



## The Parallax Review

Ian Parker

**review of:**

Slavoj Žižek (2006) *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (HB: pp. 434, £16.95, ISBN 0-262-24051-3)

The digested read digested first: The long-promised ‘magnum opus’ by Žižek is a delightful rich chocolaty confection at first bite but melts by the end into another warm soup of already circulating off-cuts, this time in which Bartleby comes into view not waving but drowning.

The first thing we should notice about Bartleby, the protagonist of Melville’s grim tale of the man who said ‘I would prefer not to’ in response to organisational demands, is that his refusal led to him being carted away by the police and dying as a vagrant refusing life itself. Perhaps he provides a fitting heroic figure for Deleuze, to whom we owe his second life in the world of social theory, but it beggars belief as to why this deliberately individualistic strategy of non-resistance should be taken up and championed by Žižek in his latest book. The famous psychoanalytic ‘act’ that Žižek has often used as a template for revolutionary disturbance of the symbolic coordinates of a situation has never been sufficiently theorised by him as applicable to collective action, and so perhaps it does make sense for him now to see Bartleby as just the latest in a series of figures – Antigone, Medea, Sethe – who stubbornly hold to their own desire (and not at all, note, the desire of the Other) and pay the price. Even if Bartleby is not a woman, in contrast to the other heroic hysterics Žižek seems to idealise, at least he is suitably feminised by the end of the tale; abject miserable victim of the legal chambers whose very reason for his resistance remains as much a mystery to the reader as to his colleagues.

The paradox is that Žižek does actually bring alive and reenergise theoretical resources for thinking about compliance and resistance at the level of the individual and the social and, crucially, at the intersection of the two. His meditations on dialectics and negation always emphasise that we must move beyond the horizon of contemporary ideological fascination with bourgeois democracy that grips academics as well as ex-leftists in the field of politics. He opens up as much as he closes down, and that is a good deal more

than much complacent ‘critical’ theory does. The paradox is articulated by Žižek in this book through one of his favourite examples from Lévi-Strauss; the Winnebago tribe consist of two sub-groups that describe the ground-plan of the village in quite different ways. In a striking lesson for those working on the spatial distribution of management structures, we find that while one group perceives the village as consisting of an inner circle surrounded by a naturally-occurring second circle, the other group views the village as being split down the middle. For Žižek, this is no mere anthropological fairy tale which is a curiosity of life in the Great Lakes, but spells out the universal ‘fundamental antagonism’ of human relationships that in capitalist society must be spelt out as ‘class struggle’.

The fundamental antagonism elaborated in this book, and signalled in the title, is ‘parallax’, and this is the conceptual core of Žižek’s argument. Against any wholesome knowledge that would pretend to give an overall inclusive account of the functioning of social systems, or any policy of ‘social inclusion’ that would honour the sum of identities of the various communities that comprise a polity, Žižek shows us how and why an individual and the social is riven by contradiction. The contradictory antagonistic nature of reality is such that every commonsensical or theoretical view is structured by the position from which we speak about it. An employer’s imperative to increase productivity and ensure the cohesion of the interrelationships between workers and management is incompatible with the historical materialist view that the ‘common goal’ to which the company is committed must be fractured if worker’s self-management is to slough off the parasitic ruling layers who profit from the labor of others.

The implication of the parallax view – a political vision of the limits of liberal consensus which Žižek has elaborated many times before – is not only that there is a mutually unintelligible clash of perspectives between exploiters and exploited, but that one of the stakes of the disagreement between them is that disagreement between them is necessary and inevitable. Those who rule must believe that it is possible to resolve the differences of perspective or value them equally as a meaningful cluster of opinions to be generously acknowledged and tolerated. Those who are ruled – and this is where Žižek is surely right and where his contribution to organisation studies is so valuable – must insist that there is no common measure between different perspectives and that it is possible to show why the necessary false consciousness that inhabits the worldview of the ruling class must be dispelled.

In the course of the book, as Žižek guides us through domains of philosophy and social theory holding to the red thread of ‘parallax’ to undermine all claims to unity of perspective, we are still left with one key parallax that haunts his own writing. The term ‘parallax’, which Žižek borrows from Kōjin Karatani (a revolutionary Japanese theorist of the specific necessary antinomy between the economic and the political in Kant and Marx), is deployed time and again to account for disparities between different theoretical accounts. The spatial, temporal and erotic modes of parallax (outlined on page 10) are intriguing and productive ways of extrapolating from Karatani’s original conception, but we are very quickly drawn into exorbitant claims that the ‘act’ operates in a ‘parallax gap’ between the aesthetic and the religious and then that Christ occupies the parallax gap between God and man (on page 105).

The notion of parallax enables Žižek to rework his account of anamorphosis drawn from Lacan's *Seminar XI*, which was then used to show why it is only possible to 'look awry' at *objet petit a* and, by implication, at social phenomena. Parallax is now both an opening to some theoretical innovations and, at the same time, a cover for theoretical inconsistencies, contradictions in Žižek's work, particularly around the extrapolation of (a version of) Lacanian clinical practice to politics. The question is whether these contradictions can be conceptualised dialectically (as he sometimes promises) or whether the term 'parallax' will simply be used by Žižek and his followers to suture the gaps between academic, clinical and political spheres of elaboration.

The key parallax to be noted here is that Žižek is an individual theorist who privileges the romantic refusal of institutions and who idealises the 'act' of those who are willing to lose everything. And then, collectivity itself, from that perspective, is rendered into something suspect which always threatens to subordinate heroic thought to a single worldview. It may be that Žižek will eventually take a step beyond the position on one side of the divide – a position that is conceptually paralysing his work and which is resulting in repetitive complaint in recent books – but we must hope that when he does so, it is not on the model of Bartleby. For that way disaster will follow, for him and for us.

**the author**

Ian Parker is Professor of Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University, located in an illicit organisation space, the Discourse Unit ([www.discourseunit.com](http://www.discourseunit.com)). He is a practicing psychoanalyst, author of *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Pluto Press, 2004), *Revolution in Psychology: Alienation to Emancipation* (Pluto Press, 2007) and *Japan in Analysis: Cultures of the Unconscious* (Palgrave, 2008).  
E-mail: [I.A.Parker@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:I.A.Parker@mmu.ac.uk)