



Jodi's Dream

Ian Parker

review of:

Jodi Dean (2006) *Žižek's Politics*. London and New York: Routledge. (PB: pp.237, £13.99, ISBN: 0-415-95176-3)

Jodi Dean's *Žižek's Politics* is the first book-length attempt to systematize Žižek's work. In some respects it is a success, presenting a clear rationale for the use of the category of 'enjoyment' and tracing through how Žižek employs this notion to analyse different social formations. Here Dean has a good grasp of key concepts, and the book could function as a useful guide to readers who have already bought into Žižek's cultural analysis and want to know how the different concepts could be articulated. She rehearses descriptions of the 'theft of enjoyment' and the function of 'transgression' very well, and it really seems at times as if all the different aspects of Žižek's meditations on enjoyment can be woven into one seamless web. Even so, her avoidance of certain topics as well the selection of others makes a defence of what she claims to be the 'underlying system' (p. xx) of Žižek's work much easier, too easy. The gaps are plugged by what appears to have been the late inclusion of references to Žižek's latest book on 'parallax', and this must have been a blessing, for she is then able, with him, to account for 'perspectival shifts in his own work' (p. 53).

The book is as good as Žižek at his best when the 'system' is being cobbled together, and often much more plausible than Žižek himself because Dean follows a single-track train of analysis and hooks together the different elements into a theoretical narrative. However, the book comes off the rails when she tries to show how the theoretical 'system' plays out in the realm of political action. It is then that we start to see that she has made a big mistake; the first step was to over-generously detect some underlying ground-plan in Žižek's politics, and this then leads to some desperate stumbling over Žižek's adventures in the real world.

There are clues that it is going to end badly from early on when she follows Žižek faithfully in a complaint that the "new social movements associated with feminism, gay activism and antiracism" have failed to bring about "a new world of freely self-creating identities" (p. 2). That settles that, unless you ask activists whether they do actually think that they have succeeded – those who still adhere to boring old revolutionary

socialist politics will say no – and whether that kind of new world was ever on the agenda before the liberal leadership of those ‘movements’ were bought off. Dean seems happy to parrot her mentor instead of thinking through the political stakes of the argument right from the start with the aid of some genuinely radical political history. She then even goes so far as to cite “feminist struggles over the right to an abortion” (p. 116) as an instance of ‘depoliticization’ (which, she says, go along with demands for marriage benefits for same-sex couples and media campaigns in favour of networks targeting black audiences) – a rather clueless, if not dangerous, stance to take in a country where the far-right do mobilize to bomb clinics that allow women the right to choose instead of the church or the state.

The fateful phrase “challenge of freedom” appears in chapter one (p. 21), and it is not long after that the ‘Bartleby politics’ Žižek vaunts in his recent account of the ‘parallax view’ is described as a way of turning “an impossibility into the possibility that things might be otherwise” (p. 29). The problem here is two-fold; first, merely saying ‘I would prefer not to’ is likely to land an individual in an institution and an early death (as it does Bartleby himself) with erstwhile comrades left behind who are mystified by what is going on – read the Melville story, and you will find that it amounts to grim and futile (anti-)‘politics’; second, it is actually quite inconsistent with what Dean seems to be adopting as the main message from Žižek’s work, which is that we should accept the ‘challenge of freedom’ by dissolving ourselves into the law. It is “only when we submit to the rule of law” (p. 163), she says, that we will meet this challenge, and this requires “full surrender to the law, with no exception” (p. 165). And, god help us, here she follows Žižek’s “idea that Pauline love fulfils the law as it renders the law non-all” (p. 168). The ‘no exception’ and ‘non-all’ are cryptic Lacanian code-words here, but since Dean does not spell out their secret meaning we are at the mercy of Žižek’s gloss on the theoretical notions he has absorbed on his long march.

In a book that is supposed to be about politics, Dean is very shy about being specific, and does not tell us, for example, whether this would include laws prohibiting abortion (which women are, she implies, wrong to put their energies into contesting). Why not, then, “refuse to accept imaginary and symbolic reassurance and undergo subjective destitution” (p. 44)? If the implication is not actually that we should do this each day before breakfast, Dean does at least make it seem as if this, first, can be done outside analysis and that, second, this analytic process will serve us in the place of politics. Despite the claim that Žižek is helpful in providing ‘political theorists’ with ‘concepts’ (p. 45), we have to wait a long time for any practical political proposals; and when these are hinted at it is clear that we are going to be in deep trouble if we take them seriously.

This is a desperately loyal book, and so the moments when Dean draws back and fails the test – the ‘challenge of freedom’ that would mean following Žižek all the way – are all the more striking. Those moments when she has to own up to her queasiness at going along with some of his analyses reveal something of the good political sense that perhaps lies submerged in this consistent ‘systematic’ narrative produced by a writer who is evidently transfixed by her subject. There are some minor scruples and attempts to tidy things up. She argues for the concept of ‘displaced mediator’ in place of ‘vanishing mediator’ to account for the role that Protestantism played in the triumph of capitalism (p. 111), and this because there is patently still a virulent Protestant

fundamentalist tradition in the United States – a fair point which finesses Žižek's use of Jameson's theoretical notion. There are some worries about some of Žižek's contradictory political assessments of Stalinism. She says he “neglects biopolitical aspects of Stalinism” (p. 85) – a pretty feeble criticism after she has just a few pages earlier lauded his claim that “the brutal violence of Stalinism testifies to the authenticity of the Russian Revolution” (p. 81). She says that he is “not always consistent” in the terms he uses to analyse fascism and Stalinism, but once again puts this down to the ‘parallax gap’ (p. 52), the handy most-recent get-out-of-jail card our hero has up his sleeve – and so this sutures over that little problem.

There are more serious worries that bring her close to the wicked multiculturalist liberal feminism Žižek inveighs against. She does not like Žižek's reference to sado-masochistic lesbian couples as evidence that ‘contemporary subjectivities’ are confronting an obscene need for domination and submission – this is, she says, “an instance of where Žižek's own enjoyment irrupts into the text” (p. 43). She has qualms about the string of examples Žižek gives of an ‘act’, saying that his examples “have their drawbacks” because they are “actually the sacrifice of someone else”, and she does notice that in his examples “the bodies are feminine and infantile” (p. 169) – but she does not follow through the political implications of this criticism. She does not like ‘Bartleby politics’ when it would prefer not to send aid to “Black orphans in Africa”, “to prevent oil-drilling in a wildlife swamp”, or to “send books to educate our liberal-feminist-spirited women in Afghanistan” (these quotes with which she disagrees are from Žižek), but she then comes up with the most liberal reason not to agree with him; that we might be able to prevent a catastrophe “for those who might be left alone and unsupported” (p. 131); this, rather than bringing to bear some political analysis of how feminism – in the activity of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, for example – has operated as a form of genuine political resistance to both the Taliban and to the US-led occupation.

At some points she is forced to confront some serious obstacles to her belief in her guide. She does notice that the political-economic system is “rife with multiple deadlocks” (p. 193) rather than fracture and an ‘act’ appearing at one symptomatic point, and this leads her to the more serious general point, that “Žižek's claim regarding the depoliticized economy as the disavowed fundamental fantasy does not follow from his account of the arrangement of enjoyment in contemporary ideological formations” (p. 193). At issue here is the relationship between politics and the economy, and worries about whether Žižek is “insufficiently materialist” (p. 188) are the least of the problem – but once again, although his “two lines of argumentation do not link up”, the inconsistency can be explained through reference to the “parallax gap” (p. 194). This sum total of instances where Dean demurs with Žižek are cited here to indicate the degree to which she holds fast to her argument that it all must fit together, that he must make sense.

The closest we come to actual political proposals is that we should combine Žižek's idea of the ‘act’ – “the violent disturbance or breaking through of the given order” – with the ‘revolutionary-political Party’ which will retroactively give form to the act; “there cannot”, she argues “be one without the other” (p. 180). It would seem, from the way concepts are accumulated in Dean's narrative, that some of the key notions have

arrived late and are designed to plug the gaps – parallax gaps no doubt – in Žižek's work. There are many points in the early chapters, for example, where we might ask why the wonderful theoretical device of 'the Party' was not brought in to solve some problems of political analysis. So, when Žižek is cited as 'prioritizing' class struggle (p. 59), we might wonder if 'the Party' might be of some use there. It seems it is not, and that for Dean 'the Party' is, instead, an entirely abstract notion that is not intended to be anchored in any actual political terrain.

Making good her claim to be light with the Lacanian theory in this book – a convenient ploy to make the 'underlying system' freer of contradiction – she very quickly asserts that class struggle for Žižek is what 'sexual difference' is for Lacan (p. 60), and so from now on we most probably will be treated to secondary-source Žižekians not only not bothering to read Lacan, but instead utilising this book for transliterating psychoanalytic theory directly into politics. Well, effectively away from politics altogether. When she says that "it is necessary to undertake the slow, difficult work of building something new" (p. 87), 'the Party' does not then seem to occur to her either – and that might be because she sees this 'Party' – even, it seems, "the Leninist Party" (p. 91) – as something which only formalises an 'act' after it has happened and so is not really worth bothering with before anything dramatic has taken place. If we connect Dean's enthusiastic embrace of the law with her belief in 'the Party', we arrive at the rather strange formulation that then "identification is with the Real Other" (p. 201). Is this identification with enjoyment? After bad ideological enjoyment that this identification replaces? Before full flowering of good enjoyment in paradise? This is starting to turn into a pretty mess by the end of the book.

What Dean refused to recognise, and this might be because she treats Žižek as the new best complete theoretical package to be washed up on the shores of thoroughly depoliticised English-speaking academic 'theory', is that Žižek's writing is a bricolage of vantage points gathered together from different writers. Dean is absolutely right when she says that "Žižek is trying to clear out a space for radical politics" (p. 49), and he is indeed battling valiantly against the liberal bourgeois democratic hegemonic forces in contemporary intellectual debate. It is necessary to affirm what is radical in Žižek's interventions against this kind of vision of his work, and to do that involves some critical assessment. When he turns the different scattered vantage points he discusses towards politics he does so as a master tactician, and this mastery includes the ability to cover his tracks and play with the naivety of his audience in the universities. Does Dean really believe that Žižek will show her how to find ways "to attach ourselves to law through belief in the founding dream" (p. 177), and that this then "opens up the possibility of an enjoyment or love beyond the law" (p. 172)? There will undoubtedly be others who will be just as bedazzled by such promises, and many more bewitched by the motif of 'parallax' as a theoretical innovation rather than seeing it as an attempt to escape charges of theoretical inconsistency, and that will be because they refuse to read Žižek politically and, instead, think that their duty is to follow him.

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