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The Big Other's 'Unknown Knowns'

By Mark Fisher

In *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* Slavoj Žižek applies his theoretical apparatus to the war on terror once again. Mark Fisher reviews the book and finds that there are some things the US intelligence services didn't know they knew

Reading Žižek, it's easy to see what Nietzsche meant by 'joyful wisdom'. Appropriately for a theorist of enjoyment, there's an irrepressible effervescence about Žižek that means he achieves escape velocity from the ponderous gravity which so much academic writing feels it is necessary to cultivate.

If you have encountered Žižek before, you'll find nothing in *The Borrowed Kettle* to radically surprise you. (Indeed, there's much here you'll probably recognize; Žižek is renowned for recycling his text from book to book. I attribute this, more to Žižek's gusto than to lazy cynicism; he's like those enthusiasts who can't help repeating themselves because they are carried away by their topic. Besides, the refrained text makes new connections when it is replayed in different contexts). If you haven't previously read him, it's as good a place to start as any.

Žižek can hardly be accused of retreating into an academic ivory tower. *The Borrowed Kettle* follows *Welcome to the Desert Real* (also Verso) as his second book on the war on terror. These slim volumes, immediate interventions into the most pressing geopolitical issues, are a wonderful advert for what theory can do. Žižek is to be applauded for both his accessibility and his willingness to put his neck on the block, to lay out a position now, rather than waiting for the security of hindsight. Sometimes Žižek's speed can lead to odd little errors; in both *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* and *The Borrowed Kettle* he attributes *Taxi Driver* to Michael Scorsese. You would have thought an editor would have spotted that one.

As usual, Žižek rejects out of hand the facile equivalence of political structures with individual psychological categories. What is crucial for Žižek in the psychic economies which sustain political systems is the role of the Lacanian 'big Other' – the symbolic structure who desires for us and on whose behalf we desire. Who was it, for instance, that didn't know that Really Existing Socialism (RES) was shabby and corrupt? Not any of the people, who were all too aware of its shortcomings; nor any of the government administrators, who couldn't but know. No, it was the big Other who was the only one deemed not to know – who wasn't allowed to know – the quotidian reality of RES. And when the illusion that the big Other did not know can no longer be maintained, the incorporeal fabric holding the social system together disintegrates. (In this connection, it's no surprise that the aspect of Deleuze's thought which most excites Žižek is his concept of 'incorporeal transformations'. Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of the function of statements in *A Thousand Plateaus*' 'Postulates of Linguistics' is strikingly similar to Žižek's understanding of the role of official pronouncements). Khrushchev's speech in 1965, in which he 'admitted' the failings of the Soviet state, is an example to which Žižek often returns. It is not as if anyone in the party was unaware of the atrocities and corruption committed in its name, but Khrushchev's announcement made it impossible to believe any more that the big Other was ignorant of them.

Žižek freely admits that *The Borrowed Kettle* is not solely or even primarily 'about' Iraq. In any case, the ostensible topics of Žižek's books are not so much rigid themes, as the initial conditions from which the chaotic systems of each work develop.

The kettle of the title is borrowed from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In an effort to illustrate the logic of dreams, Freud recounted an old joke that went: (1) I never borrowed a kettle from you (2) I returned it you intact, and (3) the kettle was already broken when I got it from you. Zizek argues that this inconsistent logic was to be found in the US justifications for last year's war on Iraq. (1) Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction (2) but even if he doesn't have any WMD, he was involved with al-Qaeda in the attack on the WTC and the Pentagon (3) and even though he has no proven links with al-Qaeda, his regime is a brutal dictatorship that should be removed.

Zizek points out that in his famous March 2003 speech about what the US intelligence services knew and didn't know – there are known knowns, known unknowns and unknown knowns – Donald Rumsfeld omitted the category of most significance from the psychoanalytic point of view: that is, 'the "unknown knowns", the things we don't know that we know – which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, "the knowledge which does not know itself"'. For Zizek it is these unknown knowns – the 'disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves' – and not the 'unknown unknowns' that are most dangerous. It is thus to their investigation that Zizek dedicates *The Borrowed Kettle*.

Zizek is accordingly – and rightly – distrustful of the notion that the real object of the 'war on terror' is an external threat. There is a real possibility that what could emerge in Iraq is the very fundamentalist Islamist state that the Americans ostensibly most fear. 'It is as if, in a contemporary display of the "cunning of reason", some invisible hand of destiny repeatedly arranges it so that the short-term success of the US intervention strengthens the very cause against which the USA intervened.' But, in what he admits is 'a slightly paranoid speculation', Zizek suggests that this apparently undesired objective may be secretly wished for. 'What if the *true* target of the war on terror is not only a global geopolitical arrangement in the Middle East, but also American society itself (namely, the repression of whatever remains of its emancipatory potential)?'

It is in this context that the American attempt to provide a legal and ethical justification of torture (a topic that has obviously taken on even more urgency since Zizek wrote the book) appears especially sinister. Zizek argues that the rare occasions in which torture might be justified – for instance, in a situation in which people's lives could be saved – should not be universalised into a general principle. Even if, *de facto*, we accept that there are such situations, to make them into *de jure* ethical or legal principles would literally be a dangerous precedent. The principle that it is acceptable to utterly violate a prisoner's human rights presages a situation in which the violation of *everyone's* human rights is legitimated.

Hence the irony – or one of the many ironies – of the name the Americans initially gave to their campaign against terrorism, 'Infinite Justice'. After Abu Ghraib, it is clear that Americans exempted *themselves* from the purview of such a justice. The only way in which justice could really become 'infinite' for Zizek, is if it took on a 'Hegelian' reflexivity: 'in short, ... it has to ask how we ourselves who exercise justice, are involved in what we are fighting against.'

Zizek brilliantly exposes the chilling underside to remarks which might appear blandly platitudinous or even humble. For instance, for all its ostensible modesty, Bush's claim that 'freedom is not America's gift to other nations, it is God's gift to humanity' actually betrays an autocratic sense of his and America's essential rectitude. Opposing America ceases to be a matter of taking a stand against a particular nation-state and becomes an affront to God. Similarly, Rumsfeld's claim that the purpose of the attack on Afghanistan was to kill as many al-Qaeda and Taleban supporters as possible – presented by Rumsfeld as a blandly self-evident truism – reveals the new logic at play in the 'war on terror'. Normally, the goal would be to achieve particular ends while killing as few of the enemy as possible. Yet the 'war on terror' – a Hegelian 'bad infinity', as Zizek points out – has no end, in any sense.

One of the most refreshing aspects of Zizek's thought is his refusal of politically correct pieties. He is particularly insistent that we do not fall into the PC orthodoxy of denying Islam's essential hostility to modernity. Rather than denying this, Zizek suggests, we should think of ways in which Islam's anti-modernism might contribute to an emancipatory political project. It's difficult to imagine where this would lead except to the ostrich position Deleuze and Guattari attribute to Samir Amin in *Anti-Oedipus*: 'withdrawal from the world market'. But as Anna Greenspan will show in her forthcoming *India and the IT Revolution*, it is precisely India's immersion in the 'world market' that has freed up emancipatory potential. India's phenomenally successful software industry, rather than being a belated entry into modernism, is rather the prototype for a 'postmodern' (or post-postmodern) global economics (or economics of globalisation), in which technologisation and globalisation do not have to equal Americanisation.

Zizek reminds us, though, that power's greatest weapon is its conviction that history is resolved and that the nature of reality is already decided. 'The rise of global capitalism is presented to us as ... Fate, against which we cannot fight – either we adapt to it or we fall out of step with history, and are crushed.' Yet Zizek's commitment to socialism – albeit a version of socialism whose lineaments he frustratingly leaves vague – prevents him from seeing what Deleuze and Guattari and Manuel De Landa had glimpsed: a flight from global capital that involves an intensification, not an inhibiting, of market forces. De Landa's distinction between markets and capital (with capitalism understood as an anti-market) remains a theoretical insight of incomparable value for an intelligent anti-capitalism. Sadly, there are few signs of such a movement developing and Zizek, for all his merits, is unable to contribute to it.

Slavoj Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, (Verso, June 2004)