 pp., $99.95 (cloth). ISBN-10: 0754639185, ISBN-13: 978-0754639183.

Bertolt Brecht once remarked to Walter Benjamin that the struggle against ideology had become a new ideology. This comment from 1938 tells us a great deal about the work of Slovenia's best-known philosopher, Slavoj Žižek. It illuminates his motivations for writing philosophy and also touches the root of his political engagements, even if it does not capture the color, breadth, and erudition of his manifold peregrinations through popular culture and the great thinkers of psychoanalysis and German idealism.

Žižek is a brilliant and prolific maverick philosopher that has been very active in Slovenia, during both the Yugoslav and independent eras. His enthusiastic presence in the worlds of publishing (i.e., Verso) and media (e.g., *London Review of Books*, *New Left Review*, and beyond) outside of Slovenia have made him quite a "phenomenon." So ubiquitous and intoxicatingly multifaceted are his engagements, and so passionate are his expatiations, that he has also been referred to as Slovenia's most successful export—or, less charitably, as a "stand-up philosopher."

It seems natural enough that analysis of a path-breaking thinker and complex writer requires complicated writing. Slavoj Žižek, who is above all an exponent of the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) and Immanuel Kant, and is also emerging as a leading light of the New Left, is not an easy read. Neither is the volume at hand. However, it is not Matthew Sharpe's intention to lay before us an introduction to the thought of the discipline-leaping and idol-tumbling Žižek. Rather he seeks to advance one of the first theses about the overall unity (if only in direction or evolution) and significance of Žižek's work.

Sharpe notes correctly that Žižek's polemical and academic starting point is the disarray of the left (since 1989 to be sure, and perhaps for quite a bit longer) and the belief that the introduction of new theoretical tools can excavate the roots of the crisis and point the way towards repair. Sharpe's starting point, in turn, is the examination of the links or relationships between Žižek's theoretical commitments (i.e., how he explains what is going on in the world) and his prescriptive or normative political philosophy (i.e., what is to be done).

One of Žižek's general points analyzed by Sharpe is that ideology requires the subconscious. Ideology is not just about ideas, politics, and false consciousness: it is libidinal. What makes an ideology attractive or enduring, and what enables a break from it, is *jouissance*, or transgressive enjoyment, a concept that Žižek has adapted from Lacan. This view pushes Žižek towards a rather complicated view of human subjectivity and agency.

Sharpe clearly states his operating assumptions or theses in the introduction. Examining the many works that have been translated into English since Verso brought out *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989, Sharpe asserts first of all that Žižek's work does form a coherent, if evolving, whole. Second, he maintains that the essence of Žižek's diverse and superabundant undertakings is firmly political. Third, and of the greatest significance in the opinion of this reviewer, Sharpe sees Žižek as continuing the engagement of the Frankfurt School on many key issues. Locating him within the context of critical theory is of vital importance to grasping Žižek's project. A fourth thesis is discussed below.

Examining first of all the dominant position of neo-liberalism (capitalism and formal democracy) in the world today, Žižek asserts very specifically and repeatedly that it is an ideology and not an objective or unavoidable truth; we are not actually in the era of post-ideological politics, where tasks are defined purely in terms of technology, historical necessity, and economic law. Even neo-liberalism after the Cold War is normative, in other words. Its existence as an ideology is made plausible by its frenetic cultivation of consumerist subjectivity, the usurpation of the professoriate, its utilization of popular journalistic tropes such as the primitive Otherness of the Balkans and the importance of multiculturalism, the "hypodermic needle" of the entertainment culture industry, and the establishment of a Gramscian hegemony based on concepts such as totalitarianism and the "war on terror." Chapter 5 clearly develops this concept that is so crucial to Žižek's entire project. The genius of late capitalism in appropriating alternative movements and subverting radicalism is unparalleled. As the French philosopher Herbert Marcuse has noted, when resistance is considered something pathological, an insidious exclusion of thought and shrinkage of possibilities occur. This is the philosophical mechanism by which capitalism reproduces itself; it is, to quote Sharpe quoting Žižek, the prohibition of "any serious questioning of how the liberal democratic order is implicated in the phenomena it officially condemns" (176).

When the reader wishes to switch the focus from descriptive to normative concerns, Žižek's cavalcading style can get in the way. However, some of the planks—albeit often broad and loose—of his political platform can be enumerated, such as the need to abolish the pathological "crutch" of nationalism and the desire to debunk formal democracy by repoliticizing the economy, an act he refers to as "radical democracy." This step would be global in impact because real democracies must learn, despite their rhetoric and isolation, to own up to the misery and violence that their appetites and trade regimes export to the "barbaric outside." Elsewhere Žižek has referred to these flaws as the "hidden reverse" of political liberalism and capitalism. The isolation of power and technology are manifested in today's disposition of intellectual property laws, digital information, biogenetics, and pharmaceutical production.

After lengthy examination of Žižek's arguments, Sharpe concludes that he fails to demonstrate an ironclad connection between his theoretical and normative concerns, although Žižek claims to do so. That is to say, Žižek's political prescriptions are not simply prognostications of where post-leftist, future leftist society is going. This conclusion in support of Sharpe's fourth thesis does not obviate either of the sets of concerns in their own right, however.

At this point, most readers of this review, as well as of Matthew Sharpe's highly technical analysis, would benefit from some general background and perspectives on Žižek and his work. His writings can be tough going, so tough that a historian sometimes feels, upon reading a philosopher as erudite, hip, and politically relevant as Žižek, that his or her work is a pale imitation of what the life of the mind should be. However, historians and other observers need not feel inferior about their discipline. They can be inspired by the heuristic devices of philosophers while still taking comfort in the utility of the unique demands that their discipline imposes: demonstrating as nearly as possible concrete cause and effect, wrestling with perspectives and sources to produce and then constantly revise chronicles of actual human activities, and tracking the evolution over time of ideas, activities, and institutions.

However, no attempt to understand Žižek will get very far without some grounding in the venerable traditions of critical theory as elaborated by the Frankfurt School and, especially, in the writings of Jacques Lacan. The Frankfurt school combined adaptive and self-critical (or revisionist) Marxism and sought the integration of social science and philosophy. It is from these scholars, such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, that Žižek inherits his concern with human subjectivity, or the capacity of an individual to be an objective thinker and an independent actor. Sharpe does a fine job unpacking issues of great importance to Žižek, such as how we escape the entanglements of what society considers *a priori* truth, politically uncontestable, and metaphysically unbreachable (21). We must, somehow, not allow ourselves to be robbed of the idea that no intellectual system or social totality is truly "closed over."

This Frankfurtian urge or inclination towards immanent critique, which is the beginning of both resistance and the pursuit of alternatives, can be aided by the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*. This is the point at which Žižek becomes original; he grafts Lacan onto Benjamin, Adorno, and company. This sense of transgressive pleasure or enjoyment (usually at sex, death, or violence) jolts one's repressed or oppressed sensibilities enough to allow an awareness of subjectivity to emerge (67, 73). This libinidal support can produce evil, but for Žižek the powerful potential to galvanize people to action is great: *jouissance* can hammer cracks into traditional hierarchies and barriers of perception. It can expose the "hidden reverse" of a system

and help achieve the Frankfurt goal: self-emancipation from epistemological domination, or the restoration of some autonomy to a subject so enmired in a system that it can only disavow negative or unethical features of that system.

On the second fundamental concern, Lacanian thought, Sharpe assumes a great deal of this background knowledge on the part of his readers. It helps to know that, according to Lacan, there is a void very close to the center of our being. We have been unable to reach it, to fill it, to scratch that itch, so to speak, or to return to a state of nature ("the Real") since we were newborns; the need to formulate desire in language and our subjugation to the will of others have created this alienation in us. This "lack" is the desire that allows *jouissance* and ideology to work on us. The "lack," or the "divided subject," helps humanity both become enmired in and then escape from successive ideological systems. Apparently because some form of socialism would rest on a social totality, or unity without exploitation, then we would return to a state of nature. *Jouissance* would lose its hold over us; we would be objective, autonomous subjects at last; we would again inhabit "the Real."

In its broadest sense, Žižek's project is to use "Lacanian interventions" to desublimate (i.e., reveal the multiple motivations behind) famous texts (fiction, nonfiction, film, visual arts), as well as to decenter them by encouraging alternative readings that expose their "disavowed presuppositions and consequences" ("Series Forward" to *The Puppet and the Dwarf*). Increasingly, though, Žižek is focusing on politics. Other Slovene Lacanians now include Mladen Dolar, Renata Salecl, and Alenka Zupančič; they are also well-published in English and have sparked something of a reawakened international interest in the works of the French psychoanalyst.

In addition to Lacan and Marcuse, Žižek peppers his approach to the critical theorists with parallels to the writings of Althusser, Baudrillard, Bourdiou, Engels, Derrida, Foucault, Freud, Hegel, Jameson, Laclau, Levinas, Lyotard, Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, and others, especially Kant. The result is a very contemporary, adaptive, energized, and incisive approach to critical theory that stays true to the primary concerns of the Frankfurt School: the relationship between hegemony, subjectivity, and objectivity. The dynamism of capitalism, for Žižek as for the early Marxists, is unprecedented; it is uniquely capable of "colonising all forms of life that preceded it and/or resist its sway" (183). In short, capitalism—and, one might add here, its corollaries of political liberalism and nationalism—convince us absolutely that "the Other does not exist" (183).

Sharpe correctly asserts that scholarly interest in Žižek's ever-expanding oeuvre is growing. Just how fast it is growing might not have been apparent at the time he wrote his volume, but today the corpus of

scholarship on Žižek is already impressive. Everyone knows that Žižek publishes, for better or worse, about a volume a year in English translation, but since 1999 major studies of Žižek in English have begun to appear at an even faster rate. These include works by Geoff Boucher et al., Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, Rex Butler, Glyn Daly, Jodi Dean, Terry Eagleton, Sarah Kay, Tony Myers, Ian Parker, Thomas Rickert, Jacob Torfing, Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright, and others. Another major critical work is set to appear in 2008.

Žižek is apparently omnipresent in person as well, and not just in print. His unorthodox choice of topics and his ability to surf atop an avalanche of ideas have created high demand for him as a speaker and panelist. He was recently written up in the *New Yorker* (Mead 2003). His status as a "phenomenon" is not as dubious a distinction as it might seem. Whether one is a Slovene, a scholar of Slovenia, a philosopher, or a supporter of the political left, one can both appreciate the attention Žižek focuses on our fields or interests and profit from answering his questions and assertions. Evidently the nickname has not hurt his scholarly reputation either because, in addition to the flood of books, three movies about him have appeared: *Slavoj Žižek: The Reality of the Virtual*, *Žižek!*, and *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*. A conference on his writings was even held at Oxford in 2006.

Žižek denies he is a postmodern theorist, but it is easy to see why he has been thus classified. Stylistically his works appear as (often delightful) pastiches or bricolage, combining serious reference to German idealistic philosophers with myriad pop culture references (especially the films of David Lynch, Neil Jordan, and Hitchcock) and lacing both of these elements with intrepid and unique political commentary. The second reason is that Lacan, Žižek's chief philosophical influence, denied the power of language to express or symbolically contain any subject, which can only be known through its real footprints. This disconnect between *Sein* and *Schein* recalls both deconstructionism specifically and postmodernism in general.

In the preface to *The Žižek Reader*, Žižek wrote that "the core of [his] entire work is the endeavour to use Lacan as a privileged intellectual tool to reactualize German Idealism" (ix). This is indeed a helpful encapsulation, although Zižek writes about pretty much everything and the summary statement gives no insight into his increasingly important political goals. Sharpe's book is not a general introduction to his work. For that, readers should, say, read the first section of *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* for Žižek's approach to politics, the post-September 11th essays *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* for his trenchant analysis of pop culture and social psychology, and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* for post-secular evaluation of Christianity. Top this short list off with the introduction "Risking the Impossible" from Žižek and Glyn Daly's *Conversations with Žižek* (1–22),

and one is up and running after one of the world's genuinely exciting philosophers.

A couple of examples of concrete analyses can help us enter Žižek's intellectual world. They give the reader, if not a systematic and philosophical understanding of his work, at least an appreciation of his uniqueness and the breadth of his applied thought. About the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001, for instance, Žižek wrote that of course Americans ended up thinking that this sort of thing should not happen here. However, before Americans could reach that point, they had to divorce themselves from a visual but abstract understanding of that sort of violence (yes, the kind that Hollywood produces) and first learn, horribly quickly, to answer a more basic question in the affirmative: Does this sort of thing really happen?

Perhaps it is also helpful to assert a certain connection between Slovenia's two best-known recent cultural exports: Žižek and Laibach. Laibach, the industrial-rock phenomenon that is part of a bigger alternative movement called NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst), is now in its third decade of provocative public grapplings with big ideas. The iconoclastic thinkers and performers of NSK treat the nature of power and the potential for subversion and freedom within ideologically enshrined systems. Žižek, who has explained and defended the often controversial and arcane methods of Laibach, addresses these same ideas but from a different angle.

Žižek sometimes raises eyebrows, or hackles, to be sure, and this is not always because of his political commitments. His subject matter is too pop and his style too much of a juggernaut for devotees of strictly starchy academic writing. His comments on pornography have offended people who found them cavalier or misogynistic. He decries political correctness, multiculturalism, postmodernism, and deconstructionism as brakes on common understanding and universal change, and he defends key aspects of religion, Kantian ethics, and Cartesian thinking. He praises Lenin, Job, and St. Paul as worthy pioneers of bold new paradigms of thought and action that liberated their followers from hidebound traditions of seemingly "logical" exchange and "objective" development. Historians will note Žižek's pro-Goldhagen stance on Holocaust issues and his anti-modernist views on the origins of nationalism, while political scientists and policy wonks will likely take issue with his characterization of rogue states (à la Milošević at his trial in the Hague) and terrorist groups as ultra-modern critiques of liberal capitalism. Sharpe raises different cautionary flags about Žižek, while not denying the credibility of many of the philosopher's theoretical concerns and analyses.

Let us conclude with a return to the big picture. I would argue that any careful reading of today's headlines proves the necessity of Žižek, and scholars that come to grips fearlessly with his methods and ideas, as Sharpe

does, are therefore also necessary. There are so many givens amid today's post-Cold War triumphalism, so much ideology and pietist acceptance of the status quo masquerading as objective political and economic thought, that we seem to have arrived at the atmosphere evoked by Bertolt Brecht back in 1938. The difficulty of swimming upstream today—that is, of even interrogating the neo-liberal consensus on economics, politics, and history—reminds one of the comment of a character at the end of Thomas Bernhard's play *Heldenplatz*: "Wer Visionen hat, braucht einen Arzt" (People who have visions need to see a doctor). Alas, as astronomers remind us, we cannot see the dimensions of our own galaxy because the cosmic dust within it prevents us from viewing its disk-shaped plane. Furthermore, as Benjamin put it more colloquially in his 1921 essay "Capitalism as Religion": "We cannot draw closed the net in which we are caught." Intellectuals, activists, and politicians stand at a fork in the road today, with one sign pointing to Bernhard's truth and the other to Benjamin's. It is increasingly Žižek's cardinal task to persuade, coax, and cajole us to believe the astronomers and look for other ways to take the measure of our home.

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