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Edward Sandowski

Betty J. Harris

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Review Essay

The Pandemic, Environmentalism, and Re-Thinking Social and Political Philosophy

Pandemic 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost

Slavoj Žižek. New York: Polity Press, 2021. 208pp.

Edward Sankowski* and Betty J. Harris†

1. INTRODUCTION-ŽIŽEK AIMS TO REFORMULATE A CAPITALISM/COMMUNISM CONTRAST IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC

In *Pandemic!2-Chronicles of a Time Lost*, Slavoj Žižek continues his discussions, written and performed in multiple media, of the pandemic that has severely afflicted the world for

* **Edward Sankowski** is professor of philosophy at the University of Oklahoma. He is interested, among other areas, in ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of the social sciences, and philosophy of education (especially higher education). He is particularly interested in the implications of globalization for normative ethics and normative political philosophy. Much of his work focuses on individual and group choice and decision-making. His work consists of both academic study and pragmatic interventions. His Ph.D. is from Cornell University.

† **Betty J. Harris** is professor of anthropology at the University of Oklahoma. Among her areas of academic interest are political economy, globalization, economic development, women's studies, Africa and the African diaspora, China-Africa interactions, South Africa, and race and ethnicity. She is interested in interdisciplinary social science, and in the social functions of universities, as well as political and other organizational activities in the wider world beyond academe. Her Ph.D. is from Brown University.

what seems so very long. And there are more trials coming, into the indefinite future, possibly, at worst, he imagines, terminated by a grand climate/ecological crisis and its consequences, which may, admittedly, end humanly experienced time altogether.

This book sparkles with its many interpretations, speculations, and promptings, though too often, characteristically, the text is maddeningly obscure or contradictory. For those familiar, as we essayists are, with many of Žižek's novel virtues as well as his flaws, continuing our complaints about his writing is becoming boring, and possibly almost irrelevant. This is how he thinks and writes, and the results are challenging to read, as well as often rewarding. The book is, as usual, impossible to reduce neatly to a common theme or to discuss in exhaustive detail as a sequential argument, in an essay.

What we readers/essayists responsible for this discussion will emphasize most is the playing out of Žižek's reformulated contrast here, in light of pandemic conditions, between capitalism and communism. Part of this theme is his increasing tendency to reformulate the capitalism/communism divide with an "ecological"/environmental dimension. Coping with the pandemic and ecology, on his view, requires a newly defined Communism. This tendency is already discernible in Žižek's first, shorter book on the pandemic, and in other writings.

It is notable that in the U.S., which still harbors an image of itself as the hegemonic world power, though it also suffers from status anxiety, especially in rivalry with China, there has been an upsurge of right-wing attacks against opponents, charging them with "socialism" and "communism." This arises in many contexts in which the words are arguably quite inappropriate in the usual historical meanings of these terms.

(True acknowledgment of the importance of globalization would require that we put the U.S. in its limited place in a wider world's social order; however, we often refer to the U.S. perspective in this essay because of its continuing influence and symptomatic role in world affairs. This includes its role as the country with the most deaths from COVID-19, and its influence, as well as its failings, in matters of global strategy about dealing with the pandemic, including vaccine distribution.)

There are also, perhaps, some contexts in which more may be at stake than aggressively inflated U.S. "anti-communist" rhetoric.

The renewed anti-left rhetoric in current circumstances in the U.S. is especially odd, given that the major countries (Russia and China) once (and still now) fearfully and angrily regarded in the U.S. as exemplars or descendants of communism have now

morphed into systems much more akin to capitalism (China—consider Branko Milanović’s views about this), though the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still claims the country’s system is socialism with Chinese characteristics. Or, in the case of Russia, the country has morphed from “socialism/communism” into an authoritarian oligarchy, with typically right-wing attributes such as extreme economic inequality, privatization, nationalist religion, and persecution of sexual minorities. This means that the heated U.S. right-wing rhetoric is invoking the specter of socialism and communism, when worries about right-wing authoritarianism institutionalizing the continuation of large-scale financially engineered private property would be more apt. Anti-communism is now, as in the past, ideology in Marx’s and Žižek’s somewhat different senses.

Žižek is perhaps himself a player from the left in these verbal games about Communism and anti-communism, in that he can sometimes claim to detect socialism or communism as positive features in less than obvious real-world examples such as the Bernie Sanders phenomenon or the Green New Deal. Sometimes he will settle for hopeful references to New Zealand as a decent welfare state, hardly a truly leftist society (119).

One of many recent examples of U.S. extremist neo-anti-communism is the behavior of a reactionary conspiracy-oriented Trumpist politician (U.S. congressional representative from Georgia) Marjorie Taylor Greene, who recently called U.S. representative from New York Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez “a little communist”; to which Ocasio-Cortez (an avowed “democratic socialist”), tweeted, “First of all, I’m taller than her.” Ocasio-Cortez thereby sidestepped having to disavow being a “communist.” Notably, a major aspect of Ocasio-Cortez’s agenda is the environmentalist/socialist Green New Deal, which Greene referenced when denouncing the Democrat as a communist. While not a Žižekian, Ocasio-Cortez is also an example of a self-avowed socialist tending to blend her socialism with contemporary environmentalism.

In the background, and as an outcome of his neo-Marxism, though focusing mainly on the pandemic, Žižek insists that war and ecological threats are even more menacing than the pandemic, and for much of humanity are experienced as such. Thus, the dedication of the book: “To all those whose daily lives are so miserable that they ignore Covid-19, regarding it as a comparatively minor threat.”

2. RELEVANCE OF TIME

As the title of Žižek's book indicates, an important dimension of his interpretation and advocacy here is about the temporal dimensions of the pandemic and its wider impacts on the global capitalist system. One would expect no less in a left Hegelian. Žižek here thinks that the pandemic marks a definite break with the past, which requires a fundamental re-thinking of what our future can or should be, in light of the pandemic. In his view, we keep imagining a return to normal that is not possible. We need a new conception of normality. Trump's evident desire to return (prematurely) to his version of business as usual was and is but one example of a much more varied and widespread tendency. And "we," Trumpists or not, are repeatedly frustrated in our expectations that the pandemic will "peak," and that we can get back to business as usual, life in normal times. Our actual current situation, Žižek says, is both more challenging and disturbing than that, and in some ways more open as to possibilities, some positive. We need to conceive a new normality, on his view.

There are other major topics here too, beyond time, of course: e.g., the usual points of reference in Žižek, capitalism, still globalizing, as an ongoing historical process (and whether it will ever end, an end which he now speculates may turn out to be necessary, given pandemic and ecological considerations), "communist" alternatives for the future (and "communism" for Žižek may be, confusedly, either still a version of Marx's ideal somewhat but not entirely as stated in the 19th century, or a new phenomenon, referred to by a verbal contrivance to match the novel requirements forced by the pandemic), movies, tv, sex, social distancing, and the need for new narratives to stimulate constructive imagination of futures, etc. We hope in this essay to weave some of the main other topics together with reflective awareness of time. Time in the senses relevant here underlies many reflections and experiences, and can seem elusive as a concept, as Augustine said. We and Žižek are not concerned with what might be called the metaphysics of time, but with the many ways human psychology, unfolding in politics, implicates time.

We essayists note that beyond Žižek, public commentary often expresses the attitude that the pandemic has and will in future drastically affect us, particularly, in "time lost." We are also urged to make up for time lost.

Thus, the publication venture Project Syndicate organized a web event and publication during Spring, 2021, entitled, "Back to Health: Making Up for Lost Time."¹²

For some commentary, it as if the busy schedule of global capitalism has been interrupted by the pandemic, and the problem is how to get back on time, perhaps using

ever more sophisticated capitalist technology, as evidenced by some of New York State's governor, Andrew Cuomo's (and Eric Schmidt's) projected schemes. Perhaps this is a serious misjudgment. Žižek thinks so. All the references, even in liberal media, to the waning of the pandemic (when we do not collectively know that the pandemic is ending) represent denial of reality.

Children out of school, we are currently often told, will suffer developmental defects, nation-states and whole continents (especially Africa) will suffer societal developmental slowdowns or reversals. Young adults will have empty time gaps in maturation instead of engaging in or undergoing their usual rites of passage, and the more elderly (though this is perhaps less often noted) will lose years towards life's end that might have been fulfilling, not solely lose those years by mass deaths among the vulnerable old, but by cheapened expanses of later life wasted for those who escape death from COVID-19. In collective history, the pandemic has been in some perspectives another crisis of the sort that Marxists have attributed to capitalism as a chronic feature of the system, but also by contrast, a frightful sign of the potential for future plagues, or the very end of humanity. The pandemic has interrupted what already seemed in some viewpoints (and for Žižek in particular) an unacceptable narrative of progress through "democracy" and "markets," as claimed at one time in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, a book often criticized by Žižek.

3. RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY

Žižek starts the book by noting class divisions in which seasonal work, now interrupted, only offered if at all under exceptionally dangerous conditions, cannot meet the imperatives for timely harvesting of crops, e.g., in Germany and many other places. "Because of the pandemic, we are faced with a typically absurd capitalist crisis: thousands of eager workers cannot get work and sit idly by while tons of produce rots in the fields" (2).

Žižek also then expresses a desire to grasp class aspects of why anti-masking sentiments abound, notably in the U.S. (But periodic upheavals also occur in other countries, as he says, against lockdown restrictions, sometimes under the banners of rightists, and sometimes fostered by self-avowed leftists such as Giorgio Agamben). Žižek refers to the connections that some anti-maskers make between refusing to wear a mask and refusing to sacrifice one's human dignity. We commentators in this essay suggest that there is in these anti-masking and associated trends often a refusal to give up or seriously

modify what have come to be considered vital irreplaceable customs that supposedly generate a sense (illusory and ideological) of reassuring familiarity, e.g., about the way one manifests oneself in public, how one appears, in public. Distinctly, now, anti-masking often expresses a desire to join a Trumpist multitude, especially in the U.S., with its Trumpist political will to cling to customs (e.g., long-standing racist practices and attitudes, engaging in mass gatherings at sports events, religious rituals, and political rallies) even if no longer viable (for the time being) in terms of reasonable cultural norms or public health. No surprise that in the spirit of Trump, there is a widespread desire (fortunately in a minority of the U.S. population, but a substantial group nonetheless) to “make America great again,” to go back in time or at least to establish the present’s continuity with a previous, supposedly better time. Part of this mentality is the anti-masker denial or downplaying of the magnitude of the pandemic, and the pitiable, infuriating claim that avoiding masks is an exercise in freedom.

There is, Žižek writes, under the conditions of the pandemic, “a genuine conflict of global visions about society” (3). He means, a new formulation of a conflict under the circumstances. To address questions about what to do, we must, according to Žižek, become philosophers, reflecting about human nature and “our basic stance toward human life” (4). The conditions of the pandemic impose complex, novel requirements about how to do this. There may be a bit of a trap for Žižek here, since he has both a culturally conservative conception of philosophy as displayed in a primarily “Western” canon, and also a less great-man focus on philosophy as a set of investigations and activities not reducible to the exploration of great and mostly European personal visions.

4. VAIN HOPES FOR AN END TO THE PANDEMIC?

Žižek notes that public advice (presumably governmental, medical, journalistic) about the pandemic has often changed rapidly or become incoherent. (Indeed, between the creation of his book and the present, very significant details have changed). He observes that any expectations are dashed about a clear movement toward a solution. Rather, “All the hopes for a quick exit (summer heat, herd immunity, a vaccine) are fading away.” Now, we note, there are indeed vaccines (this is no longer 2020, when the book was being produced), but the conflicts have multiplied anyway, taking new forms because of vaccines. While there are apparently great gains in the area of vaccines, though not in terms of U.S. domestic or global distributive justice, the emphasis on vaccines may unfortunately fortify the illusion

that effective technological fixes are all that is necessary to respond to the pandemic. Žižek would say, and we essayists would agree, that the normative ethics and politics of technology (here, biotechnology) are unavoidable.

Žižek writes: “The secret wish of us all, what we think about all the time, is only one thing: when will it end? But it will not end: it is reasonable to see the ongoing pandemic as announcing a new era of ecological troubles” (12). This is a developing theme in Žižek’s writings: the current pandemic is supposed to be only a precursor to future pandemics, and possibly to a more fearsome global environmental catastrophe involving climate change and corresponding non-atmospheric disasters (food shortages, mental health problems, etc.) Nonetheless, he projects at least the possibility of coordinated global action to cope rather well with the trials we face, though he believes this will require a more modest life-style in many places. We commentators note that giving up on, or even moderating the vision of ever-expanding gains in “the standard of living” is one of those changes in cultural norms and habits that many evidently find it difficult to accept as a reduced hope for the future. (Joseph Biden: “Build back better.” Donald Trump and his followers: “Make American great again,” MAGA). Žižek also observes, however, that it is possible that we might “enter a new barbarian age in which our attention to the health crisis will only enable conflicts like the reignited Cold War between the U.S. and China, or the hot wars in Syria and Afghanistan to continue out of sight of the global public? These conflicts operate in the same way as a virus: they drag on interminably... This decision as to which route we will take concerns neither science nor medicine, it is a properly political one” (14–15).

So, Dr. Anthony Fauci’s remarks about the virus, or science, “deciding” what to do about the pandemic are not acceptable, by implication, on Žižek’s view, which we think is correct, whatever the many merits of Fauci’s service to the world. As we write, Biden has re-authorized bombing of purportedly Iran-sponsored militias in Syria, and other military moves, while Biden also affirms the centrality of dealing with the pandemic, challenges to democracy, and major economic policy shifts. Biden, we think, is certainly preferable to Trump, but global capitalist militarism is what it is, and Biden’s foreign policy reflects this. Skepticism, indeed, bitter criticism of Biden is an aspect of Žižek’s stance. Since Žižek is sometimes compelled to accept the comparative merits of welfare-state liberalism versus populism, maybe this criticism of Biden is a case of the narcissism of small differences, a Freudian concept with an interesting history.

5. RE-THINKING CLASS

Žižek asserts the need for re-thinking an older Marxist notion of class, presumably now outdated, according to Žižek. The working class is still here, only made more apparent by the pandemic, often partly constituted by immigrants. Borrowing from Bruno Latour and Nikolay Schultz, Žižek refers to a “geo-social class.” “Much of this class is not exploited in the classic Marxist sense of working for those who own the means of production; they are exploited in the way they relate to the material conditions of their life: access to clean water and clean air, health, safety” (20–21). While we commentators would abandon details of the one-time Marxist versions of exploitation and surplus value, we would still affirm the thesis that owners take advantage of (“exploit”) the working classes, though the situation has become vastly more complex with recent trends in the global political economy and culture. Possibly Žižek would agree, and his wording may be unfortunate because it is hasty. On the other hand, he is very much on target with the idea of needed broadening of the notion of exploitation to include damage to the material conditions of life for the working classes. With the pandemic in particular, many workers are offered the “free” choice of working under unsafe conditions or lacking the benefits of an income and what comes with it. Notably, there is a very significant tendency (growing in the U.S. and elsewhere) to recognize environmental injustice, and this fits in with Žižek’s adaptation of the notion of exploitation, and his interest in ecological and environmental dimensions of social organization. It would be very much worthwhile to explore, elsewhere, the growing research and activist interest in environmental justice/injustice.

6. CAPITALISM, SOCIALISM, COMMUNISM

Žižek writes that “The eternal dream of the rich is of a territory separated from the polluted dwellings of ordinary people ... but the problem with a pandemic is that one cannot isolate from it completely...” (22). However, one should constantly emphasize Žižek’s interpretation of the pandemic as part of a broader and more threatening ecological crisis. He agrees with Greta Thunberg that “the climate and ecological crisis cannot be solved within today’s political and economic systems” (26).

In reference to what may be only a temporary situation during 2020, Žižek regrets in these pages what he considers the decline in the public presence of Greta Thunberg and Bernie Sanders. It does seem, on the contrary, that Sanders, at least, a self-avowed “democratic socialist,” is playing a significant role in the Biden administration (which has

been installed since Žižek's book was created). This might be disappointing to Žižek given his frequent persona of critic of liberal democracy, but Sanders has a presence, representing a constituency, that forces a partial recognition of the demands of his version of "socialism" on an otherwise more moderate politician such as Biden, and on Biden's usual allies. Some of the forces set loose just prior to the Biden administration, and under a Biden administration, may constitute a multi-voice contribution to a vision of a major alternative to global neo-liberal capitalism, an alternative formed in popular struggles, rather than formulated by an advance-guard cadre of radical intellectuals. Perhaps Žižek's affection for great-man philosophy makes it harder for him to recognize multi-voice emerging mass visions, as contrasted with great-thinker visions.

7. THE PERSISTENT NEED FOR AN ALTERNATIVE VISION FOR SOCIETY, THE CRITIQUE OF "WESTERN" MODERNITY, AND ANTI-RACISM

Where Žižek disappoints here, as he may realize himself, is in his lack of activist, pragmatic advocacy about possibilities for progressive group intervention in the conflicted situation that he plausibly describes. Perhaps his dichotomized view of the real historical alternatives does not help generate what his type of philosopher should want to do: if not mounting the barricades, to identify and foster new forms of group practice that could lead to improvements. After the fact, he approves of many democratic struggles against capitalism. Before the struggles emerge, he is less adept at urging new strategies and tactics.

Žižek himself says that there are varied forms of contemporary violent outbursts that could plausibly be attributed to restrictions, quarantines, etc. The problem, he writes, is that even anti-racist "violent" protest does not express "a minimally-consistent socio-political program" (33–35). (We readers doubt this; doubt both the supposed "violence" of typical anti-racist protest, at least in the U.S. and the absence of a socio-political program: see voter rights activism, calls for reparations, educational reforms, etc. in the U.S.). Žižek may be overlooking the elements of a new vision in the making, arising from group struggles. Žižek's admirable interest in these pages in addressing varied new interlocutors is not the inclusion of group struggles in generating an alternative vision for social organization. One illustration here is the troubling societal reckoning about racism, currently especially evident in the U.S.

There are aspects of Žižek's view that are terribly close to those (especially in the U.S.) who are currently (in 2021) attacking "Critical Race Theory." He thinks that the

supposed left succumbs too easily to “Political Correctness (PC)” that he claims comes uncomfortably close to thought control.

At this point, Žižek himself is alarmingly close to those reactionaries in the US who are currently (July 2021) launching a propaganda campaign against “Critical Race Theory.” Then too, there are affinities with Trump, who cunningly asked what heroes would remain once we undercut George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Žižek’s Eurocentric “philosophical” version of this attitude notes that all the great philosophers and writers would be lost if we dismiss those with traces of racism and sexism. One favored heroic European example here is Descartes. “There is no modern feminism and anti-racism without Descartes’ thought” (37). Surely this is false. For one thing, it overlooks liberationist elements in “non-Western” societies. And it focuses too much on a restrictive canon even within the U.S. and Europe. For Žižek, when in an excessive mode, it seems, only Western civilization provides a basis for critical social and political philosophy and practice.

Elsewhere, Žižek has written that The French Revolution, and French politics generally, not only admittedly co-existed with racist French colonialism, e.g., in Haiti, but the French legacy generously put liberationist slogans in the mouths of black Haitian revolutionaries, who were so fortunate as to learn from the French! Surely this could reasonably be regarded as an aggravatingly condescending view of Haitian revolutionaries, but perhaps psychologically understandable in an author so indebted to French thought and culture. It does not do enough that Žižek includes in his book a citation of Frantz Fanon, who in one complex and interesting passage rejects the imposition of white guilt for past sins (38–39).

Actually, we writers of this essay think, our task as social theorists and activists must be to ruthlessly criticize much as well as to protect and praise liberationist progressive features of Western societies. It is evidently psychologically impossible for Žižek, steeped as he is in “the Western tradition” to acknowledge fully the depth and difficulty of the project of construction of a new globally humanitarian social and political philosophy. Some of the major challenges confronted in higher education (e.g., in the U.S. today) are centered on how to carry out a critical transformation of dominant cultural traditions. Emmanuel Macron has criticized U.S. academic supposed political correctness. Some aspects of this political correctness might be better rejected, but there is a danger of losing elements of a reconstruction of culture that is politically desirable, right, “correct” in a

thoughtfully justifiable sense. Probably an assimilationist culture such as that of France finds it impossible to accept this, and Žižek shares some of the unfortunate defensiveness of elements in the French ruling class.

We could, alternatively, more charitably regard Žižek as prophetic in anticipating some of the problems of criticizing racism and sexism in fundamental ways as part of the fabric of the U.S. and Europe. We might learn from what could be regarded as a Žižekian diagnosis of why Trumpist and similar attitudes can be used to mobilize deluded and authoritarian rather than revolutionary mobs of reactionaries, incensed by political correctness generally, and incensed by attacks on totems, by what are regarded by anti-racist anti-colonialist protestors, as attacks on symbolically regressive statues and monuments; (among our examples: Confederate monuments, Cecil Rhodes, Father Junipero Sierra, et al.) But we could also treat Žižek as not a diagnostician of reaction but a theorist in unsavory company of reactionaries, voicing some common sentiments with those he often professes to disdain. It sometimes seems as if Žižek is so motivated to empathize with right-wing protestors that he risks lapsing into their outlook.

Nonetheless, Žižek announces, “the crucial ideological and political battle that is occurring today concerns the relationship between three domains: the pandemic, the ecological crisis, and racism” (71). So racism is high on his list of concerns, as would be required by the recognition of the disproportionate suffering of racially defined groups due to the pandemic and environmental racism. One might think that the case of statues and monuments would fit in with Žižek’s growing emphasis on environmentalism. Environmentalism is not only about literally green spaces, it is also about the sculpted or built environment. What we get from our author is a section entitled, “Why Destroying Monuments Is Not Radical Enough” (31–40). But we can reasonably doubt that those motivated to attack certain monuments typically consider this attack enough to do by way of critique and re-invention.

8. NEW NARRATIVES THAT MIGHT HELP GENERATE VISIONS OF A POST-PANDEMIC SOCIETY?

This book has scattered discussions of movies and other narrative creations that might, Žižek suggests, help society cope with a future inescapably different (because of the pandemic) from the past. There are mentions of *The Matrix*, Luis Buñuel (who, we note, disrupts narratives as well as presenting his own idiosyncratic narratives), etc. (109). There

are on Žižek's view unhelpful narratives that express some popular but unfortunate social psychological phenomena, e.g., that imagine scenarios including well-ensconced homeowners using guns to defend against a "hungry, COVID-infected mob, like in movies about the attack of the living dead" (77). Rather than such unhelpful scenarios, Žižek writes: "We desperately need new scripts, new stories that can provide us with a kind of cognitive mapping, a realist and also non-catastrophic sense of where we should be going. We need a horizon of hope, we need a new post-pandemic Hollywood" (82). We are skeptical about the potential of such Hollywood sources. What he especially recommends, however, is peculiar: a short film directed by Paul Franklin, *The Escape*, from 2017, which may, he thinks, help us "to begin thinking about what kind of world we should build out of the ruins of the pandemic" (96). (Franklin's film is pre-pandemic but is drafted into service here to aid us in the pandemic time-frame).

It cannot be taken for granted among social critics that they will find a role for the arts (including narrative arts) in generating alternatives to the abuses of existing global capitalism. To his credit, Žižek actively values this resource.

While affirming the relevance of imaginative fictions to the quest for new narratives about societal functioning in order to meet the demands of the pandemic situation, Žižek of course is intensely interested in visions enabled by philosophy and associated human sciences. These are the cultural activities that might yield results to advance some of his ideas about the renewed relevance of some type of Communism, or at least, an advance beyond global capitalism.

Žižek does, as already indicated, re-affirm the idea that "something like a new form of Communism will have to emerge precisely if we want to survive" (113). Žižek's stress on the newness of our pandemic situation may conflict with his desire to see Communism as in some form reincarnated. Possibly his view is that Marx can be re-construed to deliver a new outlook:

If we don't invent a new mode of social life, our situation will not be just a little bit worse, but much worse. Again, my hypothesis is that the Covid-19 pandemic announces a new epoch in which we will have to rethink everything, inclusive of the basic meaning of being human—and our actions should follow our thinking. Perhaps today we should invert Marx's Thesis XI on Feuerbach: in the twentieth century we tried to

change the world too rapidly, and the time has come to interpret it in a new way. (116–17)

Beyond movie narratives or high cultural references to Brecht, Žižek toys with the resuscitation of some ideas of Fichte, (which condemn the conception of the state as a servant of the play of market forces). More generally, Žižek, in his quest for a re-definition of normality, is willing to draw on diverse philosophical resources, either older authors such as Fichte (see 121–124) currently neglected or condemned by his despised liberals, or more recently emergent contemporary writers, either now established living figures, or less widely celebrated fledgling authors and correspondents to whom he is willing to refer in inclusive dialogue. This is part of what is most admirable about the philosophical Žižek, not the defensively or aggressively Eurocentric canon devotee and devotee of French psychoanalysis personified by Jacques Lacan.

9. OVERCOMING IDEOLOGY AND CONSTRUCTING A NEW NORMALITY

Žižek reverts to the conceptual frameworks of Freud and Lacan to discuss how our conceptions of normality and reality have been altered by the pandemic. This is familiar territory in reading Žižek on ideology. In this part of the discussion, Žižek recognizes how science and anti-science interact more specifically in the time of the pandemic. There is, he says, in some quarters, among elites and the general populace a “will not to know” about the pandemic, sometimes as extreme as a psychotic denial that there is a pandemic at all. Žižek’s musing about Freud and Lacan on dreams drifts into reflections about the anti-scientific dogmatism of the Catholic Church, and the self-consciously philosophical discussions of free will by Kant and others, which may half-suggest that to preserve our conception of ourselves as free and equal, autonomous agents we might do well to disregard causal realities about our empirical entanglements (140–42). He is mostly on the side of science, with qualifications (143) but perhaps with reference to a limited repertoire of scientific and technological writings and agendas.

The main section of the book prior to an Appendix concludes with the following observations by Žižek:

This is the choice we all have to make: will we succumb to the temptation of the will-to-ignorance or are we really ready to *think* the pandemic, not only as a bio-chemical health issue but as something rooted in the totality of our (humanity’s) place in nature and of our social

and ideological relations- a decision that may entail that we behave 'unnaturally' and construct a *new* normality? (146)

10. APPENDIX

In his Appendix, Žižek comments extensively on the “obscenity” of populist leaders, particularly Trump. He sees Trump and others as transferring what was once private obscenity into the public domain, vulgarizing public discourse and making a display of themselves. Žižek is pre-occupied with understanding the new form of authority that this constitutes. It is interesting that this was written before the election of Joseph Biden, but Žižek unsurprisingly predicts that Biden will be, if victorious, not a solution to basic problems about capitalism, but a captive of corporate/financial powers. There is attention here to the supposed reciprocal link between PC moralism and obscene populism, which after all, has sexual connotations, brought into the open by Trump’s anti-PC sexual episodes and stances. Trump’s authoritarianism is coupled with sexual and other repudiation of PC norms, and above all serving the interests of the rich, while cultivating those plain folks in his base: Žižek sees Trump and PC as two sides of the same coin. Both avoid analysis of the political economic fundamentals of global capitalism, in favor of exploiting narrow understandings of cultural conflicts, both excessively individualize freedom and responsibility, e.g., as if by scrutinizing and improving our individual thoughts and speech, we could adequately address racism and sexism (left-liberal unpolitical moralism); or as if by the electorate’s identification with the obscene clown who held political power (or now, in 2021, who still may return to presidential power) some unconscious fantasies may be gratified, and relief granted from onerous demands of puritanical PC moralism, in lieu of genuinely transformative societal changes (e.g., as our author would approve, bypassing Trumpian populism in favor of leftist repudiation of capitalism and market logic). The decline of truth and the explosion of fantastic rumors (in both the U.S. and even on Russian TV, where on one exemplary show, rumors are tantalizingly aired, not asserted, but broached as possibilities) are part of the new social reality.

Žižek may seem in the Appendix to have set aside in his concluding section his emphasis on ecology. But has he? He does not himself do this, but he could be seen as exploring the contours of a society in which digital media have become ever more influential. Though Trump’s tweets are now disabled, and Facebook is closed to Trump for

now, technologically powerful corporations are shaping the social/political environment of communicative exchanges. And the pandemic is still central, persisting despite many widespread media reassurances about a present-day return to normality:

(A)lthough one doesn't talk about this a lot, it is clear that not only Brazil but rich countries like the US and Sweden decided to sacrifice thousands of lives to Covid-19, especially those of the old and ill, to maintain the economy and the appearance of normal life. While everyone knows this terrible truth, to state it publicly would be obscene—we find here an unwritten rule that, perhaps, should be respected. (174)

At present (July 2021), there are signs that the Biden administration, better than but somewhat like Trump's, is willing to impose the risks of an opening up prior to the assurance that this is safe for workers and consumers. The wheels of commerce are perceived as generating the last word on normality (until new disasters emerge).

While in the Appendix, the ecological crisis is a less dominant theme than elsewhere in the book, it has not at all been abandoned as an emphasis:

What is needed today is for us to develop a clear perception of all the dimensions of the crisis we are in without privileging one aspect over the other (like those who claim that in our struggle against the pandemic we have the right to neglect the ecological crisis), and for radical social change to follow from this: action should follow thinking. (191)

NOTE

1. (See <https://www.project-syndicate.org/say-more/back-to-health-special-edition-2021-06> (Accessed 7/2/21)).