

# Everything you wanted to know about Organization Theory . . . but were afraid to ask Slavoj Žižek

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## **Introduction: An encounter, not a dialogue**

Slavoj Žižek has produced a plethora of books over the past 15 years (at the rate of over one a year), many of which are all curiously alike, as he recycles compulsively a limited number of key themes. Yet, one never feels any sense of sterile repetition. In revisiting a topic, he often sheds new light on it, and so continues the conversation he seems to be having with himself. Žižek is not much interested in establishing a rational, sensible dialogue with his readers. Instead, he is a firm believer in clear-cut positions. His writing is invariably crisp, provocative, and devoid of any coyness. One of Žižek's favourite one-liners is (paraphrasing Freud): 'Why are you saying that you're only giving a modest opinion when what you are giving is only a modest opinion'. Žižek doesn't 'do' modesty.

Žižek is also unconventional with the choice of philosophies he reads. Although all of his work goes through Lacanian concepts, he is not simply someone who fetishizes post-war French thought (as so many organization theorists do today). Instead, he uncompromisingly connects Lacanian categories to German idealist philosophy – the latter hardly being overly popular in organization theory. But the real uniqueness in Žižek's writing lies in the fact that he effortlessly blends together 'the 'highest' theory (Hegel, Lacan) and unrestrained enjoyment in the 'lowest' popular culture' (Žižek, 2002a: 3), whilst casually (some would argue naively) moving from the psychoanalytic to the political and back again. Some might say: he's all over the place.

At first glance he seems to write for the browser: 'They came up with the idea to do a CD-ROM, because I write in the same manner: click here, go there, use this fragment, that story or scene' (Žižek, 2002b: 43). And indeed, the typical Žižekian unit of discourse is a wittily titled (eg, 'the non-analysable Slovene'; 'let the emperor have his clothes') passage of between 5 and 15 pages, containing a dazzling cataract of demonstrations and examples from popular culture, for which a particular idea often seems a mere pretext. Wave upon wave of

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interpretation leaves the reader at somewhat of a loss as to how these brilliant but seemingly arbitrary sequences fit together.

If anything, Žižek's prime purpose seems to be to shake the foundations of his readers' commonsensical assumptions. One of his stock phrases is 'I am tempted to turn the standard formula around by . . .'. Joan Copjec, in a back-cover-commentary on a recent book (Žižek, 2004), has therefore called him justifiably 'the master of the 180 degree turn'. Žižek tries to turn the table. He calls himself 'ruthlessly radical': someone who turns the taken-for-granted assumptions of society upside down. Today's typical anti-terrorist rhetoric of Western democratic leaders often emphasizes the need to defend 'our way of life'. Žižek is someone who aims hard at turning the ideologies of democracy and the assumptions of the Western way of life upside down. In this sense, he is inextricably involved with the 'war on terror' (Žižek, 2002d).

In this chapter we aim to broadly outline Žižek's radical project and explore possible connections to, and subversions of, lines of thought in organization theory – an academic field which, despite the popularity of Žižek's work in the wider social sciences, seems to have largely ignored his writings, with a few recent exceptions (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; forthcoming; and Jones and Spicer, 2005). Perhaps this ignorance is not all that surprising since Žižek likes to profile himself firmly *against* a background which more or less overlaps with the currently fashionable 'critical' agenda in organization theory:

This background is formed by the set of (often more implicit than explicit) theoretical, ideological, and ethico-political prohibitions and injunctions. For the last two decades, multitude has been in, unity out; contingency in, necessity out; subjectivation in, subject out; multiculturalism in, the European legacy out; difference in, universality out; antinomy in, contradiction out; resistance in, revolution out; up to much more refined injunctions concerning style. (Žižek, 2003a: 499)

Having said that – and hopefully having lured the reader into this chapter – our encounter with Žižek is not so much a matter of carefully analysing every detail of his philosophical project and applying it to organization theory. It is more like the occurrence of some kind of short-circuit as a result of which 'the reader should not simply have learned something new: the point is, rather, to make him or her aware of another – disturbing – side of something he or she knew all the time' (Žižek, 2003b: preface). Ultimately, Žižek is not really interested in 'careful' theoretical analyses of texts. He cares mainly about events: events that shock; events that reveal the dirty underbelly of taken-for-granted social reality. And this is how one should approach Žižek's work: rather than subjecting it to careful textual scrutiny and debate, one should see the mountain of texts he has produced over the past 15 years or so as an event. The task of this chapter is to give the reader a glimpse of this event and begin to evaluate its significance for organization theory. Whilst his work clearly provides strong connections with important organizational themes – power, subjectivity, ideology, and the philosophy of organization – Žižek would probably balk at being described as an 'organization theorist'. Indeed, a Žižekian approach to 'doing organization

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theory' would probably result in the destruction of the very idea of organization theory, as the field would have to confront its own impossibility. Perhaps we should see Žižek therefore not so much as an organizational theorist, but rather as the *objet petit a* of organization theory; 'that 'bone in the throat' which gives a pathological twist to every symbolization' (Žižek, 2003b: 67).

### **Lacan and Hegel: Žižek's theoretical matrix**

Žižek's work is characterized by a unique blending of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelian dialectics and the philosophies of a range of mainly German thinkers (particularly Marx, Kant, and Schelling). Due to space restrictions we will concentrate our discussion on Žižek's interpretation of Lacan and Hegel, as they provide the backbone for his theoretical project. Much of Žižek's writing turns around the Lacanian *RSI* triad, tracing the relationship between the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary (see eg, Lacan, 1977, 1998). Žižek's Lacan is very much the Lacan who, at the end of the 1950s, began to move away from the relation between the Symbolic and the Imaginary in favour of a sustained interrogation of the interplay between the Symbolic and the Real (Nicol, 2001). Žižek understands the Symbolic as the arbitrary system of meanings into which we divide our world, an entity which pre-exists us, and into which we are born, learning and abiding by its rules. Its anonymity and vaguely sinister air is conveyed by its alternative name, 'the big Other'. One of the most fundamental insights Žižek borrows from Lacan is the idea that the Symbolic or the 'big Other' is always incomplete and both constituted and subverted by the Real. One could also say that the Real is the lack of the 'big Other'; it is the surplus of reality that cannot be symbolized. For Žižek, reality is not just 'out there', fully constituted and given, unconcerned by our painful progress. Our stumbling search for knowledge, our confusions and failures; precisely that which seems to *separate* us from the way reality 'really' is 'out there', is the innermost constituent of reality itself.

You symbolize nature, but in order to symbolize nature, in this very symbolization, you produce an excess or a lack symmetrically and that's the Real . . . the very gesture of symbolization introduces a gap in reality. It is this gap which is the Real and every positive form of this gap is constituted through fantasy. (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 78)

The other main theoretical source Žižek draws upon is Hegel and his philosophy of dialectical negativity. Now, it is probably an understatement to say that dialectics has not been particularly popular within the realms of organization theory in recent years (for a discussion, see, for example, Carr, 2000; Hancock and Tyler, 2001; Reed, 1996; and Willmott, 1990). A typical interpretation of the dialectical process is delivered by Burrell and Morgan when they state that 'the dialectic stresses that there is a basic antagonism and conflict within both the natural and the social world which, when resolved, leads to a higher stage of development. This dialectical process is seen as a universal principle, which

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generates progress towards the state of “absolute knowledge” (1979: 280–281). Within such a view, the dialectical process is seen as the bringing together of antagonistic categories – thesis and antithesis – in order to produce a new, progressive synthesis. Žižek, however, reads Hegel very differently. In his view, the synthesis does not heal any wound cut open by an antithesis; it is not necessarily progressive and it does not return to a positive identity (1989: 176). Instead, the synthesis is characterized by antagonisms as much as the ‘original’ thesis is. This brings us back to the Lacanian Real. If reality can be seen as a kind of social synthesis, Žižek maintains that this synthesis can never be a finality or totality. Instead, social reality – the synthesis – is always subverted by the Real: a plethora of antitheses that constitute the failure of the closure of society or any form of organization.

Žižek’s popularity partly hinges on the fact that he does not simply reproduce ‘dry’ theoretical constructs, but constantly seeks to illustrate them by making reference to popular culture and other examples. Lévi-Strauss’ famous anthropological study of the spatial disposition of buildings of the Winnebago is one such example Žižek uses to illustrate his theoretical position. The tribe Lévi-Strauss studied is divided into two subgroups. When an individual from each subgroup is asked to draw on sand the ground-plan of his or her village we obtain two quite different answers depending on his or her belonging to one subgroup or the other. Both perceive the village as a circle; but for one subgroup there is another circle of central houses within this circle, so that we have two concentric circles; while for the other subgroup the circle is split in two by a clear dividing line. The two drawings of the ground-plan are two mutually exclusive endeavours with the function of inventing imaginary representations of social contradictions. The Real here is not the actual spatial arrangement of houses, but the traumatic core of the social antagonism that distorts the tribe members’ view:

The site of truth is not the way “things really are in themselves”, beyond their perspectival distortions, but the very gap, passage, that separates one perspective from another, the gap (in this case social antagonism) that makes the two perspectives radically incommensurable. The ‘Real as impossible’ is the cause of the impossibility of ever attaining the ‘neutral’ nonperspectival view of the object. There is a truth; everything is not relative – but this truth is the truth of the perspectival distortion as such, not the truth distorted by the partial view from a one-sided perspective. (Žižek, 2003b: 79)

Such a conceptualization provides a formidable challenge to so-called ‘Critical Realist’ voices within organization theory (eg. Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000; Mingers, 1995; Morgan and Sturdy, 2000; and Reed, 1997 – for a short overview of ‘critical realist’ writings within organization theory see Burrell, 2003). Contrary to Žižek’s understanding of the ‘Real as impossible’, Critical Realists – whose work is influenced by writers such as Bhaskar (1989) and Archer (1995) – maintain that the Real has an inner constitution and is made up of essences which are not amenable to human observation. Yet, the position that the truth

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of social reality lies exactly in its *impossibility* clearly resonates well with the theoretical project of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), which conceptualizes social organization as a ‘structural undecidability’, as Laclau (1996) calls it (Laclau being an important ‘father figure’ who introduced Žižek to the Anglo-Saxon publishing world).

Žižek’s theoretical matrix has a range of implications that should be of interest to organization theorists. In what follows we concentrate our discussion on his conceptualization of self and society, his understanding of the workings of ideology, and his critique of capitalism.

### **Subjectivity, ideology, capitalism**

For Žižek, the Real penetrates both society and the individual, which means that both are always thrown out of kilter. Thus, what we take for substantive entities (eg, self and society), are actually hollow. The only substance is the Real of *jouissance*, which is excluded from both, but which subtends the sense of everyday ‘reality’.<sup>1</sup> The core of subjectivity is a void filled in by fantasy, and the fact that we can only ever plug our lack with fantasy after fantasy is what keeps us up and running (Eagleton, 2003). Žižek’s (1997) point is that this fantasy is also characteristic of what we call ‘society’ or ‘organization’. That is, the social – the political and economic relations that make up society or organization – are fantastic in the sense of being both illusory and real fillings of the fundamental gap that describes them.

Precisely because *jouissance* restlessly invests across the boundaries of self and society, the libidinal cannot be confined to subjectivity or psychology. It provides the tissue of fantasies that make up the social/organizational whilst the narrowly libidinal itself is a web of social and political representations. In this breaking down of the barriers between concepts of desire and libido (the ‘subjective’) and the social, political and economic (the ‘objective’), Žižek’s project has clear resonances with that of Deleuze (see Žižek, 2004, see also Sørensen, in this volume), although they seek to achieve their ends by different means and in different forms.

Žižek is probably best known for his interventions in the theory of ideology, as it was the core topic of his breakthrough work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). For Žižek, the important hold ideology has over us lays in its capacity to yield *jouissance*; ideological power finally rests on the libidinal rather than the conceptual, ‘on the way we hug our chains rather than the way we entertain beliefs’ (Eagleton, 2003: 198). Because ideology is an illusion which structures our social practices, for Žižek the ‘falsity’ lies on the side of what we *do*, not necessarily of what we *say* or *know*. His standard line of argument goes something like this: ‘we’ (eg, the ‘ethical’ consumer, the ‘left-leaning’ Western academic, or the ‘democratic’ politician) know exactly how things are – that ‘the West’ exploits ‘the South’ and that the Western way of life is utterly unsustainable. However, although we might *know* all sorts of things about how capitalist

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society works – and although we might create a certain cynical distance to these things – Žižek argues that we are still *doing* them; we are still engaging in the reproduction of capitalist relations precisely because these relations are objectively ‘false’ and act as systematic fantasy (1989: 32).

Žižek thus performs his trademark ‘180-degree turn’ on traditional forms of ideology critique, which assume that social practices are real but that the beliefs used to justify them are false or illusory. Such arguments are practised, for example, by some labour process theorists within the realms of organization theory (eg, Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Rowlinson and Hassard, 2001; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; and Thompson and Smith, 2001). Žižek’s key point is that the central ideological ingredient is to be located in the mode of enjoyment it makes possible, which is indifferent to so-called ‘social realities’. The aim of Žižek’s version of ideology critique is to create the conditions in which we can experience that there is nothing behind ideology. We can resist ideological power most effectively not by repudiating it but by fully accepting its dictates, and doing so in an overly literal way that brings them to the point of their inherent contradiction. Keeping a ‘critical distance’ points to ideological delusion at its worst: precisely by not identifying with the web of power one is truly caught in it.

Arguably, such conceptualizations of subjectivity and ideology pose a formidable challenge to some corners of organization theory. For example, Foucauldian labour process theory (eg, Knights and Willmott, 1989; Knights, 1997, 2001; and Willmott, 1990, 1997, see O’Doherty, in this volume), which has been one of the most popular and influential theoretical developments over the past two decades, conceives the subject as the *effect* of discourses that are produced by ‘micro-political’ relations of power and knowledge. Knights and Willmott’s concern – and that of other Foucauldians in organization theory – is to show that social reality is the constitutive product of a plurality of disciplinary techniques of power and knowledge (1989: 549). They argue that ‘forms of power are exercised through subjecting individuals to their own identity or subjectivity, and are not therefore mechanisms directly derived from the forces of production, class struggle or ideological structures’ (1989: 553). What is thus important for Knights and Willmott is the emphasis of *individual* subjectivities and the way people become tied to themselves by self-discipline and self-knowledge (1989: 550). Such readings of Foucault’s work maintain that subjectivity is a ‘performative’ process of continually reshaping and choosing alternative ‘subject positions’.

For Žižek, Foucauldian ‘micro-political’ subject positions designate a form of subjectivity that corresponds to ‘late capitalism’, which brings us back to his conception of the workings of capitalist ideology. His line of argument is that today we are ‘allowed’, for example, to be gay, radical feminist and even cynical critics of capitalism. All these different subject positions and identities are possible within contemporary capitalist relations – as long as we still engage in the labour process and capitalist forms of accumulation and reproduction. ‘Late capitalism’ enables a whole host of differences without necessarily challenging

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the fundamental logic of capitalist relations – this argument can also be connected to Hardt and Negri's (2000) conceptions of 'Empire' as a fundamentally open regime that enables a multitude of differences to exist (see also Mandarin, in this volume). Žižek's point is that rather than forming all sorts of different subject positions that aim to escape the core of capitalist fantasy, one should engage the fundamental fantasy of capitalist relations in a direct, uncompromising fashion. The way forward is therefore to 'traverse the fantasy' – a phrase which he borrows from the outcome of Lacanian therapy (Kay, 2003).

### Žižek's radical politics

Žižek has been politically active in his home country Slovenia. He finished fifth in the 1990 elections – narrowly missing becoming one of the four-person rotating presidential team – and fully supported the liberal-democratic party. Whilst such a move fitted in with his early writings against totalitarianism from a position that was, at least in outline, liberal; in his most recent writings he has become an increasingly virulent critic of liberal democracy which he sees as utterly intertwined with capitalism: 'It is only in this way, by problematizing democracy – by making it clear that liberal democracy *a priori*, in its very notion (as Hegel would have put it), cannot survive without capitalist private property – that we can become truly anti-capitalist' (Žižek, 2002c: 273). Whilst Žižek refuses to look to communism as a solution to capitalism – 'I don't have any fundamental hopes in a socialist revolution or whatever' (Žižek, 2002b: 40) – and even describes communism as 'a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself' (2000a: 18), he nevertheless likes to portray himself as 'an old-fashioned left winger' (2002b: 39).

Žižek's radical politics is founded, not in the notion of a difference that must be contained or embraced, but in the notion of the universal. He sees the political problem as one of struggle against the current of dominant, differentiating, particularist interests. He particularly takes issue with the ontologization of 'Democracy' into a depoliticized universal frame which cannot be (re)negotiated.

The radicalization of politics into open warfare of us-against-them discernible in different fundamentalisms is *the form in which the foreclosed political returns in the post-political universe of pluralist negotiation and consensual regulation*. For that reason, the way to counteract this reemerging ultrapolitics is not more tolerance, more compassion and multicultural understanding, but *the return of the political proper* . . .

True universalists are not those who preach global tolerance of differences and all-encompassing unity but those who engage in a passionate fight for the assertion of the truth that engages them. (Žižek, 1998: 1002)

Žižek thus does not feel that society would be improved by a greater commitment to order and democratic institutions or a more urgent call to civic duty – a position which stands in clear contrast to some liberalist voices expressed within the realms of organization theory (eg, Armbrüster and Gebert, 2002; du

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Gay, 2000). Furthermore, he is also pessimistic about the possibility of a gradual production of alternative organizational regimes and sees a kind of conversion between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance (Žižek, 2004). It is not that Žižek is against political activity (his own concrete political actions prove otherwise, and indeed demonstrate the necessity of such actions), but he believes that traditional political activity simply does not have the capacity for radical change: 'alternative social formations . . . are, in their innermost core, mediated by Capital as their concrete universality, as the particular formation that colours the entire scope of alternatives' (*ibid*: 186). His point is that alternative approaches typically intervene at a superficial, symptomal level. They amount to 'doing things not in order to achieve something, but to prevent something from really happening, really changing' (Žižek, 2002c: 225).

But does Žižek thereby condone a pessimist vision of social life caught in a repetitious deadlock, without any prospect for resolution, and thus opening the way to the 'celebration of failure', or even 'utter passivity' as critics (eg, Kay, 2003; Robinson and Tormey, 2004) have suggested? His answer is a dismissive 'No!', as he grasps back to a 'proper' universalism in his most recent works (eg, 2000a, 2002c). For Žižek, politics proper always involves a kind of short circuit between the universal and the particular; it involves the paradox of a singular that appears as a stand-in for the universal, destabilizing the 'natural' functional order of relations in the social body. Thus, we should not see the universal (eg, 'the non-exploitative', 'the egalitarian') in terms of an acontextual absolute, but rather as a culturally specific absolute (manifested as exception, the bone-in-the-throat, to the dominant form of the day). One way to effect change therefore is to seize on this exception, or on the random, contingent factor in the current scheme of things, and force its universal implications so as to produce a new order (Žižek, 2001a). Here his point of reference is what Badiou (2002) designates as *Event*: the art of seizing the right moment, of aggravating a conflict *before* the System can accommodate itself to the demand.

The undecidability of the Event thus means that an Event does not possess any ontological guarantee: it cannot be reduced to (or deduced, generated from) a (previous) Situation: it emerges 'out of nothing'. (Žižek, 1999: 136)

The cause immediately triggering it 'is, by definition, trifling, a pseudo cause signalling that what is at stake is the relationship to the Other' (Žižek, 2004: 205). For Žižek, all social and organizational attempts which try to establish a plural, egalitarian and 'just' order through a regime of social dialogue and bureaucratic rules, only hide the taken-for-granted (and misconceived) universalism of Western 'Democracy'.

### Žižek's critics and his 'style'

Many of the features of Žižek's thought that I tried to identify – rapidity, passion, high philosophical and political seriousness, a certain will to excess, and pure intel-



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lectual power – are in evidence here [in Žižek’s reply], and the stakes of his work are spelled out with admirable precision. On a personal level, too, I am grateful to Žižek for providing the bracing, once-in-a-lifetime experience of having a man I had just praised as the most formidable philosophical mind of his generation immediately denounce me as a lunatic (Harpham, 2003: 504).

Žižek usually does not respond well to criticism. In his replies he tends to be disdainful of his critics (viz. Žižek, 2000b, 2003a), spending a handful of sentences composing a response to their critique and then proceeding to write about something entirely else that pre-occupies him. This can be seen as somewhat symptomatic for his general writing ‘style’, which often relies on engagements with other authors’ work that are far from ‘careful’. His writing often utilizes ‘isms’, particularly ‘postmodernism’ and ‘deconstructionism’, without engaging with the work of individual authors in great detail. For example, he has been accused of making outlandish claims about Derrida’s work and ‘deconstructionism’ without citing a single source of Derrida’s or other deconstructionist writings (Gilbert, 2001).<sup>2</sup> Žižek’s project can be further qualified by an extreme reliance on the philosophies of Lacan and Hegel, which he utilizes to explain almost everything. Critics, such as Laclau and Butler (Butler *et al.*, 2000, see also Borgerson, in this volume), maintain that his psychoanalytic insights are not historicized enough and therefore act as almost essentialist concepts that stand in for a rigorous historical analysis of the social contingencies of capitalism and left politics. A related, and milder criticism concerns the fact that at certain stages in his books Žižek feels the need to rev up the metaphysical engine to such an extent (for example, in his explorations of Hegel and Schelling) that even eminent critics admit they cannot always follow his line of thought (eg, Eagleton, 2001; Harpham, 2003a; Kay, 2003). Žižek’s writings also have been criticized for overly relying on a multiplicity of analogies from popular culture (such as cinema references or popular jokes) which do not always make sense; indeed these can be seen as almost arbitrary. In an all-too-scarce instance of self-criticism, Žižek himself expresses some reservations about the ‘succession of anecdotes and cinema references in the *Sublime Object*’ (Žižek, 2002a: xi). Furthermore, Kay (2003) points out that the interpretive zeal with which Žižek tackles his examples is very much at odds with Lacan’s wariness of interpretation and precipitate understanding. Finally, it is not all that clear from Žižek’s writings what it is we can legitimately engage with. His uncompromising language often seems to preclude productive engagement in empirical and normative debates and offers only a stark ‘all or nothing’ choice (Robinson and Tormey, 2004).

However (and it is a very big ‘however’), one has to tread carefully when critiquing Žižek’s work: it is precisely because he is a man who doesn’t watch his back that it is extremely easy to find fault with the details of his work. Žižek’s way of proceeding, in terms of style and content, poses a fundamental challenge to conventional academic methods and practices. When Fleming (2004: 41), in his review of the four-volume *Critical Perspectives on Business and Management* behemoth, points out that ‘It is in the ominous spirit of an anti-modernist,

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anti-enlightenment, anti-progress and anti-emancipatory stance that the editors proceed to define what they mean by ‘critical’, this only serves as a reminder of how awkwardly Žižek’s project sits within a ‘critical’ organization studies.<sup>3</sup> Very often the target of his vitriolic critique of ‘postmodernists’ and ‘deconstructionists’ are precisely these scholars who cherry pick concepts and frameworks for intellectual comfort, so that they can ‘relieve us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevent* us from thinking’ (Žižek, 2001b: 3). For Žižek, the hope of finding theoretical foundations that can unambiguously shore up an academic field is necessarily illusory. His own thought relies on perpetual movement, fuelled by the constant switches of perspective on his eclectic assembly of materials. He, in effect, follows Lacan in proceeding in a ‘mildly maniacal manner’ (Eagleton, 2001: 50), placing a continuous positive valuation upon ambiguity and bringing theory to the brink of its own impossibility. For Žižek, theoretical concepts are both necessary and impossible.

What sets in motion the dialectical progress in Hegel’s *Logic* is the inherent tension in the status of every determinate/limited category: each concept is simultaneously necessary (ie, indispensable if we are to conceive reality, its underlying ontological structure) and impossible (ie, self-refuting, inconsistent: the moment we fully and consequently ‘apply’ it to reality, it disintegrates and/or turns into its opposite). (Žižek, 1999: 99)

Žižek uses examples from popular culture not in order to ‘apply’ his theory – as if there could exist a ready-made conceptual apparatus. On the contrary, his theory is developed precisely through, or in-between, these examples. The point is not to neatly place them within a theoretical framework but to see them as a gesture of the *jouissance* of the Real. The dissatisfying obliqueness of Žižek’s approach is precisely meant to enable the reader to see that the Real cannot be signified directly, but is always stumbled upon in a way that is at once contingent and unavoidable. He strives, perhaps impossibly, ‘to include within thought that which is heterogeneous to it’ (Eagleton, 1991: 126). Thought is always hollowed out by the inassimilable Real.

The apparent misfit between the theoretical context and the illustrative instance provokes Žižek’s readers to work out the reason for it . . . this working out leads us to the problematic at the core of his writing: that of our relation to the real. By the same token, for the reader, a relation to the real, both as something lost to conscious thought and as a fearsome threat, is conjured in the very effort of trying to understand his text. (Kay, 2003: 11)

There is a fundamental problem in the fact that Žižek tries to conceptualize something which cannot really be conceptualized. Since what is awry is the whole cast and frame of our consciousness, conditioned as it is by material constraints, no amount of intelligence or ingenuity will serve to get us further forward. Yet, the premise is a simple one, and in following it he is utterly logical in his radical politics: if a transformation would be intelligible, if we can talk about it, it could not possibly be radical enough; if it is full-blooded enough, it threatens to fall outside our comprehension. We simply ‘cannot get rid of our

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subjection through a merely intellectual reflection' (Žižek, 2002c: 253). Thus Žižek's 'style' should not merely be critiqued, but seen as part of the aporia of radical political writing as such.

## Notes

- 1 *Jouissance*, or enjoyment, is not simply pleasure. For Lacan, pleasure is produced by the symbolic order, the Other. *Jouissance*, in contrast, is beyond socially sanctioned pleasure (1998: 184); it is located in the Real, that which is not symbolizable. *Jouissance* is therefore never fully attainable; it can never be subsumed or incorporated into the Other.
- 2 In defence of Žižek, it has to be said that in some places in his work he provides very thoughtful readings of Derrida (eg Žižek, 2002a: 31–38).
- 3 Perhaps, one of the only recent examples in organizational writing that remains true to both Žižek's style and his exhortation to 'fully identify with the symptom' (without referring to him at all) is O'Doherty's (2004) excessively literal (and hence deeply subversive) reading of the *Financial Times Handbook of Management*.

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