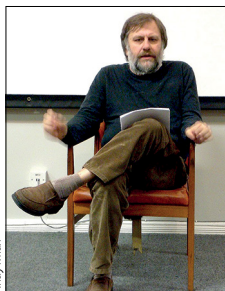
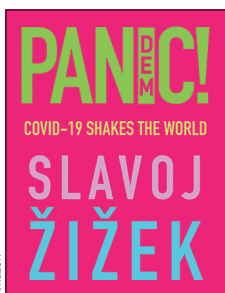




Offline: After COVID-19—is an “alternate society” possible?



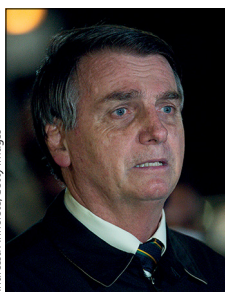
Andy Miah



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How do we make sense of this pandemic? The first interpretations are now appearing. Slavoj Žižek is a prolific philosopher and cultural theorist. He is the first to produce a volume of reflections—*Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (Polity, 2020). Žižek doubts the epidemic will make us wiser: he insists that “we should resist the temptation to treat the ongoing epidemic as something that has a deeper meaning”. Despite these cautions, we still have an important question to answer: “What is wrong with our system that we were caught unprepared by the catastrophe despite scientists warning us about it for years?” We must accept that “The coronavirus epidemic itself is clearly not just a biological phenomenon which affects humans: to understand its spread, one has to consider human cultural choices... economy and global trade, the thick network of international relations, ideological mechanisms of fear and panic.” Žižek opens his investigation in China—“China thwarts the freedoms of its citizens.” He endorses the view of Li Wenliang, the ophthalmologist who was censored by Wuhan authorities for sharing information about the new SARS-CoV-2 virus and who later died from COVID-19: “There should be more than one voice in a healthy society.” China dealt assertively and successfully with the outbreak in Wuhan. But without “an open space for citizens’ critical reactions to circulate”, mutual trust between the people and the state is impossible to sustain. That is China’s great challenge. And for us? “I fear barbarism with a human face.”

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Žižek turns his attention to the future—“even horrible events can have unpredictable positive consequences”. He sees the possibility of “an alternate society”, one that promotes “global solidarity and cooperation”. Strangely, perhaps, “coronavirus will also compel us to re-invent Communism based on trust in the people and in science”. Not a Soviet-style Communism, not “an idealised solidarity between people”. But a Communism that recognises that “global capitalism is approaching a crisis”. It is a “Communism imposed by the necessities of bare survival”. Radical change is needed, and COVID-19 is a catalyst to bring this change: “Such a universal threat gives birth to global solidarity.” The state will “assume a much more active role”, abandoning “market

mechanisms” as the solution to our predicaments. Although not a specialist in global health, Žižek thinks the pandemic, which has precipitated “a state of medical war”, could usher in “some kind of global healthcare network”. (We might call this network universal health coverage.) Beyond health, Žižek sees the possibility for “releasement”—the use of “dead time”, “moments of withdrawal”, “for the revitalisation of our life experience”. Lockdowns have enforced solitude, time to “think about the (non)sense of [our] predicament”.

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COVID-19 is a “triple crisis”—medical, economic, and psychological. “The basic coordinates of the everyday lives of millions are disintegrating.” But countries after lockdown “can be transformed, restarted in a new way”. He quotes Bruno Latour, who argues that COVID-19 is a dress rehearsal for the next crisis of climate change: “the pathogen whose terrible virulence has changed the living conditions of all the inhabitants of the planet is not the virus at all, it is humanity!” The hopeful vision Žižek offers is that “through our effort to save humanity from self-destruction...we are creating a new humanity. It is only through this mortal threat that we can envision a unified humanity.” The means to do so is through recognising “our entanglement within larger assemblages: we should become more sensitive to the demands of these publics and the reformulated sense of self-interest calls upon us to respond to their plight”. The “epidemic provides a welcome opportunity for science to assert itself”. Yet Žižek concludes his analysis with a warning: “Those in charge of the state are in a panic because they know not only that they are not in control of the situation, but also that we, their subjects, know this. The impotence of power is now laid bare.” “The most probable outcome of the epidemic is that a new barbarian capitalism will prevail.” This is Žižek’s view and you may agree or disagree with him. He has performed an important service. He has initiated a global conversation about what we do with this moment. We must continue and deepen that conversation. It is what we owe to each other.

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