Enjoying Theory: Žižek, Critique, Accountability

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“You don’t understand a thing,” said Avenarius, as if tired of my inability to grasp what he had already explained to me so many times. “There is no effective or sensible way to fight Diabolum. Marx tried, all the revolutionaries tried, and in the end Diabolum always managed to appropriate every organization whose original goal was to destroy it. . . . What is a man to do when he realizes that no organized, effective, and sensible fight against Diabolum is possible? He has only two choices: to resign and cease to be himself, or to keep on cultivating an inner need for revolt and from time to time give it expression. . . . It’s important for you, too, not to express your revolt merely through the writing of novels, which cannot bring you any true satisfaction, but through action. Today I am asking you to join me at long last!”

“All the same, it is still unclear to me,” I said, “why an inner moral need drove you to attack a poor radio commentator.”

—Milan Kundera

Many people today perceive the university to be in crisis, or at least undergoing transformation, and they feel that the role of the humanities within the university and society is uncertain. This was not always so. Indeed, those who chartered the University of Berlin in 1810, which is held to be the first modern elective-based research university, were certain they had adequately defined the roles of all the disciplines, including those comprising the humanities. This can be seen in Immanuel Kant’s *The Conflict of the Faculties*, a key document that laid out the basic blueprint utilized by Wilhelm von Humboldt and others in the formation of the University of Berlin. Kant saw the university as split between the higher faculties (law, medicine, and theology) and lower faculties (which include “the humanities”). For Kant, Johann Fichte, and others, the mission of the lower faculties was in large part the production of knowledge with a critical function, and the higher faculties were obliged to heed the lower faculties’ critical discourse (see *Conflict 45; Readings 6*). This structure set the higher and lower faculties in conflict.
It was the obligation of the lower faculties to put forth truths in the public realm that would rectify the compromised discourses proffered by the higher faculties. Since the higher faculties were motivated by business and other interests not tied to disinterested, objective truth, their knowledge and practices were suspect (Conflict 53–59). In order for the lower faculties to accomplish their mission of establishing disinterested, critical truth, Kant required that the lower faculties be shielded from business and political factors; such autonomy, he argued, preserved them from dissolution while ensuring the disinterested pursuit of critical truth (43, 53).

There is much in critical discourse today that works within this same two-hundred-year-old Kantian framework: business interests are suspect; the humanities are to be privileged with special freedoms, including substantial autonomy; critique is the road to truth and social transformation. In short, academics in the humanities find it important to maintain a belief in the sanctity, autonomy, and critical jurisdiction of the university. I must confess to an ambivalence concerning this stance: on the one hand, I have inherited, to some extent uncritically, an investment in our autonomy, while, on the other hand, I am no longer sure that seeking autonomy or critical jurisdiction are viable trajectories for us to follow. This might seem puzzling if not paradoxical, but if my reading and conversations with colleagues is any indication, it is not atypical. In this light, Robert Samuels' "Žižek's Rhetorical Matrix: The Symptomatic Enjoyment of Postmodern Academic Writing" asks me to confront this paradox, for if nothing else, Samuels' attack on Slavoj Žižek demonstrates a deep ambivalence at work in the humanities, an ambivalence that gathers threateningly whenever we academics speak of what we do and why we do it. Conceptually and philosophically, we still work within the basic framework laid out by Kant, even as we see a number of contemporary factors—corporatization, professionalization, funding, legitimation, globalization, and more—challenging if not destroying that framework. Neither “theory,” English studies, nor rhetoric and composition are free of this ambivalence. As these challenges threaten our sense of grounding purpose, we see less in the way of constructive or inventive responses. Instead, we have the emergence of reactive conflict, ressentiment, bad faith, cynicism, or a false sense of surety-in-mission that is all the more faux for being so shrill.

Robert Samuels' Critique of Slavoj Žižek
In his essay, Samuels criticizes one of the big names on the postmodern theory scene, Slavoj Žižek, in order to demonstrate that critical “theory”
obfuscates and ignores the fundamental economic realities underlying academia today. Samuels writes, "It is my contention that Žižek and many other academic critics employ abstract and universalizing political theories in order to escape the horrible working and thinking conditions shaping academic labor" (328). Samuels complains that theorists write instead about "multiculturalism, globalism, mass culture, and cyber communities" (328). He argues that such topics are either extraneous pursuits functioning as a mode of escape or legitimate pursuits that nevertheless allow theorists to stop short of addressing more pressing, concrete issues. What then does Samuels have in mind as our proper critical task? That task would be addressing "the exploitation of part-time instructors, the inflation of class size, the de facto loss of tenure, the defunding of higher education, the rise of a new administrative class, and the use of graduate students as surplus labor" (328). For Samuels, critique must address its own means of production and redress the inequities that stem from the fact that the academy has embraced business practices.

Žižek is in particular a target, according to Samuels, because he actively engages the "economics and politics of postmodern culture," yet he fails to address "the fundamental antagonisms shaping higher education." Focusing on Žižek's recent interview in JAC and a minor essay on The Matrix, Samuels goes on to characterize Žižek as a "nihilistic machine" who holds forth that "everything is fake and nothing is grounded in reality" (327, 342). This leaves him and other like-minded postmodern intellectuals free to ignore the "real material factors weighing down our symbolic discourses." Thus, Žižek's popularity is in part a function of a large-scale academic fantasy "to be global intellectual free agents" without the constraints of teaching and committee work (345, 344). Worse, Samuels argues through a close reading of Žižek's analysis of the film The Matrix that his theory itself becomes empty and universalizing because it is devoid of substantial material content. In this regard, contends Samuels, the field of composition becomes symptomatic. Writing courses mirror Žižek's theoretical moves to the extent that they too are universal and empty, and, indeed, the practical performance of writing instruction betrays a sense that anyone can teach writing precisely because it has "no inherent subject matter" (350).

It would be easy to quibble with much of Samuels' argument. He limits his analysis of Žižek to a few minor texts (what Žižek himself calls in Hollywoodese his "B-productions" as opposed to his A-productions; see Lovink) and ignores Žižek's other interviews and the bulk of his major
published material. The caricature of Žižek’s argumentative style as endlessly repeating the same four steps is reductive, albeit humorous. His accusation that Žižek is actively avoiding economic and political realities is misleading if not inaccurate, especially given that Žižek wrote political speeches for Slovenian politicians and even ran for political office himself in the early 1990s (see Lovink and Osborne). Ultimately, Samuels accuses Žižek of ignoring American political and economic realities while he simultaneously ignores Žižek’s Slovenian interests and active political engagements. Given that Žižek is not an American citizen, it is even questionable that we should assign him the responsibility of intervening in the American education system.

So, yes, it would be easy to quibble, and indeed my initial response after reading his essay was to make copious notes to the effect that Samuels simply has Žižek wrong on many important points. But I quickly realized that such a point-counterpoint approach misses the larger trajectory of the essay—misses, in short, the heart of the matter. So what I would like to do now is try to address the larger issues at stake in what Samuels argues, for they are of no small importance for any of us engaged in intellectual work in the university. There are several issues I want to explore in what follows, including the notion of “academic fantasy” and our uncertain role as humanities-based intellectuals in the university, especially as regards corporatization and bureaucratic administration. Further, I am concerned about the notion of “critique” implied and delimited in Samuels’ essay. But first I would note that there is much I share with Samuels, including his concerns about funding, class size, the “empty” composition course, and the devaluation of scholarly work in the humanities. However, I am suspicious of the attempt to short-circuit the realms of criticism and action through a blunt imposition: “Exploitation is happening; you must change your life!” Such a stance, while it has suasive passion, cannot finally motivate us to action without a greater and deeper groundwork—without, that is, a new mythos for our time that moves us out of a two-hundred-year-old conception of the university. From this perspective, theory is a kind of inventive excess. Whether it is critical or not, or even whether it focuses on material exploitation or not, there can be no final utilitarian or moral principle for which an accountability must be rendered. The humanities, including rhetoric and composition, will continue to be devalued and held accountable to a consumer-driven market logic unless we successfully remythologize them for the general public. Calling theory to task, reining it in to answer within the framework of an accountability that it exceeds and transgresses, cannot
help us in this project because theory’s excess is integral to, or a resource (a reserve) for, a new mythos to come.

**Academic Fantasy**

Since Samuels invokes the idea of academic fantasy in his essay, I think it would be profitable to examine what Žižek means for American academics today. He is one of a number of academic “stars” who have nearly made the transition to public intellectual (see Shumway). Others of similar status might include Judith Butler, Stanley Fish, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Cornel West. But, taking our cue from Robert Miklitsch, we might want to shift our locus here, from assigning Žižek a specific status (jetset-superstar-European intellectual) to asking, “For whom, exactly, does he function as the ‘sublime’ intellectual Other?” (477). Doing so, as Miklitsch notes, foregrounds the question of desire. In moving the locus of our question, we initiate a leap from which we can see that an attack on Žižek can only succeed to the extent that it disavows factors of American reception and consumption. Interestingly, this is a common theme in Žižek: our everyday practices and beliefs can depend on a disavowal of an underlying libidinal attachment. In this case, we want to ask, “What motivates a critique of Žižek that is dependent on his achieved superstar status that declines to interrogate the consumptive theory market that made him a superstar?”

To be fair, Samuels does glance once or twice in this direction, but he does so only to widen the scope of his arguments. Thus, besides Žižek we have like-minded theorists (and by association the people who read such theorists) all engaged in an avoidance of the material realities of the corporatized academy. Strictly speaking, then, we should shift the locus of responsibility from Žižek to American academics; they, ultimately, must take responsibility both for Žižek’s popularity and the popularity of the kinds of theory that fall short of the goals Samuels thinks theory should move toward. But this is ultimately as deep as Samuels goes. Given that, what can we do with his argument?

Perhaps the first thing is to admit that to a degree Samuels is right. A great deal of contemporary criticism engaging in contemporary political and economic issues leaves entirely untouched the harsh, exploitative practices ongoing in the university. Worse, left-leaning critics of the university’s corporate drift have by and large failed to address such issues—or, if they have, they have failed to supply viable alternate models. Meanwhile, what they do produce (essays, books, conferences, new professors, and so on) is still dependent on the system as it currently
functions; indeed, what they produce helps propagate that system even as it "critiques" it. If our goal is to note this, to underscore it, then we should now recognize it. But the larger question that Samuels forces us to confront is this: should we feel responsible or bad about it? If Samuels' critique has bite, I suggest, it is because our sense of mission or purpose no longer sustains us, no longer provides a raison d'être that would push us to do more than just confront the exploitative practices of the corporate university.

This brings us to a point where we need to hear a resounding intonation in the idea of "academic fantasy." Critical theory directed at cultural practices and artifacts allows both theorists and readers of theory to imagine that they are still "radical," that they are actively engaged in transforming the status quo, when in fact they are not. This constitutes the fantasy. Thomas Frank, for example, makes this charge in several works. In New Consensus for Old, he states, "Academic radicalism became functionally indistinguishable from free market theory at exactly the historical moment when capitalist managers decided it was time to start referring to themselves as 'radicals,' to understand consumption itself as democracy" (52). The term "radical" cannot mean the same thing for both these factions, but insofar as they begin to share a common trajectory—the belief that the power of the consumer is inherently democratic, if not potentially subversive—and consolidate that trajectory across the same term, we can no longer see either faction in the same light. This is because both senses of the term "radical" share a common belief in the market and thereby presuppose the work of capital. If we are to make a value judgment, academic radicalism comes off worse, for its sense of "radical" is entirely phantasmatic, a chimera supplying the needed libidinal hotwire to keep academics plugging away at cultural critique.

Still, there is more than just one intonation to be heard in academic fantasy. If we listen again, we hear resounding within the notion something larger: our dreams as academics. That is, what is it that we see ourselves as accomplishing in choosing to work in the university? To begin to answer this question in a way that moves beyond the personal invokes even more questions. What are the connections between our scholarship and the university in which we work? To what extent is the scholar to take on the role of administrator? How does this change the kind and the value of the work produced? Such questions no longer have answers as clear as they might once have been. To attempt to answer them opens us up to a still larger series of questions: How has the university
changed in past decades, and, in changing, how has it transformed the way the scholar functions within that university? To what extent is a scholar already an administrator, or at what point does one preclude the other? What is the university's role in society today? What should be the content of the curriculum in the humanities? In English? In the writing classroom? How do we legitimate that curriculum to the larger public?

It is precisely in attempting to answer these concerns that I experience a kind of impatience with Samuels. In making the charge that academics, especially those who write and read critical theory, ignore the material realities of the university, Samuels necessarily invokes the possibility of change. But I see no attempt to chart a course for change. Since the bulk of the essay is given over to a detailed critique of Žižek, I cannot but wonder where a vision for this something "else" is.7

This is not a new problem, nor is my observation of it fresh. I suspect that Samuels is himself aware of it. But this does not mean that the problem can be set aside. In *As If Learning Mattered*, Richard Miller charges several academic critics with sidestepping this issue. In the end, he argues that we should resign ourselves to "fighting our way to middle management" (as a Monster.com advertisement once winningly put it). It is in committees, faculty meetings, and the like that change occurs. "Diabolum"—Milan Kundera's word for the diabolical bureaucratic machine—is here to stay. So, according to Miller, we need to embrace fully the knowledge that bureaucratic systems simultaneously constrain and enable us (216). One rather difficult consequence of this position—difficult for some, at least—is that it sets sharp limits on the kind of change that can occur. In brief, it will be incremental and compromising. Whatever changes do occur cannot be so transformative that the established ways of thinking and doing are substantially challenged. For example, changing a writing program at a midlevel urban university entails countless variables above and beyond the specific content of the program. How will the program relate to the university at large? How will it be evaluated? What will be its relation to local community colleges? How would the course's credits be transferred? How does it relate to the state university system? All of these issues and more set concrete limits on the kinds of change that can occur, severely limiting what can be done, what resources can be brought to bear, and how quickly projects can proceed. Certainly, the elimination of the capitalist exploitation of academic workers will not occur in next week's Graduate Program Steering Committee meeting.
Creating a Sustaining Mythos

I invoked capitalism at the end of the previous paragraph because that is what Samuels is ultimately confronting. To address the materialist exploitation of the university is to examine the role of capitalism in making universities more corporate in form and function. And at this point, too, I pick up the theme with which I began: the lower faculties in the university, as conceived by Kant, were to be relatively autonomous from economic pressures. Today, we see that autonomy eroding on all fronts—indeed, we are led to question to what extent it ever existed. Be that as it may, it might be important to recall something else Kant argued. In his 1784 essay, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” Kant argues that one should be free to use one’s reason howsoever one wishes in the public realm—meaning, the realm where one’s ideas can be challenged by others—but that in the private realm where one performs one’s duties, one must obey. Kant paraphrases his king, Frederick II, the great ally of Enlightenment, saying, “Argue as much as you want and about what you want, but obey!” (42). Paul Mann responds that this “opening of free liberal argument conceals a deeper obedience to the law” (190). We need to understand that although the rulers and laws have changed, obeisance remains a constant. Today, it is the “free” market that demands our obedience. This is what Bill Readings describes as “the rule of the cash-nexus” (3). In all arenas of production, the key question is this: to what accountable use can something be put? Under this rule, we can argue about or produce what we will, so long as there are measurable outcomes that satisfy the demand for accountability.

Žižek knows this, and I would have liked to have seen Samuels engage him on this point. In The Ticklish Subject, Žižek writes,

"Today, after the breakdown of the Marxist notion that capitalism itself generates the force that will destroy it in the guise of the proletariat, none of the critics of capitalism, none of those who describe so convincingly the deadly vortex into which the so-called process of globalization is drawing us, has any well-defined notion of how we can get rid of capitalism. In short, I am not preaching a simple return to the old notions of class struggle and socialist revolution: the question of how it is really possible to undermine the global capitalist system is not a rhetorical one—maybe it is not really possible, at least not in the foreseeable future."

(352)

If exploitative university practices are going to be challenged, rectified, or otherwise changed, that change must begin in a sustained engagement
with the ways that capitalism structures the university from the inside and outside. In “Nietzsche’s Money,” Jeffrey Nealon pointedly states, “Capital, in other words, is simultaneously the ‘problem’ we must learn to respond to, and the field of forces wherein that discontinuous response will be worked out or worked over” (826). If Miller demonstrates the inevitability of bureaucratic Diabolum, then Nealon marks the necessity of grappling with capital as a productive force within which we strive. Whatever solutions we postulate to the problems facing the humanities in the university, they will emerge in response to and as produced by the bureaucratic and capitalist axes.

It is far beyond the scope of what I can do here to tackle such complexities. What I can say is this: if we want things to be better or different, we as academics must shed the Kantian framework that demands an autonomous, critical truth, and learn to articulate better and more clearly why we do what we do, why it matters, and why people should pay for it. But we can also play a double game and simultaneously invent ways to disrupt the logic of accountability. If Samuels convinces us that we can and must change the exploitative practices and material problems of universities—and especially the problematic role of composition programs within the university—then it is at the everyday level of (re)creating a vibrant and sustaining mythos where we will have to begin. There is every reason to believe that theory will have an affirmative and productive role in the creation of that mythos. Theory can be revitalizing to the extent that it is beholden to nothing, and lest the humanities themselves devolve into the “only beholden,” theory should maintain against every economic and moral calculus a disruptive affirmation that is without reserve.8

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Notes

1. The literature on this subject is diverse and exceedingly large. The following is a list of material that I have found pertinent and/or useful. It is slim and primarily limited to recent books rather than individual articles. For diagnoses of the contemporary university, see Bloom; Readings; Aronowitz; Miller; and Michael. For books positing the future or the reorganization of the university, see Brown and Duguid; Pelikan; Duderstadt; Kolodny; and Herman. For books positing a rethinking of the humanities, see Proctor; Nussbaum; and Gilman. See also Commission and American. For more discipline-specific perspectives, see Giroux and Myrsiades; Downing; Crowley; and Olson.
2. Although the modern research university is held to have begun with the University of Berlin, there were precursors such as Göttingen, the leading university in eighteenth-century Germany (see Ridder-Symoens). Indeed, Göttingen had such a high reputation that at its foundation in 1876 Johns Hopkins University was nicknamed "Göttingen-in-Baltimore" because of its large number of German professors (Ashby 4). Regardless of this, the modern elective-based, research-driven curriculum established at the University of Berlin by Humboldt was widely copied in Europe, America, and elsewhere.

3. Other interviews with Žižek include those with Dews and Osborne; Canning; Lovink; Gutmair and Flor; Hanlon; and Henwood.

4. As already mentioned, Žižek addresses his political activity in several interviews. He also addresses his more concrete political concerns in other work (see, for example, NATO and "Caught").

5. It is important to note that "theory" is not an object so much as a contentious discursive network, always seeking, adapting, questioning, postulating, and creating. This means that it is wildly recursive. This is one of the senses I get from Lynn Worsham, who proposes that we "practice a particular relation to theory—one that is critical, rhetorical, resistant, and, ultimately, thoroughly theoretical" (391). Whatever our relation to theory, it is not something we can simply escape or abandon through praxis. Nor is it, finally, something to be controlled or corralled, precisely because its recursiveness will exceed all bo(und)s. Still, theory has yet to produce an adequate comportment with its own excess; perhaps this is something it can never achieve, though it might be that the best attempt is what we call rhetoric (see also Grassi and Vitanza).

6. For example, Žižek provides the example of the strong antihomosexuality attitudes prevalent in the military. His point is that this attitude itself depends on a disavowal of the homoerotic bonding already structuring the daily life of soldiers (Ticklish 266).

7. Samuels is curiously parasitical on the system he denounces, writing a theory essay that critiques theory for not addressing the very issues he himself declines to address concretely. This seeming contradiction is not the objection it appears to be. Paul Mann attempts to theorize the impasse of critique in his perspicacious book Masocriticism, where he inscribes the drive to critique within a masochistic libidinal economy. Mann notes that criticism is "an impossible, humiliating task" that can never live up to the stakes we would set for it (39). Mann self-consciously invokes this aspect of criticism: "Wonderful: already the wrong text. The wrong text is precisely the text one writes" (20). Mann calls our attention to the way writing always goes awry, leading us to something we did not (quite) intend. Yet, our drive remains. I would suggest that Samuels works within this space but that the "lack" in his essay (of any concrete plans that would fulfill the promise of his critique) is less an objection than a demonstration of the masochistic will-to-critique—a criticism, I should add, that I am not immune from, since, to the extent that I too am engaged in critique, I work within this same libidinal economy. Nothing is overcome.
8. I am indebted to many sources for the phrase "without reserve." The two most pertinent here are Derrida, "From" and Vitanza Negation.

**Works Cited**


In Žižek’s Rhetorical Matrix: The Symptomatic Enjoyment of Postmodern Academic Writing, Robert Samuels addresses a paradox that has likely vexed many of us: “In the last twenty years we have seen universities and colleges taken over by bottom-line business practices, while we have also watched the dissemination of political and economic criticism into most areas of academic culture” (335). Samuels confronts this paradox at two levels. At the institutional level, he examines the forces that have placed composition, in Samuels’ words, “in a low position on the university totem pole” (327). At the theoretical level, he argues that the kind of postmodern political theorizing exemplified by Slavoj Žižek contributes to these forces by repositioning political-economic struggle onto the plain of theory and by ignoring the material circumstances in which many teach.

Samuels maintains that this situation holds special meaning for teachers of composition—for their institutional position and their relationship to postmodern theorizing. In making the connection between institution and theory, he argues that composition in the university is analogous to Žižek’s “postmodern global subject” in that both are “empty and universal” (350, 334). Žižek’s revisionist Cartesian subject, according to Samuels, “is defined by the empty and universal quality of the