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## **Book Review - *Demanding the Impossible.***

Žižek, S. (2013) Ed. Yong-june Park. Cambridge: Polity. 144 Pages.

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*Demanding the Impossible* (October 2013) once again demonstrates Slavoj Žižek's ability to effectively reproduce, update, and develop instantiations of his philosophies over the course of a preponderance of texts. While representative of this sort of development, the book also provides a lucid and accessible entrance into Žižek's contemporary analysis, as well as reconfigurations of many of his more canonical arguments. Organized into thirty-four chapters based on answers culled from a series of interviews, the question-and-answer-style configuration allows Žižek to assert a bold analysis without laying out or developing how he arrives at these conclusions; one of the most prominent strengths of this format lies in the book's engagement with extremely contemporary moments, issues, and events, ranging from the Egyptian revolution, the complexities of North Korea's politics, China's development, and the contemporary global financial crisis with its ongoing aftermath. Emphasizing that now represents the time for theory – "We don't yet know what is happening. So we need *theory* and *philosophy* more than ever" (Žižek 2013: 32) – Žižek, guided by the book's editor Yong-june

Park, attempts to navigate the vital questions of what do we do now, and where do we go from here?

Though slim in size (the book runs only 144 pages), *Demanding the Impossible* is wide in scope and synthesizes many of Žižek's theories from his larger seminal works, such as (but not limited to) *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and *The Parallax View* (2006). For example, he outlines how Henning Mankell, the Swedish detective novelist, represents "a unique artist of the *parallax view*" (35-6). Žižek posits that while we see these two points of view, "there is no neutral language enabling us to translate one into the other" (36). From this logic of the parallax, Žižek extrapolates the future of postmodern globalization: "globalization means a true *global field* will emerge" (37). These arguments benefit from the book's technique/unique form, which allows for many of Žižek's theories to be contextualized in contemporary issues and phenomena. Underwriting much of the book and emerging explicitly in the final chapter (the book's culminating moment) are gestures to Alain Badiou's notion of an event: the creation of new possibilities, wherein the event itself opens up the possibilities for what is normally considered impossible within the symbolic realm (for other contemporary extensions of event-philosophy from both Žižek and Badiou, see *The Idea of Communism* [2010] and *The Idea of Communism Two: The New York Conference* [2013], as well *Philosophy in the Present* [2009], which presents a dialogue between Žižek and Badiou). The creation of possibilities underpins and informs Žižek's discussions of revolution, communism, and violence.

Working within the book's interview format, *Demanding the Impossible* remains grounded in revolutionary potentialities, which ultimately lead to the book's "thesis statement" – its discussion of the title. In the beginning of the book, Žižek explains precisely how revolution functions: "the real revolution, for me, is when you change the balance itself: *the measure of balance*...reform means changes *within* the existing order...revolution is where the basic rules of society change" (7-8). True revolution, then, opens up those impossible possibilities, or operates as an event. Out of this deliberation on revolution, Žižek concludes that what we should learn from the 2008 United States' financial crisis is that the "true utopia is the way things are, that they can go on indefinitely just like that...If we do nothing, then we are clearly approaching a new *authoritarian order*" (30). Žižek then theorizes a new subject-position, what he terms a "proletarian position" (56), and contends that a revolution occurs "under two conditions: in times of poverty, and when justice breaks down" (72). However, a certain level of freedom must exist in order for those two conditions to lead to revolution, for one must be aware of her/his plight – "the first step in liberation is that you perceive that your situation is unjust. This

already is the inner freedom” (72) – as well as feel a certain amount of safety before revolt becomes a possibility.

Despite the ubiquitous presence of revolution’s possibility and potential throughout the book, Žižek emphasizes that it is not, in fact, revolution itself that primarily interests him; rather, as chapter 23’s title indicates, “The Day After” occupies the position of most importance when it comes to a revolt and/or an event, such as in the case of the 2011 Egyptian uprising. Emphasizing the tense hope/danger combination that accompanies revolts, Žižek wonders, “out of this enthusiastic moment that makes us feel free, how will this be translated into a new institutional order?” (92). One area where he views hope for the future lies in what Žižek calls a “miracle: *politicization of the slums*” (105). Žižek argues that out of a slum-collective could emerge new varieties of social awareness, as well as to prevent all of us from becoming (Giorgio Agamben’s notion of) *Homo Sacer*. To this effect, Žižek explores the topic of violence and its legitimacy in revolutions. He calls the violence in the Egyptian revolution symbolic and then asks, “are you aware of how many people die regularly of torture and terror even at times when there is *nothing particular going on?*” (113). Echoing his interest in “the day after” an event, Žižek articulates that we must concentrate on the violence that occurs in “normal times.” Thus, here he endorses symbolic violence, or civil disobedience, because violence is always-already present in our societies (Žižek elaborates on the types – subjective, symbolic, and systemic – and roles of violence in *Violence: Big Ideas/Small Books* [2008]).

All of his discussion of revolution, capitalism, and communism leads to the final chapter of the book, “The Impossible Happens,” and perhaps the most crucial moment of *Demanding the Impossible*: that we must think in terms of an event, that we must explode the notion of the impossible. Žižek implores: “One must blur the line between what is possible and what is impossible and *redefine* it in a new way. So this would be for me the great task of thinking today: to *redefine* and *rethink* the limits of the possible and the impossible” (144). In a rhetorical move that has a variety of resonances with contemporary theories of Posthumanism, he says that our contemporary times and possibilities alter how we can even define “humanity.” Thus, out of these “interesting times” (as Žižek discusses in chapter 5), we must rethink, and constantly keep rethinking, the borders, definitions, and limits of both the possible and the impossible; in short, our thinking about emancipatory politics and the contemporary political landscape must attend to the theoretical concept of an event.