

ŽIŽEK'S PANDEMIC

On Utopian Realism and the Spirit of Communism

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Abstract In the first part of this article on Žižek's recent book *Pandemic!* I show how he develops a political theology of the spirit through a discussion of social distancing. In this argument Žižek connects the idea of physical distance to the biblical story of the resurrection, in which Jesus says to Mary Magdalene "noli me tangere" ("touch me not"), in order to imagine the emergence of a community of spirit from the social, political, and economic ruin caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrasting this community of spirit to the Chinese Communist Party's Foucauldian response to the outbreak of the virus, Žižek suggests a turn away from Prometheanism and the logic of domination toward a new posthuman humanitarianism based on a recognition of human weakness, vulnerability, and fragility. In Žižek's view, this turn toward a new form of humility would emerge from the final disenchantment of the spirit of capitalism and a recognition of the difference between human work, which contributes to a meaningful world, and bestial labor that dehumanizes and means nothing. Thus, the article shows how Žižek thinks about the pandemic in terms of a crisis of late capitalism and the possibility of a new spirit of communism. While the presexual nonlife of the virus is comparable to the drive of capitalism in respect of its unthinking will to replication and reproduction, Žižek finds the basis of humanity in our (human) mortality and being toward death that open out onto a new horizon of releasement (*Gelassenheit*) beyond biotechnoeconomic nihilism. The conclusion of the article, therefore, shows how Žižek imagines that the pandemic presents humanity with an existential choice about the way we organize social life. This choice is between the biopolitical domination of Chinese authoritarianism that seeks to control every aspect of life, American disaster capitalism that accepts the brutality of the state of nature, and finally Žižek's utopian spirit of communism based on a recognition of human and planetary finitude.

Keywords spirit of communism, late capitalism, nihilism, distance, existentialism

Slavoj Žižek opens his book on the coronavirus pandemic, *Pandemic!* (2020), by developing a political theology of social distancing. The passage of the New Testament, John 20:17, that Žižek focuses on is concerned with the elevation of human community beyond the body that suffers in the world toward the eternal spirit that resides elsewhere. In the parable, Mary Magdalene meets Christ following his resurrection, but before his ascent to Heaven. After mistaking Christ for “the gardener” (gravedigger), Mary recognizes her Lord: “Jesus saith to her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father; but go to my brethren, and say to them, I ascend to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God” (John 20:17). Supporting Žižek’s reading of the parable in his essay “Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body” (2008), Jean-Luc Nancy explains that Christ’s refusal of Mary Magdalene’s touch represents the moment of the withdrawal of the spirit from the profane world to the absolute distance of the sacred. Thus Nancy connects the opposition of touch/not touch (or the untouchable, which is simultaneously profane and sacred) to the idea of the evacuation or “emptying out” of the body in the name of eternity (see the Christian concept of kenosis from Philippians 2:7 for the idea of “emptying out”). The risen body is now simultaneously carnal and celestial, and humanity is split between its participation in the flesh-bound fallen world and the perfection of the heavens. Extending this interpretation of the Latin phrase *noli me tangere* (touch me not or stop clinging to me), which concerns Christ’s return to Heaven and the Holy Spirit, Žižek reads his own political theology of the virus through the lens of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) and politics of recognition to make the case that the social violence

caused by the response to COVID-19 has the potential to paradoxically bring people together through their very distance from each other. Even though we can no longer touch each other and lead our normal lives, Žižek says that we can connect in spirit through the look and potentially transform our world on the basis of our common participation in the spirit of human community. According to this Hegelian reading of social distancing, looking into the eyes of the other can allow us to establish a deep connection founded on the dark night of the soul that reveals itself when the other looks back into us: “The human being is this night, this empty nothing that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye” (Hegel 1983: 87, quoted in Žižek 2020: 2). In other words, Žižek refers to Hegel to make the case that true intimacy is based less on the immediacy of physical touch, which may very well be shot through with the base logic of objectification and commodification (in which the other is a profane capitalist thing), and more on the tension between presence/absence, proximity/distance, and connection/disconnection, which we enter when we look into the abyss of the other and the other looks back into the night of our own soul.

Although there may be nothing more intimate than encountering the endless night of the soul in the eyes of the other, Žižek is alive to the fact that this represents the utopian possibility of the new social conditions brought about by the virus. While the Hegelian (1977) theory of recognition leans on the paradox of presence and absence and connection and disconnection in order to establish durable

social relations, we know that Jean-Paul Sartre's (2018) later reading of the gaze focused on estrangement, objectification, and shame. The same is true of Jacques Lacan's work (2004), in which the object of attention stares back, transforming the subject into a thing, and Michel Foucault (1977), who focused on the eye of power and ocular-centric domination in modern history. In each of these cases there is no reciprocity in the look, but rather a clear imbalance of power, in which the "looked at" is always transformed into a shamed (Sartre), anxious (Lacan), or abnormal (Foucault) object by the voyeuristic "looker," the authoritarian subject who is in complete control of the situation by virtue of being able to take a God's-eye view. From the Sartrean-Lacanian-Foucauldian point of view, we might, therefore, respond to Žižek's political theology by saying that there is very little intimacy about a contemporary Zoom call, simply because the screen interrupts the connection between self and other and prevents genuine human contact from taking place. Under these conditions, the online self becomes a digital object, making it impossible to establish the kind of reciprocal connection Žižek suggests in his political theology. This is the case because the imaginary representation of the subject lacks the very lack (the abyssal depths that can never be plumbed) that enables intimacy.

This is, I think, precisely what Žižek (2020) picks up on when he contrasts his own utopian vision of communism (based on the politics of *noli me tangere*) with the communism of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), which rests on a politics of estrangement, distance, suspicion, and mistrust. According to Žižek, this logic of estrangement was evident from the very start of the pandemic in, for example, the way the CCP responded to the emergence

of the virus in late December/early January. Instead of immediate action, clear communication, and calls for international cooperation, the CCP, Žižek notes, sought to cover up the outbreak, silence those who tried to raise the alarm (including Li Wenliang, who subsequently died as a result of the COVID-19 infection), and keep everybody in the dark. Despite its authoritarian political model, which means that the Chinese government has the ability to manage the spread of the virus by locking down entire cities, it is clear that Žižek considers the expansion of the Chinese system one of the great dangers of the pandemic. While it is apparent that the free market is not up to the task of responding to the chaos caused by the virus or, we now know, the impacts of ecological catastrophes likely to occur in the future, Žižek is clear that the Chinese model is not the answer. There has to be some other way to respond to this catastrophic situation. Quite apart from the fact that the Chinese political system is founded on suspicion, fear, and control, China's economy is no less Promethean in its exploitation and destruction of the biosphere than the West. Even if he could swallow his moral objections to Chinese authoritarianism, this Prometheanism means that turning toward a new politics of social control would never work for Žižek, simply because his communist utopia (based on the spiritual intimacy of *noli me tangere*) includes a new way of thinking about the human relation to the planet itself that recalls Bernard Stiegler's (2018) recent work on the *neganthropocene*.

Akin to Stiegler (2018), who imagines the emergence of a post-Promethean *neganthropocene* on the other side of the apocalypse of the entirely humanized planet, Žižek (2020) opens his own critique of the *anthropocene*, and the possibility

of moving beyond the totally humanized world on the basis of the response to the virus, by noting the relationship between lockdown and exhaustion. Here he points out that the global lockdown has produced a dialectic of necessary and contingent work brought together by a deep sense of exhaustion. While the necessary worker employed in health, social care, haulage, and so on is exhausted by working long shifts in the shadow of the virus, those working in sectors that might be considered of less immediate necessity (for example, education) are similarly worn out by laboring in a situation in which the apparent significance of their work has been undermined by the pandemic's destruction of a collective, social sense of the future. In this respect, education is a particularly good example, since the purpose of schooling and higher education is to socialize and educate the next generation of citizens who will live, work, and define our social future. The virus has destroyed this sense of futurity, since we have no idea when or, in fact, if we will ever return to anything like normal life. But what kind of normal life? We know from large-scale surveys (Rogers 2020) carried out in the UK that a large proportion of people have no desire to return to the pre-lockdown version of (late capitalist) normal life. It is important to keep this in mind because it relates to what is, I think, Žižek's basic thesis regarding the final disenchantment of the spirit of capitalism.

Before moving on to unpack this point in more detail, I think it might have been useful for Žižek (2020) to gloss his discussion of the dialectic of work, mainly to prevent a reductive reading of the difference between necessary and contingent labor, in which the idea becomes about insisting on the political and economic value of a restrictive division of labor, which sees

only certain forms of "essential work" considered worthwhile because they serve an immediate need. The grave danger of this reductive reading is, of course, that it opens up a space for the kind of rampant populist anti-intellectuals, which we find operating in America (Trump), Britain (Johnson/Cummings), Brazil (Bolsonaro), Hungary (Orban), Turkey (Erdogan), and other countries where the right would like to eliminate the possibility of a questioning intellectual culture, to make the case that we have no need for intellectual life in the world of the virus because all that really matters is responding to immediate need. Under these conditions there would be no critique, power could operate without restriction, and the human would be transformed into the figure of the pre-/posthuman proletarian laborer who only carries out essential work considered necessary for survival.

Given the historical connection between state communism and totalitarianism, in which work was simply about reproduction and the satisfaction of immediate need, not to mention the most brutal forms of Victorian capitalism criticized by Karl Marx (1990), I think that it would have been wise for Žižek to expand his treatment of this point and perhaps emphasize the difference between labor and work and the connection between these two forms and temporality (present/future), since this is where I would suggest the key to understanding his thesis resides. The point here would be to separate labor, which serves an essential immediate need, from work, which is directed toward the creation of a future, and show how it is precisely this distinction that separates a proletarian from truly human society. While the former is closer to the state of nature where survival is based on reproduction, the latter is self-conscious, reflexive, and

contemplative, looking to a future where we (humans) are more than animals.

Against the reductive reading of what we might call the division between necessary and contingent work, my sense is that Žižek's (2020) key point is essentially about the failure of the capitalist symbolic system under conditions of lockdown, precisely because what he thinks has happened to contingent work in the age of the virus is that it has started to lose its reason for being, in the context of the capitalist mode of production. This final clause is very important because it is not that forms of work specifically orientated toward humanization (education, the arts, and so on) no longer matter or have lost their intrinsic value, but rather that the virus and subsequent lockdown have severed the relationship between these forms of work and the capitalist mode of production, with potentially important impacts on the operation of late capitalist ideology. That is to say that on the basis of Žižek's Hegelian-Marxist perspective, I read his thesis on the division of necessary/contingent work to mean that while necessary workers have been exhausted by the need to keep the most basic functions of the social system operative, those working in other sectors have been worn out by the necessity to keep working in the void left by capitalist institutions forced to retreat by the virus. Thus I think that Žižek's key point is that there is value in exhaustion in respect of the way that the worker thrown back on themselves is forced to reflect on the ways in which their work has been colonized by capitalist ideologies, in which absolutely everything becomes about the production of value stretching out into the infinite future, and pressed to consider alternative value systems and reasons for living beyond the mindless, empty spirit of capitalism.

While those working in sectors considered immediately necessary have no time to think about what they are doing (in a sense their work is necessary regardless of how the social and political system constructs it), the situation of those working from home in sectors effectively locked down have been forced to reflect on the value of their work beyond the symbolic system set up by their retreating institutions invariably marked by neoliberal ideology. In this situation the traumatic impact of the lockdown has been simultaneously about the radical transformation of the present (the worker has been thrown back on their own resources by being forced to work from home and so on), but also the destruction of the planned, predictable future (in which the worker is expected to complete X, Y, and Z in a certain period of time in the name of the production of this, that, or the other amount of value) by the forced withdrawal of the institution that imposes capitalist systems of valuation on work. In the face of the retreat of this institutional symbolic system, exhaustion is a consequence of the worker trying to keep working through (capitalist) insignificance and, in Žižek's view, the prelude to the possibility of class consciousness. At this point, the worker should recognize the failure of the capitalist institution to provide significance, and in this sense clearly see the lack of the Lacanian big other, and reach the traumatic conclusion that while their work might have intrinsic human value, the capitalist structure that had sustained their labor in the time before the virus no longer matters. In short, the old system is now meaningless, and we must rethink our reasons for working and more importantly living. Thus I think that it is in many respects possible to read Žižek's (2020) book as an update of Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit*

of *Capitalism* (2010), which explained the emergence of the spirit of capitalism from religious origins. In the case of Žižek's *Pandemic!* (2020), the key point is about the radical disenchantment of the spirit of capitalism in the age of the virus and the emergence of a new utopian spirit of communism—*noli me tangere*—founded on what we might call “catastrophic necessity.”

In previous books Žižek (1992) might have explained this process of disruption and questioning in terms of the Lacanian (2004) idea of “traversing the fantasy,” in the sense that what the virus and consequent lockdown have produced is a radical disenchantment of the Weberian spirit of capitalism (in which work is valuable, only because of its location within the capitalist system) and the possibility of the emergence of a new symbolic framework for understanding work and our interactions in the world. However, in *Pandemic!* (2020) he makes very little of Lacan and instead refers to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* (2014) and the five stages of grief that lead toward acceptance of mortality. The purpose of this reference to Kubler-Ross's famous stages is to suggest that we need to reach the point where we are able to accept the traumatic break in our everyday lives caused by the virus and lockdown and forget about returning to the past. While we behaved like little neoliberal machines previrus and prelockdown, busying ourselves like worker ants to keep the late capitalist show on the road, Žižek thinks that we need to accept that we are vulnerable, that we are made of flesh and blood, and that we are fundamentally limited creatures, and that there will be no return to the old system premised on the belief in the more-than-human “Prosthetic God” (Freud 2002) who labors like Sisyphus endlessly pushing his boulder up

the hill. In short, we need to look beyond Sisyphus and let him rest. However, Žižek is clear that this will not come easy. Despite our exhaustion, there is no doubt that this acceptance will take time, simply because we must pass through the traumatic stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression and come to terms with the possible end of a social and economic system that Fredric Jameson (2003: 76) told us was more or less unimaginable outside dystopian fiction. However, Žižek's wager is that the system will never return to what it was before the discovery of the virus. Following the collapse of the capitalist future under conditions of lockdown, Žižek's great hope is, therefore, that we (the capitalist labor force) will rethink the relationship between our work and significance and start to reject the capitalist model that insists on the psychological link between labor and the production of economic value (money) stretching off into the (unsustainable) future.

Beyond the failing capitalist system, Žižek (2020) imagines a communist utopia, where the present would no longer be marked by the objectification of the other (the body of the other), which we either want to consume in the sense of the sexual object or repel in the case of the economic competitor, and the future would become about more than (a) the infinite consumption of endless others and planetary resources, (b) competition with others who look like enemies, and (c) growth in the name of the elusive moment when we no longer want for anything. Instead, Žižek imagines that the deep sense of lack responsible for the capitalist addiction to excess projected into the future might lead to the emergence of a communist spiritual society founded on the political theology of *noli me tangere* and that the human sense of temporality (the present leading into the

future) hijacked by the spirit of capitalism could collapse toward a state of stable coexistence defined by a realistic recognition of human and planetary limits. On the other side of the failing spirit of capitalism, Žižek imagines an emergent spirit of communism based on the necessity of *noli me tangere* and a recognition of the vulnerability of the human that is simultaneously more and less than a neoliberal robot for producing economic value. Against critics who suggest that his utopianism is entirely unrealistic, Žižek (2020) points out that it is already possible to see the outline of the kind of communism he imagines in, for example, the massive state interventions undertaken by the Boris Johnson Conservative government in the UK. In this case, the political party that oversaw a decade of crushing austerity from 2010 onward has now found itself paying the wages of a significant proportion of the British workforce (the state-run furlough scheme) and announcing sector-wide bailouts on an almost daily basis. Of course, we know that the purpose of this approach is not the permanent transformation of the capitalist economy (the Conservatives are not communists, even though they are behaving like Bolsheviks), and the idea is that we will eventually return to normal, but Žižek's point is that there will be no return to business as usual for the neoliberal system because the fantasy of capitalism and the self-sustaining market has been exploded by the virus. We no longer believe. The virus has effectively exorcised Weber's spirit of capitalism.

In the teeth of the pandemic and with the looming threat of future catastrophes on the horizon, it is now hard to believe in Adam Smith's (1982) idea of the invisible hand or Friedrich Hayek's (2012) theory of catallaxy or somehow imagine that these visions of the self-regulating

market are appropriate in a world ravaged by sickness, redundancy, and scarcity. Since the late 1970s the social, political, and economic orthodoxy has taught that liberal (read neoliberal) capitalism is the only effective way to organize a social and economic system, but these days the idea of a fully functioning free market policed by the state to ensure maximum levels of competition and so on seems like a utopian fantasy. By contrast the idea of a state-run economy premised on the need to ensure more or less equal distribution of goods appears perfectly reasonable and necessary to ensure society is able to survive the virus and whatever other catastrophes await in the future. This is exactly Žižek's (2020) point. In his view the communist utopia of *noli me tangere* is not simply a leftist fantasy based on a moral preference for equality or melancholia for a time before global capitalism, but rather an entirely realistic response to a catastrophic situation that requires global cooperation. In his view, the simple truth is that we are all in the same boat. Žižek's utopianism is, therefore, a kind of catastrophic realism, a dark utopian realism, founded on the idea that ultimately there is no escape from the possibility of infection. There is no escape from contagion in our globalized world. Moreover, the recognition that this situation, which essentially reflects the ecological principle that we are all equally vulnerable to the effects of a failing biosphere, applies to everybody, including the super-rich who cannot buy their way out of their reliance on others to supply their food, energy, and other essentials, is, in Žižek's view, itself inescapable and absolutely transparent. By virtue of the fact that even the super-rich live in a socially produced world, they are ultimately vulnerable, and it is impossible for them to pretend otherwise.

Although history shows that the Spanish flu pandemic of the early part of the twentieth century never derailed or completely transformed the capitalist system, even though it killed somewhere between 20 and 40 million people globally, it is important to reflect on the social, political, and economic context of the current pandemic. Perhaps the reason the Spanish flu pandemic never transformed capitalism in the way that seems to be happening in the age of COVID-19 is because the early twentieth-century economic system had not evolved into its contemporary globalized form in which national economies are more or less entirely interconnected and have become far more fragile because of this high level of interdependence. From Žižek's (2020) Hegelian point of view, it is this fragility that has essentially been exposed by COVID-19, leading to the progressive retreat of the global system through national, urban, and household lockdowns and which has, paradoxically, led to a recognition of our human commonality in isolation before what he calls "the sub-life of the virus." In this respect it is possible to see that Žižek's communist utopia of the spirit—*noli me tangere*—is based on the primitive presexual life of the virus, which has no purpose but to reproduce itself through the infection of host organisms. This is surely how we must understand the idea of the raising up of the body: the other side of the dystopia of viral sublife (corporeal contagion, disease, and sickness) is the utopia of civilized community (spiritual connection, cooperation, and social support).

Even though Žižek resists the temptation to refer to Sigmund Freud's (2003) famous discussion of the protozoa from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the connection to his reading of the virus is clear. While Freud considered the protozoa, the

single-celled organism, representative of the immortality of life before sexual reproduction, which introduces death into nature, Žižek's philosophy of the virus, which exists somewhere on the borderline between life and nonlife (the virus is a bundle of genetic material but lacks the metabolic functions that would lead to the easy association with life), leads easily to comparison with Schopenhauer's (2014) idea of the will or Freud's (2003) own concept of drive, which, as Lacan (1991) showed in his seminar on the ego, concerns what happens when we occupy the borderline state between being and nonbeing and find ourselves constantly switching between these two positions. Since the virus is even more elementary than Freud's protozoa, which he employed to show what life was like before the evolution of death, it perfectly illustrates Žižek's point that its blind will to replicate on the edge of life should remind us of the basic contingency and meaninglessness of existence that carries on for no reason.

Against Freud's (2003) conclusion, which is that the human is preprogrammed to return to the kind of flatline existence of the single-celled organism, Žižek's (2020) hope is that recognition of the basic, elementary will of the virus might shock us out of our complacent, unthinking busyness and lead us to think about the way our humanity exceeds the primitive functionalism of the bundle of genetic material on the edge of life. In other words, understanding the stupid drive of the virus should lead to reflection on the mindless will of capitalism, which transforms humans into proletarians whose only function is the reproduction of the system endlessly into the future, and cause humanity to simultaneously recognize its inherent vulnerability and existential freedom to transform its world.

Unlike the virus we are not unthinking parasites balanced on the edge of life itself but, rather, complex organisms capable of titanic individual and social achievements precisely because we know that life is fragile. We know that we are contingent, that one day we will die, and this is the source of our existential freedom and potential to change our world. To emphasize this point we might refer to Hegel (1977: 19), whom Nancy (2008) quotes in his essay on the raising of the profane body: "But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it." Here, reference to Hegel shows that we make our world, create culture and civilization, and reach out to touch God, even though we know that we are vulnerable, mortal creatures. Indeed, Nancy (2008: 45) makes the point that it is precisely because we die that human life is possible, since without death there would be nothing but contagion and what he calls "the cancerous propagation of life that would no longer be life." This life without life, this "sublife" would, of course, resemble the nihilistic universe of the virus that has no purpose other than its own replication. Against this version of endless life, or immortality that Freud (2003) connected to drive and the sexless reproduction of the protozoa, the death of the fallen creature captured in the parable of Christ's resurrection and ascent to Heaven (*noli me tangere*) represents the possibility of transfiguration, metamorphosis, and ultimately the existential choice to change the world. To develop this existential thesis, Žižek draws on Martin Heidegger (2010, 2016), explaining that the experience of the drive of the virus should lead humanity toward a recognition of its own being-toward death and its consequent release or "releasement" (*Gelassenheit*)

from its own (modern, techno, capitalist) nihilistic will to will to will ad nauseam, before turning back to Hegel's (1977) famous example of concrete universality from the *Phenomenology*: the spirit is a bone. Where the point of Hegel's idea of the phrenological equation of the spirit and skull was to show how the highest form of idealism (spirit) finds concrete manifestation in the lowest form of materiality, Žižek (2020) imagines that "the spirit is a virus" to show how the highest form of human society could emerge from the lowest form of nonlife that has no objective beyond its own reproduction.

In conclusion, Žižek (2020) explains that the virus presents humanity with an existential choice between the endless violence of unthinking Freudian (2003) drive and the possibility of a utopian form of communism based on human vulnerability and our raising up to the possibility of human cooperation. While the latter emerges from his reading of the parable of the resurrection, *noli me tangere*, the theory of kenosis, and Hegel's (1977) philosophy of participation in the spirit, Žižek identifies the former condition with the nihilistic will of the virus and the brutal social and economic Darwinism of neoliberal capitalism. If the spirit of communism is concerned with a recognition of vulnerability and the sacrifice of the self in the name of the other, then there is no such ethic of civilization and raising up of the profane body about the nihilism of the virus or the spirit of capitalism because they're all about the blind consumption of the corporeal. In respect of its stupid, unthinking drive into the future, Žižek regards the virus as a kind of synecdoche (or, in Hegelian terminology, concrete universality) of the will to will to will of late capitalism. We know that the virus is a form of elementary sublife that

simply reproduces itself by leaping from host to host, but in Žižek's reading, global capitalism is a similarly mindless, parasitical, cybernetic organism that lives through endless exchange and the generation of surpluses that enable it to keep moving forward into the future. In the past we might have thought about this movement in terms of progress, development, or modernization, but it is much more difficult to take this view today. From Žižek's point of view, calling global capitalism progressive would be like saying that the virus is a modernizing force by virtue of its ability to spread and keep moving forward by infecting more and more people. Caught between the nihilistic sublife of the virus and the nihilistic techno will to will of global capitalism, Žižek (2020) thinks that humanity can make an existential choice to change its situation. Indeed, we must make a choice because it turns out it is impossible for the virus to coexist with global capitalism in its most brutal neoliberal form. Despite what Trump and Bolsonaro would have people believe (there is no virus, it's simply a "little flu"), it seems that contagion and exchange are polar opposites, and this creates the opportunity for humanity to raise itself above the profane state of nature in which "man is wolf to man" (*homo homini lupus*) (Hobbes 1991: 89) toward a new kind of society founded on sympathy and compassion for others. Reading Žižek's (2020) short book, we see that we are now probably facing a stark choice between:

(1) Chinese authoritarianism and a model of high-tech, biopolitical domination set up to control the virus and every aspect of human life;

(2) American disaster capitalism and a social, economic, and political model that seeks to reconcile the sublife of the virus and the nihilism of neoliberal capitalism by

simply ignoring the catastrophic consequences of their coexistence and pretending everything is under control; or finally,

(3) cooperative disaster communism and a social, economic, and political model based on a recognition of human vulnerability, the limits of the organic, and a simultaneous emptying out and raising up of the profane body toward a spiritual community of sympathy and compassion founded on the idea of *noli me tangere*.

While it is clear that Žižek prefers the third option, which would respond to the bleak nihilism of the virus and the catastrophic Prometheanism of global capitalism in both its Chinese (1) and American (2) forms with a stable, spiritual model of human community concerned with taking care (*sorge*) of self, other, and world, the existential choice is not his to make but, rather, a decision that we (humanity) will have to take together.

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