



DOI: 10.1515/abcsj-2016-0022

Žižek, Slavoj. *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors* (United Kingdom: Allen Lane, 2016. 9.99 GBP 117 pp. ISBN 978-0-241-27884-0)

“Large migrations are our future”

“So the question is: What does a creepy neighbor want?”

(Slavoj Žižek)

Slavoj Žižek is one of the world’s best known philosophers and public intellectuals. He is exceptionally prolific, not always because he is popularly accessible, but because he has the ability to raise profound issues yet blend the questions these issues provoke into a charming mix of “high” and “low” culture, deadly seriousness with a “wink, wink” humor – even hilarity. Friedrich Nietzsche’s axiom, “It’s not true unless it makes you laugh at least once,” often provides him with his reigning method of political philosophy. The subject of Slavoj Žižek’s maiden lecture in Romania at the University of Bucharest’s Department of History in May, 1995, “On Totalitarian Laughter,” says it all.

Against the Double Blackmail is Žižek’s venture into recent developments currently tearing the European Union apart – immigration, refugees, terrorism, a beleaguered liberal-Left consensus and the rise of anti-immigrant populist nationalists. It is a small book but no less insightful for that. Žižek confronts these critical contemporary issues with what he calls, after Heidegger, “interpretive confrontation” – which, no less, raises the question, “What is Europe”? He does this with his trademark flair: namely, citing various contemporary and historical examples, literary figures (Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, Mary Shelley), films (by John Ford, Preston Sturges, Claude Lanzmann, Spike Lee, Quentin Tarantino), philosophers (Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and his German contemporary, Peter Sloterdijk, to mention a few) and demonstrating his knowledge of a variety of religious traditions. This heady assemblage of authoritative personnel and crisp writing – almost conversational in tone – is often spiced with the psychoanalytic insights of Jacques Lacan.

A couple of his arguments stand out: 1) *Large migrations are our future* – whose cause is global capitalism and its geo-political machinations; and 2) *the usual Left-liberal sentimentality is not the solution*. (The “double blackmail” Žižek refers to in the title of this book and that which he vehemently urges we reject, is that presented by xenophobic, anti-immigrant right-wing populists, *and* the politically correct liberal Left. Interestingly, much of his animus is directed towards the latter, so that will be a focus here.)

Large migrations are our future

Here Žižek agrees with his young friend, fellow Slovenian and frontline reporter from every major conflict zone in the last 15 years in Central Asia, Southwest Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans and Africa, Bostjan Videmsek.¹ Here is Žižek:

And there will be more migrations, not just because of armed conflicts, but because of new “rogue states”, economic crises, natural disasters, climate change.... The main lesson to be learned, therefore, is that humankind should get ready to live in a more ‘plastic’ and nomadic way: local or global changes in environment may result in the need for unheard-of large-scale social transformations and population movements. We are all more or less rooted in a particular way of life, protected by rights, but some historical contingency may all of a sudden throw us into a situation in which we are compelled to reinvent the basic coordinates of our way of life.... One thing is clear: in cases of such turmoil, national sovereignty will have to be radically redefined and new levels of global cooperation invented. (101-102)

Žižek’s argues that a solution lies in an attempt to “regulate the commons” and he insists that “one has to locate in historical reality the antagonisms that make this Idea a practical urgency.” So he asks, “[D]o we endorse the predominant acceptance of capitalism as a fact of (human) nature, or does today’s global capitalism contain enough strong antagonisms to prevent its indefinite reproduction?” (103). Žižek elaborates on four antagonisms (i.e. “commons” to be regulated) in the “world interior of capital” (Peter Sloterdijk’s phrase):

1) the looming threat of ecological catastrophe; 2) the more and more palpable failure of *private property* to integrate into its functioning ... so-called 'cognitive capital', primarily language – our means of communication and education – (i.e. a broader definition of intellectual property) but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, mail etc.; 3) the socio-ethical implications of new techno-scientific developments (especially biogenetics); and last 4) but not least... the crucial one ... addressing new forms of apartheid, new walls and slums – the antagonism of the Included and the Excluded. (106-107)

Žižek is an excellent guide through these “antagonisms,” what an earlier Marxist would have called “contradictions” – a term with a now rejected air of determinism about it. But ultimately, there are no obvious “agents of political change” who emerge who can be relied upon in Žižek’s account. His resuscitated notion of Communism (since the structure and development of world capitalism doesn’t dig its own grave, and pure “voluntarism” is unlikely to deliver these *–public – goods*) ends up *malgre lui* with a version of the pessimistic conclusion to Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) when he quotes Walter Benjamin, “It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us.” It is unsatisfying (though not necessarily untrue) to have him conclude in his chapter “What Is To Be Done?” quoting Gandhi’s motto, “Be yourself the change you want to see in the world,” the Hopi saying, “We are the ones we have been waiting for,” the philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s “Thought is the courage of the hopeless,” and finally, “So let’s bring class struggle back – and the only way to do it is to insist on the global solidarity of the exploited and oppressed” (106-107, 110).

But wait. If it were only this withered light Žižek spreads on the most significant challenges facing Europe in a generation, maybe even going back to the end of World War II, most of us would not be reading him. Žižek is not so easily dismissed.

“So the question is: What does a creepy neighbor want?”

When Žižek gets away from the utopia of global solidarity stuff (emoticon), this little book is really quite original, provocative and, one is tempted to say, realistic. Of course he rejects the epidemic of authoritarian personalities raging throughout Central and Eastern Europe right now, reactionaries who constitute a right-wing, xenophobic, populist response

to immigration and terrorism. His answer may appear somewhat paradoxical: we must inoculate ourselves against the “pathetic solidarity with the refugees,” avoid the Beautiful Souls of the predictable Left liberals, and have a serious conversation, a philosophical look at the (new) “neighbors” (63). His chapters “Limits of the Neighborhood” and “Hateful Thousands in Cologne” may come as a shock to many readers.

Žižek’s arguments are deliberately provocative, but as philosopher Theodor Adorno once remarked, “In psychoanalysis only the exaggerations are true.” Žižek writes:

...one should take a closer philosophical look at the notion of the Neighbor. As Adam Kotsko has shown in his book *Creepiness*, ‘creepy’ is today’s name for the uncanny core of a neighbor: every neighbor is ultimately creepy. What makes a neighbor creepy are not his weird acts but the impenetrability of the desire that sustains these acts... So the question is: What does this creepy neighbor want?... An experience, an encounter, gets creepy when we all of a sudden suspect he is doing something for a motive other than the obvious one. (75)

In this vein, Žižek rejects the liberal Left humanist bromide, “We are all human,” the “underneath our cultural, religious and class differences we are all the same” argument for the idea of “the inhuman Neighbor” (76-77). This is a version of the famous Lacanian psychoanalytic rejection of (the usual interpretation of) the Christian injunction, “Love thy neighbor as thy self,” because, frankly, as Jacques Lacan’s argument goes, “you will never really know your neighbor, your neighbor doesn’t even know himself, and you don’t even know yourself – you are a creepy neighbor too!” Žižek argues because one can never really have full access to the other, one should recognize the important role that alienation plays in maintaining the day-to-day fabric of a society. Racisms occur when one presumes full access to the other’s (excessive) desires (sex, wealth, sloth, strange music, etc.) which then gives rise to jealousy and hatred. “In jealousy,” Žižek writes, “the subject creates or imagines a paradise (a utopia of full *jouissance*) from which he is excluded” (75). So Žižek agrees with many psychoanalytically informed political thinkers, going back at least to Harold Lasswell’s *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (1935) and others, notably Sloterdijk. His conclusion:

Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that, sometimes, a dose of alienation is indispensable for the peaceful coexistence of ways of life. Sometimes alienation is not a problem but a solution. Sometimes, alienation is like alcohol for Homer Simpson: “the cause of, and the solution to, all life’s problems!” (74-75)

Besides, what if getting to know your neighbor meant that you find out that you don’t like him?! Then, feeling your empathy has been cheated, you turn against your new (Muslim) neighbor adding fuel to the already burning resentments of the anti-immigrant right-wing populists? One must cut the link between the immigrants/ migrants/ refugees and humanitarian empathy, insists Žižek (wink, wink, *se non è vero, è ben trovato*). The following paragraph is “vintage Žižek”:

Universality is a universality of “strangers,” of individuals reduced to the abyss of impenetrability in relation not only to others but also to themselves. When dealing with foreigners, we should always bear in mind Hegel’s concise formula: the secrets of the ancient Egyptians were secret also for the Egyptians themselves. That’s why the privileged way to reach a Neighbor is not that of empathy, of trying to understand them, but a disrespectful laughter which makes fun both of them and of us in our mutual lack of (self-)understanding (inclusive of “racist” jokes). (79)

Žižek continues this argument as he considers at some length Alenka Zupancic’s analysis of Preston Sturges’ film *Gulliver’s Travels* (1941), which is read against the films of American director Frank Capra and his enduring motif of the goodness of the poor neighbor, or the “average Joe.” This is a form of condescension, according to Žižek, because there is nothing redemptive about being a victim, nothing necessarily virtuous or lovable about being an excluded other. Just like there is nothing redeeming about the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, when Shelley allows the monster to speak for himself. He remains a monster (17).

The reason refugees and our neighbors deserve our help is not because we get to know them, decide “they are just like us,” “we feel their pain,” “and so on” (a favorite Žižek trope): “We should, rather, help them because it is our ethical duty to do so, because we cannot do otherwise if we want to remain decent people.... displays of generosity make us feel good but they should also make us suspicious: are we doing this to forget what is required?” (82).

So Žižek ends up making a very Kantian argument – his is an ethics based on reason (and justice) not the “pathologies” of the human heart; virtue then is its own reward. Is this humanly possible? It might require an ethical subject on the order of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* to be motivated by such a demanding “philosophy of the migrant,” our neighbor.

In the end, Žižek is saying that it is not as simple as just trying to love, understand, or tolerate these ‘others’. (There is an ‘other’ in all of us, we are more ‘other’ to ourselves than we know, we are not entirely who we think we are, nor do we really know what we are capable of). Offer them a place in the neighborhood – and a common struggle for a positive universal project (100).

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Notes:

¹ Bostjan Videmsek, *21st Century Conflicts: Remnants of War(s)*: Bostjan Videmsek, Borovnica, Slovenia, 2013; Videmsek, Bostjan, *Auf Der Flucht: Moderner Exodus ins gelobte Land*, Germany: Klak, 2016; and personal interview with the author, December 2015, Ljubljana, Slovenia.