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What is Wrong with Our System?

(Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020, 136 pages)

Written by the renowned Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, the book delves into the first few weeks of the pandemic. Published a mere thirteen days after the pandemic was declared on March 11, 2020, this monograph somewhat successfully encapsulates the myriad of emotions and global shifts that we – the human race – experienced during those days. It might not be the most notable work of this particular author, and the overall structure of its chapters leaves a lot to be desired, but it certainly paints a vivid picture of the state of the world (and mind) of many a person at that time.

The general idea of the book may certainly be nothing new for this prominent philosopher, as it is something that he has discussed many times before, in some form or other – the need for a new global order. However, what is new, and what features most prominently in his new book, is the context of his

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appeals – his ideas of a new world order are now strengthened by the change in perspective the pandemic has brought about. That is, these ideas are fortified by the fact that the faults of the current system(s) were laid most blatantly bare by the pandemic. Žižek calls this order “new communism,” leaving it to the reader to extrapolate from his scattered thoughts and chapters the building blocks of his idea. The reader also may notice that it seems that the author is presenting us with a *fait accompli* in a way – there are hints permeating the monograph that the shift to a new world order might be something that is already in progress, something that is, in a way, inevitable.

With all of his subsequent mentions of the word “communism,” it is perfectly clear why the reader might find it slightly odd that the introduction of the monograph begins with a mellifluous invocation of the words of Jesus: “Touch me not.” However, if we put it into the context of the just barely announced pandemic at the time, it becomes clear why he chose these particular words. Being asked to maintain distance is quite difficult, Žižek reveals, going on to affirm the power of eye contact, while also mystifying the ethereal connection between people and sanguinely declaring that “there is a hope that corporeal distancing will even strengthen the intensity of our link with others” (Žižek, 2020, p. 3). He believes that distance will actually underscore the importance that human beings have for one another. But, in a bleak turn of events (which abound in the monograph), he invokes Hegel and his claim that man truly learns nothing from history. Žižek openly expresses his doubt that we will come out of the epidemic any wiser.

The reader is also now presented for the first time with the core idea of the book: the call for a new system, a new global order. A quite possible outcome of the pandemic, Žižek claims, is that there can be no normal anymore. “The new ‘normal’ will have to be constructed on the ruins of our old lives, or we will find ourselves in a new barbarism whose signs are already clearly discernible” (Žižek, 2020, p. 3). This is another somewhat depressing point, as it implies that our old lives will effectively have to be ruined for this new normal to occur. The introduction ends with a valid question – what is wrong (with our system)? While the question is rhetorical, it is evident that Žižek thinks there are many obvious answers to it; however, his proposals for rectifying the wrongs throughout the book seem unclear, or, at the very least, incomplete.

Through the following chapters, each with a unique (one could say bombastic) title, Žižek shares his view of the issues that, he believes, were laid completely

bare by the pandemic. He also acknowledges that these issues have been simmering under the surface for far, far longer. However, he perceives the pandemic to be a catalyst that will bring forth change in many spheres of life.

In the first chapter (“We’re All in the Same Boat Now”), the author reflects on the very beginning of the pandemic, finding the root cause of it in the state control in China. State control in this instance is shown through China’s silencing of Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist and the whistle-blower who warned his colleagues about the coronavirus early on but was later censored. Žižek points to the inherent distrust the Chinese state apparatus has in its own citizens, which goes against Mao’s teachings. While the authoritarian system in China is criticised, there arises a voice reflecting the idea that, for all its shortcomings, a strong state might be what is needed in times of epidemics. A parallel is drawn with the US, which, Žižek asserts, would not have been able to enforce similar measures as China to contain the epidemic (and this has been proven true in the years since the initial outbreak). However, the main message of the chapter revolves around the tenuous trust between states and their people, and the flimsy notion of “freedom of speech,” touted by many as the pinnacle of democracy, but, apparently, quite dangerous, as proven by the proliferation of conspiracy theories.

The following chapter (“Why Are We Tired All the Time?”) focuses on something far closer to the common people caught up in the pandemic: the dichotomy between the overworked, essential workers and the people who had nothing to do because of the global lockdowns. The reader is faced with more criticism of capitalism, which, as Žižek points out, is “a class system with growing inequalities” (Žižek, 2020, p. 22). Capital and capitalism are making us tired in different ways, he claims, and this has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

The third chapter (“Towards a Perfect Storm in Europe”) centres around the Old Continent and all the “storms” it is facing. While Žižek’s previous declaration that “we’re all in the same boat” applies to a certain extent, it becomes clear very quickly that the case of Europe is specific – aside from the pandemic and its consequent economic effect, Europe has another storm to fear and stave off: “the Putogan¹ virus.” The goal of Putin and Erdoğan’s “devilish dance” between conflict and alliance at the expense of the Syrians, it is claimed, is to

¹ A portmanteau of the names of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

destroy a united Europe at a time when cooperation is needed. Their dance causes rifts in the proverbial European boat, with figures such as Viktor Orban further damaging it, without many lifelines provided. With a further look in later chapters into state control exemplified by measures previously “unthinkable in a Western democratic society” (Žižek, 2020, p. 73) – and yes, he is referring to the lockdowns – Žižek states that a further slip into authoritarian waters can only be prevented with another form of control: control over power itself. As he notes, Europe faces a challenge “to prove that what China did can be done in a more transparent and democratic way” (Žižek, 2020, pp. 75–76), but this might simply be too difficult task for this continent. What should also be noted now, almost two years later, is how Žižek did predict, in a way, the “perfect storm” that was made possible by the pandemic, and the tenuous threads of global order that it cut – the war in Ukraine. He thought a catastrophe would be brought about by the refugee crisis stemming from the Near East; however, the crisis came from Europe’s “nearer East.”² And, like with Syria, in this case refugees are also a terrible consequence of the storm. Two years ago, Žižek wrote that the only thing that might prevent catastrophe was “the strengthening of Europe’s operational unity” (Žižek, 2020, p. 35). However, it is now evident that the catastrophe managed to precede unity (as often happens). The conflict in Ukraine has indeed led to a somewhat united Europe, but it might be too late, with thousands killed³ and millions displaced.

The fourth chapter (“Welcome to the Viral Desert”) is quite an intriguing one, as this is where the reinvention of communism is proposed. Žižek dreams up a “beneficent ideological virus” (Žižek, 2020, p. 39) that will lead

² On February 21, 2022, Russia recognised the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic, two self-proclaimed states in Donbas. A few days later, on February 24, Russian forces invaded Ukraine, followed by the bombing of major cities. There have been hundreds of civilian casualties, and more than 3 million Ukrainian refugees have fled their country. In a recent piece (*What Does Defending Europe Mean?*), Žižek expounds on Russia’s attack on Ukraine, finding the root of it in Putin’s imperialism. He notes that the claim that Russia was provoked by NATO encircling it concedes that “big powers have the right to spheres of influence, to which all others must submit for the sake of global stability.” However, he poses a crucial question here: can the people of Syria and Ukraine choose their truth or are they just a battlefield for would-be world rulers? Žižek says that the best way for Europe to counter Putin’s imperial vision is to build bridges to developing and emerging countries. As he stresses, it’s not enough to defend Europe: Europe needs a change, to “ruthlessly uproot neo-colonialism” (Žižek, 2022).

³ Including civilian and military casualties.

humanity to imagine an alternate society full of solidarity and cooperation. He proclaims that the coronavirus might be the sign that “we cannot go on the way we have till now” (Žižek, 2020, p. 41) within the global capitalist system. He believes more executive power should be given to global organisations such as the World Health Organisation if they are to be more successful in dealing with a possible new virus. He also calls for the reorganisation of the global economy, crying out for its liberation from market mechanisms through the setting up of a “global organisation that can control and regulate the economy, as well as limit the sovereignty of nation-states when needed” (Žižek, 2020, p. 45). This sounds good in theory, but, as is often the case, plenty of theories tend to be ruined (or, to be more specific, abused) by the imperfect human mind. So far, many global organisations, such as the UN, have been largely ineffectual in their fundamental goals. It is quite difficult, therefore, to imagine such organisations in which the people involved are meant to rise above the interests of their own people or their own interests for the common good. Nonetheless, Žižek persists and his calls are reiterated in the sixth chapter (“The Virus of Ideology”), where he once again mentions the traditional Bogeyman of the Western world – communism. It is clear here that his idea of communism rests in solidarity: “Full unconditional solidarity and a globally coordinated response are needed, a new form of what was once called Communism” (Žižek, 2020, p. 56). If they ended there, many in the West would have no issue with his ideas. He does not sound too much like a “commie,” right? But then, this is the idea he proposes later on:

Not only should the state assume a much more active role, organizing the production of urgently needed things like masks, test kits and respirators, sequestering hotels and other resorts, guaranteeing the minimum of survival of all new unemployed and so on, (it should be) doing all this by abandoning market mechanisms. (Žižek, 2020, p. 103)

Ay, there’s the rub.

What can be inferred from his writing throughout the book is that he proposes control over control over control. And that is truly a dangerous thought, many would say.

The seventh chapter (“Calm Down and Panic!”) is dedicated to explaining the benefits of global solidarity and the need to curtail nationalist populism, foreseeing that the choice we face is either between barbarism or reinvented communism. However, what is particularly interesting about his appeals for solidarity is that, to him, solidarity means including nature as a whole. Žižek

writes with a constant sense of interconnectedness – whether it be between individuals, between people belonging to different nations, or between living beings and other living and non-living things.

However, as Yohann Koshy aptly notices in his review of the book, Žižek’s “image of communism lacks a central scene: the fate of the working class” (Koshy, 2020). Koshy pinpoints exactly the problem: Žižek’s “communism” means very little in the global south, where nations are grappling with the crisis caused by the pandemic. Žižek had a chance to expound on the connection between his idea of communism and the working class in the second chapter, where he criticises capitalism; however, while presenting various problems, he often falls short of providing solutions. Or does he believe that the aforementioned “minimum of survival” (Žižek, 2020, p. 103) is all that is needed?

A quite interesting chapter is the fifth one (“The Five Stages of Epidemics”), in which Žižek focuses on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ stages of grief and applies them to the pandemic. While it could be extremely enticing to look at the pandemic from the perspective of these five stages, this protracted crisis we are experiencing ultimately shows that they simply do not provide a sufficient explanation or division. The pandemic has lasted for so long that all the stages are blurred and repetitive. It is also in this chapter that Žižek posits that we should reconcile ourselves with the “ultimate contingency and meaninglessness of our lives,” (Žižek, 2020, p. 52) which is that a single simple thing as a virus can end us all. This cuts through all his previous attempts at optimism and is, undoubtedly, one of the bleakest points of the book.

Despite all his previous optimistic claims, in his descriptions of the possible changes our societies will undergo, there are those that are particularly depressing: as possibilities after the pandemic is over, Žižek imagines local warlords and the strengthening of Nazi ideas that disregard the plight of the old and weak.

The most probable outcome of the epidemic is that a new barbarian capitalism will prevail: many old and weak people will be sacrificed and left to die; workers will have to accept a much lower standard of living; digital control of our lives will remain a permanent feature; class distinctions will increasingly become a matter of life or death. (Žižek, 2020, p. 127)

But therein also lies another main point of the monograph – either we will yield before barbaric thoughts and actions and before the relentless strain of the human mind the pandemic has revealed, or we will consider a more humane approach to life and a “new humanity” (Žižek, 2020, p. 105).

We have “an appointment in Samara,” as he calls it, and it is the struggle over “what social form will replace the liberal-capitalist New World Order” (Žižek, 2020, p. 127).

While a short piece, the book clearly emphasises a few very good points: the need for better disaster preparation, the need for a new world order (seeing as the one currently at play has repeatedly failed us, it can be inferred), and the need for human contact. Looking at the book from across the two years of the pandemic, its truths reverberate quite strongly, leaving the reader to wonder at humans’ great ability to repeat their mistakes over and over again. Optimistic and pessimistic at the same time, Žižek does bring up many valid points about the structure and organisation of the global society, the dangers that this order poses, and the very nature of us, as we deal with (this current) catastrophe. But the most jarring thought that the reader is left with is the fact that a new world order is needed, but it is incredibly difficult to imagine it or even propose efficient alternatives to what is in existence today.

Overall, the book is a solid reflection of the first two weeks of the pandemic: the highs and the lows, optimism and pessimism seamlessly juxtaposed amidst a deluge of thoughts that inevitably come as one is left alone. While sometimes draining and confusing, the non-linear structure of the book and the frequent jumps from one topic to another represent a suitable echo of the scattered thoughts of a typical pandemic dweller of that time.

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Co jest nie tak z naszym systemem?

Na samym początku pandemii COVID-19 słoweński filozof, Slavoj Žižek, opublikował książkę ze swoimi przemyśleniami na temat pierwszych kilku tygodni nowej sytuacji. Przedstawia w niej zarówno swoje osobiste doświadczenie pandemii, jak i opinie na temat ogólnych zmian, które może ona wywołać. Ponownie wzywa do utworzenia nowego globalnego porządku, wskazując na wady obecnego systemu, które w całości ujawniły nowe realia. Filozof nazywa ten światowy porządek „nowym komunizmem”, zakorzeniając go przede wszystkim w potrzebie solidarności i większej władzy wykonawczej przyznanej globalnym organizacjom, takim jak Światowa Organizacja Zdrowia, a także bardziej aktywnej roli państwa podczas kryzysów.

Słowa kluczowe: Slavoj Žižek, pandemia COVID-19, nowy porządek globalny, nowy komunizm, *Pandemic! Covid-19 shakes the world*

What is wrong with our system?

Right at the very beginning of the pandemic, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek published a monograph about his thoughts on the first few weeks of the new situation. In it, he presents both his personal experience of the pandemic and his opinions on the overall changes that it might subsequently bring forth. As many times before, he once again calls for a new global order, basing his calls on the faults of the current system that the pandemic revealed in their entirety. He calls that world order “new communism” rooting it primarily in the need for solidarity and more executive power given to global organisations such as the World Health Organisation, as well as a more active role of the state during crises.

Keywords: Slavoj Žižek, COVID-19 pandemic, new global order, new communism, *Pandemic! Covid-19 shakes the world*

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