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

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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.

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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,

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