

Deconstructing the Panic of Pandemic

A Critical Review of Slavoj Žižek's *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*

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1) Two kinds of books

There are two kinds of non-fiction books—traps and fire extinguishers. Traps are those books that are written in order to be triggered at a future time. They are published, set in place, and then patiently wait for the right moment to spring into action. Fire extinguishers, by contrast, are books that are written in order to respond to something that is either a “hot topic” just bursting forth or an immediate crisis that calls for some kind of emergency response.

Each form of literature has its advantages and potential problems. Traps have a long shelf life and can remain pertinent well into the future. But it is possible that the issue,

problem, or opportunity that is the triggering event never takes place. Some very clever and well-devised traps have been deployed but never activated.

Fire extinguishers are a form of “just in time literature.” They are immediately needed and applicable. No one asks why this sort of book has been written or to what issue, problem, or concern it responds. Its *raison d’être* is clearly evident and not in need of explanation. But the shelf life of this kind of writing can be short—really short. It might only be pertinent for a few weeks or months, after which time the problem to which it responded has subsided, been altered, or mutated into something completely different.

Slavoj Žižek’s new book (the title of which plays on the verbal association made possible by the words “panic” and “pandemic”) certainly appears to be a fire extinguisher. It was written at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis and quickly rushed into publication in an effort to provide the public with a philosophical engagement with the opportunities and challenges of the novel coronavirus and the social, political, and technological responses that have been marshalled to contend with the panic that has accompanied it.

At this point in time, however, we do not know what its impact and shelf life will be. Will it remain an emergency response that disappears and withdraws as efforts to control the virus begin to take hold? Or will it have lasting impact, speaking to the novel opportunities and challenges of a post-COVID-19 world? Interestingly these questions are precisely the subject that is addressed and developed within the book. Žižek sets his sights not only on the immediate panic surrounding the pandemic but on the consequences that this event will have for individuals, nations, and the global community.

It’s a risky bet. It is a bet on the future in the face of present odds that are not looking so good. But that is what makes Žižek’s *Panic/Pandemic!* something more than a mere fire extinguisher. It is obviously a negative book, but negative in the double sense that we get from G.W.F. Hegel. It documents the dialectical negation that confronts all of us in the face of a global crisis that challenges our very way of life—thesis slamming head-first into the antithesis of a dangerous and potentially fatal virus. But it does not remain at the stage of this one-sided negation, it passes over into a second negation or

Auhebung. This second negative—this negation of negation—does not so much produce a positive outcome as it liberates an affirmation—a “yes saying” that is open to what can be and what possibly should be from this point forward.

2) Communism – Yes, Please

What comes to be affirmed in the course of *Panic/Pandemic!* is, in a word, communism. But not *that* communism. Not the “communism” that took root during the 20th century. This is a new thinking of communism that—to use a word Žižek probably would not like—*deconstructs* the organizing political opposition of capitalism/communism, which had been the defining condition of the previous century.

Deconstruction, despite misinterpretations that have become something of an institutional (mal)practice, is not negative. It does not indicate “to dismantle,” “to destroy,” or “to un-construct.” As Jacques Derrida (1993, 147) had explained on more than one occasion: “The ‘de-’ of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is constructing itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructionist or destructionist schema.” Toward this end, deconstruction consists in a “double gesture” of *inversion* and *displacement* that is a deliberate and calculated parody of Hegelian philosophy.

Žižek’s *Panic/Pandemic!* works by way of operationalizing this double gesture. He begins by flipping the script on the capitalism/communism duality by siding with the “wrong” term. This is a revolutionary gesture, and it produces (as one might anticipate) vehement reactions from all corners. “When I suggested,” Žižek (2020, 65) writes, “that the coronavirus epidemic may give a new boost of life to Communism, my claim was, as expected, ridiculed.” And the ridicule, which as Žižek (2020, 97) reports came from the likes of Alain Badiou, Byung-Chul Han, and many others, is not just to be expected. It is necessary and unavoidable insofar as this first move, this flipping of the script on the accepted order of things, cannot help but appear to be wrong, misguided, or imprudent.

But deconstruction (like the Hegelian logic that it dissimulates) is not and cannot be content with mere inversion or conceptual revolution. It always involves and necessitates a second move. In Hegel’s philosophy, this is the “negation of negation”

that is identified with the term *Aufhebung*. With deconstruction, it is the emergence of a new concept that—often while retaining the old name (something Derrida calls *paleonymy*)—opens on to new, previously unheard of opportunities. By identifying the need for a new form of communism, Žižek reissues the old name but does so in a way that is significantly different and no longer captive of the conceptual and linguistic order from which it has been derived.

It is this “new form of what was once called Communism” (Žižek 2020, 56) that Žižek deploys and defends in the pages of *Panic/Pandemic!* This should not surprise anyone, because this is precisely what Žižek has sought to accomplish in virtual every publication that bear his name. But *Panic/Pandemic!* gives it a new urgency. It is in the face of the COVID-19 crisis that this alternative has traction and a very good chance of being the difference that can make a difference. As Žižek (2020, 44-45) concludes, “We are not talking here about the 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.”

What this “some kind of global organization” entails, involves, and looks like is not fully developed in the rather short text that is *Panic/Pandemic!* So what we get is a rather empty concept that is in need of being further developed and determined. The best we are able to obtain in the pages of *Panic/Pandemic!*, however, seems to be good ol’ fashioned dialectical opposition, whereby the new indeterminate concept of communism comes to be differentiated in the face of its only alternative—something Žižek (2020, 83) calls “a new barbarism” or, more precisely, “barbarism with a human face.”

Whether this all there is—whether we remain at the stage of what appears to be a simple choice between, as Žižek (2020, 70) proclaims as a kind of refrain, “barbarism or some kind of reinvented communism”—is not decided or resolved. Such an outcome—ending things with what appears to be an either/or opposition—obviously runs the risk of being called-out as very un-Hegelian. But it might also be an instance of what Žižek (2006a, 4) calls “the parallax view”—the fact that the truth of the matter does not reside on one or the other side nor in some kind of synthetic third term, but emerges from the

“constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible” (Žižek 2006a, 4).

3) Philosophy on Demand

Despite (or perhaps even because of) these philosophical musings, I can hear the voices of skeptics and nay-sayers and for very good reasons. *Panic/Pandemic!* is a *philosophical* book. And right now—in the face of what amount to life and death decisions—it seems, to most people at least, that the very last thing we need is philosophy. To put it even more cynically, one could ask, what gives Žižek the right to use and capitalize on the panic surrounding the pandemic to peddle his philosophical speculations concerning a re-branded communism, when what is really needed are boots-on-the-ground efforts to help real people and communities who are either suffering or at risk of suffering?

This is a reasonable and very understandable challenge. It is one that finds expression in the current public policy debates, as cash-strapped state and national governments try to decide which public services can be slashed and burned in an effort to keep the ship-of-state afloat. And, as one might have anticipated, education and academic research—especially something as esoteric as philosophy, which has been the poster child for ivory tower navel contemplation—are definitely in the cross-hairs and are looking to be a luxury that we perhaps can no longer afford.

But that is precisely why—right here and right now—we need philosophy more than ever. In saying this, however, one needs to be very clear as to what is meant by the word “philosophy.” Unlike many (if not most) of the other disciplines, philosophy is not a problem solving activity. In fact, it is quite the opposite. As Žižek (2006) explains at the beginning of an article written in response to another global disaster: “There are not only true or false solutions, there are also false questions. The task of philosophy is not to provide answers or solutions, but to submit to critical analysis the questions themselves, to make us see how the very way we perceive a problem is an obstacle to its solution.”

The panic surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic provides a perfect case study. Right now we are all asking ourselves questions like: “When can things go back to normal?”

Žižek's main point in *Panic/Pandemic!* is that this question is not necessarily the right or even the best line of inquiry. Instead of asking "When can things go back to normal?" We should be inquiring about (the) *normal*. What is it that we think is normal? Whose normal is this? What interests does it serve? And how does asking about a return to normal normalize exceptional expressions of power and control in which we have always and already been complicit?

The question therefore is not, "when can things go back to normal?" The question should be "why do we want things to go back to normal, when in fact things have never been normal?" This pandemic, instead of being a debilitating catastrophe that ruins the status quo, forces us into a confrontation with the normality of the normal and the possibility that what is abnormal and eccentric may in fact provide better opportunities and outcomes. To return to the point where we began, it might not be enough to respond to the panic by rushing to put out the fire. We also need to ask who set the fire in the first place and what conditions—social, political, economic, and ideological—facilitated its outbreak and proliferation. *Panic/Pandemic!* might appear to be a fire extinguisher, but it is a trap. And that, is a good thing.

References

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