

Conversation with Slavoj Zizek: *Pandemic!* In Latin America.

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Abstract: 2019 was a year marked by a wide variety of global milestones capable of disrupting social spheres in different geographical locations. Social outbreaks triggered in different countries, major political and social changes, but, undoubtedly, nothing would compare to the impact that would be generated by the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic. So far in 2020, the virus, hand in hand with globalization, was able to reach every corner of the world, leaving humanity exposed and confronted with its extreme vulnerability and, in turn, exhibiting the total failure of science in the race to find a cure. In this context, intellectuals from the world of the Social Sciences and Humanities did not hesitate to carry out their profound analyses regarding this invisible enemy that is coming, as well as to make known their hypotheses about the post-pandemic scenario that would inevitably arrive. One of the analyses that caused the most attention, criticism and even mockery was that of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. In this document, we find questions about some of the premises found in his book with a focus on the Latin American region

Resumen: El 2019 fue un año marcado por una amplia variedad de hitos mundiales capaces de trastocar las esferas sociales de diferentes ubicaciones geográficas. Estallidos sociales desencadenados en diferentes países, cambios políticos y sociales importantes, pero, sin duda, nada se compararía al impacto que generaría la llegada de la pandemia del Covid-19, en lo que va del 2020 el virus de la mano de la globalización fue capaz de alcanzar cada rincón del mundo dejando a la humanidad expuesta y confrontada con su extrema vulnerabilidad y, a su vez, exhibiendo el fracaso total de la ciencia en la carrera por encontrar una cura. En este contexto, intelectuales del mundo de las Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades no dudaron en realizar sus profundos análisis respecto de este enemigo invisible que llega como también dar a conocer sus hipótesis sobre el escenario post- pandemia que inevitablemente llegaría. Uno de los análisis que causó mayor atención, críticas e incluso burlas fue el del filósofo esloveno Slavoj Žižek, en este documento se encuentran preguntas de algunas de las premisas que se hallan en su libro con un enfoque en la región latinoamericana.

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Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo: Once the Covid-19 pandemic began to proliferate without limits, unleashing human catastrophes in different countries, and naturally monopolizing the international media, the news of the publication of your book "Pandemic: The Covid-19 shakes the world" was soon spread. This short book consists of 10 chapters that outline an analysis that integrates different disciplines, namely philosophy, politics, psychoanalysis and history. What was the reason for this rapid appearance?

Slavoj Žižek: It's not a real book, just a collection of short interventions for newspapers and digital media – I go on writing them, in September volume two will appear. So why am I doing it so fast, jumping over the necessary time for reflection and publishing them before I was able to elaborate a consistent theory of what goes on? Because I desperately wanted to intervene into our situation, to make people aware that this situation is not just that of a medical emergency but also an eminently political moment: an entire way of life with all its written and unwritten rules is suspended, and the struggle is going on for what will replace it. Our social life is not at a standstill when we have to obey rules of isolation and quarantine - or, rather, in such moments of (what may appear) a standstill things are radically changing. To ignore this means nothing less than a kind of collective psychosis.

In my comments on epidemics, I often wrote about quite ordinary problems that accompany it. It is not just harvesting and distributing which are beset by difficulties - what about the growing of plants itself? Locusts are now ruining harvests from east Africa to west India causing parts of which are also threatened by droughts... If we sum all this up, the conclusion is that we are facing a prospect of considerable food shortages, if not outright hunger, and not only in Third World countries. It's not just about paying a little bit more for our usual pack of strawberries... At this point, I can hear the laughter of my critics (and friends also) who mockingly note how the corona epidemics means that my time as a philosopher is over: who cares about Lacanian reading of Hegel now when the foundations of our existence are threatened? Even I have to write about harvest now...

My critics couldn't have been more wrong. The ongoing epidemic didn't just bring out social and economic conflicts which were all the time raging beneath

surface; it didn't just confront us with immense economic and political problems. More and more, it is becoming a genuine conflict of global visions about society and humans conflict of visions. This conflict is a serious existential one, so that one cannot just make fun of those who refuse to wear masks. Here is how Brenden Dilley, a Texas chat-show host, explained why he is not wearing a mask: "Better to be dead than a dork. Yes, I mean that literally. I'd rather die than look like an idiot right now." Dilley refuses to wear a mask since, for him, walking around with a mask is incompatible with human dignity at its most basic level.

That's why a philosopher should also write about harvest now: the way we'll deal with this problem ultimately depends on our basic stance towards human life. Are we – like Dilley - libertarians who reject any encroaching upon our individual freedoms? Are we utilitarians ready to sacrifice thousands of lives for the economic well-being of the majority? Are we authoritarians who believe that only a tight state control and regulation can save us? Are we New Age spiritualists who think the epidemics is a warning we got from Nature, a punishment for our exploitation of natural resources? Do we trust that God is just testing us and will ultimately help us to find a way out? Each of these stances relies on a specific vision of what humans, it concerns the level at which we are in some sense all philosophers.

This philosophical dimension becomes clear already when we try to classify what is going on now. Traditional Marxists distinguished between Communism proper and Socialism as its first lower stage, In the Soviet Union there was a debate in 1960 about where they are in this regard, and the solution was that, although they are not yet in full Communism, they are also no longer in the lower stage (Socialism); so they introduced a further distinction between lower and higher stage of Socialism... Is not something similar going on with the Covid epidemics? Till about a month ago, our media were full of warnings about the second, much stronger, wave in the Fall and Winter; with new spikes everywhere and numbers of infections growing again, the word is that this is not yet the second wave but just a strengthening of the first continuing wave.

Now that Covid infections are rising and people worry again, and new restrictive measures are announced, these measures are accompanied by an explicit or at

least implicit proviso: but there will be no return to full lockdown, public life will go on... This proviso echoes a spontaneous outcry from many people: "I cannot take it (full lockdown) again. I want my normal life back!" I hear in these outcries an unexpected confirmation of Jacques Lacan's claim that normality is a version of psychosis. To demand a return to normality today implies a psychotic foreclosure of the real of virus – we go on acting as if the infection doesn't really take place. Look at Donald Trump's latest speeches: although he knows about the true scope of the epidemics, he talks and acts as if he doesn't know – he is ferociously attacking "Leftist Fascists" as the main threat to the US today, etc. But Trump is much less than we think an exception here - we regularly read in our media news which sound like: "In spite of new spikes of infection, the opening continues..." In an unsurpassable bit of irony, return to normality thus becomes the supreme psychotic gesture, the sign of collective madness.

Here, Jacqueline Rose made a critical point against me: "How do you square the release of obscenity, even psychosis, into public political space and your account of the progressive elements of the moment? Can ethics defeat obscenity - I fear that the whole of psychoanalysis suggests not." I think things are more complex. Freud already wrote that in perversion, the unconscious is most difficult to access, which is why it is almost impossible to psychoanalyze perverts – first they have to be hystericized, their assurances should be weakened by the rise of hysterical questions. But I think what we are witnessing now, when the epidemics just drags on, is such a gradual hystericization of those who assumed perverse or even psychotic position. Trump and other new Right populists are breaking down, getting nervous, their reactions are more and more inconsistent, self-contradictory, haunted by a question. To return to Rose: I think that obscenity itself already relies on a certain ethics, it follows certain stance which cannot but be designated as ethical - those who act obscenely want to shock people with their acts and in this way awaken them from their everyday illusions. The way to overcome this ethics of obscenity is to bring out its inconsistencies: those who act obscenely have their own taboos, they are never as radical as they think they are.

Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo: Your book begins with a sentence by Hegel which states that nothing can be learned from history. I believe that history inevitably involves what Freud called "Grief Work", a kind of negotiation with the lost object, assimilation and subsequent distancing, in this sense, there is a kind of lost-forgetting diad, which, in a superficial analysis, can go in the same vein as Hegel's point. However, with respect to the pandemic, we can see that, from history, and recalling similar events that humanity has faced, enough has been learned. For Edward Thomson the past is always by our side, lost in certain cases, but the traces prevail in the societies in us. Following this direction, the first pandemics, for example, the well-known "Bubonic Plague" served to implement measures in favour of health sanitation, countries created internal networks to improve or build new hospitals, "self-care" programmes were created, etc. Finally, for François Dosse, history is an incessant search for the truth that takes the past to build tools for the future. So, is it really possible to sustain such a statement? Why did you choose this phrase as a starting point for a pandemic analysis, what did you mean by using it?

Slavoj Žižek: I remain Hegelian here – Hegel didn't just say that we learn nothing from history, he wrote that the only thing we can learn from history is that there is nothing to learn from it. Of course we "learn" from history in the sense of reacting to past catastrophes, of including them into narratives of a possible better future. Say, after the horror of the First World War, people were utterly horrified and they formed the League of Nations to prevent future wars - but it was followed by the Second World War. I am here a Hegelian pessimist: every work of mourning, every symbolization of a catastrophe misses something and thus opens a path towards a new catastrophe. And it doesn't help if we know the danger that lies ahead. Just think about the myth of Oedipus: Oedipus's parents knew what will happen, and the catastrophe happened because they tried to avoid it... without the prophecy telling them what will happen, no catastrophe would have happened. I just think that our acts are never self-transparent, we never know what we are doing, what will be the effects of what we are doing. Hegel was fully aware of this and what he called "reconciliation" is not a triumph of reason but the acceptance of the tragic

dimension of our activity: we have to accept humbly the consequences of our acts even if we didn't want this to happen. Russian Communists didn't want Stalinist terror, this was not part of their plans, but it did happen and they are in some sense responsible for it. What if it will be the same with the corona epidemics? What if some of the measures we are taking to fight it will give birth to new catastrophes?

This is how we should apply Hegel's idealism to the reality of Covid: here also, we should bear in mind Lacan's claim that there is no reality without a fantasmatic support. Fantasies provide the frame of what we experience as reality - the Covid epidemics as a fact of our social reality is therefore also a mixture of the real and fantasies: the whole frame of how we perceive it and react to it is sustained by different fantasies – about the nature of the virus itself, about the causes of its social impact, etc. Already the fact that Covid almost brought the world to a standstill at a time when much more people were dying of pollution, hunger, etc., clearly indicates this fantasmatic dimension. We tend to forget that there are people – refugees, those caught in a civil war – for whom Covid epidemics is a negligible minor trouble.

Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo: One of the phrases that spread quickly, alluded to the solution to this world catastrophe as a "New Communism", later, in different media either written or oral, you stated that you were referring to a more "modest" form of "new communism", you simply wanted to expose that it was necessary to implement an extreme international collaboration in favor of humanity over the economy. Was it a strategy to use this phrase?

Slavoj Žižek: I know, I got many critical reactions to this idea of mine. For example, Etienne Balibar wrote: "The idea that just because the crisis is a "great" crisis (which I would agree with), all the "struggles" are potentially merging into a unique revolutionary movement (provided we cry "unite! unite!" loud enough), strikes me as a little childish... there remain some obstacles! people must survive first..." But I think something like a new form of Communism will have to emerge precisely if we want to survive!

In the last months, the topic of Covid totally eclipsed ecological concerns and was only overshadowed in the last weeks by anti-racist protests which spread

from the US all around the globe. The crucial ideological and political battle that is going on these days concerns the relationship between the three domains: Covid epidemics, ecological crises, racism. The pressure that comes from the establishment is to keep these three domains apart, and even to hint at tensions between them. One often hears that our main task now is to get the economy moving, and that to do this we should neglect ecological problems a little bit; one hears that chaotic anti-racist protests often violate social distancing and for that reason contribute to spreading Covid infections... Against this line of reasoning one should insist on the basic unity of the three domains: epidemics explode as part of our unbalanced relationship with our natural environs, they are not just a health problem; anti-racist protests were also given the additional boost by the fact that racial minorities are much more threatened by the epidemics than the white majority which can afford self-isolation and better medical care. We are thus dealing with crises which erupt as moments of the dynamics of global capitalism: all three – viral epidemics, racial unrests, ecological crises – were not only predicted but were already accompanying us for decades.

Many Leftist critics dismissed my idea of a Communist prospect opened up by the ongoing epidemics with the standard Marxist argument that there is no revolution without a revolutionary party, an organized force which knows what it wants, and that such a force is nowhere to be seen these days. However, such a critique ignores two unique features of our present predicament. First, that the situation itself – in health and economy – demands measures which suspend market mechanisms and obey the maxim “to each according to his needs, from each according to his abilities,” so that even conservative politicians in power are obliged to impose things which resemble Universal Basic Income. Second, the global capitalist system is approaching a Perfect Storm in which health crisis is combined with economic crisis, ecological crisis, international conflicts, and anti-racist protests. These last protests are not limited to the US but are emerging all around the world – it is as if we are entering a new stage of our ethical awareness where racism is simply deemed intolerable. The combination of all these struggles, the awareness that they are linked in an intrinsic way, has an immense emancipatory potential.

As Todd MacGowan pointed out, capitalism is in its core sacrificial – instead of immediately consuming the profit we should re-invest it, full satisfaction is forever postponed -, but this sacrifice is not experienced as such, it is concealed: we sacrifice now for later profit. With the Covid epidemics, the sacrificial truth of capitalism came out – how? We are openly solicited to sacrifice (some of) our lives NOW to keep the economy going, I am referring here to how some of Trump’s followers directly demanded that people over 60 should accept to die to keep the US capitalist way of life alive... Of course, workers in dangerous professions (miners, steelworkers, whale hunters) were risking their lives for centuries, not to mention the horrors of colonization where up to half of the indigenous population was wiped out - but now the risk is directly spelled out, and not only for the poor. Can capitalism survive this shift? I think it cannot: it undermines the logic of endlessly postponed enjoyment that enables it to function.

Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo: Lately you have participated in different international media giving your perspective, however, regarding the Latin American region the comments are void. Why? I would like to know what your reading is of what is happening in the Latin American region with the arrival of the pandemic?

Slavoj Žižek: The reason I did not comment the situation in Latin America is a very simple one: I don’t know enough about it. I only know little bits which are universally known: the fate of Peronism in Argentina (I was always deeply skeptical about this type of populism), the tragedy of Allende in Chile, the failure of the Cuban revolution (they did not really invent a new mode of social life) and of Chavismo in Venezuela... I only saw a true emancipatory potential in what went on in Bolivia under Evo Morales – I greatly appreciate Linera as a politician and as a theorist. It’s not mine to teach you but to learn from you - I cannot bring you the truth about yourself from outside. In Europe, Leftist intellectuals usually make two opposite mistakes. Either we patronizingly teach Latinoamericans what really is going on there, or we idealize some Latino country as the place of the true revolution (Cuba, Venezuela).

Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo: What is your reading of what happened in Chile since October 18, 2019, when my country was confronted with the consequences of

its political-economic model? As a result of this, the country was left adrift in a complex scenario unleashing social demonstrations throughout the country

Slavoj Žižek: I don't know enough precisely about this complexity of the scenario. Of course I followed the protests in Chile in the news; what surprised us in Europe is that we didn't expect them. We perceived Chile as a success story, a return to democracy with thriving economy – again, a proof of how little we know.

From my standpoint, the protests which exploded all around the world in 2019 - Hong Kong, Catalonia, Chile, Ecuador, Lebanon, Yellow Vests in France - cannot be reduced to a common denominator. In each of the cases, the protest against a particular law or measure (higher prices for gasoline in France, extradition-to-China law in Hong Kong, rise of the local public transport tickets in Chile, long prison terms for pro-independence Catalanian politicians in Barcelona...) exploded into a general discontent which was obviously already there, lurking, waiting for a contingent trigger to explode, so that even when the particular law or measure was repealed, protests persisted. But I am not sure I can define the precise nature of this general discontent. What fascinated me – but I may be totally wrong here – is the “trouble in paradise” aspect of the protests: they were not taking place in poor desolate countries but in countries of (relative, at least) prosperity, countries which were presented in our media as (economic, at least) success stories. Although these protests indicate growing inequalities which belie the official success story, they cannot be reduced to economic issues: the dissatisfaction they express indicates the growing (normative) expectations of how our societies should function, expectations which also concern “non-economic” issues like collective or individual freedoms, dignity, even meaningful life. Something that was till recently accepted as normal (a certain degree of poverty, full state sovereignty, etc.) is now perceived as a wrong to be combatted.

Another thing that bothers me is: we have protests that just want more justice etc. within the existing order; at a certain point, protests become more radical. But I don't see any convincing idea of how the new social order should look – socialism, true democracy? I only see failures, from Cuba to Venezuela. Today,

with the new crises exploding, we NEED a radical alternative to global capitalism, but we cannot imagine it...

Let me add here a general reflection. The obverse of the incessant capitalist drive to produce new and new objects are the growing piles of useless waste, piled mountains of used cars, computers, etc., like the famous airplane "resting place" in the Mojave desert in California. In these ever-growing piles of inert, disfunctional 'stuff', which cannot but strike us with their useless, inert presence, one can, as it were, perceive the capitalist drive at rest. And did something like that not happen to all of us when, with the quarantine, our social life turned to a standstill? We saw objects we used every day – stores, cafeterias, buses and trains and planes – just resting there, closed, deprived of their function. Was this not a kind of epoche imposed on us in our actual life? Such moments should make us think: is it really worth to return to the smooth functioning of the same system?

However, the true ordeal is not so much the lockdown and isolation, it begins now when our societies start to move again. In my book, I compared the effect of the Covid epidemics on the global capitalist order to the "Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique" from the final scene of Tarantino's Kill Bill 2. The move consists of a combination of five strikes with one's fingertips to five different pressure points on the target's body: the target can go on living and talking if he doesn't move - after he stands up and takes five steps, his heart explodes... Is this not how the Covid epidemics affected global capitalist? Lockdown and isolation are relatively easy to sustain, we are aware that it is a temporary measure like taking a break; problems explode when we will have to invent a new form of life since there is no return to the old. In other words, the really difficult time is coming NOW.

More generally, if there will be a strong second wave of the epidemics, I see a serious threat of the collapse of our mental health. Signs are already multiplying: according to some reports, in northern Italy up to 70 percent of adult men are mentally affected; in Spain, half of the children in metropolitan areas have nightmares; in the US, tens of thousands of suicides are expected... This trend should not surprise us: the very fundamentals of our daily lives are disappearing. In "The Moon under Water", George *Orwell* describes the

atmosphere of his ideal *pub* – for Orwell, *pubs where the key element of socializing for the lower classes, the place where their common mores were asserted, and it is doubtful if the pub life will return as we knew it... One should never underestimate the shattering effect of seeing one's daily customs collapse. When we engage in our quirks and eccentricities, we always count on the safe background of common customs, even and especially when we violate them - a true patriot is always ready to mock his country. Lacan called this space of common customs the "big Other," the symbolic substance of our lives, and psychotic breakdown looms when this big Other begins to disintegrate: the horror does not reside in our transgressions of our shared customs, the horror explodes when we become aware that these customs are falling apart, that we have no firm ground to rely on.*

More precisely, the big Other is simultaneously disintegrating, displaying its inefficiency, and strengthening (bombarding us with exact orders on how to act, on what to do not to do). That is to say, psychotic foreclosure is not the only or even the predominant reaction to the epidemics. There is also the widely-spread obsessional stance: many of us enjoy the protective rituals against the danger of infection: we compulsively wash our hands, don't touch others or even ourselves, clean all surfaces in our apartments, etc. This is how obsessives act: since the Thing-Enjoyment is prohibited, they perform a reflexive turn and start to enjoy the very measures that keep the Thing-Enjoyment at a proper distance.

Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo: To conclude, and taking up again the publication of your book and the analysis you make there, is there anything you would like to add regarding the current scenario and that future scenario that humanity will have to live? What message do you think it is necessary to send to the Latin American readers of this text?

Slavoj Žižek: I would like to indicate an answer through the idea of different modes of historical temporality. In a not yet published essay "Present Tense 2020", W.J.T. Mitchell reads the temporality of epidemics through the lenses of the Ancient Greek triad of Kronos, Aion, and Kairos. Kronos personifies the implacable linear time that leads inexorably toward the death of every living thing. Aion is the god of circular time, of the seasons and the cycle of the

zodiac, and the serpent with the tail in its mouth and the eternal return. Kairos has a double aspect of threat and promise – in Christian theology, it is the moment of fateful decision, the moment when “newness comes into the world,” as in the birth of Christ.

The epidemics is mostly read through the lenses of Kronos or Aion: as an event in the linear run of things, as a moment of bad season, a low point which will sooner or later turn around. What I am hoping is that the epidemics will follow the logic of Kairos: a catastrophe which will compel us to find a new beginning. For our liberals, the unexpected appearance of Trump was a moment of Kairos: something new shattered the foundations of our established order. I think Trump is just a symptom of what was already wrong in our societies, and we are still waiting for the new to emerge.

Again, our situation is eminently political because we are at a point where a new social order will have to be invented – it is clear we will not be able to return to the old normality. This struggle for our future is already going on. First, we have barbarian populists (like Bolsonaro and Trump) who want a return to old normality even if this means a health catastrophe – what they really want is a return to premodern barbarism which accepts plagues and epidemics as part of life... Then there is what Naomi Klein called « Screen New Deal, » a vision of a society with minimal human contact where most of our needs are satisfied through the web or by drones. By “barbarism with a human face,” I mean precisely such technocratic solutions like the “Screen New Deal” advocated by Andrew Cuomo: they strongly oppose the Chinese direct authoritarian state control, claiming that we will all keep our freedoms, and, in contrast to Trump and Bolsonaro, they also claim that nobody will be sacrificed or left behind. However, they keep silent about two things: how the details of our lives will all be registered and controlled by a combination of state apparatuses and big private companies like Microsoft and Google, plus how a whole class of people (caretakers, food suppliers, etc.) will have to remain working in real life, exposed to all its dangers, to make our splendid isolation sustainable.

It seems that our future will be a combination of these two projects. But there are, as I already pointed out, indications of a third option which I provocatively call Communism: from global solidarity to local self-organization of threatened

communities. These indications are easy to find. I was told by my Spanish friends that, at the peak of the epidemics, in Madrid and Barcelona people in local communities organized themselves to help those who needed help. Even in favelas in Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro, local gangs fighting for control concluded peace and organized themselves to help the old and infirmed. At the opposite end, it is becoming clear that a global cooperation will give us a chance – I find the very idea of a private company owing the formula of an eventual vaccine against Covid absurd and obscene. I explain all this in more detail in my book, but what I want to emphasize here is that what I mean by “Communism” has nothing to do with the XXth century Communist regimes. I am just referring to the fact that the reality of the situation compelled even conservative politicians in power to adopt measures which are in some sense “Communist” – to save lives, they had to suspend to a large extent market mechanisms and just get things done as an act of social will and decision.

What I fully endorse is Bruno Latour’s idea that the Covid epidemics is not an accident hitting us from outside but a brutal expression and effect of the global capitalist logic, a « dress-rehearsal, » as he says, for what awaits us. Even if the effects of the epidemics will be contained, there will be other pandemics and other ecological catastrophes. Just remember the recent spill of oil out of storage close to Norilsk in northern Syberia: it happened because of global warming which causes the melting of permafrost – the foundations of the building storing oil collapsed because the earth got too soft to sustain them. Just think of ancient bacteria and viruses that will be released by permafrost! I think that, at some point, we will have to socialize our production and to suspend the dominant role of market mechanisms.

If we don’t invent a new mode of social life, it will not be just a little bit worse but much worse. Again, my hypothesis is that the Covid epidemics announces a new epoch in which we will have to rethink everything, inclusive of the basic meaning of being-human, and our actions should follow thinking. Maybe, today we should turn around Marx’s Thesis XI on Feuerbach: in the XXth century, we tried to change the world too rapidly, and the time has come to interpret it in a new way.