
Original Article

Is the Balkans the Unconscious of Europe?

Dušan I. Bjelić

Department of Criminology, University of Southern Maine, 1 Chamberlain Av.
Portland, ME 04102, USA.

Abstract This essay examines Slavoj Žižek's claim that the Balkans is the unconscious of Europe. To make such a claim is to treat the entire region as a subject with a failing oedipal structure, which Žižek attributes to the absence of a Cartesian tradition and the proper symbolic authority. As a result of such absence, he claims, the Balkans has withdrawn into its pathological feminine substance and needs to be conquered by the language of the universal subject. This paper places Žižek's work in the context of other versions of colonial psychoanalysis, versions that justify oppression in the name of failed oedipalization.

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Žižek's rise to global prominence in the 1990s as a Lacanian Marxist paralleled the collapse of Real Socialism in Eastern Europe and the violent disintegration of his native Yugoslavia. In various commentaries, books, articles and interviews on the horrific and senseless interethnic violence in Yugoslavia, Žižek has succeeded in representing the complex social and historical realities of the Balkans as the geopolitical analogue of the Lacanian *Real*. By claiming that “[t]he Balkans is the unconscious of Europe” (Žižek, 2008, p. 1) he discursively links the Balkans to global capitalism and multicultural democracy and thus circumvents Balkan exceptionalism.

The Balkans is structured like the unconscious of Europe, *das Unbewusste Europas*. Europe puts, projects all of its dirty secrets,

obscenities and so on into the Balkans, which is why my formula for what is going on in [the Balkans] is not as people usually say, they are caught in their old dreams ... they can't face people here ... ordinary, modern, postmodern ... whatever reality. No, I would say they are caught into dreams but not into their own dreams, into European dreams. A French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, had a wonderful saying – maybe you know it – where he says, “*Si vous êtes pris dans le rêve de l'autre, vous êtes foutu*” If you are caught into another person's dreams you are fucked, finished. (p. 1)

The notion of the Balkans as the unconscious of Europe is not Žižek's alone. Mladen Dolar (1990) invoked it first, specifically with regard to Yugoslavia, in his discussion of Freud's “Easter trip” to Italy and Slovenia with his brother Alexander in the spring of 1898. During this trip, Freud and Alexander visited caves in the Slovenian Carso. In this subterranean space of the European continent (“the caves of Saint Cangian”) (Masson, 1985, p. 309) Freud (1898) observed the “gruesome miracle of nature, a subterranean river running through magnificent vaults, waterfalls, stalactite formations, pitch darkness, and slippery paths secured with iron railings. It was Tartarus itself” (p. 309). In one cave Freud suddenly encountered Dr. Karl Lüger, the anti-Semitic Mayor of Vienna and head of the Christian Socialist Party, whom he saw as representative of political and anti-Semitic forces in Vienna likely to oppose his pending university promotion. Dolar describes the portentous meeting with Lüger:

So in this descent into the Slovene underground, this metaphorical abyss of the unconscious, the crossing of the Styx, Freud met his counterpart *par excellence*, his arch-enemy, this *Herr*, who will, by a devious and mediate way, come to determine a good deal of the subsequent European history. The Master that emerges in the fantasmatic underworld scenery (one could say as a piece of the Real that fills in the lacking master-signifier) is the Master who determines by the stroke of a signifier – there was a famous saying by Lueger: “Who is a Jew, I will determine” – the Master who draws the line of S1, which will become the dividing line between life and death a few decades later; but also a Master designated by a treacherous signifier, a signifier of deception, Lueger – Lüger – Lügner, evoking the liar. (p. 4).

Dolar then goes on to declare Yugoslavia the unconscious of Europe:

The catalogue of Yugoslav topoi in Freud could surely be extended, but there is already an outline of a pattern. Freud takes trips from the Center to the outskirts of that disintegrating Empire. ... The *Weltgeist* on vacation meets its Other. Can one venture to say that Yugoslavia is the

Schauplatz of the European unconscious, or that *the unconscious is structured like Yugoslavia?* (p. 1)

Yugoslavia is at once a metaphor for Europe's unconscious and the stage on which its desires are projected and played out. Freud (1909) himself created the essence of the Balkans' subjectivity precisely by declaring them outside the zone of the particular mythology of psychoanalysis, claiming that people south of the Austrian border lack symbolic authority, are "anal" (p. 214) and "unanalyzable." The latter claim entered the annals of psychoanalysis in a letter from Freud to Trieste psychoanalyst Edoardo Weiss (May 28, 1922). Weiss had solicited Freud's advice about a Slovene patient suffering from sexual impotence who was not responding to therapy. This patient "had betrayed many people and had a very immoral ego" (Weiss, 1970, p. 34).

Freud advised Weiss, "The second patient, the Slovene, is obviously a scoundrel who is not worth your trouble. Our analytical art is powerless with these people, nor can our insight penetrate the dominant dynamic conditions of such cases" (p. 37). While Weiss places the emphasis on "the patient," Freud places it on "the Slovene" to suggest that the patient is "unanalyzable" precisely because he is a Slovene and that is why he cannot be helped. Instead of questioning Freud's implicit geopolitical bias, Žižek (1996) uses the original dictum about "the Slovene's" moral failings to assert the collective conditions of the contemporary Slovene Oedipus. Elaborating on Freud's diagnosis, he writes,

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. (Žižek, 1996, p. 55n)

According to Žižek, Slovenes are excessively attached in their "national fantasy" to the Mother. The absence of the Father, the bearer of internal law/Prohibition, engenders a "national fantasy" formed around maternal prohibition of external pleasures, and this attachment to the mother creates the "impediment" to subjectivity expressed in the Slovene's sexual impotence and immorality. It is only the Symbolic and internalized Law of the Father that, through inner prohibition, can engender enjoyment as a form of transgression. And, Žižek concludes, "[W]e Slovenes – 'unanalyzable' according to Freud – had to wait for Lacan to find a meeting with psychoanalysis; only with Lacan did psychoanalysis achieve a level of sophistication that rendered it capable of tackling such foul apparitions as the Slovenes" (p. 9).

This analysis coincides with Žižek's push for Slovene secession from the Yugoslav Federation and its integration with EU and NATO. He ran for a place in the collective presidency of Slovenia in 1990, hoping that his psychoanalytic

political philosophy would help his nation to move away from the Balkans and join Europe. He elaborated in one of his political speeches just how death and killing may be justified when it comes to *Realpolitik*, and he equated Yugoslavia with the land of the vampire that deserves to be killed: “We have enough of the vampires that live off of us making us guilty, that are making us pay someone else’s dues. And today we need, if I can end this poetically, only one stake, a wooden stake, together with garlic, to kill and destroy all sorts of vampires.” In other words, to remain in the Balkans is to be a vampire’s maiden.

Today, Žižek invokes such concepts as “class analysis” and “working class politics” to capture discourse on universality. But, as Ernesto Laclau trenchantly observes, “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” (Butler *et al*, 2000, p. 79). We may add to Laclau’s analysis that when class analysis really mattered, at a time when the disintegration of Yugoslavia could have been channeled in a direction other than nationalism and ethnic violence, it was conspicuously absent from his discourse. Žižek’s *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* appeared in 1994 when the Bosnian war was at its height. Instead of linking ethnic violence to class relations, Žižek links it to the lack of the Name-of-the-Father and the *jouissance féminine* (3) as “the primordial generative element” (1) of the Balkan ideology. His analysis of ethnic violence moves back and forth from sexual fantasy to real geography. In the context of his analysis, Dorothy Valens, the female protagonist of David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, becomes a personified geography. Like her, Bosnia in the absence of the Father’s prohibitions, is “sliding into the abyss of absolute depression” from which she can only be lifted by the male’s fist, a sort of “electroshock therapy” to prevent self-destruction and place her in the “proper order of causality” (Taylor, 2005, p. 121). Žižek seems to suggest that the absence of the Name-of-the-Father engenders woman’s perverse fantasy and he links rape causally to the universal structure of the phallic authority. With this logic, Žižek also issues an implicit verdict on the Bosnian father. In the absence of his nation-state, the Bosnian father is incapable of asserting a proper symbolic authority. Thus, in the place of Law and prohibition, the Bosnian father figures only as a *totem* (Lacan, 1987, p. 88) a phylogenetic supplement of feminine perverse enjoyment (Taylor, 2005, p. 75). On the bases of such analysis Žižek had called for NATO’s intervention in Bosnia to restore the rule of the Father. But if the improper rule of the Father is the reason why the West projects its fantasies unto the Balkans, and the Balkans is nothing other than the one “caught into” the West’s fantasy, should not then the West bomb itself first?

There is yet another thread of psychoanalytic colonialism that operates on the Balkans. Eighteen months after Freud’s visit to the Slovene caves he wrote to Wilhelm Fliess (February 1, 1900), “I am by temperament nothing but a *conquistador*” (Masson, 1985, p. 309). This was a remarkable shift for Freud,

who, as a young doctor, praised cocaine and the Inca's natural chemistry as a panacea not only for the natives' passive resistance to colonization but also for neurotic Europeans. According to Max Schur (1972), this letter to Fliess represents one of only two occurrences of the word *conquistador* in all of Freud's writing. *Conquistador*, literally "conqueror," has a very specific denotation, that of the Spanish adventurers who discovered, explored and conquered the New World. And, Schur writes, "The use of the same term in two completely different contexts is a beautiful example of what Freud called 'sublimation' (albeit to different degrees) – the utilization and transformation of instinctual goals for intellectual and professional achievements" (p. 201n).

The first occurrence of the word *conquistador*, in a letter of April 14, 1898, leads us back to the Slovene caves:

Strangest of all was our guide, in a deep alcoholic stupor, but completely surefooted, and full of humor. He was the discoverer of the cave, obviously a genius gone wrong; constantly spoke of his death, his conflicts with the priests, and his conquests in these subterranean realms. When he said that he had already been in thirty-six "holes" in the Carso, I realized he was a neurotic and his *conquistador* [my italics] exploits were an erotic equivalent. A few minutes later he confirmed this, because when Alex asked him how far one could penetrate into the cave, he answered, "It's like with a virgin; the farther you get, the more beautiful it is." (Masson, 1985, p. 309).

Here Freud uses the word *conquistador* to cast the Slovene cave guide as a primitive neurotic, only later Freud wraps himself in his own colonial fantasy of the primitive Other. The words Freud uses to describe the guide might well now be applied to Freud himself as the discoverer of the unconscious, "obviously a genius gone wrong; constantly spoke of his death, his conflicts with the priests, and his conquests in these subterranean realms". (Masson, 1985, p. 309)

As in the case of the "unanalyzable Slovene," Žižek and other Lacanians of the Ljubljana group did not challenge Freud's colonial fantasies. Instead, they used them as a blueprint for their "crypto-colonial" (Herzfeld, 2002) claims about the Balkans to legitimize Slovene nationalism with discourse on universalism. Since its inception psychoanalysis has followed the path of colonial psychiatry in legitimizing colonization on the ground that Empire provides psychic normality for insane colonial geographies (Keller, 2007). The language of psychic inferiority that saturates Žižek's psychoanalysis of Yugoslavia is grounded in a colonial history in which psychoanalysts and psychiatrists have played no small part. In India, British psychoanalyst Owen Berkeley-Hill regarded Hindus as "anal" (1921b) and Mohammed as "psychoneurotic" with a "tendency to attack the authority of the father in the realm of religion and

politics” (1921a, p. 34). Another British psychoanalyst, Colonel C.D. Daly (1930), analyzing Ghandi’s nonviolent resistance to British rule, concluded, “It is, in essence, an infantile trait with which most mothers and nurses are familiar” (p. 195). Antoine Porot, a prominent French psychiatrist and founder of the Algerian School of psychiatry, regarded the mission of French psychiatry as “a matter of domination over not only indigenous madness, but also the personality and character of the North African Muslims” (Keller, 2007, p. 123).

Žižek does not use such explicitly derogatory terms as those we find in the discourse of colonial psychoanalysts and psychiatrists, but he does deploy ethnic stereotypes discursively to place the Balkans beyond the pale of Eurocentric symbolic authority. In his psychoanalysis of the Balkans, he deploys essentially the same psychoanalytic logic as Octave Mannoni (1949, 1964), a follower of Lacan, did in his analysis of the Malagasy uprising of 1947. Mannoni theorized that “colonial situations” are first and foremost imaginary. Displaced in, and engulfed by, colonial geography, the white European projects upon the colonial Other “repressed tendencies towards sadism, rape, or incest, the image of the misdeed which both frightens and fascinates us.” Colonial geography acts as a “prostitute” inciting her client to sexual acts by relaxing obstacles in the unconscious, “and those obstacles are probably feelings of guilt” (Mannoni, 1964, p. 111). Because of the absence of a proper phallic authority (which only an Empire can offer), the unoedipalized Malagasy, like Bosnians, become the victim of the self-inflicted, perverse enjoyment of submission to the projected fantasies of the dominating other.

Žižek theorizes the relationship of the Balkans to Europe in much the same way that Mannoni theorizes the relationship of the Malagasy to French settlers. For Mannoni as for Žižek the absence of Cartesian universalism causes racism. But where does Europe’s racism come from if not from the Cartesian tradition of scientific objectivity that has sanctified “race” as a natural category? As Aimé Césaire (2000) has said, Cartesianism works as a colonial ideology of discrimination, invoked by psychoanalysts and psychiatrists seeking “to impugn on higher authority the weakness of primitive thought,” while claiming that their own work is based on “the firmest rationalism” (p. 56). French Sociologist Colette Guillaumin (1995) identifies this kind of thinking as a new form of racism, one based not on skin but on the knowledge of difference grounded in a structure of universal unity (p. 64). In judging the Balkans’ lack of a Cartesian tradition, Žižek, like Mannoni, constructs racial differentiation on behalf of universality. He thus does not provide a critique of racism but is only critical of the repression of racism. To claim the archaic, feminine Balkans, the “dark cave” of Europe, as the *Schauplatz* of Europe’s unconscious, transforms an emancipatory aspect of psychoanalysis – the articulation of the unconscious – into a conquistador’s fantasies about the Balkans as virgin territory. When framed in local history, “*das Unbewusste Europas*” gives a problematic meaning to *Wo es war soll ich werden!*

Epilogue

In October 2003 an exhibition of Balkan art titled “In Search of Balkania” opened at the *Landesmuseum* in Graz. The aim of the exhibition, as the accompanying “User’s Manual” proclaimed, was to revive the Balkans as “a site of intellectual endeavor and cultural desire.” Žižek was represented by a photograph of himself taken on September 9, 2001 at the Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna on the 100th anniversary of Lacan’s birth by Michael Schuster. He lies as if *in utero* on a couch covered in exotic carpets and boxed in on three sides. Above him hangs Courbet’s painting *l’Origine du monde*. The painting was originally commissioned by Halil Bey, a Turkish diplomat and collector of erotica. When the diplomat was called back to Istanbul from Paris, the painting came eventually into the possession of Lacan’s second wife, Sylvie Bataille-Lacan, the former wife of Georges Bataille. The photograph displayed at the exposition in Graz is the same one that adorns the back cover of Žižek’s (2003) book, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. The front cover displays Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio’s painting, *The Virgin and Child*. Both images refer to Freud’s visit to Trebinje (Bosnia and Herzegovina) in September 1898 and his first paper on the mechanics of the unconscious (Freud, 1898), written soon after his return to Vienna, “The Psychological Mechanism of Forgetfulness.”

That article concerns Freud’s forgetting the proper name of an Italian painter, Luca Signorelli. The names “Botticelli” and “Boltraffio” kept coming to mind in place of “Signorelli.” Freud theorized that his forgetting the name was the result of the unconscious mechanism of sexual repression. The constellation of signifiers in the photo links the psychoanalytic present with its past and confirms Žižek’s and Freud’s view of the Balkans as the place of the primitive Father. Freud’s psychoanalytic couch was covered with a carpet sent to him from Salonica by his distant relative (and future brother-in-law), Moritz Freud (Jones, 1954, p. 2). Moritz, in addition to being a carpet dealer, was also rumored to be involved in the white-slave trade (Swales, 2003, p. 62). Historian Peter J. Swales suggests that Freud not only may have suspected this but may also have enjoyed the possibility that the carpet in his therapy room bore a tenuous connection to the reputed Turkish excess of sexuality. As Freud (1898) reported, “[A colleague] had told me what overriding importance these Bosnians attached to sexual enjoyments. One of his patients said to him, ‘Herr, you must know, that if *that* comes to an end then life is of no value.’” (p. 292).

During his short visit to Trebinje, Freud walked on the carpets of a former harem that had become a tourist attraction. The visit to the harem, Swales (2003) explains, could well have evoked the exotic aura of the carpet on his consulting couch at 19 Berggasse, and conjured up a fantasy of himself as a sexual despot in a seraglio inhabited by female patients lying on the famous couch, ready for analysis as a kind of “epistemological coitus” (p. 62). “And

here,” Swales concludes, “I allude, of course, to how over time Freud would create for himself a *de facto* harem—Martha, Minna, Emma, Fanny, Marie, Helen, Lou, Anna, the Princess, etc. – with the royal couch as its very organizing principle” (p. 62).¹ If this history reveals Freud’s self-orientalizing fantasies, then the discoverer of the repressed unconscious is also the one enjoying its projections.

Reclining regally on exotic carpets and with Courbet’s sensual painting hanging above him, Žižek wraps himself in Freud’s oriental fantasies. In the photograph, Žižek, the “unanalyzable Slovene,” lies, as if the despot of the seraglio, in the position of the “primitive father.” If the “primitive father,” as Taylor (2005) claims, is the phantasmatic supplement of woman’s sexual fantasy, where does this place Žižek’s photo in relation to his own analysis of the Bosnian psyche?

About the Author

Dušan I. Bjelić is a Professor of Criminology, University of Southern Maine, Portland. His book, *Normalizing the Balkans: Geopolitics of Psychoanalysis and Psychiatry*, is to be published this year by Ashgate.

Note

1 Regarding Freud as “primal father,” see Blumenthal (2006).

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