

Interview - Santiago Zabala

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Santiago Zabala is ICREA Research Professor of Philosophy at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona and author of several books on religion, politics, and aesthetics, published with Columbia University Press and translated into numerous languages. He also writes opinion articles in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Al-Jazeera*, and many other international media outlets. When one asks this philosopher where he is from, his response is never Italy (he is Italian), but rather all those cities where he was raised: Rome, Vienna, and Geneva. He believes everyone should respond this way. "How many New Yorkers or Neapolitans actually feel like Americans or Italians? If nation-states have ended, haven't cities taken their place?" After teaching in Germany and the United States since 2009, he is based in Barcelona and has no plan to leave, as he loves the Catalan city, as well as its multicultural environment.

He belongs to a new generation of philosophers who see philosophy as a political activity meant to disclose the absence of emergency. As he recently explained, we are living in an age where "emergencies have ended," that is, where "democracy, finance, and even privacy are framed." Everything functions within previously established parameters or frames, and it is almost impossible to change or reform society. For example: "Regardless of Edward Snowden's revelations, we are still spied on by the NSA; our financial system was not reformed after the 2008 crisis; and as soon as a nation (Greece) within the EU demands to end its austerity measures, it is threatened with more sanctions." But Zabala does not think we are doomed. "Emancipation is possible as long as one manages to disclose these emergencies because, as my favorite philosopher (Martin Heidegger) used to say, 'the only emergency is the absence of emergency.'"

In this interview, he discusses, among other topics, his 2011 book, *Hermeneutic Communism* (coauthored with Gianni Vattimo), which Slavoj Žižek believes "is a book that everyone who thinks about radical politics needs like the air he or she breathes!"

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The most exciting research today is done by contemporary philosophers working on political problems related to gender issues, the revival of communism, and animal studies. I'm not only thinking of famous authors such as Amy Allen, Gayatri Spivak, or Kojin Karatani, but also younger thinkers such as Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Samir Haddad, and Matthew Calarco, among many others. These issues all belong to what I like to call the "remains of being," that is, everything our logocentric vocabulary and Western thought deems useless or unimportant. In my book *The Remains of Being*, I try to outline the ontological conditions of these remnants through several thinkers (Jacques Derrida, Reiner Schürmann, and Gianni Vattimo, among others). The point is that reality and its description are not important. Much more significant is what remains of it, those concepts or interpretations that have been discharged or find themselves at the margins of philosophy. It's always what we are left with that is more significant. This is why I'm so interested in the losers of history, such as communism, and also slums. These areas at the margins of cities are not interesting only because their global population is growing at a rate of 25 million per year, but also because they are considered an urban discharge or, better, a simple surplus product of capitalism that must be marginalized. The truth is that the slum is where the alternative to our framed democracies takes place.

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As far as philosophical debates worthy of attention, there are several interesting ones. I've been recently following the one on Heidegger (the most important philosopher since Hegel), given the new and further evidence of his anti-Semitism. Unfortunately, he is not the only great thinker with racist views (which must always be condemned), but his philosophical contribution ought to be separated from his personal views; otherwise we should also avoid reading Hume, Frege, and many others. Gregory Fried has recently contributed in a very productive way to this debate. Another debate has to do with philosophical education. Too often philosophy or other disciplines in the humanities are forced to be evaluated empirically, that is, as sciences. But philosophical results cannot be quantified in the same manner. And then students are forced to study in ranked universities, rather than with a particular academic whose research they find interesting, and the latter are asked to limit their publication to articles (also in ranked journals) instead of books.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

As you know, I attended International Schools (where UN diplomats often send their children in order to continue in the same program if they have to move), so I always had friends from different places. Apparently, we ignored one another's nationality. It wasn't something important in the school. Those years, I talked in English in school, Spanish and Italian at home, and German (in Vienna) and then French (in Geneva) in public. I think this is why I immediately endorsed hermeneutics (the philosophy of interpretation) once I started university. This is the only philosophical stance that believes that differences among philosophies are not only useful, but also necessary. Hans-Georg Gadamer, the most important hermeneutic philosopher of the twentieth century, used to say that "we understand only when we understand differently"; in other words, our own prejudices, languages, and traditions are vital to comprehend those of others. This is probably why my first book, *The Hermeneutic Nature of Analytic Philosophy*, was on the German Jewish philosopher Ernst Tugendhat. He also had an international upbringing and, through hermeneuticism, contributed to philosophy's plurality. As for many other thinkers of my generation, Noam Chomsky has always been a point of reference, in particular these past years when he has pointed out (with Tariq Ali, Richard Gott, and many others) the significance of new, democratically elected South American governments for that region and for the world in general.

You have maintained that Marx's revival is not necessarily an outcome of the 2008 financial global crisis only. How else would you describe Marx's relevance in the twenty-first century?

The revival of Marx in the twenty-first century has certainly a lot to do with the ongoing crisis of capitalism. But the crash of 2008 is not the only crisis capitalism suffered in these past years, though certainly the most significant since the Great Depression. But as Thomas Piketty explained in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, this will not be the last crisis of "globalized patrimonial capitalism" because the policies adopted can't "provide a durable response to the structural problems that made the crisis possible, including the crying lack of financial transparency and the rise of inequality." David Harvey also explained in his latest book that "crises are essential to the reproduction of capitalism. It is in the course of crises that the instabilities of capitalism are confronted, reshaped and re-engineered to create a new version of what capitalism is about." After all, capitalist imperatives of profit maximization and accumulation inevitably require putting profit before people, creating enormous social loss. The global levels of political, economic, and social inequality we've reached in 2015 because of capitalism's logics of exclusion not only are alarming, but also threaten our existence. This is why so many environmental activists seem to endorse communist initiatives.

When you present "communism" as a "radical alternative" to neoliberalism, what kind of "communism" are you referring to?

The term "communism" has acquired innumerable different meanings throughout history, but in today's public opinion it is not only considered a remnant of the past, but also imagined as a political system where all cultural, social, and economical components are controlled by the state. This seems to be the case in China, Vietnam, and North Korea. However, this stands in sharp contrast with the existential justifications for its revival. Like other philosophers, I do not think of communism as a programme for political parties to repeat previous historical errors, but rather as an existential response to the current neoliberal global condition. Let's remember that we are constantly

Interview - Santiago Zabala

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told (in particular here in Europe) that there is no “alternative” to liberal democracies – as if history has ended. But as the Arab Spring or the leftist South American governments have demonstrated, history has not ended. In Bolivia or Brazil, governments are democratically elected just as they are in Holland and Germany; the difference is that they do not endorse neoliberal economic policies.

In your opinion, are “communism” and “democracy” compatible?

Yes, of course, certainly more so than capitalism and democracy. As Naomi Klein demonstrates in her latest book, *This Changes Everything*, the greatest problem for the environment today is capitalism. Ellen Meiksins Wood has written outstanding books on this relation.

What is the role of the state in your interpretation of “communism,” as opposed to the non-state actors?

I agree with Žižek when he explains that state communism didn't work because of the “failure of anti-statist politics, of the endeavour to break out of the constraints of State, to replace statal forms of organization with ‘direct’ non-representative forms of self-organization.” These forms of “self-organization” have worked in South American nations. Sure, none of these governments define themselves as communist, but they have implemented clearly socialist measures in favor of the poorest sectors of their nation. Communism, as the anti-statist realm for equal opportunities, today has become the best idea, hypothesis, and guide for nongovernmental or stateless political movements, such as those that arose from the protests in Seattle (1999), Cochabamba (2000), and New York (2009). Here in Spain now, there is a new party called Podemos; even though it does not define itself as communist, its electoral program is clearly against the ruling government's neoliberal policies. Like many Latin American governments, the party is also accused of populism, which today has become a catch phrase to discredit anything that does not follow the IMF, WTO, and WB.

What is your take on the Chinese model of “communism” that has embraced capitalistic/neoliberal policies?

This is, of course, a problem. I often give lectures in China and notice how capitalism has been embraced. While I think it's a mistake, I can understand China's need to compete against the West. This is why they are so reluctant to reduce carbon emissions, for example. I'm just worried they might end up by making the same mistakes the Soviet Union did. In sum, while China is still proceeding within the ancient and authoritarian Soviet parameters, in Venezuela, Bolivia, and also Brazil, not only have democratic electoral procedures been respected, but also the state bureaucratic system has been decentralized through social missions for community projects, called “*missiones*.”

You have been an open critic of policies of neoliberalism. What are your thoughts on the current Eurozone crisis and the whole project of the European Union itself?

In order to understand this crisis, it is important to find a theoretical paradigm within which we may understand what Europe has become. This is why, in a recent article for *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, Vattimo and I tried to point out the latent nihilism within the European Union. Nihilism, for Nietzsche, was not only the moment when “the highest values devalue themselves,” but also “where we lose all hope.” While the Union seems to incorporate this loss of values, we Europeans have become indifferent to its potential. If there is a crisis in Europe today, it's because of the Union's latent nihilism, that is, its need to reduce the (social, financial, cultural) value of its citizens to a minimum. This is particularly evident in the way that Greece's new government is being treated. But why must we side with Greece? Nietzsche divided nihilism in two forms: passive and active. The former belongs to all those who are incapable of standing up; the latter instead is the stance of those who react, who “say no.” The current governments of Italy, Spain, and Portugal are passively nihilist, while Greece is active. I don't think the Union can be reformed. Right now, Greece must become a point of departure for other parties in Europe to stand up to the troika; otherwise, we will all be annihilated.

What is the rationale behind your suggestion that late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was a model for U.S. President Barack Obama in your co-authored book, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger*

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to Marx?

In order to understand this provocation (we admit it sounds exaggerated), we must recall that Chávez did not represent only his country, but was a figurative leader for all the Latin American countries that have joined forces (through UNASUR, ALBA, and MERCOSUR) to emancipate from IMF and the Washington consensus in general. In a way, the (democratically elected) Latin American president assumed regionally the same role that Obama seeks globally. The point is that everybody can agree that, unfortunately, Obama did not bring as much change as Chávez did. Obama presented himself as an agent of change, which we have not seen either internationally or nationally. While there are many issues I could mention, from appointing the same people who created the economic crisis or indiscriminately using drones in the Middle East, I think his greatest mistake has been to call for bipartisanship when he had the majority in the Senate during his first two years in office. Instead, Chávez used his majority not only to leave the IMF, but also to nationalise most of the country's national resources in order to fund social programmes that have led to, among many other things, the eradication of illiteracy and the creation of medical clinics throughout the nation.

While Chávez channeled massive state resources to offer houses to slum populations, in the United States, the slum population is still growing at an alarming rate. The media also played an important role here. The fact that Chávez was always portrayed as a dictator (even though he was democratically elected) was meant to make sure no one saw his policies as a model or example to follow. This is probably why Oliver Stone devoted a documentary to denouncing this disinformation. Chávez is gone now, and I'm not sure his successor is able to hold together the country as well as he did.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

To follow philosophers such as Judith Butler, journalists such as Pepe Escobar, intellectuals such as Tariq Ali, economists such as Marc Weisbrot, filmmakers such as John Pilger, and public heroes such as Edward Snowden and Julian Assange. International relations, like philosophy, must provide the big picture. These radical intellectuals might be able to help. They certainly help me.

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The interview was conducted by Dhanasree Jayaram. Dhanasree is a Senior Commissioning Editor of E-IR.