



Book Reviews

Lacan: The Silent Partners

Slavoj Žižek (ed.)

Verso, London and New York, 2006, vi + 406pp.

ISBN: 1 84467 065 3/1 84467 549 1.

Contemporary Political Theory (2008) 7, 109–111. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300316

The publishers and editor make two claims for this book, both of which are slightly misleading. The first, on the blurb on the back, suggests that the essays contained will introduce us to those ‘silent partners’ who are ‘the hidden inspiration to Lacanian theory’. In the second, which comes from Žižek’s introduction, we are told that, far from aiming at a complete list of those ‘silent partners’, ‘this volume takes the first steps in this direction, with the underlying goal of recuperating Lacan for Marxist theory’ (p. 1). Let me deal with the second of these two claims first. With the exception of Fredric Jameson’s extended discussion of Lacan as a dialectical thinker and Bruno Bosteels’ consideration of Alain Badiou’s early theory of the subject in relation to Althusserianism, there is very little Marx or Marxism in sight in this volume. The overwhelming majority of the essays collected here have little or nothing to do with reclaiming Lacan for Marxist theory.

The first claim is a little more complicated. Not only do many of the essays collected here have little or nothing to do with Marxist theory, some have very little to do with Lacan either. For instance, Miran Božovič’s contribution on Lacan and the writings of Diderot does not mention Lacan at all after the introduction and develops a notion of ‘man-machine’ ethics and materialist philosophy that sounds distinctly Deleuzian rather than Lacanian. Alenka Zupančič’s discussion of comedy as the concrete universal in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and Robert Pfaller’s discussion of the uncanny in terms of comedy and tragedy similarly engage very little with Lacan. So what is going on here? I think we need to place the stress on another quote from Žižek’s introduction: ‘The ultimate aim of the volume is therefore not, as one usually puts it, to enable readers to approach Lacan in a new way but, rather, to *instigate a new wave of Lacanian paranoia*: to push readers to engage in work of their own, and start to discern Lacanian themes everywhere’ (p. 3). What we find here then is a number of Lacanian motifs and concepts pressed into the service of reading philosophy (from the pre-Socratics to Althusser and Badiou) and art (from opera through literature to reading Lacan’s *Seminar* generically) rather than an exploration of the hidden influences behind Lacanian theory.



A number of these readings mark new trajectories in Lacanian studies, such as Alain Badiou's reflections on Lacan and the pre-Socratics in terms of discourse, mathematics and love. For Badiou, the pre-Socratics anticipated the Freudian death drive and what we have lost in the passage from the pre-Socratics to Plato is 'the meaning of non-relation, of the first separation or gap ... the difference between the sexes as such' (p. 12). Similarly, Joan Copjec's piece on Lacan's *Seminar XVII*, given in 1968 at the height of the student revolt, explores shame as affect and in particular how for Lacan 'shame is the subject's ethical relation towards being' (p. 103). Shame is not, as it is usually conceptualized, a flight from being but '*a flight into being*, where being — the being of surfaces, of social existence — is viewed as that which protects us from the ravages of anxiety' (p. 111). For those readers familiar with Žižek's *Wo Es War* series the volume assembles the usual impressive list of contributors I have already mentioned Badiou, Copjec, Zupančič, Pfaller and Jameson as well as Mladan Dolar on the voice in Kafka's writing and three essays by Žižek himself on the Thing, Wagner and Henry James. The great strength of Žižek's edited volumes is that he always takes the opportunity to include less familiar writers, for this reviewer at least, such as Miran Božovič on Diderot, Adrian Johnston on Schelling, Silvia Ons on Nietzsche, Sigi Jöttkandt on Turgenev and Lorenzo Chiesa on Artaud.

As one reads through the volume, though, there is a certain sense of *déjà vu*. We seem to return to the same concepts or motifs over and over again: the gap, the (non)sexual relation, the subject as substance, truth as contradiction, the symptom, jouissance and guilt, the four discourses, the big Other. One also notes the repetition of certain examples, themes and objects of study: the recurrence of Opera, the structure of comedy and tragedy in relation to representation, the same film examples (both Zupančič and Pfaller discuss Ernst Lubitsch's 1942 comedy about the Nazi's *To Be Or Not To Be* and immediately follow this with a discussion of Charlie Chaplin), the same set of references to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, or the work of Eric Santner. The hidden Lacan, it turns out, looks very much like Žižek's Lacan and we seem to find him in some of Žižek's favourite places. One may ask to what extent, for example, does Adrian Johnston's reading of Lacan with Schelling — as providing the conditions of possibility for 'subjective autonomy' (p. 36) — really move us beyond Žižek's own work some 10 years ago on Schelling and the Lacanian subject (Žižek, 1996). Or, when we read of the Hegelian answer to the false choice of capitalism as 'not the choice between a Big Mac and a Quarter-Pounder but, rather, the choice as the act that alters the symbolic order giving shape to reality itself' (p. 66), as we do in Timothy Huson in 'Truth and Contradiction,' we could well be reading Žižek himself. Without detracting from the impressive nature of many of these essays the question does



arise to what extent this is the hidden Lacan or the hidden Žižek. To put it another way, *Lacan: The Silent Partners* is more of an extension of Žižekian studies than an instigation of Lacanian paranoia.

Reference

Žižek, S. (1996) *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, London and New York: Verso.

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Kant's Politics: Provisional Theory for an Uncertain World

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Yale University Press, New Haven CN, 2005, 272pp.

ISBN: 9780 30010 1201

Contemporary Political Theory (2008) 7, 111–114. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300317

Throughout his many versions of a theory of the effects of commonly held principles on collective life, and most important in his mature theory of the public sphere, Kant directs our attention to the dynamism between our world and our ideals (p. 10).

In *Kant's Politics*, Ellis provides a new and insightful look at Kant's political philosophy in light of the contemporary debate surrounding deliberative democracy and its critics. Ellis argues that Kant's work contains *a priori* concepts, which remain relevant to this day, and using an empirical contextual analysis — in the vein of Skinner's recent work on Hobbes — she examines what it was Kant wanted to achieve with his work. Ellis claims to have found in Kant's work — from his pre-critical philosophy through to his late political essays — an 'original theory of political transition that accounts for that part of political change driven by the concrete effects of common political ideals' (p. x).

Ellis comprehensively dismisses the common mistakes made by previous attempts at reading Kant's political theory, and provides a reading that has its application in contemporary political problems. 'Either the reader underestimates the importance of Kant's formal, critical philosophy to the more pragmatical political work, or a reader may apply a mistaken version of this philosophy to Kant's politics' (p. 3). These mistakes take the common form of