

Philosophy, the Humanities, and Social Criticism in Slovenia¹

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In the three decades since Slovenia became an independent state and subsequently a member of the European Union, its political, economic, social, legal, cultural, educational, scientific and media domains have undergone an intensive restructuring that has been accompanied by numerous conflicts of interest emanating from various important centers of power within the society. This has had a profound effect on the shape of public intellectual debate, which ought not to be taking place in service to those centers of power but should rather be bound to make sense of social dynamics in this age following the “end of ideology.” What now remains relevant in the way of “ideas,” “spirit,” “form,” “freedom,” “justice,” “meaning,” and the express *inter-esse* of human existence and coexistence are undoubtedly concepts that have marked both the points of departure and the horizons of that debate.

In order to understand the situation of philosophy, the broader humanities, and the social sciences of the past thirty years in Slovenia, we must first touch at least on the outlines of the period from 1945 to 1990, a period that saw the rise of socialist self-management directed by a Communist Party that used every available means to maintain its power. Even so, those forty-five years, felt in many respects to have been an “iron age,” shaped many of the intellectual, creative, and civic initiatives, without which the political transformation and the formation of Slovene statehood around 1990 would not have been possible, at least not in a way that presumed fundamental human dignity. Adhering to directives from the party, the state’s repressive apparatus let no single free spirit escape its surveillance, to the extent it hadn’t already preemptively sidelined them. Thus Francè Veber (1890–1975), a former student of the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong at the University of Graz, who in 1920 founded the first chair of philosophy

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at the newly established University of Ljubljana and gained renown for his object theory version of phenomenology, was forced to retire in 1945 and dismissed from the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences, much like the most influential theologian and philosopher of his day Aleš Ušeničnik (1868–1952), and the lawyer and diplomat Leonid Pitamic (1885–1971), along with numerous other Catholic and secular intellectuals, a number of whom were also subjected to politically staged show trials. Veber's students fared little better under the Communist regime, including many who had taken part in the partisan resistance movement during WW II, such as, for example, Cene Logar (1913–95), who spent nine years in the Goli Otok concentration camp, which the Communist regime used after the Stalin-Tito split in 1948 to lock away other communists it deemed unreliable.

But by the end of the 1960s, we witness a response that Veber himself probably never anticipated. Dušan Pirjevec (1921–77), a professor of comparative literature at the University of Ljubljana, formerly a member of the partisan resistance movement, and a devout revolutionary during WW II, revisited the key philosophical propositions of Veber's *Estetika* (Aesthetics), his principal work first published in 1925.² Pirjevec's impetus for doing that was his interest in various Yugoslav neo-avantgarde artistic movements of the day, as well as the attempt at a critical rehabilitation of philosophy based on an exploration of the philosophical implications of Marxism that in Yugoslavia was most notably represented by the *Praxis* movement out of Zagreb. The chief spokesman for Praxis, and simultaneously its chief antagonist, the Zagreb-based philosopher Vanja Sutlić (1925–89) had developed a friendship with Pirjevec and his two closest philosopher colleagues in Slovenia, Ivan Urbančič (1930–2016) and Tine Hribar (b. 1941).

Above all in his studies of the European novel, the revolution in poetic structure, the status of Slovenes in the age of the end of the nation, and, not least of all, his critique of his own devotion to revolutionary ideology, Pirjevec had a profound influence on the formation of the intellectual and creative fields within which new canons of philosophical, humanistic, and social discourse were about to develop, as well as on the broader creative climate in Slovenia, a fact confirmed by the many published collections of articles that have been dedicated to his work and personality.

Beginning in the early 1980s, these new cultural trends began to appear within the context of a *postmodern turn*. Under the cover of postmodernism, it became possible, at least to a certain extent, to relativize, if not undercut the regime and the society's long-established ideological norms. At the same time, it became apparent that the framework of

² See Dean Komel, *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics*, s.v. "France Veber" (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

postmodern discourse on the “end of history” was too narrow to deal adequately with the historical epoch in which the ascendance of totalitarian ideologies had become possible and real. It was also questionable to what extent the postmodern register could accommodate the conflictedness of social reality and the demands for concrete individual and social freedom that had informed the earliest critical confrontations with the dogma of dialectical materialism in Slovenia the way that certain dissident figures in the culture, mustering a great deal of personal courage, had already dared to confront it. Considering that every political alternative, all the way up to the end of the 1980s, had been summarily disabled, a key requirement of any critically thinking cultural opposition was to neutralize the absolute veto power of the regime’s political elite, which at the same time reconfirmed the fundamental role to be played by culture itself. Notable in this respect are the magazines *Revija 57* (1957–58) and *Perspektive* (1960–64), both of which had united the younger generation of intellectuals, writers, artists, and other angry young men and women who were dissatisfied with the achievements of self-managing socialism in various spheres of public life, and particularly with the ways it limited both individual and societal freedom. In addition to outstanding works of literature, both magazines published socially critical and existentialist reflections that began to outline a new approach to the meaning of existence. By order of the Party, both magazines were shut down, their editors prosecuted and deprived of the right to teach at the university level as a routine preventive measure. Hardest hit of all was Jože Pučnik (1932–2003), who was accused of undermining the socialist order and sentenced to nine years in prison, after which he emigrated to West Germany. Because the Slovenian bureaucracy refused to issue transcripts confirming his university education, he first had to find work as a longshoreman in Hamburg. On returning to Slovenia at the end of the 1980s, he became politically active again and subsequently assumed the leadership of a coalition of new democratic parties that won the parliamentary election of 1991 and led Slovenia on its final steps to independence. He later also ran as a candidate for president of Slovenia, but did not win. Nevertheless, he is acclaimed as Slovenia’s Václav Havel, the political father of the country’s transformation into a democratic and sovereign state. In his 1987 book *Kultura, družba in tehnologija* (Culture, society, and technology), Pučnik provided a socio-philosophical analysis of the political, civic and cultural state of Slovenia while propounding the thesis that a democratic Slovenia could not be realized within the framework of a Yugoslav confederation, but instead urgently required the formation of its own state entity.

The first serious, if still somewhat restrained reflections on the Slovene national question had appeared long before in a special 1970 issue of the magazine *Problemi*, bearing the title “The National Question in Slovenia.”

After *Perspektive* was shut down in 1964, *Problemi*, which had first begun to appear in 1962, evolved by the end of that decade into the key forum for new social critique and avant-garde literature. Having survived numerous upheavals due to political pressures, as well as the schisms among the editorial staff that those pressures frequently caused, the magazine continues to function to this day, foremost as a forum for discussion by the philosophers grouped around Slavoj Žižek (b. 1947), the most recognized Slovene intellectual in the world of the past several decades, who began his philosophical career on the pages of *Problemi*. Alongside several prominent former contributors to *Perspektive*, throughout the 1960s and 1970s a succession of younger authors influenced by the work of Dušan Pirjevec achieved recognition in *Problemi*. Thus, two principal schools of philosophical and sociocultural thought gradually began to form in the journal, the first of which took phenomenology, hermeneutics, and especially the Heideggerian thesis of the predominance of metaphysics and the crisis of humanism as its points of departure, while the other expressly drew on contemporary French post-structuralist and psychoanalytical theory, Marxist social theory and, some time later, analytical philosophy. This was not a purely theoretical division but had distinct progeny which figured in future academic and political party alignments. Besides *Problemi*, we should also mention here the role of the series *Znamenja* (Signposts), which was issued by the Maribor publisher Obzorja beginning in 1968 under the editorship of Dušan Pirjevec, followed by Taras Kermauner (1930–2008), Dimitrij Rupel (b. 1946), and Tine Hribar and managed to produce over a hundred key works of literature, philosophy, sociology, and political science while constantly having to dodge censorship. A further important contribution came from various student magazines, such as *Tribuna*, *Časopis za kritiko znanosti, domišljijo in novo antropologijo*, *Katedra*, *Škuc: študentski kulturni center*, and *Radio Študent*, which, taking their inspiration from the widespread student unrest in Yugoslavia from 1968 to 1972, made critical discussion of social conditions possible and helped, as they continue to do, in the formation of alternative social movements and subcultures. Many intellectuals from the Catholic camp who had held a majority of the academic and cultural positions in interwar Yugoslavia but did not emigrate became targets of harassment and continual ideological surveillance by the police. The formal functioning of the Faculty of Theology, as well as any public presentations by its professors, was strictly limited until the faculty was finally reintegrated into the University of Ljubljana in 1992. The Slovene Catholic émigré press, which depicted WW II in Slovenia and the conditions of socialist Yugoslavia in critical terms, was banned outright. Published reviews and critiques of works by intellectuals of Slovene descent living in emigration, such as the work of the philosopher Milan Komar (1921–2006) became possible only in the 1990s.

After a brief period of liberalization, the Party increased its pressure on the intellectuals, artists and others who were close to Pirjevec and to Edvard Kocbek (1904–81), a poet and Catholic intellectual who had been harshly rebuffed by the Church during the interwar period for his pro-Republican stance toward the Spanish Civil War and during WW II represented the Christian Socialists as a member of the high command of the Slovene partisan army. Following World War II, Kocbek fell out of favor with the party's leadership for voicing objections to its exercise of revolutionary violence. Kocbek managed particularly to incense his former party comrades with an interview he gave to the writer and essayist Boris Pahor (1913–2022) for the Trieste magazine *Zaliv* in 1975, in which he spoke publicly for the first time about the extrajudicial massacre of thousands of members of the Slovene Home Guard forces and civilians who had fled in the final days of the war to Austria, only to be returned by the British to Yugoslavia and certain death at the hands of Tito's forces. Kocbek's testimony not only broke the thirty-year enforced silence about that war crime, but also undercut the moral authority of the Party elite. This was further reinforced by a book published in 1983 by the philosopher and sociologist Spomenka Hribar (b. 1941) entitled *Krivda in greh* (Guilt and sin), in which she cited Kocbek's revelation and demanded the party's public confession of its criminal acts, its acceptance of its moral and political responsibility for them and its willingness to engage in a process of national reconciliation. As a result of her initiative, a Monument to All Victims of War and Victims Connected with Wars in Slovenia was erected in Ljubljana in 2014. In spite of numerous attempts at national reconciliation, the fact that the culture war and political polarization inherited from the past are continuing and even deepening is undeniable. The declaration of the end of the civil war that Francè Bučar (1923–2015), the first prime minister of the newly constituted parliament, former professor of law, former dissident and—together with Peter Jambreč (b. 1940), likewise a professor of law, co-founder of Slovenia's new democratic constitution—had delivered in 1991 now definitively lost all its binding authority. Conciliatory speech was consistently being undercut by hate speech, a fact that would have been hard to foresee, given the process of dismantling the monolithic political system that had taken place in the 1980s in Slovenia. Still, by no means can we blame the bloated state of Slovenia's social polarization on Slovenia alone; instead, it should be viewed in the larger context of polarized discourse during the 2010s and 2020s within the member states of the European Union as a whole, not to mention the world at large.

Wide-ranging public discussion of the phenomenon of polarization had already begun at the time when Slovenia was preparing to join the EU, first appearing on the pages of the monthly magazine *Nova revija*, which was published from 1982 to 2010 and played a major role in the process of dismantling the monolithic political system. In addition to essays by

numerous Slovene and foreign authors who could be characterized as dissidents, during Slovenia's protracted democratic revolution *The New Review* succeeded in delivering a comprehensive survey of the social situation in both Slovenia and Yugoslavia following the death of Tito, with a decided bias in favor of democracy. The publication of the magazine's issue 57 in 1987, which presented a plan for achieving Slovenia's national sovereignty, triggered a stormy reaction throughout Yugoslavia. The journal's contributors were subjected to harsh pressure by the regime and co-editors Dimitrij Rupel and Niko Grafenauer (b. 1941) were forced to resign. *Nova revija* noticeably accelerated the push for democratization and independence while encouraging open intellectual discussions that drew on a range of individuals and groups from the ranks of academia, the Church and even certain political organizations that officially reported to the Party, who represented widely divergent views and in some cases were even hostile to each other. This defense of pluralism, advocated throughout the 1980s not only by *The New Review*, but also by the news weekly *Mladina* (Youth) and the Society of Slovene Writers, decisively strengthened civil society and led to the formation of new political parties. This process received further impetus with the creation of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in June 1989, when Janez Janša, Ivan Borštner, David Tasić, and Franci Zavrl were arrested by military police of the Yugoslav People's Army. From then on, in spite of frequent polemics and political stand-offs, the defense of a pluralistic civil society and human rights, national reconciliation and a decidedly pro-European orientation amid the complicated circumstances of Slovenia's socioeconomic transition helped sustain faith in progress toward democracy, even as that proved to be a long and at times uncertain process.

In that respect, a signal event for the Slovenian state was its entry into the European Union in 2004, along with nine other countries of the former socialist bloc—an event that not only brought about a thorough transformation of the “social subject,” but also had a decisive effect on its “cultural substance.” Defending Slovenia's cultural role in European history had previously served as a defense of the country's distinct national identity, in the absence of a shared economic and international political framework. After Slovenia joined the EU, a new phase emerged of “broadened horizons with a distinct point of view,” which then continually had to be developed.

In these new circumstances, the intellectuals who during the drive for independence of the 1980s had been either theoretically or practically involved in political events were offered the option of a “new beginning.” While some became directly involved in politics, whether of the left or the right, the majority continued their academic or public intellectual roles as before. The relaxation of institutional spaces led to the emergence of a new generation of intellectuals who had to confront the ensuing disorientation of values and the new conditions that brought it about.

It was precisely this pronounced search for firm footing from which to develop new intellectual horizons that led many of those who weren't already bound to one or the other social ideology to assume the *deconstructivist approach* to the philosophical and religious heritage, as well as to history and culture, that has come to dominate to this day. While the study of Slovene national history still occupies center stage, it has been supplemented with interdisciplinary research and European comparative studies. In this same spirit, anthropological and cultural studies have also gained considerable ground. Much the same holds for linguistic, literary, and visual studies. In sociology, the study of the construction of social reality has come to predominate, if we use the term that Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann championed.³ In political science, alongside expert and media analyses of the Slovene political landscape, topics connected to the collapse of former Yugoslavia⁴ and the political and economic situation of the Western Balkans in light of EU expansion have gained the ascendant.

While the growth of the EU, continued globalization and the advancement of digital technologies may have revolutionized intercultural communication, new challenges in the form of military conflicts, the threat of terrorism, economic crises, the spread of poverty, the largest numbers of refugees in the world since WW II, climate change and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have made the question of the future of mankind in the 21st century more acute. Although a society based on knowledge, global justice, human solidarity, and tolerance has widespread support, it is still unknown if that value system is sufficient to deal with the challenges posed by the *crisis of meaning*—the existential dysfunction which,

³ Thomas Luckmann (1927–2016), a widely recognized sociologist and phenomenological theorist, was born into a mixed German-Slovenian family and, from the mid-1980s on, frequently guest lectured in Slovenia, exerting a considerable influence on many Slovene sociologists and cultural theorists, including Mišo Jezernik (1923–97), Marko Kerševan (b. 1942), Frane Adam (b. 1948), Dimitrij Rupel, Aleš Debeljak (1961–2016), Igor Bahovec (b. 1961), Matevž Tomšič (b. 1969), and others. The development of sociology in Slovenia has also been advanced by the publication of the journals *Teorija in praksa* (1964–) and *Družboslovne razprave* (1984–).

⁴ The “erasure” from the official registers of permanent residents of several thousand residents of Slovenia whose passports identified them as “Yugoslav” or citizens of other former Yugoslav republics triggered widespread discussion and even public protests, and in 1992 and 1998 the Slovenian Constitutional Court found that their erasure had been unconstitutional. In 2013, a law mandating reparations to erased persons was adopted. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the humanitarian campaigns of the poet, editor, and university professor of literary theory Boris A. Novak (b. 1953), especially during his presidency of the Peace Committee of Pen International.

since Nietzsche's time, has been referred to as "nihilism" and, as Heidegger insisted, has gone from being a European problem to a planetary one.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, which epitomized the collapse of the communist political bloc, was not accompanied by a parallel breach in the wall of nihilism. The will to power that sustains that wall has only intensified, a fact reaffirmed by the proliferation of newly built walls and fences, not just at the borders of the European Union, but throughout the world. In a series of books from his *Zarasturovo izročilo* (Zarathustra's legacy) in 1994 to *Zgodovina nihilizma* (A history of nihilism) in 2011, the philosopher Ivan Urbančič explored this situation of empowered nihilism and the challenge it poses to contemporary humanity, in the process providing key insights into the Yugoslav political crisis of the 1980s, the Slovene independence movement, and the state of society in its aftermath. In the 1960s, Urbančič became the first philosopher in Slovenia to examine Nietzsche's body of work in depth, while translating Nietzsche as well as landmarks of phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy into Slovene.⁵ He also further developed Pirjevec's interpretation of Francè Veber's philosophy and his conceptualization of the Slovenes as a nation. Urbančič's study entitled *Leninova "filozofija", ali, O "Imperializmu"* (Lenin's "philosophy," or, on "imperialism," 1971) was particularly impactful. In Urbančič's interpretation, Leninism was not a revolutionary alternative to the capitalist social order, but a rival to it in its imperialist drive to seize control over man and the world. This conclusion, which amounted to a revelation of the profound hypocrisy of the entire communist project hiding its nihilistic face behind a mask of humanism and the new man, destroyed any prospect of an academic career for Urbančič, although it didn't prevent him from continuing to express his critical views of the Party and its power structures, though always with the caveat that any critique of ideology is insufficient if it isn't accompanied by an awareness of the crisis of nihilism confronting mankind today. In the final phase of his critique, he came to advance the thesis that it was impossible to oppose the domination of the world of scientific and technological production without insight into the fundamental process of the Western philosophical tradition. Only an epochal realization of that process could cast sufficient light on mankind's vulnerability to the meaninglessness of nihilism:

The modern "world" of the end of the history of philosophy has been from its inception a philosophical world, a philosophized world of things in their totality as the product of the all-

⁵ In 1990, Urbančič became president of the Phenomenological Society in Ljubljana, the establishment of which he had advocated together with Tine Hribar, Dean Komel (b. 1960), and Andrina Tonkli-Komel (b. 1961). In 1992 the first specialized journal of phenomenology and hermeneutics in East Central Europe, *Phainomena*, began publication.

encompassing productive activity of the sciences, to the extent the latter are founded on philosophy. The advanced sciences enable and control the endless closed circuit of self-perpetuating production, devoid of any awareness of the origin and driver of this eternal cycle of the same thing over and over. Man himself keeps getting produced in and after this closed circuit as something *available* to it, specialized in countless ways for the scientific production of more available material for production. Thus he is expelled from his humanity, becoming a creature of scientific production and the information society of the worldwide web...”⁶

I have explored the relevance of Urbančič’s observation about the world’s current situation in more detail in my book *Totalitarium* (The totalitarianism, 2019).

The philosopher Tine Hribar, one of Slovenia’s most influential intellectuals of recent decades, whose published work spans philosophy, religious studies, ethics, aesthetics, political science, cultural studies and art history, dealt with the nihilistic experience of contemporary man from a different angle of approach. Because of his critical stance toward the communist regime, in the mid-1970s Hribar was banned from teaching at the university level and subjected to other forms of harassment. He played a key role in founding the monthly cultural magazine *Nova revija* in 1982 and was its first editor. He is considered to be one of the key architects of Slovene statehood and published a number of books on the subject. His published philosophical works reflect wide-ranging familiarity with contemporary philosophy, and particularly phenomenology and post-structuralism, but also contemporary art, religious studies, and political and legal theory. According to Hribar, grappling with modern nihilism demands the highest possible ethical discipline transcending the ethical models that have been developed by existing philosophical and theological systems. In the 1980s he began developing the concept of the *holiness of the world* or *holiness of life*, which encompasses philosophical, religious, and artistic elements with primary emphasis on the conceptual distinction between the holy and the divine which he based on Heidegger’s conception of ontological difference and Lévinas’s ethics of the other, although always central for him is Pirjevec’s notion of “letting be” from the latter’s study of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. As *Tragična etika svetosti: Sofoklova Antigona v evropski in slovenski zavesti* (The tragic ethic of the sacred: Sophocles’s *Antigone* in the European and Slovenian consciousness), Hribar’s most influential work dating to the early 1990s, along with a number of other works—*Sveta igra sveta* (The Sacred Play of the World, 1990), *Sveto na Slovenskem* (The sacred in Slovenia,

⁶ *Zgodovina nihilizma: (od začetka do konca zgodovine filozofije)* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 2011), 24.

1990), *Pustiti biti* (Letting be, 1994), *Dar biti* (The gift of being, 2003), and *Ena je groza* (Only one terror, 2010)—all attest, the evolution of the theme of the sacred nature of life is closely linked to the moral, legal and political treatment of the exercise of violence by the postwar communist regime.

Antigone entered the Slovene consciousness along with all the unburied corpses at the end of World War II. Dominik Smole's *Antigone*⁷ takes its point of departure from Sophocles and Anouilh, but with two distinct differences: Antigone does not actually appear as a *dramatis persona* in the play, and the body of Polinexis, the dead brother whom she is determined to bury, is yet to be found. Outside of the framework of the drama, so to speak. For the ruling authority insists that "Polinexis is no more," and it is even forbidden to speak about the ban on burials. But the message has been sent. Its voice can no longer be stopped... In the sacred game of the world, we the living are not the ones who do the consecrating - that role has been conferred to death. The dead are consecrated because they are dead, not because we consecrate them. We the living cannot consecrate the dead, we can only defile them. If, that is, we don't bid them farewell as human beings. If we hate them to death, because they were our mortal enemies, even after their death.⁸

Hribar also published a number of phenomenological works in which he developed ideas of Husserl, Heidegger, Lévinas, Lacan, and Derrida, while also pursuing a formulation of the concept of a *world ethos* in the time of globalization, which was intended to be a philosophical aid for overcoming the nihilism of the modern world and, simultaneously, a spiritual meeting point for various religious convictions laying no claim to world domination. In his voluminous trilogy *Neumrljivost in nesmrtnost* (Deathlessness and immortality, 2016–19) Hribar offers a systematic genealogy of the formation of religious convictions and the production of scientific truths. He also introduced his philosophical conception of the sacredness of life into his critique of the social role of the Catholic Church in Slovenia, but also against the "apologists of Marxism," where his polemics with Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Sophocles's *Antigone* is especially notable.

At present Slavoj Žižek is one of the world's leading philosophical authorities who, thanks to a unique popular style that has brought him a great deal of undeserved criticism from self-righteous academic circles for being

⁷ Implied here is the 1960 play *Antigone* by Dominik Smole (1929–92)

⁸ *Tragična etika svetosti: Sofoklova Antigona v evropski in slovenski zavesti* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1991), 6–7.

an intellectual showman, has been dubbed the “Elvis Presley of philosophers.” Žižek bases his argumentation on a systematic interpretation of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical seminars, critical social theory, German idealist philosophy and contemporary philosophy in all its manifestations. On this basis he has developed a reconceptualization of interpretive models that is meant to challenge the present social moment. In this respect his exchanges with a number of leading contemporary philosophers are also noteworthy, including Alain Badiou, Frederic Jameson, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, and others.

On account of his association with the Heideggerian circle gathered around the journal *Problemi*, in his younger years Žižek was unable to get work as a university instructor after earning his Ph.D. in 1981 under the direction of Božidar Debenjak (b. 1935), a Marxist philosopher who held high-ranking political appointments and a translator of Hegel, Marx and Marcuse into Slovene. In 1979, with the support of Ivan Urbančič, otherwise a fierce philosophical opponent, Žižek was employed by the Institute of Sociology and Philosophy as the principal investigator of a project titled “The Role of Unconscious Phantasms in the Processes of Slovene Identity Formation.” In 1985 he earned a second doctorate in the Department of Psychoanalysis of the University of Paris-VIII with a dissertation titled *Filozofija med simptomom in fantazmo* (Philosophy between symptom and phantasm). In the 1980s, he was an active participant in Slovenia’s civil society movement, publishing regular opinion pieces in the news weekly *Mladina*. In 1983, Žižek and several of his colleagues from the *Problemi* circle founded the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis, also known as the Ljubljana Lacanian School, which extended its influence into a variety of artistic, cinema studies and alternative culture domains. Most notable among the latter was the retrograde art group Neue Slowenische Kunst, founded in 1984 as an umbrella bringing together projects in music, drama and the visual arts. With its “totalitarian aesthetic” it shocked Slovenia’s and Yugoslavia’s political authorities and has since expanded worldwide as the NSK State.

Slavoj Žižek attained international renown with his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), which was followed by hundreds of books, articles and interviews in a wide range of languages, lecture tours at universities worldwide, and TV and radio appearances.⁹ Alongside his critique of postmodern subjectivity, one of Žižek’s foremost concerns is to explore the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. In this context and based on an updated interpretation of Marxist and Leninist thought he has investigated the possibility of revolutionary change today, a prospect that is all the more intriguing for the very rigidity of its object. In his 2004 book *Paralaksa: za*

⁹ A bibliography of works by Žižek is available on Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavoj_Žižek_bibliography. Since 2007, an *International Journal of Žižek Studies* has been published.

politični suspenz etičnega (Parallax: Toward a political suspension of the ethical), he asserts,

The present crisis forces us to reconsider democracy as the default signifier of the modern world. As an ideology, democracy now functions primarily as a field of virtual alternatives, the mere appearance of the possibility of political change, the bare outline of the possibility of that change, making it possible for us to endure the existing power structure, or in other words, a pseudo-opening stabilizing the existing structures and making them bearable (similarly, individuals accept their economic situation if it is accompanied by an awareness of the possibility of change, i.e., “my fortune is just around the corner”). The opponents of capitalist globalization are fond of emphasizing the importance of preserving one’s dreams of the future, that global capitalism is not the end of history and that it’s possible to think and act differently - but what if the possibility of change precisely guarantees that nothing will in fact change? What if only a complete acceptance of the hopeless closure of the present global situation can move things in the direction of actual change, so that the virtual alternative reveals its own true nature, in other words, that it is a positive ontological component of the existing order?¹⁰

Žižek’s diagnosis of the state of democracy, counting as it does on a repetition of revolutionary transition, appears in counterpoint to what we’ve already emphasized about the contribution of intellectuals to Slovenia’s process of democratization, a process that Žižek himself was involved in. The crisis of the democratic political system, which should not be wholly identified with the crises of neoliberal capitalism—even though it is shaped by them—cannot in itself disqualify the society’s widespread active engagement in favor of democratic change while still under Communist rule. At most it prescribes a political engagement that is still in search of itself.

In the course of three decades of “life in a democracy,” the disillusionment of Slovenia’s intellectuals, writers and artists with the country’s social development has only grown. They see a society supposedly still driven by the biases, economic interests and media presence of elites that are a holdover from socialist times, hampered by dysfunction in the rule of law, substandard state administration, widespread corruption, and so forth. The demand that everything “function as it should,” which in the context of twenty-first-century technologization of production and consumption has become universal, can be misleading in the sense that democracy cannot simply *function*, but is dependent on the application of action and

¹⁰ (Ljubljana: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 2004), 176.

collaboration, both of which presume differentiation in the public's choices of goals and ideals.

In any case it is important to stress that Žižek is aiming for a critical correction of the political correctness that leads to political disengagement and societal apathy. The suspense of the ethical as such requires venturing out along borders that are themselves uncertain and boundless. Other members of the Ljubljana Psychoanalytical School have also offered their reflections on the crisis of liberal capitalism both in Slovenia and worldwide, among them Mladen Dolar (b. 1952), whose first major works were his studies of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1991, 1992), followed by other notable works such as *O skoposti in o nekaterih z njo povezanih rečeh* (On avarice and related matters, 2002), *O glasu* (2003, published in English as *A Voice and Nothing More*, 2006) and *Bit in njen dvojniki* (Being and its double, 2017), all of which were first published in the *Analecta* book series, and Alenka Zupančič Žerđin (b. 1966), who has published several psychoanalytical studies dealing variously with Nietzsche, the concept of comedy and the relationship between sexuality and ontology. In *Konec* (The end, 2021), she engages critically with Francis Fukuyama's pronouncement of the "end of history" and writes:

The historical disappearance of the capitalist order's exterior is not to be understood as the absence of serious and dramatic contradictions structuring its interior; conversely, we cannot construe its contours merely by charting the areas beyond the absence of those contradictions. Much is taking place here and has been changing drastically recently. Only by drawing on the internal contradictions and splits that in certain places are being dramatically magnified can a difference or new path be achieved. In other words, engagement at the level of capitalism's inner limits. Here, of course, the "ecological threat," the drastic images of change, must be viewed as one of these internal contradictions of the global economic order, as, for instance, the struggle (contradiction) of man and nature, or of capitalism and the planet.¹¹

In direct contact with the Ljubljana Lacanian School another circle of philosophers formed, concerned primarily with updating the philosophy of Hegel. This group was inspired mainly by Zdravko Kobe (b. 1966), a university lecturer, researcher and translator of both Kant and Hegel. In 2021, on the 250th anniversary of Hegel's birth, an international collection of articles that they edited appeared as a special issue of the magazine *Problemi International*.

¹¹ (Ljubljana: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 2021), 208.

Also significant has been the application of psychoanalytical theory to the field of feminist studies, represented foremost by Eva Dolar Bahovec (b. 1951). The media commentator Marcel Štefančič, Jr. (b. 1960), has published a plethora of psychoanalytically-influenced studies on the theory and history of film. Renata Salecl (b. 1962) introduced psychoanalytical theory into the more broadly based socio-philosophical studies that brought her recognition in international academic settings as well as in various media. The various topics in political and legal philosophy, ethics and aesthetics that Salecl explores, along with the philosophy of science, are the focus of study by members of the Institute of Philosophy of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences, including Rado Riha (b. 1948), Jelica Šumič Riha (b. 1953), Aleš Erjavec (b. 1951), Matjaž Vesel (b. 1965), Peter Klepec (b. 1966), and others. The Institute publishes *Filozofski vestnik* (Philosophical Journal) and the book series *Philosophica* and conducts a post-graduate program. Tomaž Mastnak (b. 1952), a sociologist and member of the Institute widely recognized in the U.S., who harshly criticized the Yugoslav Communist regime in the 1980s and was then forced to defend himself in court, has directed his critical attention to the “rule of terror” of liberal capitalism. The publisher Založba /^{*}cf has published two of his books on this subject, *Liberalizem, fašizem, neoliberalizem* (Liberalism, fascism, neoliberalism, 2015) and *Črna internacionala: vojna, veliki biznis in vpeljava neoliberalizma* (The black international: War, big business and the introduction of neoliberalism, 2019).

The same holds for Braco Rotar (b. 1942), a social and cultural anthropologist and translator who, besides leading the Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis in 1984 founded the book series *Studia humanitatis*, which publishes translations of the most important contemporary works in the humanities. In 2012 together with his partner, the poet and cultural anthropologist Taja Kramberger (b. 1970), with whom he had published *Misliti družbo, ki (se) sama ne misli* (Thinking a society that doesn't think itself, 2010), he emigrated from Slovenia in protest to settle in Paris. The sociologist Rastko Močnik (b. 1944), who like Rotar was one of the core contributors to the journal *Problemi* in the 1970s and then collaborated with Žižek and Dolar to develop theoretical psychoanalysis, produced a series of articles dealing with the problems of the formation of humanist knowledge brought together in *Spisi o humanistiki* (Writings on the humanities, 2015) and with the ideological structure of liberal capitalism, while exercising a direct influence on the activities of various left-leaning social movements which have their institutional center at the Mirovni inštitut (Peace Institute), which was founded in 1991 and whose president for many years was the professor of aesthetics and philosophy of sports Lev Kreft (b. 1951).

In recent years analytic philosophy and the cognitive sciences have also achieved a considerable institutional presence in Slovene academia, as they have worldwide. Nenad Miščević (b. 1950), who has taught in the

Department of Philosophy of the University of Maribor since leaving Croatia at the outbreak of war in the 1990s, but before that had already developed strong working ties with Slovene analytic philosophers, particularly with Frane Jerman (1933–2002), Matjaž Potrč (b. 1948), Andrej Ule (b. 1946), Bojan Borstner (b. 1954), Božidar Kante (b. 1951), Danilo Šuster (b. 1960), Boris Vežjak (b. 1970), and Olga Markič (b. 1959), is considered one of the most outstanding proponents of analytic philosophy worldwide and from 1996 to 1999 served as president of the European Society for Analytic Philosophy. In recent theoretical publications in analytic philosophy there has been a noticeable turn toward ethical and social topics, which has favored the development of greater connections with other philosophical orientations and with religious studies (Sebastjan Vörös, b. 1981). Slovene analytic philosophers, especially Potrč and Bojan Žalec (b. 1966), have also shown an increased interest in studying the object theory of Francè Veber.

The development of Christian thought in Slovenia in recent decades has been marked by studies in societal values and the role of religion in contemporary society,¹² with issues of individual vs. collective ethics figuring prominently, particularly in three respects. The first of these is defined by the context of Slovene national reconciliation, the historical experience of the civil conflict that took place during WW II and of Communist revolutionary violence in the wartime and postwar periods. The second focuses on present-day aspects of values formation that manifest in public debates about abortion rights, euthanasia, family law and sexual abuse by representatives of the Church. The third is dictated by the urgency of establishing an interfaith dialog in the globalized world that can help overcome intergroup hatred and the poverty afflicting nearly half of the world's population.

A noteworthy cultural influence in Slovenia has been the rise of apophatic theology as articulated by Gorazd Kocijančič (b. 1964), a philosopher, poet and translator into Slovene of the complete works of Plato, as well as many other classical Greek philosophers and Church fathers. He has also participated in a new complete Slovene translation of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) curated in 1996 by the theologian and internationally renowned Bible scholar Jože Krašovec (b. 1944). On the basis

¹² See the collection *Which Religion, What Ideology?: the (Religious) Potentials for Peace and Violence*. Zürich: Lit, 2016, edited by Janez Juhant (b. 1951) and Bojan Žalec with contributions from several other members of the Institute of Philosophy and Social Ethics of the Theological Faculty of the University of Ljubljana, such as Robert Petkovšek (b. 1965), Branko Klun (b. 1968) and Vojko Strahovnik (b. 1978). A pronounced ethical and moral orientation also characterizes the work of Anton Trstenjak (1906–96), Anton Stres (b. 1942), Edvard Kovač (b. 1950), Ivan Štuhec (b. 1953), Anton Jamnik (b. 1961) and Janez Vodičar (b. 1964).

of mystical soundings of religious thought Kocijančič has also offered critiques of postmodern subjectivity; thus, in his collection of esoteric observations titled *Tistim zunaj* (To those outside, 2004) he stressed:

God reveals himself to us in the fire of radical subjectivity that leaves no independence of the objective untouched (to this day this reading of the German mystics and of Nikolai Berdiaev is still misunderstood, perhaps precisely because of postmodernism's all too cursory critique of the metaphysics of subjectivity). "Faithful" thought - meaning faithful to God - understands the totality of being as established through the medium of the "I," of "me," as a manifestation of the apophatic personal Principle. Although, be careful. Without Him not a hair of your head shall perish, but that doesn't mean that He is some absolute barber who is content with every hairstyle. Only this identification - and differentiation - paradoxically makes possible philosophical, artistic and religious thought and the validity of words. And, of course, their critique.¹³

The journal and book series sponsored by the Logos society which Kocijančič founded has published work by a long line of Slovene and foreign philosophers, theologians, literary critics, art and literary historians, each of whom takes into account the postmodern intervention as a step in renewing their attempts at making sense of the intellectual traditions of philosophy, various branches of Christianity as well as other world religions and cultures in general. Tied directly into this is an attempt at constructing the ethical experience of the other beyond moral and ontotheological reductionism.

A focus on the field of ethics is characteristic of other journals devoted to contemporary Christian thought, such as *Bogoslovni vestnik*, *Zvon*, *Časnik*, *Tretji dan*, and *Slovenski čas*, as well as journals oriented toward personalist and existential thought, where the influence of Edvard Kocbek is always present; these include such journals as *Revija 2000*, which appeared from 1969 to 2011, and the cultural journal *Apokalipsa*, published since 1993 by a society of the same name, which in 2013 at the initiative Primož Repar (b. 1967), a philosopher, poet and Slovene translator of Kierkegaard, also provided the institutional home for the newly founded Central European Kierkegaard Institute with its wide-ranging program of international outreach.

In addition to authoring numerous works of analytic philosophy and logic, Marko Uršič (b. 1951) has also dealt with broader aspects of both past and contemporary philosophy, the tradition of the Renaissance, religious studies and cosmology, which he brought together in the tetralogy *Štirje časi* (The Four Seasons, 2002-2015). Lenart Škof (b. 1967), who inherited the

¹³ *Tistim zunaj: eksoterični zapisi 1990-2003* (Ljubljana: Kud Logos, 2004), 9.

editorship of the philosophical and religious studies journal *Poligrafi* (Polygraphs) from Uršič, bases his articles on ethics, ecofeminism and intercultural relations on the tradition of Indian philosophy, religion and literature and presents them in international academic forums. Another prominent contributor to ecophilosophy is Tomaž Grušovnik (b. 1982), who is currently president of the Slovenian Philosophical Society.

Gathered around the journal *Keria: Studia Latina et Graeca* there have been numerous scholars and translators of classical literature and philosophy, including Kajetan Gantar (1930–2022), Primož Simoniti (1936–2018), Brane Senegačnik (b. 1966) who is also recognized as a poet and essayist, Aleš Maver (b. 1978) who is also a historian and columnist, Marko Marinčič (b. 1968), the philosophers and contributors to the journal *Phainomena* Valentin Kalan (b. 1943), and Franci Zore (b. 1961), as well as the cultural anthropologist Svetlana Slapšak (b. 1948). For the translation and study of Asian philosophies and religions, interest in which has burgeoned among both experts and the wider public, we particularly have the two internationally recognized sinologists Maja Milčinski (b. 1956) and Jana S. Rošker (b. 1960) to thank. Rošker is also the founder of the European Association for Chinese Philosophy and editor of the journal *Asian Studies*.

The humanities and social sciences in Slovenia have long enjoyed productive connections with the literary, artistic and wider cultural spheres, which has led to the formation of numerous interdisciplinary research and creative projects, such as the non-governmental organization Maska (Mask) - a non-profit agency that promotes publishing, arts production (of theatrical, interdisciplinary and visual works), education and research - and Mesto žensk - društvo za promocijo žensk v kulturi (City of Women - a Society for the Promotion of Women in the Arts). Combining critical philosophical reflections with their own art projects are Marina Gržinić (b. 1957), a researcher at the Philosophical Institute of the Scientific Research Center of the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, where she has published a number of works, and Polona Tratnik (b. 1976), among whose many works we should mention her *Art as Capital: the Intersection of Science, Technology and the Arts*, which was published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2021.

It bears emphasizing that from the 1980s to the present day new magazines and book series in the humanities and social sciences issued by various publishers, institutes and universities have proliferated to such an extent that we cannot cover them all in this article, much less adequately describe their relevance. Together with new programs of study in the humanities and social sciences at all Slovene universities, these journals have had a direct impact on the assimilation of new theoretical fields into the discourse, such as intercultural, postcolonial, feminist, labor, peace

environmental studies, and so on.¹⁴ Also relevant here has been the activity of numerous non-governmental organizations that were prefigured by the pioneering alternative social movements of the 1970s. Many representatives of non-governmental organizations also collaborate with academic, student, political, cultural, media, humanitarian and environmental protection institutions, a fact that has contributed to the transformation of intellectual and creative pursuits in the society at large. The question, of course, remains open as to which humanist or post-humanist context will determine our societal framework in the future—a question that continues to be posed ever more urgently in the form of public protests.

We should also point out the important role that critical essays have played in the cultural journals, daily newspapers and Internet portals that have multiplied in recent decades throughout Slovene cultural space. The magazine *Razpotja*, which began publication in Nova Gorica in 2014, is one of the most recent standouts among them. Along with the venerable journals *Sodobnost* and *Dialogi*, it has been included in the *Eurozine* portal. Long-form critical essays have continued to contribute greatly to the transfer of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences into the educational process at various levels.

While the Slovene language played a key role in the formation of Slovene cultural identity and national consciousness in the past, today, when it is recognized as one of the official languages of the European Union, it is having to confront the question of its status in the future. As the internationalization of higher education and scientific research continues to

¹⁴ A more detailed account of the institutional situation of the humanities and social sciences at Slovene universities, in central research institutes, within the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences and at Slovenia's oldest publisher Slovenska matica would go beyond the limitations of this article. Without any doubt the humanities in Slovenia face a challenge as to what kind of knowledge they are to produce, as well as various ongoing or intensifying charges that they have no real-life application or direct economic benefits. These charges betray a lack of understanding of the value component of the human sciences even when we leave aside the fact that it neglects their role in elementary and secondary education, cultural institutions and the media, as well as in a number of economic pursuits. Furthermore, it would be important to consider individuals who have not left a published legacy, but have nevertheless had an enormous intellectual influence, such as my teacher of philosophy at the University of Ljubljana, Anton Žvan (1929–2015). Likewise, research into the contributions to social analysis that have taken place in various public and private media remains to be done. Some media commentators devote considerable attention to the situation of the media themselves in Slovenia, notably Bernard Nežmah (b. 1961) with his book *Časopisna zgodovina novinarstva na Slovenskem med letoma 1797-1989* (Newspaper history of journalism in Slovenia, 1797-1989 [Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 2012]).

advance, along with the internationalization of the labor market, the demands for Slovene to be replaced with English are becoming ever more insistent. It must be stressed that the processes of thinking and creating in one's own language are not just important for advancing a nation's culture, but at the primordial level of enabling human existence and co-existence, where the native and familiar is constantly having to interact with the foreign. While the promotion of multilingualism, intercultural understanding and human solidarity is a European political priority, at the level of political realism we're confronted with unbridgeable social blockages, the removal of which will require nothing less than a new vision of humanization, or else we risk succumbing to dehumanization.

While this essay was being written, the COVID-19 pandemic reached its peak in Slovenia, as the country found itself at the top of the list of countries worldwide with the highest rates of morbidity. At present it's still too early to hazard a comprehensive assessment of the impacts that the long-term battle with the pandemic has had or will have on the evolution of various social sectors and the concept of humanism in general, and in this respect the remark of Ljubljana Archbishop Stanislav Zorè (b. 1958) in his 2021 Christmas message seems particularly apt: "We will have vaccines for the virus, but not for the epidemic of dehumanization."

From the beginning of the pandemic, protests against the center-right government of Janez Janša have focused on claims that various measures adopted for containing the epidemic have been deliberately implemented to strengthen his political power and establish a dictatorship that abolishes democratic rule. At the same time, various voices supporting the government have suggested that the protests are politically motivated, with political forces behind them that have preserved their social influence since the times of the socialist political system. This political battle has continued to spread even after the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2022, which resulted in a change of majority party and president. But what matters is whether it will still be possible to reach a political consensus concerning Slovenia's strategic social goals in the twenty-first century, which extend beyond the economy to embrace the domains of culture, education, and scientific research. Various bills along those lines that have recently been accepted follow the general guidelines for EU institutions by foregrounding technological innovation, competitiveness, the internationalization of education and digitization of all social interactions. But this sort of planning of "human resources"—a bureaucratic phrase that recurs in the documents with alarming frequency, as though "humans" or "humanity" per se no longer existed—is all too liable to neglect the *value content* that human sense and spirit use to create the *shape of the world*, without which a *nihilistic deformation* is bound to ensue. As we've demonstrated, this latter is one of the great challenges to the intellectual and creative experience in Slovenia.

In conclusion I would note that this survey of the state of philosophy, the humanities and social critique in Slovenia has been composed based on the author's own involvement in those dynamics and may, as a result, strike some as too subjective and insufficiently objective. In that respect, I submit that the human and social sciences, by definition, can never pretend to the status or mask of "scientific neutrality," insofar as their discursive impact is always embedded in values. That they cannot be presented from a neutral perspective does not mean that they don't have critical distance, but that their critical spectrum is based in the open range of interpersonal communication, which can never be reduced to mere information - because it has meaning even when it falls wide of the mark.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Aside from the fact that the author teaches contemporary philosophy and the philosophy of culture in the Faculty of the Arts of the University of Ljubljana and leads a research group at the Nova Revija Institute for the Humanities, he has also dealt with issues in the humanities in several of his published works, including *Humanistični pogovori* (Humanistic discussions [Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2008]), *Obeležja smisla* (Features of meaning [Ljubljana: Inštitut Nove revije, 2016]) *Horizonti kontemporalnosti* (Horizons of Contemporaneity [Ljubljana: Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko, 2021]), and *V paralelah smisla* (In the parallels of meaning [forthcoming 2023]). The Nova Revija Institute for the Humanities was founded in 2005 on the basis of wide-ranging publicistic contributions by the Nova Revija Publishing House which was in existence from 1991 to 2010. Since its founding, the Institute has, among other activities, organized a series of interdisciplinary conferences on the subject of understanding Europe today (see the published collection of articles from the symposium in the Villa Vigoni German-Italian Centre for European Dialogue (Lake Como, Italy) entitled *Europe at the Crossroads of the Contemporary World: 100 Years after the Great War*, edited by Mira Miladinović Zalaznik and Dean Komel (Ljubljana: Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko, 2020).