

Book Review: The Year of Dreaming Dangerously

by Blog Admin

June 11, 2013

2011 caught the world off guard with a series of shattering political and economic events, and in this book **Slavoj Žižek** looks back on how protesters in New York, Cairo, London, and Athens took to the streets in pursuit of emancipation. **Žižek** feels that the subterranean work of dissatisfaction continues, and that a new political reality will soon emerge. Although this is a bracing read, **Luke McDonagh** writes that **Žižek** is seemingly unable to realise the dangerous 'dream' of an alternative way of life in any kind of coherent sense.



The Year of Dreaming Dangerously. Slavoj Žižek. Verso Books. September 2012.

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When the current Irish President, Michael D. Higgins, retired from being a member of the Irish Parliament (the Dáil) in 2011, he gave a memorable farewell speech where he castigated the state of Ireland's political culture. Notably, he referenced advice given to him by Slavoj Žižek:

"Frequently, people such as Slavoj Žižek have said to me that if things are as I describe them then what is needed is a form of terror that would sweep everything away and to start all over again."

This is very much the starting point of this highly stimulating book, in which Žižek analyses the underlying causes and results, thus far, of the mass popular uprisings and protests of 2011 in the Arab world, in Greece, in Spain, as well as the US and other countries. A writer in a Leninist tradition, Žižek is captured by the idea of emancipatory revolution, but he is not an idealist, or even an optimist, when it comes to the aftermath.

For instance, he acknowledges that the emancipatory effects of the 2011 uprisings in each country were ephemeral. Nevertheless, in his view they were undoubtedly worthwhile because they have helped to open the door to new political horizons.

What is crucial about Žižek's style over the course of this book is that he writes exactly as he speaks. For the reader, this is mostly a positive thing – he has proven over the past few decades to be a consistently engaging, and often entertaining, speaker. The book, therefore, flows with an easy style, so much so that the reader will likely find it difficult to put down. The negative side of Žižek's approach is that he tends to throw around coarse language and insults carelessly; for example, the term 'moron' is frequently directed towards people who disagree with his analysis. This tends to take away, rather than add to, the argumentative weight of his opinions.

Moreover, this is not the only stylistic problem with the book. In previous works Žižek has, in the post-modern sense, shown a tendency to celebrate (some would say wallow in) Western pop culture. He is an avid fan of the Call of Duty videogame, and he has written essays glorifying the cultural importance and intellectual sophistication of pieces of Hollywood hokum such as 'The Dark Knight Rises'. Yet again, in this tome, he falls into this trap. In one of the final chapters of the book he indulges in an entertaining, but ultimately vacuous, Lacanian analysis of the cult TV show 'The Wire' that adds up to very little of substance.



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What makes Žižek an important public figure, however, and what ends up being the ultimate redeeming factor of this book, is the fact that he constantly challenges the views of the reader (indeed, he also appears to be constantly undertaking a dialectical process of challenging his own views, even as he comes up with them). In this way, Žižek comes across as an almost fearless thinker – he frequently forces the reader to confront his or her own biases. Whether you are right-leaning, left-leaning, or centrist, reading the first few chapters of this book is likely to shake up your ideological certainties. To the active citizen and political thinker this kind of provocation is undeniably valuable – it brings on self-reflection. Moreover, there are few political commentators who do this kind of thing better than Žižek. In this sense, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* can be considered as a real success.

This is not to say that the book is flawless. At times the examples Žižek chooses to back up his opinions are a little too neatly matched to his analysis. For instance, his account of the difference between the Egyptian and Libyan uprisings comes across as superficial – he simply doesn't seem to know enough about either country. As a result, his account fails to convince on any level other than the fact that he clearly finds the idea of Western intervention unpalatable. Meanwhile, he is critical of those who say that capitalism can be tamed, pointing out that every time it is reformed capitalism inevitably 'escapes out of the box'. Indeed, when people say to him that capitalism remains the best proven way to raise living standards he merely replies: 'Is this really the best we can imagine?' Unfortunately for Žižek, this question can also be applied to his own failures of imagination.

On the big critical points of our time Žižek is correct: our economic model increasingly seems to be exhausted; the forces of capital easily override the actions of democratic institutions; our language is increasingly dominated by management-speak. Consequently, our ability to think beyond the current order is constrained by the very factors that perpetuate the current order. In this vein, Žižek himself is seemingly unable to realise the dangerous 'dream' of an alternative way of life in any kind of coherent sense. He is often described as a communist thinker, but his vision of communism is an empty vessel. From Žižek's writing the only thing he is clear about is that his future would necessarily require more authoritarianism, and less liberalism, than our current order. The 'terror' that Michael D. Higgins referenced in his speech emanates from the book quite strongly. Despite all of these caveats, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* is a bracing read.

Luke McDonagh is a Fellow in the LSE Department of Law. holds a PhD from Queen Mary, University of London (2011), an LLM from the London School of Economics (2006-7) and a BCL degree from NUI, Galway (2002-05). He has previously taught in the areas of Public Law, Administrative Law and EU Law at Queen Mary as well as Constitutional Law and Tort Law at NUI Galway. [Read reviews by Luke.](#)