

Dangerous Visions

by Richard Burke

The Year of Dreaming Dangerously, by Slavoj Zizek, Verso Books, London, 2012, 135 pages, ISBN-13:978-1-78168-042-1, \$14.95.

Future historians may well see 2011 as a historical turning point for the political fortunes of the world left. At the beginning of that year the left seemed to be in retreat, with austerity regimes being imposed on European countries while the 2010 midterm elections in the US saw the rise of far-right “tea party” politicians to political power.

By the end of the year, however, we had witnessed the appearance of a mass movement in Madison, Wisconsin against a Republican governor’s attempt to strip collective bargaining rights from (some) public employees; the uprisings of the Arab Spring which toppled US-backed dictators; the rise of the *indignados* movement in Spain; anti-austerity revolts in Greece which led to the realignment of the Greek left and the emergence of Syriza as a serious electoral contender; youth riots in Great Britain which quickly spread throughout the country; finally, the Occupy movement in New York City which spread throughout US cities, gathering popular support and sympathy while changing a political narrative that for decades had ignored issues of class and economic inequality. Now in his new book *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, Marxist philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Zizek offers us a glimpse into the deeper meaning of that fateful year, one which establishment intellectuals have attempted to obscure.

As Zizek writes in his introduction, “The primary task of the hegemonic ideology was to neutralize the true dimension of these events...that is why it is so important to set the record straight, to locate the events of 2011 in the totality of the global situation, to show how they relate to the central antagonism of contemporary capitalism.” After three decades in which the Soviet Union collapsed and triumphal capitalism was rampant, the capitalist world system finds itself still grappling with the effects of the worst economic crisis since the great depression.

The confident assertions of a free-market utopia have been exploded.

In other words, global capitalism has brought about a new general trend towards oligarchy, masked as the celebration of the “diversity of cultures:” equality and universalism are disappearing as genuine political principles. Even before it has fully established itself, however, this neo-spartan world system is breaking down.

Zizek’s Marxism is strongly influenced by Jacques Lacan’s interpretations of Freud. Like an Alfred Hitchcock movie, Zizek shows us how outward appearances are not always what they seem to be. “This, then is the first complication: when we are dealing with two or more socio-economic groups, their common interest can only be represented in the guise of the negation of their shared premise...”

Here he turns on their heads those critiques of Marxism which task it for reducing everything to an antagonism between only two classes, capitalists and workers, when in fact there are always more than two classes involved. “The only common denominator of all classes is the excremental excess, the refuse/remainder of all classes... in a properly Hegelian dialectical reversal, it is precisely the non-representable excess of society, the scum, the plebs...which becomes the medium of universal representation.”

It is precisely because there are always more than two classes that the fundamental antagonism of society can be represented as between only two classes. This insight, far from being a purely academic exercise in dialectics, allows Zizek to see in what outwardly appear to be purely reactionary manifestations phenomena of potentially revolutionary consequence, displaced expressions of fundamental class antagonisms. He points to what he terms the “return of the evil ethnic thing” as a symptom of a capitalist system that is breaking down.

The rise of racist and nationalist elements—in particular the killing spree of Anders Behring Breivik in the summer of 2011—can thus be seen as manifestations of a system in crisis, in which an ethnic or cultural “other” becomes the displaced symbol of a capitalist class whose activities are the true source of social chaos. Looking at things in this way gives us the possibility of reaching out to those workers who are thus mystified and confused, and showing them what their true enemy is—the capitalist world sys-

The primary task of the hegemonic ideology was to neutralize the true dimension of these events...

Do not simply respect others, but offer them a common struggle...

tem. From this Žižek draws an important lesson: “Do not simply respect others, but offer them a common struggle, since our most pressing problems today are problems we have in common.”

The Lacanian Marxism that Žižek offers us provides us insights into the psychological processes behind consumerism and the social mechanisms employed to maintain it. In particular he calls our attention to the superego “command to enjoy” that the media bombards us with daily. The catch, of course, is that all real enjoyment carries with it the danger of destructive excess, of something out of control.

The media message commanding enjoyment is actually one of continuing to consume so that the capitalist class may continue to profit. We are thus placed into the contradiction of being commanded to do something that can never truly be commanded, to enjoy but not really enjoy, a state of confused frustration that can only seek ever more commodities in a futile quest for enjoyment. Žižek examines the recent youth riots in Britain against this background.

What liberal and conservative commentators both missed in analyzing this social phenomenon was that we “encounter in the recent violent outbursts these same basic instincts—not of the lower underprivileged strata, but of the hegemonic capitalist ideology itself.” He makes here the connection between his views and Marcuse’s concept of “repressive desublimation,” stating that this is precisely what was seen in the British streets of 2011, the explosion of repressed instincts, desires purposefully engineered by global capitalism but then just as systematically repressed.

These insights are of great importance to anyone involved in challenging an economy of consumerism and endless growth, among other things because they reveal the self-destructive mechanisms of desire which

threaten the continued existence of capitalism itself. This is a dangerous situation, one which might express itself in

...these events show revolutionary potential,...reveal a kind of inhibition, a fear of going too far...

reactionary movements, but which could just as well energize revolutionary action.

Žižek thus comes to his analysis of the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, and the Indignados of Spain. He notes that while all of these events show revolutionary potential, they also reveal a kind of inhibition, a fear of going too far which holds



them back from attaining their objectives. He notes that all of these movements seek to act within what capitalist society considers the proper boundaries of politics.

What is not being considered by these movements is that which is beyond bourgeois politics, all that which is considered apolitical in terms of the prevailing social relationships, such as the question of the ownership of the means of production. It is in examining, confronting and changing these relationships that anti-systemic movements can make “another world possible.” What Žižek finds encouraging is that these movements have appeared, and in their groping and fumbling way have begun to raise opposition to the neoliberal order of the capitalist world system.

Žižek’s paradoxical view of the world provides us with a depth that is often lacking in standard leftist discourse. He shows us that in phenomena that are outwardly reactionary one may find genuinely revolutionary impulses, while in those which are outwardly progressive self-defeating tendencies may exist. His writings place these insights into mass psychology within a Marxist framework that takes seriously the idea that capitalism is approaching its final crisis.

The dystopian “fixed point,” the zero-point of the ecological breakdown, of global economic and social chaos—even if it is indefinitely postponed, this zero-point is the virtual attractor towards which our reality, left to itself, tends. The way to combat the catastrophe is through acts that interrupt this drifting towards the catastrophic “fixed point” and take upon themselves the risk of giving birth to some radical Otherness to come.

This willingness to take radical action must be based on the recognition that there are no guarantees, that whatever we do “the result always thwarts our expectations.”

All we can be certain of is that the existing system cannot reproduce itself indefinitely: whatever will come after will not be “our future.” A new war in the Middle East or an economic chaos or an extraordinary environmental catastrophe can swiftly change the basic coordinates of our predicament. We should accept this openness, guiding ourselves on nothing more than ambiguous signs

from the future.

Dangerous Visions indeed. Read Slavoj Žižek’s *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. It just might help provide the courage necessary to dream such dangerous dreams.

R. Burke is an activist, artist, writer and teacher living in St. Louis.