

ZIZEK'S HEGEL: A REVIEW

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Writing in 2010, Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Zizek open their introduction to the edited volume *The Idea of Communism* with the declaration: 'The long night of the left is drawing to a close. The defeat, denunciations and despair of the 1980s and 1990s, the triumphalist "end of history" [prophecied by Fukuyama], the unipolar world of American hegemony – all are fast becoming old news.'¹ This declaration, it seems to us, catches the spirit of post-2008 days exactly. The challenge faced by the left is not that of compromising or conceding or speaking in Aesopian tongues but that of regaining our own voice.

This being the case, it is disappointing that Zizek's massive recently-published exploration of Hegel – S. Zizek *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso 2012), 1038pp. – assimilates Hegel's thought to an outlook where postmodernist satire and irony rather than political action becomes the order of the day. Disappointment is increased when it is added that Hegel is a thinker who has inspired generations of Marxist and revolutionary critique. If the 'long night of the left' is ending, a reading of Hegel which appears to make its peace (however detachedly and mockingly) with existing social reality is surely short-sighted and out of step with with the spirit of revolutionary times.

How should a prospective reader approach the vast and many-sided discussion that *Less than Nothing* contains? A starting-point is given in Zizek's comment that he seeks to 'reclaim' Hegel 'for the contemporary universe of radical contingency' (p. 805).² In referring to the 'contingency' of the present-day world, Zizek has in mind the circumstance that social reality cannot be viewed as the actualisation of a divine or metaphysical providential plan. What does the absence of such a plan mean for the interpretation of Hegel? Zizek's claim is that a present-day Hegelian must set aside the standard (or once-standard) view of Hegel as an "idealist" who propounds a theory that attempts to incorporate reality within itself. To such a 'constipated' (p. 399) interpretation, Zizek counterposes a reading according to which a dialectical subject 'renounce[s] enforcing its projects on reality' (p 202) and, instead, 'let[s] reality be the way it is' (ibid.).³ Rather than attempting to engulf reality in theory, or *reduce* reality to theory, Hegel as seen by Zizek refers to this or that aspect of reality

1 C. Douzinas and S. Zizek, eds., *The Idea of Communism* (Verso 2010) p. vii.

2 Unreferenced page numbers in the present review are to *Less than Nothing*, as above cited.

3 See also pp. 262, 399-402. The notion of "letting reality be" is further discussed in Zizek's contribution (headed 'Hegel and Shitting') in S. Zizek, C. Crockett and C. Davis, eds., *Hegel and the Infinite* (Columbia University Press 2011).

and, having referred to it, passes by.

Is Zizek's attack on traditional interpretations of Hegel plausible? We think it is. Setting aside points that are mainly terminological, we find ourselves in strong sympathy with the claim that Hegel need not be interpreted in an idealist way. This said, our sympathy is replaced by disquiet when it is noticed that *Less than Nothing* is a work that argues on two fronts.

On the one hand, Zizek does indeed argue against an “idealist” reading of Hegel: this is the strand in *Less than Nothing* that our review has emphasised so far. On the other hand, however, Zizek opposes a reading of Hegel which he tends to link with Georg Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923)⁴ and which we ourselves see as most fully expressed in Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1947) – the reading, that is, which has underpinned generations of “Left Hegelians” and “Hegelian Marxists” and which, for us, gives Hegel's thought its conceptual (and thereby its political) bite. In a paragraph referred to earlier, *Less than Nothing* rejects Kojève: it does so by arguing that 'finite thought' (and, hence, finite subjectivity) is 'caught in the “spurious infinity”' of a 'never-ending process' with the result that 'the subject's work is never done' (p. 202 once again). Stated differently, the revolutionary action which Kojève makes central to Hegel is dismissed by Zizek as self-defeating. In drawing this conclusion, are we reading too much into a single, admittedly compact passage? We think not. Elsewhere in *Less than Nothing* – at pp. 223 and 263-4, for example – Zizek appears to acknowledge that his reading of Hegel makes it difficult to see what forward-looking, political action can achieve.

Where does Zizek's argument on two fronts (against idealism and against Left Hegelianism) leave Zizek himself? If idealist theory and revolutionary action are alike rejected, what remains is, it seems, a stance towards present-day circumstances that is socially critical but confines itself to satire and sardonic commentary and parodic play. If dialectical thought 'recounce[s] enforcing its projects on reality' and 'let[s] reality be the way it is', does not a danger of *uncritical positivism* (to quote the early Marx) emerge in Zizek's version of Hegel? And, if political action is viewed as intrinsically problematic, does not this danger become all-too-real? Once the route to revolutionary action is blocked, conceptually, must theory not become a matter of commenting from the sidelines on what takes place?

Where does Zizek's argument leave the revolutionary left? An answer to this question requires that we turn from what *Less than Nothing* says to what it fails to say. In the course of his lengthy – thousand-pages-long – discussion, Zizek has very little to say about Hegel's vital notion of *recognition*; when he turns to the topic, in his book's closing pages, it is to play down its significance and to present recognition as merely a 'liberal' as distinct from critical or radical theme (pp. 991-3, 1004-5). For us, the theme of 'recognition [*Anerkennung*]' or social acknowledgement is one of the

4 See *Less than Nothing* pp. 220, 260.

chief glories and sources of challenge in Hegelian thought.⁵ Far from being a theme of merely 'liberal' provinance, recognition is an issue of far-reaching revolutionary importance: a world where mutual (or self-consistent) recognition is lacking is a world were inhumanity and exploitation are rife, and bringing mutual recognition into the foreground of social life requires that the world be turned upside down. Drawing the threads of this review together, we note that 'recognition' is less a liberal than a Left Hegelian theme. If, today, discussions of recognition tend to have liberal rather than revolutionary credentials, as Zizek notes, this is only because the notion of recognition has come to be understood in a diluted and softened and fundamentally conformist way. Our view is that the challenges of recognition go deeper – far, far deeper – than liberal conventions admit. Our further view is that not merely the interpretation of Hegel but an understanding of revolutionary action requires that issues concerning recognition (all but ignored by Zizek) are given a central theoretical place.

[Note: For more on the position from which the present review is written, see Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding 'Holloway, La Boetie, Hegel' *Journal of Classical Sociology* Vol. 12, No. 2 (May 2012). The text of the article may be accessed at www.richard-gunn.com]

5 Hegel discusses 'recognition' at various places in his work. But see, most famously, G.W.F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press 1977) pp. 110-9.

