

From Myth to Symptom: The Case of Kosovo

By Slavoj Žižek & Agon Hamza

Prishtinë: Kolektivi Materializmi Dialektik, 2013. 103 pp.; ISBN: 978-9951-8835-2-8.

Can Eastern Europeans think? In this short book, renowned philosopher Slavoj Žižek teams up with an emerging theorist named Agon Hamza to produce a short but powerful interpretation of Kosovo's political history over the past couple of decades. The book is divided into three parts: a brief introduction written by Žižek and Hamza, a long essay by Žižek called "NATO as the left hand of God?," and finally a concluding piece by Hamza called "Beyond Independence," that examines the situation of Kosovo post-2008. Their main argument is that Kosovo represents a direct political struggle rather than a situation of cultural and ethnic antagonism between Albanians and Serbs. The irreconcilable division between Serbs and Albanians at the heart of the Kosovo conflict is shown to be a myth which is both a mystification and a racist stereotype that feeds not only conservative xenophobia but also liberal celebrations of multiculturalism. This myth serves a neo-imperial agenda, and Kosovo

is a symptom of a wider struggle against Western neo-liberalism, but at the same time Kosovo cannot be reduced to simply being a pawn in the geopolitical struggle among more powerful nation-states.

In the Introduction, Žižek and Hamza set out their agenda, which is to offer a leftist counter-reading of the stereotypical narratives of the Kosovo conflict, set within a broader Balkan, European, and global context. Insofar as we understand Kosovo to represent a cultural struggle between different ethnic groups who despise each other because of centuries-old mythical and religious passions, we refuse to understand what is truly going on. At the heart of Eastern Europe, the Kosovo conflict fuels the entire break-up of Yugoslavia after the end of the Cold War, and it indicates what is both necessary and impossible for any European "Union." The cosmopolitan argument claims that the Balkan wars in the 1990s and early 2000s are a throwback to earlier forms of nationalism and ethnocentrism, a return of the repressed after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The flip side is the rise of other forms of European protectionism, nationalism and fascism as forces of resistance to the hegemony of the EU, NATO, and the eurozone, even as the financial stability

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of Europe teeters on the brink of dissolution in the name of supposedly more stable states like Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain.

Žižek and Hamza affirm strongly, against the proliferation of the “culturalist” interpretations of Kosovo and many other struggles in the contemporary academy, that “this book insists on an affirmative and direct conception of politics” (12). They ask: of what is Kosovo the symptom? Two things, neither of which are unique to Kosovo. First, Kosovo is a symptom of the tendency to offer cultural explanations of conflicts in the world today. These explanations constitute in fact a refusal to think, and an excuse to denigrate and dismiss real human and political understandings of complex global phenomena. Second, Kosovo is an important example of a colonial struggle between occupiers and occupied, as Hamza points out in his essay. Imperial applications of managed Western democracy frames contemporary conflicts in ethnic and cultural terms in ways that depoliticize them for observers and academics, and defuses any real power on the part of the people involved. In order to accomplish a genuine revolution in Kosovo, we must go beyond simple independence in legal or constitutional terms and will “an

emancipatory political act” (103).

I will return to Hamza’s provocative conclusion, but first I want to look more closely at Žižek’s essay. This piece takes up more than half of the book, and as most of his writings are, it is somewhat loosely structured. It can be divided into about three distinct areas: first is a series of reflection on the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, along with a series of specific reflections about the situation in Eastern Europe, including Kosovo, around the turn of the century. Žižek’s political analysis is always acute even when his writing is not entirely clear, and he concludes that “the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia also signaled the end of any serious role of the UN and the Security Council” (43), which we saw even more clearly when the United States made the decision to go to war with Iraq in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the bombing demonstrated the end of “the silent pact with Russia” and confirmed Russian humiliation at the hands of the West, which then led to the emergence of Vladimir Putin who has restored some of this Russian power and pride.

The second section of Žižek’s essay, written after 9/11, concerns biopolitics more generally, and constitutes a

reaction to the work of Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's book *State of Exception* was published in 2003 in Italian, and translated into English in 2005. Agamben argues, in light of the US response to 9/11, that biopolitics concerns the juridical states of exception or states of emergency that Carl Schmitt theorized in his influential writings. Žižek points out that this proclamation of a state of emergency by a state is actually a "desperate strategy to AVOID the true emergency" that is represented by the threat of popular politicization (48). The US and other nations want to depoliticize violent conflicts by referring them to the actions of brutal dictators and crazed terrorists. Applying his sharp reasoning to the scandalous photos taken of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, Žižek argues that rather than being a direct command or an unlawful exception "the Iraqi prisoners were effectively initiated into American culture, they got the taste of its obscene underside which forms the necessary supplement to its public values of personal dignity, democracy, and freedom" (56).

Although it may seem that Žižek has strayed far from Kosovo and Eastern Europe in the middle of his essay, the key point is that insofar as "we" Western

Americans believe that we stand for and practice a civilized culture we ignore this obscene underside. It's not that upon recognizing our obscenity that we should view ourselves as barbaric and by contrast "they" are civilized or good, but the whole dichotomy is less than useless. "We" are no better than the supposedly nationalist-fascist-racist Eastern Europeans to whom we think we can preach condescending humanitarian values. Or, as self-conscious leftists struck by our guilt, we might think we cannot criticize leaders like Milošević simply because they resist and are victimized by NATO and the United States. Žižek rightly claims that we cannot simply identify one group as civilized and the other as barbarous; in fact "every clash of civilizations is the clash of the underlying barbarisms" (59).

The final section of Žižek's essay is called "The Lie of Depoliticization," and it returns to the siege of Sarajevo in the early 1990s to show how the recasting of the crisis of Sarajevo—and later instances of the long conflict surrounding Yugoslavia—in humanitarian terms "was sustained by an eminently political choice, that of, basically, taking the Serb side in the conflict" (64). Wait—the West took the side of Serbia? But it was NATO that

bombed a truncated Yugoslavia was dedicated to promoting Serbian dominance! And it was the prosecution of Milošević for war crimes by the West that ultimately ended the conflict, right?

This refusal to analyze what is really happening politically in Kosovo and the Balkans lies at the root of the ability to accept humanitarian reasons for intervention, and to ignore previous occasions when the West did not intervene. Žižek understands that NATO and the US profited from the conflict, and in part fueled and inflamed it for political and economic reasons, until they could no longer benefit from this Serbian militarism, and then they were forced to crack down. In the same way, as Žižek notes, the United States supported Saddam Hussein so long as he did their bidding, and ignored his abuses of his own people until it became convenient to do so. In this final section, Žižek applies some of the political philosopher Jacques Rancière's ideas to the concept of universal Human Rights, which do not simply exist but can become "the precise space of politicization proper" (87); the problem is that we substitute Human Rights for politics and evacuate the term of any force or meaning. As Žižek claims, "what the 'Human Rights of the Third World suffering victims' *effectively*

mean is the right of the Western powers themselves to intervene—politically, economically, culturally, militarily—in the Third World countries of their choice on behalf of the defense of Human Rights" (68). And this "Third World" effectively and selectively includes Kosovo as a part of Europe that is cut out from civilized Europe and reduced to European/NATO/American intervention in the name of Human Rights.

What can be done? At the end of his essay, Žižek asserts an "attitude of aggressive passivity" as a form of Bartleby politics. This gesture of radical refusal or withdrawal is more effective than any action, especially when all actions are prescribed and contained by the conventional depoliticized framework of global capitalism in which we live. As an extension of this possibility of refusal, Hamza urges people engaged in the contemporary Kosovo situation—as academics, as leftists, as activists—to go "beyond independence." This going beyond is in Žižekian terms a withdrawal from independence proper, without simply abandoning the achievement of independence. The point is that insofar as independence names the solution to the problem of Kosovo, it fosters dependence, condescension, racism, and the employment of

economic methods of privatization, indebtedness, and impoverishment that reinforce servility to more powerful states. The refusal of independence is not the withdrawal into dependence, but the ability to criticize the sham of independence for weaker nations and as well as the democratic framework that corporate capitalism adopts as its ideological cover. As Hamza remarks, the political scene of Kosovo “is merely a symptom of the neo-liberal interventions, lacking any ideas about how to break the deadlock” (76). The political situation that is obscured by stereotypes about cultures and myths is really “a problem of the colonised and the coloniser” (80). As I discovered when I visited Israel and Palestine in 1998, such conflicts are not about different groups of people who hate each other due to reasons of religion and ethnicity, they are fundamentally about who controls the land and its resources, including its population.

Insofar as the 2008 independence is seen as the solution to a humanitarian problem, it masks the deeper situation, which involves “the primitive accumulation of capital,” in Marx’s terms (85). Our current discourse about democracy, with its emphasis on cultural expression, “cannot but serve to obscure the relations of power,

capital, etc.” (93). Independence failed to achieve liberation or emancipation, a political act of will on the part of the people as such, which is why independence is insufficient. Hamza concludes the book by claiming that “the revolutionising of Kosovo in all its levels, from democratising the ‘imperial economy’ (by negating it), to dissolving neoliberal economic experiments, or in sum, when taking the fate of the country into our own hands, is then how the space for the politics of emancipation will open up” (103).

Hamza does not present this emancipatory political act beyond independence in the same terms as Žižek does at the end of his essay, but I think they would need to be linked. To think and enact a zone for a politics of emancipation, which is the political name for “universal Human Rights,” we need to adopt a posture of radical withdrawal from neoliberal and neo-imperial capitalism. Even if we possess political independence in nationalist and statist terms, we fail to confront our own dependence on capitalism in the form of money and debt, and ignore our interconnectedness as humans enmeshed in technologies and ecologies of power for enslavement and liberation. Just like the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, and the

Spanish 15-M Movements, the point is not to have a developed plan to put in place that will solve all our problems. The urgency is to demonstrate this refusal to comply with state nationalism *and* neoliberal corporate capitalism that opens a space for emancipation. Let Kosovo be the symptom of revolution and radical transformation, as Hamza and Žižek theorize in this important book.

Clayton Crockett

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