

Book Review: The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan by Slavoj Žižek

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Available in English for the first time, this publication from **Slavoj Žižek** represents a re-worked version of one of his earliest works. Hard to place amongst his recent works, perhaps the purpose of publishing this early work is to make us realise that the 1980s Žižek was already then the one we have come to recognise, just as the content of the book retroactively makes Hegel a Lacanian avant la lettre, writes **Jodie Matthews**.

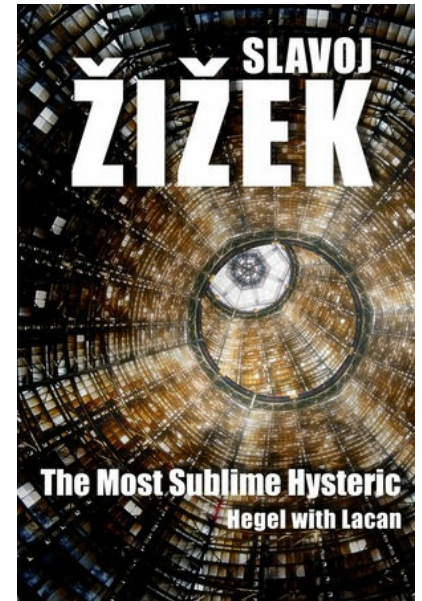
The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan. Slavoj Žižek. Polity. 2014.

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Fêted and prolific cultural theorist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek defended his doctoral thesis in 1982, and an edited version was published in French in 2011. This has now been translated into English, so *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan* does not constitute new work, but rather grants access to the ‘early Žižek’.

This is a book for theorists; while moving to pin down the ‘paradoxical nature of democracy’ (surely an important project for twenty-first-century geopolitics) it does not seek to defend the relevance of its methods. It will not convince anyone already minded to find the Hegelian dialectic an unwelcome abstraction or Lacanian psychoanalysis an outdated distraction. One might respond that works daring to grapple with questions of the totalitarian, the role of the scapegoat, subjectivity, and how we understand and act in the world will always find relevance, even if we take issue with their conclusions. In a [webchat](#) in October 2014, Žižek proclaimed that the ‘21st century will be the century of philosophy’.

Readers hoping for the elucidation of a model that allows us to diagnose totalitarianism wherever we suspect its symptoms – withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights, state-sanctioned beheadings, repression of the media – will be disappointed. There are no easy answers here. So will those looking for sustained and provocative engagement with popular culture – video games, movies, and soft drinks. We are returned to an exploration of the Hegelian dialectic and Lacanian psychoanalysis, a recurrent theme in Žižek’s extensive oeuvre. The thought travels via Marx, as one would expect, but also other key thinkers, including Kant and Kafka. The fourteen chapters tell us as much about Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan as they do about Hegel, and the telling is far from straightforward. Žižek, like many theorists, is criticised, often unfairly, for his obfuscation. To be sure, these are difficult ideas and they take considerable working through. Taken as soundbites, the words of Žižek (again, like those of other theorists) can sound banal – the Guardian website even has a [‘Who Said it: Slavoj Žižek or Russell Brand?’](#) quiz. *The Most Sublime Hysteric* contains ideas that one must follow on a twisting march through Western philosophy, with Žižek in the role of General.





Inside the mind of Žižek. Credit: [UnB Agência](#) CC BY 2.0

There are stylish summaries of key Lacanian and Hegelian concepts and terminologies, and the absolute tone in which they are communicated insists that the reader take Žižek's interpretation on trust. Žižek himself identifies the irony in the poststructuralists' 'barely concealed recognition that one is speaking from a secure, unimpeachable position'; it is a criticism he might turn on himself.

Žižek does not like poststructuralism. More precisely, he finds it 'superfluous' because the reading of meanings as plural, dispersed, and incomplete that it espouses as a strategy to defy totalitarian, monologic and universalizing reason are already inherent in a Hegelo-Lacanian framework. In a chapter that focuses on 'Why Lacan is Not a "Poststructuralist"', Žižek uses the 'quilting point' to make that case. This Lacanian term suggests points at which signifiers are anchored to the signified, stabilizing signification. For Žižek, the poststructuralist approach of searching for 'symptomatic points, fissures that would cause the totality to collapse' is unnecessary, because the quilting point is already evidence of a discursive or ideological impossibility. The trouble with totalitarianism is that it makes a success of this situation. For instance, 'fascism is founded on the rejection of the "antagonistic" character of society', and in Nazi ideology the constructed figure of the Jew (rather than Jewish individuals) acts as a quilting point that allows the denial of societal antagonism: 'the Jew is the force behind the decomposition of society, he might be the ruthless capitalist or the communist demagogue'. The 'Jew' is not the cause of social antagonism, but the way in which Nazism deals with the fact of social antagonism as a blockage to the 'perfect' society it desires. For Žižek, poststructuralism does not need to look for the ways in which the sutures of the quilting point burst apart, rupturing the coherence of fascist ideology, because the quilting point itself shows Nazism to be impossible.

The dialectic, then, looks backwards to identify when something became what it is now (we only recognise that a collection of grains of sand became a pile *after* it is obvious as a pile). Lacan's question (in a 'properly Hegelian shift', says Žižek) is not how to subvert totalization, but to ask later how there is, or ever was, the '*possibility* of a "quilting point" in a diverse text?' The problem with a set of questions derived from this interpretation is that the analysis always comes, as Žižek makes explicit but does not pursue here in ethical terms, too late. The victims of totalitarianism have already suffered by the time totalitarianism becomes legible as such.

Where can we place a text like this? It is not, clearly, a doctoral thesis any more. (If it were, its examiners might suggest that the candidate maintain focus on the central thesis rather than hopping excitedly, in a fashion that has become familiar, from one idea to another). But neither is it quite the work of the Žižek of legend, the superstar psychoanalyst, the cult critic, the theatrical theorist. Maybe, to steal the formulation Žižek uses to posit the Hegelian dialectic as the logic of the signifier, the purpose of publishing this early work is to make us realise that the 1980s Žižek was already then the one we have come to recognise, just as the content of the book retroactively makes Hegel a Lacanian *avant la lettre*.

Jodie Matthews is Research Fellow at the University of Huddersfield. Her work explores the historical representation of British Romanies and Travellers. She is interested in psychoanalysis as a philosophical/textual methodology, having studied at Cardiff University's Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory. [Read more reviews by Jodie.](#)

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