“Life,” according to Kierkegaard, “can only be understood backwards – but it must be lived forwards.” In an information-saturated culture whose collective memory is rebooted with the start of every news-cycle, Kierkegaard’s injunction now reads more like a warning than a self-evident truth, a reminder of the dangers of our attachment to the virtual walled-gardens born of late-capitalism’s deglutition of the Internet. Here, the market’s cynical answer to the problem of information fatigue is to reduce endless choices to a safe and select few, and to escape the tedium (and danger) of nuanced analysis by subtly replacing it with corporate-controlled non-speech. In such spaces, even the mildest attempts at reflection are passed over in favor of the sexy conspiracy, the pithy tweet, the dull platitude, and—always—the new.

There are some stories, of course, that are not so easily wiped clean from the public consciousnesses, either because they refuse to be hand-waved away by a news media desperate for novelty, or because they stubbornly insist on vexing the wrong (i.e., white, non-poor) people. COVID-19 is one such story; the Black Lives Matter movement is another. Neither plays by the rules of the narrative game: the news-as-entertainment mandate that every drama must have a clearly delineated beginning, middle, and end; a problem emerges, it is resolved, and then it’s over—shelved and forgotten about forever.

In the case of COVID-19, a slow-motion natural disaster made worse by Republican incompetence, there still appears to be no end in sight. This
tragic immutability—a fact that makes the virus an increasingly hard sell for the corporate Media—also makes it hard to analyze for the thoughtful observer. We are, after all, still in the midst of the storm, the danger is far from over, and the echoes of the choices we make—or don’t make—now may not return to us for many years. Certainly not enough time has passed for this (hopefully brief) fragment of our lives to be understood, for its full repercussions to be teased out from history’s tangled web. But does that mean that we shouldn’t try, even now, to identify some of the initial effects, and to ponder what impact they might have on our future?

Certainly, virus prognosticators have emerged en masse, mostly in online spaces, where their predictions at least have the advantage of incorporating the most up-to-the-minute information on a rapidly changing situation, but few book-length treatments have yet to hit shelves. One notable recent exception is Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s *Pandemic!: Covid-19 Shakes the World*, a slim volume written in the early months of the outbreak and released in late May, that—as we are breathlessly informed on the book’s back cover—purports to “uncover” the pandemic’s “deeper meanings, marvel at its mind-boggling paradoxes, and speculate on the profundity of its consequences.”

The book never quite succeeds in realizing that ambition, mostly because it isn’t the throughgoing investigation of a post-pandemic world that prospective readers might be led to believe. It’s instead—no doubt betraying the reality of its hasty creation—a rather slapdash collection of ten essays, all loosely connected by their emphasis on the current crisis. This is not a criticism of the book’s structure—as mentioned above, such brief sketches are about all we should reasonably expect at this early stage—but Žižek, as close to an actual Public Intellectual as it’s possible for a philosopher to be in 2020, would seem to be capable of much more insight than is contained within the pages of *Pandemic!*, a largely unremarkable work that has arrived too soon to be prophetic, and too late to be vital.

The closest *Pandemic!* comes to an overarching thesis (or to credible divination) is Žižek’s belief that some form of “reinvented Communism” will emerge from the ashes of the ongoing conflagration, a prediction that he admits has earned him ridicule. But Žižek takes pains to note that the form of Communism he is advocating for is merely another word for large-scale cooperation, both within and between governments (given this, one wonders why he doesn’t just dispense with a loaded term altogether) and offers it as the only alternative to the seductive approaches of Authoritarian governments like China, where viruses are just another dissident to be crushed, no matter what the collateral damage to truth or safety, to say nothing of human life. Žižek warns that such brutal—and ostensibly effective—tactics expose a potentially fatal flaw in Western Democracy, where an emphasis on individual freedom precludes the kind of forced solidarity that states like China can call upon at will. “The challenge that faces Europe,” Žižek writes, “is to prove that what China did can be done in a more transparent and democratic way.” While Žižek admits that we will need to make “radical choices” to get there, he is convinced that those choices collapse to just two: Communism or barbarism. Communism will come to the west, Žižek believes, not
as a “utopian Communist vision” but as a “Communism imposed by the necessities of bare survival.”

This is a bold presentiment, particularly as regards the US, where decades of Right-wing indoctrination (with its commensurate slow corrosion of education) have come home to roost, creating a public so distrustful of scientific advice and their own government that they believe the simple act of wearing a cloth mask in public constitutes an unacceptable encroachment on their freedoms. It is difficult to imagine the sudden flowering of widespread cooperation amongst such a group, whose paranoia borders on nihilism. If Žižek’s idea is correct, things will have to get even worse than they are now before a substantial portion of the American people are swayed by the idea of doing anything that doesn’t directly benefit—or aggrandize—their selves.

But Žižek points out that it is not just the Right who have courted disaster by politicizing the virus, noting that “the Alt-Right and the fake Left refuse to accept the full reality of the epidemic, each watering it down in an exercise of social-constructivist reduction,” and that such infighting will in the end benefit only the rich, who will be able to “afford to continue shaking hands and embracing.” Here, sadly, is a prediction that carries weight—mostly because it isn’t a prediction at all. Lower income communities in developed nations are already suffering disproportionately at the hands of the virus, a trend that will only worsen globally, as poorer countries without the infrastructure or economic resources to combat the pandemic fall victim to it, potentially toppling weakened states and leading to, according to Žižek, “a Mad Max-style struggle for survival.”

Given such dire warnings, this championing of disaster Communism is attractive, even if it’s not (yet) entirely believable. Žižek, for his part, argues that Communism in some form is already here, pointing to such hitherto impossible-to-imagine scenarios like President Trump’s invoking of wartime powers to enlist private industry in the production of medical supplies, and the distribution of stimulus payments to a shell-shocked population. Žižek, in fact, believes that Trump is actually the perfect vessel to institute such reforms (the “only Nixon could go to China” argument) but he forgets that the American Right’s guiding philosophy in 2020 is no longer political so much as it is psychopathic—MAGA Republicans set fire to American democracy, and expected the flames to warm them, instead of consuming them alongside everyone else. Though Žižek is not so naïve as to assume good intentions on the part of the Right, he is arguably mistaken in his assumption that Republicans can be swayed by reason, or even by the exigencies of catastrophe. Even if they could be, their paradoxical platform—to control government by annihilating it, to enrich the few by impoverishing the many, to uphold the rule of law by systematically undermining it—cannot, in principle, rise to the vast challenges now facing the nation. The proof of this is self-evident: forced to actually legislate for once, Trump and his ilk are overcome, attempting to shirk responsibility for the mounting dead by way of formerly formidable, but now entirely useless, weapons: deflection, propagandistic bombast, and outright lies.

As for the rest of Pandemic!, Žižek never quite finds his footing. In several
chapters, the virus connection feels shoehorned in, as if the author had hurriedly edited already existing essays to align them with the book’s central theme (a chapter on “work fatigue” is especially egregious in this regard).

Ironically, Žižek is at his most persuasive when he’s trying the least to be so, particularly in the book’s introduction and appendix, where he devotes time to the human toll taken by the pandemic: the social and physical isolation, the concern for ourselves and our loved ones, the anxiety for the future. Admittedly, Žižek’s proposed balms for this gloomy mélange don’t offer much in the way of originality, essentially boiling down to “take things day-to-day,” “revel in small joys,” and “be happy with less,” but that’s hardly the point—that he thinks to offer balms at all, is. As a surprising but welcome act of empathy—a kind of Schopenhauerian hail to a fellow sufferer—these passages constitute thoughtful, even tender, acts of compassion where none were expected, or required. In the end, they may be all I remember from Žižek’s frustrating and uneven book, but in the end, they may be all I need to.

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