

Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World

Slavoj Žižek – 2020

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Can any contemporary event or phenomenon be categorized as defining for our society without it also being legitimized as such by Slavoj Žižek's urgent critical attention? Could Slavoj Žižek ever refrain from projecting his brand of social and ideological critique on any pressing issue and crisis of our time? The answer to both these questions is a resounding no. More cynically inclined voices would surely attribute this certainty to Žižek's media-savvy persona, his almost compulsive desire to be part of the conversation and his pop-icon aspirations and would most likely not fall far from the truth.

My take on the matter and a perspective that I think is rather helpful in reading "Pandemic!," as it deserves to be read, is that Žižek's impulsive eagerness to comment on current affairs is that of an old-school Marxist for whom critique and social engagement are not just empty practices and catch phrases but fundamentally necessary processes of the self and of society as a whole. For these kinds of intellectuals refraining to comment on cornerstone issues of their time would resemble something like gross negligence.

For differently suited intellectuals, writing a divisive book on the Covid-19 pandemic not even 100 days into it, when lack of data, research and certainty is still symptomatic and disinformation is rampant, would resemble something like gross recklessness. To the surprise of critics and fans alike Žižek approaches the burgeoning Covid-19 pandemic with a nuance and restraint that is uncharacteristic for his provocative and irreverent style of critique. Of course, the usual Žižekian tropes like Hegelian, Marxist and Freudian concepts, pop culture references and a philosophical aesthetic of free-flow association are present in "Pandemic!" but to a much lesser degree than usual and are often overshadowed by salient observations

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on the fragility of our earthly existence and a surprisingly empathetic and plainly human concern for our society.

An example for this we can find in the 4th chapter of "Pandemic!" that is self-referentially named "Welcome to the Viral Desert" (Žižek 2020, 37), where Žižek, with a, for him, typical associative discursive move, refers to the "Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique" (Žižek 2020, 39), the debilitating yet only gradually deadly blow that Beatrice Kiddo deals to Bill in Quentin Tarantino's movie "Kill Bill: Volume 2," to exemplify the impact that the Covid-19 epidemic might have on the communist rule in China and on the global capitalist system; in that they "can sit, observe and go through the usual motions of quarantine, but every real change in the social order [...] will bring their downfall" (Žižek 2020, 40).

This is the speculative and associative style of thinking, laced with strong pop culture imagery, that is one of Žižek's trademarks and what makes his writing so attractive for many of his readers. Nevertheless, in this chapter of "Pandemic!" this Žižekian trope fits into the discourse rather like an eyesore than a highlight and is eclipsed by incisive observations on the status quo:

The ongoing spread of the coronavirus epidemic has also triggered a vast epidemic of ideological viruses which were lying dormant in our societies: fake news, paranoiac conspiracy theories, explosions of racism (Žižek 2020, 39)

Žižek is by no means afraid to take the bull by its horns and address bluntly and dismantle the systemic errors of our contemporary society, but, what is even more compelling and unusual, is that he is also not afraid to dabble in a sort of post-humanistic enlightenment era type of discourse that seeks to redeem the very society whose ideological underpinnings he so harshly criticizes:

But maybe another and much more beneficent ideological virus will spread and hopefully infect us: the virus of thinking of an alternate society, a society beyond nation-state, a society that actualizes itself in the forms of global solidarity and cooperation. (Žižek 2020, 39)

From this vantage point Žižek's "Pandemic!" can be read as a call to solidarity that also reflects on the possible practical and ideological enactments of this solidarity on the stage of our current society. What might rub some readers from the left and right spectrum of ideology the wrong way is that Žižek associates this grand new global solidarity with the reinvention of "Communism based on trust in the people and in science" (Žižek 2020, 39).

Although Žižek goes out of his way to explain that this new form of Communism must not be understood as a new Communist Revolution that will threaten our way of life (as Ronald Reagan would put it) but a set of measures that are uniquely necessary for the survival of our society at this point in time – “This is not a utopian Communist vision, it is a Communism imposed by the necessities of bare survival.” (Žižek 2020, 92) – it is hard to exorcize the spectres of what he calls “old-style Communism” (Žižek 2020, 45) from this new form of “disaster Communism” as an antidote to disaster capitalism” (Žižek 2020, 103).

What Žižek also failed to see in March 2020, when he published “Pandemic!,” is that this kind of pleas for global solidarity and cooperation might not necessarily offer a cure or an alternate narrative for our deeply divided social and political landscape but rather fuel conspiracy theories, fake news and fears of an ever dissolving national identity and individual liberty. Arguments like this, where he emphasizes that he is not talking about an “old-style Communism, of course, just about some kind of global organization that can control and regulate the economy, as well as limit the sovereignty of nation-states when needed” (Žižek 2020, 45) would at this point in time, when this review is written, be certainly met with an almost manic distrust by the majority of citizens of almost any country.

The problem is thus not that Žižek’s plea for solidarity does not make sense or that it does not represent the true needs of our society it is that he uses an outdated vernacular, riddled with negative historical and ideological associations, to envision a radical change that he cannot himself adequately put into words. And one might argue then that in the absence of a new discourse, that can sustain change, that very change becomes a practical impossibility for the time being.

Žižek’s analysis of the pandemic and his call for solidarity functions best when he steps out of the muddy waters of ideology. In the first chapter “We’re all in the same boat now” (Žižek 2020, 5) he argues that “we should resist the temptation to treat the ongoing epidemic as something that has a deeper meaning: the cruel but just punishment of humanity for the ruthless exploitation of other forms of life on earth” (Žižek 2020, 14) because in the end it is just a way to ensure the ontological comfort of the self indulgent pseudo-fact that “We matter in some profound way.” (Žižek 2020, 14) Žižek implies here the true emancipatory revelation, the one that can lead to true solidarity is the realization “that the ongoing epidemic is a result of natural contingency at its purest [...]” (Žižek 2020, 14) and that “In the larger order of things, we are just a species with no special importance” (Žižek 2020, 14).

Maybe the new language and discourse that this new kind of solidarity or communism needs is human humility, functional and systemic humility directed not just towards our natural world but also towards us, our words and actions

within our society and towards our own selves. I think that here Žižek stumbles upon a philosophical nuance that has the potential to shape the change that he pleads for, if and when it will be articulated in an impactful manner.

This principle of humility and empathy might also be the solution for one of the biggest perils that our contemporary society, during this ongoing pandemic, faces, one that Žižek accurately identifies towards the end of the book as the rise of “barbarism with a human face.” (Žižek 2020, 83)

I don't think the biggest threat is a regression to open barbarism, to brutal survivalist violence with public disorders, panic lynching, etc. (although, with the collapse of health and some other public services, this is also possible). More than open barbarism I fear barbarism with a human face—ruthless survivalist measures enforced with regret and even sympathy, but legitimized by expert opinions (Žižek 2020, 86)

Žižek argues that “capitalist animism, of treating social phenomena such as markets or financial capital as living entities” (Žižek 2020, 44) and the governmental practice of prioritizing these entities in the detriment of human lives is only deepening the social abyss between us and making true global solidarity sound like a naive utopia, a perverse opium for the masses, that might deliver salvation but is instantly rejected as fiction. These are the moments where Žižek's critique shines in “Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World,” when he raises the necessary red flags that are often overlooked in the heated and superficially pragmatic, or delusional, or just plain desperate polemics of our time.

“Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World” will by no means become one of the defining books of our time. It did not shake the world and it does not have the vision, the argumentative and philosophical depth and reach to enable the changes that Žižek pleads for. Nevertheless, it is an incisive representation of the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, of the social, moral and existential threats that we are facing as a global community. In the end, it does what every critical text should do: it makes you uncomfortable within the status quo and challenges you to think beyond it.

References

Žižek, Slavoj. 2020. *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*. New York and London: OR Books.