

**SIC 9**

**Repeating**

**Žižek**

**:**

**With an**

**Afterword**

**by**

**Slavoj Žižek**



**agon hamza, editor**

**Repeating**

**Žižek**



**SIC**  
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edited  
by  
Slavoj  
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**Žižek**

With an Afterword

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*sic* **9**

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ©

Typeset in Sabon by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Repeating Žižek / Agon Hamza, ed.

pages cm—(Sic series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8223-5905-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5891-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Žižek, Slavoj—Criticism and interpretation.

2. Philosophy, Modern—History and

criticism—21st century. I. Hamza, Agon, 1984–

II. Series: SIC (Durham, N.C.)

B4870.Z594R474 2015

199'.4973—dc23

2014042425

ISBN 978-0-8223-7547-0 (e-book)

Cover art: © David Levene/*The Guardian*

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## **Acknowledgments**

This book is the result of a collective work of friends, comrades, and colleagues.

I want to particularly thank Adrian Johnston, Frank Ruda, Sead Zimeri, Gabriel Tupinambá, Henrik Jøker Bjerre, Geoff Pfeifer and Agon Hamza for spending a great deal of time discussing numerous aspects of this volume from its beginning.

I thank Courtney Berger and Erin Hanas from Duke University Press for their help and guidance.

Finally, I want to thank Slavoj Žižek. While his books remain, undisputedly, the best introduction and commentary to his own work, serving as one of the few examples today of what it means to partake in the public use of Reason, Slavoj's philosophy has given us both a cause to think and to return to the truly philosophical questions of today, as well as a cause to organize ourselves and come together.

I dedicate this book to Stojan Pelko.



Agon Hamza

**Introduction:  
The Trouble  
with Žižek**

This volume is a collection of critical analysis of the philosophy of Slavoj Žižek. It is a timely intervention, especially now that Žižek's work has been introduced in many places and disciplines of thought; many books, conferences, and journals have been devoted to his project, and he is currently engaged in a substantial reworking, or rather expanding and further developing, of his main positions, especially as presented and elaborated in his *Less Than Nothing*.

To begin with, I want to argue what this volume *is not* about. That is to say, every determination is a negation, in the sense that it involves the negation of other particular determinations. This volume gathers various thinkers, whose chapters do not constitute the standard approach of a pupil who develops further the master's thought or system in a more coherent manner, or maintaining a blind fidelity to the position of the master. Further, this volume is not meant to be a *defense of Žižek*. In this regard, it is not meant to be either an introductory reader's guide to Žižek or a comprehensive monograph. Neither is it a dialogue with Žižek. Since this volume aims to be a philosophical book, we must bear in mind that "philosophy is not a dialogue,"<sup>1</sup> but "every true philosophical dialogue, is an interaction of two monologues."<sup>2</sup>

The ordinary approach to Žižek's thought is that it is polemical and controversial — meaningless and flat terms that at best present a tautological statement. We know already from Kant that philosophy is a *Kampfplatz*, a battlefield of positions that in itself involves polemics, albeit its

peculiar character. Another recurring approach is one that bases itself on the diagnosis of a lack of any system in his thought, which at its best would make him a postmodern philosopher; at its worse, he is reduced to a pop phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> According to this rather widely accepted idea, all that Žižek does is to borrow concepts from other thinkers (i.e., Lacan, Hegel, Marx, Schelling, etc.), distorting them through (re)placing them into different contexts, situations, and so on. The most problematic aspect of this is that these obliterations are being taken seriously. However, one should recall Adrian Johnston's warning: "Žižek's rhetorical flair and various features of his methodology are in danger of creating the same unfortunate sort of audience as today's mass media (with its reliance upon continual successions of rapid-fire, attention-grabbing sound bites), namely, consumers too easily driven to distraction."<sup>4</sup> In fact, to paraphrase Badiou apropos Deleuze (which Johnston uses in the same context for Žižek himself), Žižek's heterogeneous style often obscures/occludes him (or his readers) from the homogeneous content.

Taking all this into account, why a volume on Žižek, or why a book on his philosophical *system*? Or better still, why this book? In this regard, *Repeating Žižek* stands for an effective "betrayal" of Žižek through *repeating* his ultimate act. In *The Organs without Bodies*, Žižek writes:

Becoming is thus strictly correlative to the concept of REPETITION: far from being opposed to the emergence of the New, the proper Deleuzian paradox is that something truly New can ONLY emerge through repetition. What repetition repeats is not the way the past "effectively was," but the virtually inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualization. In this precise sense, the emergence of the New changes the past itself, that is, it retroactively changes (not the actual past—we are not in science fiction—but) the balance between actuality and virtuality in the past. Recall the old example provided by Walter Benjamin: the October Revolution repeated the French Revolution, redeeming its failure, unearthing and repeating the same impulse. Already for Kierkegaard, repetition is "inverted memory," a movement forward, the production of the New, and not the reproduction of the Old. "There is nothing new under the sun" is the strongest contrast to the movement of repetition. So, it is not only that repetition is (one of the modes of) the emergence of the New—the New can ONLY emerge through repetition.<sup>5</sup>

This should be understood in a Hegelian manner: Žižek's thesis is that although Hegel did think the repetition, his repetition is a repetition with sublation (*Aufhebung*), which is to say:

through repetition, something is idealized, transformed from an immediate contingent reality to a notional universality (Caesar dies as a person and becomes a universal title); or, at least, through repetition, the necessity of an event is confirmed (Napoleon had to lose twice to get the message that his time was over, that his first defeat was not just an accident). The fact that Hegel misses the excess of purely mechanical repetition in no way implies that he is excessively focused on the New (the progress which takes place through idealizing *Aufhebung*)—on the contrary, bearing in mind that the radically New emerges only through pure repetition, we should say that Hegel's inability to think pure repetition is the obverse of his inability to think the radically New, that is, a New, which is not potentially already in the Old and has just to be brought out into the open through the work of dialectical deployment.<sup>6</sup>

Repetition of Žižek's work opens up another problematic, that of formalization of his thought. At the risk of going against Žižek's own position, I argue that the main task of philosophers who are Žižekians, and work on the premises of a Žižekian philosophy, is to formalize his thought. Žižek's system of thought can be said to function as a Borromean knot: philosophy, psychoanalysis, and politics.<sup>7</sup> According to Žižek, "the three theoretical circles are not, however, of the same weight: it is their middle term, the theory of Jacques Lacan, which is—as Marx would say—the general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity,' 'the particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.'"<sup>8</sup>

Herein resides the difficulty of its formalization. A problematic comparison is that with the philosophy of Alain Badiou. To put it in a very simplified manner, in an elementary level, it is not a difficult task to be a follower of Badiou, or a Badiouian in philosophy, due to his very well-structured system. This holds true for being a Badiouian in the exegesis level. However, the case with Žižek is different: not only the formalization of his philosophy but also being faithful to his thought is a much more complicated philosophical enterprise.<sup>9</sup> Although one shouldn't dismiss Žižek's own indifference toward the proper philosophical "system," I

want to argue (in a rather bombastic fashion) that the *only* way for his philosophy to resist both its time and its (what is wrongly described as) interventionist character is to subject his system to a rigorous formalization.

Therefore, the paradigm of this book resides on the two problems that are at stake here: that is the problem of repetition qua betrayal and formalization. The two concepts are interlinked: repetition of the philosopher's thought is always-already realized in the form of betrayal.

This volume is structured bearing in mind the Borromean knot. It is divided in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and politics. The fourth additional ring to be added to the Borromean knot is religion, thus supplementing his system. In this regard, this volume relates precisely to the structure of Žižek's thought: philosophy, psychoanalysis, politics, religion, *and* related matters.

## Notes

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy Is Not a Dialogue*, in Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 49.
- 2 Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 235.
- 3 Although it is interesting to note that there has been a shift in this regard: from being labeled the “Elvis of cultural theory,” that is to say, he’s an amusing and funny guy to listen to, Žižek’s status has been switched to that of “the most dangerous philosopher in the West.” These labels are forms of censorship that in the last instance, attempts to establish a distance from *really* taking his work seriously.
- 4 Adrian Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), xiv.
- 5 Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 12–13.
- 6 Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 455–56.
- 7 Indeed, this is how he describes the structure of his *For They Know Not What They Do*: “As with *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the theoretical space of the present book is moulded by three centres of gravity: Hegelian dialectics, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and contemporary criticism of ideology. These three circles form a Borromean knot: each of them connects the other two”; Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), 2.
- 8 Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, 2.
- 9 There has been some remarkable work on what I want to call “formalization” of Žižek’s work. See Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*; Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek’s Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (New York: Continuum, 2010), and others.

P A R T I

**philosophy**



1

**“Freedom or System?**

**Yes, Please!”:**

**How to Read Slavoj Žižek’s**

***Less Than Nothing* –**

**Hegel and the Shadow of**

**Dialectical Materialism**

Adrian Johnston

Already eagerly awaited years in advance of its eventual appearance, the hulking 2012 tome *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* is a (if not the) leading candidate to date among Slavoj Žižek’s many books for the title of his magnum opus. Apart from introducing a range of new material within the still-unfolding Žižekian corpus, *Less Than Nothing* also consolidates in a single volume numerous lines of thought running throughout Žižek’s various prior texts. In particular, this 2012 work involves Žižek presenting his most thorough and detailed account thus far both of his interpretation of the full sweep of Kantian and post-Kantian German idealism as well as of how his own theoretical project carries forward these idealists’ legacies in the contexts of the early twenty-first century.

My goal in this intervention is relatively modest: to establish the preliminary basis for an immanent critical assessment of *Less Than Nothing*. Given that Žižek grounds this book and his larger philosophical pursuits first and foremost in the history of German idealism, revisiting this history is one of the mandatory preconditions for properly evaluating Žižek’s 2012 masterpiece. After putting this historical frame in place in what immediately follows, I then go on to spend time philosophically reexamining Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel especially (including the complexities of the Kant-Hegel relationship) in light of how Žižek comprehends and appropriates their ideas and arguments. To be more specific, I herein interpret Žižek’s philosophy as fundamentally a cre-

ative extension (one drawing on such post-Hegelian resources as Marxism and psychoanalysis) of certain precise features of the post-Fichtean “Spinozism of freedom” already envisioned by Friedrich Hölderlin, F. W. J. Schelling, and Hegel starting in the 1790s. Interpreting Žižek thus, my intervention here builds, via its historical and philosophical traversals of German idealism, toward a conclusion pinpointing the exact questions and problems Žižek’s materialism must address if his overall theoretical position is to be judged to be cogent, persuasive, and satisfying. In short, these questions and problems set the immanent critical criteria for determining what a successful realization of the philosophical program of *Less Than Nothing* would have to accomplish.

An extremely brief period between the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries sees an incredible explosion of intense philosophical activity in the German-speaking world, perhaps rivaled solely by the birth of Western philosophy itself in ancient Greece (although Alain Badiou passionately maintains that postwar France is philosophically comparable to these other two momentously important times and places).<sup>1</sup> Inaugurated by Kant and accompanied by the Romantics as cultural fellow travelers, the set of orientations that has come to be known by the label “German idealism”—this movement spans just a few decades—partly originates in the 1780s with the debates generated by F. H. Jacobi’s challenges to modern secular rationality generally, as well as Kant’s then-new critical transcendental idealism especially.<sup>2</sup> One of the most provocative moves Jacobi makes is to confront his contemporaries with a stark forced choice between either “system” or “freedom” (to use language that Schelling, a German idealist giant, employs to designate this Jacobian dilemma and its many permutations and variants).<sup>3</sup> In Jacobi’s Pietist Protestant view, the systematization of the allegedly contradiction-ridden Kantian philosophy—the post-Kantian idealists at least agree with Jacobi that Kant indeed falls short of achieving thoroughly rigorous systematicity—inevitably must result, as with any rationally systematic philosophy on Jacobi’s assessment, in the very loss of what arguably is most dear to this philosophy itself in its contemporaneity with both the Enlightenment and, later, the French Revolution: in a word, autonomy (in Kant’s specific case, the transcendental subject’s powers of spontaneous judgment and self-determination).<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say, Jacobi is far from satisfied with the attempted resolution of the

third of the “antinomies of pure reason” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>5</sup> This dissatisfaction is supported by Jacobi’s undermining of the Kantian noumenal-phenomenal distinction through his criticisms of the thing-in-itself (*das Ding an sich*),<sup>6</sup> criticisms subsequently broadened and deepened by the “big three” of post-Kantian German idealism: J. G. Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.

With the unintended effect of igniting a burning fascination with Baruch Spinoza among a younger generation of intellectuals, Jacobi, as part of his anti-Enlightenment agenda, contentiously claims that Spinoza’s monistic substance metaphysics is the one and only system inevitably arrived at by all unflinchingly consistent and consequent philosophical reasoning. Construing this metaphysics as materialistic and naturalistic, Jacobi equates Spinozist ontology with freedom-denying, subject-squelching determinism (i.e., “fatalism”) and therefore also with atheistic “nihilism.”<sup>7</sup> The “pantheism controversy” (*Pantheismusstreit*) triggered by Jacobi’s polemicizing saddles Kant’s idealist successors, insofar as they wish to systematize Kantian philosophy (with varying degrees of sympathy and fidelity), with the task of formulating a totally coherent metaphysics (qua a seamlessly integrated epistemology and ontology) nonetheless preserving space within itself for the spontaneity of self-determining subjectivity.<sup>8</sup>

Inspired by the failed efforts of K. L. Reinhold, the first (but far from foremost) post-Kantian German idealist, to ground Kant’s critical-transcendental edifice on the firmer foundation of an apodictic first principle (i.e., an indubitable *Grundsatz* methodologically akin to René Descartes’s Archimedean proposition “Cogito, ergo sum”),<sup>9</sup> Fichte opts for a radical “primacy of the practical” as the key to a systematized (post)-Kantianism. Skipping over numerous details here, Fichte’s position, as per his 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* rooted in nothing more than the free activity of spontaneous subjectivity, quickly is itself found to be wanting in turn by certain of his contemporaries and soon-to-be immediate successors. Hölderlin’s 1795 fragment “Über Urtheil und Seyn” (On Judgment and Being), penned by someone fresh from hearing Fichte lecture on this “scientific teaching,” lays down the initial sketches for myriad subsequent arguments of his Tübingen seminary classmates Schelling and Hegel against the allegedly excessive subjectivism of Fichte’s (and Kant’s) brand of idealism.<sup>10</sup> Hölderlin suggests the ultimate ontological