

# Review Essay

## ***Ethics of Mobility, Globalization, Political Economy, and Culture***

### ***Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors: Against the Double Blackmail***

Slavoj Žižek. Brooklyn, NY and London: Melville House, 2016. 127pp.

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#### **ŽIŽEK, A GOOD EUROPEAN**

Slavoj Žižek's *Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors-Against the Double Blackmail* is yet another book demonstrating Žižek's ability to seize on major contemporary social phenomena and to bring to bear on a topic, with provocative results, his unusual combination of traits. He is very much a European educated by study and travel into an especially vivid awareness of the connections of Western Europe (and the UK), with Central and Eastern Europe (including his native Slovenia), and much of North America. He has an expansive sense of being European that includes a sense of special

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kinship with historical and contemporary cultural extensions of Western Europe. He has as well more distant but genuine sympathies with the oppressed in non-European-centered cultures.

Obviously, Žižek thinks in global terms that comment on much more than European problems in his body of work as a whole. But in this book the focus of attention tends to return from farther-flung examples, outside Europe, to Europe. His general traits (not geo-politically specific) need to be understood with his self-ascribed more European-centered qualities in mind. These traits include erudition, passion, a taste for popular media, journalistic flair, gruff and sly humor, interest in the big picture, and an endlessly productive willingness to speculate. But his intellectual and political personality cannot truthfully be encapsulated in any list of virtues (real enough) or vices. The vices are also real enough, such as repetitiveness, obscurity, reactionary impulses that arguably conflict internally for him in regards to his renovated version of Marxism (a renovated Marxism with some puzzling characteristics), willingness to tolerate huge risks for sizable human populations in his political advocacy (whether those affected would agree to the risk or not), frequent airy repudiation of “liberal democracy” but reliance on liberal democracy and many of its characteristic accompanying ethical intuitions, “and so on, and so on,” as he often says.

A perpetual traveler, a kind of immigrant or quasi-immigrant himself, liable to pop up in print or on the screen in any number of settings around the world, Žižek here in this 2016 monograph (as elsewhere) takes as his topic some issues arising from increasing manifestations of human geo-political mobility (forced or voluntary). He is interested in the background causes of the manifestations, and the consequences of mobility, especially in cross-cultural interactions with political-economic implications.

More recently than the publication of *Refugees*, Žižek delivered a talk in Vienna, on 20 May 2017, a talk which is available online, in which he comments about many of the topics in *Refugees*. But that talk is not focused on this 2016 book, but rather looking forward to and promoting still another forthcoming book. That talk was conjoined with ruminations on other Žižekian topics such as atheism and love.<sup>1</sup> In another talk, at the University of Ghent, arranged in concert with the Department of Philosophy at that university, on 24 May 2017, Žižek also discusses related topics, e.g., “populist” demonization of imaginary enemies, including racial and ethnic “Others.”<sup>2</sup> In this review essay, while we critically discuss *Refugees*, we sometimes contextualize our discussion of

this book by calling attention to noteworthy connections between *Refugees* and other work by Žižek.

In what follows, we do not try to reproduce the actual sequence of chapters in *Refugees*. Rather, we aim to present and critically examine Žižek's stance and some of the main interconnected issues about that stance.

### **ŽIŽEK, EUROPE, REFUGEES, TERRORISM, NEIGHBORS**

*Refugees* is difficult to summarize, or even to outline. Yet in our opinion, the book frames topics and proposes a viewpoint that invites and admits of reconstruction, and amply repays critical examination. We do not know if there is a *unique* conceptual map to be drawn about Žižek's thoughts in this book, but we do find it possible to sketch and critique *one coherent picture* of what he is saying. This book is written as it were from the viewpoint of a rather loyal though anxious and pessimistic European (but certainly with supplementary interpretive references to the rest of the globe's population as well, especially the excluded and suffering billions outside some better-off areas). Žižek is primarily asking how Europe should handle problems about refugees and terrorism that result because of people from mostly distinct and separated cultures coming into proximity with one another and engaging in transactions (often conflicts) of many different sorts. *Refugees* has, at times, the dizzying comparative qualities that are present in some other excellent contemporary philosophy and social science.<sup>3</sup> Such comparative work ranges over a wide variety of societal contexts (present and past) for its sometimes startlingly juxtaposed comparisons and contrasts. There can admittedly be disjointed aspects of some of the resulting texts (including *Refugees*), and less continuous or at least less structured argumentative exposition than one might expect in much other philosophical writing. Sometimes such a text reads like a series of arresting passages of varying length only loosely moving in a definite direction towards a definite conclusion. This Žižek book, like many another by this author, has dense speculative passages, some persuasive, some not in their interpretive drift and inferences. Some of the empirical claims are questionable, or at least would seem to need a firmer basis in scientific method and evidence (possibly based on anthropological fieldwork) than Žižek's bold assertions. One example is Žižek's claim that refugees too often want the benefits of European liberal democracies but also the option to continue with their traditional cultural practices in the societies such as Norway or Germany in which they hope to settle (Žižek 2016: 61). How true is this? We do not know; neither does

Žižek, though he asserts it. Žižek is on safer ground in raising the issue what refugees might want, rather than asserting what they do want without evidence. As to some dense speculative passages in *Refugees*, often not so much empirically questionable as of questionable meaning altogether, that is the nature of some of Žižek's work generally, which can be both rewarding and frustrating in this respect. Possibly pushing at the boundaries of thought in Žižek's manner necessarily impels the thinker to some obscurity. A more negative possibility is that some of his heroes such as Lacan are unreliable resources. We nonetheless consider it very worthwhile for the reader to be patient in sorting out what Žižek has to say.

### MOBILITY AS CENTRAL TO GLOBAL CAPITALISM

Despite the difficulty in summarizing or outlining this book, one possible central and complex idea (or set of ideas), part of the current Žižek viewpoint, can be discerned. Human mobility (and corporate mobility is an aspect of this), border-crossing, as well as border-shifting, border-creation, and border-blurring, are to be anticipated as a continuing central condition in contemporary life.<sup>4</sup> For Žižek, refugees, terror, (and weird, troubling, "creepy" neighbors), are all to be expected under the circumstances of globalization, specifically global capitalism. Weird neighbors are weird and "creepy" because we have difficulties understanding what they desire (or relatedly their *jouissance*, a type of pleasure important in Žižek's theorizing, expressed in a concept difficult to decode, derived from Lacan); but we do not understand what we desire either.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the major problems we face are environmental, though basic threats take other forms as well. The most obvious other motivations for immigration or population movements are military or quasi-military violence and economic pressures.

We need, Žižek says, to get used to a more plastic and nomadic way of life. After some reflections on possible post-Fukushima-nuclear-incident scenarios in Japan, Žižek generalizes:

The main lesson to be learned, therefore, is that human-kind should get ready to live in a more "plastic" and nomadic way: local or global changes in environment may result in the need for unheard-of large-scale social transformations and population movements. We are all more or less rooted in a particular way of life, protected by rights, but some historical contingency may all of a sudden throw us into a situation in

which we are compelled to reinvent the basic coordinates of our way of life. (Žižek 2016: 110)

Žižek adds: “One thing is clear: in cases of such turmoil, national sovereignty will have to be radically redefined and new levels of global cooperation invented” (110). This is an interpretive conclusion towards which the book moves.<sup>6</sup>

So this book emphasizes problems arising from personal and group mobility and inter-cultural contacts within a global capitalist context. But the book also presupposes and re-states more general views expressed previously by Žižek. He often designates four major contemporary crisis areas: ecology; coping with the implications of intellectual property; coping with the dimensions of biogenetics; and the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded, which Žižek elsewhere and here describes in terms of many examples. The examples include politically motivated walls; gated communities; slums; a global division between comparatively prosperous parts of humanity living under comparatively peaceful circumstances, and the rest (the majority of humankind), often living in hell; new forms of apartheid (a word-concept obviously generated in South Africa, but morphing into meanings about ever-changing, new forms of exclusion).<sup>7</sup>

### **ŽIŽEK AND THE SUPPOSED NEED FOR CULTURAL COHERENCE**

Our current situation, in Žižek’s account, has implications about much needed (more local or national or geo-politically transnational, e.g., EU-wide) cultural coherence and related political economy. And culture is interconnected with political economy, e.g., in the literal sense that it translates into influential, real economy money-and-property transactions) (Žižek 2016: 18–19). Nonetheless, Žižek acknowledges, indeed emphasizes that “culture” is a problematic concept (and he is right about that point). But he notes that culture is “emerging as our central life-world category” (Žižek 2016: 63–67). It seems that for Žižek “culture” is often an “ideological” concept, better understood in more basic terms of economic conflicts and class struggle. This is an unsurprising feature of Žižek’s Marxism.

Cultural coherence necessary to unify Europe, and to preserve and extend what is best in European values and traditions (and there are analogies elsewhere in the world also) will, according to Žižek, require some specification of and insistence on what should be “the *Leitkultur* (the dominant culture),” i.e., “a positive emancipatory *Leitkultur*” (Žižek 2016: 108, 109). Substantial ethical and positive political economic improvements in the globe as a whole will require moving beyond global capitalism. But clearly defining a

viable alternative is not feasible currently, according to Žižek. Pessimism about our prospects for decent conditions is plausible, on Žižek's view. What seems like the light at the end of the tunnel may be a train coming towards us, a formulation Žižek offers more than once in his writings and talks (Žižek 2016: 115).

A viable and improved alternative to current global capitalism, according to Žižek, would require forms of organization beyond liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is failing, as periodic elections lose their genuinely legitimating function, as the welfare state declines, and as liberal democracy runs the risks in many places of turning into authoritarianism or neo-fascism. According to Žižek, we would also have to avoid (or possibly to go beyond, if we are there already) authoritarian capitalism (which is a social form making major gains, on Žižek's view, notably in China). Elsewhere, Žižek has opined that some forms of authoritarian capitalism arguably are beating the alliance of liberal democracy with global capitalism at its own game.

Žižek's reference to a *Leitkultur* or dominant culture is interesting and plausible, but also highly problematic. He writes:

One has...to do two things: first, formulate a minimum set of norms that are obligatory for everyone, without fear that they will appear "Eurocentric": religious freedoms, the protection of individual freedom against group pressure, rights of women and so on; and second, within these limits, unconditionally insist on the toleration of different ways of life. And what if norms and communication don't work? Then the force of law should be applied in all its forms. (Žižek 2016:107)

What does this mean? Žižek seems to contrast "norms and communication" on the one hand, and "the force of law" on the other hand. We need to ask, first, what, more clearly put, are these norms, communication, and laws that are crucial for articulating a *Leitkultur*? Who is formulating these norms (and associated communication), or the law, and for what supposedly legitimate purposes? We need to take into account what are the reasons given for or against the ideas proposed for a *Leitkultur*, and what are legitimate reasons here, and why? So much is unanswered or unacknowledged here in *Refugees*, even allowing charitably that Žižek is obviously not trying to state a complete and finished doctrine. Are the norms etc. and/or law to be used in decisions about immigration policy? Probably that is so, but how? Are the uses of the norms, etc. also, or perhaps primarily, intended to shape conduct once (former) foreigners are present in a society? How? What if the one-time

foreigners flout, or try to challenge or change the norms and laws of the receiving society? Is it legitimate to try to avoid this in making immigration decisions about who should be allowed in, or in deciding how to shape immigrant conduct, or in expulsions? How far should “religious freedoms” and the other values mentioned by Žižek extend? Current controversies in the U.S. show that what religious freedoms should warrant raises serious questions. How would we resolve issues about “individual freedom and group pressure”? These problems often arise when the education of the immigrant young, or parental authority in general, are issues, as well as in many other contexts, such as norms about marriage. Žižek must be aware of such types of questions, as his reference to unreasonable objections in France to burkas implies, for example, and other passages (Žižek 2016: 108). But his relatively brief references to the need for a *Leitkultur* offer almost no guidance on the vast variety of such issues. At the same time, he is adamant about the importance of some of the key issues:

...the crucial task of those fighting for emancipation today is towards a positive emancipatory *Leitkultur*, which alone can sustain an authentic coexistence and immixing of different cultures...If we make any compromise here, if we are lost in pragmatic compromises, our lives are not worth living. (Žižek 2016: 109)

This is passionately written, but settles nothing, nor does it undercut the need for pragmatic compromises in some senses of what is pragmatic. Surely we need pragmatism to deal with many of the questions. Perhaps Žižek has some vulgar meaning of pragmatism in mind, in his rejection of pragmatism.

For Žižek, and his view is plausible, the refugee “crisis” as well as terrorism are largely products of contemporary global capitalism. While economic justice is basic for him, in this book he seems very interested in how to preserve what he regards as the best in European traditions and culture. He is willing to run the risk of being accused (unfairly, he would affirm) of Eurocentrism, and willing, up to a point, to risk being accused of standing up for the aftermath of colonialism. He expresses disdain for what he considers excessive attention in some quarters to the critique of Eurocentrism. According to Žižek, given that many refugees bring with themselves their non-European cultures, there can be many problems about migration into European countries of significant numbers of non-Europeans; (he mentions early on particularly refugees from Africa and the Middle East) (Žižek 2016: 4).

### **SOME ASPECTS OF ŽIŽEK'S MARXISM**

As a self-professed Marxist, for whom economics is basic, Žižek nonetheless, and consistently, rejects the version of Marx that attributes a positive teleology to human history, a version that claims that “history is on our side” (i.e., the side of genuine as opposed to phony pseudo-progressive anti-capitalists). However, he claims that Marx himself was very much a product of Europe at its best. (Yes, we would agree, but some of Marx’s debt to European tendencies is highly questionable ethically! Think, e.g., of Marx’s defense of supposedly progressive imperialism in India.) However, what remains of Marx in Žižek’s version of Marxism is somewhat unclear, even accepting as clear enough Žižek’s concerns about class struggle, and Žižek’s rejection of progressive teleology in human history. A kind of “voluntarism” about possible societal progress is a part of Žižek’s own version of Marxism. No “Big Other” (a favorite phrase in Žižek borrowed from Jacques Lacan) will save humanity. There is no historical law that capitalism will end well. (In other places, Žižek’s concept of the “Big Other” is different: it may be God, or “the people,” etc.) If something better replaces global capitalism as we move into the future, it will be because of “us.” (Is this “us,” for Žižek, the better sort of Europeans and their allies or and/or converts to the best in European values among non-Europeans? we might ask).

Nonetheless, and Žižek emphasizes this, it is not clear at present what we should do; “What Is To Be Done?” is a great question (to use Lenin’s phrase, as Žižek does). Invention is necessary. Žižek seems increasingly pessimistic however this can be successfully pursued. He does advocate the continuing relevance, with adjustments, of “class struggle” (Žižek 2016: 117). In the present, Žižek often continues to practice the critique of ideology (in some sense rather like the old idea of critique of false consciousness). This is, indeed, his major activity.

### **ŽIŽEK: A DEARTH OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL THOUGHT?**

But without some accompanying formulation of strategy and goals, and activism towards positive developments, the critique of ideology is incomplete, as Žižek must know. Thus in a discussion of problems about the globalization of agriculture and issues about food, he remarks: “...we will have to invent new forms of large-scale collective action: neither the standard state intervention nor the local self-organizations (so much praised by postmodern



Leftists) can do the job” (Žižek 2016: 51). But he has little positive to propose in this regard.

Žižek does refer elsewhere in the book to the problems of resettling large populations of refugees, and suggests that Fredric Jameson’s idea of use of the military deserves serious consideration:

So what is required in such a desperate situation? What should Europe do? Fredric Jameson recently proposed the utopia of the global militarization of society as a mode of emancipation: while the deadlocks of global capitalism are more and more palpable, all the imagined democratic-multitude-grassroots changes “from below” are ultimately doomed to fail, so the only way to break the vicious cycle of global capitalism is some kind of “militarization,” which is another name for suspending the power of the self-regulating economy. Perhaps the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe provides an opportunity to test this option. (Žižek 2016: 105)

While the details of such ideas invite further critical study, the proposal is sufficiently alarming (even Jameson uses that word) to warrant skepticism. In another volume, Žižek and Jameson have joined forces (with comments from others) to elaborate on this approach.<sup>8</sup>

Žižek currently lacks an adequate constructive vision, and this is bad (bad both for Žižek and the world at large), because not only does Žižek have no plausible yet definite strategy about what is to be done instrumentally, he does not have any clear or reasonable (even if fuzzy) idea about what the goal of “Communism” is. Admittedly, Marx himself was unclear about this. But in Žižek, more seriously than in his references to Jameson, a series of puns about the “commons” (suggestive but not very definite) is mentioned as a preferable substitute for what Žižek now says is anything living, justifiable, and yet analogous to what should be learned from the “dead end” (as Žižek himself describes it in various texts) of 20<sup>th</sup> century actually existing Communism.

### **ŽIŽEK AND THE RE-ASSESSMENT OF (ONCE) REALLY EXISTING MARXIST REGIMES**

Yet despite his protestations in denying this, Žižek evidently harbors not only some admiration for Lenin, who also was obliged to improvise in his historical situation, but also

perhaps a certain nostalgia for at least some features of 20<sup>th</sup> century Communism. A more positive way to read the extensive discussions of mostly defunct really existing socialism in some of Žižek's writings (not so much evident in *Refugees*, but not entirely absent in spirit either) is that he sees a need for political philosophy and for normative (as well as for descriptive) social science to revisit, and re-integrate an assessment of, the role of ideas derived from an understanding of the experience of past really existing Central and Eastern European Marxist regimes, in contemporary thought and activism. This has many implications, of which one is the very live importance of understanding the example of contemporary China, which Žižek is well aware of, but which (we think assuming a debatable viewpoint) Žižek classifies as now embodying authoritarian capitalism. However, Xi Jinping's recent re-assertions of the continuing importance of Marxism in China do not comport well with Žižek's interpretation of the current Chinese reality as mainly authoritarian capitalism.

**ZIZEK AMBIVALENTLY INTERESTED IN THE POSSIBILITIES FOR  
A GREAT LEADER?**

Dangerously, Žižek may have a propensity, however muffled, for hoping for a Great Leader, despite his rejection of the Big Other. In Žižek's world-view, apparently Lenin was great (though his project was headed for failure), but Stalin was not. That Leninism might have laid the groundwork for Stalinism is somehow not to be dwelt on excessively in Žižek's exposition. Probably Žižek would be annoyed by this reminder. (We should add that there really are annoying tendencies for critics of Marxist analysis and strategy to accuse Marxism of a necessary tendency towards Stalinism).

Possibly, but this is not a definitely well-grounded claim by us, Žižek is fonder of some more historically remote Great Leaders connected with supposedly historically progressive causes (perhaps Robespierre is an example, as well as, for Žižek, Lenin). But Žižek may well be skeptical or very negative about most contemporaries as possible Great Leaders, especially those who embrace manifestly objectionable goals. (We might also recollect Žižek's put-downs in other writing of Nelson Mandela, to take one "progressive" example). Žižek is witheringly critical of various more recent authoritarian leaders; in this book, examples are Robert Mugabe, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, et al. Marine Le Pen, a fledgling authoritarian party leader with a potential for achieving political power as a rightist racist, is unsurprisingly criticized elsewhere by Žižek. But Žižek characteristically

regards Emmanuel Macron, the man who defeated her in a French presidential election conducted after the publication of *Refugees*, as a symptom of the sort of neoliberalism that will continue to buoy Le Pen or generate her successors. Elsewhere, Žižek had prophetically criticized Silvio Berlusconi, warning that he represented a charismatic political and plutocratic media-figure type whose time might well have arrived on the scene in Western liberal democracies. (See the revised, updated paperback edition, Žižek 2011: 323–24).

We wonder whether Žižek's repeated interest in supposedly heroic or mixed monstrous-but-historically-influential Great Men is a symptom of something unwholesome. To be fascinated by Stalin, Lenin, Mao, et al., some might think, could enable a political analyst to derive insightful lessons about societal dynamics. But it might also suggest too much of a tendency to conceptualize political issues from the viewpoint or circumstances of the Great Man who could voluntarily bring about change. One might compare this with the perhaps milder example of those U.S. Supreme Court watchers, e.g., lawyers or historians, who analyze issues of U.S. political morality to a substantial extent by studying the personnel involved in (and the content of) Supreme Court decisions and their circumstances. This perspective may not be the most fruitful for understanding normative societal questions or undertaking processes of societal change. The perspective may be helpful when conjoined with other, deeper perspectives. But there is no standard recipe to grasp what is the best combination of perspectives about major societal decision-making. In the case of Žižek, and in particular with the issues in *Refugees*, one cannot fairly accuse him of an obsession with the perspective of Great Men. The closest one could get to justifying such an accusation is that he uses Lenin's question, "What Is to Be Done?" as the title of his concluding chapter, and refers to Lenin's situation when depicting our need to improvise politically and invent in contemporary circumstances (Žižek 2016: 115–16). Perhaps what is more promising is remaining wary about any Great Decider, understanding that there are no indispensable leaders, and exploring a variety of possibilities for choosing our developmental direction. Žižek does at times suggest scorn about activism from below, the grass-roots, as the cliché has it. However, we do not know what persons, groups, cultures, or countries may devise initiatives that will contribute to the moral advance of humanity. We may not need a "universal" largely unified struggle, which Žižek hopes for, but rather varied struggles, some of which can be combined in unpredictable ways (not always with neat consistency) to further emancipatory democratic development. As to

cultures within a society, besides the question how they can live together, there are the questions which cultures (or activism by other sets of like-minded inhabitants) can offer distinctive projects to advance democracy, and what those projects can teach us. From this perspective, differences and inconsistencies across cultures (or other groups) in a multi-cultural society are not necessarily best hastily reconciled with one another, but may contribute through protracted conflict (if the conflict is productive, not outrageous and seriously destructive). An overbearing *Leitkultur* might render such advances impossible. Let's consider next a central feature of Žižek's outlook, his skepticism or outright rejection of multi-culturalism.

#### **ZIZEK AS A CRITIC OF MULTI-CULTURALISM (WITH FURTHER APPLICATIONS SUGGESTED)**

For Žižek, (and something similar could be affirmed of as different a thinker as Amartya Sen, or a politician such as Angela Merkel) multi-culturalism is not a solution to the contemporary problems (about refugees, immigrants, and minorities as such) with which he is concerned. In Sen's case, he is particularly critical of attempts in England to support state-funded schools that nurture the preservation of Islamic religious education, as contrasted with secular, "reason"-focused education. Sen seems to think such religious schools separatist and divisive. However, Sen has a few kind words for U.S. multi-culturalism as regards African-American culture (See Sen 2006: 115).

Multi-culturalism, in the versions Žižek criticizes, is said by him to have many weaknesses and objectionable features. According to Žižek, it too often endorses the preservation of core features of non-European cultures that are not societally consistent with the best aspects of the mores of those European societies attractive to refugees (or even attractive to voluntary immigrants as such). We would object that multi-culturalism in other contexts, such as the U.S., has at its best sought to recognize and celebrate valuable elements of the cultures of racial and ethnic minorities. At its best, such multi-culturalism is not averse to the best in U.S. (or more generally "Western") values. Nor does such multi-culturalism at a reflective level necessarily repudiate the legitimate criticism of some characteristics of minority cultures. To dismiss the vital goals of some multi-culturalism, and to assume that some of its inessential and occasional flaws are necessary elements of all multi-culturalism, as Žižek at times seems to do, and dismissively, seems to us to be a major ethical and political error. The error in fact undermines what are some of the major

strengths in European (and European-descended) traditions. Such dismissal also, and this appears to be of major importance, seems to neglect or downplay the possibility that some infusions from immigrant non-Western cultures might improve the value systems of some Western countries. Without allowing for this genuine possibility, Žižek really is objectionably Eurocentric.

Thus, a reasonably self-critical but assertive multi-culturalism need not fearfully avoid the critique of some features of Islamic societies and cultures, need not yield to accusers who denounce all such critique as Islamophobic. Such thoughtful multi-culturalism, like Žižek, may (or may not) assert the importance of freedom of expression even to the extent of supporting the publication of caricatures of a revered prophet.

Beyond a focus on multi-culturalism, other analogous topics and movements such as anti-racism, feminism, and gay rights can often be (as Žižek would probably approve of) linked with a focus on political-economic inequality and the need for an emancipatory democratic project. These varied movements can to some extent make common cause in emancipatory democratic activism from below. That suggests a rather different strategy and set of tactics from Žižek's, with his apparent attraction to more top-down foci. Top-down approaches may sometimes be promising or simply necessary, but without popular initiatives, they are likely to fall short, or perhaps to fail disastrously.

### **ŽIŽEK-THE GOOD (EVEN BRILLIANT), THE BAD, AND THE DEFICIENT**

We are grateful to Žižek for his adventuresome willingness to question boundaries and challenge dogmas of many sorts, and this applies to his ideas about refugees, terror, and trouble with the neighbors. He is capable of sharp critical observations about liberal democracy and global capitalism. But, we think, he is not as capable of constructively articulating alternatives (a criticism he seems at times to be tired of acknowledging and even may tend to shrug off). We need not expect detailed blue-prints to hope for rough sketches of a direction and approximate goals.

Žižek could also gain from greater appreciation of (but not mere nostalgic retreat to) some of the disciplinary values (e.g., in philosophy and socio-cultural anthropology) that he has profitably blurred. More seriously, Žižek could gain from an appreciation of some of the ethical and political values he has often disparaged (such as multi-culturalism, tolerance, anti-racism, and feminism), even some features of the traditions of liberalism and liberal democracy, which in any case Žižek may often “relapse” into himself, as in his

ambivalent attitudes about Bernie Sanders. Sanders gets good mentions in this book for his willingness to communicate with ordinary folk (not to dismiss them as “white trash,” Žižek says), folk who are troubled by globalization. Sanders, we would observe, is something of a reversion in his proposed policies to New Deal advocacy, and in some cases Sanders has pragmatically made common cause, whether justifiably or not, with politicians such as Hillary Clinton, who is elsewhere much derided by Žižek (as a leader of an inherently incoherent neoliberal coalition), and with the economist Jeffrey Sachs, hardly an author radically critical of the foundations of global capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

We do not deny, but affirm, that “liberal democracy” is in serious trouble, as Žižek often repeats. We do not, however, as does Žižek, descend to denunciations of “Political Correctness,” a rather empty and confusing phrase, better avoided as an attempt to express an analytical category, better avoided in popular political rhetoric, whether one defends it or attacks it. “Political Correctness” is a phrase that, in some uses in the U.S., has recently in Trump terminology been used to refer to, e.g., a supposedly cowardly and perverse unwillingness among some so-called “politically correct” Americans to attack the relatives of terrorists; or more persistently in Trump’s case, an unwillingness (e.g., by some within the judicial system) to engage in legalizing religious discrimination in immigration policy.

### CONCLUSION

Žižek is pessimistic about the prospects for a successful emancipatory project that could move beyond global capitalism and the liberal democracies that are subordinated to global capitalism. Yet he thinks it is worthwhile to attempt to continue to develop the European Marxist tradition to cope with major challenges of the contemporary world, particularly, in this book, the challenges arising from human mobility and manifestations of exclusionary societal phenomena, e.g., refugees, terrorism, and troubles with creepy neighbors. On his view, a continuing focus on political economy is important, as is culture, but “culture” has increasingly become a problematic part of political economy. On Žižek’s views about “What Is to Be Done?,” articulation of a *Leitkultur* is central, and we should avoid forms of multi-culturalism, supposed anti-racism, upper-middle-class feminism, repressive tolerance, and liberalism (etc.) that seek to detach themselves from projects to overcome major basic exclusionary (presumably highly inequitable) societal processes in the global political economy. In our discussion, we have expressed our reservations about Žižek with respect to these views.

### APPENDIX ON ŽIŽEK ON TRUMP

As we conclude this interpretation and critical evaluation of Žižek's book, as set in the broader context of Žižek's ideas expressed in many places, we feel compelled to comment also on a contextual point not explicitly referenced within the monograph: Žižek's by now notorious on-screen remark just prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election that if he were an American citizen he would vote for Donald Trump, not Hillary Clinton, that Clinton supposedly was the "true danger," and that Trump's election might generate a great awakening in the U.S. Subsequent events (like the previous U.S. campaign) suggest that Žižek's views were a serious error. Žižek has since partially back-pedaled from his earlier remarks, now referring to Trump as vulgar and an idiot. Trump is, though not original in this respect, a prototypical advocate of divisive walls and a proponent of ill-advised immigration restrictions. He is also a would-be Great Leader, though this is dangerously delusional. Though in his rhetoric an opponent of globalist sell-outs of working Americans, Trump is in practice a shameless champion of self-interested international investments and a proponent of policies that would increase the pace of ecological degradation. In *Refugees*, as elsewhere, Žižek refers to the building of walls (of which Trump's proposed wall between Mexico and the U.S. is obviously a major example) in contemporary life as deeply symbolic about our global plight. Indeed, in *Refugees*, recall that Žižek gives divisive walls an especially important status among the four elements that he has often identified from book to book and appearance to appearance as defining major signs of our "living in the end times".<sup>10</sup> Trump's sympathetic attitudes towards the likes of Putin and Le Pen, his evocation of kind words from Robert Mugabe and his welcoming of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey (whose bodyguards recently attacked protestors in Washington, DC on the occasion of his visit with Trump), his apparent interests in cooperation with (and arms sales to) Saudi Arabia, even his announced intention of withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Agreement, might not surprise Žižek, but these and other features of the Trump administration imply what a high price may be paid for any such great awakening as Žižek imagined before the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

### NOTES

1. For that 20 May 2017 talk, see <http://zizek.uk/slavoj-zizek-the-courage-of-hopelessness-may-2017/> (Accessed 8/1/17).
2. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dx1m\\_d\\_kOHI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dx1m_d_kOHI) (Accessed 8/1/17).

3. See, for example, Appadurai (2013), which mostly focuses on improving the lot of slum-dwellers in Mumbai, but also addresses more varied international issues.
4. We might recollect “The World in Pieces: Culture and Politics at the End of the Century,” an older anticipatory lecture/essay/chapter, addressing some of these themes. That is by the socio-cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, about similar topics, re-published in Geertz’s valuable collection, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (2000).
5. On *jouissance*, see, e.g., *Refugees* 81–83.
6. Recent events in June, 2017 surrounding the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change represent both a supposed attempt by the Trump administration to re-assert sovereignty by beginning withdrawal from the agreement, and reactions by much of the world against that attempt.
7. Thus see Žižek 2016: 68 on Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital* (2013). Also, see Žižek 2016 on “serial killings of women in Ciudad Juarez at the border with Texas” (35); “serial rapes and murders of aboriginal women in Western Canada, close to reservations around Vancouver”, and reservations where the dead bodies are liable to be placed after off-reservation atrocities (35); “Bantustans,” “territories set aside for black inhabitants” in formal-apartheid South Africa (78–79); the conditions in the West Bank (79).
8. Fredric Jameson 2016, edited by Slavoj Žižek. For an online discussion of Jameson’s proposals for “An American Utopia,” see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNVKoX40ZAO>, a discussion by Jameson with Stanley Aronowitz at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York on 3/29/14 (Accessed 8/1/17).
9. See, for example, Sanders’s Foreword to Jeffrey Sachs 2017. It should be noted that Sachs has become far more critical more recently than in his early-2017 book of the American political economy. See “America’s Broken Democracy”: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-political-masters-koch-brothers-by-jeffrey-d-sachs-2017-05> (Accessed 8/1/17).
10. See Žižek 2010: x, for one variation on this scheme; and Žižek 2016: 113.

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