

○ THE POLITICAL LIMITS OF LACAN

BOOK REVIEW OF *CONTINGENCY, HEGEMONY, UNIVERSALITY: CONTEMPORARY DIALOGUES ON THE LEFT*

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Roland Boer reviews *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (Verso, London, 2000. ISBN: 1-85984-278-X).

This book may not be the most obvious text for those interested in the intersections between biblical studies and critical theory in Žižek's work – my focus in this review. For that you will need to read the biblical trilogy of *The Fragile Absolute* (Žižek 2000); *On Belief* (Žižek 2001) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Žižek 2003). But this book, the dialogues between Žižek, Butler and Laclau, is in fact a crucial text on the path to those later books. To put it as bluntly as possible, *Contingency; Hegemony; Universality* (CHU) puts the bomb under Žižek that enables him to become a properly political writer. In other words, Žižek the Leninist emerges because of these debates, but he could only become a Leninist *with* and *by means of* Paul in the New Testament. In order to get there he will rely heavily on Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Badiou 2003). For Badiou's Paul, especially the materialist reading of the notion of grace, enables, eventually and with much hesitation, the crucial move for Žižek, the ability to move out of the illuminating but ultimately closed circle of Lacan's theory in order to become a political writer.

But that is jumping the gun, for my interest here is with the dialogues themselves. Judith Butler's criticism is that the Lacanian constitutive exception – the excluded item that is in fact the basis of the system in question – closes down any possibility of taking a political position. In response to Butler, Žižek voices some quite traditional Marxist categories – class conflict, mode of production, the over-arching presence of capitalism – and he comes in for a beating at the hands of Laclau for this move.

At two points in her first contribution to the dialogues, Butler comes back to the argument that psychoanalysis forbids any step out of the system, that the way Žižek's dialectic works is to generate an impasse at the very point where such a break opens up. Firstly, on the question of hegemony, she recognizes the astuteness of Žižek's many recyclings of this move, which relies on the notion that the remainder or surplus, that which is left out, comes to be crucial for the construction and viability of whatever is in question. Given that hegemony is not so much a description of the status quo but rather an inquiry into the means of political change, the key issue is that of opposition to domination. But, according to the Hegelian and Lacanian logic that Žižek employs, what happens is 'that that very point of opposition is the instrument through which domination works, and that we have unwittingly enforced the powers of domination through our participation in its opposition' (Butler in CHU: 28).

Butler is puzzled, throwing a series of questions at Žižek that all hinge on the impossibility of political action from within a Lacan read in terms of Hegel: 'But where does one go from here?' she asks. 'Does the exposition of an aporia, even a constitutive aporia at the level of the linguistic performative, work in the service of a counter-hegemonic project?' (Butler in CHU: 28). Or quite directly, where is the possibility of something new, especially in a social and polit-

ical direction? In fact, what Žižek does, suggests Butler, is pursue the other dimension of hegemony, namely the myriad ways in which consent operates, particularly to what constrains and limits us.

But what remains less clear to me is how one moves beyond such a dialectical reversal or impasse to something new. How would the new be produced from an analysis of the social field that remains restricted to inversions, aporias and reversals that work regardless of time and place? Do these reversals produce something other than their own structurally identical repetitions? (Butler in CHU: 29).

The second point where Butler reiterates the same criticism is on the question of the subject, particularly the ‘incompletion’ of the subject that is rendered by the bar - \$. And that incompletion, the impossibility of constituting the subject, is the result of the Lacanian Real, the realm that can never be represented, forever holding an unbridgeable space between the traumatic emergence of the subject and the subject itself, except that it is precisely this gap, this limit that generates the subject. Butler’s problem here is how such a position might be compatible with hegemony, where the incompletion of the subject is understood in terms of as yet unknown political and social subjects. In terms of hegemony, the incompletion of the subject is a distinctly historical question, but in Žižek’s formulation the barred subject is ahistorical, or, as she puts it, structural. Thus, she asks, in a repeat of the first question with which she opens the dialogues (see Butler in CHU: 5): ‘Can the ahistorical recourse to the Lacanian bar be reconciled with the strategic question that hegemony poses, or does it stand as a quasi-transcendental limitation on all possible subject-formations and strategies and, hence, as fundamentally indifferent to the political field it is said to condition?’ (Butler in CHU: 13). Or, more extensively:

If the subject always meets its limit in the selfsame place, then the subject is fundamentally exterior to the history in which it finds itself: there is no historicity to the subject, its limits, its articulability. Moreover, if we accept the notion that all historical struggle is nothing other than a vain effort to displace a founding limit that is structural in status, do we then commit ourselves to a distinction between the historical and the structural domains that subsequently excludes the historical domain from the understanding of opposition (Butler in CHU: 13).

Butler’s questions concern not only the closed circle of Lacanian analysis, in which the break to something new is but another way we are contained within the system, but also the perpetual suspension of the domains of politics and history in the structures of Lacanian thought. In other words, how can Žižek conceive of a viable politics that seeks to have some historical impact and that remains within the aspirations of the Left? As I mentioned above, it is actually Paul, initially via Badiou, who provides Žižek with the beginnings of an answer, one that will set him on a path to Lenin.

But first, in the dialogues Žižek responds with a series of points – that Butler has misunderstood Lacan on certain points, that the opposition between a structural, ahistorical Lacan and the historical arena of politics is highly problematic, that we shouldn’t succumb to a premature

historicizing, that Lacan's arguments have a distinctly historical and political dimension to them – but what is noticeable here (when *The Ticklish Subject* was his most recent book and *The Fragile Absolute* had not yet appeared) is that Butler's criticism bites. Compared to his earlier texts, Žižek writes with a far greater political urgency, sounding more like Jameson than the monogamous (the term is Laclau's in CHU: 76) Lacanian mass cultural aesthete (if such a thing is possible) of some of his earlier material. In the dialogues Marx is far less the one who sits in the background amongst the jesters or finds himself usurped by Lacan: rather, he is the initial means for a Žižek seeking to respond to the criticisms and become far more directly political.

Now, for Žižek, that which is left out, the unnameable and unrepresentable ground of the political possibilities both Butler and Laclau explore, the conditions for the dispersed and shifting postmodern political subjectivities, the background to Laclau's historical narrative of the move from essentialist Marxism to the contingent politics of postmodernism, or to Butler's account of the shift from sexual essentialism to contingent sexual formation, is capitalism itself. Or rather, what we have here is not 'a simple epistemological process but part of the global change in the very nature of capitalist society' (Žižek in CHU: 106). Is this a much more political Lacan? In fact, it is straight Marxist theory illuminated by Lacan: the Real has become that which refuses to be historicized (the stages of capitalism) and politicised (the economy, which simply cannot be changed). What he is after is not the contingency or incompleteness within a particular horizon but the exclusion that constitutes the horizon itself.

For all Žižek's detailed response to Butler's criticisms, her point remains valid, it seems to me. Thus, even though he charges Butler herself with being ahistorical (the proper dialectic should be between historical change and the traumatic historical kernel), that she is not historicist enough, since her notion of 'passionate attachment' remains the limit of subjectivity, with harbouring a Kantian formalism (gender performativity is her a priori formal model), even though he argues for historicity rather than historicism, or a need to historicize any historicist move – despite all these attempts to correct her perception of psychoanalysis and even of Hegel, the question concerning the political possibilities of Lacanian psychoanalysis remains. As Butler points out in her second essay, Žižek conflates Lacan and Marx: capitalism becomes both the occluded and unrepresentable Real of hegemonic struggles *and* the specific background of those struggles. Or, in his effort to 'patch' Lacan into a Marxist framework, Žižek argues that capitalism is the primary condition for hegemony and that the subject as lack is the primary condition, without any explanation as to how these two primary conditions – the one historicist and the other formalist – relate to each other (see Butler in CHU: 137-9). In other words, when he wants to make a political point Žižek turns to Marx, Lacan has to fit in somehow.

Laclau makes a similar point, although in more detail. Somewhat nonplussed by Žižek's overt Marxism in the dialogues, he writes:

I think that Žižek's political thought suffers from a certain 'combined and uneven development'. While his Lacanian tools, together with his insight, have allowed him to make considerable advances in the understanding of ideological processes in contemporary societies, his strictly political thought has not advanced at the same pace, and remains fixed in very traditional categories (Laclau in CHU: 206).

Laclau castigates him for taking terms uncritically from the Marxist tradition, or more precisely from the writings of Marx himself and from the period of the Russian Revolution, without any awareness of the subsequent debates and intellectual history of the terms (Gramsci, Trotsky, Austro-Marxism and so on). Laclau cites the questions of ideology, class and capitalism, suggesting that Žižek's assertions have little argument to back them up, and that even then they are at best highly troubled. As far as Laclau is concerned, the Marxist categories come as a collective *deus ex machina* to render his Lacanian framework political – the obverse of Butler's take, but the point is the same. Laclau is of course much more enamoured with deconstruction than Žižek, and he is suspicious of any Marxist category that has not gone through the deconstructionist grinder (although it seems to me that this is different from being aware of the intellectual and political history of Marxism). But the point remains: Žižek's 'discourse is schizophrenically split between a highly sophisticated Lacanian analysis and an insufficiently deconstructed traditional Marxism' (Laclau in CHU: 205).

Žižek's problem as it emerges in the dialogues lies, I would suggest, in the ambiguity over the 'cure' provided by psychoanalysis. To put it crudely, whereas Freud explicitly sought an end to the analytic process, worrying when such a process failed (as with Dora), for Lacan the possibility of the end remained an open question. Would the analysand finally be cured, or was psychoanalysis a process without end? As Žižek points out in *The Ticklish Subject*, for Lacan psychoanalysis is not psychosynthesis: there is no new harmony, no new beginning for the subject. Instead, the desired moment is the Void, negativity, a wiping the slate clean (Žižek 1999 pp. 153–154). However, at the point of the dialogues with Butler and Lacan, he pursues two options. The first is to place the problem within Lacan's own development (see Žižek in CHU: 219–23, 254–5): thus the later Lacan devalues the paternal function and the importance of the Oedipal conflict and stresses that paternal authority is an imposture, a temporary stabilization. If the early Lacan was given to conservative cultural criticism, then the later Lacan, especially from the 1960s, seeks a way out of this framework, to show that paternal authority, the big Other, the Symbolic order, is a fraud. This is the Lacan of the Real, which shows up the fragility and contingency of every symbolic constellation, that every historical figuration of the limit of the Real is always susceptible to radical breakdown and overhaul. And what is this Real? Capitalism itself. In other words, Lacan himself recognized the problem Butler identifies within his own theory, and his shift to emphasize the Real is his effort to deal with the problem of the closed circuit. But note what has happened here: the Real is capitalism. Even in the very discussion of Lacan, Žižek's second and preferred option for dealing with the problem raised by both Butler and Laclau shows itself, namely the juxtaposition of Marx and Lacan.

But Žižek will need to do more than throw Lacan and Marx together, rather than Lacan turning out to be a Marxist (and he will of course continue to defend the viability of Lacanian analysis), or indeed Marx a Lacanian *avant la lettre*, some mediation will need to come into play, some mechanism of transition that will link both Marx and Lacan at a much deeper level. In response to Laclau's criticism that he is insufficiently aware of the Marxist tradition, Žižek will become a Leninist. But, as I have suggested, the step to Lenin, which is at the same time the necessary mediation between Lacan and Marx, is Alain Badiou's reading of Paul.

The dialogues are, then, crucial for those interested in Žižek's somewhat startling move into the New Testament in his subsequent works. But it begins here, with the criticisms of Butler and

Laclau, although they would not quite have expected that their debates would lead Žižek precisely on that path.

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