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Book Review - *A Left That Dares to Speak Its Name*. Žižek, S. (2020). Cambridge & Medford: Polity.

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Slavoj Žižek's latest book, *A Left That Dares to Speak Its Name*, is an anthology composed of 34 of the philosopher's recent and, of course, polemical interventions into the public media (although substantially revised from their original incarnations for this publication). With topics ranging from Greta Thunberg to 'rights for sexbots' and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to #MeToo, each intervention is typical of Žižek's tendentious style and offers acute insight into an aspect of the current 'global mess'.

Given the broad range of subject matter, one might cautiously anticipate the book's subjection to the typical criticisms launched against Žižek, such as his purportedly superficial argumentative method and focus on breadth over depth. In actuality, the book makes a convincing case for the inter-imbrication of its seemingly disparate topics, such that they can all be classified by a single predicate. Žižek claims

that 'only a communist standpoint provides the appropriate way to grasp [them]' (p.1). Each one stems from - to use Mao's vocabulary, which Žižek astutely elucidates in the second chapter - the same 'principle contradiction', and while some are direct reflections of the latter, others are 'secondary contradictions'. To this end, the breadth of content is what contributes to the deep insight to be grasped from the book: just how far-reaching the consequences of the current situation's immanent antagonisms truly are.

While many of Žižek's smaller, more accessible works often go overlooked (and perhaps with good reason if we think back to *The Courage of Hopelessness* and *Like A Thief in Broad Daylight*), *A Left That Dares to Speak Its Name* puts forth his most decisive political position in recent memory, thus warranting attention. While Žižek has never shied from deploying the word 'communism', nor from endorsing some of the totalitarian sentiments with which it is concomitantⁱ, he has rarely been clear about the signifier's referent. It is here that he finally imbues the word with positive content and gives us the chance to surmise from his advice *what is to be done*. The book on its own is a significant contribution to the contemporary political-theoretical canon, for readers both interior and exterior to academia, but its contribution to Žižek's edifice as a whole is what most necessitates its examination.

In some recent lectures, Žižek has begun hinting at what animates his conception of communism: in his April 2019 debate with Jordan Petersonⁱⁱ, he claimed that he supports universal health care and education, and acknowledges the need to address ecological threats with international might, but that he uses the word communism as more of a provocative device than a concrete designation. At the 2019 Holbergⁱⁱⁱ Debate with economist Tyler Cowen, the latter pressed Žižek (also designating him a 'moderate right communist') on his attachment to communism given that the political advice he tends to propound is generally pragmatic and incongruous with revolutionary Marxian ideals. Although Žižek does not fully capitulate, he insinuates that communism designates a supranational socio-political ethic, embodied by figures like Julian Assange and Greta Thunberg (the latter of whom he also suggests embodies, in the tradition of Antigone, the emancipatory qualities of what is often derided as 'toxic masculinity' (p.101)), which must inform contemporary politics.

Ethics have heretofore had the state as their supreme arena for actualization, but it is becoming increasingly obvious, with issues like climate change and escalating digital control, that a non-neoliberal ethic that transcends state borders and national identities is requisite. This sentiment, reminiscent of Marx's injunction 'Workers of the world, unite!', substantiates Žižek's enduring fidelity to the Marxist legacy, even if it no longer extends much further than this.

As far as the affairs of individual states are concerned, we can glean from his recent lectures that it is some form of self-limiting capitalism (though a curious postulation given that he often states that one cannot keep the healthy economy and throw out the dirty bathwater within which it currently sits) and an alienated bureaucratic state apparatus that seem to form an attractive political-economic framework for Žižek, aligning his vision closer to what Hegel puts forth in his *Philosophy of Right* than what Marx and Engels do in the *Manifesto*. In the present book, he finally asserts that this is in fact the case. He impels readers not to exclude 'the possibility of a strong non-capitalist state that resorts to elements of capitalism in some of the domains of social life' (p.188). Against the pervasive pleas for 'direct democracy' and 'post-industrial digital communities', Žižek contends that bureaucratic socialism is the best vehicle for maintaining social order and collective well-being and would enable the creative passions of individuals to flourish.

Žižek recommends that 'we should change the goal of emancipatory struggles from overcoming alienation to enforcing the right kind of alienation' (p.17). As a result, the guiding question for engaged political agents should be "how to achieve a smooth functioning of "alienated" (invisible) social mechanisms that sustain the space of "non-alienated" communities' (p.17). He states that a degree of alienation is unavoidable in all political life – derived from his Lacanian hypothesis that 'the only true heaven is a moderate pleasant hell' (p.228) - so instead of idealizing its wholesale elimination, the key struggle for the Left should be to advocate for a just form of it. Hence, it is anything but Marxist communism for which he is arguing.

It is worth noting in passing that it is possible Žižek may share with Alain Badiou a proclivity to remain faithful to the *name* communism, a movement that contributed to his personal subjectivization, which would explain his refusal to renounce the term.

While this may be the case, *A Left That Dares to Speak Its Name* clearly distinguishes Žižek's practical 'communist' position from that of Marx or Badiou, leaving the empty container that is the name itself as one of the few elements that continues to link their political philosophies.

With his theoretical position now more transparent, the question of implementation must follow. How is it that he imagines (his vision of) communism will finally enter the stage? Not through 'a simple parliamentary electoral process, of course, but through a state of emergency enforced on us by an apocalyptic threat' (pp. 87-88). Given this speculation, one cannot but point to the serendipitous timing of the book's release: at the inception of the greatest pandemic to affect humanity in over a century, exactly the type of 'apocalyptic threat' he means.

COVID-19 has placed the principle (global) contradiction to which Žižek alludes in the book (which remains consistent with his past work) center stage. It is not that the pandemic itself has generated new contradictions, *per se*, but rather it has illuminated and intensified the situation's already-existing antagonisms. Several months ago, many Left liberals would have castigated him for postulating that the true utopian ideal 'is that we can survive [the current situation] without such a revolution' (p.184) and that 'nothing can really be changed (within the existing system)' (p.196) without undermining the very coordinates which sustain it. However, it is those very liberals who are now calling for measures including universal basic income (which, despite expression suspicion toward it in *Living in the End Times*, he now more openly supports) and rent suspensions, exposing the extreme unsustainability of the neoliberal positions they normally steadfastly maintain.

While Badiou argues that true politics never emerges from necessity^{iv}, Žižek believes that a moment of necessity like this is precisely when real politics must enter. The trajectory and the terrain of struggle are open, marking this an obvious call to action. Žižek makes clear that the Left's strategy must be robust and thoroughly engaged with both the state and supranational entities if, in the return to normalcy (or 'the morning after' as he often refers to it), we wish to find ourselves in circumstances fundamentally heterogeneous to those of erstwhile.

The pandemic properly substantiates Žižek's condemnation of 'the basically irresponsible "politics at a distance"' (p.4) espoused by countless thinkers on the Left, including Badiou. Are we ready and willing to admit that a strong state, with its alienating excess and all, is not what is ultimately most desirable at a juncture like this, such that the people's basic needs are ensured, and an advanced healthcare system is available? Certainly, this position, *contra* Hobbes, can be distinguished from a mere cry for security in times of peril. Further, would not 'a strong [neo-communist] global agency' (p.3), and one that is not just a reflection of the hegemonic states' interests like the UN, be useful to coordinate the production and distribution of essential resources, such as masks and vaccines, and facilitate relief efforts? Hence, subtractive cabals that resist engagement with the state while still expecting it to remain responsive to 'prescriptions' in times such as these, as Žižek states on multiple occasions through the book, should be jettisoned.

Žižek reinforces his commonly known support for Bernie Sanders in this book, but his position takes on renewed significance in the context of 2020. His exegesis of how Sanders factors into the American (and resultantly, global) landscape is relatively brief but acts as a nodal point around which Žižek organizes his now-unambiguous political-theoretical position. His contention that the Left needs a new Master is not unique to this book, but it is plain that Sanders, whose 'power stems from his fidelity to his vision, from not compromising it' (p.147), fits this role as Žižek consistently portrays it.

Despite that Sanders' proposals are modest compared to the social-democratic frameworks of many European states (making his fervent endorsement of Sanders seem incompatible with the 'radical' title he is often assigned), Žižek suggests that the effects of their implementation in the current coordinates would be anything but modest. He asserts that 'in today's new situation, to insist on the old social democratic welfare state is an almost revolutionary act' (128). It is with this position that his oft-stated adage 'only a conservative can be a true Leftist today' resonates most.

Žižek frequently cites the scene from Ernst Lubitch's *Ninotchka* in which the film's protagonist orders a coffee without cream, to which the waiter responds that they do not have cream, so it will have to be a coffee without milk (p.198). The actual coffee the

protagonist drinks is nonetheless the same, but the virtual dimensions surrounding the subjective experience of the beverage's consumption play a pertinent role. To extrapolate, since the virtual dimensions surrounding the idea of a social-democratic state today, especially during a global crisis, are entirely different from those of the mid-twentieth century, it is feasible that its endorsement is somewhat revolutionary. Žižek holds that only by supplanting the current incarnation of liberalism can its emancipatory kernel be preserved. With this position, he has altered the virtual dimensions that surround his oeuvre, consequently enabling his loyal theoretical disciples to perform 'retroactive reinterpretations' (3) of his more seminal works and mine from them implications that were not previously available.

Žižek remains vehement in his assertion that it is not a decentralized mode of futuristic, aleatoric politics, nor is it a weak form of neoliberal incrementalism that acts within the existing coordinates, that is needed to properly rival today's principle contradiction. While many decry an assertion of the emancipatory potential intrinsic to the 'idea of Europe' as backward-looking, Žižek is one of the few Leftists brave enough to posit that, rather than a regression, a return to 'Europe' – though now without milk instead of cream – would be a *recovery*.

ⁱ See Žižek, S. (2008). *In defense of lost causes*, London/New York: Verso.

ⁱⁱ For a streaming version of the debate:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsWndfzuOc4>

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^{iv} See Badiou, A. (2005/1998). *Metapolitics*, trans. by Barker, J., London/New York: Verso.