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Review Essay

One Interpretation of the Current Pandemic Emphasizing Political Economy and Culture

PANDEMIC! COVID-19 Shakes the World

Slavoj Žižek. New York: Polity Press, 2020. 140pp.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Slavoj Žižek's "little book" (85) on the current global pandemic and its ramifications has been written and published very rapidly. Nonetheless, this is not a rush job by a notably prolific author. The book is an achievement well worth respect and detailed attention. It is part of the vast and increasingly manifold set of commentaries on the pandemic and its political economic and cultural implications. Žižek has produced a book linked in its origins with an early time in the pandemic. We can anticipate a much lengthier and as yet

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unpredictable unfolding of historical changes arising from the pandemic. Žižek nonetheless successfully expresses a perspective which will continue to matter as part of a bigger picture, even if it needs later correction and supplementation, or indeed possibly rejection. Reacting quickly to the pandemic has limitations but also benefits.

This should not be construed as a situation akin to that of Žižek's well-known, but unforgettably mistaken briefly somewhat pro-Trump attitudes expressed early-on, and pre-pandemic. He spoke too soon, in reference to Donald Trump versus Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential political domain. In this book, possibly as a partially intended continuing redemption in reaction to his earlier blunders, Žižek is critical of Trump (42–43, 75, 91, 100). But while Trump is acknowledged as a source of trouble, Žižek avoids over-personalizing the major problems raised by the pandemic. For Žižek, it is not as if pandemic problems (even in the U.S.) are the responsibility of Trump alone. Žižek realizes that the pandemic problems have resulted from systemic not merely individual causation.

Some of Žižek's valuable previous writing often combines philosophical interpretation with journalistic flair; that is so here. There is also reference to popular culture, and to literary culture: H.G. Wells, Leo Tolstoy, Kamila Shamsie, Peter Handke, Boccaccio, W. Somerset Maugham. As often occurs in Žižek's written work, the exposition here can at times lapse into fragmented meditations and interesting (though sometimes contradictory) aspirational advocacy. Thus, early on: "Hegel wrote that the only thing we can learn from history is that we learn nothing from history, so I doubt the epidemic will make us any wiser" (3). Yet obviously much of the following text is an attempt to say something that will improve our understanding and advocacy, using history as one resource.

Žižek's advocacy, however, is not necessarily addressed to definite agencies of desirable change, which indicates a philosophical gap. Who will create the progressive post-capitalist or less-capitalist global institutions and cross-nation-state, cross-cultural solidarity that he calls for, so necessary to cope justly and effectively with these COVID 19-driven and forthcoming threats to our human world? How will this be done or accomplished, if it is? (He cites Thomas Piketty as raising these as key questions) (94).

Just how horrible and barbaric might the negative reactions to the pandemic be? He says he fears barbarism with a human face more (for now) than open barbarism (86). Will there be counter-reactions that reverse many of the gains or losses? He contemplates such possibilities like ecological reversals after apparent earlier gains, e.g., there may be

exceptionally bad weather after improved air quality due to lessened air pollution (115). There will be new conflicts and struggles. We do not yet know the details, as Žižek is aware. But we two current co-readers can clarify and evaluate some major features of this book.

There are provocatively titled short sections of text assembled in succession. Still, while hard to construe as an integrated logically sequenced communication about facts, interpretations, and values, the book has some major features worth critical evaluation and extended elaboration. We can profit from Žižek's insights and speculations. What we propose in this essay is a discussion of some major themes and devices in the text. This approach contrasts with what does not fit this monograph: our approach does not begin at the beginning of this book and then work through the short sections in sequence.

There is, however, a possibility for readers and interpreters of this book to discern in it a series of thematic ideas (Žižek's ideas and those of some of his readers) that are inter-related. First, there is a supposed pandemic-driven choice projected by Žižek between barbarism and re-invented Communism. Second, the complexity of individual and group choices that we all must face because of the pandemic dissolves Žižek's supposed dichotomy. Third, there is a question what Žižekian neo-Communism, as one among many trends, could mean. Fourth, there are issues about Žižek on Political Correctness. Žižek, after all, contrasts Political Correctness (especially its supposed fake Left forms) with the allegedly deeper insights of Marxist, class-based analyses. Fifth, can opposition to racism in the conditions of the pandemic be squared with fussing as much as Žižek does about Political Correctness, given Žižek's own Marxist conception of class struggles as basic? Sixth, can or should national sovereignty be overcome as part of a solution to the problems generated by the pandemic? Seventh, how might group decision-making and action enter into the operations of society in dealing with the pandemic? Justifiable and necessary progressive class-based actions, on Žižek's views, must be contrasted with what he calls "the triumphal return of capitalist animism, of treating social phenomena such as markets or financial capital as living entities" (44). Eighth, what are some ways that knowledge necessary for progressive action must be re-interpreted to understand our situation with the pandemic? This must fit into Žižek's persistent interest in exposure and analysis of ideology. Ninth, how is global solidarity relevant to choices that are needed? Tenth, is market logic inconsistent with solutions to the pandemic? Žižek certainly thinks so. Eleventh and last, a revised conception of the environment and ecology is needed to

overcome the problems revealed and generated by the more immediate issues presented by the pandemic.

2. A FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE?

As implied just above, the book is persistently dominated by the proposed dichotomy of enhanced global solidarity, or descent into barbarism. As a self-avowed Marxist, Žižek watches here, as previously, for another major crisis characteristic of capitalism. The crises of capitalism may offer opportunities for progressive change. However, there are no laws of history assumed by Žižek to guarantee progress; belief in such laws is a form of mistaken affirmation of the existence of a big Other (here a fantasy progressive big Other) on Žižek's views. More controversial but nonetheless perceptive, is Žižek's observation that "science" or other expertise cannot be a big Other in providing knowledge or reliable guidance about What Is To Be Done.

We two co-authors of the current essay maintain that real-world events are more likely to be complex about good and evil (or mixed) consequences of the pandemic than Žižek's dichotomy of solidarity versus barbarism. Indeed, this monograph is more complex than the dichotomy suggests. The book is pre-occupied with shared group problems, but the book also at times reads like an individual-to-individual communication, a self-help volume, reflecting on Žižek's own personal attitudes and offering individually relevant advice to the perplexed, or panic-stricken reader (134–36). We readers in this essay are not at all dismissive of this individualistic element of the monograph, but find it unusual within Žižek's oeuvre, and intriguing in tone. It is at times written in a confessional tone. There are remarks about Žižek's own sleep patterns and nightmares, expressions of personal emotions, etc. (89, 129). But Žižek rejects analytic over-concentration on individual consciousness. He rejects the idea that as individual egos each of us is the source of the worst types of self-discipline and self-re-invention (19–21). The sources of control, on Žižek's views, are primarily societal, particularly generated by global capitalist class conflicts. On his view, notably, there are new class divisions due to the pandemic, some of which he describes (17–27, esp. 26).

3. THE COMPLEXITY OF OUR CHOICES, AND ADAPTATION OF OLD IDEAS TO NEW CIRCUMSTANCES

The book is deeply admirable in many respects in bringing to the newly urgent, overwhelmingly important topic, adaptations of general ideas that Žižek has inherited from his ancestors, borrowed from contemporaries, or worked out over pre-pandemic time. Now those ideas have a new relevance that invites novel elaborations. In addition, there are numerous perceptive points made here that are unique to the pandemic situation, and as mentioned, even touchingly personal at times. Here, Žižek is not only the generalizing Hegelian/Marxist, psychoanalytic (particularly Lacanian) social critic (as significant as those roles can be), but the self-confessedly frightened, panicky, and mournful individual appreciative of the insights he has gained from friends, and from personal or “private” communications, aware of the fears of his sons who are mindful of the risks of infecting him (presumably given his risk factors and with his co-morbidities), melancholy about the irrevocable loss of a world of experiences that were already dimmed by global capitalism, but that did not so much as now hinder the possibilities for human warmth and intimacy, experiences of environmental beauty, and so on, all now lost to a new and according to Žižek permanent “fragility.” Žižek seems stung by ridicule, mockery of his attempts to resuscitate or invent a contemporary version of Communism as a remedy for the major problems.

4. HOW MIGHT “COMMUNISM” BE RELEVANT TO OUR CHOICES?

We would be remiss not to mention (and indeed to treat as central) our paradoxical disappointment about his haltingly continuing to aspire to a newly conceived and enacted Communism that is supposedly not the old Communism (mostly twentieth-century), but that may, as currently framed, collapse into varied enumerated forms of class struggles that are challenging to characterize in a coherent way that might counter what Žižek regards as the fundamentally harmful tendencies of global capitalism. Žižek, for example, tags the World Health Organization (WHO) as providing an example of renovated Communism, a way of thinking about the WHO that oddly mirrors Donald Trump’s criticisms of the WHO as too sympathetic to China. If neo-Communism (as we might call it, but Žižek does not) is the sum of the modes of current resistance to the abuses of global capitalism, Žižek has not sketched an alternative vision, but is increasingly reduced to remarking approvingly about some scattered tendencies in what is actually happening. Thus, for example, he

emphatically, in disgust, rejects survival of the fittest temptations (e.g., in Italy), or medical rationing scenarios considered in the UK, to abandon the old and weak to the ravages of the pandemic, but he also notes approvingly that civilization has advanced in that there is typically rejection of such barbarism (69–70). Nonetheless, notoriously, for observers of the U.S., a center of the global pandemic, for all its wealth and (possibly evaporating) nation-state prestige, a Texas state official did express agreement with those who were willing to die for the recovery of that Republican’s favored version of the capitalist economy. Žižek mentions this (101–3). Although Žižek does not mention Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York State, it is notable that as a national voice, Cuomo is one person who rejects such Social Darwinism, to that extent providing evidence for Žižek’s supposition that civilization is advancing in this respect.

Žižek appears, in these pages, to harbor some hurt feelings by what he describes as widespread criticism of his significant claim that a type of Communism suitable for our times is the only alternative to barbarism. Something like this thesis about Communism has appeared in Žižek’s work before. What seems to the current readers/authors a bit more alarming is the possibility that Žižek might succumb to his selected surrounding academic-based and media-based influences and reduce the alternative to global capitalism to some rather modest and conflict-ridden goals of varied and diffuse struggles. Struggles have goals, and while it is often encouraging that there is (progressive) struggle at all, struggles typically are aimed at advancing goals beyond the particularized struggle.

Most likely, Žižek thinks something further about larger goals beyond global capitalism (rooted in class struggles) could be inferred, and thus, a global vision constructed, by interpreting and even changing (re-directing) existing struggles. But this is not yet something that Žižek has worked out in any elaborated way. Meanwhile, there is the danger that he will be depicted, as he is in what may be the publisher’s epigraph to the book, as a critic of Right and Left, an implicitly false equivalence if there ever were one. If Žižek himself wrote a note that appears at the end of the text, and starts to believe what the note says about himself, it will represent an ominous movement toward emphasis on his role of critic of left thinkers, such as the somewhat leftist Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Agamben’s relevant views cited here seem to us co-discussants and interlocutors, observers from the US, to resonate with those views of crazed right-wingers with guns invading Michigan legislative space to protest restrictions on their “freedom”). Žižek, while respectfully criticizing Agamben, much more scornfully rejects by

implication what seems like a plague of pseudo-liberal, even pseudo-radical academics (a minority among U.S. academics, contrary to right-wing hysteria). Žižek is still declaiming in this book (with a small measure of justice) against the “censorship” and other sins of Political Correctness, while right-wing tendencies, e.g., in U.S. academe (not the only source of Žižek’s assumed picture of Political Correctness) are very much on the rise. Right-wingism in the U.S. includes funding source and university-administrative demands for universities to “open up.” Those demands are still current in many places, even if the higher education in-person workforce risks illness and death (not a voluntary employer-employee transaction, to put it mildly), and even if “opening up” threatens the health and very lives of staff, students, and those in the communities surrounding campuses.

5. IS “ŽIŽEK VERSUS POLITICAL CORRECTNESS” BECOMING MORE QUESTIONABLE?

The declamations against Political Correctness are woven into this monograph, along with Žižek’s justifiable rejection of the ideological emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility in the age of the pandemic. Now he also claims to detect the positive (what we might call “objective”) historical role of Trump in his embrace of measures that might be construed as progressive (though blessedly, Žižek is very critical, now, e.g., in this book, of Trump’s “subjective” motives and policies, as we might use traditional words marking a subjective/objective contrast). It is notable that Žižek does not here much explore the stupidity and brutality in Trump’s response to the pandemic. Perhaps that is too obvious for him to comment on. Perhaps Žižek is more concerned with Europe, where the European economy and the EU integrating project are in his view in particular jeopardy. His particular concern about Europe is in tension with his stated emphasis on global, world-wide humanity.

Žižek clearly has maintained for some time that global co-ordination (including not only needed U.S. national health care, but global health care) is necessary to counter the conflicts and other mal-adaptations and horrors often generated by nation-state sovereignty under contemporary global capitalism. Žižek’s negativity about national sovereignty deserves looking into. He still maintains that nation-state sovereignty must be transcended, but has increasingly conceded the extreme difficulty of offering an alternative vision that might represent what preferable type of society can be attained from the already ongoing brutality of current global capitalism. Žižek realizes that barbarism (albeit often

“with a human face,” aided by supposed sympathy and expertise, which he is particularly afraid of) could be the result of the pandemic and “post-pandemic” conditions. But he also realizes that the pandemic requires the contemporary social order to abandon the usual logic of global “free market” capitalism, and that this raises the possibility of progressive revolutionary change.

The state (e.g., dramatically, the U.S. nation-state) must adopt modes of decision-making about distributive questions (guaranteed income, etc.) that would have been inconceivable in pre-pandemic times. In a way, for Žižek, Trump, as a potentially proto-fascist authoritarian, can do some of this, while some milder form of liberal democracy (e.g., as displayed by Obama) would occasion withering opposition for comparable acts. Žižek compares this to Nixon “recognizing” what was once called “Red China.” As to China, Žižek has to an extent joined critics of China, but singing in a different key, perhaps even lending his voice potentially to the new Cold War chorus that is apparently developing in the West, but also a two-directional phenomenon, conflicts growing between two authoritarian regimes, in the U.S. and China. (Admittedly, the vast majority of new China Cold Warriors in the West are unlikely to welcome Žižek into their ranks.)

China is often interpreted, e.g., by the economist Branko Milanović, as a new type of capitalism (which we are hesitant to endorse as an account of contemporary China, and about which we two co-authors would probably disagree between each other). Žižek here seems bitterly critical of current PRC ideology. That ideology he (obviously unlike contemporary neo-liberals fighting China) regards as hostile to potentially progressive more authentically Marxist elements in Chinese society (such as Marx-friendly students and old CCP revolutionary cadres, those of “Maoist” inclinations, even some in the PRC armed forces). He may approve certain views of a Hong Kong-based critic of the PRC, who claims that if there had been free speech for those who anticipated the threat of COVID-19, the pandemic may never have spread as it has. But Žižek qualifies this type of reading of his own views by hedging, citing the continuities between free speech and the circulation of rumors (some of which certainly do harm to public health). In the U.S., we have not only rumors but conspiracy theories, and a constant bombardment of lies and distortions by some sources in government and the corporate sector.

6. ŽIŽEK AND RACISM

A major issue that Žižek largely bypasses in his “little book” is impossible to ignore in the U.S., but also worldwide. The pandemic has occurred alongside with, and reinforcing, an upsurge in racist policing in the U.S. The upsurge, and the racial inequality that preceded it, and still predominates, and that has been countered by mass demonstrations (themselves provoking furious rightist opposition) that are justifiably greeted with approval by many progressive activists. Is racism simply an issue superadded to the pandemic, or is it a topic that must be dealt with in reflection on the pandemic, to grasp how an adequate restructuring should go of our ideas about how global society must be re-imagined and reconstructed? We co-commentators in this essay are inclined to take the latter view. Žižek shows by his shortage of interest in a racial dimension that he is less than enthusiastic about this type of attitude that we express. Perhaps this is a manifestation of a tendency to emphasize a version of class struggle that downplays racial dynamics. There is a peculiar turn of phrase in his book: “...(I)ntolerance of other races and cultures, or of sexual minorities, pales into insignificance compared with the scale of the crisis we face” (104). Surely Žižek does not mean that racial intolerance is insignificant because of the pandemic! A more charitable reading of what is perhaps only an isolated passage is that “we” must learn to set aside our possible lingering tendencies to be intolerant. (However, Žižek has often criticized what he takes to be over-emphasis on tolerance). Thus on this view the scale of the crisis we face, and the crisis itself, is quite distinct from racial intolerance. But we two co-authors say that the “two” things overlap. The inequities across racial divides have been worsened by the pandemic and official responses to it. Arguably the pandemic itself as it is proceeding is in part a matter of genocidal racism, particularly in the U.S., but also beyond U.S. borders. Racial minorities are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and the elite’s contra-egalitarian indifference to the fate of those employed in risky work, or unemployed, incarcerated, threatened with eviction. In bypassing this dimension (and he might not deny what we have said), Žižek misses a key factor in his diagnosis of the meaning of the vastly damaging effects of responses to the pandemic.

7. GLOBAL SOLIDARITY AND NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

The issues surrounding nation-state sovereignty are difficult and complex. Žižek stresses the need to go global and to emphasize human solidarity rather than taking a We-First (e.g., presumably, a Trumpian U.S.-First) stance. While there is much truth in this, we think that

there are some values worth affirming that are sometimes expressed in using the notion of nation-state sovereignty. Criticisms of imperialism, colonialism, economic underdevelopment, etc. have often used, not rejected ideas about national sovereignty. In the U.S., indigenous peoples' tribal sovereignty continues as a major concern. Democracy, in some justifiable sense, may require a measure of nation-state sovereignty. This is complex, hardly rationally settled. Perhaps Žižek could be forgiven for not going into nuances about the topic under present circumstances. But re-examining the unjustifiable (or sometimes justifiable) functions of nation-state sovereignty is necessary in order to deal with the problems generated by the pandemic. Even Žižek's hopes and anxieties about Europe might be interpreted as concern about a larger-scale possibly sovereign European entity analogous to national sovereignty within each of the varied EU member states.

8. CRITIQUE OF MISPLACED TELEOLOGY

There is a notable theme in this monograph that consists in opposition to personifying or endowing the virus, and thus the pandemic, with a purpose or purposes. What is most shocking, according to Žižek, is grasping the sheer contingency or blind causality (our words) of the pandemic. The pandemic is comparable on this view to an asteroid (with no divine agency to move it) striking the Earth. The absence of retribution or purpose or what have you reveals a basic, a fundamental meaninglessness in the pandemic. The pandemic reveals that we are just another biological species, he thinks. (We doubt this). We might note that nonetheless (no doubt speaking metaphorically) even Dr. Anthony Fauci at times has attributed decisions to the virus, e.g., that it and not we would decide its own course. What Žižek should be logically compelled to acknowledge, given his other views, is that once we get beyond the fundamental fact that the virus/pandemic has occurred, there is indeed a space that allows various purposes (individual or group) to be potentially applicable to the course of virus events. In some quarters, there do seem to be sought-after reductions of racial minority populations in the U.S., subjection of the citizenry to anxieties that may (or may not) weaken their resolve to challenge authoritarianism, or much more individually, the use of quarantine in coping with the virus to expand reflection about the course of one's life: all these can, in context, link the pandemic with group and individual purposes. This apparently, and by linguistic extension, allows speakers to endow the pandemic with purposes.

Žižek himself toys with examination of the language of viruses and more broadly infections. He claims that there can be linkages among different uses of the word ‘virus’, including biomedical cases and computer viruses and capitalist-financial viruses. He thinks of Tolstoy and the language of “infection,” which in Tolstoy’s vocabulary could be a positive phenomenon. Žižek’s musings about the language of viruses do not seem to us (the current authors of this essay) to go very far. However, the pragmatics of pandemic-related language use might become significant in further developments, for one type of consideration, if in the course of events, the relevant aspects of language come to color the mindsets of groups, and influence decisions and actions. In what directions this might go is currently indeterminate, but the possibilities may bear watching out for. Žižek does note that this includes a dangerous potentiality, but claims that it has not thus far been pronounced. Unlike in some features of Tolstoy’s biography, some of the political uses of the language of disease have been destructive. The Nazis notoriously medicalized the characterizations of groups that they isolated and attempted to exterminate. So far, this has not happened much in the U.S., where there has even been, instead, among some, an irrational rejection of conceiving of the pandemic as a major public health problem. In a potentially vicious turn of events, Trump has attempted to associate the virus with the Chinese, in a combination of supposedly historical fact, given the virus’s “origins” in Wuhan, and political propaganda, during a period when conflict is rising about the relations of China and the U.S. In assessing the context of the pandemic, Jason Stanley’s *How Propaganda Works* and *How Fascism Works* may yet prove to be all too applicable to the pandemic situation.

9. SOME ISSUES ABOUT EPISTEMOLOGY

There are some explicitly epistemological features of this text. The book starts with the note: “For Michael Sorkin—I know he is no longer with us, but I refuse to believe it.” Thus does Žižek begin an intermittent but definite personal tone in this monograph; he also challenges accounts of knowledge that require that the knower believe what is known. On a more impersonal level, Žižek writes in his Introduction (paradoxically, stressing as a theme the need for intimacy in a time demanding social distancing): “We will have to raise the key question: What is wrong with our system that we were caught unprepared by the catastrophe despite scientists warning us about it for years?” (4). Later, Žižek writes: “... In the last couple of years, after the SARS and Ebola epidemics, we were told again and

again that a new much stronger epidemic was just a matter of time, that the question was not IF but WHEN. Although we were convinced of the truth of these dire predictions, we somehow didn't take them seriously and were reluctant to act and engage in serious preparations—the only place we dealt with them was in apocalyptic movies like *Contagion*" (64). We could question Žižek's focus on apocalyptic movies as another example of his overemphasis on popular culture. Of perhaps more interest, however, is his suggestion that there are odd quasi-cognitive conditions in which individuals, groups, and whole societies somewhat know about or believe in looming catastrophes (such as the pandemic and probably even worse climate change disasters) but somehow ignore adequately acknowledging the facts, somehow fail to undertake serious preparations.

10. GLOBAL SOLIDARITY AND CONCERN ABOUT ALL HUMANITY

A claim that has appeared in Žižek's writings before re-appears here, in a quiet way. One opportunity presented by the crisis of the pandemic is the compellingly persuasive need to conceive of all of humanity as a subject of ethical attention, concerns about justice, and so on. Žižek has maintained that the possibility of an end to humanity underscores wider concerns than more usual concerns about individuals or more confined groups than humanity as a whole. Žižek is once again stressing the importance of global concerns as a necessity for preparations to deal with other catastrophes. We two co-authors of the current essay have expressed doubts that the felt possible extinction of humanity is a psychological necessity for motivating an ethics about humanity as a whole. However, this is a speculative matter about group psychology.

11. CRITIQUE OF MARKETS

Žižek repeatedly says, plausibly, if vaguely and ambiguously, words to the effect that the political measures necessary to cope with the economic consequences of the pandemic go "outside the coordinates of the market" (12). In this, Žižek seems like many commentators to assume that the concept of "the market" is definite enough to figure in his claims. We doubt this. What the market is, is constantly changing, "it" is the referent of very disorderly discourse, and may mean very different things if there are assumed very different historical/institutional/cultural settings. As a philosopher with Hegelian/Marxist roots, Žižek surely knows this. But like authors with very different ideological commitments, his assertions seem at times to forget his Hegelian/Marxist orientation and to relapse into

something akin to Platonism about “the market.” One finds similar language to Žižek’s about “the market mechanism” at times in work of the philosopher/economist Amartya Sen. There is similar internally inconsistent talk about markets in the economist Joseph Stiglitz’s writings. Stiglitz ridicules “market fundamentalism” but also talks about markets as if the concept is sufficiently determinate to contribute to propositions about market efficiency and inefficiency, the desirability of market competition, about “rent-seeking” (which usually has historically implied some determinate notion of “markets” as part of an arrangement that government should not damage by favoring some organized economic interests over others).

What is correct about Žižek’s assertions about going outside the coordinates of the market might be better expressed than he does. There are common attitudes among some politicians and economists as well as businesspersons that include restrictive norms about the extent and grounds for rightful governmental promotion and regulation of for-profit businesses. Very often these attitudes are incoherently combined with advocacy of policies that presuppose extensive governmental action to make some for-profit businesses viable enterprises. Such policies are often not publicly identified (indeed, are often disguised) as what they are, which is the furthering of governmental action in support of particular enterprises or whole business sectors (e.g., the fossil-fuel sector, so afflicted before the pandemic but afflicted even more so with the coming of the pandemic). The pandemic has made it even more so than in pre-pandemic circumstances necessary to do governmental policy in such a way as to overtly prop up many for-profit businesses (including large banks and diverse large corporations), if those businesses are to survive. The government has always been going outside the coordinates of the picture often publically presented of the coordinates of the market. With the pandemic, the overt actions of government are shamelessly furthering certain institutions “in the market”; in pre-pandemic conditions, this behavior was relatively discreet, often concealed, and ideology only favored conceding this reluctantly in public.

Possibly Žižek would agree in general with what we are saying. But his language suggests at times that he accepts the picture of markets that is presented publicly under global capitalism. Of course, he should, given his views, reject that language and that picture. We leave unexplored the question whether confused language about markets must lead to objectionable thought and action.

12. AN OVERARCHING ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS?

There are very significant passages by Žižek in this book that indicate that he interprets the current crisis, as viewed through an emphasis on the pandemic, as part of a larger ecological/environmental crisis. He seems to think that the challenges posed by global warming are even more disturbing than the challenges presented by the coronavirus. The consequences of this outlook, in the case of Žižek, lead him not only into very plausible comments about atmospheric sciences and negative weather events, flooding, etc. but also into more speculative areas, including advocating interesting re-orientation influenced by Bruno Latour (110–17) of our ideas about the environment, but also into more questionable attitudes about the reducibility of our status as humans to that of a relatively minor biological species. We think that re-characterizing our “environment” is a good idea. But there is nothing obvious about concluding that the Real Truth simpliciter about humans is that they are members of a rather minor biological species. Žižek himself may undermine this view of humans, saying that he is “an unabashed philosopher of subjectivity” (117). We reject a possible temptation to biological reductionism about humanity. We say this with absolutely no intention whatsoever of advancing creationist or for that matter not even purely one-sided anthropocentric perspectives. What we do maintain is that the adjustments needed in our individual and group attitudes about humans in light of the pandemic require much more than the type of disgraced and abashed humility that may at times be an element (we hope minor) in Žižek’s outlook. A recognition that humans are in one perspective, a minor biological species must be supplemented by a perspective that humans can be grander than that.