

# [Review: The Courage of Hopelessness: A Year of Acting Dangerously by Slavoj Žižek](#)

written by John Yohe | June 7, 2018



*The Courage of Hopelessness: A Year of Acting Dangerously*  
by Slavoj Žižek  
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336 pages / [Amazon](#) / [Melville House](#)

Although the subtitle of Slavoj Žižek's *The Courage of Hopelessness* is *A Year of Acting Dangerously*, the book encompasses just over two years, from the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks in 2015, up to Trump winning the American presidential election. Those two years may not seem to mean much to most Americans, post-election. They should. Though Brexit, the collapse of the Greek economy, and the refugee crisis 'happened' in Europe, *The Courage of Hopelessness* explores how these events affect(ed) the whole world. The publication time delay (the American printing comes out a year after the British printing, I don't know why) might sound like a disadvantage—so much has happened just in America in these two-to-three years!—but Žižek gives us the chance to review and re-examine some huge shifts in economy, politics and culture, with a much more thorough exploration than any mainstream media outlet could give at the time, or even now.

There is just so much to cover in *any* Žižek book, too much for any one review. If you're already a Žižek fan, *The Courage of Hopelessness* will not disappoint. For those new to Žižek, where have you been? He's biggest far-Left counter-cultural political critic we have, besides Noam Chomsky (with

whom he has disagreed some). Zizek analyzes, in a Big Picture way, global events with both humor and Hegelian super-philosophy speak, plus a sprinkling of pop culture references (mostly movies) to help demonstrate his points. At times, he can get super academic, to the point where I'm not sure if even *he* knows what he's talking about, though more likely is that I'm just not smart enough. But instead of feeling stupid, he challenges readers, makes us feel smarter for having read him. And all, as far as I can tell (no translator ever listed) while he's writing in English, a second language (he's Slovenian, but apparently also fluent in German)(!).

The weakest point of *The Courage of Hopelessness* is what American readers will probably think the most interesting, the last chapter "The Populist Temptation," in which Zizek shares his big picture analysis (and again, this book only goes just into February 2017) of what happened in our most recent presidential election, and why it matters to the rest of the world, in particular Europe. What will outrage centrist neo-liberal readers and voters (i.e. Clinton voters) is Zizek's argument that Trump, despite his outrageous rhetoric, is not actually a pretty standard middle-of-the-road Republican in foreign policy (although Democratic Party foreign policy doesn't differ that much) and at least one of his campaign pledges, to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership—the TPP, a free trade deal in the style of NAFTA implemented by the Obama administration—was actually a big goal of progressive voters (remember all the crossed-out TPP signs at the Democratic Convention that the people in charge didn't want us to see? Along with the walkout? But I get ahead of myself...). Trump has since backed off on this, like he has with some other of his proclamations, most recently saying that "we" need to renegotiate it. But, Zizek is arguing, it could have been worse. Still could be if we get someone like Mike Pence.

Nor will Zizek's kerfuffle with Chomsky please even some so-called progressives. It's about whether progressives should have voted for Clinton after Bernie Sanders "lost" the primaries. Chomsky apparently argued yes, that we had to swallow our gall and prevent a Trump administration no matter what. Zizek argues no, that both candidates were "worse." He has nothing to say, at least here, about alternatives, like third parties such as the Greens, or the growing Democratic Socialist movement. Likewise, since he was much more interested in Sanders as a candidate, I'm surprised to *not* hear any critique of how the Democratic Party, through the Democratic Campaign Committee (DCC), which was financed and run by the Clinton campaign, fixed the primaries against Sanders, nor about how/why Sanders, knowing this, still endorsed Clinton instead of going independent/third party.

I'm not sure if Zizek just doesn't know, or doesn't feel he has enough information yet to make a thorough analysis or recommendation, but this a good example of how I and some other readers of Zizek wish he would offer more solutions. He does sometimes, small ones, like for example with the refugee crisis, that the west/Europe should set up processing centers on the east and south sides of the Mediterranean and provide safe ferries of their own, so-as to stop the flow of millions of dollars to smugglers and the loss of refugee lives. But as for any larger solution to the crisis, he basically shrugs and claims that refugees are, like terrorist violence, an inevitable

result of capitalism, something that's just going to happen unless and until we get rid of capitalism. Which may be true, but there are surely more short-term fixes.

For Zizek's analysis of American politics, since he does say that our system is broke, I guess I'd like him to come right out and say what many of us on the left think, that salvation is *not* coming from the Democratic Party. That in fact, they're the problem. But he doesn't quite go that far. Maybe in his next book? But, this missing—or leaving out—of important behind-the-scenes aspects of the 2016 American election, including the DCC/Sanders debacle, but also the multiple cases of voter fraud during the Democratic primaries, make me wonder if he's perhaps leaving out aspects of *other* topics in *The Courage of Hopelessness*.

Zizek's response would be that nobody can cover everything, and that his books are above all a way to get readers to think about all of these problems themselves, and to go beyond him. And again, secondarily, that we can never know all the answers—we can never know all the problems or questions—but that that can't stop us from trying, especially now. The "hopelessness" of the title is the idea of nothing left to lose. Again, this applies more obviously to the situation in Greece, where the European Union is jamming austerity down their throats, but for Zizek that that's the canary in the coalmine: The canary is dying, and the rest of the world better pay attention.

One major weirdness in this American printing of *The Courage of Hopelessness* is that Zizek's intro, "*V for Vendetta*, part 2" is completely missing! How do I know this? Because the citations for it are still included in the end "Notes"! Melville House didn't respond to my question, nor could I find the text online, but based on some Zizek lectures on YouTube, and my familiarity with the both the movie and graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*, (by legendary writer Alan Moore) Zizek's question, which informs the book, is to ask what happens *after* the end of that story, when the authoritarian (bureaucratic) dictatorship is overthrown? What replaces it? Who replaces it? How to the people come together to create a better world? Or do they?

Again, no answers. But one thing is clear with Zizek, even from past writings: He's always urging the people to organize and strive to create something better, even if messy, and even if there's no 100% full plan to do so, that the dangerous 'act' of the subtitle is what counts, even and especially in the face of seeming hopelessness, because to wait and do nothing is what the autocrat-bureaucrat of the European Union and the United States (and, say, Israel and Saudi Arabia) want us to do.