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Edward Sankowski
esankowski@ou.edu

Betty J. Harris
bharris@ou.edu

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Review Essay

Political Discoveries in a Žižek Substack Project **Critical Digital Studies**

Edward Sankowski* and Betty J. Harris†

1. INTRODUCTION

We are interested in this essay in interpreting and evaluating selected aspects of Slavoj Žižek's publication practices and content as he uses Substack over one time period. Beyond examining Žižek's contributions, we aim to learn and say something innovative ourselves about communicating philosophy and cultural theory online.

We comment a bit, somewhat generally, on why and how Žižek uses the platform to convey his ideas as a philosopher and cultural theorist. To an extent we connect Žižek's work from outside the Substack context to what he writes on Substack.

But primarily we aim to focus on a continuing interconnected line of mutually associated topics of particular importance in Žižek's writings, and talks, prior to his relatively recent appearance on Substack. This line of thought is also developed and modified in some of his many writings on Substack. As a critic of capitalism, for example, the pre-Substack Žižek has already increasingly stressed the importance of

* **Edward Sankowski** is professor of philosophy at the University of Oklahoma. He is interested, among other areas, in ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of the social sciences, and philosophy of education (especially higher education). He is particularly interested in the implications of globalization for normative ethics and normative political philosophy. Much of his work focuses on individual and group choice and decision-making. His work consists of both academic study and pragmatic interventions. His Ph.D. is from Cornell University.

† **Betty J. Harris** is professor of anthropology at the University of Oklahoma. Among her areas of academic interest are political economy, globalization, economic development, women's studies, Africa and the African diaspora, China-Africa interactions, South Africa, and race and ethnicity. She is interested in interdisciplinary social science, and in the social functions of universities, as well as political and other organizational activities in the wider world beyond academe. Her Ph.D. is from Brown University.

environmental/ecological problems generated by global capitalism. (We have commented on this, e.g., in two prior essays in this journal, “Living Beyond the End Times,” Vol. 2, 2012, and “The Pandemic, Environmentalism, and Re-Thinking Social and Political Philosophy,” Vol. 11, 2021). This continues as one strand of thought on Substack. That strand of thought changes there, in some notable ways. The more optimistic attitude he may express at times (less so as time has gone by and his doubts about historical progress, and indeed progress as an idea, have gained in force). He has obviously been influenced by his Hegelian Marxism. That attitude once might have suggested that a huge environmental crisis, especially due to climate change, would necessitate the progressive transcending of capitalism. However, a much more pessimistic Žižek persona sometimes emerges, pre-Substack and on Substack, who observes ecological degradation (not solely climate change) and anticipates the possible end (in some sense) of the human world. In this mode, a brighter future for humanity is scarcely to be hoped for.

We also find on Substack interesting new environmental/ecological reflections, both promising and problematic, in some of Žižek’s writings there.

2. ONE QUESTION TO START

We begin with one question, which will be mostly superseded or supplemented with others as we continue this essay. Why is Slavoj Žižek relatively recently making use of the online publication platform Substack? He mentions the desire to overcome “censorship” and puritanism, especially emphasizing the former.

See his post under the opening category “About:”

“Comrades,

Welcome to the desert of the real.

I am tired of censorship and puritanical editors, aren’t you? Editing out all my nuances and dirty jokes. So, I have created a Substack, where I can evoke and provoke philosophy, politics, and culture with all the freedom afforded to me.”

This is puzzling, since Žižek has, prior to his appearance on Substack, had access to very many publication outlets (academic, journalistic, even artistic and entertainment oriented) in addition to his opportunities to speak in many forums and circumstances. Why would he need to escape censorship by taking to Substack?

Žižek’s speaking opportunities have often been recorded and made available online. There are advantages and disadvantages about his online voiced views that could

be instructively compared to and contrasted with points about his online Substack presence or his journalistic writings circulated in varied news outlets online. His spontaneous remarks in less-scripted situations sometimes have been unwise.

For example, there was his notorious remark on camera favoring Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton during the 2016 presidential campaign. Žižek has since unfortunately felt obliged to re-affirm what was once an unwise quip (in our view).

More recently, in an interview situation posted online (a podcast with unHerd), Žižek has mused favorably about some features of Trump's top-down decision-making (while rejecting Trump's goals). There he implausibly compares Trump with FDR and even Abraham Lincoln! (See esp. at 15:39 etc.-<https://unherd.com/watch-listen/trump-is-a-liberal-fetish/?us>) (Accessed 6/19/25)

The larger point is that access to spontaneous political expression delivered to the public can result in some notable and regrettable blunders. These may subsequently be defended as deliberate provocations which serve to stimulate constructive thoughts. But sometimes they shake confidence in his reliability as a political philosopher and cultural theorist. In a less immediately delivered way than with spoken opinions, Substack may enable less wise content to be expressed due to its potential for relatively quick unrefereed opinions of an author to be publicly expressed.

Against possible problems, less carefully filtered content sometimes contains insights or yields evidence that would be lost in a more painstakingly edited or refereed process connecting author to readership.

A vulgar explanation, surely insufficient, for why Žižek has taken to Substack might be that this is a distinctive and better-paying way to monetize his writing. He has stressed previously that his preferred mode of expression is writing, not speaking engagements. Thus, extracting more money from his essays or news-like stories might seem more attractive to him. It would be all too easy for critics on the left and right to ridicule this self-avowed communist for his capitalist venture. He has in fact been criticized before as supposedly all too integrated into the global capitalist media system. See <https://gabrielrockhill.com/2023/01/02/article-capitalisms-court-jester-slavoj-žiček/> (Accessed 6/3/25). Gabriel Rockhill, e.g., in an article published online ("Capitalism's Court Jester: Slavoj Žižek") and in an interview also published as a video online, has polemicized against Žižek: "He refers to communism as 'maybe the worst catastrophe in the history of humanity' (sic). No wonder he is the (capitalist) world's most famous 'Marxist!' He is capitalism's court jester: aping the figure of the Marxist-qua-antisocial-fanatic, he encourages disdain for the real-world project of socialism, while advancing his

career by hawking the wares of Western consumer society & the global theory industry through his pop cultural mash-up.” (Another address for the full Rockhill article is <https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/01/02/capitalisms-court-jester-slavoj-Žižek/>)

Rockhill’s attack, while not gaining widespread attention, has enough plausibility to be somewhat upsetting (as possibly true) to those who are more sympathetic to Žižek. The very harsh nature of the attack, however, illustrates the risks in it.

A minimally careful reader of Žižek’s massive oeuvre will realize that Žižek is very respectful about Lenin. (Too respectful, we think). This is evident in many places, including a recent entry on Lenin in Substack. Žižek, as we discuss later, respectfully uses ideas about revolution attributed to Trotsky. And so on. Žižek regards twentieth-century communism with detailed and sometimes sympathetic interest, although in his view it needs for the most part to be abandoned. He asserts that a new Communism is essential to deal with the crises of our time, a new Communism that needs to take account of contemporary changes in our historical circumstances. In this article, we will distinguish with a small “c” the communism from the Russian revolution to the dissolution of the USSR. This is contrasted with the new, improved Communism (capitalized word) to which Žižek wishes to contribute. An example discussed later in this essay, as already mentioned, is his attempt to draw contemporary lessons from Trotsky (a Communist), about uses of technology in revolutionary praxis.

Žižek at times does scorn the language of “socialism,” as Rockhill notes, saying it is sometimes used in a garbled supposedly favorable way by billionaires. Or he explicitly prefers Communism to what some non-billionaire progressives call socialism. But Žižek remains respectful of some self-avowed socialists, such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. These obvious qualifications are unacknowledged in Rockhill’s rather crude assault.

The criticism coming from Rockhill resembles Žižek’s own criticism of faux-radical arts festivals and the like, which are part of global capitalist markets. See our discussion in this journal (Vol. 14, 2024, esp. p. 21) of Žižek’s book *Freedom, a Disease Without Cure*. There we point out that art and culture may be integrated into global capitalism, while also generating genuine critique of global capitalism. Something similar may be and is true of Žižek’s work.

Žižek, we concede, or his Substack-company representatives, urges the reader on Substack (in a somewhat gross fashion) to subscribe, and even to contact and solicit more subscribers to Žižek’s Substack account; or to upgrade the reader’s account to a bigger monetary investment. Despite this nudging and marketing, even hucksterism, it is

implausible to ascribe a mainly commercial motive for this activity. He has too much to say, some of it deep and original, that runs counter to ascribing an exclusive or major profit motive for such a publication project.

3. ANOTHER QUESTION

Here we current essayists can change the question, or add another question, away from a primary focus on motivation to an inquiry into the objective advantages and disadvantages of this Substack type of publication. What might such publication do for philosophy or cultural theory (or for the real world)? Here we are concerned with the direct consequences of the author's work (the texts he initially dispatches) but also the consequences in readership responses. Readers are in fact told that they can punch a button and comment in writing on the issues discussed on his Substack. It may be that this feature can be used in a way consonant with some positive remarks that Žižek makes on Substack about South Korean author-public co-production of fictional works created and manifested online.

4. CENSORSHIP?

Žižek's references to overcoming censorship are relevant both to his motivation for using Substack, and the objective value question about advantages or disadvantages to use of Substack. It may well be that Substack enables an author to work around censorship by editors and publishers. Even if Žižek is likely to be able to push back against such censorship from editors or referees by sheer force of reputation and personality, censorship may be effective too often, even for him.

The currently customary editorial and refereeing practices of book publishers and academic journals are circumvented on Substack. An author can publish a text, and then may get responses, favorable or unfavorable, from those who care to react. An evaluation process can happen, but in that case not prior to publication, rather post-publication. Especially with increasing societal prevalence of information and communication technology, ICT, particularly the internet, censorship in one relatively narrow ordinary sense is (in addition to his other output) a changing though still important problem. This is to be distinguished from a notable glut of information that distracts from communications that are especially perceptive and important. It is not clear that adding more digital communications through Substack is addressing that problem. In fact, the sheer volume and unavoidably variable quality of Žižek's postings may worsen the problem of glut with respect to some topics. That is not old-time censorship, but it may still be objectionable in discouraging rightly attentive readership.

Are there new forms of censorship, in the more usual sense of suppression of public or third-party access, that he finds oppressive? To mention one topic, he is increasingly critical of Israeli governmental propaganda, which he now says with increasing emphasis is becoming even more formidable. It allegedly engages both in swamping opposing viewpoints and, in his account, seeking to censor in the sense of hiding and suppressing information from relevant publics. His Substack entries about Israel are full of indignation. But it is very unlikely that the topic of censorship is in his view exhausted by his criticisms of Israeli-origin censorship; he has in mind broader aspects of censorship.

We think that Žižek needs a more discriminating and synoptic account of the varieties of what is usually characterized as censorship (preventing or removing public or third-party access to information). That contrasts with packaging and presenting information in ways that misinform or disinform (but that do not seek to eliminate from public accessibility some rival-framed information or advocacy altogether, eliminate it from public awareness or availability). This is also contrasted with swamping important insights and perceptions with a sheer glut of distracting communications. Other contrasts may be needed as well.

5. INFORMATION GLUT AND A NEED TO FOCUS ON “POLITICS” ON ŽIŽEK’S SUBSTACK

In the case of Žižek’s Substack glut, it is worth noting that we authors of this essay have in our other writing about Žižek somewhat sternly questioned his voluminous writing about popular culture. (On Substack he writes that all culture is popular culture). Some of his writing about popular culture is precious, but the sheer volume generates doubts about the significance of some of it. What is severe about our criticism is our concern that unstinting interest in movies, tv, etc. runs the risk of encouraging succumbing to the narcotizing-like impact of immersion in global capitalism’s information and communication systems. See our discussion of this in our essay in this journal, “Enjoyment and Ideology,” Vol. 13, 2023, esp. pp. 16–17.

We think, as one modest remedial measure for purposes of this essay, that focus on Žižek’s category of Politics on Substack is far more perceptive and more important than dwelling on his category of Popular Culture, or Substack-“googling” as one can and getting lost among the potentially vast range of posts of Žižek’s work. Substack-“googling” is a potentially useful option. But initially, on entering Žižek’s Substack labelled “Goads and Prods,” we have our attention directed to posts that have presumably been designated by the site’s organizational nudging to be centrally about Politics. We current readers have found

it more rewarding not to be so compliant about following the Categories arrangements. Rather, we have actively looked through Sub-stack-googling for posts about what we judge the major organizational topics of Žižek's politics. Also, note that several other subcategories on his Substack platform have a dearth of posts, creating an impression of a raggedy-structured initial-entry and overall platform presence.

A small illustrative point about Žižekian information glut relative to Politics as compared with Popular Culture is his post written after the death of David Lynch, a post to which he seems to try to add weight by referring obscurely to the supposed survival of the "ethics" of David Lynch. What is vital in the ethics of David Lynch is not made evident by Žižek to us. Our point here is to illustrate that normative ethics or politics is at the core of Žižek as an author, but the lure of popular culture posts sometimes distracts from core topics, even while implausibly suggesting it is not a distraction.

6. POLITICAL AUTHORS AND SUBSTACK

On the topic of Žižek's motives for taking to Substack, it may be that he is in part simply accompanying a crowd of well-known and respectable politically oriented authors. Robert Reich is an example, as is John Mearsheimer, neither of whom are in Žižek's dialogical circle. There is also Žižek's friend and interlocutor, Yanis Varoufakis. (Žižek's relationship with Varoufakis is briefly discussed elsewhere in this article). There is a diffident Kohei Saito, who is listed on Substack, but apparently has not posted yet.

With the Substack mode of authorship and publication having been established and populated with politically minded authors, it is probably more attractive to add contributions of this type. This is not merely motivated mimicry. Having a set of such authors may offer opportunities to innovate within the format, to learn from the mistakes and achievements of others, to discover the limitations of the outlet, etc. That is both about motivation to do Substack and is also liable to suggest some advantages and disadvantages with respect to objective value in taking to Substack. Assessing such ideas about Substack communications might be analogous to assessing the advantages and disadvantages of the sprawling and varied academic journal systems, or academic book-publishing systems.

In the case of the authors just mentioned (Žižek, Reich, Mearsheimer, Varoufakis, Saito), despite their large ideological differences, an additional motivation and advantage offered by taking to Substack may be a project of overcoming or at least ameliorating comparative exclusion from true mass media. The political scientist and international relations scholar Mearsheimer has complained at times about his exclusion from mainstream media, which may explain his frequent online appearance in recorded videos and on

Substack with a potential for extra-academic circulation and real-world influence. None of these authors has been neglected in academic circles. However, Reich and Mearsheimer certainly have ambitions to exercise an impact not only on public opinion, but also on public and especially governmental policy. Varoufakis once held a political role as a finance minister in Greece and has pursued activist democratic projects in the EU context, albeit with some major frustrations. Varoufakis may indeed be seeking Substack advantages in part because of his frustrations in EU electoral politics. It is possible, but not obvious, that Žižek has comparable ambitions. A consciously European Varoufakis and Žižek share political interests in furthering a European role in global politics. Then too why would a Marxist like Žižek not harbor some such ambitions for real-world impact?

Perhaps Žižek has at times in other writing displayed an ambivalence about his proper social role, as he has praised the uselessness, as he conceives it, of many humanities activities. Nonetheless, Substack may offer the possibility of expressing, in public domain, opinions and attitudes not subject to the vagaries of mediation by editors or publishers inserting themselves between author and reader. There may also be the added bonus possibility of influence on real-world policy. This may seem more realistic for authors closer to the political center than Žižek. Nonetheless, he has elsewhere at times inserted his ideas in online contexts like Project Syndicate, alongside much more conventional authors (academic or political figures) who are advocating in hopes of real-world as well as academic impact.

Moving on, entering “Goads and Prods” leads one to the following array of categories for posts. “Home-Politics-Popular Culture-Bonus Obscenities-Philosophy-Archive-Leaderboard-About.”

What are we to make of this haphazard-seeming arrangement of categories? Not clear; (but clarity may not matter much here). A click on any category leads one to various posts. It is not necessarily obvious why a posted item is in that category rather than another, or no category listed at all. There is also the point already mentioned about a dearth of posts within some of the categories.

7. A NEED TO SELECTIVELY READ A POLITICALLY AND CONCEPTUALLY CONNECTED SEQUENCE OF ŽIŽEK POSTS

A bewildering variety of discussions of topics is offered here in the landscape of Žižek’s “Goads and Prods.” Some of the discussions seem to us to be brilliant, such as the item about an environmental catastrophe in Zambia. This item is arguably about a theme that has been emerging for years in Žižek’s thought: that environmental crises are particularly

important manifestations of the conflicts in global capitalism. Žižek has suggested that a Communism apt for the present might come in significant part from reflections about the commons of the environment. See, e.g., his book *Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors-Against the Double Blackmail* (2016), especially section 11, “What Is to Be Done?”

We have sometimes speculated that in Žižek's books, abrupt transitions between one subject and another can serve as an inducement to see unexpected and innovative connections between and among subjects. (We have in the past compared some of Žižek's texts to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. We have noted that Wittgenstein seemed to find his own thought best expressed in short passages, amongst which connections had to dawn.) Sometimes the transitions in Žižek, whether in other writings or in “Goads and Prods,” merely fall flat, yielding no insight. Even he at times seems dismayed by this. In other cases, connections (whether consciously intended or not) stimulate constructive new thought, as Wittgenstein hoped. Possibly Žižek might hope for something comparable, in side by side reading of very different posts, even if this could take very hard work on the part of the reader.

The comparison of Žižek to Wittgenstein may be helpful in calling attention to both of these authors as expecting their readers to work very hard at seeing connections among different elements of their texts. However, Žižek's texts in Substack and elsewhere are typically far more extended than Wittgenstein's gnomic utterances and his paragraphs or sections. Moreover, Žižek is quite capable of completing large scale books with unified overall book-length topics, however complex their internal organization can be.

In recognition of scope limitations for this essay, and the bewildering variety of categories and posts, we will not aim to do the impossible, to cover the whole territory of Žižek on Substack. Žižek's Substack is not here a book, but on the other hand at this point it still resembles a publication project with a kind of unity, however heterogeneous its elements. But what is one sequence of thoughts about various posts?

8. CENTRALITY OF COMMUNISM FOR ŽIŽEK

We take it as central to Žižek's persona and writings that he is a self-avowed Communist aspiring to update that stance to the present. One way of approaching his use of Substack is to take Žižek's Communism as central to it, as to his other writing. In this reading, the Politics category is central, and so is the conception of capitalism as generating a series of crises that will result in its end. The topic of materialism is sometimes mentioned, even in a far-flung connection with some music composition. As a Marxist, he must in some sense

maintain a belief in the materialist conception of history, and the prospect of an end of capitalism. This, although he mentions in a post on his friend and collaborator Frederick Jameson that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (a saying he credits to Jameson). We note also that as a cultural theorist Žižek is inclined to view cultural phenomena as not “merely” superstructural, but as crucial for explaining major, even infrastructural phenomena. While Marx and Engels were not entirely dismissive of culture in explaining and potentially changing society, Žižek’s stance probably requires some revision of Marxist traditions. Žižek’s stance perhaps resembles that of Antonio Gramsci.

In our interpretation, Žižek is disposed to conceive of the end of the world mainly as an environmental crisis caused by capitalism and its conflicts. Nuclear war is another threat for him, of course, but is not so central in his Substack writings as environmental catastrophe. With that mindset, it is particularly significant that an environmental perspective on the end of the world, and, perhaps, the end of capitalism, was already anticipated, particularly in the form of a climate change phenomenon, likely fatal for all humanity, in various earlier books as well as on Substack.

In some posts on Substack, however, Žižek is also interested in other environmental crises attributable to global capitalism. Two examples are his posts discussing industrial pollution of a river (actually, it was two rivers) in Zambia; and a post about an electricity blackout in the Iberian Peninsula (with his discussion most attentive to Spain). In both examples, beyond more local or regional aspects of the crises, the roots in global capitalism are fundamental.

9. EXAMPLE OF ZAMBIA ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER

An example of Žižek’s political commentary focusing on anti-capitalism and environmentalism is his publication about a recent environmental disaster in Zambia. This is a fairly quick but not rapid-fire after the fact story. We say this to express the point that one advantage of Substack is its potential to very quickly bring events to the attention of the public, in a way that journal or book publishing could not readily match, though 24/7 or daily journalism might match. In some posts, Žižek may hope to call attention quickly on Substack to an occurrence that might otherwise be neglected or be inadequately theorized in other media. This is not evident in his Zambia post.

The disaster in Zambia resulted from a China-owned corporation’s involvement in copper mining using a dam on the major river in Zambia. The story has been widely reported in international media, so we are probably justified in thinking that something

very like the disaster as described by Žižek did in fact occur. What Žižek adds about the Zambia example here is not bringing to an interested and educated public something not otherwise reported. (In other cases, Substack would be able to do that, and Žižek sometimes seems to aim to do that with a post).

Perhaps his major contribution on the Zambia disaster is what he adds to the global interpretation of the disaster. Western media have in many cases probably welcomed the chance to display the exploitation of an African country's environment by a Chinese company. While China is arguably a problematic as well as constructive presence in Africa, the propaganda motives of most anti-China Western media are not wholesome, in our view. Žižek's characteristic stance has contextualized his coverage by a focus on global capitalism. For once here his reflections also criticize European tourism in the "natural" African (and other "Third World") contexts, which in his account may closely co-exist with environmental disasters like the Zambia case. Thus, Žižek manages to avoid the tactic of "blame it on the Chinese" which is increasingly common and loud in much political discourse in the West. (Western elites are increasingly panicked by the ascendancy of China as a potential or likely new hegemon, regional or global). He refers to BRICS, not solely China, in his commentary. BRICS can only be interpreted as operating to a large extent in a global capitalist framework, despite BRICS including China. We would of course not get a Žižekian perspective in typical Western media. We can understand other expressions of non-traditional-Marxist historical pessimism by Žižek in public statements since the non-Western world offers little in the way of an alternative to prevent future such disasters. In this writing about Zambia, Žižek uses the "Goads and Prods" options to publish a fairly prompt analysis that would otherwise not be as visible if done by someone else somewhere else, or if done in mass media.

In his discussion of Zambia, he is more able to overcome a certain eurocentrism that he has often been criticized for, (including criticism by us, the authors of this essay). That is criticism that he has often argued against or shrugged off.

10. A BLACKOUT IN SPAIN AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS OF TECHNOLOGICAL "INTERCONNECTEDNESS"

The Spanish example is especially interesting because of its analysis of environmental vulnerabilities resulting from societal interconnectedness requiring computerization and ICTs.

Žižek's environmentalist/ecological interests are also clear in his Politics commentary from early May 2025. See "Lessons from the Electricity Blackout," May 3,

2025: <https://slavoj.substack.com/p/lessons-from-the-electricity-blackout>. (Accessed 6/23/25)

Žižek discusses the electricity blackout in Spain which gets his attention initially from journalistic coverage of events in Israel (wildfires) as well as media coverage of the Spain situation in Europe. Here, as in the discussion of the Zambia river pollution example, Žižek does not seem to be motivated by a desire to call attention to an event too readily liable to be overlooked. Rather, he discusses the wider implications of the event in Spain and proposes views about the vulnerability of contemporary societies due to their technology-laden interconnectedness. He opines that a movie could depict a large-scale catastrophe not in terms of a nuclear holocaust, but rather in terms of blackouts due to electricity being cut-off, or deprivation of clean drinking water. The end of the world in this sense can come in this form rather than a more commonly feared possibility of nuclear winter (or for that matter climate change-driven total planetary catastrophe). Žižek's discussion again re-emphasizes the idea that a crisis amounting to capitalist collapse could be interpreted in environmentalist terms. "Environmentalism" or ecology here has been somewhat re-conceived. We are not referring here to the environment as mainly the "natural" world.

What is omitted here by Žižek is a suggestion of what might be hoped for after an overwhelming capitalist crisis. Marx and Engels, as we all know, offered some very sketchy but revealing ideas about this bright future in the Communist Manifesto. Žižek has less to offer about how to cope with a collapse furthered by a technologically infused crisis due to problems in ICT "connectedness." This would be, so to speak, an end to our world as we know it, rather than the end of human life altogether. Whether in a post-capitalist situation or not, how might technology be re-conceived systemically so as to carry on? We might observe that there is a gap here not only to be depicted in light of the Iberian blackout with its evoked Žižekian fantasy-scenario of a systemic collapse. There is also a question what our stance should be about the role of Substack-like technologies in the total landscape of author-readership relations (particularly in the humanities and social sciences). That is a big, rather inchoate question. How to deal with it, still, is a question implied by the growing presence of Substack-like technologies. These technologies might be a niche phenomenon or might have larger consequences than that. If misused in ways not now anticipated, Substack-type information technologies might in some respects (probably already do or will increasingly) contribute to possible societal breakdown. Right-wing extremist ICT-based collectives are working at this. This aspect of ICTs should not prevent humankind from benefitting, when possible, from Substack and the like. But it does lead to questions about

political reflection and activism concerning the technology being used. In other posted writing on Substack, Žižek opines that positive revolutionary change might be advanced by using digital technology. He analogizes this to a view he attributes to Trotsky about the role of revolutionary takeover of infrastructural technology; we discuss this elsewhere in this essay.

Žižek proceeds, in his post about the Iberian blackout, to discuss ideas of Kohei Saito, a de-growth communist philosopher who has attracted a lot of attention, including the interest of Žižek in a previous book publication. Saito criticizes sustainable development ideology, as noted by Žižek. Saito at one point was and presumably is at pains to show that the later Marx had an interest in environmentalism, a position of Saito that Žižek appreciates and applauds. In recent statements, while remaining a self-avowed “communist,” Saito seems to have expressed a more disappointed, critical attitude towards Marx. He is also expressing more non-Marxist frank pessimism about a “bleak” future in light of the dictatorships that technologies are making more threatening. (See the May 20, 2025 post at <https://globaldialogues.georgetown.edu/responses/techno-capitalism-and-the-perfect-dictatorship>). Žižek seems to share an affinity for some non-Marxist pessimism with Saito. However, Žižek’s attitude about technology seems more mixed than Saito’s. In his discussion of the Iberian blackout, he sees a potential for major crises due to technology’s dysfunctional role as deployed in some circumstances. And the market-driven appetite for some resources figures in his discussion of Zambia. However, in a recent post Žižek rewrites some previous views he had expressed about revolution, drawing on ideas which he adapts from Trotsky. Žižek at least for a time also apparently specifically attributes a positive revolutionary potential to digital technology. We suppose this has something to do with his use of Substack, but it is not obvious what more can be said about this.

In his post referring to Trotsky, Žižek has re-written some ideas previously expressed (by Žižek) about revolution. Žižek starts with an intriguing point about politicized re-enactments of revolutionary changes. The re-enactments are often not faithful to actual revolutionary events. In the Russian Revolution, allegedly the storming of the Winter Palace was not in actuality significant, as re-enactments would suggest. Trotsky, in this account, accepted by Žižek, de-emphasizes assaults on governmental targets, such as governmental buildings, meeting places for governmental officials, etc. and emphasizes revolutionaries getting control of chiefly technologically significant features of Russian society. This would include transportation systems, communications networks, etc. rather than official governmental physical sites such as executive or legislative buildings.

It occurs to us, we who are the authors of this essay, that in this account features of the infrastructure rather than the superstructure are deemed more plausible as revolutionary targets to effect change; in that sense, Trotsky's viewpoint as interpreted here seems to be classically "materialist."

Žižek's attempted extrapolation from Trotsky and Russia at that time to our present focuses on present-day digital technology. In some sense, on Žižek's view, revolutionary aspirations for the present should be expressed in significant part in activism about the internet and related ICTs.

Readers of Žižek's extrapolation from Trotsky might be forgiven for some justifiable doubts. Might his extrapolation not take an unnecessarily circuitous route to a politically vague contemporary emphasis on revolutionary takeover of digital technology? Both liberal non-Left authors and even the political Right have either populated platforms such as Substack or commented on political developments about Substack use. And what about Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter (now X)? Could this be countered by a vanguard of left-wing digital activists?

Fox News Channel has a posted item noting the increasing presence on Substack of what it considers liberal or progressive authors. (See <https://www.foxnews.com/media/substack-emerges-solidly-progressive-platform-liberal-thought-leaders-flocking-researcher-ays>) (Accessed 6/28/25)

Another interesting post about the political role of Substack is on The Bulwark, a conservative but anti-Trump platform. (See <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/substack-election-democrats-platform-social-communications-buttigieg-2028>) (Accessed 6/28/25)

Apart from taking account of Fox News Channel or The Bulwark, the academic world could gain from accelerating its multidisciplinary research into what is happening on platforms such as Substack. This essay itself is a modest implementation of that claim.

Žižek may be on-target in gesturing at digital technology as a major site of struggle between Left and Right but may be remiss in lack of explicit insight about how to conduct the struggle.

Digital technology is obviously a major part of our contemporary cultural scene, as well as our economic reality.

Under our circumstances, the division between infrastructure and superstructure as applied to ICTs seems rather arbitrary. This fits views expressed elsewhere by Žižek, that cultural phenomena cannot be dismissed as causally superficial and superstructural in explaining social phenomena. Such views are no doubt congenial to Žižek the cultural theorist.

While replete with provocative and puzzling features, including a baffling conclusion about protest, enunciation, and shame, a fundamental element in the Žižek post about digital technology and revolution is its advocacy of a disciplined core group of “engineers” to “take over” and “occupy” the spaces created by digital technology. While it remains obscure exactly what Žižek means by this, some illustrative examples readily suggest themselves. There is Žižek’s own pretty non-revolutionary example of a group of Israeli academics publicizing a letter of protest against Israel’s attacks on occupied Palestinian territory and its inhabitants. This letter of protest is intended by Žižek as an illustration of partial occupation of publicly available ICT space, as well as an expression of shame at shared complicity in war crimes. Another example could well be Žižek’s own participation in Substack and other ICT venues. Žižek is hardly an “engineer” in the sense of the Trotsky story, but he is *inter alia* working at using information technology for what he considers positive goals. This is to be contrasted with his other post about the Iberian blackout and associated risks created by ill-advised use of technology.

Žižek’s projection, however vague of a possible constructive use of digital technology for revolutionary purposes, also contrasts sharply as we have wished to show with Kohei Saito’s online recently expressed pessimistic view about technology supporting dictatorship.

Žižek in his Iberian-focused post seems to think he is making common cause with Kohei Saito’s criticism of the supposed opium of “sustainable development.” Neither Žižek’s outlook nor Saito’s outlook about technology and environmental catastrophe advocates a sufficiently definite and consistent position. Nor is it clear whether Žižek and Saito are on the same page in major relevant respects. A striking part of this is Saito’s apparent disappointment to some degree with Marx’s sensibility about technology’s progressive role. This contrasts with Žižek’s apparent continued goal of adapting but continuing Marx’s legacy. However, Žižek too has come to question in some degree the historical optimism in Marx.

Žižek’s genuine respect for Saito must also be understood in combination with his criticism of Saito. We learn more about this by going outside the Substack entry about Spain, indeed outside Substack. For example, there is an essay (including a critique of Saito) posted on the internet under the auspices of The Philosophical Salon (<https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/mobilize-to-really-slow-down/>). There is an essay “Against Progress” covering some similar ground in a volume of Žižek’s essays published by Bloomsbury in 2025. The editors of the Bloomsbury volume note and comment on Žižek’s criticisms of Saito:

In “Against Progress,” one of the most helpful, leftist visions of what progress might look like—the eco-Marxism of Kohei Saito—is shown to be fatally flawed in its reliance on humans being other than they are. Not for the last time, calls for a rehabilitation of planning, showing that slowing down and decentralizing, appealing as they might sound, are not the answer to a rat-king of global crises gathering pace and power. (p. viii, Liza Thompson and Hannah Wilks) Study of Žižek’s essay “Against Progress” in the book “Against Progress” shows a brief but much more complex critique by Žižek of Saito than the remarks on Saito within Žižek’s Iberian commentary on Substack would suggest. In the book about progress, Žižek’s critique of Saito relies *inter alia* on Žižek’s theorizing involving Lacanian psychology about desire, and the suggestion that Saito has affinities with aspects of Buddhism that Žižek disapproves of. In light of these contrasting discussions by Žižek of Saito, we are left somewhat puzzled about Žižek’s references to Saito in Žižek’s Substack post on the Iberian blackout. If Saito’s background attitudes are questionable as the book essay says, how can Žižek invoke Saito as an apparent ally in rejecting sustainable development ideology?

Another issue that goes beyond our focus on Substack is whether Žižek’s critique of Saito in the book of Žižek’s essays is really as devastating as the book editors say. We have our doubts about Lacan, and about Žižek’s simplifying summary interpretations of very complex Buddhist traditions, as well as Žižek’s hint that Saito might be too Buddhist. Žižek may risk descending to commit himself to a version of supposed Western superiority to Asia. This has been a problem with some key aspects of Marxist traditions.

In a Substack post, then, Žižek is not only critiquing sustainable development, apparently making what he thinks is common cause with Kohei Saito. Žižek links his own critique of sustainable development with his criticism of Israel. This is difficult to construe. We are not here commenting on Žižek’s other criticisms of Israel, or criticisms by other authors of Israel. We are commenting on Žižek’s linkage of his criticisms of sustainable development with criticism of Israel. He quotes and criticizes advocates of settlements speaking within an Israeli context. In criticizing sustainable development, he does not make it clear what version of sustainable development he is rejecting, or what feature(s) of sustainable development, or how that version or feature is to be connected with Israeli-context settler activism. He probably has in mind primarily the UN 2015-2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which he refers to in characterizing Saito’s views against sustainable development ideology. The connection between the SDGs and Israeli policies and activism, however, is far from established by Žižek. See, again, “Lessons from the Electricity

Blackout,” May 3, 2025: <https://slavoj.substack.com/p/lessons-from-the-electricity-blackout>. (Accessed 6/23/25)

One problem about Žižek’s views here is presented by reflections on the role of the economist Jeffery Sachs. Sachs (a market-focused economist) occupies a key UN role in defining what sustainable development means or should mean. Sachs is a vocal critic of Israel (sometimes joining his anti-Israeli statements explicitly with statements by the very vocal critic of Israel, political scientist, and international relations scholar John Mearsheimer. So how can Žižek claim that sustainable development and Israeli governmental policy wedded to pro-Israel settler activism are at bottom the same? We question this puzzling claim. Probably Žižek might say (as would Saito) that the sustainable development goals cannot be achieved under capitalism. This may well be true, contrary to Sachs’s overall outlook. We set aside the view that capitalism and sustainable development are inconsistent with each other. That view is not supported or examined here. But the UN, which is a collective agent responsible for the SDGs, has some of its sub-agencies such as the ICJ condemning Israel. This presents an interpretive problem for Žižek’s claim that links sustainable development with contemporary Israeli society. Žižek might say that the UN can obviously be internally conflicted as a complex organization. In that way, the ICJ statements could criticize Israel, while the UN’s General Assembly endorsed SDGs could still express a view supporting Israel (alleged support which Žižek obviously criticizes). But how could Žižek show that the SDGs express such a view? The SDGs by now are not a unitary doctrine, the same the world over. Some versions of SDGs need to be understood in terms of specific contexts, e.g., in anti-colonialist or decolonizing contexts that reject global capitalism as definitive of genuine justice. These are difficult issues that properly dealt with can support our view that Žižek is not justified in his conjoining of sustainable development with pro-Israel ideology.

Žižek would do well to re-consider or amend his views after reading some of the anthropologist Jason Hickel’s work. Hickel (who is on Substack) is a determined critic of capitalism. He also speaks the language, possibly a dialect, of sustainable development advocacy. A complication is that he also criticizes some versions of sustainable development, e.g., that of Jeffrey Sachs. Nonetheless, Hickel continues to invoke sustainable development as a value system, e.g., proposing his own idea of a sustainable development index. What are we to make of this? Sustainable development ideology is not reducible to what some well-established advocates define as sustainable development. What the meaning of sustainable development is or should be is a legitimately disputed matter. Žižek makes the mistake of overlooking that. Kohei Saito is probably criticizing some

circulated claims about sustainable development that are arguably propaganda, either consciously or unconsciously serving the interests of ruling classes. Thus, Saito refers to the SDGs as opium for the masses. Saito's claim here can be carefully analyzed and evaluated. We will not do that, though we have doubts or more mildly reservations about Saito's claims in this respect.

We acknowledge that invocations of sustainable development are sometimes objectionable propaganda. But we deny that referring to sustainable development favorably must be objectionable. We ourselves have raised critical questions about the ideology of sustainable development without denouncing sustainable development in all its versions. See our essay in this journal, "Is There a Crisis of Sustainable Development?," Vol. 8, 2018. (<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1149&context=id-journal>) (Accessed 6/24/25)

We argue there that a reasonable account of sustainable development requires a normative conception of justice that conflicts with neoliberalism.

Žižek's critique of sustainable development goes astray. His conflation of sustainable development content with pro-Israel politics is implausible. More generally, his oversimplified assumptions are implausible about the meaning of sustainable development. Meaning can often be construed as use, as the later Wittgenstein suggested. The uses of sustainable development languages are very varied. The Hickel example is a vivid challenge to Žižek's oversimplified meaning assigned to "sustainable development."

11. SUMMARY SO FAR

Substack arguably offers a vehicle to publish, at the author's discretion, Žižek's creative process as it unfolds, including short-form and some longer-form writings. Academic and non-academic print and online journals, academic and trade book publishers (sometimes difficult to distinguish from one another) do not offer comparable options. It is true, as Žižek writes on Substack, that the results do not offer neat conclusions. But to take advantage of what we can learn from access to Žižek on Substack, we focus on what it helps to display about Žižek's changing views about capitalism, older communism/updated Communism, ecology/environmentalism, technology, and possible futures.

We point out that Žižek seems to be in the process of proposing a conscious use of ICT for purposes of thinking aloud in public and perhaps soliciting public inputs as well as engaging in an author-driven form of political practice. Unlike Kohei Saito's sometime despair, Žižek hopes that some aspects of technology can be put to progressive use. This,

although in some of his writings online and in printed book essay encapsulated form, Žižek critiques an ideology of progress. Despite Žižek's criticism of Saito in some venues, Žižek clearly thinks he must take account of Saito. He welcomes and praises Saito's case for an ecological/environmentalist later Marx. This resonates with Žižek's own independent movement towards inclusion of ecology/environmentalist features in his account of capitalist crises. He welcomes and apparently draws on Saito's criticism of sustainable development ideology. However, arguably Žižek (as does possibly Saito) oversimplifies and distorts some forms of sustainable development ideology. This can be illustrated by reference to work by a young anthropologist, Jason Hickel. Hickel appears to be ignored by Žižek. In Žižek's case, he implausibly links sustainable development ideology with pro-Israel politics. We can note that the history and scope of sustainable development thinking and practice includes an emphasis on ethically just development and distribution of technology. That aspect of sustainable development values could contribute to Saito but especially Žižek's evolving positions.

Something akin to what Yanis Varoufakis calls "techno-feudalism" (in an analysis that Žižek resists but is sometimes tempted by in interpreting contemporary phenomena) could be challenged by an ethics, normative politics, and normative cultural theory of technology. Techno-feudalism as a concept is among other things an attempt to re-think Marx's historical sequence that includes a passage from feudalism to capitalism (and beyond). Žižek typically resists the Varoufakis attempt to claim that capitalism is finished. A more plausible view in a Žižekian mode is that capitalism has in yet another self-transformation changed into a form that requires more detailed and up-to-date Communist attention to the role of technology within capitalism and possible successor systems. Following up on what he depicts as an extension of Trotsky's revolutionary practice, Žižek focuses on digital ICTs. He enacts this in part by his work published on Substack.

12. VAROUFAKIS, TECHNO-FEUDALISM, CAPITALISM, CHINESE MARKETIZATION, ADAPTING MARXISM TO DEAL WITH CURRENT EVENTS

In a post that is dated 11/30/24 (presumably after Trump's re-election), "The Minotaur's Death Cramps," Žižek is both honest and confused as he adopts certain stances from Yanis Varoufakis. The text seems scrambled in part, as if someone is editing it or hastily re-writing it. As the Trump administration censors and re-writes official websites, we may be forgiven for questioning whether Substack is exempt from similar tampering with content. Substack, not only as an online presence but as a privately held company, is after all subject to the priorities of its owners or other interested parties. Here and elsewhere, Žižek may be partly

adopting certain ideas from Varoufakis's views about techno-feudalism replacing capitalism, while Žižek is also maintaining his own anti-capitalist stance. Žižek may be persuaded in part by Varoufakis's status as an economist, but in our opinion he should not be. The disciplinary perspective of economists weakens their capacity to understand and act on societal reality. That Varoufakis is a self-avowed "leftist" does not exempt him from skeptical questioning. Žižek appears on some of these Minotaur posts to be parroting Varoufakis's descriptions and explanations about some socio-economic phenomena.

We acknowledge that Varoufakis's views include some truths, obvious and unobvious. Among these is the very obvious claim that large-scale technology-centered corporations are currently playing a much more influential role than previously in the global political economy. Most striking in Žižek's post, however, is his view that marketization of the Chinese economy (post-Deng) forces a re-thinking about Marx and the Marxist tradition. The importance of China been noted by authors such as Branko Milanovic and Thomas Piketty. Presumably Žižek, while continuing as a Marxist anti-capitalist, has been engaged in this re-thinking before and after taking to Substack. His acknowledgment of our intensified global crisis is not merely a plaintive performance, but an assertion of his duties going forward.

Žižek increasingly relies on his own ethical/moral sensibility as a philosopher and cultural theorist, beyond affectations about scientific socialism. In the social sciences, within which Žižek sometimes works as a non-conformist participant, there is a difficulty in that their normative persuasive power often depends on such background as accumulation of massive compendia of facts, or uses of mathematics, or mysterious language. Žižek is obviously not one to blind us with mathematics. However, he has some tendency to beguile us with details, e.g., such as arcane historical or sociological details, or textual references. And his expectation that we should be impressed by Lacanian psychoanalysis is both impossible to ignore and implausible. (Though very Lacanian, he has acknowledged some problems with Lacan's outlook).

There is a brief moment in a video posted online in which Varoufakis questions Žižek's reliance on Lacan. This is well-taken coming from Varoufakis, who does not focus on anti-Lacanian skepticism, but goes forward with his own agenda. He will not cure Žižek's addiction to Lacan but will influence Žižek's economic analyses. That influence is visible in the 11/30/24 post.

13. CONCLUSION

We identify some gains and losses from Žižek's use of Substack. Žižek's attempt to articulate certain features of an updated Communism is unsurprisingly central for him. That is true though his revisionism changes some aspects of Marx's and Engel's outlook. A greater pessimism about historical change emerges. Žižek continues on Substack an emphasis on environmental/ecological themes on his account of global capitalism's conflicts and breakdown. His discussions of a Zambia disaster and an Iberian electricity blackout are examples. He agrees with key ideas proposed by the Japanese "degrowth communist," Kohei Saito. One agreement is a critical rejection of sustainable development ideology. Žižek proposes an implausible conflation of sustainable development with some political projects in Israel which he vehemently rejects. Žižek seems as well to object to some of Saito's position. This is sometimes explicit. It is also sometimes implicit. Saito, for example, is more critical of technology, while Žižek makes suggestions which he seems to regard as analogous to some version of Trotsky's stance about the positive revolutionary potential of technology. For Žižek, this would be exemplified by a possible "takeover" of digital technology by progressive revolutionary activists. Žižek's stance displays some affinities with but some differences from that of Yanis Varoufakis. For example, Žižek apparently agrees with some of Varoufakis's politics and economics, but disagrees in that Žižek, unlike Varoufakis, does not accept the view that capitalism has ended with the emergence of techno-feudalism.