

Ricardo Camargo Brito (Chile)

Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute of Humanities, Universidad Diego Portales.

Postdoctoral Fondecyt Research Project: “Towards a Radical Conception of Politics: A Critical Analysis of Žižek’s Theory of the Act”

Abstract: Is it possible to conceive of a type of politics that breaks from the constraints imposed by a given “objective” political situation? In other words, is it still possible - within the context of apparently undisputable “objective rules” - to conceive of a kind of politics that defines itself as going against such rules, as proclaiming the “impossible”? Or rather are we definitively posed, with good reason, in the realm of pragmatic-technocratic or, at best, deliberative politics? This research project seeks to explore these questions by critically assessing the thesis of radical politics developed by the Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek, using examples taken from Chilean contemporary politics as a methodological strategy to problematize Žižek’s thesis.

Žižek’s thesis of radical politics asserts the idea of a political act as one that, despite originating *with regard to* a situation, cannot be accounted *within* the given horizon of what appears to be ‘possible’ in such a situation. Furthermore, it is an act that is both assumed as impossible within the horizon of a situation and one that comes to radically change such a horizon, posing in a reversible way its own conditions of possibility. Žižek’s theory of the act, controversial as it is, has fuelled an intense debate because it directly opposes dominant conceptions of politics such as Habermas/Rawls’ deliberative thesis and Laclau/Negri’s post-Marxist approaches. My contention is, however, that it is one of the most innovative attempts to theorise the problem of conceiving of a type of politics that is liberated from ideological misconceptions, which, since Althusser, has revolved around political theory. Moreover, Žižek’s theory of the act directly aims to rethink how to make possible an emancipatory type of politics in a time in which social inequality and exploitation are, not only a constant, but also an increasing feature of the global order. It is therefore a worthy theory that deserves theoretical attention.

This research project will be focused on two of the most controversial aspects of Žižek’s theory of the act, i.e. the ontological and normative implications that such a conception presents for contemporary political theory. On the ontological implications, the research project will explore the question of how “radical” can a radical conception of politics be. In other words, it will assess whether Žižek’s proposal can be assumed as successful in overcoming not only Althusser’s totalising early conception of ideology but also Žižek’s own reinforcing notion of ideology. My aim here will be twofold. First, I will seek to critically reassess the theoretical conditions that Žižek has to assume in order to conceive of a radical act. Second, I will assess to what extent Žižek’s

endeavour gives rise to an “authentic” political act, i.e. one that, traversing ideological fantasies, inaugurates a new “emancipated” symbolic order. My hypothesis here is that a radical or emancipatory act cannot be thought of in relation to changes affecting the elements represented in a given symbolic situation alone, even if these changes essentially alter those elements. Rather, what would define the possibility and character of a radical act (and the new symbolic universe that it gives rise to) is a positioning of the elements of the situation with regard to what we can call, following Žižek-Lacanian terminology, the “Real” of the situation, which must be, in some way, touched or represented by the act. This would open the possibility of both a radical or emancipatory political act and a new emancipatory (not exploitative) arrangement of the elements of a new situation. For this purpose, the research project will critically contrast both Žižek’s theory of ideology and of the act with Althusser’s early and late works as a background. This is the task for the first year of this project.

The second part of this research project aims to problematise the normative aspects involved in Žižek’s theory of the act and is guided by the question of how “radical” radical politics should be. In other words, I will explore the challenges that Žižek’s theory of the act poses for the democratic ethos that dominates contemporary political theory, particularly with regard to the problem of violence (revolutionary and/or totalitarian). My hypothesis here is that a radical or emancipatory act can only be tentatively thought of from a current normative point of view. This is because any normative approach cannot avoid being attached to (and in some sense trapped in) the “language” of a given situation, which the act, if successful, will radically change. In this sense, the normative assessment of a radical act, with regard to the idea of democracy, can only be properly made *a posteriori*, when the new conditions of possibility will have already been posed by the act. For this purpose, this research project will develop a critical analysis of the normative implications (risks and consequences) and challenges that Žižek’s theory of the act presents to deliberative, (*à la* Habermas and Rawls) as well as to post-Marxist radical (*à la* Laclau and Negri) approaches to democracy. This is the task for the second year of my research.

The methodological approach used in this research project is inscribed within the wide tradition of Critical Theory. This implies the development of a dynamic assessment that will seek to “intervene” in Žižek’s theses. In that way, the aim is not only interpretative but essentially creative. The expected outcomes of this research project are threefold. First, the production of a critical assessment of ontological and normative aspects of Žižek’s theory of the act. Second, the enhancement of the field of theorisations on radical politics. Finally, to contribute to the broadening of the understanding of contemporary Chilean social disruptive political phenomena by observing them from a perspective of radical politics. I will accomplish this by dealing with and furthering the new possibilities opened by Žižek’s theory of the act

but at the same time seriously confronting shortcomings and alternative theorisations asserted by rival approaches.