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A CONVERSATION WITH SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES Slavoj Žižek has emerged as a leading transdisciplinary theorist, with critical writings on film, philosophy, politics, psychoanalysis, and religious studies. His breadth of scholarship, along with his novel understanding of Lacanian psychoanalysis and politics, has lifted him to the status of academic celebrity—a position that Žižek rejects outright, but cannot escape.¹ Living down this paparazzi style attention that follows him from lecture to lecture and the general problem of academic fanfare is the subject of Astra Taylor’s documentary film, *Žižek!*, that explores this tension between Žižek’s intellectual commitment and his celebrity obligations. Setting aside the burdens of academic “stardom,” if one were to fit Žižek’s scholarship into the available modes of academic discourse, it would most likely fall within Lacanian philosophico-cultural analysis, although Žižek’s Lacan varies from the received “structuralist” Lacan of the 1970s (see Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989). Žižek’s Lacanian-inspired scholarship is not limited to the internal debates of psychoanalysis; his reconsideration of Lacan in the context of the western philosophical tradition, namely German Idealism, has opened new lines of transdisciplinary inquiry. Presenting Lacan as a figure “outside” of the mainstream of American “ego

NOTE: This interview took place during the “St. Paul Among the Philosophers Conference” in Syracuse, NY on April 15th, 2005. I would like to thank Professor Žižek for his time and John D. Caputo, Thomas Watson Professor of Religion, Syracuse University, for arranging the conversation during a very hectic time. I also would like to express my gratitude to Gregg Lambert, Syracuse University, for his technical help and determination to recover the interview when it was “lost” in digital space.

¹ My attempt to move Professor Žižek from the lecture hall to a quiet space for the interview was thwarted by wave upon wave of people wanting his autograph, his email address, or his approval of their dissertation or book proposal. The last interruption on our way to the interview came from a man who said, “I traveled for a day and half just to hear your lecture.” Žižek responded in sincere amazement with, “Surely, you had more important things to do.” With just one more burden to address before the next session, Professor Žižek invited me up to his suite for the interview, thinking, I imagine, “doesn’t he have anything better do with his time?”

psychology” redefines the place of Freud and psychoanalysis within contemporary cultural studies debates. “The genius of Žižek’s contribution,” Kenneth Reinhardt writes, “[is] to demonstrate that this version of Lacan offered an extraordinarily fruitful approach to thought, culture, and religion.”²

Not only could one describe Žižek’s work as generically “extraordinarily fruitful” for multi-disciplinary analyses, it also is significant for post-metaphysical political thought. Žižek brings together Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-Althusserian Marxist ideology critique for the express purpose of revolutionary thought and action. This possibility for transformative thought and action recently has been the subject of Žižek’s “religious” writings on St. Paul, for whom, along with Alain Badiou, the power of radical “belief” is central:

Christianity proper—the belief in Christ’s Resurrection—is the highest expression of the power of symbolic fiction as the medium of universality: the death of the “real” Christ is “sublated” in the Holy Spirit, that is, in the spiritual community of believers. This authentic kernel of Christianity, first articulated by St. Paul, is under attack today.³

Žižek’s, clearly not a “believer” in the actual resurrection of Jesus, finds Christianity worth defending for its power of belief. The “under attack” observation is not a call for a new *apologia* for Christian “spirituality,” but a defense of a “fidelity” to an absolute proposition. This position on “belief” is clarified by Žižek in his book *On Belief* (Routledge 2001) and in a vigorous response to an essay by Geoffrey Galt Harpham published in *Critical Inquiry*.⁴ Citing G.K. Chesterton, the Catholic dogmatist, Žižek points out that everyone’s view is the “right one” or it would not be the view that is held: “Compare the struggle and pain of the fundamentalist with the serene peace of the liberal-democrat who, from his safe subjective position, ironically dismisses every full-fledged engagement, every dogmatic taking of sides. Consequently, I plead guilty: in this choice, I without hesitation opt for the fundamentalist position.”⁵ In *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek further describes the radical nature of Christianity’s unalterable “view” as *sui generis*. Christianity, as described by Žižek, is the paradigmatic example of a political movement that wholly rejects the world and aims unremittingly and “ruthlessly” to transform it into a “new symbolic fiction

² Kenneth Reinhardt, *Paragraph*, vol. 24.2 (2001), 162.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London/New York: Verso, 1999), 331.

⁴ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Doing the Impossible: Slavoj Žižek and the End of Knowledge.” *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 2003), 453-485.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Critical: Response: A Symptom—of What?” *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 2003).

which erases the past ones.”⁶

My interview with Professor Žižek was framed by the *St. Paul Among the Philosophers* conference in Syracuse, NY. The conference featured the work of Alain Badiou and included noted scholars representing historical, rhetorical, philosophical, and theoretical methodologies. The “historical” St. Paul, the “rhetorical” St. Paul, the “philosophical” St. Paul, and the “theoretical” St. Paul intersected or, better, collided during the talks and discussions. Žižek and Badiou offered the most “radical” St. Paul, a St. Paul whose “universality” prepared the foundation for a transformative politics. My discussion with Žižek, however, only touched on these concerns. In preparation for the interview, I decided to invest in Žižek’s notion of engagement and present him with opportunities for thinking and experimentation—a better format than asking him to once again explain Lacan’s concept of the “Real.”

The first “set” of questions attempt to have Žižek speak on the topic of reception or the problem of hearing, which came up during several of the discussion sessions. The “hang-up” joining Lacan and Ricouer was, I thought at the time, a useful “way” into the conversation. Regardless of my intentions, it did produce an opportunity for Žižek to say that if a phone conversation were to take place between Jesus and St. Paul, “Jesus would hang-up on St. Paul.” After the first “set” of questions, however, Žižek continued along his own path of inquiry and I, happily, followed. The “interview,” then, is a series of commentaries and observations, which, I believe, is superior to the explication-based interview one finds abundantly in a variety of publications online and elsewhere. I also feel compelled to apologize for my own remarks of acknowledgement, laughter, and paper rustling that one not accustomed to conducting interviews fails to squelch. The discernible second “set” of questions prompts Žižek to comment on the tension between tragedy and comedy. This opened a brief discussion of Franz Kafka and the rhetorical, if not political, power of the ridiculous. Žižek, in conversation, directly and indirectly elucidates many of his main concerns through a high speed drive through literature, film, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. “Enjoy” the next sixty-eight minutes!

⁶ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 331.

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PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/07.1/zizek-taylor-intro.pdf>