

Slavoj Žižek: Last Exit to Socialism

Slavoj Žižek writes in *Jacobin* that today's exploding ecological crises open up a realistic prospect of the final exit of humanity itself. Might socialism be our off-ramp, or is it already too late?

Slavoj Žižek argues that we must avoid the common wisdom according to which the lesson of the environmental crisis is that we are part of nature, not its center. (Simon Plestenjak / Flickr)
The latest data make it clear that, even after the (very uneven) spread of vaccination, we cannot afford to relax and return to the old normal.

Not only is the pandemic not over (infection numbers are rising again, new lockdowns are awaiting us), other catastrophes are on the horizon. At the end of June 2021, a heat dome — a weather phenomenon where a ridge of high pressure traps and compresses warm air, driving up temperatures and baking the region — over the Northwest of the United States and the Southwest of Canada caused temperatures to [approach 50°C](#) (122°F), so that Vancouver was hotter than the Middle East.

This weather pathology is just the climax of a much wider process: in the last years, northern Scandinavia and Siberia regularly see temperatures over 30°C (86°F). The World Meteorological Organization had a weather station in Siberia's Verkhoyansk — north of the Arctic Circle — record a [38°C \(100.4°F\) day](#) on June 20. The town of Oymyakon in Russia, considered to be the coldest inhabited place on Earth, was hotter (31.6°C [88.9°F]) than it has ever been in June. In short: “Climate change is frying the Northern Hemisphere.”

True, the heat dome is a local phenomenon, but it is the result of a global disturbance of patterns which clearly depend on human interventions into natural cycles. The catastrophic consequences of this heat wave for the life in the ocean are already palpable: “‘Heat dome’ probably killed 1bn marine animals on Canada coast,” [experts say](#). “British Columbia scientist says heat essentially cooked mussels: ‘The shore doesn’t usually crunch when you walk.’”

While weather is generally getting hotter, this process reaches a climax in local extremes, and these local extremes will sooner or later coalesce in a series of global tipping points. The [catastrophic floods](#) in Germany and Belgium in July 2021 are another of these tipping points, and who knows what will follow. The catastrophe is not something that will begin in the near future, it is here, and it is also not in some distant African or Asian country but right here, in the heart of the developed West. To put it bluntly, we will have to get used to live with multiple simultaneous crises.

Not only is a heat wave at least partially conditioned by reckless industrial exploitation of nature, but its effects also depend on social organization. At the beginning of July 2021 in southern Iraq, temperatures swelled to over 50°C (122°F), and what occurred simultaneously was a total collapse of the electricity supply (no air conditioner, no refrigerator, no light), which made the place a living hell. This catastrophic impact was clearly caused by the enormous state corruption in Iraq, with billions in oil money disappearing to private pockets.

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If we access this (and numerous other) data soberly, there is one simple conclusion to be drawn from them. For every living entity, collective or individual, the final exit is death (which is why Derek Humphry was right to entitle his 1992 pro-assisted suicide book *Final Exit*). The ecological crises which are exploding lately open up a realistic prospect of the final exit (collective suicide) of humanity itself. Is there a last exit from the road to our perdition or is it already too late, so that all we can do is find a way to painless suicide?

Our Place in the World

So what should we do in such a predicament? We should above all avoid the common wisdom according to which the lesson of the ecological crises is that we are part of nature, not its center, so we have to change our way of life — limit our individualism, develop new solidarity, and accept our modest place among life on our planet. Or, as Judith Butler put it, “An inhabitable world for humans depends on a flourishing earth that does not have humans at its center. We oppose environmental toxins not only so that we humans can live and breathe without fear of being poisoned, but also because the water and the air must have lives that are not centered on our own.”

But is it not that global warming and other ecological threats demand of us collective interventions into our environment which will be incredibly powerful, direct interventions into the fragile balance of forms of life? When we say that the rise of average temperature has to be kept below 2°C (35.6°F), we talk (and try to act) as general managers of life on Earth, not as a modest species. The regeneration of the earth obviously does not depend upon “our smaller and more mindful role” — it depends on our gigantic role, which is the truth beneath all the talk about our finitude and mortality.

If we have to care also about the life of water and air, it means precisely that we are what Marx called “universal beings,” as it were, able to step outside ourselves, stand on our own shoulders, and perceive ourselves as a minor moment of the natural totality. To escape into the comfortable modesty of our finitude and mortality is not an option; it is a false exit to a catastrophe. As universal beings, we should learn to accept our environment in all its complex mixture, which includes what we perceive as trash or pollution, as well as what we cannot directly perceive since it is too large or too minuscule (Timothy Morton’s “hyperobjects”). [For Morton](#), being ecological

is not about spending time in a pristine nature preserve but about appreciating the weed working its way through a crack in the concrete, and then appreciating the concrete. It’s also part of the world, and part of us. . . .

. . . Reality, Morton writes, is populated with ‘strange strangers’ — things that are ‘knowable yet uncanny.’ This strange strangeness, Morton writes, is an irreducible part of every rock, tree, terrarium, plastic Statue of Liberty, quasar, black hole, or marmoset one might encounter; by acknowledging it, we shift away from trying to master objects and toward learning to respect them in their elusiveness. Whereas the Romantic poets rhapsodized about nature’s beauty and sublimity, Morton responds to its all-pervading weirdness; they include in the category of the natural everything that is scary, ugly, artificial, harmful, and disturbing.

Is this not a perfect example of such a mixture as the fate of rats in Manhattan during the pandemic? Manhattan is a living system of humans, cockroaches, . . . and millions of rats. Lockdown at the peak of the pandemic meant that, since all restaurants were closed, rats that lived off the trash from restaurants were deprived of the source of their food. This caused mass starvation: many rats were found eating their offspring. A closure of restaurants which changed the eating habits of humans but posed no threat to them was a catastrophe for rats, rats as comrades.

Another similar accident from recent history could be called “sparrow as comrade.” In 1958, at the beginning of the [Great Leap Forward](#), the Chinese government declared that “birds are public animals of capitalism” and set in motion a large campaign to eliminate sparrows, suspected of consuming approximately four pounds of grain per sparrow per year. Sparrow nests were destroyed, eggs were broken, and chicks were killed; millions of people organized into groups, and hit noisy pots and pans to prevent sparrows from resting in their nests, with the goal of causing them to drop dead from exhaustion.

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These mass attacks depleted the sparrow population, pushing it to near extinction. However, by April 1960, Chinese leaders were forced to realize that sparrows also ate a large number of insects in the fields, so, rather than being increased, rice yields after the campaign were substantially decreased: the extermination of sparrows upset the ecological balance, and insects destroyed crops as a result of the absence of natural predators. By this time, however, it was too late: with no sparrows to eat them, locust populations ballooned, swarming the country and compounding the ecological problems already caused by the [Great Leap Forward](#), including widespread deforestation and misuse of poisons and pesticides. Ecological imbalance is credited with exacerbating the [Great Chinese Famine](#) in which millions died of starvation. The Chinese government eventually resorted to [importing](#) 250,000 sparrows from the Soviet Union to replenish their population.

So, again, what can and should we do in this unbearable situation — unbearable because we have to accept that we are one among the species on Earth, but we are at the same time burdened by the impossible task to act as universal managers of the life on Earth? Since we failed to take other, perhaps easier, exits (global temperatures are rising, oceans are more and more polluted . . .), it looks more and more that the last exit before the final one will be some version of what was once called “war communism.”

By Any Means Necessary

What I have in mind here is not any kind of rehabilitation of or continuity with the twentieth-century “really existing socialism,” even less the global adoption of the Chinese model, but a series of measures which are imposed by the situation itself. When (not just a country but) all of us are facing a threat to our survival, we enter a warlike emergency state which will last for decades at least. To simply guarantee the minimal conditions of our survival, mobilizing all our resources is inevitable to deal with unheard-of challenges, including displacements of dozens, maybe hundreds, of millions of people due to global warming.

The answer to the heat dome in the United States and Canada is not just to help the affected areas but to attack its global causes. And, as the ongoing catastrophe in southern Iraq makes clear, a state apparatus capable of maintaining a minimal welfare of the people in catastrophic conditions will be needed to prevent social explosions.

All these things can — hopefully — be achieved only through strong and obligatory international cooperation, social control and regulation of agriculture and industry, changes in our basic eating habits (less beef), global health care, etc. Upon a closer look, it is clear that representative political democracy alone will not be sufficient for this task. A much stronger executive power capable of enforcing long-term commitments will have to be combined with local self-organizations of people, as well as with a strong international body capable of overriding the will of dissenting nations.

I am not talking here about a new world government — such an entity would give opportunity to immense corruption. And I am not talking about communism in the sense of abolishing markets — market competition should play a role, although a role regulated and controlled by state and society. Why, then, use the term “communism”? Because what we will have to do contains four aspects of every truly radical regime.

First, there is voluntarism: changes that will be needed are not grounded in any historical necessity; they will be done against the spontaneous tendency of history — as Walter Benjamin put it, we have to pull the emergency brake on the train of history. Then, there is egalitarianism: global solidarity, health care, and a minimum of decent life for all. Then, there are elements of what cannot but appear to die-hard liberals as “terror,” a taste of which we got with measures to cope with the ongoing pandemic: limitation of many personal freedoms and new modes of control and regulation. Finally, there is trust in the people: everything will be lost without the active participation of ordinary people.

The Way Forward

All this is not a morbid dystopian vision but the result of the simple realistic assessment of our predicament. If we don't take this path, what will happen is the totally crazy situation which is already taking place in the United States and Russia: the power elite is preparing for its survival in gigantic underground bunkers in which thousands can survive for months, with the excuse that the government should function even in such conditions. In short, government should continue to work even when there are no people alive on the earth over whom it should exert its authority.

Our governments and business elites are already preparing for this scenario, which means they know the alarm bell is ringing. Although the prospect of the mega-rich living somewhere in space outside of our Earth is not a realist one, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the attempts of some mega-rich individuals (Musk, Bezos, Branson) to organize private flights into space also express the fantasy to escape the catastrophe that threatens our survival on Earth. So what awaits us who have nowhere to escape?