Event

Slavoj Zizek


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Events rupture the ordinary course of life and provoke significant change whether it is at the personal or the societal level. It can be an epiphany, the act of falling in love or some trivial thing that nevertheless provokes the change described. Zizek provides an initial definition: “At first approach, an event is thus the effect that seems to exceed its cause – and the space of an event is that which opens up by the gap that separates an effect from its causes (p.3 – emphasis is in the original).” Must an event have a cause? To say that it must is to follow the transcendental approach to philosophy, while to argue otherwise is to be part of the ontological or ontic approach. In the Buddhist tradition, knowledge can come from within and may be released through meditation and the greatest event of all is that moment when enlightenment is achieved, perhaps in the form of the lightning bolt of Vajrayana (Zen) Buddhism. In western philosophy, understanding of the event (ereignis) is most closely linked to Heidegger, where it takes the form of catastrophic change after which it is impossible to return to the conditions of the past.
This event is the subject of this book by the notorious Communist bad boy of contemporary philosophy Slavoj Zizek. It is part of a series entitled Philosophy in Transit, which also includes Truth, Self and Why Grow Up? The conceit is that these books can be read during the course of a commute, hence the transit in the series title. I don’t know how long the other books are but I imagine Zizek has pushed the idea to the limit. He set himself as his task a “… journey through Event as Fall, Event as Enlightenment, the three philosophical Events and the three aspects of Event in psychoanalysis. After confronting the possibility of undoing an Event, we reached our final destination by outlining the contours of a political Event (p.190).” This is quite a lot of material to cover and the pace can be a little rapid, especially since the author includes his usual quota of jokes and extensive references to popular culture. Hitchcock makes several appearances, while there is also space for Ted Hughes, the Tarkovsky film version of Solaris, Mansfield Park and DARPA. In order to accommodate all of these elements, there must be confidence in the structures of his thought. Here, for example, is his summation of western metaphysical philosophy:

“There are three (and only three) key philosophers in the history of Western metaphysics: Plato, Descartes and Hegel. Each of them enacted a clear break with the past: nothing remained the same after they entered the scene. Plato broke with pro-Socratic cosmology in search of the inner harmony of the universe, and introduced metaphysical idealism; Descartes broke with the medieval vision of reality as a meaningful hierarchic order … and Hegel broke with traditional metaphysics – idealist or materialist – and introduced the era of radical historicity in which all solid forms, social structures and principles are conceived as results of a contingent historical process (p.77).”

Hegel, of course, is one of the heroes of the text and another is Lacan. Marx makes only a fleeting appearance but his influence may be discerned more broadly. The text is dialectical in nature throughout, with sudden reversals and abrupt changes of direction which ultimately result in the negation of the negation: “At a more conceptual level of his logic of reflection, Hegel uses the unique term absoluter Gegenstoss (recoil, counter-push, counter-thrust, or simply counter-punch) to designate a withdrawal-from which creates that from which it withdraws (p.47).” This is the mechanism that is at the heart of the strategy for making claims and arguments. Not everybody appreciates this approach to the world, of course, for a variety of ideological or aesthetic reasons. Yet the sheer proliferation of books, articles and papers by the great man indicates that he spends his time more productively than worrying about what others think of him.

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