

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

August 23, 2016

Agon Hamza, ed., *Repeating Žižek*, Duke University Press, 2015, 304 pp., \$ 24.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9780822358916.

Žižek studies is a fast growing field, but the question of a Žižekian philosophical system is still open for debate. As Agon Hamza, the editor of this new collection on Žižek's work correctly notes, with the publication of his 2012 book, *Less Than Nothing*,¹ the eminent Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek continues to revisit and expand the main premises and propositions of his philosophical system.² These developments, of course, predate *Less Than Nothing*, and were anticipated in Žižek's move of decoupling Hegel from Lacan.³ Consequently, there is an urgent need in the field today to formalize Žižek's philosophical system, by identifying a homogenous content at its core.⁴ Such a project will complement and expand earlier attempts at formalizing Žižek's thought that predate this recent turn.⁵

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012).

² This new "magnum opus," as Adam Kotsko points out in his contribution to this volume, was intended as a replacement that "makes up for the failure" of Žižek's original masterpiece, *The Parallax View* (251).

³ See, Todd McGowan, "Hegel as Marxist: Žižek's Revision of German Idealism," in *Žižek Now: Current Perspectives in Žižek Studies*, eds. Jamil Khader and Molly Rothenberg (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013), 31-53. It is important to note that this split is evident also in the structure of *Less Than Nothing*, in which the first part repeats Hegel and the second repeats Lacan.

⁴ Since this new magnum opus, Žižek has published a few more volumes, in addition two co-authored books, one of which is with the editor of the volume under review here, Agon Hamza. These books include, *Event: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin, 2013), *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), and *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014). This year alone, moreover, Žižek is slated to publish four more books: *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours* (Allen Lane), *The Wagnerian Sublime: Four Lacanian Readings of Classic Operas* (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig), *Disparities* (Bloomsbury), and *Antigone* (Bloomsbury). This will definitely make the project of formalization even more challenging.

⁵ These earlier attempts, as the editor mentions, include Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendentalist Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2008) and Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (New York: Continuum, 2010). In his contribution to this volume, Gabriel Tupinambá offers a useful schema that explains the different periods in Žižek's work: The first period centers around the work of the Argentinian philosopher Ernesto Laclau, posits democracy as an ideal, and is grounded in Marx's critique of religion, while the second period privileges the work of the French philosopher Alain Badiou, idealizes communism, and reactivates Hegel's version of Christianity (177). Moreover, Kotsko concurs with this division, but adds the important point that the "decisive shifts" in Žižek's work pertain to some conceptual deadlock that Žižek fails to resolve (244-245).

At first glance, it might not be obvious why a review of this collection is suited for this publication, and such a review might, in fact, rub some readers the wrong way. There are only occasional references to the recent revolutionary movements in the Arab world in the book and only one chapter substantially examines Žižek's approach to Islam. What's more, in his contribution to this volume, Sead Zimeri notes that compared to the space he allocates to discussions of Judaism and Christianity in his work, Žižek's treatment of Islam is scandalously disproportionate. For Zimeri, moreover, Žižek not only reduces Islam to an "unaccommodatable surplus" (259), but also marks its Otherness in both geographical and conceptual terms (260). Zimeri even takes Žižek to task for his Eurocentric and "provincial philosophy" (264).

I will return to Zimeri's more positive assessment of Žižek's approach to Islam later, but suffice it to say now that, as I recently made clear in the context of the debate about his comments on Syrian refugees in Europe, Žižek, throughout his oeuvre, has consistently engaged with the political realities of the Arab world against the backdrop of European imperial and Orientalist epistemologies and power structures. His incisive and provocative critiques of Islamic fundamentalism, modernity, the crisis of the Arab Left, the Arab Spring, Palestine, and even the radical value of political Islam, within the current impasses of the global capitalist system, constitute the ground for a decolonial and emancipatory epistemology and praxis in Islamic thought.⁶ As such, it is important not only to account for Žižek's take on Islam, but more importantly, to understand his approach in the context of his philosophical system as a whole.⁷

In his very short introduction to this collection, Hamza lays out his non-standard approach to the "homogenous content" underlying Žižek's philosophical system (2). He also explains the volume's two main objectives, which are also the main tasks for Žižekian

⁶ Jamil Khader, "Why Žižek's Critics are Wrong—and Where They Could Have Gotten it Right," *In These Times*, last modified Dec 11, 2015, <<http://inthesetimes.com/article/18683/why-zizeks-critics-are-wrong-and-where-they-could-have-gotten-it-right>> (accessed May 25, 2016).

⁷ In a recent post on his blog (See: Adam Kotsko, "Would not the most radical political intervention for Žižek be precisely to STOP?" *An und für sich*, May 23, 2016, <<https://itself.wordpress.com/2016/05/23/would-not-the-most-radical-political-intervention-for-zizek-be-precisely-to-stop/>>, [accessed May 27, 2016]), Kotsko calls on Žižek to refrain from writing political commentary. The perennial problem of the public role of philosophers notwithstanding, Žižek's political commentary cannot be accommodated in Kotsko's idea of mainstream political punditry—if it needs critics to make the arguments accessible to the wider public, then it should not be published. Perhaps a different classification for his writing is in order—a philosophical political commentary that must be understood in the context of his philosophical work. It is a question of the discrepancy between the genre and the "interpretive community" that we think is responding to Žižek. Moreover, Kotsko dismisses Žižek's interventions in these worldly affairs, since these political interventions have no "real-world" effects. Kotsko, of course, does not provide any yardstick to measure and assess the impact of the work of living philosophers on the world of Realpolitik. Rather than interrogate the political impetus and personal animus that motivate certain interpretive communities' deliberate misreadings, falsifications, and vulgar caricaturist re-presentation of Žižek's political commentary of his work in this specific "South Park"-style, Kotsko suggests that Žižek simply dumbs down his rhetoric so it can be understood without controversy or agon.

Unfortunately, Kotsko ends his blog with a slippery slope argument, by contending that these "pithy" political commentaries will eventually lead to the destruction of Žižek's "reputation and legacy." However, the shift in the discussion from political commentary to reputation and legacy is presented without any evidence. One can argue, as he does in his contribution to this book, that the new trajectory of Žižek's work devalues the contribution of religion, especially Christianity, to his political philosophy. Other readings, however, can show how he reframes the Christian legacy in relation to concrete universality. Far from ruining his reputation or his legacy, Žižek is moving in the right direction.

philosophers today. The first objective of the volume is to repeat Žižek's philosophy (2-3). This repetition can be glossed in two ways: The more common Kierkegaardian sense, which insists on producing the New through repetition of some originary impulse that is buried under a history of failures, the way Žižek himself talks about repeating Lenin.⁸ Repetition can also be understood here in its Hegelian meaning as a "repetition with sublation" or idealization, which as Žižek puts it, entails transformation "from an immediate contingent reality into a notional universality."⁹

The second objective of this volume is to formalize Žižek's philosophical thought into a coherent system, a recognizable Žižekian school of philosophy that bears his own imprint (3-4). It is important to note that this project is developed against various approaches that deny the existence of any such system of philosophical thought at the core of Žižek's work (2). Ironically, though, Hamza indicates that such a project would most probably be antithetical to Žižek's own "indifference toward the proper philosophical 'system'" (3-4).¹⁰

Notwithstanding Žižek's own likely protestations, Hamza believes this is the only way that Žižek's philosophy can withstand the test of time and be appreciated as more than "interventionist"—that is, to be valued as truly philosophical. This approach begs the question of whether or not formalization is indeed necessary to accomplish this objective. Suffice it to mention that the German philosopher, F. H. Jacobi, to whom both Žižek in *Less Than Nothing* and Adrian Johnston in his contribution to this volume refer, believed he could develop his own theory of knowledge against Kant's, "without incurring the kind of formalism that...affected Kant's own transcendental method."¹¹

Hamza, nonetheless, proposes to approach this problem of formalization through one of Lacan's early topological figures, the Borromean knot. This triadic structure represents the immanent and noncomplementary relationships and connections among the three main circles that define the "theoretical space" of Žižek's work, namely, Hegelian philosophy, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Marxist politics (3). Unfortunately, the productive implications and limitations of this approach to formalizing Žižek's work are not examined in depth within the conditions of possibility of the Borromean structure. Other contributors, most notably, Gabriel Tupinambá, however, take up the challenge of exploring the ramifications of the Borromean knot for understanding both the "limit of Žižek's own project and the beginning of a properly *Žižekian thinking*" (159, emphasis in original).

The triadic structure of the Borromean knot also functions as an organizing principle for this volume itself—the first three parts of the collection deal with philosophy, psychoanalysis, and politics, respectively. Prior to the recent turn in his work, Žižek used to elevate Lacanian theory over the other two, for it was the "middle term" that determined, as Žižek writes, "the specific gravity of every being which [had] materialized within it" (quoted

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917* (London: Verso, 2002), 310.

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 455.

¹⁰ Žižek would probably oppose such a formalization on both Hegelian and Lacanian grounds, and he often talks about the "impasses of formalization" in relation to the Lacanian register of the Real. See, for example, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 110. One could also apply Žižek's critique of the genome project to formalization, because such mapping "will not allow for full mastery of the way the organ functions—the mapping gives only the element of the set, but says nothing about the larger subjects—excess of the subject over the set" (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 849).

¹¹ George di Giovanni, "Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/friedrich-jacobi/>> (accessed May 25, 2016).

by Hamza on page 3). However, this collection maintains its fidelity to the recent turn in Žižek's work in that it decouples Hegel from Lacan and privileges the former. Indeed, the weight of the philosophical ring in this volume clearly reshuffles the coordinates of this triadic structure.

Most contributions in the first section on philosophy, therefore, demonstrate the weight of this ring by outlining the contours of Žižek's dialectical materialist philosophy and materialist ontology, especially through a meticulous explication of different parts of *Less Than Nothing*. Johnston thus argues that Žižek's philosophy shares "certain precise features of the post-Fichtean 'Spinozism of freedom'" (8, 32), and reads Žižek's philosophy against the backdrop of the Gang of Four of German Idealism, namely, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel (to which, one might add a fifth, Hölderlin). In his turn, Frank Ruda examines Žižek's return to Plato's *Parmenides*, and the production of a specific Žižekian brand of Platonism that repeats idealism in a "materialist vein," which he refers to as "idealism without idealism" (47) and a "Platonism of the non-All" (54). Samo Tomšič discusses Žižek's repetition of Hegel's materialist ontology, in light of his commitment to the radical and subversive core of psychoanalysis and the critique of political economy (58). Finally, Katja Kolšek and Oxana Timofeeva elaborate on the importance of the shift of the gaze for an understanding of Žižek's materialism. Materialism, at the fundamental level, explains that "the reality I see is never whole—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it."¹² These philosophical elaborations of Žižek's ontology serve as the ground upon which the premises of a Žižekian psychoanalysis and a Žižekian politics can be both interrogated, reworked, and developed.¹³

The triadic structure of the Borromean knot as an organizing device, however, turns out to be somewhat problematic, since the book also contains a fourth section on religion in Žižek's oeuvre. The circle of religion is considered a supplement to the triad, but there is no discussion of the implications of adding this supplement on the integrity and function of the triadic structure. Nevertheless, both contributions in this section (Kotsko and Zimeri) make it clear that religion in Žižek's work is inherently a sub-species of the political ring of the knot. More specifically, Kotsko links religion to the political question of the Event, the deadlock of the revolution, and "the promise of a non-ideological form of community" (248), especially in the context of the radical Christianity legacy, while Zimeri laments Žižek's exclusion of the common "*struggling* universality" (256, emphasis in original) that Islam shares with Christianity from his work.

Ironically, moreover, the section on religion is added at the point in which, as Kotsko seems to suggest, the new trajectory of Žižek's work, as evident in *Less Than Nothing*, seems to devalue the contribution of religion, especially Christianity, to his political philosophy (245, 253). Žižek, in other words, drops religion altogether, to use one of his recurrent phrases, "like a hot potato." In contrast to Zimeri, Kotsko offers the exact opposite reading of Žižek's alleged return to the "emancipatory kernel of Christianity" over other religious traditions especially, Islam (257). It would have, therefore, been very helpful and useful, not with regard to this section only but also in relation to the rest of the book in general, to explain how each contribution fits into this grand plan of formalizing Žižek's work within the limits of the book's Borromean structural device.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 17.

¹³ Because of restrictions on space, I will not be able to provide general summaries of the sections on the psychoanalytic and political rings of the Borromean knot, but I will discuss a few of these contributions below.

The challenge of this much-needed project of formalizing Žižek's philosophy can be better appreciated in the context of the critical reception of both Žižek's polemical work and his credentials as a philosopher. Although the collection was not meant to be a defense of Žižek (1), some contributors inadvertently engage these criticisms and come to Žižek's defense, while others like Zimeri level more accusations against him. Ruda, for example, tackles some of the dismissive critiques of Žižek's philosophical work in public and academic discourses that paint his "gappy ontology," in Robert Pippin's words, as anachronistic, irrelevant, or unserious (46). Moreover, Benjamin Noys laments the low level of "personal insult, patronizing or racist characterization, and political smearing" to which his critics have stooped (78). Gavin Walker goes even further in his defense of Žižek, by condemning the "economy of resentment" that he detects, in particular, in the critical Marxist reception of Žižek's "actually existing work" (195-196).

Interestingly enough, some contributors to this collection seem to resist the viability of this formalization, interrogating Žižek's credentials as a philosopher especially, in relation to Badiou's critique of Lacan's anti-philosophical position.¹⁴ Hamza points out, in fact, that philosophers who are Žižekian are always reminded that compared to Žižek, "it is not a difficult task to be a follower of Badiou, or a Badiouian in philosophy, due to his very-well structured system" (2).¹⁵ To this extent, Noys cautiously reiterates Badiou's claim that Žižek is "not exactly in the field of philosophy," only to propose that Žižek is a "reader of philosophy," someone who offers not a philosophy but a method (74).

Bruno Bosteels makes this case against a Žižekian philosophy more forcefully. He claims that after his international career took off, Žižek has been struggling very hard to disassociate himself from the field of cultural studies, in which his work was initially received and "misrecognized," and to reclaim his name as a philosopher. Bosteels writes: "Thus, whereas Badiou after the completion of *Being and Event* speaks from within the bastion of a classically or neoclassically styled philosophy, waving the banner of Platonism with sufficient self-confidence to accept the challenge of an antiphilosopher such as Lacan, Žižek is still at pains to downplay the late Lacan's anti-philosophical provocations for the sake of gaining respectability as a philosopher" (132).¹⁶ For Bosteels, this seems to offer a seamless explanation of Žižek's "proverbial nervousness." His tics simply betray an anxiety about being excluded from prestigious institutional apparatuses and departments of philosophy, whether in Slovenia, Britain or France (133). As such, he performs the role of the hysteric to the "master's discourse of a stoically unfazed Badiou" (133-134). Henrik Bjerre and Brian Hansen offer a more convincing interpretation of Žižek's tics by identifying his "seemingly neurotic anxiety" with the anxiety of the "wild analyst" (155). As a wild analyst who is engaged with the analysis of culture and society, Žižek combines elements from both the master's discourse and the analyst discourse, aiming at endless interruption of society and its "cultural formations" and the production of new thought, while also "insisting that the impossible can happen" (156).

¹⁴ For more on this question of Lacan's anti-philosophy, see Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 841-858, 873-878.

¹⁵ It might be worth noting that for Badiou, as Bruno Bosteels writes elsewhere, the idea of formalization is possible to grasp, since formalization is "the forceful passing of the real," which is in itself "the impasse of formalization" (Bruno Bosteels, "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject," in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek [London: Verso, 2006], 153).

¹⁶ See *Lacan and Philosophy: The New Generation*, ed. Lorenzo Chiesa (Melbourne: re.press, 2014) for other discussions of the nuances of Lacan's "anti-philosophical" position.

It is with this insistence on the utopian dimension of Žižek’s radical politics that the question of repeating Žižek becomes most critical. In his own contribution to the volume, which ties in nicely with other contributions with regard to the meaning of materialism, Žižek offers a brilliant reading of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and Samuel Becket’s masterpiece *Not I* in order to correct some common misperceptions of his theory of the Event. For him, the Event is not an allegedly grandiose occurrence of cataclysmic ramifications. Rather, Žižek argues, the Event, as exemplified in moments of subjective destitution, is “just a barely perceptible shift in the subjective position,” and more specifically a minimal shift that reorients the subject toward a reconciliation with an intrusive traumatic event (276). This subjective destitution opens up a space for the freedom, as he says elsewhere about Malcolm X, to invent a new universal identity.¹⁷ This, however, leaves the central problem of radical politics today without any reformulation, let alone answers: how to re-articulate the specific forms of (secondary) struggle against exploitation and oppression within the struggle over the fundamental antagonism or the class struggle.¹⁸

In his contribution to this collection, Fabio Vighi maintains that to repeat Žižek today is to insist in a Kierkegaardian fashion on “the hidden or disavowed presuppositions of his thought,” which are still waiting to be reactualized in a future struggle about the shape and coordinates of a postcapitalist society (183). This can be done, Vighi points out, only by linking Žižek’s negative ontology qua the antagonism with the current crisis of global capitalism as seen in the production of “human waste” (183-187). Vighi, nonetheless, does not explore any other potential Žižekian trajectory, whereby this “human waste,” or the “part of no part,” can serve as the basis for a new radical politics.

Likewise, Zimeri maintains that repeating Žižek is necessary for progressive Muslims and Islamic feminists today, because these groups need his “intellectual help” to articulate their anti-capitalist and anti-clerical (especially the fight against theological obscurantism) struggles. Repeating Žižek, in this context, comes closer to the Hegelian sense of the term, indicating the possibility of repeating Žižek’s “struggle under different conditions and laying the ground for the emergence of a true universal solidarity that renders all our attachment to our traditions that obstruct the struggle for equality and emancipation obsolete” (265, emphasis added). As such, Muslims can make possible the political recuperation of Islam’s emancipatory legacy from different forms of *salafi* and *takfiri* movements, without falling into the trap of politicizing Islam in the name of *sharia* (265).

This repetition, however, might be misinterpreted as inscribing Žižek ambiguously within colonial and imperial discourses that at worst turn him into a savior of the savages (much like what he says about the white hero in *Avatar*). At best they turn him into a “vanishing mediator whose function is to restore [progressive Muslims’] sense of identity and purpose in life” (like Leonardo DiCaprio’s character in *Titanic*).¹⁹ My point, though, is that the only true fidelity to Žižek’s revolutionary politics is precisely theorizing this missing link between “human waste” and a “true universal solidarity.”

¹⁷ For more on this, see Jamil Khader, “Why Žižek’s Critics are Wrong—and Where They Could Have Gotten it Right.”

¹⁸ Agon Hamza’s chapter on Žižek’s politics in this volume explains that for Žižek, “politics is the name of the problem, rather than the name of the solution” (225), and hence, Žižek does not provide answers to perennial problems but reformulates the right questions.

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “Avatar: Return of the Natives,” *The New Statesman*, last modified March 4, 2010, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2010/03/avatar-reality-love-couple-sex>> (accessed May 25, 2016).

Jamil Khader
Dean of Research and Professor of English
Bethlehem University

© 2016: Jamil Khader

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Khader, Jamil, Review of *Repeating Žižek*, *SCTIW Review*, August 23, 2016.
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1194>.

ISSN: 2374-9288