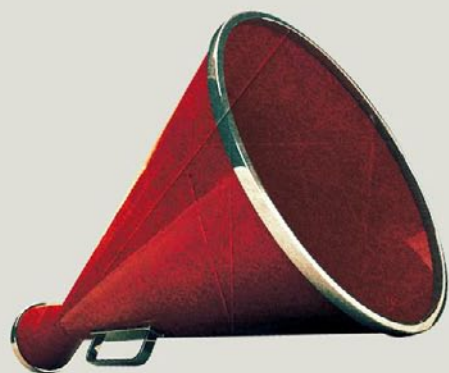


SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK



Demanding the Impossible

Edited by Yong-june Park

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Slavoj Žižek

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polity

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My colleagues and I hope that the conversations in this book will prove enjoyable to the reader, and will spark lively discussions.

Yong-june Park

I

Politics and Responsibility

What is to be done for politics today? In the midst of radical changes – ecological catastrophes, fateful biogenetic mutations, nuclear or similar military-social conflicts, financial fiasco, etc. – where our commons are at stake, is there such a thing as the common good? To what extent is it useful to speak of the common good?

SŽ: For me, what is problematic is not the word “common” but the word “good.” Because the way I see it, from my European perspective, traditional aesthetics was directed toward some *supreme Good*. It could be God, humanity, the universe, etc.: we see this *common good* as a supreme substantial value that we should all have to work for. But for me, modernity begins with Descartes, and then with Kant – to be precise, with an ethics that is no longer an ethics of the common good. For example, in Kant, you find it is purely formal ethics: ethics of the moral law and so on. Here, ethics cannot be, in any way, *politicized*: politicized in the sense that you cannot simply presuppose some common good.

Politics and Responsibility

Rather, it is a matter of decision. This is what I find problematic about the notion of the common good.

What is a common good today? OK, let's say ecology. Probably most people would agree, even though we are politically different, that we all care about the earth. But if you look closely, you will see that there are so many ecologies on which you have to make so many decisions. Having said that, my position here is very crazy. For me, politics has *priority* over ethics. Not in the vulgar sense that we can do whatever we want – even kill people and then subordinate ethics to politics – but in a much more radical sense that what we define as our good is not something we just discover; rather, it is that we have to take *responsibility* for defining what is our good.

And, as many radical ecologists have pointed out, how much of ecology, which pretends to work for the good of nature, involves *hidden* political choices? When you say, for example, that the common good should be our Mother Earth, and that our planet should thrive – why should our planet thrive? Because we humans want it to, so that we can survive. Ecology, from my point of view, is the most egotistic, human-centered machine there is. Nature is crazy. Nature is chaotic and prone to wild, unpredictable and meaningless disasters, and we are exposed to its merciless whims – there is no such thing as Mother Earth. In nature, always, there are catastrophes, things go wrong, and sometimes a planet explodes.

What I want to show you is the fact that, if you look at this closely, when we refer to some higher common good, it is always, at least the way I see it, defined by our secret priorities. For example, people may say “Oh! We are constructing another big city and it will destroy

nature. It is horrible!” And the usual response to this, even of many ecologists, is that “we should live in a more natural way, closer to the forest, and so on.” No! One ecologist, a friend of mine from Germany, whom I appreciate very much, told me that this kind of response is, ecologically, totally catastrophic. From an ecological standpoint, the best thing is this: there is a lot of pollution everywhere, so you pack as many people as you can into a big city; it is then very concentrated and there is much less pollution per capita so you can keep the large domains relatively clean. I don’t know if you are doing this in Korea, but somebody told me they are doing it in Japan. I think that large dirty cities where people live packed together are ecologically the best thing for nature. Again, there is another ecological idea, as we call it, which is that we should live in small self-sufficient houses with solar energy – people believe this is one way of living ecologically. But can you imagine how it would end up if the majority of people wanted to live like that? Everyone would be very spread out, and the forests would disappear. Ironically, this is related to the question of how much we can “safely” pollute our environment. So I am very distrustful of this view. Whenever something is proposed as being for the higher good, and we say we should transcend our egotism and work for it, we will always discover that we are already secretly doing just this.

What I like to suggest, based on my basic position, is not politics in the sense of what people usually associate with politics – such as cheap manipulation, corruption, power struggles, etc. – but politics in the sense of fundamental decisions about our life on earth, and collective decisions for which you have to take *full* responsibility.

Obsession for Harmony/ Compulsion to Identify

What do you mean by “full responsibility”? If the common good is a matter of decisions we have to make, precisely in the field of political struggle and ecological crisis, is this a term that embraces responsibility even for social reform or revolution?

SŽ: Well, what I think problematic from a European perspective is this oriental wisdom that says there is some kind of natural balance or harmony of the elements. I don't see any harmony in this world. On the contrary, I see that all harmony is only *partial harmony*. What do I mean by this? Some people, for example, would say: “Communism was bad because it was too socializing. Everything was social, and no individuality was allowed. On the other hand, liberal capitalism is too individualistic and everybody is for himself, and so on. So they say they are both disharmonious, and we need a kind of middle road: a society that has a certain social sense of community but allows, nonetheless, some individual freedom.” No! I think that what we should think

about is this very *contrast*. How do we imagine individual freedom? And how do we imagine the common good? These questions already belong to a certain field. These are the extremes within that certain field.

The first thing I would like to do is show how absurd it is to urge that we have two extremes and need to find the balance. These two extremes already flow into each other. This is why “synthesis” does not affirm the identity of the extremes, but, on the contrary, affirms their difference as such. So the *synthesis* delivers difference from the “compulsion to identify.” In other words, the immediate passage of an extreme into its opposite is precisely an index of our submission to the *compulsion to identify*.

I can think of an example from North Korea. I read a book about North Korea, written by a Western author who was trying to describe the everyday life of the terrible hunger experienced there in the last 15 years – you know, when, 15 years ago, the North Korean state government simply more or less stopped functioning. That is to say, the state controlled pretty much every social infrastructure, so people didn’t get enough food to survive and couldn’t get a job, and so on. And what did emerge there? A kind of very rudimentary brutal form of capitalism: people went to the forest and gathered fruits for their own use and to sell at the market. Isn’t it interesting how you find a terrible Darwinian survivalist individualism beneath everything – lavish spectacle, the Mass Games with their doll-like robotic dancers – that they show to the world? Basically, life for everyone is just for the individual. It was the same in Stalinism. Even in China, I claim that the real result of the Cultural Revolution is the capitalism that they now have.