UNIVERSALITY AND COMMUNIST STRATEGY; ŽIŽEK AND THE DISAVOWED FOUNDATIONS OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctorate of Philosophy

In

Sociology

School of Social and Cultural Studies

Massey University, Albany

New Zealand

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2010
Abstract

Using global poverty as its central reference point, this thesis seeks to consider the political applications of Slavoj Žižek’s work. Regarded as one of the most significant contemporary continental philosophers, Žižek is also one of the most controversial. Whilst Žižek’s Hegelian-inspired reading of Lacan and Marx provides an influential reading of social life, and in particular global capitalism, his political interventions have not been so readily embraced. Arguing that his emphasis upon the essential fixity of capitalism and the need for radical change prevents the identification of any subtle forms of political action, critics have suggested that Žižek’s political interventions are misguided, or conservative, despite his radical pretensions. In spite of this rejection, the thesis comes to align itself with Žižek’s politics. Considering the applications of Žižek’s work to the pressing demands of global poverty, I suggest that whilst his theory does not provide any practical alternative to capital, its value lies in a strategic form of politics which attempts to open up space for political action by evoking the symptoms of capital. It is in this positioning of Žižek’s work in regards to practical political issues, that the most original, and valuable, element of this thesis resides. Situating Žižek’s work within the Marxism tradition, the thesis begins by documenting the contemporary limitations of Marxist politics, particularly in relation to the discursive turn. Moving to a consideration of the way in which Lacanian psychoanalysis has been deployed to rehabilitate the political efficacy of Marxism, I suggest that Lacanian theory provides neither a normative basis for Marxist politics, nor a form of political organisation in itself. Nonetheless, through Žižek’s reading, Lacanian theory provides a powerful political response to global capitalism which has, in Žižek’s terms, ‘hegemonised the place of hegemony’. This value lies not in the production of a radical alternative to capitalism but, rather, the strategic utilisation of ‘surplus labour’ – best embodied by ‘practicing concrete universality’ – to dislocate the place of capitalism such that new space for rethinking the political and production emerge. Moreover, Žižek’s politics are not reduced to a negative strategic approach but have been supplemented by a utopian ‘communist hypothesis’ that potentially reshapes considerations of Žižek’s politics today.
Acknowledgements

Writing can often appear to be a solitary pursuit. Long hours are spent with one’s head in a book or hunched over a silent computer. Large periods can pass without a word being uttered. Yet, constructing this thesis has been anything but a lonely experience for me. I have been accompanied and encouraged by a range of characters throughout the journey, without whom this document might not have come to completion.

This thesis might otherwise have been called ‘Coffees with Warwick’, such has been the influence of these discussions upon the argument developed in this thesis. I began working with Warwick Tie in my Honours year and this project has been a culmination of several years of debate and discussion which I have found to be nothing less than a pleasure. Warwick has been a constant sounding board and a great mentor for whom I have massive admiration. I have no doubt that without his influence, not only would this thesis not have been produced but I would have been unlikely to have undertaken post-graduate study. For this reason, I owe Warwick, along with my co-supervisor Grant Duncan, a huge debt of gratitude – and more than a few coffees!

This experience would certainly not have been the same without the companionship and camaraderie of my fellow students in the PhD room at the School of Social and Cultural Studies. Being able to share this experience with you all is something I will never forget. Also, to those within the school who provided resources, guidance work, or a friendly smile, I thank you also.

To my good friends and flatmates – Marty, Drakie, Doddy, Thames and Leon – most of whom I have known since high school, I thank you for putting up with my political rants and my strange habits, my lack of funds and increasing withdrawal from ‘real life’.

To my family; Mum and Dad, James, Melanie and Grandma and Grandparents lost, as well as my ‘new’ family, the Maynes, I thank you for being the ongoing foundations of my life. If I have faith in anything, it is faith in the love and support of my family. From my early years to this day, this has never wavered and I’m sure this thesis would have not have been possible without this support.

Most of all, to my wife Victoria, who has stuck by me through thick and thin, from my days as an aspiring undergraduate business tycoon, to doctoral communist, through breakdowns –
academic, financial or ‘other’ – and now out into the big, wide world. Victoria, you have been my constant companion throughout this journey, riding the ups and downs as much as I have. You have tolerated the (occasional) long hours, (constant) financial sacrifice and my increasing detachment from everyday life as this project lurched its way towards completion. I love you; I dedicate this thesis to you.
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