

Comradely Greetings: The Prison Letters of Nadya and Slavoj

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Abstract: Žižek and Tolokonnikova's exchange letters provides the reader with the suggestive image and evocative words of two intellectuals speaking from very different contexts. This article discusses the relevance of this volume in the context of localized global capitalism and an equally localized global struggle against it.

Keywords: Slavoj Žižek, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Pussy Riot, Global Capitalism, intellectuals, class

In a well-known essay with the provocative title of "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes (1988) argued that the reader should separate a given literary work from its creator. Such discernment would allegedly liberate the text from the involuntary but still effective tyranny exerted by the writer's political views, social contests, and personal attributes. However, the genre of epistolary correspondence may be appreciated for the opposite reason, because instead of abstracting the author from his/her history, it tends to situate authors in the intersection between biographic notes and contextual history. From this point of view, and in contrast to Barthes' argument, this particular form could be considered as an interesting literary transposition of the principle stating that people make history but not under the condition of their own making.

In this specific case, *Comradely Greetings* invites the reader to look at the imperfect—and for this reason probably more credible—"history making" of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Slavoj Žižek. The former is an artist, member of the Pussy Riot punk group, and a political activist who was arrested and convicted in Russia for "hooliganism" on August 2012. The latter is a renowned philosopher, prolific writer, who tours around the world as a quasi rock star of critical theory.

Certainly Tolokonnikova's condition of imprisonment, Žižek's sympathy for that, and the inevitable reference to the "prison letters" *topos* do not make their arguments any stronger, any clearer, or any less problematic. In fact, their words acquire an ambivalent value: on the one hand, they gain a special force as they humanize high theory, especially when instead of sublimating into abstractions, their theoretical elaboration is anchored to their lived experience; on the other, they attain the special privilege to be evaluated for their evocative power while not being completely accountable from the argumentative side.

Accordingly, this work cannot be easily judged as a coherent essay but rather as a self-referential expression of the distance and closeness of the two authors' positionality, which emerges in intentional as well as unintentional ways. Žižek for instance recognizes a potential tension implied by it: "I feel a certain sense of guilt in writing these lines: who am I to explode in such a narcissistic theoretical outburst when you, concrete individual are exposed to very real empirical deprivations" (51). Conversely, Tolokonnikova invites the philosopher to not take into account her imprisonment and suggests that the comradeship between the two is based on reciprocally felt intellectual and moral affinity, a shared critical vision of the world.

However, I think it is actually in that fissure that most productive energy comes from, in the distance between their conditions. It is such a differential that propels the discussion of topics such as the nature of current capitalism, the distinctive conditions of freedom and unfreedom within it, and the ways such a context can be challenged without ending up being incorporated. In this sense, I would like here to focus on what I think are some of the most

salient themes: the tension between universalization and localization of critical theory, and the aspect of “organicity” of the intellectual/activist in current circumstances, particularly in relation to the question whether the he/she needs to build on universals or specific social groups values.

First of all, reflecting on the mode of struggle adopted by Pussy Riot, the two authors interrogate whether current critical perspectives on advance capitalism in the West can provide an adequate interpretation for geopolitical areas such as Russia (or China), and in turn, an adequate understanding of what can be done to oppose it. Tolokonnikova affirms that like Dionysius, the Pussy Riot’s political mission is to bring chaos into the apparent constituted order established by the capitalist system in Russia. Žižek replicates that Dionysian subversion is ineffective in such a phase of capitalism development. That is, because it has already incorporated insurrectional and rebellious behaviour as an effective asset of valorization, like in the case of the commercialization of cultural commodities, which uses subversion as a marketing strategy as well as to semiotically display the alleged uniqueness of their use value.

Responding to that, Tolokonnikova reminds Žižek that the way capitalism operates in Russia cannot be compared to one in the West and therefore cannot be antagonized in the same way. This is in my view one example in which the already mentioned distance of circumstances of the two authors helps exploring an important theme. In fact, *Comradely Greetings* could be taken as an empirical engagement with the complexity of the global productive process and of the invisibility of some its basic processes.

Such a convolution produces different facets of capitalism such as the erratic, creative aspects of “informational” capitalism, with its paradoxical ideological hybridization, as well as the more violent side of capitalism operating in places like Russia, in which civil rights of workers and citizens are, to say the least, inconsistently defended. Indeed, Tolokonnikova’s fate and the repression against groups such as the Pussy Riot represent the evidence how distant the two worlds can sometimes be and how different the repercussions to try to make such a reality visible (53): “erratic behavior is not tolerated from workers here; homogeneity and stagnation rule” Tolokonnikova observes.

Accordingly, behind a knowledge driven kind of work (McKercher and Mosco 2006), the allegedly “immaterial” nature of labour (Lazzarato 1996) and our computer screens there is an overwhelmingly concrete and material world that, citing Tolokonnikova, could be defined as a “special economic zone” (51), in which, like in Tolokonnikova’s penal colony, workers in exploitative conditions must mine the raw material and manufacture the goods needed to build the infrastructure that sustain informational capitalism. Tolokonnikova makes the same point talking about advertising and the gap between the two facets of capitalism is symbolically annihilated:

Modern capitalism has a deep interests in seeing that you and I believe that the system runs completely on principles of free creativity, limitless growth and diversity and that the flip side—millions of people enslaves by all powerful (and take it form me) fantastically stable standards of production, remains invisible. We an interest in exposing this deception, which is why I insist on unmasking the static, centralized hierarchic basis on what the advertising later will sanctify as a product of unbridled creativity alone (54)

The two authors’ important reminder of the need to always historicize how capitalism develops in different contexts leads to the other theme that I find particularly significant in their exchange: given the important acknowledgment that the very conditions that allow global capital to function as such entail the existence of an highly localized dimension, can those differences be articulated in a way to provide an organic vision of the struggle against it? Alternatively, are those differences marked enough to provide considerably distant or even competing meanings of injustice, oppression, and liberation? On the one hand, Žižek remarks that

it's absolutely crucial to insist on the universality of our struggle, the moment we forget that Pussy Riot and Wikileaks are moments of the same global struggle, everything is lost, we have sold our soul to the devil (99).

On the other, the two authors' discussion of the recent wave of demonstrations in Ukraine rejecting the country's historical closeness to Russia and demanding a firmer integration with the European Union seems also to suggest a more complex scenario. In regards to that, Tolokonnikova maintains that, "It is impossible not to sympathize with the passionarity of the Ukrainians involved in Euromaidan (91). She observes how the importance of their struggle cannot be reduced to false consciousness or Fascist consciousness, but has to be contextualized in a fight for civil and social rights and better material conditions. Žižek agrees and responds, "anti imperialist Leftist reacted to new about the massive protests their usual racist patronizing the poor Ukrainians" (99).

However, considering the historically rooted social and cultural divisions between the Western and Eastern part of Ukraine the other significant portion of Ukrainians willing to re-join Russia cannot be dismissed either. In the end, the overall argument of a population moved by material interest rather than ideology could apply in the case as of Eastern Ukraine as well: the frustrations with the wild liberalization of the economy dictated by Western neoliberalism ended up creating an impoverished and plutocratic kind of society. Thus, as per the first theme, recognizing the need to contextualize different forms of capitalist oppression and different forms of struggle, what are the criteria to evaluate whether the so-called Euro-maidan can be considered as regressive or a progressive force? Is Kiev's heavy artillery bombarding the Donetsk civil population part of the universal struggle Žižek was talking about in his letter?

Tolokonnikova and Žižek's discussion of the situation in Ukraine exemplifies the question whether an intellectual can really be organic to a universal struggle under the current historical conditions. Is that really desirable? Wouldn't he/she resemble what Gramsci defines as the traditional intellectual, who lives under the illusion of being able to operate outside of her or his historical context? In the end, this also revolves around the question of whether we can still envision class politics, which is, I think, a helpful perspective that lacks in this thought exchange.

Class still matters when it comes to envision political activism in the current complex scenario (Fuchs 2010; Wright 1997). That is because while the *ethos* that propels radical politics may reach a level of universality, which boils down to the primordial principle of moral philosophy—the goal of pursuing human happiness—the social organization of labour in a capitalist system tends to fragment that objective. In fact, in a material environment defined by scarcity, social groups emerge in the process of production and redistribution of wealth, and parallel to them, organic intellectual elaborations are formed. From such a perspective, the universality of struggle is not necessarily rejected but rather more dynamically understood at the level of dialectical confrontation between classes and the possibility, in every given époque, to find a superior synthesis out of it.

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