

The Untold Story of Changing Fate: Thoughts in Reading Slavoj Žižek's *Year of Dreaming Dangerously*

Raluca Bejan, University of Toronto (raluca.bejan@utoronto.ca)

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Introduction

Slavoj Žižek's *Year of Dreaming Dangerously* is a start-to-finish book. Nonetheless, the reviewer had difficulties in formulating a clear position on the paperback. In line with similar Žižekian works, the text seemed to concomitantly develop a mixture of scintillating yet equivocal ideas, thus anchoring the reader into a state of abstract ambiguity.

Devoid of a clearly defined purpose, Žižek scratches the surface of just about all contemporary issues within our postmodern societies: the immigrant threat, Zionist politics, neo-Marxist class struggles and contestations of state supported social democratism. Yet thinking about all of them makes one dream dangerously.

This book review is not a mot-à-mot review. It merely works through Žižek's subversive thoughts that may well open up transformative possibilities of change. It insists on: 1) contestations and conceptualizations of resistance or mobilization efforts and 2) shortcomings of our socially responsible capitalism—what Žižek calls the postmodern capitalism.

Are We Fighting the Right Battles? Rebranding the Middleclass into the New Superclass

Žižek speaks of 2011 as an antagonistic year of emancipatory dreams. Positioned against global capitalism, he states that the 2011 Western protests were non-proletarian in essence.ⁱ Representing those lucky enough to be employed, such dissents have been carried out by a new class of citizens—the salaried bourgeoisie. Capitalism distorted to such an extent, that long-term employment (what Žižek calls the opportunity of being exploited in a long-standing durable job) is nowadays a privilege. Workers are not temporarily unemployed but rather structurally unemployable. Therefore, the old bourgeoisie is no longer the old bourgeoisie as we know it. Re-functionalized as a class of salaried managers (i.e. companies' executives), servicing in returns big banks and corporations, this new class, shifts the locus of privilege from appropriating surplus value to appropriating surplus wage. Grounding class struggles in the formation of a new class altogether, Žižek brings forward a theoretical approach that opposes capitalism beyond the traditional 1% versus 99% dichotomies.

For Žižek, many of today's anti-capitalist protests are merely mobilized efforts against the gradual erosion of a political privileged position. Joking with and about Ayn Rand's ideological fantasy of capitalists going on strike, Žižek brands our current dissents as mobilizations of the

salaried (bourgeois) middle class, whose complicity maintains a stable capitalist hierarchy: it is those with middle class statuses that have the power to politically engage, driven by the fear of losing their surplus over the wage. It seems that Žižek criticizes a certain type of bourgeoisie, represented by the hipsters and the bo-bos who, despite endorsing assumed characteristics of being good leftists (i.e. biking everywhere, caring for the environment, shopping at thrift stores and fighting for theoretical inequality), fail to acknowledge their privileged position that allows them to foster such thinking.ⁱⁱ While the hipster fights for the poor, the hipster was never poor. Acting for hypothetical equality while maintaining a matter-of-fact inequality, the left might perpetuate capitalism more so even than the right, as it combats the *passé* war of owning surplus property from the privileged position of owning waged benefits.

Žižek refers to Greece as an illustrative example of how recent uprisings reflect this so called “proletarianization of the lower salaried bourgeoisie,” threatened by anticipated privilege loss.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, the neoliberal austerity mania, characterized by restructuring and downloading responsibility for state deficits onto its people, was deeply felt by the Greek society in a series of drastic public service cuts that included jobs, wages and pensions.^{iv} The Greek dissents, although highly engaged forms of political participation, were far from being proletarian in essence. Rather, they were “protests against the threat of being reduced to a proletarian status. In other words, who dares to strike today when having the security of a permanent job is itself becoming a privilege?”^v That said, such movements should not be easily dismissed Žižek warns; they still have a radical potential, with Greeks retaliating against the “European economic establishment” and possibly electing SYRIZA as a viable leftist alternative to outmaneuver the “EU-IMF program of austerity and fiscal reform.”^{vi} Žižek nevertheless avoids the *faux pas* generalization of all protests as revolts of the salaried bourgeoisie. By contrast the Tahrir Square crowds have embodied Rousseau’s *volonté générale* he states, as for the Arab Spring, people revolted against an oppressive regime and rapid economical worsening.^{vii} Despite being branded by the West as fragmented desires of being like the West, the Arab Spring protests were not a quest for liberal values but merely social justice demands.

Žižek concludes this train of thought by mocking western expectations of a lawful Egypt, albeit the long-lasting and systematic unlawfulness of the Mubarak regime. Then again, he does not set forth clear propositions vis-à-vis this newly established class of salaried bourgeoisie, although he suggests a systemic subversiveity: opposing the status quo, seeking out the germs of the new in the present, and reasoning about alternative forms of political organization.

Postmodern Capitalism, Neoliberalism and the Welfare State: How Do They All Connect?

Žižek pencils in another “dangerous” point: our newly reformed postmodern capitalism, which he strictly defines as the all-practiced socially responsible private entrepreneurship.

Contesting the archetypal model of the western welfare state, Žižek challenges the viability of a social market economy or a socially responsible capitalism. The eco and socio-enterprise efforts of regulating capitalism are the ones to humanize the very same capitalism they aim to reverse, Žižek argues. Sustaining a highly organized corporate capitalism as socialism within capitalism, equates to supporting a fairer exploitative system in lieu of eradicating exploitation. The collective interests of the Capital are particularly supported by social democratic positions (i.e. Obama's support for Wall Street), he posits, which polarize the 1% and the 99% even more during hard-hitting economic times. It is publically supported that the poor should get poorer and the rich should get richer. Congruent with scholarly positions showing that economic growth depends on state institutions for support, Žižek contests the capitalist reproduction propelled by liberal democratic frameworks. State support for the market subsequently translates into less support for its people (i.e. downloading responsibility for the 2008 financial downturn to ordinary people via public interventions footing corporate bills).

For Žižek, state supported welfarism is what promulgates this new, postmodern and neoliberal capitalism. Democratic rights and neoliberal economic politics are two sides of the same coin. Global capitalism undermines democracy, yet it is the democratic-liberal framework that sustains capitalism by promulgating its democratization. Žižek contests the doxic universality of the liberal-democratic values, alluding to the inherent illusion(s) dividing those participating in the Dream and those left behind: having a choice between either playing by the rules or acting out translates into a lack of a real choice, into a type of conflict between society and non-society, between consumers and those unable to realize themselves via consuming.

Yet the solution to Wall Street is not Main Street, Žižek argues. Rather, we need to dismantle the system "in which Main Street is dependent on Wall Street."^{viii} While the western political rhetoric has abandoned class struggles in favor of anti-racist and feminist debates, capitalism is nowadays stronger than ever: the market is constantly referred to as if it was a living entity (i.e. the market is not easily satisfied); or whole countries' destinies are determined by the speculative game of the Capital (i.e. a state in ecological decay or human misery might still be referred to as financially healthy, so long as its Capital flows). How can we then go beyond social democratic reforms, Žižek rhetorically asks, when the notion of resistance is merely a social democratic product? When choice is structured on the inability and impossibility of real choice in a society perceptually based on individual freedom of choice? How can we collectively change fate if we are deprived of the opportunity of changing it? Resistance is for Žižek a false change; the antinomy of the welfare state, a priori appropriated by authority. It implies the ongoing perpetration of the system and legitimizes the system. He calls it a hopeless resistance—resist although you know that you will finally lose.

Whereas the resistance rhetoric does not acknowledge the possibility of changing the system we aim to resist, Žižek proposes a subversive and radical rupture from the dominant structure: "difficult as this is to imagine today, from time to time, the very dispositifs we resist

are themselves subject to change.”^{ix} Seeing that capitalism keeps shifting, those refusing to change are truly the real agents of change, he argues. The only way of stopping the system is to stop resisting it. Stop fighting small battles and focus on the big ones ahead. Resistance is part of the game and keeps the system alive. Nevertheless, accepting no future for the system might create an opening for change (i.e. transporting isolated protests of chaotic resistance into a positive program of global social change): “Foolish is the person who misses his chance and afterwards reproaches fate.”^x Not resisting fate but changing it instead.

ⁱ Žižek refers to the notions of ‘proletarian’ and ‘proletarization’ in class based Marxist terms, equating proletarians’ with those receiving minimum wage. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 10.

ⁱⁱ See Mark Kingwell, *Unruly Voices: Essays on Democracy, Civility and the Human Imagination* (Toronto, ON: Bibioasis, 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 12.

^{iv} Global austerity measures have been initially backed up by the famous Reinhart-Rogoff paper (published soon after Greece officially stepped into crisis), which claimed that debt levels exceeding 90% of GDP automatically trigger sharp economic drops. Paul Krugman, “The Reinhart-Rogoff Depression: Austerity Imposed on the Basis of a Flawed Economic Paper,” *CCPA Monitor* 20 (2013): 26; Peter Davy, “Trust in Greek Pensions Fades,” *Financial News*, March 5, 2012.

^v Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 12.

^{vi} Ibid 13, 14. SYRIZA stands as an acronym for the Greek coalition of several radical left wing political parties.

^{vii} Ibid 88.

^{viii} Ibid 78.

^{ix} Ibid 107.

^x Ibid 64.