



The charmed circle... set straight

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review of:

Boucher, G. (2008) *The Charmed Circle of Ideology*. Melbourne: re.press. (HB: pp. 194 + xi, £14.99, ISBN: 978-184467 188 5).

Geoff Boucher, in his book *The Charmed Circle of Ideology*, plunges into a project of critical mapping of 'postmarxism defined by the political strategy of radical democracy' (p. 3). He brings together works of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek and approaches them as one distinct political tendency. He seeks to demonstrate that theory of class politics can be developed without recourse to 'postmarxism's tendency to reduce politics and economics to ideological struggle' (p. 16). In other words Boucher tries to demonstrate that there is space for social and political reality which escapes the influences of ideological mechanisms. In what follows, I will focus on Boucher's criticism of Slavoj Žižek's premises which most clearly demonstrates Boucher's assumptions which undermine the logic of the argument he puts forward in the book. I suggest that Boucher does not succeed in establishing an adequate conceptual engagement with Žižek's ideas already at the level of his position of enunciation, prior to the presentation of his argument.

In spite of the fact that Boucher makes a number of interesting comments in relation to Žižek's line of thought, I will not attempt to engage in discussion of their soundness and that is for two reasons. Firstly, Žižek himself responds to Boucher's allegations on the pages of *Teolos* (Žižek, 2004). Although Žižek's reply addresses Boucher's article published in 2004 in the same issue of *Telos* (Boucher, 2004), it is entirely valid in relation to the premises introduced in *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* (published in 2008). Boucher has not changed the line of his attack and admits that: 'I have not altered my position because ... Žižek does not appear to me to have a reply' (p. 165). Meanwhile, Žižek makes very clear where Boucher's argument goes astray: he makes a number of factual inaccuracies in rendering Žižek's position; he does not seem to grasp Žižek's elucidations of the idea of the 'death drive'; he constructs false oppositions underpinning Žižek's framework (e.g. the Real as an 'inherent transgression' of the Symbolic versus the symbolic field supported by an obscene enjoyment, Žižek's oscillation between 'ethical Marxist' and 'materialist Pauline'). It is very clear to any reader of Boucher's book who is acquainted with Žižek's work that Boucher confounds a whole series of key distinction in Žižek's work.

Secondly, an enlightening effect of reading Boucher's book, together with his and Žižek's earlier publications, comes from grasping what is in this debate more than the debate itself. It reveals the more general character of the foundations on which many 'critical scholars', in wide sense of the term, construct their arguments without appreciating the complexity of the thinking of the writer with whom they engage. It is the case of Boucher's project which he describes as aiming at 'theoretically disentangling the many strands of [Žižek's] thinking' (p. 235). It is this aspect of reconstructing a multidimensional, circular framework into one-dimensional one which turns Boucher's project into a mere supplement of Žižek's thinking rather than its critique.

Boucher admits that he does not investigate Žižek's contributions to film theory and psychoanalysis (p. 3) suggesting it is his intentional choice, made independently of his main intellectual venture. However, if looked at closer, this is not a random choice but, rather, a necessary exclusion which makes the construction of the linear and straightforward interpretation of Žižek's concepts possible at all. This repression (which also excludes the whole Kierkegaardian side of Žižek) is the condition which makes Boucher's critical mapping of 'Žižek's postmarxism' feasible. It is his lack of concern with a broader sense of Žižek's theories which renders possible an impossible mission of determining the 'unity-in-diversity' (p. 4) in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek in spite of their insistence on their distinctiveness which even Boucher recognizes in the concluding part of the book (p. 234).

Boucher discusses extensively Žižek's idea of historicism and simultaneously excludes Žižek's distinction between historicism and historicity. It is an exclusion which again makes the construction of Boucher argument possible. Žižek argues that historicity depicts a condition of a person caught in the flow of historical 'becoming' and its 'openness' where the historical sense is provided by the gaze of those stigmatized by the actual distress (Žižek, 2001). On the contrary, historicism captures a mindset concerned with and privileging the retrospective view of history as some 'eternal necessity'. The latter is the gaze represented by Boucher. He declares that he is 'interested in the moment of emergence of postmarxism: broadly speaking, from *Hegemony of Socialist Strategy* (1985) through to the joint declaration of tendency in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000)' (p. 15). Retrospective reconstruction of 'the moment of emergence of postmarxism' (p. 15) in the period between these two publications is a gesture by means of which Boucher creates a link in a chain of historical necessity, taking an outsider's perspective and reconstructing the history of intellectual struggles and tensions as a neat linear process rather than as an evidence of its impossibility.

It becomes then clear that there is an additional dimension to the 'exclusions' which Boucher argues to be deliberate and intended for logical reasons. In fact they carry a number of strategic consequences in relation to the validity and effectiveness of Boucher's criticism. As a result of this repression of the repressed, he frequently falls into acting-outs which take form of his charging Žižek with unjustified statements and 'vulgar' judgments (expressed in statements which desperately seek to fix Žižek's political stance: 'Instead of a radical politics for the twenty-first century, I suggest, Žižek's metaphysical radicalism risks descent into irrationality and relativism' (p. 218);

Žižek's 'position, as archaic as it is irrational, cannot possibly found a radical politics for the twenty-first century. To the contrary: it has strong neo-conservative affinities' (p. 221). Meanwhile, in line with the logic of psychoanalysis, the accusations against the other (i.e. Žižek) are in fact accusations against one's own (i.e. Boucher's) soul. Boucher himself reproaches Žižek for using 'psychoanalytic "invectives"' (p. 226) such as 'hysteric' and 'pervert' in relation to some thinkers. The paradox of this situation rests on the fact that in Žižek's framework these 'invectives' are systematically elaborated concepts, in which case they lose their 'vulgar quality'.

By falling into the crude critical remarks in regard to Žižek's philosophy and by trying to locate him on the politico-theoretical map, Boucher returns Žižek's lack which is unavoidable consequence of a phenomenon which Žižek, drawing on Lacan, describes as identification *qua* symbolic opposition. Boucher closes an intellectual field which Žižek strives and continuous to open. As a result, Boucher does not expand Žižek's argument but, paradoxically, repeats and reinforces it.

For example, Boucher brings to attention Hegel's distinction between the *absolute negativity* ('Natural negation of consciousness ... which remains without the required significance of recognition' (p. 186)) and *radical negativity* (negation 'of self-consciousness, which generates a continuous movement of transcendence in quest of self-reflexivity through mutual recognition' (p. 186)), accusing Žižek of engaging in the former. This creates an economy well described by Žižek where an enunciator (Boucher in this case) by means of the enunciated content transmits a statement determined at the level of his position of enunciation. Boucher, by way of the implicit force of his speech, personifies what, at the level of locution, is the object of his denunciation – 'Žižek's absolute negativity'.

Radically negative engagement with Žižek's project requires considering details of Žižek's manner of extending the political project with psychoanalysis and investigations of culture. These extensions trigger understanding only when Žižek's line of thought is treated as an entity, rather than as a set of separated arguments which can be arranged and made sense of in a linear way. True, Žižek falls into inconsistencies many of which, however, he remains aware. On various occasions Žižek underlines the tension of being involved simultaneously in philosophical and in political projects, reflections which remain outside of Boucher's analysis.

He points out that Žižek 'claims the real question is 'how are we to reinvent the political space in today's conditions of globalization?' I suggest that Žižek has no real answer – hence the rhetorical question' (reference omitted, p. 227). Boucher is right Žižek is probably the last to throw himself into a project aiming at finding 'the real answers'. On few occasions of his public speeches, he admits, that his philosophical project consists of searching for the 'real questions' (or unmasking the unreal ones) rather than providing 'real answers'.

Boucher's critique contributes to a 'negativity' which by its disruptive power generates positive effect of an identity of a writer critical towards Žižek's arguments – a libidinally attractive position in an intersubjective intellectual network. However, an enlightening critique of Žižek would consider the reasons for his recurring failures to

marry the philosophical and the political. It would also account for the condition of today's intellectual world which contributes to Žižek's increasing popularity. It would attempt to unravel the present situation of the social theory and theorists which renders Žižek's style, with all its inconsistencies, vulgar jokes and vivid illustrations, attractive to thinkers in spite of the fact that they disagree with him radically, to thinkers like Geoff Boucher himself.

references

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