

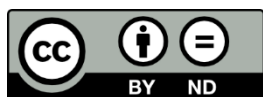
Through the pandemic, towards a new communism?

Nicolae Sfetcu

01.11.2020

Sfetcu, Nicolae, "*Through the pandemic, towards a new communism?*", SetThings (November 1, 2020), DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12914.12484, URL = <https://www.setthings.com/en/through-the-pandemic-towards-a-new-communism/>

Email: nicolae@sfetcu.com



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>.

Translation of:

Sfetcu, Nicolae, "*Prin pandemie, spre un nou communism?*", SetThings (11 octombrie 2020), DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.31451.80167, URL = <https://www.setthings.com/ro/prin-pandemie-spre-un-nou-comunism/>

Abstract

Following the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, Slavoj Žižek published a book called "Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World", which triggered a wave of reactions. In the book, he presents how the media ruthlessly exploited this subject, accentuating the panic. Many major studies have predicted the emergence of such a pandemic, but have been ignored by all governments, declaring them to be exaggerated. Žižek believes that the current pandemic has led to the bankruptcy of the current "barbaric" capitalism, wondering if the path that humanity will take is a neo-communism (he describes himself as a "radical leftist" and a "communist in a qualified sense").

Žižek argues these ideas with the pandemic socio-political measures of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the President of France, and the temporary nationalization of the railways by Boris Johnson. "Even [US President Donald] Trump transferred billions of dollars to the public. He issued calls to take over the private sector insofar as medical supplies are concerned."

Through the pandemic, towards a new communism?

Following the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, Slavoj Žižek published a book called *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (Žižek 2020a) which triggered a wave of reactions. In the book, he presents how the media ruthlessly exploited this subject, accentuating the panic. Many major studies have predicted the emergence of such a pandemic, but have been ignored by all governments, declaring them to be exaggerated.

Žižek believes that the current pandemic has led to the bankruptcy of the current "barbaric" capitalism, wondering if the path that humanity will take is a neo-communism (he describes himself as a "radical leftist" and a "communist in a qualified sense").

"The threat of virus contagion provided us with new forms of solidarity and clarified the need for control over power. On account of our efforts to save humanity from self-destruction, we are creating a new kind of humanity." (Hadar 2020)

Žižek argues these ideas with the pandemic socio-political measures of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the President of France, and the temporary nationalization of the railways by Boris Johnson. "Even [US President Donald] Trump transferred billions of dollars to the public. He issued calls to take over the private sector insofar as medical supplies are concerned." (Hadar 2020)

But it can still be a form of sophisticated capitalism that tries to save itself through unique, seemingly socialist temporary actions. Like Bruno Latour, (Latour 2020) Žižek considers that the current crisis is part of a continuous and irreversible process of ecological change.

Žižek believes that we needed catastrophes to be able to meditate again on the society in which we live. The epidemic is a variation of the "five point palm exploding heart technique," a term specific to Žižek that appears in the films *Shaw Brothers*, *Clan of the White Lotus*, and *Executers of Shaolin*. The term is used by the protagonist in the movie *Kill Bill: Volume 2*:

(Tarantino 2004) five quick sword blows, one after the other, to the heart region, which will explode.

The moral task during this pandemic is to alleviate suffering, not to "save." The daily routine of daily freedom is almost impossible in our pandemic days. In time, it will turn into nostalgia. We will have to invent a new way of life, new rituals. Life so far will not return.

In these times, it is important to turn to humanism. Ordinary people are preoccupied with their daily problems, with no connection to any ideology.

Žižek states that he fears a "human-faced barbarism" - a survival by forced inhuman means, albeit sympathetically, based on expert advice, along with messages that undermine the cornerstone of our social ethics.

Žižek's book highlights three post-pandemic development trends: the Trump model of ruthless capitalism, the optimistic European model, and the Chinese model. (Hadar 2020) Žižek's fear is a permanent, Matrix-type isolation.

China will probably emerge as the most effective superpower in fighting the pandemic, compared to the poorly organized systems centered in Washington and Brussels. After a crisis of legitimacy, between an incompetent Western barbarism and an effective Eastern totalitarianism, Žižek predicts the emergence of a latent "communism". By "communism", Žižek means the need for a "global organisation that can control and regulate the economy as well as limit the sovereignty of nation states when needed." when nation states are needed and a "shift away from the market." Coronavirus epidemics can give a new impetus to the life of communism." (Žižek 2020a) This trend is already seen in the massive mobilization of state resources for the payment of wages, in the nationalization of services and direct industrial production. "When Donald Trump is issuing

cheques to millions of Americans, and a Conservative British government is effectively nationalising the railways, old orthodoxies melt into air." (Koshy 2020)

This new kind of solidarity is not based on idealistic slogans of the left, but on a necessity. "Communism is the translation of this epidemiological reality into a durable politics." (Koshy 2020)

The rolls of toilet paper are a prime example of Western bourgeois culture, a heyday of consumer capitalism. (Peters 2020) The Western panic purchase of these products, based on a viral rumor, is an example of creating the problem of lack. Strahle and Bonfield note that " [p]anic, as historically conceived, has been represented as a polar case of collective disorganization clearly resting beyond the explanatory power of economic theories which depend on the rationality assumption." (Strahle and Bonfield 1989) The argument of "cumulative collective irrationality" contradicts the theory of efficient markets.

In *Monitor and Punish? Yes, Please!*, Slavoj Žižek wonders who will still be able to shake hands and hug? Privileged, he replies. The financial elite will retreat to isolated areas and have fun there with stories in the style of Bocaccio's *Decameron*. (Boccaccio 2003)

" We, ordinary people, who will have to live with viruses, are bombarded by the endlessly repeated formula "No panic!"... and then we get all the data that cannot but trigger a panic. The situation resembles the one I remember from my youth in a Communist country: when government officials assured the public that there was no reason to panic, we all took these assurances as clear signs that they were themselves in a panic." (Žižek 2020a)

In this paper, Žižek clarifies that when he spoke of the fact that the coronavirus epidemic could give a new impetus to the life of communism, he did not think of China, "this is not the Communism I have in mind," arguing with public statements. of WHO:

"WHO chief Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Thursday that although public health authorities across the globe have the ability to successfully combat the spread of the virus, the organization is concerned that in some countries the level of political commitment does not match the threat level. 'This is not a drill. This is not the time to give up. This is not a time for excuses. This is a time for pulling out all the stops. Countries have been planning

for scenarios like this for decades. Now is the time to act on those plans,' Tedros said. 'This epidemic can be pushed back, but only with a collective, coordinated and comprehensive approach that engages the entire machinery of government.' (Berlinger 2020)

Or, as Will Hutton said: "Now, one form of unregulated, free-market globalization with its propensity for crises and pandemics is certainly dying. But another form that recognizes interdependence and the primacy of evidence-based collective action is being born." (Hutton 2020)

The coronavirus epidemic not only signals the limit of market globalization, but also the limit of nationalism, of state sovereignty. Humanity can only be saved through global coordination and collaboration. (Žižek 2020a) And this would be true for all deeper crises.

Some cynics would be tempted to see the coronavirus as a beneficial infection that allows humanity to get rid of the old, the weak and the sick, and there are signs of reduced unconditional solidarity, Žižek arguing that the final choice is either a brutal logic of survival, or a kind of reinvented communism. Even when life returns to normal, it will not be the same normal as before; we will have to learn to live a much more fragile life, with constant threats hiding right around the corner. (Lewis 2020)

Žižek explains here a term he developed starting from a specific technique of sword blows in the heart area, the "five point palm exploding heart technique". He argues this concept from *On Death and Dying*, (Kübler-Ross and Ira Byock 2014) in which Elisabeth Kübler-Ross proposed five stages of how we react to the knowledge that we have a terminal illness: denial, anger, negotiation, depression and acceptance, steps considered by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross to be valid for any form of catastrophic personal loss. These five steps can also be applied to society in the event of traumatic crises. In the case of the coronavirus epidemic, there was first a denial (there is no such thing), then anger (sometimes racist), followed by negotiation (we can limit the damage), depression (we are all doomed), and finally acceptance, which it can take two directions: accepting the disease, or acting in collective solidarity.

As Agamben speaks of "naked life", (Kotsko 2020) Žižek says that we should reconcile with "the undead", a threat to our very survival, exploding when we least expect it. Viruses are considered to be "non-living chemical units or sometimes as living organisms." This oscillation between life and death is crucial: viruses are neither alive nor dead in the usual sense of these terms. They are the living dead: a virus is alive due to its drive to replicate, but it is a kind of zero-level life, a biological caricature not so much of death-drive as of life at its most stupid level of repetition and multiplication." (Lewis 2020)

Jean-Luc Nancy speaks of "communovirus": a virus that comes from communism, a virus that communizes us. (Nancy 2020) It is still too early to know how to designate the society produced by this combination, if it will be communist and how the virus has affected individual competition, but so far COVID-19 has allowed China to demonstrate the effectiveness of the collective and state aspect of its system.

The virus communicates to us. It puts us on an equal footing, paradoxically isolating each of us. This need for unity, interdependence and solidarity, together with the decrease in air pollution due to the reduction of transport and industry, have led some sociologists to speak of the collapse of techno-capitalism.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides an ideal philosophical and political experiment, to which Western governments have responded very differently. Panagiotis Sotiris (Sotiris 2020) argues that the transition from the power of the sovereign as a right to life and death to the state guarantee of the health and productivity of the population

"Faced with the frenetic, irrational and entirely unfounded emergency measures adopted against an alleged epidemic of Faced with the frenetic coronavirus.... why do the media and the authorities do their utmost to spread a state of panic, thus provoking an authentic state of exception with serious limitations on movement and a suspension of daily life in entire regions?." (Agamben 2020)

The paradigm of biopolitics, Foucault's concept for the administration of life and a territory, should be complemented by that of bioinformation, in which the forces of biology and information coagulate in bioinformational capitalism. (Peters 2020)

In *Is Barbarism with a Human Face Our Fate?*, Slavoj Žižek states that radical changes are already taking place in the current pandemic, against which a mega-economic crisis will follow. "The impossible happened, our world has stopped." (Žižek 2020b)

Žižek says he fears barbarism with a human face - ruthless surveillance measures but legitimized by expert opinions. The authorities urge us to be calm and confident, but at the same time come up with terrible forecasts for long periods of time, suggesting that we will have to reduce the basic premise of our social ethics: caring for the elderly and the weak. This pandemic utilitarianism violates even the basic principles of Kantian ethics with which we are accustomed. Hospitals are already doing the same with patients suffering from other diseases.

The fight against coronavirus can only be waged together with the fight against ideological mystifications, plus as part of a general ecological fight, which includes nature. In these efforts, we must keep in mind that we are in a triple crisis: medical (epidemic), economic, and mental health.

Žižek reaffirms that he spoke of a communism imposed by the need for survival, a version of what, in the Soviet Union of 1918, was called "war communism." We are all socialists in a crisis but, he wonders, will this forced socialism be socialism for the rich (like saving the banks in 2008 while millions of ordinary people lost their small savings)? "Will the epidemics be reduced to another chapter in the long sad story of what Naomi Klein called "disaster capitalism," or will a new (more modest, maybe, but also more balanced) world order emerge out of it?" (Žižek 2020c)

Srečko Horvat also states in an interview that the virus opens an eschatological threat almost forgotten by the West, which, together with the climate crisis, creates a dystopian vision of the future. Fear has become the main currency; no one really believes the authorities anymore. "Coughing today has become almost a terrorist act." (Pogačar 2020)

"Today's reality is already much worse than Orwell's 1984, it seems closer to Aldous Huxley's, a sort of narco-capitalism in which technology anaesthetises the social body to a degree that many are not even aware anymore that they are enslaved. Ironically, coronavirus stopped the global machine, at least for a moment, and even showed that it is, in fact, possible to radically stop carbon emissions. ... The only alternative, if we don't organise and mobilise, is barbarism." (Pogačar 2020)

Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2020. "L'invenzione di un'epidemia." Quodlibet. 2020. <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>.
- Berlinger, Joshua. 2020. "WHO Says 'this Is Not a Drill' as Coronavirus Infections near 100,000." CNN. 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/06/asia/coronavirus-covid-19-update-who-intl-hnk/index.html>.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. 2003. *The Decameron*. Edited by G. H. McWilliam. 2nd Edition. London: Penguin Books.
- Hadar, Alon. 2020. "Celeb Philosopher: After Pandemic, 'World as We Know It Will Be Just Nostalgia.'" The Times of Israel. 2020. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/celeb-philosopher-after-pandemic-world-as-we-know-it-will-be-just-nostalgia/>.
- Hutton, Will. 2020. "Coronavirus Won't End Globalisation, but Change It Hugely for the Better." The Guardian. March 8, 2020. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/08/the-coronavirus-outbreak-shows-us-that-no-one-can-take-on-this-enemy-alone>.
- Koshy, Yohann. 2020. "Pandemic! By Slavoj Žižek Review – the Philosopher Provides His Solution." The Guardian. April 23, 2020. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/23/pandemic-by-slavoj-zizek-review-the-philosopher-provides-his-solution>.
- Kotsko, ~ Adam. 2020. "Giorgio Agamben: 'Clarifications.'" *An Und Für Sich* (blog). March 17, 2020. <https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/>.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, and M. D. Ira Byock. 2014. *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*. Reissue Edition. New York: Scribner.
- Latour, Bruno. 2020. "Imaginer les gestes-barrières contre le retour à la production d'avant-crise." *AOC media - Analyse Opinion Critique* (blog). March 29, 2020. <https://aoc.media/opinion/2020/03/29/imaginer-les-gestes-barrieres-contre-le-retour-a-la-production-davant-crise/>.
- Lewis, Michael. 2020. "The Virus and Philosophy | Philosophy@Newcastle." 2020. <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/philosophy/2020/03/18/the-virus-and-philosophy/>.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2020. "Communovirus (English and French Text) | European Journal of Psychoanalysis." 2020. <http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/communovirus-english-and-french-text/>.
- Peters, Michael A. 2020. "Philosophy and Pandemic in the Postdigital Era: Foucault, Agamben, Žižek." *Postdigital Science and Education*, April, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00117-4>.
- Pogačar, Marko. 2020. "Coughing Has Become Almost a Terrorist Act: A Conversation with Srečko Horvat." 2020. <https://www.versopolis.com/people/conversation/835/coughing-has-become-almost-a-terrorist-act-a-conversation-with-srecko-horvat>.
- Sotiris, Panagiotis. 2020. "Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible?" Viewpoint Magazine. March 20, 2020. <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2020/03/20/against-agamben-democratic-biopolitics/>.
- Strahle, William M., and E. H. Bonfield. 1989. "Understanding Consumer Panic: A Sociological Perspective." *ACR North American Advances* NA-16. <https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/6964/volumes/v16/NA-16/full>.

- Tarantino, Quentin. 2004. *Kill Bill: Vol. 2*. Action, Crime, Thriller. Miramax, A Band Apart, Super Cool ManChu.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2020a. "Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World." Wiley.Com. 2020. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Pandemic%21%3A+COVID+19+Shakes+the+World-p-9781509546107>.
- . 2020b. "Is Barbarism with a Human Face Our Fate?" *In the Moment* (blog). March 18, 2020. <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/18/is-barbarism-with-a-human-face-our-fate/>.