

Boris Buden and Darko Suvin

ONLY INTELLIGENT PLANNING WILL SAVE US (2017, 2,850 words + 1 illo)

Boris Buden: Universalism is not an innocent concept. In *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism*, published shortly after the fall of the historical “communism,” Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, former Marxist philosophers and disciples of Georg Lukács, accuse Marx and his followers of turning the Hegelian concept of universalism into a philosophy of praxis, a “predictive and action-orienting device” applied to change the world. This is what then led to Gulag and all the horror of the so-called Communist totalitarianism – the burden of guilt that seems to last on anyone who dares to still claim a universalist stance today. Still, you have you never abandoned universalism?

Darko Suvin: I’m not too fond of the term “universalism,” but accept it as a stenographic abbreviation that respects the fact capitalism has, with its attendant technology, today put ALL our lives – that is, the universal existence of homo sapiens and probably of the vertebrates too – into danger and doubt. I don’t want to discuss Fehér and Heller, understandably shell-shocked by the particularly repulsive Hungarian Stalinist terror up to 1956 and then by the ensuing stasis of “gulash communism.” However, as Brecht remarks, the stone does not excuse the fallen, and Heller in particular is simply a full-scale renegade fleeing to post-modernist neo-liberalism.

Any intelligent – that is, radical – Left necessarily responds to total capitalism and must therefore itself totalise and globalise. It must also historicise: as different from capitalism, living only for the next profit, that exists imaginatively in the immediate future -- from one day to one year but no longer. The Left, if it is to exist, must imaginatively exist in the wrongs of the past (as Benjamin stressed) and in all the futures – immediate, medium, and long duration – and then apply all of these to a much richer human present. For just one example, the overwhelming evidence (see only Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*) is that the capitalist-induced climate catastrophe is raising the sea levels and will relatively soon cause tens of millions of new “climatic refugees” and a rebuilding of all the ports of the world. This will of course result in new dictatorial powers to the exploiters, covert or quite overt. Therefore, only neo-liberal murderers of millions can afford not to universalise; and they can afford this because they make the 99% of us pay it.

BB: But have they also succeeded in making universalism for us 99% definitely useless?

DS: Their anti-universalist arguments are generally feeble and disingenuous, for universal rule could theoretically be of any kind. It could be Stalinist, though this was evidently not in the cards. It could be the warfare-oriented dictatorship of financial capitalism plus a few Western armies, as today; this could, in the coming dire emergencies, easily evolve into a neo-fascist rule, which a fraction of the present rulers has already prepared as a back-up. There could also be, in theory and in a truly libertarian communist-oriented practice, a universal direct plus associative democracy. It all depends on us, on how we use universalism: as a strategic horizon NOT denying today for tomorrow nor the local for the global but defending here and now better because of the interaction of the general with the particular.

All such strategies exist, as a first sketch, in people such as Brecht, Benjamin, Gramsci or Gayatri Spivak, of whom the shell-shocked do not speak. They speak of a self-constructed strawman.

BB: Your mentioning the necessity to historicise evokes today, in our allegedly post-historical age, the famous demand by Fredric Jameson: "Always historicise!". Is this what you wanted to achieve with your recently published book *Splendour, Misery, and Potentialities: An X-ray of Socialist Yugoslavia*, Brill, 2016, and now in paperback Harvester, 2017 – historicizing, not as saving past from oblivion but as creation of a genuine historical experience, one that however particular and concrete can still be totalized and globalized for the sake of future?

DS: Yes, the book in that sense follows Jameson's warning, and he even kindly supplied a very pithy introduction to it. True, I officially trained in literature and theatre -- and have from my philological training retained, I trust, an eye for shapes and ear for meanings of words or artefacts. However, I've also had a lifelong fascination with questions usually posed by philosophy, such as "what does this mean" or "what values are here present or absent", all of them inextricably wedded with political economics as our Destiny. And I was born and bred in Yugoslavia, living my childhood under the fascists and my youth as a Titoist activist. I could not understand how come what had started so well, as a genuine plebeian and liberatory revolution, had finished in the worst possible way, as misery, hatred, and fratricide, leading to a full counter-revolution. So I wrote a book on this subject because I would have liked to read one and there wasn't any. And then I realised that in fact nobody inside ex-Yugoslavia was supposed to write about it, it was discouraged. Hypocritically, it was not explicitly forbidden; but nobody would finance it, nor would you make a scholarly career if you insisted.

BB: During the war in the 1990s this oblivion took even more oppressive forms targeting not only "a better past" but also the utopian dimension of future, which was a constitutive element of the Yugoslavia socialist modernity.

DS: Oblivion is too normal a term for what was and still is happening in "post-communism," in that famous "transition" to primordial predatory or *Raub*-capitalism without a human face in the whole of the ex-Soviet bloc plus Yugoslavia. The counter-revolutions may have in some cases (not in most of ex-Yugoslavia) been velvet ones, they always had an iron fist compounded of military violence and financial steering toward scarcity and dependence on private funding: in brief, a violence dependent on tanks and banks.

This violence, the suppression of alternatives and indeed of memory of what was good in SFR Yugoslavia, seems to be twofold, implicit or latent and explicit or manifest. I don't know which is worse. I have mentioned the implicit (withholding of funds for unwelcome themes). It could be enlarged to deal with, for example, the Catholic Church's steady and successful drive to take over all the key posts in Croatian higher education. As to the manifest violence, we all know about the open killing of people in the Yugoslav Secession Wars but few know that, for example in Croatia which is whence both of us come from and know most about, hundreds of socialist commemorative monuments to the Liberation War 1941-45 were blown up *manu militari* by Tudjman, a couple of thousands if you include also the commemorative plaques – all of this without any law or public debate. This included some great works of modernist art and architecture. Some of the best of those monuments (by the great Vojin Bakić, for example – see below) looked like futuristic spaceships taking off, probably towards the sun of freedom

and openness. This symbolic example must be read as deep hatred of the new clerico-fascist rulers of anything speaking of a radically different future.



Vojin Bakić, *Monument to the Victory of Revolution by the People of Slavonia*
(destroyed)

The implicit and explicit violence fuse in the burning of books. All public libraries had to burn not only all Cyrillic-printed books but also many in the approved Latin script but with an ideologically suspect horizon. This is quite equivalent to the Nazi 1933 burning of books. Yet Croatia was then admitted to the European Union as a virtuous member...

Writing my book, I found out that the heartpiece of S.F.R. Yugoslavia was an attempt at workers' control over production and similar ways of organising in culture. It was a half-hearted attempt and not a full control. Still, it produced remarkable enthusiasm and economic results up to about the mid-1960s, and it was certainly in all regards better for the great majority of working people than what they have today. Thence all the suppressions and damnations of memory!

BB: In his famous essay on freedom of press, young Marx compared freedom to the solar system: each of its worlds, while turning on its own axis, revolves only around the central sun of freedom (*die Zentralsonne der Freiheit*). As a young Marxist in what was then Tito's Yugoslavia you turned your

intellectual interests towards the Universe – by discovering and exploring the imaginary worlds of science fiction. Was it again the central sun of freedom that you were searching for there?

DS: Of course it was: freedom and its twin, knowledge, understanding, or cognition. As Giordano Bruno told us (and was burned for it), innumerable worlds exist and are possible. Somebody in the 1950s optimistically called SF “a general staff of mankind, planning on paper its future battles”. Maybe the metaphor is too military, but only intelligent planning can save us all. We must understand not only the most disparate potentialities of people – or intelligent species, SF calls them psychozoa, which I rather like – living together that slumber in our bosoms, but also, most important, the price each of it demands in human lesions and sufferings. Thus all good SF unavoidably fuses the sweet hope of utopia (the good place) with the bitter but salvific draught of dystopia (the bad place, so near to the tendencies we see every day): in the past Wells, Zamyatin or Stapledon, in the Golden Age 1940-74 from the generation of Heinlein, Simak, and so on to that of Le Guin and the Strugatskys, and even today, in writers such as K.S. Robinson.

BB: We have already mentioned Fred Jameson. In his *Archeologies of the Future* he praises you not only for generically linking utopia with SF, meaning your definition of utopia as a “socio-political sub-genre of Science Fiction”, but even more importantly, for having conjoined the SF with the utopian critical tradition by means of the Russian Formalists’ notion of *ostranenie* or Brecht’s *V-effect*. You, however, have complemented these critical notions with a cognitive meaning (“cognitive estrangement”), which reasserts the realistic implications of literary texts. But today the interest for SF, for literal and social critique, for utopia or even for the future seems to have completely evaporated from our brave neoliberal world governed solely by the TINA-principle. As though Kant’s Enlightenment slogan of “The starry sky above me and the moral law within me” has been fully replaced by the horror vision of a world of global warming and neoliberal self-destruction, say, “The burning sun above me and the predatory greed within me”. Do you feel like being among the last ones who still remember future?

DS: If SF functioning as a general staff for humanity is too optimistic today, at least it could be an early warning system. For, the estrangement (*ostranenie* or *V-effect*) is in SF based on a critical distance from the norms under which we live, mobilising an imagination of otherness. Thus, there are, as you say, realistic implications of SF texts or movies at their best (though movies are almost all hopelessly falsified by Hollywood). There are two interlocking components here: first the reader must perceive a believable alternate world, esthetically coherent, pleasurable, and interesting (whether dark or bright). But second, her understanding necessarily compares it to the world in which she is: through the esthetics or the narrative, we cannot but think of real science, of real politics, and of their utopian alternatives. Of course, post-modern capitalists have no use for it, and drown it in a masochistic wave of safe horrors, zombies, vampires, and werewolves. As you say, it is as if Kant’s old slogan has been replaced by its dystopian antithesis, the capitalist predatory greed within us. This results in a pitch darkness into which we are descending; you can even literally see it in the lighting of all the horror and supposedly SF movies, in the darkness, say, of *The Game of Thrones*. We live in the Anti-Enlightenment. Light has been degraded by military co-optation. Beginning with the light of explosions of killer drones and bombs, and ending with the atomic flash “brighter than a thousand suns” -- which we might well see again in North Korea or wherever.

BB: You remember Robert A. Heinlein’s *Universe*, the first part of the SF classic *The Orphans of the Sky*. It is a story of the so-called generation ship Vanguard that is cruising without guidance through the

Universe. Long ago a mutiny killed most of the crew and their descendants have forgotten the purpose and nature of the ship. They have even regressed into an irrational, pre-technological culture dominated by superstition, and now mistake their ship for the whole universe. The picture weirdly resembles today's identitarian communities; moreover, whole normative identity blocks (like the West) have forgotten their modernist, universalist pasts and adhere now to more or less fundamentalist religious beliefs: they mistake what they think are their own unique cultures for the universe itself. Imagine now we both meet as passengers on that ship and I, like Heinlein's hero Hoyland in the novel, similarly lost in space and time, ask you "Hey! Shipmate! Where are we?"

DS: Indeed. Our friends Horvat and Štiks say in their book's title we are "in the desert of post-socialism". Fichte might say we are in a perfectly sinful anti-utopia that actively suppresses historical memory and truth. Our shipmates believe they are forsaking the partially mythologised socialism -- that had at least a glorious emancipatory past in almost all Marx and most Lenin -- for rock-bottom reality. However, what they live in (and force us all to live in) is a totally mythologised, most violent, and most vengeful neo-capitalism, talking of democracy not only amid obvious frauds such as the US electoral system determined by money and the shameless European Union lack of any effective election, but also -- more important -- amid the immiseration of the solid majority and the aided and abetted rise of neo-Nazism. We are in 1930 again but without any organised Left -- whatever were its drawbacks, surely present too -- to fight against this rise. So we might well arrive to Fascism 2.0 (rebooted -- the enemies being the migrants and the Left, instead of Jews and communists)

BB: It looks like those who have consciously abstained from historicising are doomed to repeat the horrors of their past. Is the fear of grand narratives still so strong?

DS: Doomed are those who have abandoned courage to face the horrors of their present and allowed fear to command their minds. But good old Kant knew it already -- the problem is not our inability to think but the lack of courage to do so: "Dare to know!" said he. Back then, as today, one had to dare. So, what was the essence of history in the last 60 years? Using the slogans of free trade, civil society, and globalisation, the rich organized bundles of radical interventions by major States and the roof organizations of international capitalism to make themselves vastly richer, while multiplying the poor in their nations, eviscerating the middle class prosperity based on stable employment, and upping the income gap between rich and poor countries from 10:1 to 90:1. Facing the few thousand billionaires, today possibly 3,000 million people struggle today to survive, failing fast, while more than half of them live in the most abject poverty, dying more or less quickly of hunger and attendant diseases; the hundred million dead and several hundred million other casualties of warfare in the 20th Century seem puny in comparison (though their terror and suffering is not). It has been calculated that a 1% increase in US unemployment correlates with 37,000 deaths and an increase of 4,000 inmates of mental hospitals, but the hidden psychic toll is surely greater. A large mass of chronically poor was thus created, politically first neutralized and then turned towards neo-fascism by creating fear of even poorer immigrants. The purpose of capitalist economy, profit, has led to mass dying and unhappiness. For billions of people it means shorter and more painful lives, for everybody, except maybe the upper two or three percent in the world, a liberation theologian (Hinkelammert) tells us it means disabling stress, gnawing want, and often utter despair.

It may well be that our hope is in the short term realistically a hope without hope, *eine hoffnungslose Hoffnung* is the elegant German way of putting it (Kafka had some interesting things to say about this).

The black difference to Heinlein's story is that this is compatible – as the Nazis proved once and for all – with the highest development of capitalist science and technology, thus multiplying the myth-masters' power by giga or tera-factors, as they proudly say in bomb lore.

BB: Is all then lost?

DS: I think Mrs. Thatcher stole the TINA slogan from the Left, very cleverly. But we can again say: socialism or barbarism, communist utopia or crash of civilisation -- TINA!

And nothing is ever finally lost -- just look again at reborn Nazism. It depends on how people organise to change it for the better. But we better do it soon. Centrally: using estrangement and cognition. Also much indignation, solidarity, and persistence.