

Slavoj Žižek

The Year of Dreaming Dangerously

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The year 2011 was a year of social unrest. People exercised the right to insolvency by refusing to pay debts that extended to encampments at city centers like New York's Zuccoti Park and the Tahrir Square in Egypt; to the Syntagma Square at Athens, and even at the Breiviks of Netherlands and Hungary. These protests, howsoever, created a pattern. Like the 1968 student mobilization, these social movements represent radical emancipatory attempts against the hegemonizing ideologues of democracy that vanguard contemporary capitalism.

Slavoj Žižek, "the most dangerous philosopher of the west" according to Adam Kirsch, offered an interesting analysis of this pattern of social movements that wheeled 2011 as the *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. To uncover the vortex of the book, I delved into the consistency of the author in exposing his project: first, by analyzing his introduction vital throughout the text; second, echoing the present formation of capitalism; third, exposing social movements of 2011 as response to this new form of capitalism, and lastly; four, localizing the trajectory of Zizek's project in the book either a political attempt or a theological one in quasi-Derridean sense. Zizek's project centers on the attempt of social movements in 2011 to change the present order of society as prefigured by *exploited* middle-class and religious fundamentalists in order to alter the future set of events, namely, to make the future in favor of their cause. It is divided into ten short chapters and concluded with an unexpected theological twist. It is written in usual Žižekian fashion: from his punning of social scenes up to his mixtures of citations from Hegel, Marx, Freud, Lacan and especially to his contemporaries such as Negri and Badiou. The first half of the book examines the basic features of contemporary capitalism and the remaining half is largely attributed to the famous social movements of 2011 such as the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and Arab Spring (AS).

Žižek opened the discussion with a Persian expression: *War Nam Nihadan* (to murder somebody, bury his body then grow flowers over the body to conceal it). According to Žižek, the adage strongly hits 2011 social movements in which "[t]he primary task of the hegemonic ideology was to neutralize the true dimension of these events" like the use of media that killed the radical emancipatory potential of the events then grew flowers

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over the dead corpse (1). That is why for him, it is important to locate these events of 2011 within the central antagonisms of contemporary capitalism. These events, he writes, are deadlocks, or distortions, coming from subjective standpoints offering their own concept of objective reality (3). Meaning, that from their contours, reality is based on how they subjectively engage these deadlocks (contemporary capitalism) e.g. OWS and AS in order to favor what constitutes their objective goal contra capitalism's hegemony. From this ideological deadlock, the question that basically arises is not only one of origin but also of its nature, namely, *what is the status of global capitalism today?*

Žižek expanded three features of today's mode of capitalism: first, the shift from profit to rent (rent in terms of privatized common knowledge a la biopolitics and rent as natural resources); second, structural role of unemployment in terms of being employed in a long-term basis as a structure of exploitation which workers seen as privilege and lastly; third, emergence of the new class called "salaried bourgeoisie" (8). Getting the nutshell from Hardt and Negri, it is called "socialism within capitalism" in which the wealth is distributed to the middle class participating in the privatized "common knowledge" system (like the information sphere of technological world) that results to deprivation of all those who are unable to participate in the system (those are below middle class which usually are uneducated and rely on hard labors in order to work). In this context, Marx's concept of "general intellect" was utilized as Žižek echoing Hardt and Negri, on the side of capitalism, meaning, the central planning agency that Marx endeavored created today a similar structure in terms of "immaterial labors" (brought by computer programmers, CEO's and the like who are working intellectually in terms of computers and other machineries). What happens, as Žižek puts it, is that there comes "a passage from material to symbolic production, from a centralist-hierarchical logic to the logic of autopoietic self-organization, multi-centered cooperation and so on" or in other words, "immaterial production is directly biopolitical" (9). He called this as "frictionless capitalism".

What is then the framework of Capital today?

Žižek furthered: "the self-propelling circulation of capital remains more than ever the ultimate Real of our lives, a beast that by definition cannot be controlled" (79). Here comes his lenient backing from Lacan. Žižek noted: "The Real is simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible (. . .) [and] eludes our grasp" (25). He further adds: "the Lacanian

Real is not only distorted, but the very principle of the distortion of reality” (25). In this vein, Marx’s idea of capital is comparable to the Lacanian Real because both escape the self’s or subject’s control, thereby resulting to a gap that separates the capital from its subjects and Real to its dreamers. This very separation or absence of the capital is what enables capitalists to fantasize or in Kojin Karatani’s Freudian term: “dream-work” (24). Dream occurs in a subjective engagement of what one desires. The space or gap allows one to dream or desire for the fulfillment of such gap. However, because of proximity, the subject continuously desire the possession of the Real, though impossible, the subject can only imagine, fantasize, and “dream.”

Were the efforts of 2011 social movements a precise characterization of this “dream-work”?

Since the subjects involved in contemporary capitalism are “salaried middle-class,” the tension arises from that prefecture. For example, in China, they are starting to introduce capitalism without the bourgeoisie since social instability might be brought by that particular class (11). The “tightening belts,” for Žižek, are in the lower level salaried bourgeoisie which coerce them to nominally combat the brutal logic of the market by joining the proletarians in the power of political protests (11). He wits in this tone: does this fantasy not find a perverted realization in many strikes today, which are often strikes of the privileged “salaried bourgeoisie” driven by the fear of losing their privileges (the surplus over the minimal wage)? (11-12). These social movements heretofore, display a pattern like “dream-work” that gains recognition from its identification as a protest movement against the difficulties of proletarian life. They emerged from the visionary status of a secured future either seen economically, socially or politically. The middle class were proletarianized according to him (12). Henceforth, movements were not a totality of forces acting on a certain cause but perhaps on multiple causes better be a personal interest of a certain class. Let us take a peek on these social movements of 2011 that best described the class antagonism transforming into differences based on Žižek’s analysis.

The first event: Occupy Movement.

In his book, Žižek manifested a warning against OWS that it might be in a dangerous position: “the danger that they will fall in love with themselves, with the fun they are having in the ‘occupied’ zones” (77). On the contrary, this should be the goal of every protest: “to democratize capitalism, to extend democratic control to the economy, through the pressure

of mass media, parliamentary inquiries, stronger regulation, honest police investigations, and so on” (86). As what he portrayed, Žižek has been hostile to capitalism precisely when democracy vanguard its private interests particularly through “democratic institutional framework.” He wrote further: “It is the “democratic illusion,” the acceptance of democratic procedures as the sole framework for any possible change that blocks any radical transformation of capitalist relations” (87). The democratic illusion lies when democratic institutions like banks (IMF, World Bank and others) co-opted hand in hand with corporations to exploit each social relation. Resonating from Alain Badiou, “Today the enemy is not called Empire or Capital. It is called Democracy” (87).

With this relation between capitalism and democratic institutional frameworks, what has been exploited over the years is the “middle class” whose intellectual capital helped run the system. They become modern slaves whose impetus to revolt is the structure of the exploitation itself: lack of economic security, unjustifiable wages, and illegal contract of work. According to Žižek, the OWS harbors two insights: first, that the problem is capitalism as a *system* and second, the existing multi-party democracy is incapable of dealing with capitalist excesses thus, there should be a reinvention of democracy that expands beyond this multi-party representational system (87-88). In response, he asked these questions: how can we institutionalize collective decision-making beyond the framework of the democratic multi-party system? Who will be the agent of this re-invention? Or, to put it in a direct way: who knows what to do today? (89). Well, he gave a cunning answer: the people know the answer but never know the question. The OWS is successful at one point, but what has to be done after it translates itself far away (77)? What waits after today? Žižek’s questions are attempt to critique what has to be the best form of ethical revolution (that is, without a violence) and yet should not fall to the abyss of narcissistic semblances.

The second event: Arab Spring.

The event of 2011, for Žižek, amplifies the legacy of finding a “good” Islam “unfolding in front of our eyes” (67). This is what he saw as a framework of the revolt: “When an authoritarian regime approaches its final crisis, as a rule, its dissolution follows two steps. Before its actual collapse (. . .) all of a sudden, people know that the game is over, and they are simply no longer afraid” (67). The regime then loses its legitimacy and people are aware of it (or in some other sense, people knows that the ideology

loses its exercise of power therefore they tend to go out of the circle). He claimed further that the same backbone changed Iran forever prior the assumption of a certain Ahmadinejad in Iranian political scene.

The events of 2009 in Iran (Ahmadinejad's fight for independence) reached the streets of Cairo and Tunis that from an inchoate form of protest into a large and massive uprising known as the Arab Spring. Mubarak of Egypt and Gadaffi of Libya became the caricatures of the revolution. Their authoritarian regimes, as Žižek puts it, "approach its final crisis" and its near-collapse raises the baton for people's awareness of its near-decline. However, he plainly contends that in these revolts, the political program is vague. The Islamists meddling with the radical emancipatory attempts of the left proposes no lasting significance. As Žižek proffered the big question: "what would happen the day after?" (71). Both positions will be reduced in a struggle of whoever wins will emerge as a political master.

In usual Žižekian fashion, he critiqued that the West intervenes with the revolt in order to proclaim its hegemonizing ascendancy in propagating democracy. This happened when the West interceded in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars via proposing a political program (democracy) to the struggle of the citizens lacking an economic and political emancipatory agenda (72). The same line extends to Pakistan where feudal forces become "natural allies" of liberal democracy while the radical left (as pro-poor) surfaces as the mortal enemy. Islamist fundamentalists tend to collaborate with the western liberal programs in order to control the entire state (such as feudal forces in Pakistan). What results, according to Žižek, is an "Islamofascism", the escalation of which corresponds to the disappearance of the secular Left in Muslim countries (73). He arrived at a method to contain these revolts in success: the key liberal should not ignore the left (74). These democratic rebellions are awakening for an emancipatory struggle however the "western media celebrate them (. . .) as pro-democracy" (74). It is a desire to become West, Žižek adds negatively. Democracy (and in line with Occupy *wallers*, it has been the blame for democratic institutional frameworks) becomes the savior for countries playing in the Arab Spring where less authoritarian regimes distort human potential. Hence, social and economic justice (as inherent bonuses of democracy) also becomes a great demand. Žižek ended that chapter about Arab Spring with a blow: "Against this cynical temptation, we should remain unconditionally faithful to the radical emancipatory core of Egyptian uprising" (75). But what can be found before that page is something that we should look more into and it greatly applies to all ideologically-driven social movements of the 21st cen-

ture: “We should not be overly fascinated by sublime moments of national unity, since the key question is always: *what happens afterwards?*” (74; emphasis mine).

Did Žižek remained consistent in his political trajectory?

As he would like to remain a political animal, Žižek cannot veer away from what is coming. He asked this question as he ventured towards the conclusion of the book: “Where do we stand now in 2012?” (127). The dream-works of these 2011 social movements truly suggests that year as *the year of dreaming dangerously*. The radical emancipatory project lost its momentum in 2012. “The signs of exhaustion begin to show,” Žižek wrote. The Arab Spring fell into the bastion of religious fundamentalism while the Occupy movement was cleansed from their camps in Zuccoti Park. He As a reminder, he threw these questions: “What are we to do in such depressive times when dreams seem to fade away and is the only choice we have between nostalgic-narcissistic remembrance of the sublime moments of enthusiasm and the cynical-realist explanation of why these attempts to change the situation inevitably had to fail?” (127).

There are signs to be read according to him. But how we will basically read those signs? Events like the OWS protests, the Arab Spring, the demonstrations in Greece and Spain, and so on, have to be read as such *signs from the future* (128; emphasis mine). How are we to read then those signs coming from the future? Žižek answered “that we should turn around of the usual historicist perspective of understanding an event through its context and genesis” (128). “Radical emancipatory outbursts . . .,” he fostered, must be taken as “limited, distorted fragments of utopian future that lies in the present as its hidden potential” (128). This is the key idea though: one must learn to recognize the “germs of communism” from an engaged subjective position while learning how to watch and interpret those signs as if the future is here. Signs from the future are not constitutive but regulative in the Kantian sense (129). That is, it is properly engaged from a subjective standpoint like those inchoate protests of 2011 events. Uprooting from a Pascaline *deus absconditus* (hidden God), Žižek emphasized that communism is also hidden, and if we follow those signs, it will unfold itself.

He already saw the downfall of capitalism and its democratic elitism. In a nutshell, he grasped the idea in a single term—*apokalypsis* (revelation) (132). What comes after the revelation is the unfolding of the New as he called it. This is the future. But as he puts it, let us not be seduced by or wallow in the future. Let us have a cool head and “watch” (132). In this way,

we can summon the future as a discontinuity of the present (*avenir*) not the usual *futur* as the continuity of the present. Nonetheless, it is ambivalent to say that there is no future ahead of us. But in this sense, is not the very idea of belaboring a “no future” in order to generate change gears toward non-catastrophic futurism which unveils a New “to come”? (134). Žižek, in the final analysis, concludes from the springboard of Hegel’s tragic vision: “no hidden teleology is guiding us” (134). What do we mean by this? Žižek caters a space for radical openness of accepting whatever happens in the present that might alter the coordinates of our predicaments. In the final note: “We should accept this openness, guiding ourselves on nothing more than ambiguous signs from the future” (135).

Does Žižek finally makes sense in his project of exposing the present precarious condition? *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* offered a crystal-clear venture on social movements in the 21st century. The new faces of social revolts, as Žižek was able to show, are not anymore in the old-form social relation as Marx theorized between capitalists and proletarians. But as the book emphasized, it is now in the playing field of the middle class whose intellect was used to fuel postmodern capitalism and religious fundamentalism longing for an “Islam” that caters freedom and emancipation. As I see it, the book will open new gates of dialogue on the present state of capitalism and whether Marxism or other social theories are able to respond to the present terrain. In my opinion, Žižek is already reminding us of his new joke, that is, a buggery in the modern-day concept of struggle and revolt that shall put forward on what should philosophy and humanities do in this time of crisis. Social theorists should put a keen eye on the pages of this book. He finally contributed his own version of communism in germinal position, that is, a communism hidden in the development from the unknown future in the theological sense. The present struggles attempt to expose this future but, as Žižek advanced, still lingers in the “dream-work” process. Awakening is uncertainty for they are still dangerously dreaming in these years of precarious affairs.

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