

Reviewed Work:

Slavoj Žižek

Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World.

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Publisher: OR Books
Page Count: 265 pp

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This book consists of ten chapters followed by an appendix where Žižek has included the text of two letters he received from friends. The introduction titled *noli me tangere* (touch me not) starts with the central paradox of the pandemic – the dictum of no touch, since the virus passes easily from one body to another through touch. The oft repeated dictum ‘touch can heal’ or rather the idea of the ‘healing touch’ becomes a paradox here since in this case touch does not heal, rather it can infest and contaminate. The author then makes the point how the eyes substitute the intensity of touch when distancing becomes the norm. Enforced distance reinforces in the mind the intensity of connections. He ends the introduction with the crucial question which I am sure is on the minds of most humans on the planet now: What is wrong with our system that we were caught unprepared by the catastrophe despite scientists warning us about it for years? (Introduction, page 4)

The authoritarian control that the Chinese state exercises over its subjects is rooted in the brutal dismantling of any form of horizontal bonds developing between the subjects away from the gaze of the state. The virus has blown the cover over the deficit of trust, solidarity and good will which in turn hampers every effort to tame it. The virus has also exposed the world to the limitations of a world order conformed to the dictates of the market. Along with market, the other usual suspects are also in line: globalization and the lifestyles of the globetrotting rich. At the end of day, humans have been reduced to just another species. The

catastrophe underscores the contradictions in the heavily used phrase 'we are all in this together'.

Today humans are actualizing a new form of subjectivity - an 'achievement subject' who conceives the self as a project pandering to compulsive forms of optimization. The quest to be an achievement subject is observable among self-employed workers in the west, assembly line workers in the third world and a growing number of care workers. Each of these three classes have specific ways through which they become overworked and tired. Medical professionals out of their wits with precarious overtime work, caregivers burdened with never ending demands for care and the 'work from home' privileged class driven by obsessive career moves are all variants of the 'achievement subject'.

On Europe, Žižek talks about how the pandemic is coupled with the devastating effects of the geo-politics played to perfection by Turkey and Russia. If by any chance Turkey orchestrates another rush of the refugees to Europe, there is every possibility that the right-wing rulers there would make a connection between the immigration of refugees to the pandemic to further tighten their control over people and seal their national borders. He proposes that the counter to this possibility is the earnest effort to preserve the operational unity of Europe, especially coordination between Germany and France. (p. 35)

Žižek argues that the pandemic has triggered the growth of 'ideological viruses': fake news, conspiracy theories, racism and sealing of borders. He dreams of a useful virus - the possibility of thinking about a future beyond nation states. It points to the need for a radical rethink on the global capitalist system. He paints the beleaguered world health organization as one visible sign of such a possibility. Žižek extends the five stages of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's take on human response to news of imminent death due to terminal illness to environmental catastrophe, inordinate digital control of human lives, the medieval response to plague, and to the corona virus of 2019.

'Where does data end and ideology begin' turns out to be relevant question for Žižek. More than anything else, it is time to imagine a new form of communism as the need of the hour. The pandemic may also bring about something constructive in humanity. The enforced conditions of isolation and dystopia

may in some ways force a rethink in the minds of people, instilling shame for the policies of fragmentation and violence that national governments have followed against imagined others. The comprehensive approach that the world health organization proposes cannot be pulled off by a single government. It needs to involve local mobilization backed by strong international collaboration. Information is to be shared and plans coordinated. He suggests the name that he gives for his new scenario is 'a new form of communism' which is rooted in the idea of interdependence and evidence based collective action.

Commenting on the panic reaction from leaders of governments across the world, Žižek predicts that the choice before the world is only between a new form of communism or barbarism with a human face. Žižek imagines a sort of 'disaster communism' as opposed to 'disaster capitalism'. The state assumes a more active role of guaranteeing welfare of the citizens especially those rendered precarious by the changing conditions of work. The institutional health system will have to depend on local communities to take care of the weak and the old. Effective international collaboration needs to be strengthened to share resources. This is what he means by new communism, some of which are already put in motion by heads of states such as Boris Johnson or Donald Trump.

The book points to a binary – roughly two different ways in which the world is reacting to the pandemic. One, with overtones of barbarism fragmenting human solidarity and the other, an abundant flow of camaraderie and collaboration across borders of all kinds and a return to the importance of the local community in operationalising care. The book is overwhelmingly optimistic stating that the pandemic will turn humanity on a more collaborative course and will lead to hitherto unseen, greater forms of solidarity and trust. Žižek terms it 'new communism' or 'disaster communism'. Žižek has delivered a well written commentary on a situation that everyone in the world right now can relate to. The characteristic humour and irony laden style of Žižek makes it engaging. It is definitely aimed at popular readership due to the lucid and flowing style of writing without the use of philosophical jargons. The book also is a testimony to the amazing range of Žižek as he picks and chooses ideas, anecdotes and narratives from practically all corners of the world. All in all, it is an engaging and hope-inducing book well suited for the times we are living in.

