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Review Essay

Trouble in Paradise: Political Economy and Cultural Criticism

Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism

Slavoj Žižek. Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2015. 264 pp.

Edward Sankowski and Betty J. Harris *

Slavoj Žižek's title *Trouble in Paradise* is also the name of a 1932 movie directed by Ernst Lubitsch, a movie which Žižek begins discussing as his first topic in his introduction. But the title obviously also reflects the notion that there is a difference between the superficial appearances of social life (often publically attractively depicted, with supporting justifications, sustaining collective illusions) and a time of deep societal troubles. Žižek says about his own title: "The 'paradise' in the title of this book refers to

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the End of History (as elaborated by Francis Fukuyama: liberal democratic capitalism as the finally found best possible social order), and the ‘trouble’ is, of course, the ongoing crisis that compelled even Fukuyama himself to drop his idea of the End of History” (7). This is a switching of perspectives between what we might call “cultural” interpretation and criticism and critical examination and advocacy about the more overt power systems of political economy. Such switching of perspectives, which we do not object to, but which we wish to emphasize, recurs throughout the book.

Against the mirage of “paradise,” Žižek still advocates the pursuit of an emancipatory project based on a Communist Hypothesis. However, it remains unclear, apparently even to Žižek, exactly what that might entail, and the unclarity is not completely removed by this book (or in Žižek’s many interesting, even fascinating, communications in other contexts). Nonetheless, this book includes many provocative observations and insights. In various writings, Žižek seems to connect the Communist Hypothesis with some type of egalitarianism. Possibly, Žižek’s objective could be at least partially characterized by reference to removal of or challenges to what he analyzes as the many objectionable features of the global capitalist system. But this approach would seem to be a somewhat negative account of emancipation, as a removal of unfreedoms, rather than a positive account of emancipation as an advance in freedom.

We think that much of what Žižek does in this book, though fragmented in some respects, can be interpreted as a reconsideration of how improved economic and societal “development” (quite possibly not the best word, given its associations, but part of a now common vocabulary, even used by Žižek) should be conceived (obviously, not as they are now widely conceived in the terms of global capitalism).

We reviewers see the politics and economics of a society as intertwined, as the phrase “political economy” implies. Beyond that, there are what might be called factors of “cultural” development, diverse phenomena not reducible to aspects of politics as government, or economics. Žižek’s exposition in this book often switches back and forth between political economy and cultural criticism, as well as moving from one region to another, worldwide, for examples to interpret. One question we could ask is whether or how this cultural criticism contributes to preferable changes in the global political economy. Might it be a distraction, or might it be a mode of emancipatory education, even as it also somewhat entertains (sometimes as a horror movie might entertain)?

This book reflects its origins in lectures on communism given at a South Korean university in Seoul, a juxtaposition of contexts that even Žižek concedes seems odd.

Yet, for all his travels and wide interests, Žižek is from a country (Slovenia) once “communist” and part of another country (Yugoslavia), outside the usual Western European orbit, but now absorbed into the EU. He is loyal (but not uncritically so) to many of the ideas and attitudes that have emerged from Europe (including the Enlightenment), and wants to insist that communism is part of this totality. He still seems to want to reconstruct Marxism and integrate it into an emancipatory project not simply as a bookish philosophical outlook, but as a historical reality, a very real history with characters (Lenin, Stalin, Andropov, Prokofiev, et al.), not a history or personages to be erased or forgotten, all with an influence that lives on in Europe and elsewhere (such as in its more causally remote but hugely consequential implications in Asia). And Marxism in Žižek’s view is of course not merely an historical artifact, but a practice with a future. Admittedly, he is ambivalent about the past, sometimes (in other places than this book) joking about the gulag, etc. but often declaring that the twentieth century project of Marxist communism was and is a dead end.

The organization of this book has something of the imposed structure (perhaps deliberately and humorously artificially contrived) that we find in some of Žižek’s work (a structure presented here in terms Žižek rather mysteriously claims to derive from a conceptual structure [diagnosis, cardiognosis, prognosis, epignosis], paralleled with elements of a bad French joke about a British snob who cannot speak French). The book ends with an appendix about a blockbuster movie of the Batman genre. Both the structure and the content can be puzzling, but nonetheless reward study and reflection. Žižek writes:

This book will proceed in five steps... We will begin with the diagnosis of the basic coordinates of our global capitalist system; then we will move on to the cardiognosis, ‘knowledge of the heart’, of this system, i.e., to the ideology that makes us accept it. What will then follow is prognosis, the view of the future that awaits us if things continue as they are, as well as the putative openings, or ways out. We shall conclude with epignosis (a theological term that designates knowledge which is believed, engaging us in our acts, subjectively assumed), outlining the subjective and organizational forms appropriate for the

new phase of our emancipatory struggle. The appendix will explore the impasses of today's emancipatory struggle apropos of the last Batman film. (7)

Despite the somewhat eccentric nature of his conceptual organizational sequence, he professes that his book moves toward an account of how to pursue an emancipatory struggle under contemporary conditions. So why conclude with a discussion of a blockbuster movie about Batman? We might well ask this. Noam Chomsky has unsympathetically criticized Žižek as an exhibitionist and entertainer, but Žižek's humor and his "weird" ways (a favorite word for him) are perhaps part of his methodology, and Chomsky's condescension is regrettable. However, while Žižek's perceptions about and decoding of cultural phenomena may have intrinsic value, it is not obvious that they contribute much to the real-world overcoming of global capitalism that Žižek hopes for, as distinctly from analyzing the dreams expressed in movies or meanings expressed in the spectacles of societal events. Possibly, the cultural criticism can sharpen our capacities to understand what is going on and to invent a way forward.

The introduction to Žižek's book starts with a series of possible interpretations of the Lubitsch movie, which includes a story about an affectional triangle involving two trickster criminals, (a heterosexual couple), and a rich woman who is a target for a confidence game played by the couple, but who also participates in a mutual attraction with the male of the couple.

One of Žižek's major topics in many of his writings, as already indicated, is the critique of ideology (roughly in the sense of false consciousness, as conceived by Marx and Engels), and this is a major emphasis here. Indeed, the critique of ideology reappears everywhere, as one might expect, and not solely in one section of the book. Often there is some linkage with theorizing about sexuality. In the Lubitsch movie, for example, Žižek notes, there is a significant framing image of a double bed as a symbol of sexual fulfilment (or frustration). Thus, Žižek has among his major interpretive ancestors Marx and Freud, but often by way of elaborations due to Alain Badiou and Jacques Lacan. We confess our preferences for insights as expressed in the earlier pair.

Žižek, here as elsewhere, seems better at criticism of ideology, (whether in political economy or "culture"), less capable of contributing to pictures of alternative possibilities to aspire to, and to further activity against the capitalist-dominated global

system of inauthentic liberal democracies and outright autocracies (as well as completely failed states), a system that he seems increasingly pessimistic about.

As to cultural criticism, many movies, videos, musical works, and so on, as well as other heterogeneous aspects of a way of life, a culture (e.g., the silence alleged by Žižek in contemporary South Korean society about extreme prior collective suffering) that are discussed by Žižek can be classified loosely under this category. As mentioned above, Žižek's text moves sometimes rapidly and surprisingly from cultural critique into political economy and back again. Also, as previously mentioned, because he is discussing a global system, he sometimes moves surprisingly from observations about goings-on in one region to some distant and apparently unrelated region. What binds these remarks together is his overall picture of global capitalism and its dynamics.

Žižek's insights, it seems to us (and they are impressive) arguably emerge from his free-flowing connections among accounts of particular societal phenomena and politically and psychologically astute Marxian inflected notions, rather than from his invocations of specific theoretical outlooks such as the Marxism of Alain Badiou, Žižek's friend and ally; the "psychoanalysis" of Jacques Lacan; and Žižek's version of Hegelian philosophising. Probably Žižek would not agree with our characterization of his salient merits.

We concede that some such post-Freud supplementary concepts as *jouissance* are usefully suggestive. (Thus his reference to the *jouissance*, the compulsory and defective "pleasure," in participating in and experiencing a Korean "Gangnam Style" video from 2012, with Psy the star, with monotonous music and accompanying dance, often collective.) Žižek refers to "the stupid *jouissance* of rave music," and adds:

Many viewers find the song disgustingly attractive, i.e., they 'love to hate it', or rather, they enjoy finding it disgusting, so they repeatedly play it to prolong their disgust—this compulsive nature of the obscene *jouissance* in all its stupidity is what true art should release us from. Should we not take a step further here and draw a parallel between the performance of 'Gangnam Style' in a large Seoul stadium and the performances staged not far away across the border, in Pyongyang, to celebrate the glory of the North Korean beloved leaders? Do we not get in both cases a similar neo-sacred ritual of obscene *jouissance*? (12)

For the two of us as readers, as we have noted elsewhere, Žižek has great depth in his observations of particulars, as framed by a systems approach to understanding the global capitalist-market dominated political economy (and its cultural manifestations). His depth is formidable even when some of his avowed theoretical sources leave something to be desired, and even when, as here, his insights seem to depend on unusual juxtapositions from differing cultures. His learning is even acknowledged (briefly and unobtrusively, somewhat enviously) by the British conservative Roger Scruton, who however mostly engages in ritual abuse of Žižek as a destructive leftist.

Žižek mentions in the introduction that, in its own terms, and in the terms of global capitalism, superficially, South Korea may seem a high-tech success story. Yet it also has, ominously, what Žižek claims is the highest suicide rate in the world. He ponders the extraordinary attention worldwide (for a while) in social media to a South Korean Gangnam Style video that is essentially aesthetically vacuous, indeed a piece one might love to hate. North Korea cannot be an escape from the nightmare of the contemporary global system, but furnishes another expression of it, by Žižek's account, and South Korean and North Korean social phenomena, in Žižek's account, to some extent, rather bizarrely, resemble one another. For Žižek, contemporary global capitalist development deprives localities of their culturally specific meanings.

For Žižek, we can look for meanings in movies (e.g., about crimes against the wealthy, and about love, such as *Trouble in Paradise*, or in real-world settings such as South and North Korea, or in internet videos. (In more traditional Freudian psychoanalysis, *Trouble in Paradise* might be interpreted as a story about love and work, since the loving couple's work is crime [burglary], but even their remaining a couple, after the temptation to transgress due to the triangle has passed, could be used to illustrate the banality, even the criminality of their bourgeois-like couplehood, despite the simultaneous crime of the rich woman enjoying her property).

Whether Žižek intends this or not, we could see in his discussions a contrast among different modes of evaluation of the developmental level of a social order. Some modes focus on particular features of the economy, politics, technology, numbers of hits on YouTube, etc. Other discussions by Žižek depict what he often derides as the aesthetic and moral emptiness of much of the landscape of the global capitalist system. Žižek, nonetheless, it should be noted, is surely no technophobe, nor does he condescend to pop culture generally. Movies of all sorts, including blockbusters, in particular, constitute a

sort of collective dream, in his view, which can be revealingly interpreted (sometimes, using his curious version of French psychoanalysis, Hegelianism, eclectic other sources, including some “conservative” ideas, as well as sheer improvisation). If he thinks that global capitalist culture is a wasteland, he seems to be delighted to examine its waste products at length.

Some of the juxtaposed or even superimposed topics bewilder at times (North and South Korea, Lubitsch, an analysis of the North Korean Dear Leader as representing a feminine archetype, etc.) but this mode of exposition yields its own rewards for the thoughtful (and patient) reader willing to work hard to see connections among what is juxtaposed, and to imagine how to go on with Žižek’s claims, hints, and speculations. Žižek’s exposition tends toward the less than entirely sequentially organized, but his content is often provocative in its insights.

Particularly suggestive and even amusing is Žižek’s mention of a movie available on the internet: *Propaganda*. Made by a New Zealand-based team, it is presented as if it is a documentary made in North Korea from a North Korean point of view, about the excesses and deformities of capitalist society. A gravely serious feminine provides a voice-over. There is as well a persistent male narrator in the movie, his face blurred into indiscernibility, supposedly a North Korean psychologist, who comments as a stern superego condemning features of capitalist consumer society, mindless entertainment, debt slavery, imperialism, warfare, etc. It is as if Žižek wishes to show how the much ridiculed regime in North Korea has to furnish a pretext in order to generate a narrative (and imagery) about so much of what’s objectionable about contemporary capitalism, such as Western celebrities baby-shopping in what used to be called the Third World. The society outside North Korea is perhaps by implication incapable of mustering the resources to frame its own moral absurdities, indeed atrocities. However, consider: this movie was the work of a group of New Zealanders putting a critique of Western “liberal democratic” societies into a framework supposedly advanced by North Korean sources. As George W. Bush, Tony Blair, the Pope, et al., and images of advertisements and war atrocities, comments on debt slaves, and so on, play across the screen and are denounced in the narrative, we realize how bizarre this Western way of life is (as well as its supposed “alternatives” elsewhere).

As bizarre as the West and the rest framed by global capitalism may seem in some ways, Žižek himself is deeply sympathetic to some features of European society

and history. He rejects reflexive anti-Eurocentrism. Žižek, however, is deeply disturbed by what he sees as a split increasing within Europe between (loosely speaking) the more affluent North and the poorer South, the latter suitable for outsourcing (lower wages for an educated workforce), tourism, etc. Among much else, the growth of individual debt in many places he sees as a form of societal control within many a national society, e.g., in the U.S., and within Europe. Debt is in his account a form of control among nation-states generally. He has been particularly disturbed in other writings and interviews/discussions/ talks (and he also expresses this here) about the use of debt by German banks to impose impossible demands for repayment of national debt on Greece. (Žižek has written and spoken about this topic quite extensively.) Here as in his remarks about austerity (possibly currently scheduled to wane somewhat) in other parts of Europe. He combines psychological speculations about the irrationality of demanding suffering by impositions of austerity that are demonstrably counterproductive, and shrewd commentary about widespread trends and possible if seemingly unattainable remedies such as creating a more socially accountable banking system.

In “Cardiogenesis: Du Jambon Cru?” Žižek starts by referring approvingly and sympathetically to Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, and others who have informed the public of problematic goings-on in paradise, and suffered severe consequences. Pretty clearly, Žižek wishes to link discussions of privacy and spying with his often stated interest in the new situation we are in with respect to intellectual property and technology, but here, initially, more specifically problems emerging from information and communications technology. But that is only part of the subject-matter here. This section of the book shifts rapidly among observations and topics, including considerations about the repeated issues involving Catholic clergy and sexual abuse. The Church is depicted unflatteringly as an institution committed to hidden secrets.

“Cardiogenesis,” however, moves along kaleidoscopically. Might one inquire whether there is an overall leitmotif here? If there is, it seems to be about information and privacy, what the public is entitled to know and what can be assumed to be private, and the relation of such issues to potential freedom in a contemporary political economy. This subject gets expanded into something much broader, a set of questions about individual and institutional limitations on and disclosures of knowledge and information. While whistleblowers are generally well-regarded by Žižek, he is perhaps less attuned to legitimately desirable limits on disclosure, which are not always invidious secretive

concealment. Yes, it is true, as Žižek holds, that “public reason,” praised by the likes of Immanuel Kant and Amartya Sen (neither mentioned here by Žižek, though he is on record as a fan of some relevant aspects of Kant, according to some of Žižek’s other writings) often requires more transparency than exists at present (67).

However, as the philosopher and legal scholar Anita Allen has argued, some individual privacy and concealment is so valuable that it may be desirable to enforce paternalistic limits on what persons are allowed or encouraged to disclose about themselves. In Žižek, the subject matter in this chapter extends to the individual unconscious and institutional ideological constraints on disclosure of the truth. We might add that capitalism has historically tended to tout its commitments to honesty and transparency as part of its ideological justification of itself. This has many manifestations, such as its conception of contracts as resting on voluntary agreements, its advertisements for a free press and free media, and so on. It was always possible to find problems (using Marxist and non-Marxist methods) in these justifications, and it has become easier as the problems have multiplied in contemporary global capitalism. As the otherwise capitalist contemporary economist Joseph Stiglitz has written, intellectual property law, if too protective of property rights, hides information that could advance the societal public good. There is a notable similarity between the sensibility in Žižek and the very non-Marxist Stiglitz on information as a public good, generally better when not “enclosed,” as the “commons” in land was once enclosed. Stiglitz, however, is mainly concerned with scientific and technological progress for the sake of “economic development,” whereas Žižek is mainly about disclosures of information and knowledge that challenge illegitimate authorities. We mention Stiglitz as an example of a “liberal” (even if a former chief economist of the World Bank) who might for some purposes be an ally of Žižek, who seems to be open to cooperation between some liberals and Marxists.

Žižek cites remarks by Vladimir Solovyov “the Russian Orthodox critic of Communism” (101), a figure from the nineteenth century, apparently mocking “atheist socialism”: “Man has evolved out of a monkey- therefore it is our duty to love one another.” Žižek doubts (correctly) the underlying insinuation about the implications of Darwinism. Žižek proceeds to note the apparently contradictory nature of “Christian-capitalist societies”: “Man is a creature of God with an immortal soul—therefore we should immerse ourselves in the human-animal utilitarian pursuit of pleasure.” This, we should observe, is a contradiction in a legitimating ideology that applies to many people

in many Western societies, each taken as a whole, and for the most part, in which there is an often half-hearted, but sometimes religiously enthusiastic Christianity embraced by many citizens, and often a muddled mixture of egoistic hedonism or universalistic “greatest happiness principle” type utilitarianism inchoately combined. However, many individuals in these capitalist societies, e.g., in the U.S., do not embrace the combination of ideas that Žižek mentions. Either such individuals are dubious altogether about legitimacy, they do not raise the question, or perhaps widely circulated propaganda about political democracy and economic development would serve to quiet critics. (If only society actually seemed fair and delivered the goods, rather than appearing frustratingly to be a dysfunctional operation!) How the U.S. political economy, for example, is currently (in its public psychology) legitimized (if it is) must be much more complex, probably not yielding readily to overly simple generalizations such as Žižek’s (probably only half-serious) characterization. What about the pathetic affirmations by many in the U.S. of a religion of the Constitution, an attempt at legitimation that could scarcely survive serious philosophical scrutiny? (It does persist in controversies among lawyers who are impervious to basic normative philosophical challenges.) This is usually a civic religion of rights rather than utilitarianism. Žižek here leaves this major U.S. discourse of pseudo-legitimation neglected.

The closing remarks by Žižek in this chapter explicitly primarily about ideological legitimation, suggest once more to us that Žižek’s interests are elsewhere. He is trying especially hard to integrate a history of Central and Eastern European controversies into something more comparative and synoptic, an overview of an evolving global political economy increasingly dominated by capitalism. Žižek aspires to much more than a re-appropriation of the history of Marxism in theory and practice, particularly in “non-Western” Europe, but he does to a major extent want to accomplish such a re-appropriation, as is amply evidenced in his text. The overall world system is even less coherent in its self-justifications than Žižek suggests. He may be right that the framing fact for the global system is capitalist organization (even increasingly including China, perhaps) and “liberal democracies,” which co-exist with autocracies, secular or fundamentalist, and failed or failing states.

In “Prognosis: Un Faux-Filet, Peut-Être?” Žižek, as foretold, takes on questions about the way or ways forward. He refers to many countries and situations in which change seems to be occurring, possibly extending beyond the current global market

system: Egypt and Tahrir Square, Peru and the defeated Shining Path, Eastern and Central European shifts from the Soviet sphere to independence of a sort (actually, in his view, incorporation into the global capitalist system of markets), South Africa's move beyond legal apartheid (but mired in inequality), etc. It would be miraculous indeed to be able to give a very general account of the details of a unitary type of desirable emancipatory transition, a structure of the way forward amongst such variety. He notes that often when apparent progress occurs, there is the defeat of a tyrannical figure, or of an oppressive regime, and the glow of unity in a population that follows. Subsequently, the unity fragments into a variety of contending forces. Žižek credits Hegel with this insight.

Here again, Žižek excels at striking descriptions that do not themselves seem to point a way forward, as in his description of an imposter who did meaningless sign language for the deaf at Nelson Mandela's funeral, thereby, in Žižek's view, symbolizing the emptiness of the gathering of the world's dignitaries at a point in post-apartheid South Africa when basic economic inequalities had not (and still have not) been dealt with, though a black elite has arisen that corresponds to the white elite, while the black and "colored" masses continue to suffer. Žižek is rather unkind in some of his writing to the great revolutionary Mandela (admittedly suffering from ideological use as an icon to legitimate an incomplete revolution), but Žižek is no doubt disappointed about the stalling into neoliberalism of the previously more left-oriented revolution which the ANC had originally pursued. (One ANC leftist activist told the present reviewers recently, the ANC was a great revolutionary movement, but has serious shortcomings as a revolutionary governing party.) We will comment here on a certain relationship between the changes in Eastern and Central Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the weakening of demands for transformation in South Africa. This collapse must have contributed to a "pragmatic" move by the ANC leadership in South Africa towards favoring integration into the global market economy, which Žižek is of course criticizing. (The career of the great revolutionary, Joe Slovo, a communist who was a major figure in South African armed struggle, with some support from the USSR, but who was subsequently a major negotiator of the transition agreement and an official in the post-1994 government, is instructive.) In Eastern or Central Europe, freedom for many regimes from Russian imperialist colonialism came simultaneously with greater coordination with (or one might say integration into, or, for pessimists, capitulation to)

the Western European society, which also meant accepting a role defined by the global capitalist order. In both cases, South Africa, and the Eastern/Central European transition, the outcome was one not welcomed by Žižek, and it is not clear (perhaps unfair to expect him to supply) what the way forward would be, for example in these two cases, let alone the many others he mentions.

Now in the South African case, it would be much more illuminating for Žižek to discuss global power shifts of the type we have referred to rather than to write disrespectful pieces about Mandela after his death (as Žižek did elsewhere), and amusing but bitter analysis in this book of the symbolism of a nonsensical sign language pseudo-interpreter at Mandela's funeral. This can be a problem about cultural criticism that turns away from an emphasis on the political economy and international relations fundamentals. Where is the Marxism, or even the sound non-Marxist critical, philosophically astute social science, in that? Cultural criticism can be constructively integrated with pointing a way forward to something better in the political economy (combined with cultural progressive development). But presenting cultural criticism from lapsing into something akin to providing careerist entertainment or journalistic attention-grabbing can be a challenge.

The way forward that Žižek prefers, at least verbally, recalls the liberatory impulses in Marxism. Thus: "It is true that there is something of an imaginary unity in the first phase of the revolt, when all groups are united in the rejection of the tyrant. However, there is more in this unity than imaginary ideological illusion—every radical revolt by definition contains a Communist dimension, a dream of solidarity and egalitarian justice that reaches beyond the narrow sphere of politics into economy, private life and culture, permeating the entire social edifice" (117). Yes, it is useful to distinguish, roughly, politics, and economics (but symbiotic in political economy), and culture. We do not, however, consider it obviously helpful or informative to call this Communist. Again, we find Žižek ruminating about many very different societal contexts (Syria, Ukraine, Hungary, etc.) and improvising different suggestions about a way forward. His ruminations are often interesting, but what emerges is not, it seems, a coherent strategy or tactics. The absence of coherent strategy or tactics may admittedly not be Žižek's fault, but may lie in the situation he and we face.

When we reach the last two chapters of Žižek's book, we encounter an ever more fragmented but still interesting and suggestive set of ruminations. These are

ruminations rather than continuous prose with an argument or narrative. This is prose, but often breaks off to take up a different topic. And besides the political economy foci, there is the lengthy interpretation of the Batman movie!

We propose that rather than condemning Žižek for what may seem like mere disorganization, the reader might approach his text as a periodically phantasmagorical assemblage of prose reflections with a potential to stimulate new thoughts and actions. The recurring themes are usually recognizable to readers familiar with many of Žižek's ideas. Some of the themes have been mentioned already in this essay. Given the context of Žižek's lectures in Korea, we find particularly interesting the suggestion from Žižek that the desire is justifiable of some South Koreans to disaffiliate from breakneck modernization and capitalist economic development, in the interests of saner cultural arrangements. Working out the details of this might illustrate one way to connect cultural criticism with development towards saner political economy arrangements.

We pass over detailed examination of Žižek's discussion of Christopher Nolan's Batman movie, *The Dark Knight Rises*, as well as Žižek's account of a Robert Redford movie, also fictional, about former leftist radicals.

We do note in closing Žižek's own closing, in which he seems to imply that recovering the name "Communism" (by which he seems to mean an obscure object of his desire) would be a gain in present circumstances, but also remarks that his book may appear to be a form of forgetfulness he calls by the Scottish word 'tartle', "jumping as it does from our debt-driven economy to the struggle for the control of cyberspace, from the impasses of the Arab Spring to the futility of anti-Eurocentrism, from the superego-pressure of ideology to the ambiguous role of violence in our struggles. No single idea underlies this bric-a-brac...to orientate the book's analyses towards a clear political strategy. The author nonetheless hopes that the attentive reader will discern beneath the multiple topics the Communist horizon" (243–44). These concluding remarks seem to display considerable self-insight and frankness about the book. Žižek is here writing between a recollected past that he regards as having come to a dead end in its Marxist communist twentieth century phase; and a future that has something to do with the "commons," an idea that has yet to be elaborated from the bric-a-brac of his thinking about political economy and cultural criticism.