

Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, London: Verso Books, 2012. 142pp., \$14.95. ISBN 9781781680421.

Reviewed by Christian Lotz

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Given the presence of Slavoj Žižek within the leftist international intellectual circuit, one might sing *Žižek here, Žižek there* (having Rossini in mind). As a follow up to his more recent tomb on Hegel, the new book entitled *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, is a collection of essays focusing almost exclusively on what Žižek sometimes calls “shitty politics” in his interviews and public speaking engagements. As we are used to expecting from Žižek’s public engagements, the discussion of “shitty politics” in his new book is filled with many excursions through contemporary ideology. And indeed, the book is based on lectures that Žižek delivered around the world during 2011. Though *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* is divided into ten so called “chapters,” the essays neither hang together nor do they form a unity, despite the fact that Žižek deals with repeating themes, such as the political events of 2011, Capitalism, and new ideological expressions of the contemporary political state of affairs. In comparison with other books of primarily political nature that Žižek has published, this new book remains – because of its collective character – dissatisfactory overall, as the essays are extremely brief and the reviewer often wished that Žižek would spend more time on the topics and ideas that he examines.

The first three chapters and the essay on Occupy (chapter 7) are marvelous essays, however, as they display Žižek’s uncanny ability to transport well known topics found in the Marxist traditions to new, often psychoanalytical or ideological, shores. In addition, in these chapters one can study his political commitments in more detail. All texts are written from what Žižek calls the “engaged position” (129), namely, the assumption that we are unable to analyze the current political and cultural situation from a neutral standpoint - populist, determinist, or stagist Marxist positions included. Insofar as the view from nowhere, which allows us to know in advance where the historical process is going and what tools we need to push it forward, is not given to us, Žižek seems to say, we need, simply, to accept the diversity of contemporary signals and the mess we currently find ourselves in on the practical level as well on the

theoretical level. The messy reality, in other words, cannot be overcome by non-messy theorizing. In some sense, then, even the postmodern aspect of Žižek remains heir to the theory/praxis entanglement of classical left positions, though at times the theses he advances lead to an uncanny combination of pragmatics *and* radical ideas.

Nevertheless, as he claims in the introduction, the main task of his book is to show how the events of 2011 (to which, apparently, the TV series “Wire” belongs, and to which Žižek devotes one essay) “relate to the central antagonism of contemporary capitalism” (1). Unfortunately, however, even after 140 pages of Žižek’s intellectual “mapping of our constellation” (3), one still wonders what this “central antagonism” precisely is, though several “guiding clues” to these antagonisms are given throughout the book, if one reads his text very cautiously. They could be summarized as follows: [1] we are confronted with new forms of Capitalism today; [2] the problem of the left is its trust in utopian concepts of the future and its attempt to rethink the idea of Communism without repeating 20<sup>th</sup> Century ideas; [3] we can observe the return of the class struggle in displaced form, and [4] left protest and democratic upheavals lead to the threat of new forms of hate and exclusion. In what follows, I shall briefly run through these four points.

According to Žižek, we can currently observe three significant changes within Capitalism: (1) the shift from profit to rent, (2) the structural role of unemployment, and (3) the appearance of the “salaried bourgeoisie” (8), all of which the author poses as critical points against Hardt’s and Negri’s version of immaterial labor, multitude, and biopolitics as signs of an already arriving “communism of capital.” Žižek claims that Hardt and Negri underestimate how the privatization of the common has been extended through forms of rent, that they do not see that the old capitalists reemerge as “managers” with salaries, and that unemployment becomes structural and does not lead to a general disappearance of labor itself. As a consequence, he argues, many of the recent political movements should be understood as the protest of the potentially privileged members of society: the middle class that finds itself being threatened through becoming proletarianized, or the middle class being threatened by structural unemployment, and the middle class being threatened by the lack of future employment in the case of student movements. Accordingly, for Žižek, the 2011 upheavals are not really “political” in the leftist sense, as these political movements are about the possible loss of social status and positions, but are not driven forward by the idea of a new society. The fact that many of these movements do not lead to positive political organization imply that these movements are *internal* to Capitalism. The middle class, in other words, is not the revolutionary subject in Žižek’s depiction of those social movements. Though in

some respect Žižek's thesis makes sense in relation to Occupy, in the case of the UK riots as well as in the case of the Arab Spring, the political dimension of these counter movements can hardly be reduced to protests by groups that will lose their social status in the future. Moreover, it remains a question of whether Negri's and Hardt's (and others') attempt to decipher the non-capitalist seeds in Capitalism is more successful, as those authors at least look more carefully for the internal contradictions in the mode of production (including public investment and network society) as well as at other important aspects of our current situation, such as war and the overall militarization of society, whereas Žižek, at times, seems to rely solely (in line with Badiou) on a *political* idea of those "signs of the future." The political, Badiou claims, cannot be reduced to the social-economic, and Žižek does not have to say much about the underlying concepts of this debate from a classical Marxist point of view, such as the role of the state, state apparatuses, and the concept of value (which, in turn, Hardt and Negri no longer accept).

In one aspect, Žižek agrees with Hardt/Negri, however, namely in terms of the claim that we should not conclude from the crisis of the traditional welfare state that we should fight for fixing the welfare state; rather, we should take the welfare state as a system that was "false" from the beginning on (16): "If, today," as Žižek puts it, "one wants to save the core of the welfare state, one should precisely abandon any nostalgia for twentieth-century social democracy" (113). The idea of "humanizing" Capitalism would repeat its structural flaws in Žižek's view. Hence, according to the author, we need to think more about what is beyond Capitalism (a task that has not become easier since the invention of the modern left and utopian thinking). Unfortunately, though, Žižek does not offer much in this regard, except for a few very abstract considerations about Communism as such.

Surprisingly, in these considerations Žižek's deeper commitments shine through, especially since one of the main themes of his analyses of the political events in 2011 (Arab Spring, UK riots, Occupy) is the ambiguity inherent in these movements and events. Should we read those events as a "sign of the future," or should we take them to be what Marx had in mind in his early years when he defined Communism as the "real movement of history?" Žižek, as many leftists before, remains ambivalent on this question and tries to have his cake and eat it too: on the one hand, he embraces these political movements, while on the other hand, he tries to argue that they contain contradictions, are not really "political," and will most likely fail to bring any society closer to "Communism." Žižek is, as he has expressed elsewhere, not a friend of communally-oriented direct Democracy, which has led to accusations of him playing with the idea of Stalinism and totalitarianism. As we know, Žižek rejects this critique and claims, in a Derridian fashion, that we need a "totalitarianism without totalitarianism."

In *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* the question of how to go back to Lenin and the question of how revolutions could ever be carried out with the organized discipline of a party, but without the leader who comes with it, is raised on a few occasions. On the one hand, he celebrates, rather romantically, militant and violent “radical freedom fighter[s]” (124), and on the other hand, he criticizes the Occupy movement precisely for its not being able to turn into a reorganization of the entire social reality. Simply put, it remained a “protest” movement with no base in politics (in Badiou’s sense). We might also say that the idea of Communism remains absent as a regulative idea or axiom of the political. As Žižek puts it, “it is not enough, then, to reject the depoliticized rule of experts; one must also begin to think seriously about what to propose in place of the predominant economic organization, to imagine and experiment with alternative forms of organization, to search for the germs of the new in the present. Communism is not just or predominantly a carnival of mass protest in which the system is brought to a halt; it is also and above all a new form of organization, discipline, and hard work. Whatever we might say about Lenin, he was fully aware of this urgent need for new forms of discipline and organization” (82). We should be cautious though. As Žižek puts it in an older essay on Lenin: “Consequently, to *repeat* Lenin does *not* mean a *return* to Lenin” (for this see Žižek, “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 2. (Winter, 2002), pp. 542-566, here 566). Given this bold statement on the misguided chaos of Occupy, the reader is even more surprised about what the author then claims not too long after the page just cited. In a striking nearness to authors such as Adorno, Žižek claims that we need to practice a “Communism *absconditus*” and that “we should abstain from any positive imagining of the future” (131), given that “we can no longer pretend (or act as if) the Communist truth is simply here for everyone to see, accessible to neutral rational historical analysis” (131). It seems to me that this position not only is contradictory if we take into account what he says about Occupy, but that such a position is too skeptical if we compare it with how Žižek justifies the larger picture that he puts forward, especially given that Žižek, despite his play with negative theology, often hints at many aspects of what “Communism” in a positive sense means. For example, he refers to the public use of reason with which Communism begins (3), the sense in which Communism seems to be a form of egalitarianism (3), how Communism is based on a proletarian position (4), the way in which Communism is based on discipline, hard work, and organization (82), that there is a communist “care about the common” (83), and, finally, that a communist ethics of giving is based on needs and abilities (118).

This surprising hint at a communist ethics is, to be sure, surprising. Žižek discusses this topic in the context of a brief critique of Sloterdijk's proposal to move forward with a new "ethics of giving" (114-115) within which the wealthiest are asked to give back to the society (which is basically already in place in the US). Despite the question of whether Žižek misses Sloterdijk's point, Žižek argues that we need to ask whether "generosity," rather than being tied to the capitalist framework and the inequalities that currently exist, should be taken as a future concept. To make the wealthiest the "givers" overlooks that the real "giver" is the whole of society, on which the wealthiest feed like parasites. Žižek therefore concludes: "'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' – *this* is the only ethics of gift-giving that has an authentic utopian dimension" (117). In sum, the negative position from which Žižek believes he is speaking stands in stark contrast to what he positively says about it, continuously, and if we would propose to him that Communism is already in place in the official US politics under Obama (which indeed many US Americans believe), then he would most likely find a good argument for why this is not "Communism" and for why we would need to change our conceptions. Accordingly, the idea is already in place for talking about what *it is not*, the fact of which Žižek himself admits when he speaks of Communism as a regulative idea (129). As we know, however, negative theologians like to speak about what one cannot speak about, which in this case is "the emancipated future, the future of the Communist idea" (128).

It is interesting to note, though, that in the context of his discussion of contemporary changes in Western Capitalism Žižek returns to a topic that Hardt/Negri and others have given up, namely, the class struggle, which, to underline this point again, implies the thesis of the primacy of the political over the social in Žižek's overall approach to topics important for the Marxist tradition of thought. He thereby takes up and varies a theme introduced by Marx in *The German Ideology*, namely, the relation between a non-universal class position and the imagined representation of the whole society in the ideology of that class. We could be thinking of the contemporary rhetoric that suggests that we "all" have to share the burden of our contemporary debt problems, *except for* the rich (23). In addition, recent attempts to replace politicians with technocrats and administrators are based on the same logic. Whereas politicians are unable to find solutions because their views are partial, technocrats are supposedly "neutral" and represent the whole without special interests (24), which is of course a claim that is nonsense. Finally, Žižek deals with the topic of the "foreign intruder" (23) who is created in critical situations (mainly by the right) in order to unify the society through the creation of a threat from the outside, which is based in most cases on racism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, or anti-Islamism. He argues for this

especially in an essay on the Norwegian mass killer Brevik, but also in other essays. The class struggle, as Žižek points out, becomes “displaced” (as in Freud’s interpretation of dream work) and appears in a form that hides its origin. In a psychoanalytical move, Žižek tries to explain even the disappearance of the class struggle and its transformations into “culture wars,” racial conflicts, or religious conflicts as processes of displacement, which in turn means the displacement of the economic itself, if we assume that the class struggle is rooted in the economic opposition of labor and capital. As a consequence, “[p]olitics’ is thus a name for *the distance of the economy from itself*” (27). The question of how far Žižek moves away from the primacy of the political remains unanswered here.

To sum up, this new book is, despite the interesting main moves that I outlined above, somewhat dissatisfactory, especially since Žižek’s ideas appear even more disconnected than in other books that deal with ideas about current politics, and, moreover, they remain more undeveloped than in other books. It is clear that it will satisfy neither academic philosophers nor other writers in the Marxist tradition, but we should not, I propose, mourn this fact, as it is precisely Žižek’s strength to be an intellectual for whom we have no name. We should take his marginalization in the academic discourse as a *good* sign and we should be happy about the fact that he can handle all kinds of topics in surprising twists, combinations, and with a very undogmatic attitude. It is precisely this unusual and undogmatic treatment of ideas that makes listening to Žižek intellectually enjoyable. One of the main reasons for his ambivalent reception in academic circles and by narrow academic specialists is his ingenious handling of an uncanny mix of culture, films, philosophy, intellectual history, personal stories, daily politics, combined with a politically incorrect wit (especially in his lectures). This at times overwhelming combination of ideas remains unmatched in the contemporary intellectual scene. Unfortunately, though, this pushes Žižek’s more rigorous and more theoretical engagements into the background. So, if you do not have time to keep up with Žižek’s industrious writing output, skip *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* and read other essays, such as the appendix to Adrian Johnston’s *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, the essays on Lenin and on German Idealism, his exchanges with Badiou, or the essays on the concept of ideology.

At one point Žižek – while discussing the ambivalent reactions of Western politicians to the events in Egypt – quotes the following motto by Mao: “There is chaos under the heaven – the situation is excellent.” We should apply this motto to Žižek himself: there is chaos in Žižek’s world – the situation is excellent.