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Socialism or death: the quarantine edition

[Slavoj Žižek, *PAN(DEM)IC! – COVID-19 SHAKES THE WORLD*, New York and London: O/R Books, 2020, pp. 114]

Slavoj Žižek's third book this year (following *Hegel in a Wired Brain*, published by Bloomsbury and *A Left That Dares to Speak Its Name*, published by Polity) is a short volume which is an event at least as much as it is a proper book. Its publication was announced on the 24th March 2020, the book was initially given away for nothing (the first 10,000 electronic copies could be downloaded from the publisher's website free of charge), and the author's royalties will go to Médecins Sans Frontières. It is not difficult to see *PAN(DEM)IC!* as something of a publicity stunt, especially since the volume collects Žižek's commentaries on the pandemic already published individually in various media outlets. At the same time, it is undeniable that the book *is* a feat, released during an unprecedented global crisis at a breakneck speed. The question remains, inevitably, about the value of the text, and this is very much the question will be considered here.

The short answer is: this is by no means Žižek's greatest achievement, but it is not pretending to be anything of the sort either. The book is slight in terms of volume and not too densely academic by any standards.[1] A sense

[1] For example, in introducing Byung-Chul Han's concept of "burnout society," Žižek makes a reference to the book of the same title, but rather than describing the theory himself, he "shamelessly but gratefully" opts for a

of urgency permeating the publication is conveyed already at the level of the all-caps title with its exclamation mark and the word "panic" shouting at the reader from the aggressively coloured cover. At the same time, the volume does offer some perceptive and provocative commentary which has been the trademark of its author for years now. In many ways, however, the ideas presented in *PAN(DEM)IC!* are only too familiar to Žižek's readers, since the book employs his well-established tropes, strategies and postulates. This, in some sense, is the volume's biggest drawback: a text produced in extremely unusual circumstances – and doubtless something of an achievement logistically whatever you think of its merit – proves to have disappointingly little to say about the situation that inspired it. To put it briefly, the observations made in the volume are somewhat underwhelming in the face of the great historical event that they supposedly concern. Žižek's provocation this time is in his modesty, apparently. He has made similar points many times before, and on occasion one may get the impression that the pandemic serves as little more than an impressive backdrop against which he can say with surprisingly toned-down triumph, "See, I told you so!"

PAN(DEM)IC! is made up of 10 chapters, accompanied by an introduction and an epilogue, and despite what I have said about its origin, it does manage to be more than a mere collection of reflections on various aspects of the pandemic. Undeniably, it is also that, and some of its sections coalesce better with the whole than others (chapter 5, "The Five Stages of Pandemics" in particular stands out as a closed off, separate argument, which might be removed without affecting the book in any significant manner). At the same time, however, one could well say that the book as a whole does have a thesis to demonstrate, if not always very effectively. In brief, Žižek strives to convince his audience that the pandemic has exposed the undeniable flaws and limitations of late capitalism, and if humanity is not to collapse into a new barbarism, we have to turn to various forms of transnational cooperation that are not profit-driven; in other words, some incarnation of communism (admittedly, Žižek, despite his undeniably left-wing politics, uses this term with understandable caution, clearly aiming at a broad audience).

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full-page quotation from the Wikipedia entry on Han. (Slavoj Žižek, *PAN(DEM)IC! – COVID-19 SHAKES THE WORLD* (New York and London: O/R Books, 2020) p. 19.)

The book's introduction is intriguing enough, with the self-avowed "Christian atheist" establishing his credentials by elegantly analysing social distancing in the light of Christ's *noli me tangere* injunction and Hegel's early writings. His unexpectedly constructive conclusion is that the physical distance we carefully maintain precisely because we care for each other will paradoxically only serve to strengthen the interpersonal bonds that hold us together. More significantly, he notes that this is a requirement of our survival in the post-pandemic chaos, a condition for avoiding barbarism he sees as already looming on the horizon (and in this prepares ground for the central argument about the inevitable alternative of barbarism and communism).

Chapter 1 opens with a powerful criticism of the Chinese government's handling of the crisis, going against praise of the Chinese response heard in many quarters. While many commentators appear to be almost disappointed when they note how democratic countries cannot hope to act with the swiftness and decisiveness of the Chinese precisely because many of their actions are unthinkable in non-authoritarian states, Žižek sides with those who blame the very outbreak on the undemocratic suppression of the realities. It is not difficult to agree with him when he argues that the very phenomena considered to be a threat by authoritarian regimes – social solidarity, horizontal networks of cooperation, trust between authorities and citizens – are indispensable in an epidemic. After all, this is a time when it is in our own best interest to think about the good of our neighbours, as well as a time when for our own good we are only too happy to have our liberties limited – preferably by people who act for our benefit. **Žižek** briefly and effectively shows how in our overconnected world, with countless sources of information bombarding us ceaselessly, any efforts by the state to control circulation of information is only likely to fuel conspiracy theories – and thus erode social trust on which the efforts are based. One would hope, however, that more attention were devoted to the antirationalist narratives which form an extremely significant aspect of the situation. Unfortunately, both in Chapter 1 and throughout the volume, Žižek slides over the conspiracy theories blooming in the historic situation of a global crisis narrated largely through social media.

The chapter also signals that market mechanisms will not be enough to cope with the aftermath of the crisis – unless at a price of barbarism

(like in nineteenth-century England, exporting food from famine-afflicted Ireland). Here Žižek makes the major point of this section, and one of the most powerful points of the entire book. Much as he recognises the degree to which the pandemic is related to our way of living, he speaks very strongly against ascribing any moral significance to the outbreak, and dismisses the temptation to see the crisis as some sort of punishment or nature's revenge on humanity. For Žižek, this is another manifestation of the same anthropocentric arrogance that contributed to it in the first place:

> If we search for such a hidden message, we remain premodern: we treat our universe as a partner in communication. Even if our very survival is threatened, there is something reassuring in the fact that we are punished, the universe (or even Somebody-out-there) is engaging with us. We matter in some profound way. (14)

Instead, Žižek insists on perceiving the unfolding events as deprived of any underlying meaning. The stark reality of the contingency of our condition, deprived of any symbolic support, is a striking observation, for reasons he sets out explicitly only in the book's epilogue. Disappointingly, Žižek ends the chapter on a weak note: quoting the help offered by the Israeli government to the Palestinian authority, he exercises cautious optimism, which is only made more naïve by its very caution. Žižek's argument is that this is not caused by goodness of heart, but by a common interest – the fact that "we are all in the same boat," as the chapter's title announces – a pragmatic realisation that our survival depends on the survival of our enemy. This is almost touching in its idealism disguised as realism, but the enthusiastic voices from the UN on Israel's cooperation with Palestine are contradicted by reports of continued obstructions in providing health care to Palestinians.[2] We may well be in the same boat, but apparently this does not stop us from continuing to try and push our enemies overboard. Perhaps the epidemic has as much potential to bring out the best in us as the worst, and perhaps, despite his own injunction, Žižek is a little too eager to read a moral meaning into the crisis.

Chapter 2 tackles another aspect of contemporary reality: the self-exploitation of late capitalism's individualised, internalised urge for efficien-

[2] Raphael Ahren, "UN praises 'excellent' Israeli-Palestinian cooperation in fight against pandemic," *The Times of Israel*, March 30, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-praises-excellent-israeli-palestinian-cooperation-in-fight-against-pandemic/

cy which turns "everyone" into their own superego. Žižek rightly points out Han's omission of external pressures that also shape our behaviours, and notes that Han's "everyone" is limited to the providers of intellectual labour in the developed countries, while millions of people around the globe are still very much subject to classic labour relations, in which he shows more insight than at the end of the previous chapter. This is perhaps one of the reasons for the violent outcry against misguided attempts by celebrities to make similar claims: to hear Gal Gadot, whose net worth is estimated at about 20 million dollars, sing "I hope someday you'll join us" is obscenely insulting to much of her audience. Unfortunately, Žižek devotes no space in the book to the violent uproar against celebrity culture, which is arguably one of the most spectacular manifestations of the rejection of the status quo brought about by the pandemic, which he so fervently postulates.

Overall, the problem of Chapter 2 is that it is only slightly connected with the main topic of the book, though clearly there is potential for more here. **Žižek**'s remarks on contemporary labour market are on point, but the effects of the pandemic on how we work – and will work in the future – certainly merit more attention. One actually gets the impression that the brief comment on how in the face of the epidemic, some are unbearably overworked (emergency workers etc.), while others are going insane with idleness (most of the population, supposedly, encouraged to stay home and binge on streaming services),[3] is no more than an excuse to include this reflection in the volume. What is being said here would be equally valid before the pandemic.

Chapter 3 is the briefest and the most overtly political one in the book. **Žižek** coins a less-than-catchy portmanteau "the Putogan virus" to refer to the threat posed to the stability of the European Union by Russia and Turkey. The problem is that, once again, this point feels relatively unrelated to the state of emergency in which we have been functioning lately. Yes, Putin and Erdogan are clearly not working for the well-being of the EU, but this has been true for a good while now, and **Žižek** does not convincingly demonstrate any pandemic-related operations on their part. Worse still, he overlooks the threats posed by the crisis to the duo themselves. This is one

[3] Thankfully, **Žižek also sees potential for increased self-exploitation of people like – say – academics,** who are perceived as finally having the time to do some writing.

point at which the book may already be said to be aging badly: while **Žižek** somewhat one-sidedly focuses on the pandemic as an opportunity for Putin, we are already aware that the drastic fall of oil prices and disastrous handling of health care have shaken up his grasp on power to a dramatic degree. Of course, I do not expect **Žižek** to have foreseen the cancellation of elections which were supposed to cement Putin's position for another decade *and* the calling off of the grand propaganda spectacle of the Victory Day celebrations for the first time in 25 years. However, in the light of these developments, it becomes evident that his argument mistakenly presents authoritarian regimes as somehow immune to the influence of the pandemic. **Žižek** is much more convincing when he points to the potential threat that the crisis will activate xenophobic sentiments and aggravate the already terrible situation of refugees, "mass-produced" by the operations of Putin and Erdogan. He concludes by once again arguing that this crisis is also an opportunity in that it necessitates levels of solidarity that are perhaps easier to promote when we – as humanity – are facing a common threat, and the survival of the privileged depends on the safety of the oppressed.

Chapter 4 is by far the least coherent of the whole book: it briefly mentions conspiracy theories, only to dismiss them in favour of the apparently much less infectious, "much more beneficent ideological virus [that] will spread and hopefully infect us: the virus of thinking of an alternate society, a society beyond nation-state, a society that actualizes itself in the forms of global solidarity and cooperation" (39). What follows is the obligatory colourful metaphor of the death of capitalism, borrowed from Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, which has predictably become something of the book's trademark. Over the years, **Žižek** has used a broad range of colourful metaphors to talk about how events only become part of the social construct known as reality after being registered in the symbolic (among the most frequently recycled ones is Wile E. Coyote and the "cartoon gravity," which only drags him down after he notices that he has run over the edge of a precipice), so neither the style nor the argument are particularly new here. More importantly, this metaphor significantly misses the point: unlike the villain who uses the gap between the deadly blow and his actual death to make peace with his killer, capitalism is very clearly not going down without a fight. If we consider only the staggering numbers of COVID-19-related deaths in the USA amid widespread demands to end

the lockdown (and the continued increase in the wealth of the superrich),[4] perhaps defeated Balrog dragging Gandalf with him into the abyss might be a more apt pop-cultural reference.

In the face of the presumed death blow to the capitalist system, **Žižek** returns to the notion of global cooperation, citing the example of WHO as a model to follow. He then quotes the infected Irani health minister to restate the argument about the democratising effect of the virus, which has all the force of Madonna's bathtub remarks about COVID as "the great equaliser."[5] It is quite likely, after all, that Iraj Harirchi has received much better treatment than an anonymous refugee in an overcrowded camp on a Greek island. And studies show clearly that the African-American and Hispanic populations of the US are at higher risks of being infected[6] (the first victims among medics in the UK also happened to be persons of colour). Systemic oppression appears to be doing rather well under the current conditions, and it is somewhat surprising how easily Žižek overlooks this fact for most of the book.

He does make a valid point when he reminds his readers – against a popular, and perfectly understandable, sentiment – that there will be no "return to norm," that we have left the normal times behind for the foreseeable future. This is by no means a new concept,[7] but one that bears repeating, especially after the first wave of infections has subsided and we are all too eager to go back to making up for the lost time. Unfortunately, after that, the chapter loses focus altogether – one paragraph mentions potential changes to bodily self-discipline, without exploring the subject, another does the same with digital viruses, and finally, a salient remark on "capitalism animism," a tendency to personalise market abstractions, rendering them more worthy of our sympathy than actual people, leads to a stronger conclusion. This time around, **Žižek**'s claim that solidarity in the time of a

[4] Andrew Naughtie, "Coronavirus: US billionaires add $282bn to their wealth in just 23 days as millions lose jobs," *Independent*, April 27, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk /news/world/americas/coronavirus-billionaires-wealth-inequality-us-unemployment-jobless-claimsa9486216.html. Zizek will only provide examples of how the pandemic may in fact increase already existing inequalities in chapters 8 and 10.

[5] *The Telegraph*, "'Covid is the great equaliser' says Madonna from a petal filled bath," March 23, 2020, accessed April 29, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UYU4Slh34I.

[6] *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, "COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups," April 22, 2020, accessed May 13, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html.

[7] See: Ziauddin Sardar, "Witajcie w czasach ponowoczesnych" on page … of this journal.

pandemic is a matter of self-interest rather than idealism is supported with an impressive inversion of the notions of communism and liberalism:

> If we designate as "liberals" those who care for our freedoms, and as "Communists" those who are aware that we can save those freedoms only with radical changes since global capitalism is approaching a crisis, then we should say that, today, those of us who still recognize ourselves as Communists, are liberals with a diploma— liberals who seriously studied why our liberal values are under threat and became aware that only a radical change can save them. (46)

This is the same thesis that he has already proposed, but this time it is presented with a degree of inspiration and intellectual discipline that is not found at many points in the book.

Chapter five, as I have already signalled, though elegant enough in itself, brings little into the book as a whole: **Žižek** fits the global reaction to the pandemic into the famous scheme of five stages of reacting to diagnosis of terminal illness, proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. He is reasonably convincing in drawing analogies here with how we approach the ecological catastrophe or digital surveillance, and concludes once again that having gone through denial, anger, bargaining, and depression, we should move on to acceptance of the contingency of our existence and – more pragmatically – the necessity to reorganise our way of living radically.

Chapter 6 opens with a question that has received deserved praise: "where does data end and ideology begin?" (55) **Žižek** is something of an expert on ideology, and data has been politicised ceaselessly during the pandemic, so there is potential here. Unfortunately, the remaining part of the chapter does not live up to the promise. By way of answering the question, **Žižek** ponders the nature of our mastery over nature, which he perceives as paradoxical (the more sophisticated our technology becomes, the more vulnerable it is to malfunction). This in itself is unexpected, since as a Lacanian he is doubtless aware that there is nothing paradoxical here: it is in the very nature of systems to produce their own disturbances; any ordering effort must by necessity create some disorder.

What is worse, after a quick reminder of the necessity to build a new form of communism, apparently unrelated to the rest of the argument, Žižek plunges into another bout of wishful thinking. The collapse of busy consumerist society becomes an excuse for an emancipatory vision of "[d]

ead time – moments of withdrawal, or what old mystics called *Gelassenheit*, releasement – [which] are crucial for the revitalisation of our life experience" (57). Coming from a man who has been able to release three books in four months, this sounds ironic at best. Coming from the thinker who coined (with Robert Pfaller) the term "interpassivity" for the strategies we employ to defend ourselves from the maddening insistency of capitalism's superegoic injunction to enjoy, this is puzzling, to put it mildly. **Žižek**'s vision of enjoying a stroll through the empty streets of Wuhan has been criticised on ethical grounds (not everyone appreciates **Žižek**'s gratitude for extra time to think in peace, considering the cost of thousands of lives lost to the disease), but for me it is even more striking how far from reality this vision is. For most of us – **Žižek** included, by his own admission – the possibility of escaping the "compulsion of thought" by taking a walk (as Kant did) has been severely limited in the last couple of months. More than ever before, our primary way of relating to the world – working, staying in touch with family and friends, being entertained – has been through screens of our devices. Theatres, galleries, musicians, writers, not to mention politicians, NGOs and all sorts of grassroots initiatives – have gone out of their way to keep us busy every second of the day (and night: the Internet never sleeps). The idling time – walking to work, waiting on a bus stop – has been taken away from us, so what **Žižek** describes as "the urge to fill in every moment of the time allotted to us with intense engagement" (57) has never been more intense. The lockdown might very well be argued to be a time of overstimulation, not of "forced quietness" (58).

Žižek is equally off the mark when he outlines the optimistic possibility that the time of reflection will lead to societies poisoned by populism to come to their senses. "Maybe, some British people will gather the courage to feel shame about falling for the ideological dream that brought them Brexit," he ponders (59). In early May, as the death toll in the UK exceeded 30,000, headlines of British newspapers excitedly anticipated the first steps towards the lifting of the lockdown regulations and it was becoming more and more clear that the government is likely to use the crisis to push on with Brexit, while the public was busy celebrating Victory Day with a "social distancing conga line."[8] Again, this is not about Žižek's fortune-

[8] Cheshire Live, "Cheshire street's VE Day conga celebration sparks fury as residents are accused of 'breaching social distancing rules'," May 9, 2020, accessed May 13, 2020, https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/cheshire-streets-ve-day-conga-18226099.

telling abilities, but if he chooses to speculate that the pandemic may be an antidote to populism, one would expect some elaboration of the idea. What exactly about COVID-19 is supposed to account for a sudden return of "common sense" in politics?

Chapter 7 opens with a reflection on self-propelling mechanisms of panic: even if there are no grounds for hoarding, the very mention of the issue may lead to bulk-buying "just in case," and thus fuelling increased demand which justifies an originally unjustified fear. This attitude is complemented by ignoring threats that we are warned against due to a reluctance the reasons for which **Žižek** disappointingly chooses not explore. Instead, he elaborates his idea of what an appropriate response should be, and in this justifies his postulate of a new form of communism. He envisions a form of global collaboration through an executive political body based on the model of WHO, and ensuring coordination of response on a worldwide level, which is the only way to address the crisis effectively. Admittedly, **Žižek** is at his most convincing when he argues that by their very nature the problems generated by our hyperconnected world require solidarity and cooperation.

The very interesting Chapter 8 is devoted to the fear of a possible totalitarian turn, and opens with a discussion of Agamben's unorthodox reaction to the crisis, which **Žižek** very effectively critiques by asking *cui bono* in response to Agamben's somewhat paranoiac reading of pandemic restrictions. Agamben questions the severity of the danger and consequently sees pandemic restrictions as proof that state of exception is becoming an increasingly normal form of government. **Žižek** insists that whatever truth there is to the fear of socio-political consequences of the lockdown, the biological reality of the virus remains, and reiterates his claim that new forms of solidarity may emerge precisely in response to increased state control. He also finally appears to acknowledge that the privilege of the elites is preserved at least to some extent during the crisis.

More significantly, **Žižek** refines his rejection of "return to norm" by claiming that any norm to emerge after the pandemic will have to abandon our anthropocentric sense of security. To drive home the ineffable nature of the threat, which forces us to face the contingency of our existence, he stresses the uncanny, liminal character of viruses, with even their status as living organisms open to question. At the same time, he reminds us that human nature itself is viral: "Human spirit is a kind of virus that parasit-

izes on the human animal, exploits it for its own self-reproduction, and sometimes threatens to destroy it" (79). Lacan is not quoted, even though the idea of subjectivity as something alien to us, the result of our being infected by external systems, reproducing automatically but certainly not deserving the name of living organisms, is very Lacanian. The conclusions **Žižek** draws from these very interesting observations are surprising to say the least: rather than the object of infection, humanity becomes its source, and COVID-19, against the view offered in previous chapters, is portrayed as retribution. This is so incoherent, it leaves the reader puzzled (and tempted to dismiss these final remarks as sloppily attempting to infect us with another striking idea).

In Chapter 9, abstraction is abandoned in favour of more specific political commentary, and here **Žižek** gives elegant new shape to the thought he has already stated several times: if the pandemic achieved the impossible by grinding our world to a halt, we should respond to the crisis also by doing what is deemed impossible within the old coordinates. Facing the danger of what he names "barbarism with a human face" (i.e. not open violence of post-apocalyptic dystopias, but a civilisation driven increasingly by survivalist strategies, abandoning empathy in favour of efficiency), we should, says Žižek, reject the well-known neoliberal strategy of obscuring the systemic nature of the problem (and the required solution) by individualising responsibility for the situation. A complex crisis like the one we are faced with now affects every aspect of our existence as a civilisation, but also must be seen as the result of our way of life (here **Žižek** quotes Kate Jones: "We are creating habitats where viruses are transmitted more easily, and then we are surprised that we have new ones" (89)). This is why we must accept modifications as drastic as the ones in our individual lives (lockdown, avoiding physical contact with others etc.) on the level of organising global economy, healthcare, industry and so on. **Žižek** points to wartime strategies already being implemented by otherwise very liberal states (Donald Trump using the Defence Production Act to give the government influence over production in the private sector or the temporary renationalisation of railways in the UK), and restates that more will necessarily follow, leading to "a Communism imposed by the necessities of bare survival" (92). Thankfully, here he does emphasise the uncertainty about the ultimate outcome of the crisis.

Chapter 10 makes a more assertive statement, and stresses the opposition to his claims from a broad range of authors who maintain that, if anything, the crisis will bring a reinforcement of the grip that capitalism has on how we function, and the lockdown will only exacerbate our individualist way of life. Žižek opposes these ideas, reading isolation as a Christian meditation, an exercise in empathy (and very nearly conflates the figure of Jesus with that of Julian Assange in the process). A quote from Assange is used to demonstrate that the crisis has indeed shaken up the world, that old certainties have indeed been suspended and now it is "clear to us that *anything goes* – that everything is now possible" (99). **Žižek** openly admits that this includes a possibility of relapse into a more or less civilised form of barbarism (using examples from American public discourse, in which the lives of a considerable section of citizens are deemed of less value than saving the capitalist status quo). Understandably, Žižek focuses on other possibilities – also ones that might seem unthinkable now – and for this reason he fiercely debates the illusion of "return to normal." What is happening, he insists, is not just another epidemic, it is a sign that things have changed irreversibly: epidemics on the scale of this one will continue happening, accompanied by other ecological crises, unless we introduce radical changes. It is difficult to disagree when he claims we are no longer willing to accept epidemics as our fate – one might add that perhaps what he is saying here is that if they are to be accepted as fate, then fate must be recognised as the result of our decisions.

Žižek is also right to point out that the socio-economic effects of the pandemic are too serious to be left to the mechanisms of the "free market." Some reasons he offers for optimism (the supposedly growing perception of wars and prejudices as irrational and meaningless in the face of this common threat) are not particularly convincing, if only in the light of his own remarks on the instrumentalisation of the military conflict in Syria. Žižek hits hardest when he presents the necessity of cooperation as precisely that, a pragmatic choice made even by the hardhead liberals. That said, the conclusion of the chapter – and the book – is unabashedly idealistic: "In fact the opposite is true: it is through our effort to save humanity from self-destruction that we are creating a new humanity. It is only through this mortal threat that we can envision a unified humanity" (105).

These are, however, not his final words: the book closes off with an appendix, based on discussions Žižek conducted with two of his friends via e-mail as the pandemic was unfolding. While this may appear to be no more than a way to add volume to the short book, in fact this section contains some of its more interesting points. The first e-mail is from his Brazilian friend, psychoanalyst Gabriel Tupinamba, who sheds more light on the reason why the virus is just such a terrifying threat. The question is quite relatable: with around 15,000 officially diagnosed infections in Poland, chances are most of us have not been infected or do not know anyone who has. These calculations do not include, of course, people who have been infected but had no symptoms, or whose symptoms were so light as to be ignored or mistaken for a less serious disease. In other words, the very serious threat that has significantly changed our lives is imperceptible on many levels. This is precisely what troubles Žižek, and what is explained as illustrating the gap between the Lacanian notions of the real and reality. Real is what remains impossible to represent, to include fully in our conceptualisations of our experience. The way Žižek puts it, "the real is a spectral entity, invisible and for that very reason appearing as all-powerful" (110). This is why even the experience of contracting the virus, with all the suffering this involves, seems preferable, since it encloses the spectre within the limits of symbolic reality, giving it a concrete shape and allowing us to address it. Admitting that not all of us can – or indeed should – confront the threat heroically (e.g. exposing ourselves to it through volunteer work in hospitals) in order to encapsulate it within our realities, Žižek does something even less predictable at this point in the text than his return to Lacan, and gives specific advice. It is simple enough: "identify with your symptom," which is to say, surrender to your guilty pleasures with no qualms, do what you need to not to think too much, develop "small rituals" for the sake of mental stability. This is supplemented by advice from his other friend, German journalist Andreas Rosenfelder, to lower our expectations. What motivates us to keep going against the present calamity is "the idea of a world where you have an apartment, basics like food and water, the love of others and a task that really matters, now more than ever. The idea that one needs 'more' seems unreal now" (113). This is an appropriately modest way to conclude this modest book, and one that is unexpectedly moving in its low-key optimism.

Žižek had the foresight to become interested in the outbreak of COVID-19 back in January, when it was hardly a hot topic for most commentators in Europe. It is all the more disappointing that his book on the subject lacks focus and despite a number of inspired moments leaves the reader with the impression of chaos. *PAN(DEM)IC!* also has some inspiring moments, and it is especially for their sake that one wishes the author had put in some more effort into supporting his claims. This is not essential reading, and not even essential Žižek. This is, however, Žižek pushing an agenda, and the more insistently he repeats that his proposal is not ideological but purely practical, the more any reader of Žižek should be suspicious – after all, if he has taught us anything, it is that ideology operates most effectively when we believe it is not ideology.

Sławomir Konkol
Socialism or death: the quarantine edition

Slavoj **Žižek**, *PAN(DEM)IC! – COVID-19 SHAKES THE WORLD* (New York and London: O/R Books) is a publicity stunt and a logistic achievement at least as much as a proper book. One must admire the speed with which it was produced and the foresight of its author, who began following the topic closely before most commentators in the West. It is all the more disappointing that the book's central argument is not better organised and supported. This review considers both the moments of brilliance and the flaws of Slavoj **Žižek**'s most recent publication.

Keywords: Slavoj **Žižek**, COVID-19, pandemic, communism
Słowa klucze: Slavoj **Žižek**, COVID-19, pandemia, komunizm