

## Chapter 2

# Welcome to Žižek's Beard

**Abstract** The problems and possibilities of educating in ways that enable people to break free from their shackles continues to exercise critical educationalists. This is where Žižek takes his stage as a skilled provocateur; he is notoriously difficult to read and is criticised for speaking through excessive storytelling and exemplification of points, often without actually stating what his point is (or might be). With a dialectical twist, however, here is Žižek in his full pedagogical glory, sharing important learning opportunities with us; it is us who have to take an active role in making sense of what 'the point' is, and what to do with it once we think we have grasped it. Žižek thinks, writes and performs like a cocktail with a kick: a Marxist liquid base, mixed with a dash of Lacan and Hegel on the rocks. The result is a commitment to tackling and navigating a contemporary capitalist society in ways which expose the hidden tricks and illusions that mobilise our deep unconscious motivations, often in contradictory ways. Never with a clear solution in sight, these underpinnings form a kind of Žižekian critical pedagogy; a way of engaging us in thinking about education without set or prescribed answers, but with crucial questions that take us on intellectual rollercoasters of inquiry about what education might involve, and therefore what it might become. But Žižek warns us, every perspective can only ever be partial, so bearing this in mind, welcome to our story of Žižek's beard.

**Keywords** Marx • Lacan • Hegel • Ideology • Situationist • Provocation • Critical

## What Do You Get When You Mix Marx with Lacan and Hegel?

There is a not so well known joke about Žižek which serves the purpose of introducing this book and the man himself in a fully affectionate fashion. Two academics travel to London for a talk about 'how to start a social revolution in

30 minutes'. They enter a large, poorly lit lecture theatre that can seat over 300 eager students. They choose to sit on the front row so they can see the presenter clearly and easily read the presentation slides. The lecture theatre soon fills up with the prospect of learning something insightful from the celebrity speaker; it is such a popular talk that people are standing on the rickety staircase alongside the multiple rows of seats. As the two academics wait with silent enthusiasm, the half-hearted spotlights fail and the audience plunges into complete darkness.

The two academics tentatively leave their seats and stumble forward. Fumbling around, they try their best to reach for a light switch or to open a door to shed light into the blackness. After rummaging in the dark, the first academic finds an object which is prickly, stiff and dry, much like the bristles of a garden brush. He wonders why there is such an object in the lecture theatre. The second academic reaches out and carefully handles a soft and thin fabric, much like the texture of an undergarment fit for the harshness of winter. He, like the first academic, wonders why there is such an object in the lecture theatre. Soon enough, the lights flick on to full beam with startling brightness. There, revealed in full colour and fiercely vivid, are the two academics fondling two parts of Žižek; one was grasping his t-shirt, and the other was groping his beard.

There is of course another version of the joke that starts with 'two academics walk into a bar...', but the ending is pretty much the same. Both jokes are a useful introduction to a book about Žižek's ideas and how they might be useful to people working in education. To the cynical eye, for example, the humorous aspects of the joke would not have been the fondling of Žižek's bits. It might have been the contemporary impossibility of there being 300 students sat in a lecture theatre (rather than being in bed). Or the unlikely nature of there being 300 students interested in starting a social revolution—in whatever timeframe. Another aspect might have been the contemporary educational condition where educationalists are required to package up their knowledge into specific consumable forms, in this case, 'how to start a social revolution in 30 minutes'. That is of course, avoiding the possibility of the question 'how many academics does it take to change a light bulb?'.

For a Žižekian gaze, however, these are not just flippant comments about a joke: they provide Marxist glimpses into contemporary issues in education in modern capitalist society. For Žižek, Marx exerts such an "influence in the general field of social sciences... offering us a key to the theoretical understanding of phenomena... [where] there is definitely more at stake than the commodity form" (Žižek 1994, p. 301). By this, Žižek is referring to how our sense of reality is shaped when production in society takes the form of an "immense collection of commodities" (Marx 1976, p. 73) where articles of wealth are bought and sold in the market. Here, we develop a commodity fetish, whereby we attribute to the product being exchanged something which is *more than* the commodities being exchanged, and *more than* the social relations that are involved in the making and exchanging of them. Something 'mystical' beyond the physical commodity which captures us in ways where we have deep desires for these things, such as big cars or houses (even though these might not of themselves be accurate measures of wealth). For Marx,

this was a ‘false consciousness’, or a distortion of a self or being, that was based on something other than a ‘natural’ way of being.

Our problem in this context is that this false consciousness feels real; a consciousness distorted by a particular way of being, or particular “doctrine, composite of ideas, beliefs, concepts...” (Žižek 1999, p. 63), or ideology. The conventional Marxist concern is that these ideological grips take hold because ‘we do not know what we do’, until we do become aware of it and revolt in some way, morphing the capitalist society into something else—hence the emancipatory flavour of Žižek’s work, with commitments to social revolution and change (Butler 2005; Taylor 2010; Wood 2012). Yet Žižek is intensely interested in why ‘we *do* know what we do, *and still do it...*’ (Žižek 1989). To explain this, he often refers to that well known amateur philosopher Donald Rumsfeld, the then US Secretary of Defense, to elaborate on the dangers we face:

‘There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don’t know.’... But what Rumsfeld forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the ‘unknown knowns’, the things we don’t know that we know –... which is precisely the Freudian unconscious... a symbolically articulated knowledge ignored by the subject... [which] frame, of our experience of reality. (Žižek 2014, pp. 8–10)

Žižek wants us to seek out and closely examine these ‘unknown knows’, because they alert us to how contemporary capitalism manifests in our daily lives, despite our awareness of it. It is for this intense concern, scholars say that Žižek offers “iconoclastic interpretation of the ubiquitous and deeply naturalised nature of ideology today... min[ing] the (only apparently) obvious and prosaic in order to produce startling insights” (Taylor 2010, p. 3).

It is here where he employs the psychoanalytical apparatus of Lacan, particularly Lacan’s later theoretical expositions of the Borromean knot, as a metaphor for the mechanics of human subjectivity (Myers 2003; Wood 2012; Žižek 2014). The dimensions of the Borromean knot (for Lacan, the Symbolic and Imaginary realms and the Real) and how they interconnect will be the focus of the rest of this book, but a key insight here is that the language we use on a daily basis is by no means innocent, but always loaded with particular ways of engaging with the world—and it is these which shape how we engage in education, and in any sphere of life (also see Barnett (2003, 2011) in the context of education). With these tools, Žižek explains how particular ways of thinking and relating to things within capitalist society live through our language and influence how we act in daily situations. But as we will soon see, in what is quintessentially Žižek, it is not just what is captured by language that shapes us, *but also that which escapes it has importance to our unconscious desires and drives*. And this is central to why we might notice ‘troubles in paradise’ but carry on regardless, even if we have been trained to question our own assumptions and engage in critical reflection—we are readily duped and tricked, and ‘being critical’ can even lead to the concepts we are seeking to dismantle taking an even tighter grip on us (Žižek 2006).

This helps to explain why Žižek uses, some would say excessively relies upon, stories and jokes to illuminate and animate his ideas. In one reading of his approach, we might argue that much of his writing is not necessarily direct or clear in the point he is making (see some of the critiques at the end of this chapter). Yet in another reading, this repetitive storytelling is about illuminating aspects, dimensions or angles of the point he is trying to make, rather than being absolutely, definitively clear about what the point is: his argument is that as soon as we try to capture some-thing, something else always escapes. Just like in the joke at the start of this chapter, it is a situation of: is it a garden brush? Is it an undergarment? No, it's Žižek! Sometimes, Žižek's jokes or stories can be considered vulgar or low class. The intention here seems to be to shake, shock, jolt or move the way we see the things and acts around us that are taken for granted, that is, that have become naturalised (the unknown knowns). He says:

Most people think I'm making jokes, exaggerating – but no, I'm not. It's not that. First I tell jokes, then I'm serious. No, the art is to bring the serious message into the forum of jokes. (Aitkenhead 2012)

Elsewhere he argues that “fiction is more real than the social reality of playing roles” (Žižek 2001, p. 75) because “there is a domain of fantasmatic intimacy which is marked by a “No Trespass!” sign” (Žižek 2001, p. 72). In other words, our attitude of engagement with something that is marked as ‘fiction’ allows us to see aspects or dimensions of a situation that we would not normally want to see. As we will discover later on, it might be deeply unsettling to who we think we are if we do see it directly (or might give us a headache), even though it is present in our behaviour.

The jokes and stories are aspects of Žižek's provocations and he sits within a long tradition of provocateurs. His startling interventions (and possibly motivations) have parallels with the Situationists who emerged in the late 1950s and attracted a certain vogue around the time of the events in Paris a decade or so later. Theirs was an anti-authoritarian Marxism which involved the attempt to influence and construct unsettling ‘situations’, from the small-scale such as squatting and the disfiguring of advertising hoardings, to the large-scale ‘May Events’ in Paris of 1968 (see Debord 1970; Vaneigem 1983). The idea was to challenge the ways in which our commodity fetish was taking hold in our daily lives, in order to enable people to free their desires, and go beyond the prevalent wage labour-money-commodity relationships. As Vaneigem implied, workers' relationships with the means of consumption were becoming almost as significant as their relationship to the means of production:

Purchasing power is a license to purchase power. The old proletariat sold its labour power in order to subsist; what little leisure time it had was passed pleasantly enough in conversations, arguments, drinking, making love, wandering, celebrating and rioting. The new proletariat sells his labour power in order to consume. When he's not flogging himself to death to get promoted in the labour hierarchy, he's being persuaded to buy himself objects to distinguish himself in the social hierarchy. (Vaneigem 1983, p. 52)

The Situationists strongly influenced some of the founders of the punk rock phenomenon in the mid-1970s, including Malcolm McLaren, manager of the Sex Pistols (Marcus 1989). The notorious foul-mouthed appearance by the Sex Pistols on ITV's live Bill Grundy show in 1976 was an act of cultural sabotage and provocation reflecting the dictum 'we still have some time to take advantage of the fact that radio and television stations are not yet guarded by the army' (Debord 1970). Their deliberately ripped clothing, safety pins and bondage trousers were purposively designed to challenge contemporary conceptions of fashion and therefore to shock. In many ways, their working-class youthful insouciance reflected a conscious desire to provoke the consumers of suburbia into questioning received nostrums and conventional behaviours. This aspiration also motivated their re-appropriation of the swastika and portraits of Karl Marx—especially given they were certainly not Nazis, and not necessarily Marxists either.

Though it may not be immediately obvious that this reflects a Žižekian style, is this not precisely what Žižek does to make things even more eye-catching and exciting (or perhaps frustrating for some)? Indeed, is this not what he is doing in his provocative display of pictures of Stalin in his home (Taylor 2005)? In his scholarly work, Žižek has been known to engage in 'literary hoaxes', for example, publishing fictional roundtable discussions, and an intentionally flawed critique on an imaginary book (Boynton 1998). Perhaps there is an intention to encourage an attitude of engaging in and questioning the debate rather than consuming it? Or perhaps it was a statement about the 'unknown knowns' of academic publishing systems? In our view, this sort of approach is about placing a 'question mark' over what we are reading or hearing, which is an invitation to possibly do both, more, and possibly neither. Sir Ken Robinson might agree with the spirit of Žižek's ambition to offer forms of teaching and learning which enable new creative capacities to flourish in education, rather than 'kill it', if not, perhaps the vehicle and tactics Žižek uses (see TED 2015).

This leads to another aspect of a Žižekian gaze on education: the close examination of antagonisms also feature in Žižek's work through the use of contradiction, using a dialectical method. Žižek illustrates this pointedly in *Event* where he observes 'take away the illusion and you lose the truth itself' (2014, p. 106). In other words, it is through opposition and polarity that real meaning can be found and (potentially) progress can occur. Inspired by Hegel, with a dash of Marx and Lacan, Žižek considers that everything contains the seeds of its own transcendence, or every paradise has with it, troubles. Here, every 'thing' has opposing elements in a shifting and unstable equilibrium that can burst asunder and create a new formation when the composition of the elements changes. Hegel's dialectical approach—often simplified into thesis/antithesis/synthesis—was famously adapted and refined by Marx who attempted to relocate its driving force from the abstract realm of ideas to the notion of ideas being situated in (and driven by) particular circumstances. Hence Marx's comment:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. (Marx 1984, p. 360)

It is through opposition and polarity in these circumstances, Žižek argues, that we can find new insights into how contemporary capitalism works and how it can trick us into repeating and reproducing it. At a fundamental level these Žižekian moves are attempts to encourage 'sense-making' through highlighting and emphasising contradictions and questioning the assumptions which set them up, within the context of specific daily circumstances or situations. And the practical application of this method—as with Lacan—involves word-play, jokes, puns, and much else that can expose hidden contradictions and encourage alternative perspectives, identifying and magnifying the unstable elements of the dialectical process so as to establish movement towards a new, unstable equilibrium. This Žižekian frame and method applies to education as well as much else—indeed, in many ways *what we learn, how we learn it and for what ends*, is at the very heart of Žižek's philosophical approach, and in this respect his method has an intrinsic epistemological dimension.

Žižek might well have been an avid punk rocker (or of course, the converse: punk rockers might well have the full and extensive Žižek back catalogue), but perhaps his leanings position him somewhat closer to contemporaries like Frank Furedi, an educational scholar with similar, self-consciously controversial stances that garner media attention? It is no surprise that Furedi has a comparable academic and radical background: Furedi was the leading theoretician of one of Britain's erstwhile Trotskyist organisations (the Revolutionary Communist Party), and was then part of the network of provocative media commentators and academics that emerged from it (Spiked Ltd 2015). From his support for Argentina in the Falklands War to recent opposition to state censorship disguised as anti-terrorism legislation, Furedi seems to demonstrate similar influences and methods.

For both Žižek and Furedi, provocation and polarity are defining threads. So this leads us towards our answer to the question, 'what do you get when an educationalist mixes up Marx, Lacan and Hegel?'. The answer is probably 'an emancipatory hagfish pedagogy', but this needs some explaining. The hag fish has an inbuilt property whereby as soon as it is pressed or grasped, it releases a slimy substance which repels or resists its capture. This is not a claim that Žižek or his approach is fishy or slimy in any literal sense, but the hag fish and its properties provide an angle from which to think about and make sense of Žižek and his ways of educating (or provoking). In engaging with Žižek, there is always a sense of not fully capturing what he is saying, because he is circling the point with a recognition that as soon as he tries to capture it precisely, something escapes (an utterly Lacanian point).

With such a frustrating approach, the responsibility of sense making becomes a task for the audience: we have to understand the possible messages in statements and interactions, rather than relying on the communicator to specifically outline what is intended (and of course, the associated exertions of power in such a

relationship). This, for Žižek, is a starting point to generating new ways to act, or at the very least, raising the possibility of new ways to act.

The same applies to this book; as we attempt to become increasingly precise about what Žižek and his ideas are, there will be an inevitable failure. We might grasp his beard and his t-shirt through this book, and they might feel like something very real to us as we grasp at them—but a bit of Žižek will always escape. Yet this inevitable failure is not a unique feature of this book, but any book about Žižek and his work: none of these books grasp the totality of Žižek. This is perhaps what stimulates the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* and its vibrant community of over 14,000 subscribers across multiple fields. There are not enough hands to grasp the totality of Žižek within this book, but using Žižekian thought, we realise that would be an impossible task. All we can aim to do is reveal a part of his beard and expose a bit of the t-shirt, in ways that may be interesting to people working (or studying) within the education system.

## Lovers and Haters

There is a well-known yeast extract product which is the by-product of beer-brewing. Its intensely salty flavour and dark gloopy texture splits opinion—some people love it, and some absolutely detest it. It seems Žižek creates the same effect, as captured by this critical question: “Is [Žižek] an intellectual charlatan who has parlayed his neurosis and love of film into academic celebrity?” (Cooley 2009, p. 382). Žižek receives criticism about his style (including lack of academic referencing in many of his pieces), approach, as well as theoretical underpinnings. Many of Žižek’s most trenchant critics have especially attacked his method as philosophical agent provocateur, claiming that this has allowed him to hide behind a lack of specificity in his outlook. In effect, a method that has led him to be labelled a theorist without any theory, an empty vessel making much philosophical ‘noise’.

Perhaps most notably, this has been the line adopted by Noam Chomsky, another self-styled radical theorist who has set about challenging a wide variety of cherished assumptions about capitalism and how it operates:

[W]hen I said I’m not interested in theory, what I meant is, I’m not interested in posturing – using fancy terms like polysyllables and pretending you have a theory when you have no theory whatsoever. So there’s no theory in any of this stuff, not in the sense of theory that anyone is familiar with in the sciences or any other serious field. Try to find in all of the work you mentioned some principles from which you can deduce conclusions, empirically testable propositions where it all goes beyond the level of something you can explain in five minutes to a twelve-year-old. See if you can find that when the fancy words are decoded. I can’t. So I’m not interested in that kind of posturing. Žižek is an extreme example of it. (Chomsky in *Veterans Unplugged* 2015)

There have been other trenchant critics in the anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements too. On occasion, these have contended that Žižek’s method has effectively hidden or obscured an authoritarianism seemingly out of keeping with his

otherwise radical posturing (Roos 2013). Some might argue his approach which explores inversions and sets up contradictions ‘does not make sense at all’ (Cooley 2009; Myers 2003). Or, simply put, it is “impenetrable” (Aitkenhead 2012). Another theoretical criticism relates to the extent to which we are shaped by the wider social structures in which we participate. For example, some have argued that psychoanalysis generally (not Žižek specifically) over-emphasises these determinants and does not provide sufficient wiggle room for an individual to “escape complete and utter domination and compliance” (Holland et al. 1998, p. 32). For Holland et al.:

persons develop through and around the cultural forms by which they are identified, and identify themselves, in the context of their affiliation or disaffiliation with those associated with those forms and practices. A better metaphor for us is not suture, which makes the person and the position seem to arrive preformed at the moment of suturing, but co-development – the linked development of people, cultural forms, and social positions in particular historical worlds. (Holland et al. 1998, pp. 32–33)

This book will encourage you to consider and develop your own views, which we hope might mean exploring Žižek’s work and his opponents in more depth (see the final chapter of this book for springboards into other resources). However, many scholars have sensed in Žižek’s work a fundamental desire to shift thinking beyond the conventional and towards the transformative. We align with Cooley who argues:

it is clear that Žižek’s work is useful in the sense that it has the hallmark of all great philosophy – namely it raises questions about people’s beliefs and concentrates on aspects of everyday life... Žižek can be seen as a modern gadfly uttering the ancient Socratic mantra ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’ within the media and cultural spectacle of the present. (Cooley 2009, p. 382)

Or as Aitkenhead says, he operates with:

exhilarating ambition and his central thesis offers a perspective even his critics would have to concede is thought-provoking. In essence, he argues that nothing is ever what it appears, and contradiction is encoded in almost everything. Most of what we think of as radical or subversive – or even simply ethical – doesn’t actually change anything. (Aitkenhead 2012)

Our view is that if Žižek is having the same polarising effect as a yeast extract product—in his case, to spark lively debate about contemporary events—this is a productive activity for social change that can be aligned to Marxist ambitions. For us, Žižek is often true to his theoretical underpinnings (as discussed above), and there is always the possibility of a Žižekian intention to disrupt with almost every statement he makes, especially the ones which deeply offend (see for example, Schuman 2014). What we value from a Žižekian style and approach is the possibility of feeling effected and inspired to act in some way, but with the possibility of our setting our own next steps through the thick, yeasty substance. Žižek very rarely talks about education directly. It is our view that a Žižekian frame applies to education as well as much else and enables us to make comments about what we learn, how we learn it and for what ends. So how do these ideas and methods relate to education more specifically? This is where our focus now turns.



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