

Through Ideology and Beyond

A mediation between capitalism and communism

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Abstract

In *Trouble in Paradise*, Slavoj Žižek elaborates on capitalism as pathology and develops the case how communism can help us out of the crisis of capitalism. Our capitalist universe is a supposed paradise, but the storm is about to come. Even though capitalism is a system that enhances continuous change and progression, it never fulfils a desire or lives up to an expectation. Capitalism is a corruptive and exploitative system that has become the only game in town. Can we truly rather imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism? Žižek elaborates extensively on the notion of ideology and explains what he thinks should entail our new emancipatory struggle to break free. Using theories of Lacan, Marx and Hegel, Žižek paves the way for revolutionary communism.

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Introduction

Trouble in Paradise (2014), subtitled *From the end of history to the end of capitalism*, written by Slavoj Žižek is the work on which this thesis is based. The title of the book refers to the ongoing crises in our capitalist, globalized system: Žižek warns us for the proverbial calm before the storm, without knowing if and when the storm will begin. Capitalism has become a completely internalized system, such that it has become extremely difficult to imagine the end of it. If even an economic crisis such as the crisis of credit in 2008 is not enough of a wake-up call, then what is? Žižek is an outspoken, extraordinary contemporary philosopher who is both heavily admired and criticised from all over the political spectrum. It is remarkable that in our era of capitalist dominance, one of the most debated philosophers is an outspoken communist. Why is Žižek convinced that the world should undergo a fundamental change in which capitalism must make place for communism?

Interestingly, the international edition of the book is published with a different subtitle: *Communism after the end of history*. A possible interpretation of this clause is that Žižek is not proposing an adaption to the current world, but aims to fundamentally challenge the very basis of the world that we are living in. For Žižek, the ultimate answer lies in ideology. Throughout his life, Žižek has observed major changes in geopolitics and the rise of postmodernism, accompanied with a revised view on ideology and critique. Žižek was born in 1949 in Ljubljana, then Yugoslavia, now Slovenia, where the government actively shaped the framework of lies serving the communist ideal.¹

So what exactly does this ‘end of history’ entail? Didn’t Francis Fukuyama provide us with a plausible explanation in terms of the end of the Cold War, when capitalism won the fight against communism?² Or does Žižek intend to state that capitalism is the last phase history will have to go through before history can be properly completed – and be finalized in ultimate communism? Žižek sees communism as ‘*the only horizon from which one can not only judge but even adequately analyse what goes on today*’.³ Yet, Žižek observes that we do not ask ourselves the question anymore if our future will be communist, fascist or capitalist: Rather, we all silently accept that capitalism is here to stay. Žižek thinks this is problematic and pleads that we need a utopia. This is an impossible state but it is the only way to break free from capitalist domination. The answer to the question how there can be something after everything has ended, is that we must practice the impossible.⁴

¹ Van Oenen (2014), 470

² In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama describes how liberal democracy triumphs and how the post-ideological society gained ground. Ideological evolution has come to an end and liberal democracy is the final stage.

³ Žižek (2014), p26

⁴ Taylor (2005)

Trouble in Paradise is a critique on capitalism and warns that if the Left does not act, 'a new Dark Age is looming, with ethnic and religious passions exploding, and Enlightenment values receding'.⁵ The book starts with explaining what the capitalist system looks like according to Žižek. He continues by clarifying what it is about this ideology that makes us accept it, which is followed by what the future will look like if we do not change our ways. Žižek concludes with what he thinks should entail our new emancipatory struggle to break free. He does all this by making an enormous amount of references to pop culture such as movies and music videos, and he exemplifies his theories by giving real world examples from Egypt to Korea and from Russia to the United States. This thesis aims to draw the theoretical lessons from the book without referring to the specific examples to get to the purest form of his ideas. This thesis focusses on abstractions and not on Žižek's observations of the world.

Žižek tries to overturn the status quo, the usual way of thinking and classic notions of cause-effect relations by making use of paradoxes, contrast, exaggeration and political incorrectness. He uses these techniques to trigger the mind and to put things in a different perspective – and possibly also to provoke and confuse. Central themes are ideology and emancipation, and recurring topics are unemployment, freedom of choice and regulated freedom. Žižek incites, is unconventional and aims at stirring things up. A fine example of this is his statement that '*The worst of Stalinism is better than the best of the liberal-capitalist welfare state*'.⁶ This could be interpreted as that people had a better life in the Soviet Union than in the West – a debatable point, to say the least. The statement could even be seen as a way of condoning the use of violence and mass murders, which is even more debatable. However, if this is understood and read at the ideological level, another conclusion might arise. Stalinism is based on the communist ideal of equality, of power to the people and fair power relations. The liberal capitalist welfare state however is based on a never ending, unfulfilling ideological illusion infiltrated by crisis after crisis and a meaningless existence. Could it be that the Soviet Union had been able to provide its people with the possibility of a meaningful existence, which the Western Bloc could only offer in material means? One could say there are better, subtler and more on point ways of phrasing this intention. Žižek might be simply provoking. All in all, statements like these nicely match one of his sayings: '*Philosophers are not there to solve problems, but to redefine problems*'.⁷ The philosopher is not there to tell you what the world should look like, but to challenge assumptions, to provide us with a different perspective and to reevaluate the status quo. Žižek wants to show us that we must break free from the boring, conformist capitalist universe. Radical emancipation is necessary for that and moreover, a 'Master' who knows the communist drill. We need a revolution and not any sort of middle-way solution such as tax reforms or

⁵ Žižek (2014), p136

⁶ Žižek (2014), p144

⁷ Taylor (2005)

philanthropy. To achieve a society with more equality and democracy, radical emancipation is the only way to go. Žižek is strongly influenced by Karl Marx, Jacques Lacan and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, which is noticeable by Žižek's continuous references to for instance communist and materialist ideals, the psychoanalytical analysis of ideology and the dialectics of revolution and emancipation.

This thesis aims to answer the following question: How can capitalism as ideology be understood and even defended following the philosophy of Slavoj Žižek? This study tries to be a devil's advocate in favour of capitalism and hence to critically assess the validity of Žižek's defence of communism. Žižek's assumptions and reasoning concerning ideology, specifically capitalism and communism, will be carefully studied. Capitalism and communism are economic, political and social structures, and are possible understandings of how society should or could be organised. Žižek interprets the systems in terms of ideology. This conceptual and theoretical approach is complemented with the ideas applied to the public, actual world.

Žižek explains the ideological as a coloured but necessary interpretation of reality. Capitalism and communism can therefore be seen as internalised illusions that give us the feeling that life is worth living. If people indeed need ideology and yearn for living in illusion and being fooled, this reasonably leads to capitalism being the most applicable and logically following system that people opt for. Capitalism is a continuously changing system, in which expectations always can be revised and of which the individual can be part while feeling like he makes his own choices. Communism however, needs central planning, mobilization for revolution and is a system that is not mouldable by the individual. It is therefore less successful in fulfilling people's ideological needs. Evaluating communism and capitalism as ideologies implies that the scope is beyond the economic, political and social. It concerns a way of life, a conviction about right and wrong – an interesting case would even be to compare it to religion.

This thesis is structured as follows: First, an outline is given of how Žižek perceives ideology. What is its function and what does it mean as a social construct? Then, communism and capitalism will be scrutinized, with special attention for how these two systems are related and how the negation of the one can (or cannot) lead to the other. Afterwards, the basic assumptions, consequences and logic that Žižek uses to shape his outspoken opinion, are challenged and the boundaries and internal contradictions of the theories are explored. Afterwards, the results are briefly summarized and the major lessons from this work are listed.

Ideology

In the famous documentary *The Pervert's guide to Ideology*, Žižek explains that ideology popularly is used as a metaphor for glasses that we can put on and off, in the sense that we can and do

deliberately choose how we perceive the world. But Žižek disagrees: Ideology is our spontaneous, involuntary relation to the world and is not simply imposed upon ourselves. Ideology is about how we perceive meaning and how it colours the view we have on reality. This is even a process that people enjoy, as stepping out of ideology entails the acknowledgement of having lived in a lie. We recognize the untruthfulness in our belief in ideology, yet we act on account of it. Critique of ideology aims to, so to speak, take off the glasses and offer the possibility to view reality as it is. But is reality even accessible to us at all? According to Žižek, ideology always shapes our perception of reality. Ideology is a fantasy, or belief, and underlies the functioning of every society. It is difficult to accept that ideology is an illusion and not reality itself. Yet, ideology is bearable because it is a pleasant illusion, but more importantly, a necessary illusion.⁸ An interesting illustration of this intuitive problem with a Žižekian example entails the sketch of reality in *The Matrix* movies. The trilogy describes the existence of the real world and a simulation of the world. Those who live in the simulated world, do not know that it is not real. When Neo, the main character, leaves the simulated world and enters the real world, he is offered the possibility to go back to the simulation and forget everything that happened, including the awareness of the existence of the real and the simulated world. The other option is to learn about the Matrix; the real world. Realizing that ideology is an illusion but still acting on behalf of it and believing in it describes the indecisiveness of choosing between going back to the old life and remaining forever fooled, and being confronted with the harsh and unpleasant truth of reality.

Žižek based his notion of ideology on a politicized interpretation of Lacan's psychoanalysis, one of his major inspirations. This theory states that the cynic who says he can pierce through it all and that he is not deceived by ideology, is himself the most deceived of all. This follows the idea of Sigmund Freud that illusion or fantasy is built into reality itself. Fantasy sides with reality and dreams let us encounter the traumatic Real. Žižek therefore states that critique of ideology is not about criticizing reality, but about criticizing our dreams.⁹ We think that when we are dreaming, we have escaped reality. However, the exact opposite is true when we have entered ideology.¹⁰ As Lacan had already shown¹¹, fantasy is the filter that protects us from the Lacanian notion of the Real and makes sure that we do not get overwhelmed by it. Žižek sees ideological dreams as how we structure reality and therefore it is not opposed to reality. If fantasy structures what we experience as reality, reality itself could be a way of escaping running into the Real. The Real is unbearable and is only in flashes accessible to us as traumatic experiences. Lacan distinguishes the Real and the Symbolic, which are constitutively impossible to unite

⁸ Fiennes (2012)

⁹ Žižek (2014), p193

¹⁰ Fiennes (2012)

¹¹ Žižek (2014), p92

– impossible but necessary. The Real as defined by Lacan escapes the Symbolic. It is not possible to speak or write the Real and it cannot be reduced to meaning. Lacan states that every symbolic world is ruled by a rule that only derives its legitimacy from itself. Fantasy domesticates the impossibility to symbolise the Real and transforms this into desire. Reality itself therefore serves those who cannot bear the Real that shows in their dreams.¹²

Referring back to the deceived cynic, they are the ones who justly criticize the philosophers' belief in the power of ideas and their belief that ideas rule the world. But the critic does not see his own naivety. The philosopher is aware of the impossibility and inconsistency of the cynic position, because cynics effectively follow the principle they criticize.¹³ The cynic does not seem to recognize that critique of ideology has to include a theory of constructed ignorance.¹⁴ Both the power and the flaw of ideology is that it remains open to all possible meanings. Žižek states that it is the fantasy that supports ideology. There is a symbolic efficiency of illusions: Illusions organise how we experience the social world.¹⁵ Could that possibly explain human (un)willingness to act, (un)awareness or (dis)interest? What could that entail for how we perceive ourselves and society? To what extent do we derive how we see ourselves from ideology? According to Žižek, we bear and deny our subjectivity through ideology.¹⁶ Ideology functions both as constitutive part of our individual subjectivity, as well as collective social order. Ideology conceals the fundamental incompleteness and impossibility of society. Problems in one's own ideology can easily be solved by the intrusion of the Other. That does not require revising our own beliefs, because the act of being wrong is transferred to someone else. The problem is sought in the outsider shaking things up rather than within ideology itself. Following Hegel, Žižek sees subjectivity as originating from confrontation with the Other. Our individuality and subjectivity are shaped by how the Other shapes his expectations towards us. The main question is how appreciation and recognition by the Other comes to exist and develops. In order to understand themselves, subjects need the desire of the Other. Interesting about Lacan is that subjectivity in Lacanian psychoanalysis is about the lack or absence of something. Subjects undergo the continuous experience of missing something that would complete their subjectivity.¹⁷ Human comprehension of development only arises through initial misunderstanding. There is an untrue position that is a necessary and inevitable entry to the true position. This symbolises the radical non-coincidence of thinking and being, of ideal and reality, of a constitutive lack of identity.

¹² Žižek (2014), p92

¹³ Žižek (2014), p192

¹⁴ This is a reference to Agnotology (2008) by Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger. Ignorance can come about in many different ways and has to be evaluated as a social construct. Certain knowledge does not become known, is ignored or is delayed. Agnotology studies knowledge through the concept of ignorance.

¹⁵ Fiennes (2012)

¹⁶ Fiennes (2012)

¹⁷ Van Oenen (2014), 472

But this does not describe the loss of something we once had, but rather we can be the way we are exactly because of this experience of lacking something. Understanding ourselves is nothing more than a fantasy about what the other sees in our constitutive emptiness. And eventually, we will have to accept that we do not possess a deep, fundamental core. What keeps us, the subject, together is nothing more than fantasy.¹⁸

This intuitive paradox is a common concept in Žižek's work. Žižek is strongly inspired by Hegel and his dialectics, a process that arises from the emergence and resolution of the internal contradiction. Worldviews evolve through the existence of conflict and contradiction within. Reflection on different beliefs create internal tension. Retroactive constitution of the meaning of the failed event will show us how it must be repeated. According to Žižek, retroactivity states that we cannot say how the future will be, nonetheless it will be a repetition of the past. The future is unpredictable, yet the past will be paradoxically repeated. Each new phase in history rewrites the past. Each rephrasing of the past deconstructs the past. This is an infinite dialectical process without progress or upward synthesis. Every second attempt is a negation of the failed negation. We are in such a degree loyal to the current event, that our opposition to the existing order is a result of this fidelity itself.¹⁹ When the Soviet Union ceased to exist, the big communist counterpart of capitalism disappeared. The definition and negation of the capitalist identity through the expectation and negation of the other, vanished.

Žižek uses Islamic fundamentalism to illustrate this point. Žižek divides the world in two camps: Fundamentalism and liberal capitalism, and thus splits up the West and the Other. Fundamentalist Islamic terrorism arises from feelings of superiority, but because the terrorist secretly considers himself inferior. Also, the West sees the fundamentalist as inferior. The politically correct denial of the West that the West has feelings of superiority over these fundamentalists, offends the fundamentalists even more. The friction however does not occur in cultural differences: The fundamentalists have already internalized the capitalist standards and measure themselves according to these standards. In such a way, they have already become like the capitalists. They are fascinated by the Western world and intrigued by non-believers and their sinful lives. The West structures the desires of false fundamentalism. The pseudo-fundamentalists are bothered by the sinners of the West, but only symbolically: By fighting the sin of the non-believing capitalists, the Islamists fight their own temptation to sin. However, combating against the West only intensifies the desire to be part of it. Islamic fundamentalists inject themselves into Western society. The true fundamentalists however, states Žižek, would withdraw from society, like the Amish. Islamic fundamentalism is therefore more accurately described as pseudo-fundamentalism.²⁰ If the

¹⁸ Van Oenen (2014), p472

¹⁹ Žižek (2014), p112

²⁰ Žižek (2014), p88

pseudo-fundamentalists derive their identity from their own negation, could Islamic fundamentalists be considered capitalists? By ignoring that there is such a thing as religious fanaticism, fanaticism itself is only encouraged and the internal paradox is constituted. Market freedom and religious fundamentalism derive their existence and legitimacy from each other. Žižek even goes as far as to state that those who do not want to criticize liberal democracy should remain quiet about fundamentalism.²¹ Liberal permissiveness and fundamentalist intolerance function in a similar way as law and sin are related: They implicate and strengthen each other.²²

Within the political spectrum from left to right, liberalism is placed in the centre. From this central perspective, both the radical left and right are extremes and forms of totalitarianism. For the left, the far populist right is a consequence of the liberal's inability to deal with the radical left.²³ Žižek identifies several political systems and creates a political coordinate system, with 3 axes: Pro-capitalism and anti-capitalism, political right and political left, and pure and impure. The use of this is that the negation of the one thing doesn't necessarily lead to the opposite. We can understand the underlying logic of conflicting political positions, when taking class struggle into account.²⁴ Žižek states that ultimately, we will need a Master to take the revolutionary leap in order to come close to the communist ideal. In times of deep crisis, a Master figure is needed more than ever. The Master is the one to filter who wants to stick to the old system and who wants to move on with the revolution.²⁵ It remains unidentified if the notion of the Master figure refers to an individual, the communist party, or perhaps even a force or movement. Also, is it up for debate when the task of the Master is completed – if that is ever the case. What is known, is that the status quo needs a challenger to be challenged.

Understanding Marx and Žižek's departure from Marx

In capitalism, the owners of the means of production receive profits as a reward for the selling of surplus, rather than the labourers who create the actual surplus. Marx stated that labourers are exploited because the wage that they receive is lower than the added value they produce. The result is that society is split up in two classes: The capitalists on the one hand and the workers or proletariat on the other hand. Marxism suggests that the material conditions decide how society is organised. Marx aims at demolishing the vicious circle in which the labourer ends up. The capitalist pursuit of money and competition is immoral, exactly because it is an exploitative system and because wealth is collected by the lucky few. In

²¹ Žižek refers to Max Horkheimer, who said that those who do not want to speak critically about capitalism should also keep quiet about Fascism

²² Žižek (2014), p101

²³ Žižek (2014), p100

²⁴ Žižek (2014), p64

²⁵ Žižek (2014), p179

order to change society, the economic relations should be changed.²⁶ Žižek examines a long passage from *Economics and Philosophic Manuscripts*, in which Marx describes the paradoxical yet self-sustaining mechanisms of capitalism:

The labour is meant as the realization of the worker, but instead it appears as the loss of his realization; instead of appearing as what it is, the appropriation of the object through labour appears as its estrangement; instead of possessing more of what he produces the more he produces, the worker possesses less; instead of civilizing himself though producing civilized objects, the more civilize his object, the more barbarous the worker becomes.²⁷

In a capitalist society, workers should get organised in order to overthrow capitalism. The revolutionary class struggle will overthrow this system and will bring back the power to the people in organised communism.²⁸ Marx aims for a classless society with no private property in which everyone contributes to his capacities and profits according to his needs. Marx did perceive the immense power of capitalism and self-enhancing productivity, but, according to Žižek, overlooks that the capitalist dynamic is limited by capital itself. There seems to be a *contradictio in terminis* in capitalism: Full usage of production factors is both impossible as well as the condition of possibility. This infinite possibility of growing productivity is exactly effectuated by never making full use of what there is. By releasing capitalism from its own paradoxical potential, it is precisely the productivity that is lost. The idea of unleashed productivity outside the frame of capital remains a fantasy as well for the capitalist. The productive power of capitalism will only work in capitalism, and not in communism. Žižek states that Marx makes an essential mistake here. A new, higher social order named communism, will not enhance the ever increasing spiral of productivity which in capitalism is rebuffed by economic crisis, as Marx thought.²⁹

Capitalism derives its legitimacy from its own existence. Žižek acknowledges this and therefore envisions a system of communism in which a continuous emancipatory movement is active. True emancipation is a departure from and an imitation of the old order. An infinitely repeated revolution is required when the communist ideal is installed. The first revolution has to end up in disaster, which creates the necessary conditions of its own overcoming.³⁰ Only the catastrophe is able to make us aware of our failure. The failure of 20th century communist ideals shows the unleashed potential of the communist ideal.³¹

²⁶ Žižek (2014), p146

²⁷ Žižek (2014), p147

²⁸ Žižek (2014), p78

²⁹ Žižek (2014), p146

³⁰ Žižek (2014), p104

³¹ Žižek (2014), p205

Žižek also explicitly departs from Marx when it comes to the understanding and function of ideology. Marx speaks of how the proletariat is unaware that they are misguided by capitalism and are fooled by ideology. Marx wants to radically break with the system by showing the people that they are being fooled. Dialectical materialism implies a knowable world composed of material elements only. Žižek disagrees and states that people know that they view the world in ideology, but act on behalf of it anyway. To put it differently, Marx states that *'they do not know it, but they do it'*, to which Žižek replies that *'they know it, but they are doing it anyway'*.

Recurring in the book is a cynical joke about a Nazi officer who replies to a question about the German concentration camps in occupied Poland: The Germans do the concentrating, the Polish do the camping. Žižek recognizes an ironic interpretation of our risk society. There indeed are similar mechanisms to be found in the capitalist economic system: The consumer bears the risk of the mortgage, whereas the mortgage seller does the choosing. The employee saves for his pension, but the pension fund oversees the pension payments.³² In order to get to the very essence of these examples, basic capitalist mechanisms have to be investigated. Neoclassical economic theory incorporates logic of higher rewards for higher risks, including a chance of default and receiving nothing. Could consumers therefore know and should they accept that if they would like to receive a higher interest rate on savings, this includes the risk of losing it all? There is also a similarity with the communist system and the critique on capitalism of Marx: The labourer puts in labour, but does not receive the profit. However, the entrepreneur bears the risk, whereas the labourer performs his tasks (or, as Žižek and Marx would phrase it: The labourer is forced to produce). The income of the labourer is fixed, whereas the entrepreneur receives a flexible reward. The entrepreneur bears the risk of going bankrupt, which also entails that the labourers become unemployed. These examples indicate the importance and normative valuation of economic relations. Marx, and with him Žižek, in this sense do away with neoclassical economic theory.

Capitalism as pathology

Interestingly, Žižek poses capitalism as the ultimate system of progression. Capitalism has appeared to be the true revolutionizing force that embodies continuous innovation, change and development. Exactly because capitalism knows how to maintain itself and does not need active intervention of someone or something actively enforcing it, it is a system that people experience as natural. This is an uncomfortable thought for the leftist: Only the one who sees the antagonisms of global capitalism is a true conservative.³³ Žižek's case against capitalism transcends the concept of progress: Žižek evaluates capitalism as a perverse system that is deeply rotten in the core. Capitalism is a pathology

³² Žižek (2014), p180

³³ This is a reference to Marx' Communist Manifesto (1848), in which the Bourgeois is criticized

and should be overthrown completely. Since capitalism is fully internalized and goes even further than the status quo, Žižek states that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world rather than the end of capitalism.³⁴ His pursuit of showing that the only way out is radical change is a merciless destruction of the foundations of capitalism.

Capitalism can be understood in terms of modernization and industrialization. It enhanced the disintegration of old stable relations, which led to turmoil in traditional social relations. Capitalism functions consistently and constantly through its continuous instigations of instabilities. The revolutionary force of capitalism is both distorting as well as an innate, stable process.³⁵ Capitalism is always in crisis and that is exactly what makes capitalism indestructible. Crisis is a force that pushes the system forward and enhances an ongoing, self-revolutionizing process of change. In that sense, capitalism follows the same logic as religion does: It has to circulate to reproduce itself.³⁶ Capitalism is all about money, power and influence. The meaning of life for the capitalist is him as personification of the capital and its reproductive circulation. When the capitalist realistically admits this, the illusion is shattered. That is how the ideology is turning into blindness. Illusions are useful and structure and sustain the power games of financial speculation.³⁷

Neoclassical economic theory describes itself as the discipline of the allocation of scarce resources and is occupied with how value is created, attributed and appropriated. Žižek begs to differ if that is also what an economic system is or ought to be about. In capitalism, the only true commodity is money. Paradoxically, in a crisis it is not the money that loses its value, but the commodities. That is because there is no one to buy them anymore.³⁸ Since capitalism is in constant crisis, does this mean that commodities never have value? Or does this entail that commodities are relatively becoming less valuable than before in an infinite downward spiral? Žižek states that you cannot have capitalism with just the real economy; when accepting capitalism, you also accept financial speculations and the financial world as parallel universe.³⁹ This world of speculation is both fictional and meaningless, but the illusion is necessary to take part in capitalism. The capitalists underestimate the importance of illusion for the functioning of the system.⁴⁰ Capitalism is the first system, according to Žižek, that de-totalizes meaning. Capitalism may have reached global levels on a geographical scale; there is no such thing as the global capitalist world view. There is no such thing as capitalist civilization. The Real is captured in the market

³⁴ Taylor (2005)

³⁵ Fiennes (2012)

³⁶ Fiennes (2012)

³⁷ Žižek (2014), p32

³⁸ Žižek (2014), p28

³⁹ Žižek (2014), p32

⁴⁰ Žižek (2014), p67

mechanism and the Symbolic is absent in it. Capitalism has truth without meaning.⁴¹ The market mechanism itself is not accessible to us, yet we deal with our projection of it and use capitalist ideology as means of mediating between the Real and the absent Symbolic.

In capitalism, the realization of the goal is infinitely postponed.⁴² The goal of capitalism is ambiguous, but is always comparatively phrased: More profit, more efficient, better results, a higher market share, and so on. This goal is never fulfilled; the superlative is never reached.⁴³ There is no bliss point to works towards: Every time the goal seems to get closer, the goal is set higher and further away. Capitalism is the ultimate system of paradoxes. The people do not see that a revolution or change is needed, since people only call for this when their expectations aren't met. That is why capitalism is problematic: It is continuously changing and hence setting new expectations. Since the system is continuously developing, old expectations are never not lived up to. Capitalism paradoxically never satisfies but nevertheless always keeps on going forward.⁴⁴ Development and change cause new instabilities, unexpected events and expectations that cannot be realized, intuitively leading to disappointment. But because the anticipated is also constantly adapting, there is no time to look back and evaluate what happened. Capitalism is not about the past and not even about the present: Capitalism is about what is about to come. The aim and routine of capitalism accommodate the needs of the future. This continuous paradox as the essence of life is translated into basic neoclassical economic theory of supply and demand. Capitalism has shaped the economy as a system of producers and consumers. The higher the production, the more worthless the product becomes, so the harder one has to work, and so on. The constant drive within capitalism to become more efficient leads to higher production and lower labour costs. If labourers work harder and become more productive, less labourers are necessary to perform the same task. Žižek refers to a notion of Frederick Jameson: Because of the perfect functioning of capitalism, there are people who are not likely to get a job ever again. This structural employment is also a form of exploitation, in addition to the notion of exploitation posed by Marx. The exploited are not just the workers who receive less wage than the surplus that they produce, but also the ones who are condemned not to produce.⁴⁵ The capitalist does not only need workers, but also this so-called reserve army of people who are permanently unemployed. They are the product of capitalism. The better capitalism is functioning, the higher the unemployment rate. It should be noted however that this dark scenario does assume full dependency of the labourers on the capitalist. The other side of the coin of

⁴¹ Žižek (2014), p8

⁴² Žižek (2014), p68

⁴³ Žižek (2014), p21

⁴⁴ Žižek (2014), p20

⁴⁵ Žižek (2014), p23

capitalism is the self-enhancing, paradoxical system that enhances desire. The goal is not to fulfil the desire, but it is about desire for desire itself. This is a continuously growing, self-sustaining process: The more you have, the more you want. What is it that makes the commodity desirable? What is actually important and fulfils needs? Is that the pleasure it gives you, is it the fulfilment of a desire, or is it just that there is room for even more unfulfilled desire?

The hegemonic neoliberal ideology reduces everything there is to investment logic: People have become ‘the entrepreneur of the self’ in their everyday life. Every individual action is seen as an investment choice. Rights and certainties are transformed into freedoms and choices. Žižek warns for these intuitively positive notions: Instead of enabling people with more possibilities to shape their life, it makes people more dependent on capitalism itself. It leads to people having more responsibility, but will barely experience the profit and for sure will carry the burden. Every individual has become his own capitalist. Society does not simply protect its inhabitants, but instead offers the availability of consumer credit. People do not have rights anymore, but are constantly indebted.⁴⁶ As entrepreneurs of the self, we have lost our right to for instance education and health, but we do now have the freedom to choose if, where and when we will make use of what type of education or health care. We tell ourselves that we are autonomous, but actually we are ever more indebted and therefore more restricted than ever. Being towards debt has become a way of life. People lose their self-rule in the system of constant debt, guilt and control. Debt is directly treated as a means of control and domination. In fact, the forgiveness of debt shifts away the debt of a one-time repayment to a lifelong being in debt of gratitude. Because this freedom becomes more of an anxiety, we are slaves of the system with every choice that we make. Debt is our new addiction. Debt and unemployment have a structural role in our capitalist society, and every accumulation of this leads to a more deplorable system. It goes even further than that: The debt is not even expected to be returned. Someone in debt can be controlled and dominated.⁴⁷ The aim of lending money is not to have it paid back, but to indefinitely continue the flow of debt which keeps the debtor dependent and subordinated to the lender.⁴⁸ Once you have not been able to pay back a loan and take up another loan to pay off the initial loan, it is extremely difficult to get out of this vicious circle. Debt will pile up and you will never be able to pay it back. The average empirical study of microfinance describes this process and will leave the reader with a feeling of unease. Also does it facilitate fraudulent investment schemes, loansharking, and so on. The continuous indebtedness facilitates a system that is mainly concerned with the creation of value out of money itself, instead of creating actual commodities that could have consumer value. The capitalist desperately wants to believe this system works and is fair.

⁴⁶ Žižek (2014), p42

⁴⁷ Žižek (2014), p45

⁴⁸ Žižek (2014), p46

However, trouble awaits if this system is not being controlled or the investor is fooled by his own unconditional belief in the capitalist system. Žižek paraphrases Descartes: I am in debt, therefore I exist as a subject integrated into social order.⁴⁹ Capitalism is a structure that is concerned with debt, forgiveness and guilt in the social construction of duty and obligation. Following Italian sociologist Franco Berardi, Žižek states that capital creation is no longer just the work of accumulation of labour surplus: It's also about rents on services and interest for loans. Capitalism has shifted away from the classical notion of supply and demand and production and consumption of commodities. Capital and labour as means of production are replaced by a system of accounting. Value creation happens now within the financial market. Debt and rent form the engine of today's global capitalist society.

Nevertheless, capitalism is a system that in theory makes the notion of individuality possible, which is something that communism lacks. Even if capitalism is approached as a system of debt, the responsibility and freedom of choice is shifted from the state to the individual. The individual carries the freedom, the potential, the problems and solutions. Žižek states that capitalism poses itself as a system that emphasizes the existence of the individual instead of the individual as part of a group. Capitalism and liberalism form a huge attraction because it is masqueraded by this freedom and openness. Nothing is taboo and everything can be included and can be part of the system. However, every individual might merge towards the same end product of capitalism. Capitalism is often associated with convergence towards the same and mass culture. Could it be that exactly the authenticity, the imperfection and the peculiarity is what has become taboo? Every authentic culture can be absorbed in the system, but will also be swallowed in the domination of the regularity. If the individual acts as an individual, how do social and political structures come into existence? Almost unnoticeably societal structures reproduce without consent or objection. In capitalism, we believe that it is our freedom and falsely believe that we choose autonomously for our way of living. Freedom and choices have become commodities and are there to serve the system. But even though we might realise this, we do not want liberation from it. We like to feel that we are in power and that we decide. The false belief of being in control is more important to us than actually being in control. Our own obscene desires determine how we live our lives. We need our beliefs and needs that keep us from getting what we want. We internalize the law and obey authority because we tell ourselves that is how we get to our goal – the goal we will never reach. We become involved with our selfish, made-up capacities and change the world by repeating the same thing over and over. Is this to be understood as individual responsibility, or is it a matter of playing deaf for those telling the truth? Overall, the infinite mechanisms of capitalism emphasize the pathological side as well as the sustainability of the system. The objections concerning exploitation, indebtedness and financial value creation are obvious.

⁴⁹ Žižek (2014), p87

Yet, even though the notions of autonomy and freedom are illusionary, those participating in the system will always have something to live for.

Captured in ideology

Žižek admits that there is no pure form of capitalism in the real world: Is it then even possible to say anything about the practicality of capitalism? Ideology can be separated from how the world is actually organised, just the same as that convictions, principles and ideas can be seen apart from actions. Žižek mentions that a big weakness of capitalism in the real world is that it violates its own rules: For example, the United States support their own agricultural industry and democratic countries have tight diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰ Anecdotal evidence however does not lead to the very core of the argument and misses the essence of critique of pure ideology. This study deliberately does not aim to discuss the practical dimension and compare countries or practical situations, since the *ceteris paribus* condition will never be met and the ideal design is never fully lived up to. An important implication is that the horrible mass murders committed by big communist reformers of the 20th century cannot be used as a counterargument for communism. This study goes beyond the evaluation of capitalist or communist regimes guided by the notion of ideology. Žižek is a man of extremes and that is also how he pictures the world. Žižek does not even bother to discuss fascism or socialism and pictures the world as either communist or capitalist. Gradual and smooth change are excluded from his set of possibilities; only fundamental change can save the world from the pathological state it's currently in. A strong case that Žižek makes for the overthrowing of capitalism is that he states that, contrary to Marx, people are well aware that they are captured by ideology and appear to be fine with it. Simply the realization of being fooled by the system is therefore not enough. The combination of the internalization of the capitalist ideology and the realisation of this, has led to indifference. The only radical overthrowing of capitalism could lead to breaking free from the market mechanism, the tyranny of debt and the infinite vicious circle of growing unemployment and exploitation.

Žižek is convinced that the only way is to overthrow everything there is and to replace it with something completely new. But could it be that capitalism might just be the exact system that is the best suitable for making the world a better place? Žižek acknowledges capitalism as the system of progress. Capitalism is continuously changing, adapting and developing. Would it be possible that the mechanisms of capitalism itself are the solution to the problematic facets of capitalism? Žižek prefers the radical emancipatory movement and sees this as the only way to break free. However, capitalism appears to be a system that is able to adapt: Capitalism should be able to deal with emancipatory movements with a need

⁵⁰ Žižek (2014), p110

for change. Žižek mentions the digital era and the blurring of the private-public distinction: Isn't this an indication that capitalism itself is able to adapt to a changing environment, with shifts in property rights and means of production that depart from the classic approach of labour and capital? The radical revolution is continuously taking place within capitalism itself. Interesting is that Žižek transformed Marx' communism by adapting certain capitalist traits, such as the continuous emancipatory movement. Capitalism is a convincing system that is very easy to internalize and is a system that derives its legitimacy from itself. Therefore, once it exists, it is plausible that it will always be there. The world is never perfect, completed or done: There is always the unknown, the unexplored and the unidentified. Capitalism is self-sustaining, is never finished and always strives for better. Shall the world end before capitalism will die out? Žižek makes a case for the eventual shattering of the illusion. But will this ever happen, and is this something that we should even plea for? People need the symbolism of unfulfilled desire and the infinite, untenable possibility of being, having and doing more, in a better way and on a higher level. Search for fulfilment is an illusion, but people enjoy living in this illusion because it gives life purpose.

In capitalism, expectations are never met but also never disappointed due to the continuous adjustment of expectations before the dissatisfaction could even take place. In Žižek's alternative reading of communism, he proposes revolution on revolution in order to stay awake and to stay emancipated. Yet this would entail the continuous disappointment and actual embodiment of dissatisfaction. Žižek's communism would be a system that is being wronged time after time. Capitalism is a system which does not pose a feasible goal or a bliss point: Capitalism has never reached her goal since the goal is always formulated in comparative terms like more, better and stronger. Therefore, expectations will always be adapted, and old expectations are not relevant anymore. For the communism proposed by Žižek, there will be bliss point on bliss point and emancipation as a continuous process. Exactly that is what reminds us of capitalism, and of that which was part of the big crux of the system in the first place. The infinite horizon might just be thing that people need that will always give meaning. Knowing that the process will always make sense because of the argument of infinite regress. It is said that everything should have a beginning, but does everything need to have an end? If capitalism will always exist, there will be always something that people can live for. Could it be stated that meaning translated as having something to live for until tomorrow is captured in the market mechanism? Ideology is such an abstract entity that is intangible to humans even though everybody appeals to it. The same applies to meaning. Sustainability of a pathological but self-sustaining system is comfortable and answers the questions that people deliberately ask themselves. The questions that really matter are unanswerable and unbearable, but need not be asked nor answered. This way, people might never reach the actual essence of their existence – but is that even something that anyone desires? Marx famously spoke about religion as opium for the masses

and a tool for manipulation. Could both communism and capitalism be explained as (atheist) religions as well? These ideologies might not speak of transcendental truths, yet they do provide us with a philosophy of what ought to be. Also illusionary convictions can offer satisfaction and meaning.

An interpretation of capitalism is that it is a system based on micro foundations and individual optimizing behaviour. Capitalism could therefore be interpreted as an individualistic interpretation of society. Marxism on the other hand is about the proletariat, about the labourers altogether. But what is the most accurate description of society and ‘the People’? Capitalism implies that society is the sum of all individuals, whereas Marxism focuses on class distinction. Yet this appears to be an incomplete evaluation of a complex society. The People is an ambiguous ever changing entity – can it even be approached from the broad societal view?

Critics of emancipation state that emancipation will lead to an overregulated society, if the focus will be too much on equality and solidarity. Everything will converge towards something similar. But to that, the emancipatory movement responds that capitalism is the system of mass culture and is therefore the system that will eventually lead to everything being the same. In the guise of constant change, everything eventually will be the same. Mass culture that intuitively is linked to capitalism does not even have to be there in order to exist: Not the material product, but the feeling of wanting it is what matters. The emptiness and the desire for more is exactly what mass culture is about. It is the insatiable desire for more. The need is inexhaustible. Capitalism seduces us by stating that we will be free and open, but that is simply to trick us into the fall of the vicious circle of inappeasable hunger for things. Authenticity is lost. How can authenticity and true individuality ever occur there? Doesn’t the illusion of authenticity, change and progression in capitalism appeal much more than the brute blending of communist mass culture? We are the supposed experts about the self, but we remain unable to transcend the inauthenticity of the self.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to get a better understanding of capitalist dynamics following the theoretical framework that Žižek offers in *Trouble in Paradise*. This is done by the exploration of the abstract concepts of and important facets within ideology, communism and capitalism, and by evaluating how these notions interrelate, exclude or complement each other. The hidden and obvious relations and assumptions are critically considered. Essential for understanding Žižek are the notions of capitalism as pathological ideology, the understanding of ideology itself and the illusionary power of ideology. Critique of ideology has to include a theory of constructed ignorance. Both the power and the flaw of ideology is that it remains open to all possible meanings.

Žižek describes ideology as a necessary but pleasant illusion. People do not want to and cannot bear to be confronted with actual reality. The human experience is unavoidably always mediated between ideal and reality. Ideology could be understood as a coping mechanism. Therefore, people aim to live in the illusion. Whereas Marx believed that making the people conscious of the oppression of ideology, Žižek acknowledges the consciousness and deliberate choice of people to live in the lie. Even though the ideal of communism might be appealing, capitalism is a system that plays into this need in a much better way. Whereas communism demands revolution, capitalism encourages laissez-faire. Whereas communism requires a Master and top-down organisation, capitalism is a bottom-up individualistic, self-organizing system based on micro foundations. Capitalism is self-sustaining and is a continuous process of change, crisis and crisis management. Žižek makes a valid point that this system in nonstop crisis is a ticking time bomb. But how do we identify that the bomb will soon, or ever, explode? Žižek also pleads for a Master with proper understanding of communism that will lead us to a better future. However, why would the system of self-sustaining capitalism that is maintained through its own legitimacy ever allow such a Master to intervene? Capitalism is a system that de-totalizes meaning, yet the illusionary experience of meaning is lived up to. Desires are ever growing and paradoxically the fulfilment of desire will only lead to a growing desire. But exactly since the expectation is never met and the aim is always set higher, there is always something to strive for and life for. Žižek strongly opposes capitalism, but what is the value of his objections if those living in the capitalist system gladly remain fooled?

Communism is appealing exactly because it can be finished. But can the world ever be finished? Isn't the fight to make the world a better place not exactly what makes life worth living and acting worth acting? Wouldn't the reaching of the ultimate goal de-totalize meaning even more? An old saying poetically teaches us that life is about the journey, not the destination. If that is true, capitalism will allow us to remain forever travelling.

Trouble in Paradise is accessible, easy to read and definitely provides new insights. One of the difficulties is that because of Žižek's writing style, topics recur all over the book. Also, it is not clear what the exact intent of this book is. Yes, Žižek wants to warn us for what we do not want to see. But what exactly would be the big loss in staying fooled? Then, Žižek also states that realisation alone is not enough, but we also need to act. Žižek however remains ambiguous about what steps we should exactly follow. It remains undecided if this book is about a better world, equality or fairness: There is surprisingly little written in this book about ideals, considering the sophistication and historical awareness of the writer who is mainly concerned with studying ideology.

The book clearly outlines why Žižek thinks capitalism is problematic, yet does not tell us how to escape the vicious circle of capitalism that we are in. However, there are some very useful, practical

lessons that Slavoj Žižek teaches us that stem from his theories on ideology. First, ideology colours how we view the world. Undecided remains if this is applicable to the individual or to society as a whole. Also, there is no such thing as an uncoloured world view. It is useful to realize that ideology helps us as mediator of truth, meaning and experience. The task of the philosopher, the critical intellectual, is to continuously take the place of the gap in the symbolic order; the gap symbolizing the experience of freedom. Perhaps the most important lesson of all is that both Žižek's beloved communism and rejected capitalism show enormous flaws. History has taught us that designing the ideal world order has been so far impossible, and will perhaps always be. The search for an alternative shall no matter what be continued – until the end of history that Žižek implies, if that moment will ever come to be. Truth about how the world should be organised might not even exist, since this implies agreement on how to come to normative judgement and the existence of objective moral values. Critique, the ongoing revolutionary and emancipatory force of critical assessment, and the awareness of our human fallibility are useful in evaluating systems that cover the entire political, economic and social spectrum. Žižek's theory of ideology critique appears to be an excellent method for evaluating theories on how the world can be organised such that the world can become a fundamentally better place.

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