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Review Essay

Technology, Science, and “Post-Humanity”

Like a Thief in Broad Daylight: Power in the Era of Post-Human Capitalism

Slavoj Žižek. London: Allen Lane, 2018. 256pp.

Edward Sankowski and Betty J. Harris *

1. PREFACE

In this book, *Like a Thief in Broad Daylight: Power in the Era of Post-Human Capitalism*, Slavoj Žižek mulls over issues about technology and science in the contemporary world. This is a world which he thinks, plausibly, is dominated by global capitalism, a condition which he wishes to go beyond, to something better. The nature and distribution of power must be changed. Changes in the status of “humanity” and the notion of “post-humanity” concern him. One aspect of his difficult text is that he explores how post-humanity might symbolize, not solely our degraded condition. Rather, humanity and post-humanity (and

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fears and hopes about post-humanity), examined and understood together, might also help generate some constructive ideas about how to arrive at a better future. We argue in this essay that despite his lapses into pessimism, and his acknowledgment that an alternative normative vision has not been framed by the global left (including by himself), Žižek does offer some hints about alternatives, and emphasizes the importance of hope. The worst contemporary ideology, in his view, seeks to crush hope, but this can be opposed (211). Technology and science, he suggests, may to an extent be turned against the established order, partly by revolutionaries occupying the digital commons, partly by providing access to information, movies, and other cultural work that can stimulate revolutionary insights, etc. By these and other means, emancipatory democratization may find ways beyond our current horrors and absurdities. So Žižek apparently thinks.

Žižek "contextualizes" these aforementioned topics historically. One feature of this contextualization, for Žižek, is to incorporate reflections on prior major revolutions, most notably consciously anti-capitalist examples in Russia and China. There are also comments on the French Revolution, and much more recent events such as Hugo Chavez's aborted Bolivarian efforts (15–16). The emphases on Russia and China are particularly prominent since he says he is motivated by a desire seemingly impossible to fulfill: the transcending of capitalism, in his view difficult even to imagine in the future. As is often the case with Žižek, his streak of what we might call a Central/Eastern European inflected type of "loyal Europeanism" frequently prompts his thoughts about Marx and Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin and the experiences of those living through the existence of the USSR and the former Soviet-dominated bloc. Mao too is a subject for Žižek to reflect about repeatedly. But once again, in this volume, Žižek allows his thoughts to venture in multiple directions. Discussions of technology and science in relation to normative political economy (and what might be called a "philosophical anthropology" about the changing status of humanity transitioning towards a supposedly "post-human" condition) as well as cultural studies, and all this in relation to global capitalism, do recur insistently as the main connected topics in this book. But there are as usual with him meanderings and genuine insights about other matters. Indeed, while sometimes startling, part of what is stimulating about Žižek is his juxtaposition in different media (print and other) of matters usually not discussed together. The result here is dense with allusions, asides, references, and quick changes of subject, all difficult to map as a continuous argument, but gathering force more by hints about connections among variegated claims and observations.

The phrase “Thief in Broad Daylight” is a transposition of a biblical quotation that refers to a thief in the night. Possibly what Žižek means is that global capitalism is revolutionizing our world before our eyes, though as a Marxist he of course would wish to overcome capitalism. Possibly one problem about this is that as a Hegelian-Marxist surely knows, capitalism is always changing. While we would not deny some continuity in what is capitalism, Žižek’s approach may at times make certain features of capitalism look ubiquitous and unassailably adaptive (14, 23). This appearance may contribute to attributing a false necessity to “capitalism” (whatever it changes into, and whatever it is called). Strangely, this may be somewhat like the false necessity attributed to the triumph of an institutionally unspecific communism, supposed to be inevitable by some Marxists. Assertions by Marxists of such false necessity were more common, perhaps, in the past, as in the *Communist Manifesto* (about which Žižek elsewhere continues to write) especially before changes such as “marketization” in Russia and China. The word so often used and less adequately understood, ‘market’, however, is a term, like ‘capitalism’, often used with little or nothing in mind by way of possible contrast. That is a philosophical way for social science to degenerate into something like necessitarian “metaphysics” (in one of the many possible uses of this ambiguous word ‘metaphysics’), or at least obscurantism. Žižek moreover may run a risk of succumbing to something like an “essentialism” that is sometimes criticized in the academy. To criticize essentialism about capitalism, as we are doing, admittedly has its own risks, including downplaying significant cross-cultural similarities and historical continuities in the societal tendencies called “capitalistic.” In any event, we find an ambivalence in Žižek about contemporary global capitalism. It is, for him, domineering and omnipresent, immensely capable of adaptation to cope with crises that threaten its existence. Yet for him it is now changing into something else (what precisely is not entirely clear in our author’s account), and for him this is perceptible to some observers (14, 23–24).

There is a less a priori, more a posteriori, more empiricist social scientific version of Žižek’s outline of a conception of contemporary global capitalism, and he does here and there express it in this book. In his picture, global capitalism has become increasingly centered on financial manipulations and related societal phenomena, including uses of technological innovation along with science. Money matters, but in an age of computerization, it is less and less material, more and more abstract and computerized. (Nothing peculiarly Marxist here, of course. Many a bourgeois economist would agree:

e.g., Joseph Stiglitz.) Financialization, the mobility of capital, and global trade, all supported by military power, usually nationalist, as well as media-transmitted propaganda, supply the connections among different societies. Global capitalism in the Žižek view includes a mindset that is not committed to any particular set of “cultural” norms. Thus, fundamentalisms of varying types can, for all that capitalists as such care, co-exist in culturally very different societies, each relatively undisturbed within its domain, so long as the global financial system backed by force, and accompanying sanctions, binds the whole arrangement together. Self-styled multi-party liberal democracies can co-exist with fundamentalist tyrannies. Thus, for example, alliances could be formed between Trump’s U.S. and Saudi Arabia, sustained by self-interested relationships between national powers enclosing very different cultures. On this type of Žižekian view, national “sovereignty” (whatever that means more exactly) would have to be overcome (at least to a large extent) for the overall system to improve (36). Indeed, we commentators on this book and its outlook think that puzzles and suspicions about the reality or the desirability of national sovereignty seem eminently justifiable. Unless the focus on sovereignty is overcome or rendered more thoughtful in the interests of humanity as a whole, on Žižek’s view, global capitalism will intensify an undesirable retreat from an ethics centered on worldwide “humanity.” This is a negative aspect of post-humanity. Capitalism will, rather, further distinct and conflicting identities across national borders, and conflicting identity ethics and politics even within some national borders. Žižek, rather like some other contemporary political thinkers, some very opposed to him (e.g., certainly Francis Fukuyama, to whom Žižek often objects, or to a lesser degree, lately, Anthony Appiah, who works in a very different academic and cultural dimension from that of Žižek) considers identity politics a plague. In Žižek’s view, identity politics obfuscates the much preferable goal of “universalism.” (We consider this an oversimplification on the part of Žižek.) Alas, Žižek perhaps tends to understand “universalism” in idealized Europeanist terms. European identity seems an exception to his animadversions on identity. For him, at its best, good Europeanism approaches an ideal of what he denominates as universalism (117–18). He tends to shrug off objections to Eurocentrism, often sneering at political correctness in this and other regards. Thus his suspicions and criticisms about liberal feminism (and his pronounced animus towards Hillary Clinton), multi-culturalism, his rejection of what he thinks are wrong emphases on “tolerance,” and so on.

The reference to “post-humanity” in the book title indicates one topic on which Žižek chooses to reflect, albeit ambiguously. One aspect of this is Žižek’s commentary on “biogenetics,” commentary which is interspersed with speculations, both professedly factually futurological and science-fiction focused, about biotechnological manipulations of human reproduction, artificial intelligence, and technologically enhanced changes in the human presence in public media. Žižek’s speculations in this area are sometimes rambling. Sometimes there is rather mechanically pedantic text, in which Hegelianism and Lacanian concepts are deployed. Yet on reflection, as is so often the case, we two readers are left with the sense that his seeming eccentricity, garrulous avidity for popular culture, his sometime clownishness, and his displays of erudition, as well as some suspiciously amateurish passages on natural science, as well as are nonetheless, despite their occasional embarrassments, encompassed in a wide-ranging and original intelligence and imagination.

“Post-humanity,” for Žižek, signifies a variety of ethical-political-social-theoretical topics, including that which, under global capitalism, must be sorted out about ongoing changes in what counts as human agency, or what language about “humanity” means. Žižek seems relatedly nervous about the idea of “the people” but wants to hang onto an idea of a positive ethics of “humanity,” even as threats to humanity in his view increase and the condition of post-humanity (currently mostly but not entirely negative) advances. This makes what we could call his “philosophical anthropology” an anxious study. The possibilities (and indeed the already present actualities, likely to expand as global capitalism “develops”) about biogenetically manipulated organisms that are human or humanoid, or (distinctly) holographic beings that are apparently human in form, and into which paradigmatic humans (in the old-fashioned sense) can enter into relationships, e.g., emotional and sexual, are part of Žižek’s examination of the advancing condition of post-humanity.

We will observe here that some of these topics could be combined with a re-thinking of older, even pre-high-tech situations. Affective relations of paradigmatically human agents with non-paradigmatic human or partially human or non-human agents/beings, even relations of a sexual or quasi-sexual nature, have presented philosophical and anthropological questions for a long time. Think of some targets of veneration within religious traditions, human-god liaisons, overtly fictional, sometimes quasi-fictional personages. After movies came on the scene, there are characters in movie fictions, or movie and other entertainment celebrities, any of which could sometimes be

considered as ontologically odd cases of "humanity." Of course, we concede that modern technology or science, and global capitalism, vastly complicate these topics about paradigmatic humans and other humanoid beings, and that is emphasized by Žižek. However, there are considerable continuities between older phenomena examined in philosophy and the social sciences (or in predecessors of social science), and their contemporary ramifications, or variants. Where there are discontinuities, also, it is worth studying how public consciousness has populated the cosmos with non-human beings both before and after technology and science became such a major contemporary influence on the ever-changing totality of humanity and post-humanity.

2. ŽIŽEK'S "INTRODUCTION"

The introduction to the book alludes to a variety of familiar but here vaguely formulated philosophical problems about science (and even more, technology) in relation to concepts such as freedom, responsibility, and meaning. Rather often, Žižek's thoughts address a major area in philosophy and the human sciences, the critical examination of freedom and responsibility. Žižek early on refers to Kant, among others: "Kant himself was focused on the problem of how, while fully taking Newtonian science into account, one can guarantee that ethical responsibility can be exempted from the reach of science—as he himself put it, he limited the scope of knowledge to create the space for faith and morality" (3). Žižek, however, is obviously much more interested in the societal role of technology, including its function in the political economy. He is generally far more interested in the potential use of causal knowledge and its technological applications in societal control and manipulation, rather than what might often be thought the metaphysics of free will. But his own primarily Hegelian "metaphysics" is of course important to Žižek.

We should also note that Žižek is in some respects concerned with the content of "science," including what we might call science-like or merely would-be science (that is, what has been questioned, justly or unjustly, as to its scientific status) as thought and activity: Freud, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, et al. Those readers who are skeptical of the genuinely scientific status of some or much of the literature that Žižek invokes (including some of Lacan's obscure ramblings about science and "letters") might consider the possibility that Žižek simply does not much care about demarcating "real science" from this or that simulacrum. His allusions to "faith" and later to Brecht suggest that Žižek is more interested in other issues. Some philosophers and scientists will be profoundly dissatisfied

with, even hostile to this perspective, but Žižek may be much more interested in some types of societal change, more so than whether those changes better fit the scientific facts of our situation. (At one point, he discusses meanings of different types of truth in Russian, and his own interest may be much greater in what is “Pravda” than in factual truth, *istina* [62]).

Žižek’s view is in some respects much closer to that of Angela Davis, as expressed, for example, in her recent collection, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* (2016), rather than any interest in Kant’s noumenal freedom, or the projects of Kant’s contemporary descendants. (However, Davis is not averse to some forms of “identity politics,” which Žižek spurns.) Relatedly, Žižek writes: “So when we talk about the continuing relevance (or irrelevance, for that matter) of the idea of Communism, we should not be thinking of a regulative idea in the Kantian sense but in the strict Hegelian sense—for Hegel, ‘idea’ is a concept which is not a mere Ought (Sollen) but also contains the power of its actualization” (12). Davis’s “struggle,” when successful, achieves power that cunningly escapes the manipulations of a capitalist societal order. The Žižekian idea of freedom seems also to have a place of honor for imagination, and this may partly account for his sometimes obsessive but also suggestive interests in film narratives. Film narratives after all often explore possible worlds in ways which put the scientifically studied contingent causal order in its (power-driven but limited) place. That is a place for science that accords science the potential for a contribution to make in political philosophy and real-world politics. But this view seems to imply that science cannot supersede the social imagination combined with normative judgment. All this might be given a Kantian interpretation of sorts, but the post-Kantian Hegelian-Marxist Žižek is obviously much more concerned with changing the real world than was Kant. Žižek considers himself a Marxist, and science interests him for that as well as other reasons, but Žižek’s Marxism seems less emphatic about the revolutionary role of science as contrasted with the importance of invention and imagination. Thus, for example, when he celebrates some features of Lenin’s historical activities, Žižek stresses Lenin’s political improvisation, not his scientific insight into supposed laws of history. And although some critics claim Žižek overemphasizes the laws of history, Žižek himself strenuously denies belief in any progressive teleology inherent in supposed laws of history.

Žižek, citing his friend Alain Badiou, distinguishes philosophers who “prod” from those who try to “reconcile” philosophy (and Žižek would surely associate at least some science and technology with philosophy here) “with the established order.” Thus Žižek

begins the book: "Alain Badiou's *The True Life* opens with the provocative claim that, from Socrates onwards, the function of philosophy is to corrupt the youth, to alienate (or rather, 'extraneate' in the sense of Brecht's *verfremden*) them from the predominant ideologico-political order, to sow radical doubts and enable them to think autonomously" (1). Though he does not straightforwardly say so at once, surely Žižek approves of those philosophers who "prod," and he approves also of those artists and cultural activists such as Brecht who engage in similar projects, in Brecht's case, overtly aiming to undermine the capitalist order.

3. ŽIŽEK'S "I-THE STATE OF THINGS"

For Žižek, "In our late-capitalist consumerist dynamic we are bombarded by new products all the time, but this constant change is becoming increasingly monotonous" (13). In the immediate passages that follow, Žižek seems to assert that certain propositions are equivalent when they are not. We two readers decline to fuss about this. His main point is that there is change within the global capitalist system, and there is change of the system, and that much talk about change and innovation (particularly technological innovation) is deceptive ideology, limited to promoting very little if any emancipatory revolutionary change. He then launches into a discussion of Louis Althusser on proverbs. Žižek appears to agree with Althusser, using the example of proverbs, that a genuine revolution must not only overthrow an old order but establish a new one on the level of everyday life. "Leaders like Lenin and Mao succeeded (for some time, at least) because they invented new proverbs, which means that they imposed new customs that regulated daily lives" (14). Later, however, Žižek criticizes Mao's crackdown on what Žižek depicts as a genuinely revolutionary Shanghai Commune, so it is perhaps thankfully obscure (for the sake of anti-authoritarians who would like to admire Žižek) whether Žižek entirely agrees with the top-down culturally revolutionary outlook he attributes to Althusser. It is again symptomatic of Žižek's paired interest in both revolutionary politics and cinema that he quotes with approval Sam Goldwyn. "One of the best Goldwynisms recounts how, after being told that critics had complained that there were too many old clichés in his films, Sam Goldwyn wrote a memo to his scenario department: 'We need more new clichés!'" (15). This is amusing, but how is it integrated with the themes of technology, science, global capitalism, post-humanity; or the adjoining Žižekian commentary on Hugo Chavez that follows? Or the remarks about China and Vietnam supposedly returning to capitalism? About rightist

movements appropriating slogans (and to some extent, e.g., in Poland) some major policies that one might have associated with the Left? This Žižek patchwork has suggestive elements, but is not a connected exposition. Perhaps a significant connective hint is that some progressive innovations require critical examination and active efforts to be distinguished from pseudo-change. Beyond that, he may aim to present a series of passages whose inter-connected implications must be the result of hard work (some theoretical, some more matters of intuitions about particulars), by the serious reader.

A major emphasis that emerges here is that technological innovation in the context of global markets presents itself as liberation, but that the constant pseudo-revolutionary change generates huge problems for a genuinely just acknowledgment of humanity, including the prospect of fossil-fuel driven ecological catastrophe and nuclear (or similar) technologically-based annihilation. Shallow warnings about the need for post-capitalism by the likes of Bill Gates or Elon Musk are (not surprisingly) dismissed with contempt by Žižek. Socially conscious billionaires are incapable of imagining a viable post-capitalist future; but at present so are leftists, (regrettably according to Žižek). Žižek writes pessimistically that “Every technological innovation is first presented ... (so) its health or humanitarian benefits (are) emphasized, which blinds us to more ominous implications and consequences: can we even imagine ... (the) new forms of social control”? (39–40).

Žižek is an impassioned and sympathetic defender of Julian Assange (42). One can, however, detach the issue of Assange’s character from Žižek’s broader point. We authors of the present commentary and critique do not here (for the sake of brevity) take a normative position about Assange. The bigger topic is that technology assists the collusion of corporations and undemocratic governmental agencies and political trends, as with *Cambridge Analytica*. “The biggest achievement of the new cognitive-military complex is that direct and obvious oppression is no longer necessary: individuals are much better controlled and ‘nudged’ in the desired direction when they continue to experience themselves as free and autonomous agents of their own life” (ibid.). Žižek does (briefly) directly connect technologically sophisticated politicized and corporate use of science to issues about free will. This recalls some of the passages in his introduction. In true Žižekian fashion, connections are made with the themes in a science fiction movie such as *Blade Runner 2049*. Much beyond this example, Žižek refers to real-world Stalinist and Nazi (often racist) aspirations and active state-supported attempts to use science (or pseudo-science) to invent technological modes of intervention (e.g., applied genetics, drugs

generally) that would improve authoritarian-statist-employer-controlled performance of workers and soldiers, to some extent aiming to turn them into post-humans of a type compared by Žižek to the population of zombies depicted in the 1932 film *White Zombie* (in which Bela Lugosi plays an important part as a character explaining the advantages of such exploitation in a Haitian context). This section of the book then turns into a set of more detailed reflections (which we shall not examine) about some films.

There are further questions about the function of interpretive activities about movies in which Žižek often engages. We the authors of the present essay think that those questions are not easy to deal with. Academic or journalistic commentary on movies is not arguably a matter solely or even mainly of political praxis, but for a philosopher such as Žižek, movie interpretation is at least in part political praxis. How significant the role of interpretation of movies should be in critiquing and transcending global capitalism is a diffuse but serious question. Possibly movie interpretation and criticism has some role in establishing a progressive new order "on the level of everyday life." What is insufficiently relevant to his main goals, or disproportionately over-attentive to movies in Žižek's program, admits of no very definite answer. We are inclined to say that his interest in cinema is too often far-fetched or excessive or not aptly framed in terms of his supposed goal of critiquing and surpassing global capitalism. We say a bit more about this in our brief and compressed discussion of Žižek's section 4 in this book, mainly about Ernst Lubitsch.

4. ŽIŽEK'S "2-VAGARIES OF POWER"

Žižek next turns to questions about political power that has been exercised against capitalism (at least in the limited case of the capitalism that existed in Russia prior to the October Revolution). Žižek does seem quite sympathetic to Lenin. He takes the comparatively "libertarian" anti-hierarchical, egalitarian political vision presented in Lenin's 1917 *State and Revolution* ("a kind of preparatory theoretical work for the October Revolution") as a sincere statement of Lenin's outlook. This interpretation can be contrasted with Noam Chomsky's claim that (in effect) as a politician, Lenin was manipulatively trying to ingratiate himself with some potential followers, but did not believe in what he was saying at the time. (Bear in mind that Chomsky is an anarchist, an anarcho-syndicalist, unlike Žižek.) Žižek admires Lenin's seeking to grab and hold onto power. But Žižek here sets aside as a question of secondary interest what happened after

the Bolshevik success and why; he claims to turn to the more philosophical issue about the “normative grounding” of a putatively egalitarian and liberating revolution. Žižek notes that in some of his text Lenin seems to be appealing to supposedly age-old non-coercive rules of human intercourse, as if a historically unchanging “human nature” could support such a revolution. However, in Žižek’s reading of Lenin’s text, elsewhere in *State and Revolution*, Lenin seems to invoke the importance of a changed human nature arising in change from the lower stage of Socialism to the higher stage of Communism envisaged by Marx. Before that, there will be “*human nature as it is now*” and this necessitates “administration” and “subordination” (60). Lenin rejected what he believed was the utopianism of anarchism. Probably, Žižek is here in part cognizant of (without carefully defining or resolving) some issues relevant to the transition from humanity to post-humanity, without drawing any definite conclusions. He does write that on Lenin’s reflections about a change in human nature, changes in productive forces would not be a key to the transition to the higher societal stage.

Žižek wants to be able to admire Lenin and condemn Stalin. Justifying such a position inclines Žižek to distinguish between Lenin’s “improvisations,” which were supposedly needed under the difficult circumstances in which Lenin exercised power, and Stalin’s anything-goes “opportunism,” which was “totally pragmatic and arbitrary.” Under Stalin’s rule, “Leninism” was constructed as an ideology, often by invoking “proverbs” (language) to justify policies that were adopted for quite other reasons. In Žižek’s account Mikhail Suslov, a member of the Politburo, was chiefly responsible for explicit ideology from the era of Stalin to (presumably the beginning of) the Gorbachev era. Interestingly, Žižek poses the question whether something analogous applied to Lenin’s construction of Marx’s meanings (67). This question seems to us to subvert somewhat Žižek’s admiration for Lenin.

How is any of this related to technology and science, if it is at all? Possibly the improvisatory nature of Lenin’s exercise of political power is being contrasted to the idea of strict scientific laws of history (a fantasy in some quarters in the Marxist tradition, but not only in that tradition; it appears in some capitalist economics). Possibly it is being hinted that changes from current humanity to post-humanity (while risky and possibly disastrous) are the key to revolutionary change, not changes in the technology and science of economic production. Perhaps it is implied that Lenin was unduly hopeful about change in humanity, in human nature? But there is more to it than that.

The rest of "Vagaries of Power" is from time to time tantalizing though too often not only complex but fragmented and inconclusive. We will be very selective in discussing it. Žižek says that elections are (can be) modes of direct democratic pressure on representative institutions. For Žižek, apparently (given what he says in this chapter and elsewhere), elections, while not to be rejected wholesale, can of course be problematic. (Žižek is not, at his best anyhow, a would-be dictator, nor is he a Thoreau generally skeptical about voting in a supposed democracy.) For example, voting sometimes masks extremes of elite manipulation (often technologically enhanced), but Žižek thinks that direct democracy, sometimes longed for, cannot be readily mobilized or sustained. We take it (it is not crystal clear!) that Žižek agrees with some version of a view that positive emancipatory revolutionary events do require an active minority that persists when the dissatisfied masses would either remain disorganized before significant and needed political changes are enacted; or dissatisfied masses become fatigued after basic changes have occurred that make possible (without yet creating) something much better than what had existed. Besides elections, "popular presence" may take the form of large groups of people assembled in central public places, and the assembled people may put popular pressure on supposedly representative institutions (71). Žižek adds: "(A)n important open question is: how does cyberspace presence/pressure operate, what is its potential?" This point raises but does not elaborate on a very noteworthy question (raised well before Žižek) about the emancipatory potential of cyberspace technology. We will return to Žižek on that topic.

Žižek, contrary to worries about him and accusations against him of authoritarianism (and we have sometimes expressed such suspicions), seems at his best to prefer a non-authoritarian path, and it is with the background of this assumption that he expresses deep skepticism of multi-party democracy, and of direct democracy as well. He writes, "The basic problem is this: how to move beyond multi-party democracy without falling into the trap of direct democracy?" (74).

There is then, a bit further on, in a subsequent section, "Welcome to the Boredom of Interesting Times!" (77–106), *inter alia*, a discussion by Žižek of recent European political events and of Trumpism in the United States. Žižek asks at one point, and this could be read as a question punctuating his reference to "the basic problem": "What vision has the Left to offer that would be strong enough to mobilize people? We should never

forget that the ultimate cause of the vicious cycle of Le Pen and Macron in which we are caught is the disappearance of a viable Leftist alternative” (80–81).

Žižek continues: “No wonder a new spectre is haunting liberal-progressive politics in Europe and the US, the spectre of fascism. Trump in the US, Le Pen in France, Orban in Hungary—they are all demonized as the new Evil against which we should unite our forces” (81–82).

There are niceties to Žižek’s position that go far beyond the focus on technology and science with which we are working. The far-ranging discussion, however, does present a picture of the contemporary global capitalist system that (in Žižek’s view) is primarily responsible for the chaotic political and cultural scene he discusses. He subsequently addresses Trotsky’s role in the October Revolution, as if that might provide some clues about how Leftists ought to proceed. (This might be going a long, circuitous way back indeed for clues about how to address a very different contemporary situation.) The scope of these speculations in “Vagaries of Power” is huge. Without ridiculing his compressed account of contemporary Euro-U.S. politics and global political economy, let us focus again on the themes that we (and Žižek) have designated as central. On Žižek’s view, Trotsky is an important figure who eventually won over Lenin on some basic issues. “...Trotsky was all too aware of the inertia of the masses—the most one can expect of the ‘masses’ is chaotic dissatisfaction. A tightly defined, well-trained revolutionary force should use this chaos to strike at power and thereby open up the space in which the masses can really organize themselves ... The true novelty of Trotsky becomes visible here: the striking force does not ‘take power’ in the traditional sense of a *coup d’etat*, occupying government offices and army headquarters, it does not focus on confronting the police or the army on the barricades” (103). Those deeds are in fact done, but by others.

Žižek proceeds to develop the idea that Trotsky focused strategically on technological infrastructure rather than the overtly political institutions of the superstructure, or the police or military personnel. “Trotsky ... targeted the material (technical) grid of power (railways, electricity, water supply, post, etc.), the grid without which state power hangs in the void and becomes inoperative” (104). Žižek then directs our attention to “the progressive digitalization of our lives in what could be characterized as the new era of posthuman power” (ibid.). He proceeds to ask a rhetorical question obviously meant to be answered in the affirmative: “(I)s it not the case that today the ‘occupation’ of the digital grid is absolutely crucial if we are to break the power of the state

and capital?" and writes that we also need a disciplined, conspiratorial group dedicated to the goals of emancipation (105). He does not envisage this instead of, but in addition to new political parties, etc. So here is a proposal centered on technology and science for a way of thinking about "our new commons" in relation to emancipatory change. It is worth considering Žižek's suggestion seriously (though not in this essay), but in our opinion a "disciplined, conspiratorial" group is the wrong approach for an authentic democratic revolution. Disciplined, to some extent, yes; "conspiratorial," no. The proposal needs more thought as well as experimental testing in varied circumstances. The political/economic Right is already massively invested in occupying digital space. Žižek is on target in seeing oppositional activism as needed here, but he may underestimate the need for great scope and involvement of many activists of decidedly varied non-Bolshevik types. Some of those on the internet barricades might be more comparable to Brecht than Trotsky.

5. ON ŽIŽEK'S "3-FROM IDENTITY TO UNIVERSALITY"

Section 3 of the book is in its negative aspect a critique of identity ethics and politics, both as implying (misleading) factual pictures of societal functioning and as normative guides to how we ought to think and act. In its positive aspect this section highlights and advocates an ideal of universality. The section begins with an account of an Agatha Christie novel from 1970, *Passenger to Frankfurt*, which, Žižek maintains, was symptomatic of the discombobulating effect of the late 1960s on Agatha Christie, who supposedly had lost her "cognitive mapping" and succumbed to a fear of chaos (107). Žižek compares our own situation to that of Christie. The plot of the novel assigns the disorders in the world to a conspiracy generated by Hitler, who had taken refuge in Argentina, and other Nazis who planned to create chaos in the world through which they intended to re-institute a Nazi movement to take over the world. This set of reflections transitions into an account of the bizarre nuclear threats exchanged by Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. Žižek argues plausibly that the world needs a presumably ethical sense of humanity as a whole, and that this is somehow rendered psychologically possible by the conceivability of technologically enabled destruction of all humanity, whether by nuclear war or ecological disaster. This is an interesting speculation, which it is not obvious how to confirm empirically. The sense that humanity as a whole is precious and that it should survive in some form may be increased by threats of total destruction of all humanity, but it is not clear that possessing some form of this sense requires the awareness of such threats. Perhaps more important for

Žižek's position is that he maintains that the best of the European tradition expresses something through the EU's best efforts that is worth fighting for globally, transcending the nation-state and promoting ecological sanity, and justice in social-welfare provision. For Žižek, at their best, EU countries have transnationally overcome dangerous European internal hatreds. We encounter Žižek shrugging off the legacy of colonialism, and insinuating that Haitian slaves turned rebels owed the shape of their emancipatory desires to the French Revolution. We think this is a disturbingly one-sided account. It is true that Europe has produced (and at its best continues erratically to champion and extend) some ethical ideals worth consideration by humanity as a whole, and that uses of "European" technology and science have sometimes contributed to genuinely humanitarian projects; (the latter point seems less obviously, if at all, part of Žižek's own position here). But we think that it is ethically dubious to conflate Europeanism, even at its very best, with "universality." And certainly European technology and science have not always been in the service of universal benevolence or justice, to put it mildly.

Rather than heaping contempt on ideas of particular social identities that sometimes themselves in fact generate valuable ethics and politics, Žižek would do better to acknowledge the role of identities in all our thinking, and to aim to critically evaluate our identities (some of which are less than admirable), including the admirable concept of our shared human identity with all humanity. This does not require, and it must lead us to reject, radical skepticism about arriving at well supported attitudes concerning what is best for humanity as a whole. We reject the idea that we must all choose between self-aware and sometimes self-accepting or self-critical identities that we inhabit, on one hand, and "universality" on the other. We also think that without self-flagellation, current and future Europeans can acknowledge that their ancestors and contemporaries have at times combined value-systems and technologically-based, scientifically-based prowess into power that has caused enormous unjustly distributed suffering in the world. Surely Žižek knows this. His critique of global capitalism plainly requires an acknowledgment of this.

Žižek also wishes to maintain the fundamental nature of class struggle, supposedly more basic than the more particularized conflicts that are defined in terms of various other social identities that can be connected with inequality and unjust subordination (120, 128). The issues here seem to extend much beyond technology and science. (He would acknowledge that a too-frequent Marxian focus on "scientific socialism" is problematic.) The types of examples he discusses are familiar enough, and he

often makes sound critical points against those who ignore their own privileges while complaining about their suffering injustices that while often real enough, are not as imperative to correct as the inequities addressed by understanding class struggle. There is, of course, a major challenge about articulating and defending a concept of class that captures the worst forms of exploitation, which as a Marxist, Žižek is obliged to think are the results of global capitalism. We do not pronounce here for or against the idea that Marxism as usually understood can do this work successfully. We do think, however, that it is one thing for Žižek to criticize certain types of identity-centered theory and practice, and quite another thing for Žižek to imply that it is essential to all identity-centered theory and practice to fail (either as ethics/politics or as social science). Žižek himself manages to use identity notions thoughtfully at times.

6. ON ŽIŽEK'S "4-ERNST LUBITSCH, SEX AND INDIRECTNESS"

Section 4 of the book, with its extensive commentary on the movie director Ernst Lubitsch, is perhaps the strangest in the setting of this book, given the book's projected major themes of technology, science, and post-humanity under global capitalism. (Žižek has elsewhere commented notably on Lubitsch, e.g., in *Trouble in Paradise-From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* [2014].) Movies could in numerous ways have been fitted as a subject into Žižek's focus on technology, science, global capitalism, and post-humanity, but as his discussion proceeds, the attention to Lubitsch seems rather contrived, even if at times intrinsically interesting. At one point, Žižek suggests, rather bizarrely, that the "Lubitsch touch," supposedly averse to bureaucratic inflexibility, and in Žižek's estimation averse to both populist neo-racism and to alleged interrelated political correctness, might have made Lubitsch an attractive artist who shows us how to fulfill one of Lenin's supposed late-life dreams of a possible Soviet societal governance institution that might somehow correct the authoritarian excesses that eventually moved Leninist institutions in the direction of Stalinism. What a strange politico-aesthetic-auteurist-psychoanalytic concoction by Žižek!

While there is much of interest in this section of the book, despite its incongruities, for the sake of brevity, and to stick to our major themes, we will not go into detail in the present essay about this section of the book. We do limit ourselves to the following brief remarks. Some issues about movies might have been addressed in ways much more directly connected with the emphasis on Žižek's major topics in this book (global capitalism,

technology and science, post-humanity, etc.). And we think it is somewhat odd that a philosopher committed to the centrality of class struggle spends so much effort on discussing movies, TV, etc. in the way he does. We may in the future explore these and related points in another essay, framed differently from this one, and not primarily about Žižek.

7. ŽIŽEK'S "CONCLUSION" AND OURS

Žižek's conclusion has the subtitle "For How Long Can We Act Globally and Think Locally?" What does this mean? And how is it connected with the content of the conclusion? And how does the conclusion punctuate the whole book? Possibly, Žižek intends to say that our thinking is still local while our actions already have global significance (whether we like to acknowledge this or not). But the sub-title might imply that our thinking too must become global so that we can act knowing what should be done taking into account global considerations such as the condition of overall humanity, suffering as many populations, and classes do under international injustice in societal arrangements.

The conclusion then may seem, on the face of it, another patchwork of associative thinking with only tangential continuity between some of the elements of the patchwork. Perhaps we should just realize that rather than a mishmash, this is sometimes how Žižek thinks and writes? If it were Wittgenstein (who said in the *Philosophical Investigations* that he could not force his thoughts to go in a long sustained direction), there might be numbered sections of widely different lengths, which the reader/interpreter is supposed to construe and connect himself/herself. The content and connections, in the case of Žižek, which is at hand here, are not simple and easy to state.

We now prefer to find a more constructive, though ambivalent, concluding admonition in the text. Do not, he stresses, give up emancipatory hope for humanity, despite all the reasons for pessimism. We say this, though in an earlier passage, Žižek writes, in a different context, that we are in a "hopeless situation" if we face the choice of voting in a French election for Macron or Le Pen (81). That is a particular situation; the hope that we say he commends is for the possibility of fundamental change in the conditions in which we can choose. On his view, it seems, we should understand that it is possible and indeed obligatory to hope for humanity to achieve justice, to transcend the failures of its past abuses and atrocities, some committed in the very name of erring

conceptions of humanity "the people." In that sense, he wants a kind of post-humanity, i.e., a change in human nature that allows more of us to envisage and act on the possibility of radical emancipatory politics. But, he warns us, be on guard against continuing traps and new ones. In his 2017 book, *The Courage of Hopelessness*, despite its title, Žižek entertains some ideas about thinkable and actionable strategies for radical change, but also extensively reviews obstacles to change and negative developments due to global capitalism. In light of this, whether or not he uses the language of hope, Žižek does appear to advocate for hope.

We writers of the current essay have wanted to trace the stated major theme of technology and science in an age of global capitalism in which the status of "humanity" has become questionable and "post-humanity" is also salient. We have objected or moved our commentary along when he strays too far from his main themes and concepts (which are themselves obviously quite broad). One of his key concepts, as we have said, is "humanity" and the super-added concept of "post-humanity," about both of which we think he is ambivalent. (But he is more typically positive about "humanity" and more typically negative about "post-humanity.") On the one hand, he fears de-humanization, and decries deficiencies in our care for humanity as a whole. On the other hand, he has noted that Lenin, whom he admires, was interested in, hopeful about a stage of development in which human nature would change (a transition to a positive kind of "post-humanity," perhaps?), and bureaucracy, coercion, and the like might be dispensed with. This author seems to be endorsing a view on which we should cultivate care for humanity, but without allowing this to turn into an empty abstraction, sometimes even an abstraction supporting major harms in the name of a distorted picture of humanity. Sometimes he is fearful about losing the value of a sense of humanity, or the associated idea of "the people," sometimes he hopes for achieving a better type of humanity and respect for the people. He may in the end express this ambivalence in the language of humanity/post-humanity, but sometimes also in maintaining the importance of "the people," while also fearing misuses of the idea of "the people," "populism," and so on.

The alleged abstraction of "the people" seems to arouse Žižek's anxieties, as apparent in his suspicions of talk about "the people" as a narcotic, in addition to his references to actual drug use, such as the U.S. opioids crisis. Widespread drug use plus the abstraction of "the people": these two categorically distinct elements are sometimes paired together by Žižek in an expanded account of the concept of "the opium of the people," the

well-known, well-worn phrase so often, as here, cited from Marx (from the “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”) about religion (197–99). Žižek has referred to religion as “stupid,” but philosophical or literary license seems to be exercised by him more than occasionally in delving into religious materials for ideas and language. Consider the biblical passage that he partly mimics, partly transforms in the title of this book, the underlying sympathy expressed in Žižek’s rather mild criticism of Pope Francis, and Žižek’s explicit admiration and advocacy of the inclusion of the Book of Job in the Old Testament. (Elsewhere, however, it is notable that he attacks the Catholic Church, e.g., for its failure to deal well with sexual abuse.)

There is also in Žižek a corresponding tendency to idolize great, canonically recognized thinkers (for Žižek, Hegel is plainly one, and obviously Marx as well) as supplying a mindset by which we can judge what is to be done societally. While we two commentators understand that much can be learned from great canonical philosophical figures, and much can be learned by reflections about the deliberative situations and deeds of influential political leaders. Nonetheless obviously “great” figures cannot spare us from the necessity of integrating the perspectives of many human agents (some obscure), past and present. This is not succumbing to a religion of “the people” as one aspect of the opium of the people, a tendency Žižek remarks on and objects to in some places. Rather, it is a recognition that a community should not mainly be “led” in directions that leaders envisage, nor the community’s customs renovated top-down.

There are times when Žižek seems himself to advocate need for greater respect for comparatively uncelebrated, ordinary people, as when he refers to a Russian submarine officer who may supposedly have averted a nuclear catastrophe during the Cuban missile crisis, and (earlier in history) a Russian doctor (a woman) whose resistance (though she was tortured) to the idea of falsely confirming a medical plot against the Soviet regime may supposedly have avoided a possible disastrous Stalinist-Soviet military intervention. But too often Žižek has seemed to analyze history as if what is of interest is mainly what great leaders or great thinkers have thought about *What Is To Be Done?* Here and elsewhere, as we have mentioned, he refers admiringly to Lenin’s willingness to improvise in difficult circumstances.

To escape the crushing of hope, Žižek implies, is central today in addition to (or as part of) the critique of ideology. In many of Žižek’s works, the critique of ideology is famously crucial. That is still so in this book. But here, as the book is ending, Žižek almost

seems to say that it is now widespread for "the people" not to believe in what elite use of ideology is trying to make them believe, and Žižek remarks (perhaps in a tone of fatigue or exasperation) that even Tony Blair (who is a global capitalist ideologist, for sure, in Žižek's bestiary) claims that we need to escape ideology. The hope that should not be crushed by the devilry of contemporary ideology, is for Žižek a hope about imagination and social realization of a world that will escape the maldistribution and unfreedoms of global capitalism, achieving a set of hard-to-define freedoms for humanity, for "the people" instead, without losing autonomy and succumbing to the spell of thinking or acting as if humanity or "the people" could be what he often calls a Big Other, while also avoiding alternative types of traps (e.g., traps set or exacerbated by technology and science, like opioid addiction, especially notable in the U.S., still a center for the exercise of power through its global reach). Žižek's main achievement may be holding out for some better set of arrangements (as yet unimagined even by him and unrealized in collective practice anywhere, yet, except in fits and starts) (211).

Despite major reservations about his views, to some extent we find major insights in this author. Perhaps the main emphases in this book are as follows. Technology and science are central to the operation of the world system, but tend to exacerbate the problems and dangers of global capitalist organization. There has been too much confidence about the promise of technology and science for promoting progress within and beyond capitalism, and too domineering a focus on supposedly technological and scientific aspects of our consciousness. Some more elusive and less regimented modes of awareness, combined with commitments to updated appreciation of class struggle, may help us think constructively. Such awareness can be found, among other regions of the mind, in our responses to fictions and in our ethical sensibility, e.g., in judgments attentive to story after story, whether in movie fictions, occasionally novels; and poetry, or in fact-based historical or contemporary-journalistic stories; etc. There are plenty uses of such stories in this book. The concepts or values expressed by judgments, attitudes, and practices about humanity and post-humanity are conflict-ridden, paradoxical, including both very negative, objectionable features and very positive features with hints about possible better futures. Capitalism, with its incorporated technology and science, might begin to be improved on if there is somehow curbing and reversals of dehumanization and manipulation of people, the drugging of whole populations, ecological ruin, or deploying of threats from nuclear weaponry, which are as things stand harmfully facilitated by technology and science. Help

might be hoped for from a critique of the limits and risks of much technology and science, and from sympathetic attention to works of imagination, especially certain movie narratives (available, somewhat paradoxically, more readily, through technology) supplemented by ethical reflection about facts and possibilities. As to the latter, ethical thinking, we need care for the whole of humanity, not limited concern about selected citizens of our supposedly sovereign nation-states, we need to avoid neglect of despised subordinated groups within the nation-state, or the wretched of the earth in overlooked or exploited domains anywhere. But we also need to thoughtfully examine imaginative stories, and real-life anecdotes and narratives, set in historical or contemporary circumstances, learning what we can from their insights and exposing their flaws; we need to hope that humanity can reach a higher emancipatory ethical level (perhaps this aspires to a “post-humanism” in a surprising sense) without allowing misconceptions of notions such as “humanity” or “the people” to become abstractions that distort our ethical attitudes and activities.