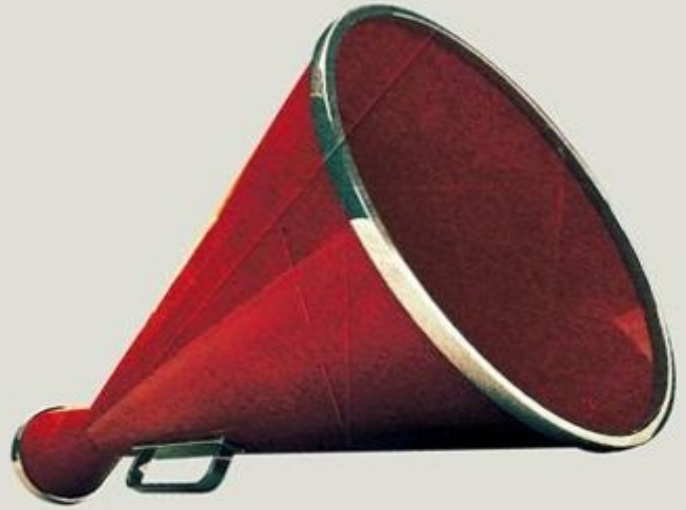


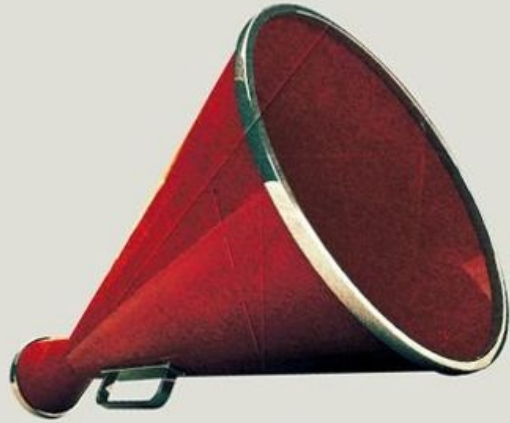
SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK



Demanding the Impossible

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Contents

Acknowledgments

- 1 Politics and Responsibility
- 2 Obsession for Harmony / Compulsion to Identify
- 3 Politicization of Ethics
- 4 Means Without End: Political Phronesis
- 5 “May You Live In Interesting Times”
- 6 Communism: The Ethico-Political Fiasco
- 7 Who Is Afraid of a Failed Revolution?
- 8 Another World Is Possible
- 9 For They Know Not What They Do
- 0 Parallax View on Postmodern Globalization
- 1 The Public Use of Scandal
- 2 The Screen of Politeness / Empty Gestures and Performatives
- 3 Deadlock of Totalitarian Communism
- 4 The Subversive Use of Theory
- 5 Embodying a Proletarian Position
- 6 New Forms of Apartheid
- 7 Intrusion of the Excluded into the Socio-Political Space
- 8 Rage Capital and Risk-Taking Revolutionary Changes
- 9 Café Revolution
- 0 To Begin From the Beginning
- 1 The Fear of Real Love
- 2 Dialectic of Liberal Superiority
- 3 The Day After
- 4 The Universality of Political Miracles
- 5 Messianism, Multitude, and Wishful Thinking
- 6 Politicization of *Favelas*
- 7 Bolivarianism, the Populist Temptation
- 8 Violent Civil Disobedience
- 9 Legitimacy of Symbolic Violence
- 0 Gandhi, Aristide, and Divine Violence
- 1 No Moralization But Egotism
- 2 Possibility of Concrete Universality
- 3 Common Struggle for Freedom
- 4 The Impossible Happens

Acknowledgments

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My colleagues and I hope that the conversations in this book will prove enjoyable to the reader, and will spark lively discussions.

Yong-june Park

Politics and Responsibility

What is to be done for politics today? In the midst of radical changes – ecological catastrophes, fateful biogenetic mutations, nuclear or similar military-social conflicts, financial fiasco, etc. – where our commons are at stake, is there such a thing as the common good? To what extent is it useful to speak of the common good?

SŽ: For me, what is problematic is not the word “common” but the word “good.” Because the way I see it, from my European perspective, traditional aesthetics was directed toward some *supreme Good*. It could be God, humanity, the universe, etc.: we see this *common good* as a supreme substantial value that we should all have to work for. But for me, modernity begins with Descartes, and then with Kant – to be precise, with an ethics that is no longer an ethics of the common good. For example, in Kant, you find it is purely formal ethics: ethics of the moral law and so on. Here, ethics cannot be, in any way, *politicized*: politicized in the sense that you cannot simply presuppose some common good. Rather, it is a matter of decision. This is what I find problematic about the notion of the common good.

What is a common good today? OK, let’s say ecology. Probably most people would agree, even though we are politically different, that we all care about the earth. But if you look closely, you will see that there are so many ecologies on which you have to make so many decisions. Having said that, my position here is very crazy. For me, politics has *priority* over ethics. Not in the vulgar sense that we can do whatever we want – even kill people and then subordinate ethics to politics – but in a much more radical sense that what we define as our good is not something we just discover; rather, it is that we have to take *responsibility* for defining what is our good.

And, as many radical ecologists have pointed out, how much of ecology, which pretends to work for the good of nature, involves *hidden* political choices? When you say, for example, that the common good should be our Mother Earth, and that our planet should thrive – why should our planet thrive? Because we humans want it to, so that we can survive. Ecology, from my point of view, is the most egotistic, human-centered machine there is. Nature is crazy. Nature is chaotic and prone to wild, unpredictable and meaningless disasters, and we are exposed to its merciless whims – there is no such thing as Mother Earth. In nature, always, there are catastrophes, things go wrong, and sometimes a planet explodes.

What I want to show you is the fact that, if you look at this closely, when we refer to some higher common good, it is always, at least the way I see it, defined by our secret priorities. For example, people may say “Oh! We are constructing another big city and it will destroy nature. It is horrible!” And the usual response to this, even of many ecologists, is that “we should live in a more natural way, closer to the forest, and so on.” No! One ecologist, a friend of mine from Germany, whom I appreciate very

much, told me that this kind of response is, ecologically, totally catastrophic. From an ecological standpoint, the best thing is this: there is a lot of pollution everywhere, so you pack as many people as you can into a big city; it is then very concentrated and there is much less pollution per capita so you can keep the large domains relatively clean. I don't know if you are doing this in Korea, but somebody told me they are doing it in Japan. I think that large dirty cities where people live packed together are ecologically the best thing for nature. Again, there is another ecological idea, as we call it, which is that we should live in small self-sufficient houses with solar energy – people believe this is one way of living ecologically. But can you imagine how it would end up if the majority of people wanted to live like that? Everyone would be very spread out, and the forests would disappear. Ironically, this is related to the question of how much we can “safely” pollute our environment. So I am very distrustful of this view. Whenever something is proposed as being for the higher good, and we say we should transcend our egotism and work for it, we will always discover that we are already secretly doing just this.

What I like to suggest, based on my basic position, is not politics in the sense of what people usually associate with politics – such as cheap manipulation, corruption, power struggles, etc. – but politics in the sense of fundamental decisions about our life on earth, and collective decisions for which you have to take *full* responsibility.

Obsession for Harmony/ Compulsion to Identify

What do you mean by “full responsibility”? If the common good is a matter of decisions we have to make, precisely in the field of political struggle and ecological crisis, is this a term that embraces responsibility even for social reform or revolution?

SŽ: Well, what I think problematic from a European perspective is this oriental wisdom that says there is some kind of natural balance or harmony of the elements. I don't see any harmony in this world. On the contrary, I see that all harmony is only *partial harmony*. What do I mean by this? Some people, for example, would say: “Communism was bad because it was too socializing. Everything was social, and no individuality was allowed. On the other hand, liberal capitalism is too individualistic and everybody is for himself, and so on. So they say they are both disharmonious, and we need a kind of middle road: a society that has a certain social sense of community but allows, nonetheless, some individual freedom.” No! I think that what we should think about is this very *contrast*. How do we imagine individual freedom? And how do we imagine the common good? These questions already belong to a certain field. These are the extremes within that certain field.

The first thing I would like to do is show how absurd it is to urge that we have two extremes and need to find the balance. These two extremes already flow into each other. This is why “synthesis” does not affirm the identity of the extremes, but, on the contrary, affirms their difference as such. So the *synthesis* delivers difference from the “compulsion to identify.” In other words, the immediate passage of an extreme into its opposite is precisely an index of our submission to the *compulsion to identify*.

I can think of an example from North Korea. I read a book about North Korea, written by a Western author who was trying to describe the everyday life of the terrible hunger experienced there in the last 15 years – you know, when, 15 years ago, the North Korean state government simply more or less stopped functioning. That is to say, the state controlled pretty much every social infrastructure, so people didn't get enough food to survive and couldn't get a job, and so on. And what did emerge there? A kind of very rudimentary brutal form of capitalism: people went to the forest and gathered fruits for their own use and to sell at the market. Isn't it interesting how you find a terrible Darwinian survivalist individualism beneath everything – lavish spectacle, the Mass Games with their doll-like robotic dancers – that they show to the world? Basically, life for everyone is just for the individual. It was the same in Stalinism. Even in China, I claim that the real result of the Cultural Revolution is the capitalism that they now have.

On the other hand, look what we have in capitalism. People talk about individualism, but what kind of individualism is this? No wonder large corporations

are delighted to accept such evangelical attacks on the state, when the state tries to regulate media mergers, put strictures on energy companies, strengthen air pollution regulations, protect wildlife, and limit logging in the national parks, etc. It is the ultimate irony of history that radical individualism serves as the ideological justification of the unconstrained power of what the large majority of individuals experience as a vast anonymous power, which, without any democratic public control, regulates their lives.

Let's see what is now happening on the internet. We get, more and more, to serialize our lives: we go to see the same movies and we watch the same news. People describe it as movement toward the clouds: cloud computing. We no longer need a big computer to play video games, like the one I have in my room to have fun with my son. A decade ago, a computer was a big box on one's table, and downloading was done with floppy disks and USB sticks; today, we no longer need strong individual computers, since cloud computing is internet-based – i.e., software and information are provided to computers or smartphones on demand, in the guise of web-based tools or applications that users can access and use through a browser as if it were a program installed on their own computer. In this way, we can access information from wherever we are in the world, on any computer, with smartphones putting this access literally into our pocket.

Everything happens out there. Are people aware of how this will standardize everything? We will only be connected to one single provider, like Google or iTunes, but we are limited to their choices. Our struggle should thus focus on those aspects that pose a threat to the transnational public sphere. Part of this global push toward the privatization of the “general intellect” is the recent trend in the organization of cyberspace toward so-called “cloud computing.”

So back to the point: I don't like this approach which says that we have two extremes and we have to find a balance, because this principle, for me, is too abstract. For example, we may say that some countries have no democracy and, on the other hand, some have too much democracy. You can always say that we need balance. But the real revolution, for me, is when you change the balance itself: *the measure of balance*.

When I was very young, before the sexual revolution, it was considered that there were two different views: conservatives, who thought sex should be allowed only in marriage and, on the other hand, those who urged liberating sexuality. But what then happened? The balance totally changed. You cannot simply say that the old balance was lost and that we now have too much sexual freedom, but rather you should say that the very measure of what is extreme has changed. So for me this is the true revolution. It is that *totality* changed; the very measure of the extremes changed.

This is also related to your other question about social reform. The point is not that I think we need violence for social revolution. Of course I don't like violence. But for me reform means changes *within* the existing order: you can say that we now have too much individualism, so we need more social responsibility. But this stays within the field. On the contrary, revolution is where the basic rule of society changes. This is why capitalism was a radical revolution. Because the whole notion of stability has changed with capitalism or even with capitalistic democracy: only with capitalism does a certain dynamics become a part of stability. If things don't change, they fall

apart. Capitalism changed the whole logic of social space. When you talk about stability today, it means the stability of dynamic development. It is a totally different logic of stability from that of pre-modern times.

Politicization of Ethics

How should we comprehend our responsibilities when faced with this new logic of modern capitalism?

SŽ: Well, I am suspicious about the notion of a common good. I think there is no common good, which is prescribed, a priori, in advance, by nature. Even with regard to nature, what would be the common good? We might say nature needs to be balanced so that humanity can survive on earth. But we will have to define the balance. I mean, as we all know, nature is crazy. Nature has catastrophes all the time. Can we even imagine what happened when dinosaurs died out or when oil was created? We know now that the Sahara Desert was once a large ocean.

So nature is not balanced. Here I am very modern. Before modernity, people believed, to put it very simply, in a predestined order: that is, a kind of global harmony which we humans have ruined, so now we have to return to it. I don't believe in this solution, especially with regard to ecology today. I don't think there is any natural order. Natural orders are catastrophic.

To return to your questions, I am, in this sense, in favor of the *politicization of ethics* in the sense that we are not only responsible for doing our duty or for working for the good, we are also responsible for deciding what this good is. Well, even when some people urge that there is a sort of natural balance, isn't this also a totally coherent *politico-ecological* decision? For example, some may say that the global population has grown too large – that there are too many people and we have developed too many productive forces, and so on. The point they make is that we should instead encourage infectious diseases so that at least two-thirds of humanity will die, while those who don't should learn to live more modestly. This will be best for the earth and even for humanity. I, of course, totally disagree with this vision, but what can you say a priori against it? You cannot argue from an ecological standpoint. What will you say? Is it bad for the earth? No! It's probably better for the earth than to say there should be food for all the people now living. Wouldn't the best thing for the earth be to organize slowly so that two-thirds of the people will die? For the earth, this is probably the best thing that could happen.

Here is my point. We already made some *ethico-political* decisions. This is what I would like to emphasize: we are much more free and responsible than we think. Usually it is fashionable to say – old Marxists used to say things like this – that “we just appear to be free. You go to the store and buy whatever you want, but in reality you are manipulated.” It's true, but we are also way more free than we think we are. If you believe in some kind of a destiny, it makes life easier. The difficult thing is to break destiny. We all assume that this explosion of development and industry is our destiny. Even the majority of ecologists argue about how to make industry ecological.

They accept the primacy of industry. But I find all this problematic.

I think the first step is to accept the consequence of modernity, which is radical freedom not only in the good sense, but also in the terrifying sense that we have to decide. It's totally up to us. This is what Jacques Lacan means when he says: "There is no big Other – *il n'y a pas de grand Autre.*" There is no agency on which we can rely. Whenever there is a crisis, people spontaneously look for some kind of a lost balance. All this started with Confucius, whom I think of as the original form of idiot. Confucius was not so much a philosopher as a proto-ideologist: what interested him was not metaphysical truths but, rather, a harmonious social order within which individuals could lead happy and ethical lives.

No wonder that Confucius' description of the disorder he sees in society around him ironically provides a good description of a really democratic society. Confucius proposes here a kind of proto-Althusserian theory of ideological interpellation: the ideological "big Other" (tradition), embodied in its apparatuses (rituals), interpellates individuals, and it is up to the individual to live and act in accordance with the title that makes him what he is. Confucius' idea was that crisis happens when the original harmony is lost and then the idea is to restore harmony. I think that we should drop this. There is no harmony to which we should or can return. For harmony, we have to *decide* what we want and we have to struggle and fight for it.

Means Without End: Political Phronesis

What kind of values should we foster to help guide our ethico-political decisions?

SŽ: What fascinates me are the events going on in Egypt. The West has been saying for years that “we want Arabs to become democratic.” This is all hypocrisy. Now we have had a democratic explosion, which involved, at the same time – at least till now – absolutely no Muslim fundamentalism. Nonetheless everybody is afraid. This is what always fascinates me. Here, theoretical analysis begins and this is often true in politics: you bridge something from very different sides.

In Slovenia, we have a proverb that, if you talk too much, you want something: you really are afraid that something could happen and you talk a lot to make sure that it doesn't. It's a little bit like this with democracy in Arab countries. Everybody was saying that they needed democracy, but everyone was deadly afraid that democracy would finally come about there.

This is maybe where you should teach me. When you say common good, I think of something like true political activity – and of course I don't mean power struggle or corruption; rather, I mean the process of decision-making. In this political domain of judgments and decisions, we need what Aristotle called *phronesis*, a reflection, where you don't have any advanced theoretical measure and cannot determine your priorities in a non-political way. Politics for me is not just a means to make decisions on religious, social, and ethical issues in an objective way. It simply is not true.

The lesson of politics is that you cannot distinguish between *means and ends (goals)*. We all know this was the big contradiction of Stalinism. They wanted communist freedom, but the way they went about it achieved the opposite. So again, for me, politics precisely means that everything is a matter of decision-making, not that you have this self-willful contingent decision. But decisions are to be made, especially today and not only with ecology, but also with biogenetics and all other issues.

It is clear that we have to decide everything. In a very short period of time, we will be able to do horrific things that not only influence physical appearances, by manipulating genes, but that also influence psychological properties. For example, a couple of years ago, I visited Beijing and Shanghai and met some people who were working for the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and they showed me a pretty horrifying program at their Institute of Biogenetics. They said: “Our goal is to take care of the physical welfare and also the *psychological* welfare of the Chinese people.” This means that they plan somehow to control even the psychological properties of the people. Here, the old religion doesn't work. All our traditional wisdoms – you can't apply them here. Because the basic coordinates are undermined.

Traditional ethics tells us that one should do one's duty and work hard. But let me give an example of two students. One is lazy and the other works hard. In normal ethics, the good guy who works hard will win. But what if the lazy one takes some pills, which tremendously enhance his ability so that he then works just a little bit and beats the hard-working one? What will you do here? Will you prohibit pills? The ethical coordinates change here.

Jürgen Habermas – although I disagree with him – was aware of this, and his solution was simply not to do it. But I don't think his solution works. Can you imagine how painful a decision this is? Let's say I am a lazy student and you are a hard-working student. You work hard and I take a pill and do it much faster, without any effort, than you. Then you will have every right to feel like an idiot. Why did you have to go through all that ethical effort and hard work? What is the basis of our ethics? That you become free? As people like to say: "Freedom comes with duties. To be free you have to earn it by disciplining yourself and working hard." But what if we have to change the very discipline and the sense of work? What if it can be influenced through some chemical means, even genetics? Everything changes. So we are in a totally new situation.

So again, if what you mean by the common good is an awareness that we have to decide what the common good is, then I agree with you. I just don't believe that, with regard to where humanity is today, we still can apply the traditional Confucian paradigm that there is chaos so we should return to stability. We should decide what stability we want. And we don't have any guarantee of any natural balance or social harmony. In this respect, I am a pessimist.

“May You Live In Interesting Times”

Speaking of our strikingly new situation, you once quoted Antonio Gramsci: “The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters.” And in these interesting times, there is something right in front of us. Among all these so-called monsters, how do you analyze the rise of China, seen by some as the new monster?

SŽ: I don’t know if this is true, but in Europe we claim that the Chinese have this proverb that if you really hate someone, the curse to fling at them is: “May you live in interesting times!” But when I was in China, they told me that they heard this from Western people. It’s typical how you attribute something to some people and then if you go to them, they don’t know anything about it. Somehow, historically, the “interesting times” have been periods of unrest, war and struggles for power in which millions of innocents suffered the consequences. And today we definitely live in interesting times – with danger and tensions.

Who knows what will happen with the growing chaos of nature and economics. This is what worries me: there have been big debates where some people started to doubt ecologists, claiming that they are just exaggerating global warming. But the point is just an easy answer: when you listen to the good ecological scientists, they warn that global warming doesn’t simply mean that it will get warmer everywhere, it means there will be more extremes. There is a prediction, which is paradoxical, that if global warming continues, there may be a new ice age in Western Europe. It’s a theory about the Gulf Stream: if it gets warmer, the Gulf Stream will no longer reach Europe. People tend to forget that New York is geographically at the same level as Spain. That is to say we, in Europe, have relatively warmer weather than people in the North. So global warming means a new ice age in Europe. This is madness.

Again, this is what I try to adhere to: given the sense of urgency, we need to think – and this is not because of any of my communist dreams. I have lived in a communist country. I know how horrible it was – in a more *global* sense. Let’s say something like a new ice age in Europe or more severe droughts in Africa do happen. At the same time, they tell us – I don’t know whether it’s true – the gigantic forests in northern Siberia will become habitable because the permafrost is melting there. True, climate change will bring increased competition for resources, coastal flooding, infrastructure damage from melting permafrost, stresses on animal species and indigenous cultures of the region – all this accompanied by ethnic violence, civil disorder, and local gang rule. In the same way, we hear more and more voices enjoining us to heed global warming. The pessimistic predictions should be put into a more balanced context.

But if this happens, do we even have mechanisms to organize things? How will we transfer people from, let’s say, Africa to wherever? There are already spontaneous transfers happening. In a year or so, cargo ships will be able to take a direct northern

route, cutting the consumption of fuel and reducing carbon emissions. And I was told that many Chinese are already moving to Siberia. Are we aware of what is happening? Two million Chinese are already in Africa taking over. This horrifies my leftist friends there.

But I'm telling them that we are effectively approaching a multicentric world, which means we need to ask new, and for the traditional left, unpleasant questions. Doesn't this mean that maybe we should accept that the United States is not always automatically the bad guy? We talk about America being an economic neocolonialist state, but what about Chinese neocolonialism? I am what you might call abstractly an anti-capitalist. I am, for instance, suspicious of the old leftists who focus all their hatred on the United States. Why is the left silent about that? When I say this, it annoys them, of course. But it is obvious that China is now a mega economic colonial power in Africa. They are doing some better things than the West, but not all. For example, take Sudan or Zimbabwe where they are ruthlessly creating factories run by local tyrants. Or take Myanmar. It is absolutely clear how the General survived the great protest led by the Buddhist monks a couple of years ago: the military regime was saved with the discreet help of Chinese security advisors. Myanmar is effectively a Chinese economic colony, with China playing the standard postcolonial strategy of supporting the corrupt military regime in exchange for the freedom to exploit the vast natural resources.

It is the same as what South Korean business corporations tried to do in Madagascar. I've heard that it didn't go through, but it is another example of capitalist colonialism. As I was told, the plan was pretty horrible. Daewoo Logistics, one of the major international corporations in South Korea, announced that it wanted to buy some 3.2 million acres of farmland, the most fertile land, in Madagascar, amounting to nearly half of its arable land. And it plans to put about three-quarters of this land under corn, with the remainder used to produce palm oil, a key commodity in the global biofuels market. And they claim that their deal will also benefit Madagascar. But everyone knows that it is OK as long as the economy goes well. If not, people in Madagascar will suffer from hunger. I really think we are living in such crazy times, where, without some kind of links beyond and above the level of state, we will be lost in a new chaos. The circle of postcolonial dependence is thus closed again.

From what I heard from my political friends, many states are silently already preparing for debt. One way to read American politics is to see it based on the premise that most of the world will be in chaos soon. So we just have to isolate ourselves, protect ourselves and think about how we have control over a few vital issues, like oil in the Middle East. And the others – who cares? Let them starve. So communism is once again at the gates. Who is to decide on the priorities here, and how, if such decisions cannot be left to the market? It is here that the question of communism has to be raised once again.

Communism: The Ethico-Political Fiasco

As you have argued, the resuscitation of the notion of communism can only be justified when it is related to the commons. And in an interesting interview with the Guardian, you “disclosed the secret” that communism will win. What did you mean by that? And by your claim that the explosion of uprisings and rebellions would lead us to overcome the failures of twentieth-century communism?

SŽ: I like the aspect of *common*, in the sense that we are facing mega problems where old notions of sovereign states or even issues like ecology are being questioned. See, for example, what they did for the financial crisis: compare the \$700 billion spent by the US alone in order to stabilize the banking system to the fact that, of the \$22 billion pledged by richer nations to help develop poorer nations’ agriculture in the face of the current food crisis, only \$2.2 billion has so far been made available. The financial meltdown made it impossible to ignore the blatant irrationality of global capitalism. In this sense, the Copenhagen Climate Summit was simply a fiasco. When there is any type of ecological meeting, all they say is: “Yes, we should go on talking and then we succeeded because we decided that we will meet again and talk in two years.” You see, nonetheless, for the financial crisis, they are able to act immediately with sums of money, which are simply unbelievably huge. This, I think, is a paradox.

Look what Stalin said: “If you shoot one person you are a murderer. If you kill a couple of persons you are a gangster. If you are a crazy statesman and send millions to their deaths you are a hero.” It’s horrible. We now can say the same thing about crime. If you steal one hundred thousand dollars, you are a thief. If you destroy billions, banks and the state will help you. I’m really worried.

This is what I mean about my communism – not the Leninist version, which was total madness. Many leftists hate me when I argue that twentieth-century communism might have been the biggest ethico-political fiasco in the history of humanity. I think there is no other soft explanation. Some things were done well here and there, but globally it was a fiasco. But the problems, to which communism tried to provide an answer, are still here, more than ever. They are returning.

This is why I like to say communism, for me, is not an answer. Communism is not the name of a solution but the name of a *problem*: the problem of the *commons* in all its dimensions – the commons of nature as the substance of our life, the problem of our biogenetic commons, the problem of our cultural commons (“intellectual property”), and, last but not least, the problem of the commons as that universal space of humanity from which no one should be excluded. Whatever the solution might be, it will have to solve this problem. So what you are trying to capture with the common good is the name of a problem. This is communism for me. What will be the answer? I don’t know. Maybe we don’t have an answer. Maybe it will be a catastrophe. Maybe ... I don’t know.

Nonetheless, and I'm not being too pessimistic here, but what shocks me, again and again, is how so-called specialists are proven wrong. About 10 or 15 years ago, people said that in postmodern times there are no longer revolutions; forget about people taking to the streets. My god, now you have them all around. Who knows where we will go from here?

I would like to see Saudi Arabia. This is the true worry. Everybody is in a panic not so much because of Egypt, but Saudi Arabia, which is an incredibly corrupt regime. But do you know what's really absurd? It is that corruption, in a way, doesn't exist there, because it is the system itself. In other countries you have politicians who steal from the state, but there the king *is* the state, so he doesn't have to steal. The system itself is simply horrible.

I was in Qatar for the New Year and I met some people from Saudi Arabia who told me this incredible story. Basically, the royal family possesses the state. They don't even have to steal anything, because they already have it. The key is that they all have a mistress and the breeding, so there are around 10,000 princes in the family. They all have a wonderful life. But if you go out into the neighborhoods, the country has its own poverty. Did you know that, a couple of years ago, there were small demonstrations even in Saudi Arabia? It has already started there. Now everyone is afraid in the West, but don't they see that the more it is postponed, the more crazy and self-destructive the explosion will be?

I see explosions everywhere. In Qatar, a female curator at a museum took me to an industrial city in the suburb of Doha. I asked immediately who does the work for all those nice buildings. It seemed almost like a concentration camp. You have military barracks for immigrant workers. They just seem like self-employed men who sold themselves into slavery. Many of them came from Nepal, Indonesia, or the Philippines. And for four years, they take away the workers' passports and claim that it is a safe way to pay the stipend. They are not even free to leave. They have to work without air-conditioning where the temperature in summer rises to 57°C. Literally, in this temperature, if you step out you can fry eggs without any problem. And they are paid \$150 per month out of which the company takes some for food.

Now comes the beauty: they want them to be *invisible*. On Friday, they are free to visit the city. But to prevent them from going to stores, they found an ingenious solution. Every Friday, entry into a shopping mall is prohibited to single men – officially, to maintain the family spirit in the malls; but this, of course, is only an excuse. Of course, all these workers are single. So under the pretext of protecting the family, they are prohibited from going to shopping malls on the only day they are free. This is all just waiting to explode. It's interesting what is happening in all these places – Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Dubai. This is slavery and it will just explode.