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Slavoj iek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London and New York: Verso, 2009. Paperback, 158 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84467-428-2¹

Slavoj iek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London and New York: Verso, 2012. Paperback, 142 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-78168-042-1²

First as Tragedy, then as Farce and *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* are two recent publications by Slavoj iek dealing with a wide variety of topics, including security, protest and radical politics. In *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* – a title that draws inspiration from the famous work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, by Karl Marx, referring to the repetition of the Bonaparte (Napoleon and Louis) in power – the Slovenian philosopher argues that we are living in a new stage of global capitalism, in which the same fear discourse(s) that had guaranteed a geopolitical offensive after the 9/11 attacks is struggling to find solid ground in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Indeed, the analysis of the ideology of the period between September 11th and the 2008 breakdown is at the core of its contention in the book. iek, who has been known for putting psychoanalysis and philosophical concepts at the service of the critique of the liberal ideology, states that Francis Fukuyama’s thesis of the end of History and the belief in the capitalistic liberal democracy has finally been defeated, twice. Firstly, the attacks of September 11th have symbolized the collapse of the political utopia of liberal democracy. However, it was the 2008 financial crisis that

¹ I will use the original English version of the book in this review, but I would like to point out that there is also a Portuguese translation: *Primeiro como tragédia, depois como farsa*, trans. Maria de Beatriz de Medina (So Paulo: Boitempo, 2011).

² As in the case of *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, I would like to mention that there is a Portuguese translation available: *O ano em que sonhamos perigosamente*, trans. Rogrio Bettoni (So Paulo: Boitempo, 2012).

axed the final blow to Fukuyama's dream, symbolizing the end of its economical utopia.

Throughout the book, Žižek demonstrates that, in the current stage of capitalism, the state interventions that use tax payers' money to quench the effects of the crisis – relieving banks and financial speculators – occur as an inevitable necessity to sustain the markets. Therefore, it is useless to point out the immorality of these actions without reflecting about ways of overthrowing a system that allows this kind of blackmail based on fear: help the banks, or millions will suffer the consequences. For this reason, the injustice provoked by the capitalistic world order will only be averted when its architect, *the capital*, is destroyed. To put it in another terms, to live on the razor's edge, in a condition of constant insecurity, is, as Agamben would argue, the exception that becomes the rule in the contemporary capitalistic order, transpiring the rational "irrationality" of its logic, its instrumental reason as Adorno and Horkheimer have taught us. Always waiting for the next crisis, the liberal discourse can no longer even defend its ideological premises: when it seeks to lower taxes or regulate the markets, it is postulating its own ruin.

The corollary of the book is that the ideology of capitalism that we are experiencing today does not operate in the traditional symptomatic way as Psychoanalysis had taught us, in which we at least could hope for the return of the repressed, denouncing the content as its disguise. Differently, the author describes an ideology with a rather fetishist functioning and framework, in other words, a more refined ideology that convinces the subject to be self-assured of his convictions because they are the harbors that allow him to live a life that would otherwise be unbearable.

Furthering his analysis of the aforementioned subjects, in *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* Žižek gathers texts and interventions about the events of 2011 – the year in which, according to his words, "we have dreamed dangerously" –, at the light of the impact and (re)interpretations that these events went through already at the beginning of 2012. The dangerous dream the author refers to points to two different directions:

[there were] emancipatory dreams mobilizing protesters in New York, on Tahrir Square, in London and Athens; and obscure destructive dreams propelling Breivik and racist populists across Europe, from the Netherlands to Hungary.³

Similarly to what is stated in *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, right from the beginning of the book there is an effort to establish an explicit social and political positioning (in antagonistic terms) in order to achieve an “objective” analysis of the current situation of global capitalism. Its background, that ultimately explains the events, is the crisis of financial capitalism that has forced two antagonistic forces (the two opposite dreams) to position and express themselves politically. The orientation of that reading stems from the necessity of resuming the Hegelian concept of totality in order to stop a dispute for the Universal. As the author states in the first text, referring to the economical crisis of 2008: “The good old Marxist-Hegelian notion of totality comes into it own here: it is crucial to grasp the ongoing economic crisis in its totality and not be blinded by its partial aspects.”⁴ Remaining true to his framework, his analysis is based on the material antagonism which leads to an upheaval against domination, exposing a process of global exploitation that is leading to a revolutionary overturn. The precondition for such an overturn is that we act according to the philosophy of dialectical materialism and that we observe the notion of totality. This is the key to contemporary analyses dealing with the fight against domination, which value the multiplicity of scattered and discontinuous fights, asserting once again the centrality of theory in order to homogenize the authors that were transformed into political rivals. According to the philosopher:

The theories of Foucault and Agamben are insufficient: all their detailed elaborations of the regulatory power mechanisms of domination, all the wealth of notions such as the excluded, bare life, homo sacer, etc., must be grounded in (or mediated by) the centrality of exploitation; without this reference to the economic, the fight against domination remains “an essentially moral and ethical

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

one, which leads to punctual revolts and acts of resistance rather than to the transformation of the mode or production as such” – the positive program of such “ideologies of power” is generally one of some type of “direct” democracy.⁵

Taking a closer look at the book, the eight texts that constitute it are devoted to the several events organized according to the antagonistic power of the dream mentioned in the title, tackling the main subjects that stimulate the contemporary social and political debates: the multicultural politics, organized according to race and gender, the financial crisis of 2008 and its devastating effects on Europe, and the current apocalyptic discourse on ecology and the so-called natural disasters. Throughout his analysis, Žižek openly criticizes what he calls the “philosophy of difference”, seeking to renew a universal egalitarianism and the effectiveness of the concept of class struggle, be it through the political communist path, or the religious perspective of Christianity.

As far as the effects of the financial crisis and the ecological catastrophic discourses are concerned, the terms and subjects are reciprocally implied and intertwined. Žižek points once again to a picture of structural crisis and exhaustion of the virtual/financial capitalism, and presents the ecological question as an apocalyptic announcement of the end of time – the end of the era of capitalism – that, therefore, should be received with arms wide open. However, the factors of adaptation or renewal of current capitalism, found in the alleged crisis as well as in the ecological discourse, are ignored or simply justified through external (partial or ideological) factors that are not a part of the “universal”, but, instead, belong to the “desert of the real”.

Moreover, although Žižek continuously draws upon the texts of the Old Testament, trying to give them an immanent and revolutionary logical imprint, he seems to fail to notice that the announcement of the end of time and the return of the messiah functions, both subjectively and socially, as a way of acknowledging our limitations and fallibility, thus allowing us to improve according to the image of divine perfection. Quoting the words of the philosopher who, in turn, evokes the Gospel of Mark:

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 1003-4.

Furão: Slavoj Žižek, First as Tragedy, Then as Farce. London and New York: Verso, 2009. Paperback, 158 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84467-428-2

In ecology, this apocalyptic fascination takes many diverse forms: global warming will drown us all in a couple of decades; biogenetics will mean the end of human ethics and responsibility; the bees will soon die out and global starvation will follow ... Take all these threats seriously, yes, but don't be seduced by them or wallow in the false sense of guilt and justice they invite ("We offended Mother Earth, so are getting what we deserve!"). Instead, keep a cool head and ... "watch".⁶

The announcement of the end of time may work just as a wake-up call, alerting us to the fact that perfection and God are divine, not human, and therefore, according to message of the Holy Ghost, filling us with hope that mundane hypocrisy will meet its end in the Kingdom of God. Nonetheless, a different analysis suggests that, if there is indeed a teleological foundation in the ecological catastrophist discourse, it is not so much located in an otherworld but rather in the human selflessness regarding its divine aspirations as far as the manipulation of Nature is concern; it is located in the awareness of its causal relation to catastrophes or climate changes. Only at this light it is possible to analyze the contemporary anxiety to improve the human body/spirit and the planet, which goes against the theoretical perspectives that argue that we live in an increasingly secular world.

We seem to be part of an ongoing process of building an environmental dispositive and an ecological governability that will reshape capitalism through the discourses and practices of a sustainable development, rather than belonging to a stage that is rapidly marching towards the end of capitalism. Not surprisingly, the protection of nature, the respect of dignity and social responsibility, are subjects and values shared by governments, NGO's, international companies, but also by socio-political movements, such as *Occupy Wall Street*. Even so, given the velocity of our time, with its technologies of information and communication, and the primacy of intellectual labor in our societies, that has led to an increasing depletion of social/political movements, these two books remain priceless contributions to help us take the pulse of contemporary events that otherwise would be too close to home for us to tackle.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.