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Žižek’s Marx: ‘Sublime Object’ or a ‘Plague of Fantasies’?

Of the many attractions that draw contemporary radical theorists to the work of Slavoj Žižek, one of the most significant is, it seems, his commitment to an uncompromising ‘Marxism’. Žižek claims not only to be a Marxist in the broad sense, but an orthodox Marxist, an ‘old fashioned dialectical materialist’; and, of course, this stance has been conjoined by the demand to ‘repeat Lenin’. This otherwise peculiar desire to claim for himself the mantle of ‘Marxist’ is evidently important for a number of reasons, political, strategic and theoretical. Firstly, it serves to problematise the assumption that, as someone whose primary points of reference are more obviously Lacan, Hegel and German idealism, Žižek would be no friend of Marx nor, indeed, of ‘dialectical materialism’. This problematisation serves in turn to neutralise potential leftist critics by allowing him to stand in their midst, as if to say ‘It’s OK comrades: I’m one of you’.1 In recent work, his identification with

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1 Among those who seem happy to endorse Žižek’s ‘Marxism’ is Alex Callinicos who, in a review of some of Žižek’s recent work in this journal, generously notes that Marxism is ‘capacious’ enough to accommodate otherwise heterodox figures such as Žižek wishing to deploy ‘classical Marxian concepts’. See Callinicos 2001, pp. 400–1. See also Brian Donahue, who terms Žižek’s analysis ‘specifically Marxist’ (Donahue
‘Marxism’ also allows him to don the mantle of political ‘radical’ vis-à-vis his intellectual opponents, whom he delights in accusing of political moderation and ineffectuality. His radicalism is, he wants to tell us, of the muscular, ‘serious’ and transformational kind, the kind we associate with being a ‘Marxist’ (and even more so with being a ‘Leninist’), whereas the radicalism of Mouffe, Laclau and Butler (to take three obvious targets) is effete, ‘reasonable’ and inconsequential. Thus Žižek’s ‘Marxism’ is a key totemic device to ward off potential radical leftist criticisms of his position whilst, at the same time, legitimating his stance against his intellectual ‘opponents’ in the eyes of the Left.

We argue here that, whilst Žižek’s (re)turn to Marx is indeed to be welcomed, his own ‘Marxism’ is unrelated either philosophically or politically to Marx’s work. This is not the same as claiming that Marx’s work is necessarily superior in all respects, nor, indeed, that Marx’s œuvre should be treated as a set of holy texts, impossible to refine and immune to criticism. Our concern is, rather, to reveal the shallowness of Žižek’s attachment to Marxist categories and the disingenuous nature of the game he is playing. Žižek’s ‘Marxism’ is, we wish to argue, a cover for an approach that is philosophically, theoretically and politically at odds with Marx. For this reason, we argue that those who wish to develop a progressive, transformative politics ‘after’ Marx should recognise Žižek’s work for what it is: the development of an idealist (in the philosophical sense) and politically reactionary position, of the sort Marx himself was critical of.