

Fabio Vighi

On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation.

London and New York: Continuum 2010.

208 pages

US\$120.00 (cloth ISBN-13: 978-1-8264-6443-9)

This book is a sophisticated inquiry into the potential for a revolutionary politics within the philosophy of Žižek. Informed as much by a Žižekian conception of the subject as by a ready-made political perspective, it is actually by allowing the one to resonate with the other that the book proposes that an alternative to capitalism should be sought through a coincidence of politics and theory. The challenge of thinking this alternative has to do with the way capitalism maintains an unconscious hold even while promoting itself as disinterested in anything other than the freedom of individuals. It is in response to this ubiquitous power that Vighi explores the Žižekian dialectical sequence: against an edifice that monopolizes the entire field of what it is possible to conceive today, this sequence involves reinvesting the gentrified surplus internal to capitalism with its antagonistic quality, so as to bring about a subtraction that forces thought into a creative encounter with its own outside. The book is scrupulously argued, which is how Vighi manages to approximate the familiar Žižekian verve without resorting to a parody of Žižek's inimitable philosophical method. This scrupulousness is exhibited in a particularly astute account of surplus-value that follows the concept through the complex development it undergoes at the hands of Lacan in his seventeenth seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*.

Capitalism is understood throughout this book as a duplicitous mechanism that manages to transform the compromising surplus from which it is perpetuated into a fundamental principle of social life. The surplus of capitalism corresponds to the apparently straightforward ideological injunction to enjoy, where what matters is not so much what is consumed as that there is voracious consumption. This injunction has capitalism identifying with its own obscene core in a way that allows it to appear as a happy, non-ideological effect of being and to integrate even the most blatantly antithetical forms of behavior. Here, Vighi makes reference to Lacan, whose address to the student revolutionaries at Vincennes in 1969 emphasized the way their behavior was accommodated by the capitalist paradigm (18-19). The reason the injunction to enjoy functions is that what it invites is effectively not excessive at all. Advertising slogans that promote non-alcoholic beer and fatless food are, for Vighi as well as for Žižek, so many indications of how the parallaxic emptiness of the commodity reduces enjoyment to an anxiety-provoking displacement without which the consumer would be deprived of his or her minimal being (23-4). It is not necessary to believe in commodities because belief is externalized, given over to the commodities, which perpetuate themselves through this dynamic of disappointment and consumption.

The ruse of capitalism has to do with how it sanitizes the excessiveness on which it depends. Even in Marx, surplus-value describes the accrual of capital from an enigmatic surplus on the side of labor: the initial exchange of capital for labor is geared

toward an excess that emerges through this labor, one that is then valorized so as to give the capitalist something for nothing in the form of net income. If surplus-value accords less to non-remunerated labor-time than it does to an unconscious knowledge-at-work, then the Lacanian equation of surplus-value and surplus-*jouissance* is already apparent. Lacan situates capitalism at the transition from the discourse of the master to that of the university, which is, for him, when surplus became quantifiable, as it is today in the distribution of credit points. The slave whose unconscious knowledge-at-work went into producing for the benefit of a master is replaced by the worker who participates as a consumer only at the expense of handing over this knowledge. Endorsing the Lacanian insight that workers are expropriated of the knowledge unique to them, Vighi insists that an alternative to capitalism must involve the politicization of surplus-*jouissance* (58).

This proclivity for transforming surplus into value does not extend to the impoverished human surplus, which, as a particularly heinous manifestation of surplus-*jouissance*, becomes a key site for politicization. The political intervention Vighi outlines coincides with what Lacan has to say about shame (91-4), but it also follows Lacan in emphasizing the revolutionary potential of the unconscious more generally. Vighi explores this juncture of the political and the unconscious through the subject in Žižek (97-103). It is a subject that is duped, alienated by the social edifice in a manner that renders any belief in an autonomy attained through a withdrawal from the social as a fundamental misrecognition of its own condition. The cynic whose apparent liberation coincides with a social withdrawal is here a ridiculous solipsist. Autonomy is possible for Žižek, but only through a paradoxical identification with the social itself, one that uses its constitutive antagonism to allow the subject to radically subtract from its own content. This is why Žižek maintains that an authentic political act has to be marked by a contingency that both guarantees its autonomy and renders unpredictable the consequences of the subsequent fallout.

The Žižekian act is a leap that treats the inconsistency of the existing social order as a vertiginous opportunity to bring about what had appeared to be impossible from within its ideological configuration. But here Vighi finds Žižek insisting on a dialectical moment that renders theory dependant: he notes the way that Žižek describes theory as requiring a heterogeneous event in order to break from the discursive horizon that prevents it from acquiring any genuinely revolutionary potential (151-3). The argument that theory has to await an event so as to become subtracted from the ideological hold of capitalism is one that Vighi deems unsatisfactory, not only because those communities impoverished by the capitalist mechanism can already be understood as pockets of subtraction, but also because a theory without revolutionary potential will lack political effectiveness (154). Instead, Vighi proposes a coincidence of politics and theory that is actually no less Žižekian, where theory confronts its own destabilizing surplus to bring about a new that is already thoroughly political. The ultimate insight of this book is achieved by rearticulating the surplus through which capitalism is covertly sustained as the urgent theoretical project of constructing an alternative social formation.

Morgan Pulver

University of Queensland