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Review Essay

Living Beyond the End Times

Living in the End Times

Slavoj Žižek. Verso: London and New York, 2010. 432pp.

Edward Sankowski* and Betty J. Harris**

In *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek takes up themes many of which he has explored elsewhere in his numerous works embodied in varied media. This Slovenian origin cosmopolitan philosopher and cultural critic uses many types of outlets and modes of expression (books and scholarly journal articles, but also journalistic publications, TV interviews, appearances in documentary films, etc.) to explore variegated subject matter. He responds to politics in an age of increasing globalization by taking up a global range of issues, and responds to the multimedia environment which conveys ideology as false consciousness with his own multimedia works, possibly counter-ideological. He addresses, here and elsewhere, our complex (likely unsustainable and arguably largely illegitimate) global political economy, our cultural, (in his view too often objectionably

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multi-cultural) visions and fights, our often twisted and conflicted personal psychology. He does so here and elsewhere in ways worth far more (for their sparkling, sometimes witty, often disturbing insights) than any sober typically conformist academic treatise might do. This is so despite occasional unintelligible passages and some more serious philosophical lapses.

As the title indicates, there is an apocalyptic tone dominating this book. Yet Žižek has a quite realistic (even if apocalyptic) sense of the absurdities and political volatility of our situation worldwide. Such volatility may indeed destroy us, but may change for the better (if this were not possible, why fuss as we do, as if things could be otherwise?). The possibility of genuine progress, beyond the likelihood of catastrophe we currently seem to face, would require very basic re-working of our global political economy arrangements. That takes more than the critique of ideology. To say this is not to gainsay the important role of ideology, and the importance of critique of ideology, but to emphasize that unmasking ideology is not enough.

In his introduction Žižek notes that the fall of the Berlin Wall seemed like a dream, with Lech Walesa soon ascending to the presidency of Poland; but yet a few years later Walesa was less popular than “the man who, a decade and a half earlier, had attempted to crush *Solidarność* in a military coup—General Wojciech Jaruzelski” (vii). Even this Eastern European example early in the book shows many of us that Žižek’s mind is likely to frame key illustrative events in a manner somewhat foreign to some of us in the U.S. and even in Western Europe: the setting is presupposed of a victory over a nominally Marxist government by an apparently progressive trade union in an often rather marginalized country where communism subsequently made something of a comeback (though not as the ideology of a dominant party). According to Žižek, nostalgia for communism, right-wing nationalism, paranoia about communism, later, after its overthrow, characterized Poland. “If capitalism is so great, why are we miserable?” some Poles, it is said, have asked. Žižek asks this also. The question crystallizes one of Žižek’s main themes, the possibly continuing relevance of Marxism’s, and communism’s challenge to capitalism. As he summarizes in the introduction, “The underlying premise of the present book is a simple one: the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. Its ‘four riders of the apocalypse’ are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw

materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions” (x).

The overall structure of the book is determined by a conceptual scheme borrowed from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, about the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Interestingly, however, in the stage of acceptance, Žižek “discerns the signs of an emerging emancipatory subjectivity, isolating the germs of a communist culture in all its diverse forms, including in literary and other utopias (from Kafka’s community of mice to the collective of freak outcasts in the TV series *Heroes*)” (xii). Thus our remarks above, about the possibility of the pre-empting of apocalypse (or possibly survival and hopefully progress beyond apocalypse). Maybe, however, Žižek would welcome a disaster that contained the seeds of redemption. He writes, as a translation of a passage from the New Testament (although Žižek is otherwise a skeptic, to put it mildly, about religion, and Christianity in particular): “Our struggle is not against actual corrupt individuals, but against those in power in general, against their authority, against the global order and the ideological mystification which sustains it.” He refers to a movie about Spartacus. Asked if he knows that a slave rebellion is doomed, Spartacus answers that “it is a principled rebellion on behalf of freedom, so even if they lose and are all killed, their fight will not have been in vain since they will have asserted their unconditional commitment to freedom—in other words, their act of rebellion itself, whatever the outcome, already counts as a success, insofar as it instantiates the immortal idea of freedom (and one should give to ‘idea’ here its full Platonic weight)” (xiv–xv).

There is a seductive attraction (which should be questioned) to the nobility of this idea of positive freedom. We are not advocating any critique of Žižek on behalf of Isaiah Berlin’s praise of negative freedom. As Amartya Sen and others have argued, an ideal of freedom should include both positive and negative features. However, freedom has sometimes been invoked to strengthen tyranny, and even when not tyrannical, sometimes invoked to justify terrible sacrifices of mere finite contemporary individuals. Žižek cites remarks by his friend, the French philosopher Alain Badiou: “To engage in this struggle means to endorse Badiou’s formula *mieux vaut un désastre qu’un désêtre*: better to take the risk and engage in fidelity to a Truth-Event, even if it ends in catastrophe, than to vegetate in the eventless utilitarian-hedonist survival of what Nietzsche called ‘the last men’” (xv). This may seem heroically attractive to some readers, but much of humanity has not had even the opportunity to be a little bit

utilitarian-hedonists. (For some expression of the seductive attraction of sacrifice, not necessarily intended as self-critique, but poetically perhaps expressing ambivalence, see W.B. Yeats on the Easter Uprising, which failed and led to executions by the British in Ireland: “A terrible beauty is born.”) To say this is not for us to engage in “renouncing all positive projects” while “pursuing the least bad option,” a stance Žižek himself disdains. Rather, it is to suggest self-examination of the motive to long for or welcome the total destruction (or at least a catastrophe: something less than total destruction, perhaps?) of a global political economic system that multiplies abuses constantly. Our criticism of Žižek says also that concrete justly distributed progress in freedoms rather than vague references to a noble but unspecific Platonic idea of freedom is indispensable, even if not totally satisfying. In fact, a reasonable criticism of Žižek is that he is somewhat short on “positive projects” himself. More ominously, he sometimes seems to extol revolutionary death in situations hopeless as to surpassingly great results. This may we admit embody some moral beauty at times, but basing a social program of thought and action on it is inadequate. For example, a more dangerous attempt might have been made in apartheid South Africa to root out the worst features of racial and economic inequality through a more violent confrontation than actually occurred. This might have succeeded, it might be thought (and is thought) by some, and might have avoided a certain stagnation in progress, avoided prolonged economic inequality as well as some political setbacks in post-apartheid South Africa. However, it might also have failed and at huge cost of life as well as at the expense of a transition that did occur to all-race liberal constitutional democracy. Instead, there was armed struggle of a more limited sort and a negotiated solution, then all-race elections. Should something grander have been attempted? If so what? More generally, it is unfair, we believe, to expect the exploited masses of the world, e.g., the masses of South Africans, to sacrifice themselves to an ill-defined but inspiring freedom that is beyond reach. In the case of South Africa, this does not mean that we settle for something contemptible; we achieved a gain for living generations and those to come.

Žižek, to repeat, expresses views in support of “terrible beauty,” such as that described above, at the end of his introduction, in the name of the eternal idea of freedom, stressing the Platonic nature of the freedom invoked here. While we support the importance of articulating and being guided by an ideal of freedom (among other values to be emphasized, it should be added) we also note that much evil has been defended by a

very general and unspecified freedom that has seemed to some more important than mere finite lives of individuals or groups and cultures. Military adventures have been marketed in the name of freedom. The U.S. system is prone to this, e.g., with its slogans in relatively recent twenty-first century military campaigns of “infinite freedom” and “enduring freedom.” Žižek would not support this (though he has elsewhere at a point in the past expressed some support for staying the course in Afghanistan), but isn’t he similarly trying at times to seduce the reader with his talk of freedom and exhortations to sacrifice in the name of freedom? Better, perhaps to be leery of both Žižek’s “communism,” when it has objectionable results, and leery of the features of capitalism he criticizes. We probably need a fresh vocabulary and the invention of new institutions or re-purposing of existing vocabulary and institutions. (Maybe Žižek would agree?) Communism and capitalism (at least in some of their forms) have much more in common than is obvious, such as some objectionable ideas about the necessary course of progress in modernity, including the need for destructive industrialization, a tendency to subordinate individual and collective choices to supposed historical or economic laws (Žižek himself is critical of this), excessive skepticism about ethics, too much reliance on technical expertise where it cannot reasonably be expected to be honest or effective in delivering prescriptions about public policy. And another point communism and capitalism sometimes have in common is a fetish about freedom, at least in rhetoric. While a critically examined ideal of social and political freedom is indispensable (and not only for Hegelians such as Žižek) too often false appeals to freedom are used for ideological purposes by self-avowed capitalists and communists to manipulate populations, using a morally powerful motivating ideal.

To make some excuses for Žižek (which he would doubtless not welcome) his “communism” sometimes seems to have been cleansed of “Stalinism” and to have become a rather abstract egalitarianism. Sometimes he seems to revert to some type of “liberal democracy,” which he often professes to reject. (However, maybe for shock effect, he also occasionally reverts to sympathetic discussions of aspects of Leninism/Stalinism.)

We, (the authors of this article), hopefully obviously, do not condemn, we favor ethical and political egalitarianism, but it is not clear what Žižek in particular means by it, why it should be called “communism” or how it might be combined with a robust and well-defined freedom (or freedoms). We can imagine arguments to clarify this on behalf

of Žižek, but Žižek does not seem to focus on this. Momentarily, at this writing, Obama is being attacked by Republicans who fear that they are losing the contest for presidential power, partly for his advocating years ago some “redistribution” that would give everyone a “fair shot.” Obama is denounced for such mild stuff in some quarters as a socialist or communist. But if all that means is mild advocacy of “equal opportunity” and corresponding freedoms, as much as that should be defended for some purposes, it is too minimal a slogan for humanity; the correlative type of freedom by itself is easily mystified and absorbed into a system that mocks more substantive demands for freedom and equality.

Possibly the chief concrete supplement to abstract egalitarianism and invocations of eternal Platonic freedom by Žižek has to be inferred from his commentary on numerous features of worldwide cultures, numerous events and personalities. This is promising. His commentary is intellectually and culturally rich, whether or not one argues with this or that. Sometimes, however, there is a very mixed or unclear message, and the sheer multiplication of examples generates dizzying ambiguities and potential conflicts. Also, Žižek’s critique of global authority and deception, as valuable as it is for some purposes, is still somewhat negative in terms of what it communicates: freedom from mystified authority, from ideological lies does not constitute a positive program sufficient to motivate or guide constructive change. However, let’s look more closely at Žižek on ideology.

Chapter 1, “Denial: The Liberal Utopia,” is mainly about ideology, one of his favorite subjects. Kubler-Ross’s psychological category is analogized to false collective consciousness. His discussion of contemporary liberal democratic and previous Stalinist ideology (along with ideology in other social contexts) is brilliant although at times, tantalizingly elusive to interpret and inconclusive about practical implications. It does stimulate the engaged reader to thoughts of his/her own, to fill in the blanks where a clear conclusion about what to do is not obvious. We think that rather than critics (including us) upbraiding Žižek for avoiding altogether clear inferences, he should be praised, with reservations, for his encouragement of thought in others, thought that may lead into constructive action.

Žižek writes: “When we read an abstract ‘ideological’ proclamation we are well aware that ‘real people’ do not experience it abstractly: in order to pass from abstract propositions to people’s ‘real lives,’ it is necessary to add the unfathomable density of a

lifeworld context” (3). This he does with passages, including a brief and meaningful reference to the academic Harry Frankfurt’s ideological apparent respect for John McCain’s plain talk; including a more developed but still fragmentary critique of liberal interpretations of Stalinism; a discussion of “hedonistic transgressions” that are not really transgressive because they are allowed by a contemporary society’s underlying code; an account of ancient Confucian legalists (Žižek refers to the Wikipedia entry for “Legalism [Chinese Philosophy],” a reference that might make us wonder about the depth of his account of the details!) The range of eras and topics here is obviously very wide, but Žižek really warms to his subject of ideology most (and develops a more continuous point of view) when criticizing what he takes to be contemporary liberalism and liberal democracy.

Žižek is very critical of “liberal multiculturalism,” and of the distinct but sometimes empirically (or “dialectically”) related aspiration (with its Kantian roots, as in Rawls) to justify a legal and governmental order that in a sense escapes moral foundations. We leave aside for now the issue of multiculturalism, to comment on Žižek’s apparent suspicion of attempts to ground morality in some sense in self-interest. That could take at least two forms, in our view, the first of which would be a “justification of taking the moral point of view,” as some analytic philosophers might phrase it. A second form would, according to some philosophers, be different: it is exemplified by Rawls’ attempt to use the veil of ignorance and self-interested choice of the principles of justice in the original position as a device with a significant role in arguing for the basic principles of justice. Notably, Žižek does not venture into a critical examination of Rawls. This is probably wise. Žižek’s most usual seriously philosophical influences and interlocutors are either those we might call “the traditional great Western philosophers” or contemporary authors from the European Continental tradition. (Notice in passing that in some U.S. academic philosophy contexts “continental” means [Western] European, whereas academic Africanists, for example, might mean by “the Continent,” Africa.) Examining Rawls through traditional philosophical argumentation would most usually tend toward taking at face value what Žižek would surely regard as ideological mystification (e.g., *A Theory of Justice* or *Political Liberalism*). Žižek might have tried to interpret and judge an institutional context (the modern U.S. research university and its underpinnings or extensions) to explain how Rawls is ideological, but his heart and background are not in detailed attacks on the internal features of an

ideological body of argument, or even in critical social science interpretation of its Anglo-American university context. (Late in the book he does make some remarks about the modern university.) Nonetheless, his attacks on liberal ideology could often be refashioned to be directed against Rawls (and something like some of these Žižekian points against liberal ideology have sometimes appeared in academic objections to Rawls). Also, a Žižekian examination of the corporatization of American universities, with, for example, their increasing reliance on philanthropy, their subservience to the nexus of arbitrary governmental and economic hierarchy, could be readily imagined, but is not undertaken in this book. Žižek's work could, however, be a resource for this sort of project.

Two other issues are worth mentioning. While Žižek could be depicted as a philosopher more attuned than most to the globalization of normative ethics and politics, like most philosophers in the Anglo-American or "Continental" categories, he is still primarily Eurocentric in the authors he engages with. He does include Central and Eastern European voices much more readily than most influential U.S. academic philosophy, but Žižek is not really an author to go to for serious attention to African, Asian, Latin American or Middle Eastern normative thought and action.

The second issue, set aside temporarily above, is about multiculturalism. Some progressive U.S. philosophers and social scientists will be puzzled and put off by Žižek's use of the category as something of a strawman normative and conceptual scheme, his aversion to multiculturalism as a supposedly racist, apartheid-like travesty that pretends to be tolerant but is actually opposed to genuinely liberatory politics. Interestingly, there are philosophers each of more than usual scope in the Anglo-American tradition who also are committed to globalizing normative ethics and political philosophy, and who are hostile to multiculturalism. Amartya Sen and Anthony Appiah, so different as philosophers from Žižek, are notable examples, also for their own reasons critical of what they take to be the supposed cultural separatism and other flaws in "multiculturalism." U.S. and British "liberal" if also communitarian academics in philosophy and the social sciences (as well as activists) who have been generally sympathetic to what *they* call multiculturalism (see, e.g., Charles Taylor or Joseph Raz) will be understandably suspicious of Žižek's repudiation of liberal multiculturalism. This needs to be sorted out carefully. We think the political circumstances and praxis out of which multiculturalist discourse and policy have arisen is very different in different parts of the world. We think

there is still much of substance in U.S. multiculturalism, and we regret confusions and reactionary alliances that may arise from the wholesale suspicion of multiculturalism that Žižek seems to support.

Žižek seems more interested in unmasking the workings of ideology as false consciousness, not in arguing with academic analytic political philosophy on its own terms, which he has very little interest in indeed, or even in the American academic lifeworld more broadly speaking, but rather in the ideological lifeworld of non-academic “ordinary” people; and he is of course especially pre-occupied with ideology in major public contexts in which political and economic power deploys ideology. That different types of liberalism are assignable to both Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. interests him. The ideology of a Bill Gates interests him. These are cases where major political and economic power dynamically converges with ideology.

Following the chapter on denial, there is an interlude, “Hollywood Today: Report from an Ideological Battlefield,” in which Žižek engages in one of his preferred activities, discussion of movies. One might have doubts that the content and form of movies could be deeply revealing of basic ideological conflicts. However, Žižek carries this off, doing much more than providing more grist for the mill of the English Department and Film Studies academics. He connects the interpretation of movies with psychoanalysis (in his case, as is well-known, French psychoanalysis, especially as formulated by Lacan, inflected with Slovenian influences). We refrain from attempting to evaluate Žižek’s version of Lacanian psychoanalysis. To our minds, however, the more impressive features of Žižek’s discussions of films and ideology relate the movies to large political situations in places such as contemporary Israel or the U.S. Žižek’s discussions will strike some as pretentious and obscure speculations. It seems to us that sometimes this is so. But his writing on movies and ideology here cannot be dismissed, and can be profitably studied. More than that, it is sometimes challenging and deserves close attention and further development (somewhere, though this is not feasible in this essay). Only then would anyone be able to say what the interlude is worth, with its occasional raging at multiculturalism, its references to the interesting and we think usefully provocative concept of *jouissance*, so important in much of Žižek’s writing, the interlude’s range of reference, e.g., to Western philosophy and *Kung Fu Panda*.

Beyond the incongruities of combining topics in high and low culture, Žižek seems mainly to wish to insist on the pervasiveness of ideology. Such a view might run

the risk of undercutting itself, by eliminating any possible intelligible contrast between ideology and non-ideology, but we think it would be facile to dismiss or condescend to Žižek's efforts in this part of his book. In general, he thinks the task of political liberation requires a change in our dreams and our modes of dreaming, not just a fulfillment of our dreams, and he thinks of movies as part of our collective dreaming. Thus: "In a radical revolution, people not only 'realize their old (emancipatory, etc.) dreams'; they have also to reinvent their very modes of dreaming" (78). But what would it be to change this aspect of our dreams (part of our ideology)? We (the authors of this article) do not understand what Žižek means by that, nor do we understand how, on Žižek's views, the rest of a social system would participate in such a change in the ideological role of movies.

Chapter 2, "Anger: The Actuality of the Theologico-Political," must here be discussed in a much more compressed way, omitting intriguing details in Žižek's thought processes, both for lack of space and ingenuity. In brief, Žižek maintains that the denial of ideology, the view often maintained that we live in a post-ideological period, is a chief source of violent eruptions of religion and ethnicity as nationalism into politics. There is much more to his discussion, such as his remarks about our fascination with Nature as if it could be in principle viewed as it is in itself, without a human conceptual scheme. Also notably, there is a Žižekian putatively anti-determinist view of history that rejects for Marxists and other leftists the willingness to leave to conservative historians play with ideas about "What-if" history, that takes alternative possibilities seriously. Here as elsewhere, it is useless to try to boil Žižek's text down to a central thesis.

In interlude 2, "Reverberations of the Crisis in a Multi-Centric World," Žižek criticizes American liberalism for focusing on racism and sexism instead of capitalism (and surely this is a clue to the aspersions he casts on multiculturalism and identity politics); he criticizes anti-Semitism but also Israel, and argues for a secular state including Jews and Palestinians; maintains that China can be interpreted as pursuing a Lenin-like analogue to the NEP in which capitalism develops the economy but requires a strong party apparatus to rein in its "wilder" features, and may possibly be more efficient (and better able to promote growth) than liberal "democratic" capitalism. Žižek is obviously covering a lot of ground here. In one of the highlights of the book, Žižek includes a fascinating discussion of the responsibility of the West, particularly France, in the devastation of Haiti, the scene of one of the greatest emancipatory slave rebellions in

history, against French colonialism, and a continuing arena for interventions by Euro-American power and its allies, (even approved by Brazil's Lula, who supported the 2004 overthrow of Aristide) (160). In this, and in his discussions of China and Congo, Žižek goes well beyond his more usual focus on Europe. His speculations may be grounded on shrewd guesses and quick studies, but the overall drift can be inferred, and expresses a powerful critique. Capitalism, as a Western originated system, is implicated in the problems of the Third World (an out-of-date phrase, actually), including Haiti and Ruanda. In Africa, among other areas, he writes, "Beneath the façade of ethnic warfare, we thus discern the workings of global capitalism" (163). True enough. He observes: "There certainly is a great deal of darkness in the dense Congolese jungle—but its causes lie elsewhere, in the bright executive offices of our banks and high-tech companies" (164). Back on the topics of the U.S. role as a global policeman and the European Union's democratic deficit, Žižek tellingly proposes that since the American Dream is nearing its end, the only alternative to Chinese authoritarian capitalism (as he categorizes it) is "a European Dream." Here we part ways with Žižek, who is interpreting globalization in such bold strokes, from such an altitude, and from such a perspective covertly Eurocentric after all (an extended Eurocentrism, so to speak), that we would prefer a less boldly assertive, more cautious approach, more open to constructive developments from different places, "Western" and non-"Western" in "a multi-centric world." Also, his assessment of China is, alas, probably stereotypical and not fully informed; he underestimates the inventive and developmental potential of China. In this, he may well be much influenced by his master Hegel.

In chapter 3, "Bargaining: The Return of the Critique of Political Economy," Žižek begins by citing Alain Badiou, who writes about a radical emancipatory movement failing in three ways, of which "the most terrifying form of failure" is this: "Guided by the correct instinct that every consolidation of the revolution into state power results in its betrayal, but unable to invent or impose a truly alternative social order, the revolutionary movement engages in a desperate strategy of protecting its purity through an 'ultra-leftist' resort to destructive terror" (181). This is one worry. However, the concerns of this chapter are much broader, about the critique of political economy in general (185). Of course, Žižek takes up this question from a primarily Hegelian/Marxist viewpoint, even if an innovative one. He himself notes some of the affinities we have mentioned between Marx and the Marxist tradition and capitalism, with their incessant emphasis on

increasing productivity, growth, and so on (188–89). Žižek’s discussions of commodities, commodity fetishism, materialism versus idealist mystification, etc. are interesting, but the fussing about getting the Marxist categories in order is a bit too much for the sake of the ongoing conversations and arguments among writers, pro- and con-Žižek, in which he is immersed much of the time. Despite the importance and scope of some of the human problems addressed in these debates, and the ingenuity (even if Žižek’s ideas are often underdeveloped) the debates perhaps risk becoming either a new type of scholasticism or a multi-media quasi-journalistic exercise in ad hominem attacks and replies, complete with footnotes to *Capital* and *The German Ideology*. Žižek has some objections to the most definite idea (a minimum income) that he mistakenly takes to have arisen in the last few decades on the left, but he has precious few positive proposals or action programs of his own. To revisit the labor theory of value is all very well, intriguing for some purposes, but it is not obvious how this discourse will enter into a politics that effectively engages problems about work and unemployment, how to correct a production and distribution system in which one major central dynamic of the system is aimed at reducing labor costs and indeed rendering the work of many people superfluous. The current Presidential contest in the U.S. is an example of both parties avoiding acknowledgment of this basic source of unemployment, probably in the belief that American voters would be disturbed by such a diagnosis, or possibly in fear that something basic might actually change if the American people understood the problem correctly. Žižek must be aware of the problems of which we speak, but it is not clear how the critique of political economy which he conducts here can cope pragmatically with the problems. By “pragmatic” we do not mean unimaginative, merely reformist, compromised, but active and consequential improvements in society. Straightening out the relations between Hegel and Marx’s thought, for example, is interesting but does not directly engage the problems of practical interrelationships in the political economy, the sorts of topics with which Marx himself was chiefly concerned. Even Žižek himself pronounces the labor theory of value implausible in a global world in which, for example, he claims, Venezuela appears to be exploiting other countries by using its oil resources to its own advantage. And as noted above, he is impressed by the possibilities for failure attributable to the left. His (and Badiou’s) most feared type of failure results from an inability to implement genuine alternatives to a morally dysfunctional social order. If this

is a sound fear, Žižek is doing too little to dispel the concern that his type of left, if successful in gaining power, might fail in the way he himself most fears.

Thus, for all its occasional flashes of insight, this chapter, which should be full of practical proposals coordinated with its critique of political economy, is ultimately rather disappointing. We hope we are not demanding too much of Žižek. We do not expect Žižek to solve the world's problems, but we do expect more articulation of pragmatic ideas about what to do (at least general strategy if not so much by way of tactics). It is not enough to say, as Žižek does in some of his writing, that action is overrated and that pausing to reflect and think may be preferable. We can rightly ask for more from a political philosopher, more than flights of textual interpretation, interpretation of history, and laments about the deplorable, even desperate situation we now live in.

We pass rapidly over interlude 3, "The Architectural Parallax," which Žižek begins, revealingly, by remarking that he knows little about architecture. We do suggest, however, that one better way of approaching this topic, if it had to be dealt with in this book at all, might have been to connect the topic of the built environment with environmental issues more generally. Overall close thematic integration, admittedly, might not be the right standard to apply to this book.

In chapter 4, "Depression: The Neuronal Trauma, or, the Rise of the Proletarian Cogito," Žižek mulls over a variety of topics and authors. Perhaps the main unifying thread, if any, is the examination of globalized threats to the role of traditions, memory, and the past, whether this is about India's incorporation of modernity; China in relation to the Cultural Revolution, and to Tibet (although Žižek is ambivalently a bit sympathetic to the Chinese government about its Tibet policy, or at least skeptical about the Dalai Lama's status as both a religious and a political leader); and (which occupies most space in this chapter), the implications for mind and memory of modern forms of extreme socio-political trauma (supposedly globalized), as discussed by Catherine Malabou. (See for clarification especially the passage from Malabou quoted by Žižek about "the victims of socio-political traumas...today" [294]).

The next and last interlude, "Apocalypse at the Gates," takes up such topics as the erosion of basic moral boundaries, the "moral vacuum" attributable to global capitalism on Žižek's view; and the concept of the "Anthropocene," which implies that "the basic distinction between nature and human history" is being undermined (333). The

last subject enables Žižek to comment on issues about genetic manipulation and bellicose international competition for scarce resources, but his main focus here is on environmental issues about climate change, global warming, earthquakes, and so, that are connected with one another both causally and by their role in “versions of apocalypticism” (336). A less detailed aspect of the discussion of apocalypse is Žižek’s sketch of the possibilities for globalized uses of biotechnology not only to treat disease but (for co-ordinated purposes of transnational or state-centered control and private profit) to change human beings in fundamental ways. Žižek objects to “the absent ‘public’ use of reason (a free intellectual debate in an independent civil society on what is happening: how might such developments infringe on the individual’s status as an ethically autonomous agent, and so on, not to mention the possible political misuses)” (341). We agree with the objection, but Žižek’s call for public reason remains well within the usual range of liberalism and liberal democracy, which he often argues is insufficient. Also, as we have argued, something more actively interventionist than public reason is necessary, at least as a part of philosophical strategy.

We arrive at the culminating chapter 5, “Acceptance: The Cause Regained.” Clearly, from the text, Žižek (and his friend Badiou) have been much impressed by the events in France of May 1968. We would not deny that those events demand remembering, analysis, and lessons drawn. For Žižek, plausibly, capitalism adapted and changed, from more hierarchical to superficially more participatory and team-oriented forms. More libertarian mores in lifestyle options were another result of 1968, that made it possible for Nicolas Sarkozy both to exploit the new lifestyle options and to disparage 1968. Advertising adopted an inauthentic “ethical” and “humanitarian” guise in some campaigns. But the events of 1968 failed and the basic capitalist structures preserved themselves.

While Žižek touches on other events, such as 9/11, and also makes perceptive general observations, e.g., about the way “a complex network of legal, educational, ethical, economic, and other conditions form an invisible thick background to the exercise of our freedom” (359), Žižek remains especially focused on France in 1968. So he writes “If we consider our predicament from the perspective of ’68, the analysis should be guided by the prospect of a radical alternative to parliamentary-democratic capitalism: are we constrained to withdraw and act from different ‘sites of resistance,’ or can we still imagine a more radical political intervention?...How are we to prepare for

this radical change, to lay the foundations for it? The least we can do is to look for traces of the new communist collective in already existing social or even artistic movements” (363).

One can sympathize with a desire to define alternatives, even under an unpromising name, but what follows is to some extent a return to a display of cultural flashiness: allusions to mass actions in New York City and Los Angeles (that we think in fact presented no serious threat to the preservation of an entrenched and dangerous system of power, but that for some might evoke reminiscences about the mass events of 1968 in France); an extensive discussion of a marvelous fable about mice by Kafka, his last story, in which Žižek thinks there are portents of a constructive communism (which requires “a shamelessly total form of immersion into the social body”); references to *Parsifal* and the rock band Rammstein (371). This part of the text is followed by a series of passages that do not (as we read them) build up a sustained answer to the problem that Žižek poses about possible alternatives. Probably, we need a fresh start to address the question posed in this chapter by Žižek.

As a whole, Žižek is a very interesting, thoughtful, and provocative philosopher and social theorist. He represents one very valuable type of intellectual who is needed to deal with the moral demands of globalization. (On the topic of globalization, we also find work on globalization by, for example, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai worth studying in this vein.) Much can be learned from Žižek, and we commend *Living in the End Times* to the reader.