

Spring 2009

The Balkans: Radical Conservatism and Desire

Dušan I. Bjelić
University of Southern Maine

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/criminology>

Recommended Citation

Bjelić, D. I. (2009). The Balkans: Radical Conservatism and Desire. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 108(2), 285-304.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Criminology by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

Dušan I. Bjelić

The Balkans: Radical Conservatism and Desire

The “catch” of the Universal resides in what it secretly excludes.

—Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*

The *Mittel Land* of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* invokes both the Balkans and Central Europe, and Central Europe has been imagined as “a transitional zone between proper Western civilization and the unfathomable identity of Russia.”¹ This transitional status is intensified in the Balkans, which, in addition to being part of the East/West, is also seen as a bridge between the Christian north and the Muslim south. Both Western and Eastern Christianity, as well as Islam, are established in the Balkans, and their practices coincide with ethnic and national lines. The Balkans were never colonized in the modern sense. Rather, during the centuries of Ottoman rule, strategies of repopulation, religious conversion, and polarization were introduced to control the territory, and Balkan people came to perceive each other (and themselves) as both colonial rulers and colonial subjects. Because of this inscribed ambiguity, the Balkan nation-states emerging in the nineteenth century were particularly vulnerable to both *representational* colonization by “proper Western

South Atlantic Quarterly 108:2, Spring 2009

DOI 10.1215/00382876-2008-034 © 2009 Duke University Press

civilization” and aspirations of “European” identity. During this period of the formation of Balkan nation-states on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, it was de rigueur for members of the intellectual elite to be educated in the cultural centers of their nations’ respective geopolitical allies. For example, Slovenes and Croats would be educated in Vienna or Berlin, Serbs and Romanians in Paris, and Bosnian Muslims in Istanbul, with the destination of cultural pilgrimage changing as alliances shifted. Thus, the representational hegemony of former imperial powers became firmly entrenched in the Balkans’ small nations, and the production of ideas there has traditionally reflected that intellectual hegemony. The discourse geography of *Balkanism* accounts not only for this representational process but also for the ways in which the geopolitical ambiguity of the Balkan space as always *in* and *out* of Europe has been internalized into the Balkan identity.²

This essay focuses on Balkan discourse geography as a hidden contingency of the intellectual work of two Lacanian psychoanalysts from the Balkans, Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek. Their iconic status as global intellectuals and the sheer volume of their work have generated an industrial-size body of criticism. However, most of that criticism has taken their work at face value as stemming solely from the tradition of the European discourse of rationality and does not take into account the extent to which their carefully constructed “cosmopolitanism” and “universalism” reflect disidentification with the Balkans. Jodi Dean, for instance, situates Žižek among a veritable pantheon of only *Western* intellectuals (and one saint): “He develops his thought through critical dialogue with a vast array of formidable thinkers, including, but not limited to, Giorgio Agamben, Louis Althusser, Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Rene Descartes, Sigmund Freud, G. W. F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Marx, Blaise Pascal, Saint Paul, Jacques Ranciere and F. W. Schelling.”³ Samir Dayal, in his introduction to Kristeva’s *Crisis of the European Subject*, uncritically reiterates her problematic characterization of Bulgaria as the symbol of the crisis: “Just as she had revealed that Arendt envisions a resubjectivation that passes through melancholia, Kristeva believes that precisely the suffering of Bulgaria, because it plumbs the profound depth of inwardness, can become through *metanoia* the road to an approach to the Real of the European crisis.”⁴

In what follows here, instructed by Antonio Gramsci’s concept of intellectual labor as social praxis and its self-empowerment through marginal geography, I emphasize the discursive geography of the Balkans as a dis-

sonant infrastructure to the transcendent, ahistorical quality of Kristeva's and Žižek's work and their self-proclaimed universalism and cosmopolitanism. Gramscian concepts, such as geographic and historical specificity as central to both intellectual labor and the internal plurality of the subject, are particularly relevant in today's climate of tension between the homogenization of global capitalism and the cultural diversity of immigrant and exiled labor, which have displaced the economic conflicts of global capitalism onto culture and identity. Edward Said writes of Gramsci's belief, "All ideas, all texts, all writings are embedded in actual geographical situations that make them possible, and that in turn make them extend institutionally and temporally."⁵ Many of the academics and writers working in fields such as cultural studies are themselves expatriates who identify with the subaltern groups about which they write or from which they come and whose dislocation operates as radical resistance to the cultural orthodoxy of their host nations, the former colonial centers.⁶

The work of Kristeva and Žižek, on the other hand, offers a reverse, dissident response to "exile," which discursively subjugates the Balkans and immigrants to European symbolic dominance. Under the guise of psychoanalysis of the Balkans, their work promotes the internalization of the Balkans' geopolitical location as the other of Europe and produces a negative version of the Balkans' subjectivity as a failing Oedipus, pathologizing displaced subjectivity on the basis of the incestuous bond with the lost space. This pathologization is achieved by invoking the Lacanian theory of the split subject as a universal structure of modern subjectivity, which replicates the cognitive split between empire and colony as symbolic father and archaic mother. The significant transaction between the two contexts, internal/universal and external/local, replicates the ushering in of European universality by the Enlightenment, when the western part of Europe created its marginal space by relegating the eastern part to a second serfdom.⁷

The philosophy of the Enlightenment constructed Eastern Europe and the Balkans as the dangerous exterior, "the dark side within a collective Europe," the place of Europe's forbidden desire, of vampires, unruly feminine sexuality, and tribalism.⁸ That is, all that the West had to discharge in order to become the center of the world—the empire—was ascribed to the East as the constitutive dark counterpoint to Enlightenment. Relations here have traditionally been fixed by a sort of "cognitive paranoia," whereby the West constructs the identity of the "other" part of Europe. Lacking its own Enlightenment and corresponding Eastern European Cartesianism,

this geopolitical other either submits to (and internalizes) the externally imposed identity or completely rejects it.

Bulgarian American historian Maria Todorova proposes that what we know about the Balkans cannot be separated from *how* we know it—the conditions that have formed our knowledge of the region. The Balkans as a stable representational scheme that originated in travelogues, literature, and Western journalism may now be seen as a discursive problem rather than as “truth.” When Todorova named this process of representation *Balkanism*, she named two contradictory elements: the Balkans as an object explained by rational knowledge and a space abandoned by rational knowledge. Todorova acknowledges the Orientalist character of Balkanist discourse, but as Milica Bakić-Hayden writes, “Todorova shows that balkanism independently developed a rhetorical arsenal of its own via its specific geo-political religious and cultural position.”⁹ Bakić-Hayden goes on to elucidate “nesting Orientalisms” as an important element in Balkan identity formation. According to this scheme, “The designation of ‘other’ [in the Balkans] has been appropriated and manipulated by those who have themselves been designated as such in orientalist discourse.”¹⁰ Specifically, the Slovenes see themselves as more civilized than the Serbs, who are farther east; the Serbs, in turn, see themselves as more civilized than the Albanians. In addition, such representational schemes based on spatial hierarchies have been internalized as essential identities because they allow and justify exclusion of the other.

Žižek uses the psychoanalytic language of desire to construct a comprehensive political philosophy and Kristeva to advocate “oedipal revolt”¹¹ as a unifying culture of Europe. Both of these intellectual projects embody what Gramsci programmatically opposes, as Edward Said notes, “the tendency to homogenize, equalize, mediatize everything, what we can call the temporalizing and homological function by which the whole problem of specificity, locality, and/or identity is reformulated so as to make equivalence.”¹² That is, considerations of regionalism and cultural hybridity, as well as historical contingencies of time and place, are absent, except in essentializing contexts such as Žižek’s elaboration of the Lacanian “father thing” as endemic to Bosnian violence or Kristeva’s reference to immigrants’ hair, faces, smell, and clothes.¹³ The lack of Gramscian “spatial consciousness” in Kristeva’s and Žižek’s work extends to their own relation to their Balkan origins. They discuss their respective maternal spaces only in elaborately intellectualized terms through the medium of psychoanalysis. This careful

distancing of themselves from their origins alerts one to the unacknowledged centrality of Kristeva's and Žižek's Balkan origins to their writing about the region and also points to the Balkanist character of their intellectual production.

Rastko Močnik's account of the status and function of *Balkanism* within the context of globalization provides a framework to illustrate how Kristeva's and Žižek's discourse fits into the scheme of Balkanist discourse. According to Močnik, two major a priori structures of domination and subordination govern *Balkanism* as politics and as identity: the first is *horizontal* antagonism among the Balkan ethnic groups, in which each of them is a potential aggressor; the second is a *vertical* system of cooperation between each of these parties and the European Union. Within this system of antagonisms and cooperation, stereotypes of Balkan character emerge as *knowledge* and *identities*. The Balkan identity becomes complete only when the geopolitical map has been fully inscribed and reflected as an ambiguous and incomplete self and as such is a supplement to global ideology in its very archaic closeness. Kristeva's and Žižek's respective discourses conform to both aspects of Močnik's scheme: horizontal antagonism in relationship to the Balkans as the primitive other, as maternal space, and as dangerous neighbor—and vertical cooperation with the established geopolitical hierarchy. However, for both Žižek and Kristeva, the only *acknowledged* allegiance is the transcendent vertical one—to the universal subject and to psychoanalysis. The horizontal, self-Orientalizing antagonisms remain unaccounted for.

Kristeva's politics of signification discursively transforms intellectual labor from an agent of symbolic material intervention into a purveyor of desire for signifiers and self-signification as a permanent source of revolt and creative negativity. Her concept of "exile" as a state of cosmopolitanism originates not so much from her life in Paris as from her experience of herself as a liberated, fully oedipalized subject exiled from her maternal space of birth. As Kristeva writes, "Exile is already in itself a form of *dissidence*, since it involves uprooting oneself from a family, a country, or a language."¹⁴ Kristeva extends this concept of dissidence to the idea of "oedipal revolt" against the maternal space and posits that the subject exists in the tension between the joy of speech (desire for the father) and the seduction of the prelingual state of maternal unity (desire for the mother). In and through the tension created by these opposing forces, the desiring subject and autonomous speaker are constituted. She herself, in order to become a fully oedipalized subject, had first to demonize her Bulgarian identity

according to her own theory of abjection: “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*.”¹⁵ She apostrophizes Bulgarian citizens as follows: “You suffer from chaos, from vandalism, from violence. You suffer from the lack of authority. You suffer from corruption, the absence of initiative, the sloppiness that redoubles an unprecedented brutality on the individual level, the arrogance of the mafia and the scams of the newly rich.”¹⁶ Her advice to Bulgarian citizens is, following her example, to “undergo a psychoanalysis or psychotherapy” in order to join European civilization successfully.¹⁷ Kristeva discursively reintroduces the colonial paradigm into European geopolitics via her politics of signification in the same way the Lacanian split subject is articulated through her theory of poetic language. The maternal drive for the lost space supplies endless raw material for building the cultural capital of the French nation.

Žižek became engaged in national politics through his collaboration with *Neue Slovenische Kunst* (New Slovenian Art) and the Lacanians, and he was politically active during the formative years of the new Slovene state, running unsuccessfully for a seat on the collective presidency in 1991. The Socialist and multiethnic Yugoslavian state had officially nurtured progressive thinking around class divisions during a time of resurgent reactionary geopolitical and ethnic identifications, and the Lacanians were able to exploit the residual Marxist rhetoric of class equality while promulgating a psychoanalytic explanation of the interethnic violence capturing the political and theoretical attention of the West. At a time when Yugoslavia was literally in flames, the Lacanians’ discursive strategy was to identify the Balkans as the Lacanian *real*, which worked as a theoretical reinforcement to the nationalist rhetoric of Balkan otherness in the new Slovenian state.¹⁸

The impetus toward the establishment of a Slovene state and the success of Žižek’s and his group’s psychoanalytically mediated political praxis in that context had much to do with the Slovenes’ historical self-identification with Central Europe rather than with the Balkans. (Janez Drnovšek, prime minister of Slovenia, then president from 2002 until 2006, proclaimed, “back to Europe where we always belonged” and “this is a choice between Europe and the Balkans.”) Žižek is more specific: “I’m not even Eurocentric, I’m Germanocentric.”¹⁹ Historically, the concept of “Central Europe” has fluctuated according to the contingencies of European geopolitics, and it still fluctuates from nation to nation. In the 1970s and 1980s, toward the end of the cold war, emphasizing culture and subjectivity, political dissent,

ethnicity, and individual desire, “Central Europe” gained fresh currency as an alternative to the East/West ideological and geopolitical binaries. Freud and psychoanalysis, as Central European avatars of modernity, have been an important influence on the post-cold war construction of Eastern European cultural identity, with psychoanalysis becoming both the paradigm of Central European subjectivity and a discourse of dissent against political repression. Slovenia, a few hours by train from Vienna and the most liberal of all six Yugoslav republics, was fertile ground for such new expressions of dissent to take root and flourish.

Contemporary engagement with psychoanalysis by the European-leaning Slovene intelligentsia as a path to discursive and political separation from the archaic Balkans was foreshadowed in a 1922 letter from Freud to Trieste psychoanalyst Edoardo Weiss, in which Freud makes clear that the people directly to the south of his native Austria—the Slovenes—do not meet the oedipal civilizational standard: “Our analytical art when faced with such people, our perspicacity alone cannot break through to the dynamic relation which controls them.”²⁰ Southern Slavs in general, Freud argued in his clinical history of the “Rat Man,” are anal; not only do they have a proclivity to sodomy, but they also dream of feces as a sign of gold and good luck.²¹

The Lacanian group adopted Freud’s cognitive map of Europe as a basis for its own particular form of psychocultural discourse. This is apparent when Žižek, articulating a project of national rebirth through psychoanalysis, takes up the case of the failing Slovene Oedipus, where Freud’s discussion with Weiss concerning the “immoral Slovene” leaves it. Instead of questioning Freud’s implicit geopolitical bias, Žižek returns to the original pronouncement of “unanalyzability” to diagnose the collective condition of the Slovene Oedipus: “The ‘immoral’ Slovene mentioned does not just embody the paradoxical way enjoyment and the Law are linked, but hides yet another surprise, which leads to the key to the Slovene national fantasy, to the theme of the ‘maternal superego,’ to the theme of the mother (not the father) as the bearer of the Law/Prohibition.”²²

According to Žižek’s Lacanian interpretation, the absence of the father, the bearer of internal law/prohibition, engenders a “national [Slovene] fantasy” formed around maternal prohibition of external pleasures and creates the “impediment” to subjectivity expressed in the Slovene’s sexual impotence and immorality. Only the symbolic and internalized law of the father, through inner prohibition, engenders enjoyment as a form of transgression. Žižek concludes, “We Slovenes—‘unanalysable’ according to

Freud—had to wait for Lacan to find a meeting with psychoanalysis; only with Lacan did psychoanalysis achieve a level of sophistication on which it is capable of tackling such foul apparitions as the Slovenes.”²³ In other words, Žižek accepts and perpetuates Freud’s Eurocentric perspective and deploys it as the site of national self-transformation through application of Lacanian precepts. When subjectivity has been restored to Slovenia, what becomes of the “unanalyzable” identity attributed to it by Freud and Žižek? It may be transferred to the “other” Balkans via the Lacanian concept of the *real*, the presymbolic world. Not only did this discursive strategy reproduce the hoariest of representational clichés about Balkan violence, but it was also really *self*-Orientalizing in its adherence to the scheme of “nesting Orientalisms” in Balkan identity formation.

During the early 1990s, when apparently senseless killings, rapes, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia were horrifying the rational West, Žižek’s unique position as both insider and intellectual observer allowed his analysis of ethnic violence to be interpreted as coming directly from the Balkan subaltern. But this was far from the case. His analysis of the region—and particularly the ethnic violence of the early 1990s—was, in fact, an Orientalizing discourse on the Balkan (non-Slovene) other. Moreover, his submission of the region to psychoanalysis greatly enhanced his status as a global intellectual and purveyor of universalism. *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Woman and Causality* appeared in 1994 when the Bosnian War was at its height.²⁴ In this book, Žižek analyzes the Balkans, including the sexual violence of the war in Bosnia, using Lacanian theory and language to relate the Bosnian violence to the Lacanian “father-enjoyment” (*père-jouissance*). That is, soon after Žižek called on Slovenes to abandon their incestuous bond with the archaic mother and to ground their enjoyment in the name of the father, he turned to Bosnia to diagnose the general conditions of the declining Oedipus and the resurgence of the primal father as the political enjoyment of the Balkans’ nationalism. For instance, the Serbs committed horrendous rapes of Bosnian Muslim women and often sadistically forced fathers to watch the rape of their daughters. Here is Žižek’s interpretation of one such hypothetical instance, in which he situates the ritualized sexual violence in the Lacanian presymbolic and circumvents the question of ethnicity by focusing on the “father thing” in the cruelty of the rape:

Because his desire is split, divided between fascination with enjoyment and repulsion at it; or—to put it another way—because his yearning to rescue the woman from her torturer is hindered by the implicit

knowledge that the victim is *enjoying* her suffering. The observer's ability to act—to rescue the victim-woman from the torturer or from herself—bears witness to the fact that he became “dupe of his own fantasy” (as Lacan put it apropos of Sade): *the blow aims at the unbearable surplus-enjoyment*.²⁵

Following Lacan, Žižek presents both facets of the “father-enjoyment” here: the symbolic and the presymbolic. The former sets the rules and parameters of normative order, and his joy is separate from the *real*. The father in his presymbolic aspect (the primal father of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*), on the other hand, is the owner of all women, the object of his sons' hate, and the source of sexual violence. He is also exempt from castration. The Bosnian father hypothesized by Žižek epitomizes the presymbolic, the primitive, the Balkan *real*, one who still enjoys (by force) the incestuous bond. As such, he is inseparable from the history of the established pathology of the place itself, as are the rest of the people living there. This particular Lacanian dyad (symbolic father and presymbolic father) of *père-jouissance* discursively replaces the unanalyzable Slovene with the Bosnian father as primitive other who is all too readily analyzable by Žižek himself as symbolic father and phallic authority.

Both Kristeva and Žižek are traditional intellectuals in the Gramscian sense that their intellectual work upholds the cultural hegemony of the Eurocentric symbolic authority against the subaltern as an archaic threat to European modernity. In a recently published essay, “Thinking in Dark Times,” Kristeva addresses the question, “What is intellectual labor?”²⁶ As the essay's title suggests, she proposes that the act of “thinking” is the intellectual labor. She elaborates: “My practice as a psychoanalyst, my novel writing, and my work in the social domain are not ‘commitments’; rather these activities are an extension of a mode of thinking I look for and conceive as an *energeia* in the Aristotelian sense of thought as act, the actuality of intelligence.”²⁷ Although we live in dark times, Kristeva declares herself an “energetic pessimist” and calls intellectuals to a new humanism: “A new conception of the human is thus being constituted with contributions from the fields in which we work. . . . This conception is synonymous with the desire for meaning, which is inseparable from the pleasure rooted in sexuality and which commands both the sublimity of culture and the brutality of acting out.”²⁸ Kristeva's “new humanism” would seem to resonate with Gramsci's own humanism, his belief that “Each man, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity,

that is, he is a ‘philosopher,’ and artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.”²⁹ Closer inspection reveals an essential difference between Gramsci’s and Kristeva’s formulations. According to Gramsci’s philosophy of *praxis*, the task of intellectual labor is to trace the social totality beyond its juridical form by unpacking the organic ties between histories and territories inscribed in human subjectivity. Gramsci posits, “Every philosophical current leaves behind a sediment of ‘common sense’; this is the document of its historical effectiveness” (*Prison*, 326 n5). Further, the subject recognized in its local history and geography is intelligible as an “inventory of traces” and may be the source of its own social intelligence.³⁰ Then, as self-empowered intellectual, it may act from various points of resistance beyond political institutions and traditional Marxist revolutionary thinking.

Gramsci’s humanistic concepts are fundamentally at odds with Kristeva’s therapeutic praxis. Foreigners under her therapy—far from being viewed as an “inventory of traces”—have exhibited the same psychic structure of matricide and are inevitably pathologized. Her clinical notes read, “Changing language often doesn’t just respond to a political urgency, but is the sign of a matricide that no satisfactory relation with the Father could prevent or compensate for.”³¹ Identifying foreigners as psychological Balkans, she infers the definition of exile as pathology and “matricide as a violent, destructive separation from the mother that follows on from maternal violence itself” (*Revolt*, 79). She adds, “Exile often harbors a trauma that’s difficult to confront and elaborate on: it predisposes these patients to acting-out that run from cynicism to corruption, defiance to fundamentalism” (*ibid.*). Kristeva’s designation of the Balkans as the sign of the archaic mother in immigrants connects the geopolitics of Europe, the formation of “intimate democracy,” and her own biography in a self-referential scheme anchored in psychoanalytic theory. We may conclude, then, that Kristeva’s psychoanalytic exclusionism is *self-Orientalizing* in the sense that she locates and subjugates her Bulgarian origins as the East to her French superego. Then, in turn, mimicking “nesting Orientalisms” to maintain her identification with the French superego as her West, she Orientalizes “strangers” as her abject Balkans.

Controversial as it is, Kristeva’s work has polarized critics. Gayatri Spivak, writing from her own perspective as an exile, is one of Kristeva’s detractors:

"I'm repelled by Kristeva's politics: what seems to me to be her reliance on a sort of banal historical narrative . . . Christianizing psychoanalysis . . . ferocious Western Eurocentrism."³² A central difficulty of Kristeva's elucidation of the Balkan subjectivity through psychoanalysis is that her use of terms such as *archaic* and *primitive* in articulating her theory of the abject, which is central to her concept of exile, lends racial overtones to her discourse. According to Celia Brickman, "'Primitive' is the key to the racial economy of psychoanalysis, the watchword of a psychologizing discourse behind which is concealed an ideology of race."³³ In stressing the civilizing superiority of her French identity, Kristeva incorporates these inherent exclusionary aspects of psychoanalysis in her project of oedipal revolt and thus fails to elucidate the Balkan subjectivity in its own right. What she does, in fact, is produce yet another form of hegemonic representation of the Balkans, while appearing to believe that she follows Bakhtinian principles of heterogeneity and dialogism to envision, through psychoanalysis, the "subject as a dynamic of rebirth and creation."³⁴

Psychoanalysis is, essentially, a discourse of power and was recognized as such by Gramsci. In pathologizing diasporic identity and offering psychoanalysis as a sophisticated method of cultural assimilation, Kristeva participates in "moral coercion," which, for Gramsci, was the function of psychoanalysis inside the global system of labor. In *Prison Notebooks*, there is the following note: "Psychoanalysis and its enormous diffusion since the war [World War I], as the expression of the increased moral coercion exercised by the apparatus of State and society on single individuals, and of the pathological crisis determined this coercion" (*Prison*, 280). Writing from prison in 1928, Gramsci had already "caught the connection between Fordism and psychoanalysis."³⁵ "The truth is that the new type of man demanded by the rationalization of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalized" (*Prison*, 296–97). In other words, rationalization of production requires "intimate revolt" against presymbolic sexuality and demands that erotics be placed under the sign of the universal law as the precondition to successful application of Fordist principles to industrial production and development of a "new type of worker." Gramsci situates psychoanalysis at the very center of the Fordist model: "Regulation" of sexual instincts, because of the contradictions it creates and the perversions that are attributed to it, seems particularly "unnatural": "Hence the frequency of appeals to 'nature' in this area. 'Psycho-analytical' literature is also a kind of criti-

cism of the regulation of sexual instincts in a form which often recalls the Enlightenment, as in its creation of a new myth of the ‘savage’ on a sexual basis (including relations between parents and children)” (ibid., 294–95). In this passage, Gramsci addresses the relation of industrial capitalism to the oedipal structure of labor. The productivity of labor, he discerns, has an intimate erotic dimension; unsignified desire obstructs the planned conditions of production. Psychoanalysis, in its dual, self-contradictory role of promoting the language of sexual emancipation and regimenting sexuality, resolves contradictions of capitalism by deploying oedipal structure into labor’s intimate self-identification. In place of Gramsci’s model of social praxis as the union of mental and manual labor, Kristeva offers a radical split between the two, assigning to her own intellectual labor the task of managing the desire of the new type of worker. Today, in the post-Fordist era of globalized capitalism, with its flexible, mobile, and decentralized workforce, Kristeva’s construction of “revolt culture” as an anodyne for displaced immigrants is still directly relevant to Gramsci’s criticism of the connection of psychoanalysis to the rationalization of production and loyalty to symbolic authority. Sociologically speaking, then, an assimilated workforce enables reproduction of global capitalism without the threat of rupture by class conflict. The “energetic pessimist’s” call for new humanism in the contemporary era constitutes de facto support of the neoliberal economy and French nationalism.

The year the Berlin Wall fell, 1989, was a benchmark for both Kristeva and Žižek. It was the year Kristeva visited Bulgaria and began to comment sporadically on Eastern Europe. That same year, Žižek published his first major work in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.³⁶ Neoliberalism was on the rise, along with a general presumption of the end of ideology. Žižek not only refutes the death of ideology but also argues that the proclamation of its death represents ideology in its purest form. Ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia and elsewhere and the rise of European nationalism have proven him correct in that argument. Writing in the context of the ideological storm raging in the former Yugoslavia, in vivid language that drew from continental philosophy (Kant, Hegel), psychoanalysis (Lacan), and Anglo-Saxon popular culture, he soon established himself as an Eastern European political philosopher like none other, not only because of his ideas but also because of the prodigious volume of his work. In addition, Žižek’s work, carried out in conjunction with his role as the most prominent member of what is now known as the Slovenian group of Lacanian psychoanalysis, was

instrumental in revealing the existence of a flourishing philosophical scene in the formerly Marxist East.

But it was the “French Freud”³⁷ and “French Oedipus” (*Revolt*, 74) who assigned Žižek and his Lacanian friends the mission of bringing subjectivity to the Slovenes. When Žižek returned to Slovenia after studying in Paris with Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan’s son-in-law and intellectual heir, his group took over the avant-garde magazine *Problemi* and used it as a medium for channeling the precepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis into Slovenian public discourse. Mladen Dolar, who also studied with Miller in Paris, remembers his own and Žižek’s return to Slovenia in the 1980s as a sort of mission to establish a Lacanian outpost there, encouraged by Miller: “We had been publishing Lacan in *Problemi* and *Analecta* for years, and [Miller] was grateful for that. He thinks very strategically and didn’t have anyone else published in Eastern Europe. To him, we were the last stronghold of Western culture on the eastern front.”³⁸ Miller sent Žižek and Dolar to establish a foothold for Lacanian discourse—but, more important, to rid Slovenia of its taint of Balkanness and unanalyzability and to establish a climate of psychoanalytic rationality there that would embody “the most radical contemporary version of the Enlightenment.”³⁹ Miller’s injunction to Žižek and Dolar to spread the Lacanian gospel reflects not only a desire to establish psychoanalysis as a discursive hegemony on the “Eastern front” (i.e., the Balkans, spearheaded by Slovenia), but it also shows Miller’s naturalization of the geopolitical map of Europe built into the logic of the empty signifier.⁴⁰

According to Žižek’s logic of the empty signifier, Gramscian cultural hybridity is still incestuous because it is consubstantial to geography, and for him, the logic of the signifier supersedes empathy with labor’s spatial particularity and replaces it with the totality of the abstract and with productive antagonisms. Žižek’s formulation of productive antagonisms leads him to oppose the categories of “worker” to “immigrant” and Marxist class antagonism to multicultural tolerance. While the first category stems from universal relations anchored in the abstract logic of capital and offers the possibility of productive conflict, the second comes out of recycling the premodern substance of tradition and ethnicity into multicultural identities. The latter, in Žižek’s view, preempts the revolutionary potential within class society by repressing class conflict. He also advocates multi-ethnic hate, rational and politically organized hate, in the place of multicultural tolerance, in order to reaffirm class antagonism: “The way to fight

ethnic *hatred* effectively is not through its immediate counterpart, ethnic *tolerance*; on the contrary, what we need is *even more hatred*, but proper *political* hatred: hatred directed at the common political enemy.⁴¹ He inveighs against regression into the sensibilities of national taste, therapy, and otherness, because they are all anodynes that displace the productive antagonism of class struggle basic to Marxism. National taste, therapy, and otherness are also, of course, prominent themes in Kristeva's work, and in one of the few instances where he actually mentions her, Žižek warns, "There is a danger that issues of economic exploitation are converted into problems of cultural tolerance. And then you have only to make one step further, that of Julia Kristeva in her essay 'Etrangers à nous memes,' and say we cannot tolerate others because we cannot tolerate otherness in ourselves. Here we have pure pseudo-psychoanalytic cultural reductionism."⁴² In considering the question of cultural hybridity, Žižek rejects Kristevan considerations of "national taste, therapy, and otherness" as well as consubstantial geography: "Criticism of the possible ideological functioning of the notion hybridity should in no way advocate the return to substantial identities—the point is precisely to assert *hybridity as the site of the Universal*."⁴³

In a recent book, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek formulates a concept of the "radical intellectual." Referencing Michel Foucault's support of the Iranian Revolution and Martin Heidegger's of the Third Reich, Žižek articulates intellectual labor as epitomized by Robespierre and the Jacobins, arguing that the intellectual, by taking a personal stand against political positivism, creates a psychology of collective effervescence out of a radical split between the universal and the particular. The inherent tragedy of the intellectual is the fact that terror is the means of achieving the radical split. Žižek then goes on to construct a psychology of the radical intellectual out of Hegel's philosophy of the negative. This radical intellectual should not be immersed in a life of democratic tolerance but, fully committed to negation, should become as intimate with death as the Zen master who begins the day as if already dead.⁴⁴ To clarify this intellectual ideal, Žižek invokes Robespierre's politics of truth: "Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue. It is less a special principle than a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most pressing needs."⁴⁵ The radical intellectual, taking hold of state power in order to act according to the transcendent principle of truth, becomes the embodiment of an abstract principle. Terror assures that the private reality of virtue and the universality of the citizen become

the objective reality of the Hegelian state. Terror is inherently philosophical in that it prevents actualization of the particular, forcibly separating identity from consubstantial tradition and space. Žižek writes: "This logic was brought to its extreme in the Jacobin Terror, where every individual was at least potentially excluded: every individual is branded by some 'pathological' stain (of corruption, egotism, etc.) and, as such, does not fit the notion of Man, so that guilt ultimately pertains to individual existence as such."⁴⁶ Thus, terror, like a father figure, causes the split between the fullness of maternal substance (manual labor) and the ideal of universal abstraction (mental labor).

Gramsci also regarded Jacobins as radical intellectuals, but his view differs markedly from Žižek's. Žižek, in order to separate the thinking subject from its consubstantiated tie with local tradition, anchors political terror to the empty signifier and the psychology of negation as a contingency for new history. To Gramsci, Jacobin terror is not an empty force but signifies the labor of organic intellectuals who deploy terror strategically to create a new social class. Robespierre's terror was governed by historicity and territoriality as much as by abstract universality and revolutionary psychology. Gramsci warned against a "tendentious and fundamentally anti-historical" view of Jacobins as "abstract dreamers" and represented them as organic intellectuals—"the thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class . . . directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong" (*Prison*, 3). Lacking political support from a strong bourgeoisie, Gramsci points out, Robespierre was forced into a strategy of engaging the rural subaltern in order to produce a new social class. Early in the Revolution, the Jacobins held power, but Paris itself was controlled by the Girondists, a moderate political group promoting federalism rather than the centralization of state power. Going from region to region to suppress rural uprisings, Jacobin forces brutally crushed an insurrection by an alliance of peasants and royalists in the Vendée. After the final defeat of the rebellion at Savenay, republican General François Joseph Westermann wrote to the Committee of Public Safety: "There is no more Vendée. It died with its wives and its children by our free sabres. I have just buried it in the woods and the swamps of Savenay. . . . Mercy is not a revolutionary sentiment."⁴⁷

When provincial troops joined the revolutionaries on their return to Paris, the Jacobins won control of the city, which allowed them to initiate internal terror. "But this," Gramsci emphasizes, "only happened after the

whole territory had been won for the revolution" (*Prison*, 81). To Gramsci, the Jacobins' deployment of political terror was neither purely psychological nor philosophical, but rather represented a clear calculus of territoriality and the force of the subaltern in managing the balance between terror and consent and was always historically informed (*ibid.*, 79). In contrast, Žižek's characterization of Jacobin terror as judicial and political—a "constitutive crime" like the killing of the primal father, rather than the organic process of the historical production of a social class—actually works to conceal the subjugation of the subaltern by the universal.⁴⁸

Both Kristeva and Žižek abandoned their Marxist roots for the politics of desire for self-signification. Žižek has since resumed espousal of a rhetorical Leninist Marxism, and his exegesis of the "radical intellectual" and Jacobin terror shows the uneasy alliance between Leninism and Lacanian psychoanalysis that characterizes much of his work. Furthermore, his view of Lenin is as overintellectualized and ahistorical as his view of Robespierre. Deployment of the "agrarian question" figured prominently in the success of the revolutionary strategies of both Lenin and Robespierre. By representing to the rural peasantry that their interests as a class lay on the side of the republic and the worker's state, both successfully mobilized the rural peasantry as a revolutionary political force to consolidate power. Not only did Gramsci follow the same strategy, but he based his theory of the "organic intellectual" on this organically mediated alliance between the subaltern and the universal principles. As Ernesto Laclau trenchantly observes, Žižek simply ignores the intellectual history of Marxism: "All Žižek's Marxist concepts, examples and discussions come either from the texts of Marx himself or from the Russian Revolution. There is no reference to Gramsci, virtually none to Trotsky, and as far as I know not a single reference to Austro-Marxism."⁴⁹ Laclau observes further, "The notion of class is brought into Žižek's analysis as a sort of *deus ex machina* to play the role of the good guy against the multicultural devils."⁵⁰ We may add to Laclau's observation that when class analysis really mattered—at the time when the disintegration of Yugoslavia could have been channeled in a direction other than nationalism—it was conspicuously absent from Žižek's discourse.

Kristeva's Marxist past has also not been completely exorcised by her embrace of psychoanalysis, though she declares herself "an exile from socialism and Marxist rationality."⁵¹ "Working class" for her, is not just an economic concept but the equivalent of her repressed Bulgarian identity, of political machinery that "excludes the specific histories of speech, dreams

and *jouissance*.”⁵² Her whole identity is at stake when confronting Marxist language: “The intellectual, who is the instrument of this discursive rationality, is the first to feel the effects of its break-up: his own identity is called into question, his dissidence becomes more radical.”⁵³ Here Kristeva’s disingenuous formulation of “dissidence” reveals her denial of class exploitation for the sake of the radical gesture of repressing her own past, which opens her to the empty space of signification. The same geopolitical logic explains why Žižek replaced the empirical history of Yugoslav class *solidarity* with the *enjoyment* of nation.

Central to the intellectual work of both Kristeva and Žižek is the abstract universality of the psychoanalytic subject and radical emptying. This opposes the empirical history of human solidarity formalized in the Marxist philosophy of class struggle and actualized in Gramsci’s own praxis as a founder and leader of the Italian Communist Party and in his concept of revolution as a “human, active, political phenomenon.”⁵⁴ Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis challenged not only Cartesian subjectivity as pure *cogito* but also the Cartesian elevation of abstraction over the senses. In place of the self as abstraction, Gramsci offers the intersubjectivity of histories reflected in the internal plurality of a subject who speaks from a specific historical and geographic location as the nodal point of an “inventory of traces.”⁵⁵ Gramsci was also able to conceptualize the intimate, historical, and geographical intersections of his own life as a heuristic source of new alliances and resistances, and his emphasis on this “intersubjectivity of histories” not only casts into relief Kristeva’s and Žižek’s reliance on the universal scheme of the Lacanian split subject but also points to his own origins in Sardinia.

There are parallels between the history of Sardinia and that of the Balkans. The cultures of both were formed through centuries of foreign domination. Alastair Davidson’s argument that “Every Sardinian was the dialectical product of the interaction between his personality and imperialism and its products” holds true for the people of the Balkans as well.⁵⁶ The chief difference, of course—and an important one—is that the Balkans were not culturally or ethnically homogeneous and the small nation-states that developed there along ethnic and religious lines reproduced imperial modalities in their ways of thinking about themselves and their interactions with one another.

According to Davidson, “There was one ‘real’ Gramsci, whose growth away from a ‘threefold and fourfold Sard provincial’ was always a building

upon the past in such a fashion that successive influences and developments in his views could only be understood in terms of earlier ones and his life itself, only in terms of *his* history.”⁵⁷ Gramsci’s incorporation of his origins in this marginalized, poor region of Italy into his intellectual and political praxis presents a stark contrast with Kristeva’s and Žižek’s psychoanalytically mediated decoupling of their intellectual production from their own geopolitical origins in the Balkans. Kristeva’s “cosmopolitanism” depends on her abjection of her Bulgarian origins and Žižek’s universalism on replacing consubstantial territoriality with the empty signifier. Their local histories are expressed through disidentification and self-Orientalization as a constitutive gesture of subaltern intellectual labor. In the Balkans, psychoanalysis has met its uncanny geography. Instead of exploring geopolitical ambiguity for the sake of the intellectuality of human solidarity, Kristeva and Žižek paradoxically reproduce in their discourse the very conditions they seek to escape.

Notes

Many thanks to Rosemary Miller for her help on this essay.

- 1 Tomislav Z. Longinović, “Vampires Like Us: Gothic Imaginary and ‘The Serbs,’” in *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, ed. Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 39–55.
- 2 See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 3 Jodi Dean, *Žižek’s Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xiv.
- 4 Samir Dayal, introduction to *Crisis of the European Subject*, by Julia Kristeva, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2000), 41.
- 5 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 466.
- 6 Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10.2 (1986): 5–27.
- 7 Robin Okey, *Eastern Europe, 1740–1985: Feudalism to Communism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
- 8 Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 53. See also Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).
- 9 Milica Bakić-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review* 54.4 (1995): 920–31, 920.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 922.
- 11 Julia Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 77.
- 12 Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 466.
- 13 Lacan’s “father-enjoyment” (*père-jouissance*), quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), 85 n28; and Julia Kristeva,

- Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 12.
- 14 Quoted in Danielle Marx-Scouras, *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel: Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 195.
- 15 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.
- 16 Kristeva, *Crisis of the European Subject*, 176.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 182.
- 18 Tonči Kuzmanić, *Hate-Speech in Slovenia: Slovenian Racism, Sexism, and Chauvinism* (Ljubljana: Open Society Institute–Slovenia, 1999).
- 19 Jason Boynton, “Saying the Unsayable: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek,” *Philosopher’s Magazine* 25.1 (2004): 37.
- 20 Sigmund Freud, letter to Edoardo Weiss, May 28, 1922, quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1996), 8.
- 21 Sigmund Freud, “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 10, *Two Case Histories: “Little Hans” and the “Rat Man”*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), 215; and Sigmund Freud, “Dreams in Folklore,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, *The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), 187–203.
- 22 Žižek, *For They Know*, 55n.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 24 Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 26 Julia Kristeva, “Thinking in Dark Times,” *Profession 1* (2006): 13–21.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 29 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 9; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *Prison*.
- 30 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 25; *Prison*, 324.
- 31 Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, trans. Brian O’Keeffe (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002), 79; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *Revolt*.
- 32 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 17.
- 33 Celia Brickman, *Aboriginal Populations in the Mind: Race and Primitivity in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 5.
- 34 Julia Kristeva, “La Langue, la Nation, les Femmes” (address at University of Sofia, May 2002), 8–9.
- 35 Eli Zaretsky, “Narcissism, Personal Life, and Identity: The Place of the 1960s in the History of Psychoanalysis,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society* 13 (2008): 94–104, 95.
- 36 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).
- 37 Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud’s French Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 49.

- 38 Robert S. Boynton, "Enjoy Your Žižek: A Profile of Slavoj Žižek," *Lingua Franca* 8.7 (October 1998): 46; available at www.robertboynton.com/articleDisplay.php?article_id=43 (accessed September 6, 2008).
- 39 Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 7.
- 40 For a perceptive account of Europe's discursive divisions during the cold war, see Timothy Brennan, "The Barbaric Left," in *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 41–64.
- 41 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 11.
- 42 Sabine Reul and Thomas Deichmann, "The One Measure of True Love Is: You Can Insult the Other" (interview with Slavoj Žižek at the Frankfurt Book Fair, October 2001); available at <http://slash.autonomedia.org/node/563> (accessed September 6, 2008).
- 43 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 225.
- 44 Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 170.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 46 Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 157–58.
- 47 François Joseph Westermann quoted in Reynald Secher, *A French Genocide: The Vendée*, trans. George Holoch (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 110.
- 48 At the time he was politically active in the 1990s, Žižek, in the name of "pragmatic politics" and Leninist discipline, tacitly condoned human rights abuses by the state while his party was in power, including the secret and illegal erasure of the files of more than eighteen thousand resident immigrants from the former Yugoslavia. According to Slovene human rights activists Jasminka Dedić, Vlasta Jalušič, and Jelka Zorn, this silence of the public intellectuals constitutes a consent to the hegemony of Slovene nationalism ("organized innocence"). Jasminka Dedić, Vlasta Jalušič, and Jelka Zorn, *The Erased: Organized Innocence and the Politics of Exclusion* (Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2003). To apply Žižek's own version of "radical intellectualism," state violence against immigrants was employed in the service of Slovene nationalism—not to uphold the law—allowing the terror to fall into primitive jouissance.
- 49 Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 204.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 51 Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 299.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 294.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 295.
- 54 Carl Boggs, *The Two Revolutions: Antonio Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 278.
- 55 Said, *Orientalism*, 25; *Prison*, 324.
- 56 Alastair Davidson, *Antonio Gramsci: Towards an Intellectual Biography* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977), 1.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 270.