

February 2021

**Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek, editors. Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism. Northwestern UP, 2020.**

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## Recommended Citation

Loh, Vanessa (2021) "Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek, editors. Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism. Northwestern UP, 2020.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 45: Iss. 1, Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2189>

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**Abstract**

Review of Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek, editors. *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism.* Northwestern UP, 2020. 270 pp.

**Keywords**

materialism, consciousness, unconscious, dualism/non-dualism, Hegel, Lacan

Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek, editors. *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism*. Northwestern UP, 2020. 270 pp.

This collection of essays edited by Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek reorganizes and reframes the debate surrounding idealism and materialism, clarifying the distinctions between the positions of the various stakeholders. The conversation has long been in need of a substantive shift in perspective in order to keep up with advancing discoveries in the field of modern physics—which is the most fundamental and most important intervention this volume accomplishes. And also one it underplays. Critiques of cultural materialism, sometimes referred to as historicism, have come under the banners of New Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology, and various types of realisms, all aiming to refigure the over-anthropocentrized subject and all resulting in the misguided erasure of the subject altogether. The essays in this collection, on the contrary, begin from a post-Newtonian perspective in which we can no longer posit an external objective reality that exists independent of the human mind. Rather, we must integrate mind with matter, idealism with materialism. We are compelled, therefore, to reconceive—to overhaul, even—the notion of the subject. The Lacano-Hegelian dialectical materialists featured in this collection understand the subject not as consciousness, but as the unconscious; not as the thinking I, but as the elusive subject that dwells within the unconscious.

After an introductory essay by the editors, the collection is divided into two parts: “Part I: Hegel and Philosophical Materialism,” contains five essays and concludes with an essay from Žižek; and “Part II: Lacan and Psychoanalytic Materialism,” contains six essays and concludes with an essay from Sbriglia. Other notable contributors are Mladen Dolar, Andrew Cole, Adrian Johnston, and Alenka Zupančič. The titles of the subsections suggest that the authors approach philosophical and psychoanalytical materialism separately, but there is frequent overlap, something those familiar with Žižek will recognize.

Žižek’s interpretation of G.W.F. Hegel, it is widely noted, is unorthodox. This particular collection of essays continues to depart from the standard interpretation of Hegel by maintaining that although he is initially an idealist, Hegel eventually comes to see that idealism and materialism are integral to one another. The view that Hegel sees mind and matter as non-discrete is the implicit justification to read Hegel psychoanalytically. Whether this is an accurate reading of Hegel or not, by the end of his life Maurice Merleau-Ponty reaches a similar view of idealism and materialism, independently of his reading of Hegel. In the working notes for his unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty regrets that *Phenomenology of Perception* takes as its starting point a distinction between consciousness and the object. There is however a certain usefulness, maybe even a practicality—given that the task is to reconfigure subjectivity—in

re-thinking the Hegelian subject within a psychoanalytical framework. It's not so much about Hegel as it is about finding tools for navigating the landscape of this new conception of subjectivity.

Using Hegel's subject as a point of departure allows us to retain the concept of a Self enmeshed in a dialectical process of becoming, but where Hegel stresses experience through action, Žižek et al. posit the unconscious. The role of the unconscious "I" involves an extremely passive Self, but only after the feat of radical self-negation—in other words, deep stillness after the revolutionary action of shedding the ego. This shadow side of subjectivity Žižek calls the embodiment of lack, or more specifically, of the "hole" in reality caused by the subject's presence in the same field. It is the blind spot in the subject's frame of reference. It is Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a*: it governs our decision-making and our choices while at the same time it persistently eludes us. The essays in this collection argue against theories that attempt to correct Cartesian dualism by positing an objectivist worldview that excises subjectivity. The answer offered by the present volume is to bring subjectivity deeply inward where it becomes so expansive it seems to vanish, while at the same time, it exerts thorough control.

The ramifications of a subjectivity of the unconscious are as important as the shift itself. How does this updated conception of subjectivity effect our conception of agency in terms of decision-making? Or, in terms of practical action in the world? Do we need to have a discussion about free will? The authors in this collection only subtly touch on some of these questions. And there is an apparent resonance with aspects of unified field theory in physics that the authors do not acknowledge. Physicist John Hagelin—who situates the self even more deeply within—has offered compelling ideas about the potential relationship between consciousness (qua subjectivity) and unified field theory that would help to sharpen the many robust ideas in this volume into more practical hypotheses. Instead, at some points the contributors seem to be merely fussing over the way we conceive of outdated terminology like idealism and materialism.

A ground-shifting collection such as this poses difficulties, including the fact that its accessibility may depend in part on the reader's familiarity with advances in scientific fields not traditionally associated with the discussion at hand. This volume is a beginning step towards shifting the way the fields of philosophy, political science, and literary and cultural studies understand the subject-object relationship. Exposing relevant chapters to graduate students during coursework could help turn the conversation in the right direction. The collection as a whole is a must read for anyone writing on consciousness, subjectivity, dualism/non-dualism, psychoanalysis, or phenomenology generally—because to ignore this line of thinking will ossify the current stagnancy on these topics. These are the relevant ideas to be in conversation with, to be challenging, and to be further elaborating.

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