

My Dream of Wuhan

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"We need a new communism": Slavoj Žižek

Quelle: STR / AFP; Getty Images/ Ulf Andersen

All those, who want to put all of China under quarantine, should be ashamed, says philosopher Slavoj Žižek. And longs for a world, where a dreadful event like the corona epidemic would have positive consequences.

So much was already written about the coronavirus epidemic - what can I add to it as a non-specialist observer with a very limited access to data? But perhaps, one should raise the question here: where do data end and where does ideology begin?

The first obvious enigma: there are much worse epidemics going on, so why such an obsession with this one when thousands die daily for other infectious diseases? No need to remember the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic known as Spanish flu whose death toll is estimated to have been at least 50 million: now, influenza has infected 15 million Americans: at least 140.000 people have been hospitalized and more than 8.200 people killed this season alone.

Racist paranoia is obviously at work here – remember all the fantasies about the dirty old Chinese women in Wuhan skinning live snakes and slurping bat soup... At this point of time,

a big Chinese city is probably one of the safest places in the world.

But there is a deeper paradox at work here: the more our world is connected, the more a local disaster can trigger a global fear and eventually a catastrophe. In the Spring of 2010, a cloud from a minor volcanic eruption in Iceland – a small disturbance in the complex mechanism of the life on the Earth – put to a standstill the aerial traffic over most of Europe – a reminder of how, with all its tremendous activity of transforming nature, humankind remains just another living species on the planet Earth.

The very catastrophic socio-economic impact of such a minor outburst is due to our technological development (air travel): a century ago, such an eruption would have passed unnoticed. Technological development makes us more independent from nature and at the same time, at a different level, more dependent on nature's whims. And the same holds for the spread of coronavirus: if it were happen before Deng Hsiao Ping's reforms, we probably wouldn't have even heard about it.

So how are we to fight the virus when it just multiplies as a weird invisible form of parasitic life, an undead (living dead) spectral entity whose precise mechanism remains basically unknown? It is this lack of knowledge which causes panic: what if the virus will mutate in an unpredictable way and trigger a true global catastrophe?

This is my private paranoia: does the reason of the panic displayed by authorities although the actual effects are till now relatively modest reside in the fact that they know (or suspect, at least) something about possible mutations that they don't want to render public in order to avoid public confusion and unrest?

One thing is sure: isolation, new walls and further quarantines, will not do the job. Full unconditional solidarity and a globally coordinated response are needed, a new form of what was once called Communism. If we will not orient our efforts in this direction, then Wuhan today is maybe the image of a city of our future.

Many dystopias already imagined a similar future: we mostly stay at home, work on our computers, communicate through videoconferences, do fitness on a machine in the corner of our home office, occasionally masturbate in front of a screen displaying hardcore sex and get food by delivery...

There is, however, an unexpected emancipatory prospect hidden in this nightmarish vision. I must admit that during these last days I caught myself dreaming on visiting Wuhan. Do half-abandoned streets in a megalopolis – the usually bustling urban centers looking like ghost towns, stores with open doors and no customers, just a lone walker or car here and there, individuals with white masks – not provide the image of non-consumerist world at ease with itself?

The melancholic beauty of the empty avenues of Shanghai or Hong Kong remind me of some old post-apocalyptic movies like *On the Beach*, which show a city with most of the population wiped out - no big spectacular destruction, just the world out there no longer ready-at-hand, awaiting us, looking at us and for us... Even the white masks worn by the few people walking around provide a welcome anonymity and liberation from social pressure for recognition.

Many of us remember the famous conclusion of the students' situationist manifest from 1966: «Vivre sans temps mort, jouir sans entraves» - to live without dead time, to enjoy without obstacles. If Freud and Lacan taught us anything, it is that this formula – the supreme case of a superego injunction since, as Lacan aptly demonstrated, superego is at its most basic a positive injunction to enjoy, not a negative act of prohibiting something - is a recipe for disaster: the urge to fill in every moment of the time allotted to us with intense engagement unavoidably ends up in a suffocating monotony.

Dead time – moments of withdrawal, of what old mystics called *Gelassenheit*, releasement – are crucial for the revitalization of our life experience. And, perhaps, one can hope that one of the unintended consequences of the coronavirus quarantines in Chinese cities will be that some people at least will use their dead time to be released from hectic activity and think about the (non)sense of their predicament.

I am fully aware of the danger I am courting in making public these thoughts of mine – am I not engaging in a new version of attributing to the suffering victims some deeper authentic insight from my safe external position and thus cynically legitimizing their suffering? When a masked citizen of Wuhan walks around searching for medicine or food, there are definitely no anti-consumerist thoughts on his or her mind, just panic, anger and fear. My plea is just that even horrible events can have unpredictable positive consequences.

Carlo Ginzburg proposed the notion that being ashamed of one's country, not love of it, may be the true mark of belonging to it. Maybe, some Israelis will gather the courage to feel shame apropos Netanyahu and Trump politics done on their behalf – not, of course, in the sense of shame of being Jewish but, on the contrary, of feeling shame for what the Israeli politics in the West Bank is doing to the most precious legacy of Judaism itself. Maybe, some British should gather the courage to feel shame about the ideological dream that brought them Brexit.

But for the people of Wuhan, it's not the time to feel ashamed and stigmatized but the time to gather the courage and patiently persist in their struggle. The only ones truly ashamed in China are those who publicly downplayed the epidemics while over-protecting themselves, acting like those Soviet functionaries around Chernobyl who publicly claimed there is no danger while immediately evacuating their own families, or those top managers who publicly deny global warming but are already buying houses in New Zealand or building survival bunkers in Rocky Mountains.

Maybe, the public outrage against such double behaviour (which is already compelling the authorities to promise transparency) will give birth to another unintended positive political development in China.

But those who should be truly ashamed are all of us around the world thinking just about how to quarantine the Chinese.

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