

Book Review: Demanding the Impossible by Slavoj Žižek and Young-june Park

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*Based on live interviews, this book aims to capture Slavoj Žižek at his irrepressible best, elucidating such topics as the uprisings of the Arab Spring, the global financial crisis, populism in Latin America, the rise of China and even the riddle of North Korea. **Demanding the Impossible** not only offers an accessible insight into Žižek's thought but also offers inspiring ideas for those interested in understanding our contemporary world and debating the most topical issues, concludes **Francesco di Bernardo**.*



Demanding the Impossible. Slavoj Žižek and Young-june Park. Polity.

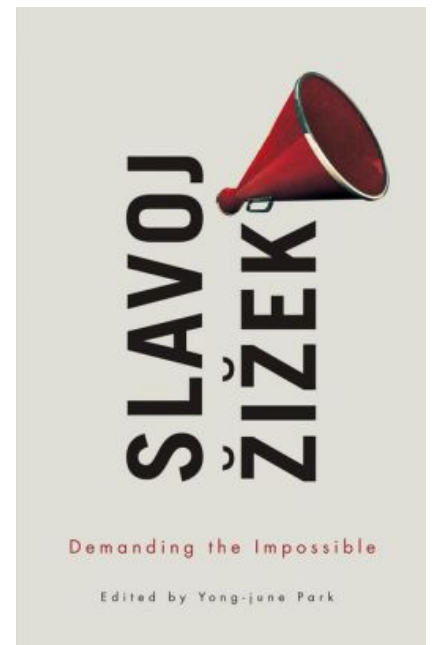
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Demanding the Impossible is a book that indeed makes the impossible (or at least the difficult) possible: it presents a series of interviews with Slavoj Žižek – a philosopher renowned for his impenetrable and idiosyncratic style – and covers some of the most topical issues of our times in a truly accessible and enjoyable way. The range of topics discussed varies from North Korea to the Egyptian Revolution, to the conceptualisation of new revolutionary forms to fear of love, from violence and civil disobedience to the subversive use of theory, and from Chinese capitalism to critique of populism. The editor, Young-june Park, gives readers a perfect introduction to the thought of this treasured and prolific Slovenian cultural theorist.

For unfamiliar readers, Žižek has published numerous books and essays on different topics such as political theory, film theory, psychoanalysis, Hegel, and Lacan. He has recently starred in the truly wonderful *Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fiennes, in which he examines the nature of ideology through a psychoanalytic approach to film. The film is the sequel of *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) in which he analysed a number of films through psychoanalytic perspectives.

The book is composed of a series of Q&As between an interviewer and Žižek, with the aim of the book being, according to the editor, to 'spark lively discussions' (p. vii). The thought-provoking answers provided by Žižek surely have the potential to ensure that this goal is reached.

The first chapters deal with the definition of common good and with ethics. Žižek affirms that 'we have to take responsibility for defining what is our good' (p. 2); a statement in which lies the basis for the idea of participatory democracy discussed in the concluding chapters. Žižek agrees with the view that we live in a post-democratic world, affirming that 'the marriage between capitalism and democracy is over' (p. 30) and that we live in a 'global apartheid society' in which some people are not allowed to participate in public life (p. 63). Žižek believes that therefore this situation cannot last perpetually – 'I see explosions everywhere', he says (p. 23) – and therefore he is convinced of the urgency of finding new forms of participatory democracy. Žižek sees in the Arab Spring(s) the seeds of a global uprising against global capitalism (pp. 119-120), and, although the recent events in Egypt have complicated and vanished his hopes in a real alternative to Mubarak's rule, his interpretation of the Egyptian revolution and his analysis of the revolutionary potential of the politicization of the marginalised (p. 103) is certainly of great relevance.





Slavoj Žižek in São Paulo, Brazil, 9.3.2013. Credit: [Simon Plestenjak](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

He subsequently discusses the alternatives to global capitalism. He affirms that the first task to construct an alternative is to 'politicize and discipline – the “destructured masses”’. The claim is preceded by an analysis of the [riots in the Parisian banlieus](#). He explains that in a depoliticised society there is the risk of forms of 'bad revolt' (p. 105) resulting from an 'abstract discontent' (p. 106) not channelled in political activism nor at any radical change of society's structures. Žižek, however, discussing alternatives to global capitalism, while appreciating the politicization of the masses brought about by Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, declares himself sceptical of the latest implications of it, affirming that 'Chávez started well in politicizing and mobilizing the excluded, but then he fell into the traditional populist trap' (p. 109). Žižek subsequently moves on to the analysis of forms of resistance to global capitalism and discusses the issue of violence related to revolutionary acts. Beginning his analysis discussing Gandhi and Aristide, Žižek advocates a non-violent, 'symbolic violence' (p. 118), which is also defensive violence but it is primarily the act of ignoring the authorities: 'So just by ignoring and not being afraid of the authorities, impossible revolution can truly occur' (p. 120).

To make a real change, however, Žižek affirms, 'we also need people who will think more radically to arrive at the real root of the problems' (p. 54). In chapter 14 Žižek provides a critique of the Bologna Process and the marketization of education and culture. Žižek critiques the Bologna reform, affirming: 'What they really want is simply the “*private use of the reason*” [...] so that universities basically produce experts who will solve problems' (p. 53). Žižek then points out that 'this is not thinking' (p. 53) and advocates a form of education beyond the logic of the market 'to prevent the narrow production of experts' (p. 54). As stated in the title of this chapter, Žižek believes in 'subversive use of theory': a theory which can produce real change and not merely offer expert opinion. Similarly, education should provide thinking and not mere expertise.

The book is at its best when Žižek provides a critique of the dominant culture. In chapters 20 and 21 he provides truly insightful analysis of contemporary ideology. He affirms that the 'apparent radicality of some postmodern trends should not deceive us. So transgressive model should no longer be our model' (p. 77). To substantiate his affirmation he declares some forms of art 'simply disgusting' (p. 78) and that a truly radical culture should 'take over some motives of the so called 'moral majority' to provide a real and successful alternative instead of following the myth of going beyond good and evil (p. 78). Another area of human experience which Žižek finds affected by the dominant ideology is that of love. He affirms that in today's hedonistic and narcissistic society people are afraid to love and that love is consequently becoming transgressive (p. 81): 'any form of passionate attachment is seen as a threat in our solipsistic, narcissistic, and individualistic culture' (p. 83). Žižek thus opposes [Laura Kipnis's view of love as form of oppression](#) and affirms that this view of love as something dangerous 'is today's ideology' (p. 83).

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those interested in understanding our contemporary world and debating the most topical issues.

Francesco Di Bernardo is completing a PhD in Modern and Contemporary Literature, Culture and Thought at the [University of Sussex](#). He is interested in the relationship between literature and history, economics, sociology and politics and the thesis he is currently finishing focuses on the representation of British history from the seventies to the post 2007-2008 financial crisis in the works of Jonathan Coe and other contemporary British authors. He is Associate Tutor at the School of English of the University of Sussex and has worked as Research Support Assistant for the School of Media, Film and Music at Sussex. [Read more reviews by Francesco](#).

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