

Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle

by Slavoj Žižek, Verso, 2004, 188 pp.

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If the task of a review is to boil down the book's content to a series of discrete propositions and subject them to analysis and evaluation, then any book by Slavoj Žižek is strictly speaking unreviewable. Like Hegel, one of his key theoretical resources, Žižek is less interested in the statement than in the *performance* of a thesis. And unlike most psychoanalytic writers, Žižek takes seriously the Freudian insight into the irreducibly libidinal character of thinking and writing. Whether or not this accounts for his manic prolificity (a given month seems incomplete these days without the appearance of a new Žižek title), it certainly accounts for the delirious energy that infuses his work, its dizzying oscillations between dense theoretical speculation in the Continental mode, makeshift pop cultural analysis and political intervention. The incessant digressions into movies, reality TV, New Age 'philosophies,' pop psychology, obscene jokes and geopolitics which make Žižek so much more enjoyable (to pick up on one of his persistent Lacanian motifs) than the average contemporary theorist, far from being illustrative add-ons to the high-theoretical substance, are the high-theoretical substance. As he put it at the outset of one of his earliest books, it is these cultural and political concretions of theory that 'render visible' those aspects of it 'that would otherwise remain unnoticed.'

All this is by way of owning at the outset that, regardless of my agreement or otherwise with its substantive claims, I always take pleasure in reading a book by Žižek and being carried along its choppy, unpredictable argumentative waves. Even the most maddening provocations (and there are many in *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*) and stylistic tics (above all presenting claims in the form of clustered rhetorical questions – is this not a particularly effective strategy for luring the reader into unthinking assent?) carry an undeniably seductive charge.

As well as sharing in all these general Žižekian difficulties, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* presents some peculiar challenges of its own. Like *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, his response to 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, it is ostensibly more an 'interventionist' than a theoretical text. But unlike that earlier and more structurally more straightforward polemic, *Iraq* is a highly theorised intervention. It consists of

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a central chapter, 'Non Penis a Pendendo' (each of the unexplained chapter titles invokes an obscure and characteristically Lacanian bit of jocular Latin etymology – 'a penis isn't called such because it 'pendendo' – hangs') and two appendices. The main chapter is a series of relatively unformed and disjointed 'impressions and reactions to the unfolding story of the US attack on Iraq' (p. 8), whilst the appendices are more sustained theoretical reflections on questions of democracy, political action and sovereignty. These latter chapters both illuminate and estrange their predecessor, pointing us towards some of the philosophical premises implicit in Žižek's preceding commentary on Iraq and the US. As well as drawing liberally on his most familiar points of reference – Lacan, Hegel, Badiou – the appendices show evidence of Žižek's ongoing and defiantly unfashionable engagement with Lenin as political philosopher. Chalk it up to my postmodern jadedness, but for all the freshness of perspective he brings to the reading of Lenin, I can't help seeing in this affiliation a bit of scandalizing irony which only intensifies the more strictly he insists on its sincerity. For one thing, the attentiveness to the knotty textual problems in Lenin is never matched by a similar attentiveness to the ethical problems (to be a just a little euphemistic) associated with Lenin the historical actor.

The book's complex form poses a problem for a reviewer. It invites one to make explicit the textual relations the book deliberately leaves implicit, with the potential clunking effect of explaining a good joke. Still, the analogy only takes us so far: Žižek's appendices don't provide the kind of spontaneous and total illumination a good punchline gives to what precedes it. The light they cast over the chapter preceding them is rather more faltering and erratic – many of Žižek's books have been more theoretically demanding, but somehow none have caused me such intellectual eye-strain. Still, I shall try to outline some of the ways in which theory and polemic are speaking to one another through this interesting and frustrating experiment with structure.

Žižek seeks consciously to distinguish the tone and logic of his broadside against the Iraq war from those of his counterparts in the mainstream anti-war movement. In one of his more telling footnotes, he confesses to a 'fundamental sympathy' with Christopher Hitchens, despite their very different stances on Iraq and the war on terror: 'I infinitely prefer him to standard liberal-leftist anti-American 'pacifism.' Hitchens is an adversary worth reading – in contrast to many critics of the war on Iraq, who are much better ignored' (p. 182.)

It may be helpful to consider this passing doff of the hat towards Hitchens in the light of Žižek's previous comments on the cardinal virtue of Leninism in his 2001 book *On Belief*: 'a Leninist, like a Conservative, is *authentic* in the sense of *fully assuming the consequences of his choice*, i.e. of being fully aware of what it actually means to take power and to exert it' (p. 4.) Žižek's withering contempt for the anti-war movement is directed against the contrived and (as Lenin would have it) infantile 'purity' of its politics, the stance of Hegel's 'Beautiful Soul.' Thus, where Hitchens recognises that *any* authentic political judgment will bloody one's hands, the anti-war movement is enslaved to the fantasy of its own political innocence. Such a fantasy harbours more than a little unacknowledged violence of its own.

This insistence on Leninist responsibility (again, I can't help inserting a note of parenthetic petit-bourgeois anxiety here – is Leninism *really* the most apt name for this responsibly self-implicating politics?) helps make sense of one of the apparent contradictions in Žižek's political writings, namely that he seems simultaneously more uncompromisingly radical and more pragmatic than the liberal-left he prefers to ignore. He is more radical in that he insists on the imperative and efficacy of political action in the face of the trend towards the primacy of the ethical in contemporary Continental European philosophy from Habermas to Derrida and Laclau. In the first of his theoretical appendices, he contrasts the Derridean political act – a strategic intervention which always falls short of an impossibly transcendent ethical imperative – with a more Lacanian conception of the act as 'the impossible that *did happen*' (p. 80, Žižek's emphasis.) Whilst the tone of Žižek's engagement with deconstructive political theory is exact and respectful, it seems also to be the high-theoretical analogue of his much ruder critique of the anti-war left, which also regulates its politics by means of an impossibly high ideal and thereby evades all hard judgments.

Nowhere is the potential folly of such a purist politics better illustrated than in Žižek's splendid riposte to those 'Western leftists' who, in the early 1990s, reproached him for 'betraying the unique chance of maintaining a united Yugoslavia – to which I always answered that I was not yet ready to lead my life so that it would not shatter the dreams of Western leftists' (p. 24.) It is in this sense that Žižek plays pragmatist (in the strict sense of responsiveness to the shifting conditions and demands of the particular situation) to his idealist counterparts on the Left; his interest is in facilitating the passage from ideal to reality, rather than measuring reality against the impossible ideal. Thus, where much of the anti-war movement has staked itself in a reading of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict all too consonant

with the Islamist version, Žižek is trenchantly clear as to ‘the only viable solution – an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, the establishment of a Palestinian state, the renunciation by the Palestinians of their refugees’ return to the land within the borders of pre-1967 Israel as well as some kind of compromise over Jerusalem’ (p. 38.) Indeed, the psychoanalytically inflected question raised here is not how reconciliation between two such bitter enemies could be possible, but how the conflict continues in the face of the widely acknowledged obviousness of the solution. Is the real obstacle, Žižek wonders, an unconscious investment in the obstacle itself, ‘as if there is some kind of pathological libidinal profit gained by persisting in the deadlock’ (p. 39)?

One of Žižek’s persistent interests, then, is in how decisive intervention is blocked by pathological theoretical and political investments in an ideal beyond the reach of action. Nonetheless, his polemical ire in this book is not directed primarily against the Western left. The main chapter of *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* is above all a ferocious if rather scattershot attack on the Iraq war and the foreign policy assumptions on which it was based. Whilst sufficiently honest to fully acknowledge the collateral benefits of the attack, most obviously the removal of Saddam, he is scathing of any defence of the war on this basis. It is, he argues, self-deluding to seek to dissociate the motives and interests of the US from any possible benevolent outcomes of the war. ‘Abstract pacifism is intellectually stupid and morally wrong,’ he argues. ‘Of course the fall of Saddam is a relief to a large majority of the Iraqi people. Even more, of course, militant Islam is a horrifying reactionary ideology... *But*, although all this is true, the attack was wrong – and it was who did it that made it wrong’ (p. 50, Žižek’s emphasis.) If an unimpeachably sincere belief in the prospects the war might bring for democracy and prosperity in Iraq was one layer of the over-determined American motivation, so, nonetheless, according to Žižek, was the US drive for uncontested global hegemony and control over Iraqi oil reserves.

This unacknowledged impurity of motive is alluded to in the book’s title. The ‘borrowed kettle’ joke is one that recurs in Freud, first appearing in *The Interpretation of Dreams* as a brief illustration of the dream-work’s tolerance for logical contradiction, and then more extensively in *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious* as means of showing how a certain kind of joke gives us near unmediated access to the raw contents of the unconscious. In the joke, such as it is, the borrower of a kettle returns it to the owner with a hole in it, protesting when reproached that a) he never borrowed it, b) he returned it unbroken and c) it was already broken. The joke displays an aggressive self-preservative impulse bordering

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on the psychotic in its brazen disregard of the law of non-contradiction. As such, Žižek suggests, it resembles the shifting logic of US justifications of the war: a) there are WMDs in Iraq, b) Iraq is in league with al-Qaeda, c) Iraq is a ruthless dictatorial regime.

Given that Žižek confers the privilege of the book's title on this joke, it's surprising he does so little with it. In the first place, the analogy between the two chains of reasoning is uncharacteristically clumsy. Had he returned to Freud's discussion in *Jokes*, he might have noted that it was the 'mutual cancelling-out' of the borrower's excuses that gives the joke its unnervingly comic undertow. Only in the unconscious are contradictory thoughts and impulses permitted to co-exist side by side. The sequence of American excuses, in contrast, may be weaselly, but not contradictory. The point is, I would hope, not merely pedantic – there is a large difference between the nakedly aggressive self-interest that annihilates reason, and the political slipperiness that evades detection under the cover of reason.

Indeed, it is slipperiness rather than aggression which seems to be Žižek's real beef with the US. It is unable to assume the consequences of its political actions. Instead, self-interest is presented in the hollow guise of ethics. Thus, in one of the book's more neatly provocative formulations, Žižek declares that '*the problem with today's USA is not that it is a new global Empire, but that it is not: in other words, that, while pretending to be, it continues to act as a nation-state, ruthlessly pursuing its own interests*' (p. 19.)

How are we to understand this problem from a theoretical perspective? The discussion of the Lacanian distinction between 'S1 and S2,' the two levels of signifying practice, provide some suggestive clues here. S2 is the level of the positive statement or action, S1 of the Void or Nothingness from which it issues. This is the level not of concrete political actions, but of the very condition of action, namely the existence of a 'contentless' public space available to appropriation and intervention by different actors. Žižek's helpful and often-invoked illustration is the motif in Kasimir Malevich's painting, in which the black square is set against the empty space of the white square figures 'the minimal difference between the place and what takes place.' *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* offers a cultural-political illustration of this minimal relation in a brief discussion of 'flash mobs,' whereby a group summoned by text message performs an arbitrary act at an assigned place and time and then disperses. Here too is a moment of cultural-political organisation whose purpose seems to be no more than that of 'marking a minimal difference' (p. 124.)

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Why should this mark matter to political thought? Because, Žižek argues, the possibility of political transformation is alive only when the minimal space between the positive enunciation (political speech and action) and its conditions (the very fact of community) is kept open. When this space is closed down (this closure, he suggests, is what marks the transition from Leninism to Stalinism), the scope of political possibility is reduced to whatever is permissible within the terms of positive political enunciation; intervention to transform the actual conditions of political enunciation is invalidated from the outset.

For Žižek, it is this closure of the gap between S1 and S2 that characterises the US's conduct of geopolitics today. It has created a political space hermetically sealed against the possibility of real contestation, imposing the sovereignty of its own interests on the world under a show of imperial benevolence.

The urgent question provoked by this closure is, of course, what is to be done? And it is here that Žižek's intervention strikes me as running most seriously aground, derailed by its own unproductive contradictions. In a bizarre transposition of contexts, he proposes in a key section of the main essay that we take a position vis-à-vis Islamism correlative to that of the conservative intellectual historian Emil Nolte's vis-à-vis Heidegger's Nazism. Just as Nolte saw in Heidegger's turn to Nazism not, as standard historical accounts suggest, an aberration of no consequence to the integrity of his thinking, but 'a viable option in the situation of the late 1920s and 1930s in the context of economic chaos and the Communist threat' (p. 46), so in Islamism (or simply 'Islam' – Žižek seems to find the distinction suspiciously ideological) we find a politically viable response to American global hegemony. It's important not to understand Žižek too quickly here – he is not, I believe, advocating a Galloway-style alliance between Islamism and the Left on the basis of a common anti-Americanist denominator. His argument is arguably rooted in a more classically Western Marxist analysis of fascism and communism as means of harnessing the same concentrated political energies in radically different directions. This distinction duly made, I find a passage like the following nonetheless very difficult to take:

Precisely because Islam harbours the 'worst' potentials of the Fascist answer to our present predicament, it can also turn out to be the site for the 'best.' In other words, yes, Islam is indeed not a religion like the others, it does involve a stronger social link, it does resist integration into the capitalist global order – and the task is to work out how to use this ambiguous fact politically. (p. 49)

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It *is*? I can't help finding in these reflections a certain theoretical and political *decadence*, a will to gratuitous scandalizing that borders on the louché. Is Žižek seriously proposing that an embrace of some transformative promise buried in radical Islam might keep open the space between S1 and S2?

I'd have thought that probing the continued and profoundly troubling gap between America's benign imperial claims and its *realpolitik* realities provides a much more productive line of inquiry. Like Žižek and many opponents of the war, it's a gap I deplore – but one which can and should be used to advance uncompromisingly the primacy of the universal political good against destructively narrow self-interests, be they Western, Ba'athist or Islamist. From this perspective, support for grassroots political reconstruction in Iraq, far from involving capitulation to some nefarious Western agenda, is an exemplary claim for popular control of political space against all the ideological interests seeking to appropriate it. This, surely, would be one meaning of maintaining the distance between S1 and S2 in Iraq.

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