



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: S2-20-0008

Project manager: Alexander Stagnell

Project title: Post-Communist Communism in Eastern Europe: A Rhetorical History of The Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis

1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

Despite being significantly shortened, the project still managed to produce results and deliver conclusions connected to some aspects of all three of the goals stated in the application. These goals consisted of: (i) providing a conceptual history of the concept of communism within the work of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis; (ii) offering an interpretation of the role played by the idea of what is here referred to as post-communist communism within the School's more general understanding and analysis of the present political conjuncture; and (iii) to study how the concept of communism has been and is employed in the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis' analysis of historically existing socialism in Eastern Europe.

Regarding the first aim, the project has been focused on the work of the School's main philosophical leader, Slavoj Žižek. By focusing on the ways in which Žižek has made use of the notion of communism within his work, the project has been able to present important results on a previously understudied notion within his philosophy. From this can be drawn the conclusion that the 'communist idea' that Žižek has been purporting since 2008 cannot be reduced to just a rhetorical provocation or be read as a synonym of a critical philosophical practice. Instead, the conclusions drawn from the project can be summed up in the interpretation that the communist idea captures Žižek's grappling with the problem of actualizing political ideas and thus plays an important role in the transformations of his political philosophy around the time of the 2007-2008 financial crash. Furthermore, the analysis of Žižek's work on communism has shown how this notion offers a bridge between the philosophical and the political aspects of his work, allowing for conclusions to be drawn concerning the influence of his political analysis on certain central philosophical notions such as fantasy, idea, and ideology.

The second aim of the project, connecting the notion of communism to an analysis of the contemporary political situation, has for the most part been focused on Žižek's critique of Ernesto Laclau's notion of populism. Against the wide-spread idea that the last decade constituted a populist moment in which left- and right-wing populisms struggled to re-politicize the political sphere after an era defined by post-political managerialism, the project's results have shown how Žižek, already before the 2008 financial crisis (often said to be the instigator of the populist moment), had developed a philosophical critique of populism that brought together (and transformed) his philosophy through an analysis of the present political conjunction and the purported hope connected to the growth of populist politics. By focusing on the close relation between Žižek's critique of populism and his



development of the idea of communism, the project has allowed for the conclusion that the latter arises out of his understanding of the impotence of the former, giving birth to a Žižekian notion of populism radically different from those employed by mainstream work in Populism Studies.

The final aim, to study Žižek's analysis of communist ideological practice in Eastern Europe, has allowed the project to draw conclusions surrounding the importance of this analysis in his overall philosophical project. By focusing on the small differences in Žižek's incessant return to a number of examples from Soviet and Yugoslavian communism, it was possible to point to how the concrete analysis constantly pushed his conceptual apparatus to its breaking point. Through his particular approach to this ideology, two important conclusions drawn from the project is (i) the importance of this analysis of how the ideology of Eastern European communism was practiced for several of Žižek's most central philosophical notions (including for instance ideology, fantasy, and the idea), and (ii) the unique perspective that Žižek offers on the disastrous failure of twentieth century communism in Eastern Europe. In addition to this, the project has also shown the importance of distinguishing between communist ideology (as the analysis of how ideology functioned in communist Eastern Europe) and the communist idea (as the attempt to realize a political transformation) in Žižek's work.

2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

The specific aim of this project was to develop a conceptual history of the concept of communism within the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis. The project has contributed to this goal by complicating the existing narrative of how, in particular, Slavoj Žižek has dealt with the notion of communism. In opposition to the three major perspectives in the current reception of his work – either dismissing his use of the notion as a mere provocation, assuming that he has always remained a proponent of communist politics or reducing the notion of communism to simply the equivalent of 'critical philosophy' – the project has uncovered how this notion is tied to Žižek's attempt to rethink several basic notions of his own philosophy. By bringing this transformation to the fore, the project has also shown the importance of Žižek's analysis of communist ideology in Eastern Europe and how it prompted him to not only rethink several of his basic philosophical notions but also his previously almost exclusively negative understanding of communism.

A more general aim of the project was to contribute to the literature on how contemporary political philosophy has grappled with the problem of realizing political ideas. This issue, which has its specific ties to leftist political movements in Eastern Europe, is also seen all across the world. Here, Žižek's engagement with the notion of populism as it has been developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe proved incredibly fruitful. Up until the present, not much had been written on the role that Žižek's critique of Laclau's theory of populism played in Žižek's larger philosophical project. But by taking into account the historical proximity between a critique of populism and Žižek's development of a notion of communism, the project was able to show how Laclau and Žižek, often treated as two thinkers with much in common, differs precisely on how political ideas can be realized in practice. In other words, Žižek's formulation of the communist idea takes as its starting point what he sees as the limits of a populist approach to leftist politics.



In its limited scope, the project has contributed to two research traditions: on the one hand the commentary on Slavoj Žižek's philosophical work, and, on the other, to contemporary critical political philosophy with a focus on Žižek and Ernesto Laclau. In respect of the former, the project has offered a deepened understanding of the importance of Žižek's analysis of communist ideology, as well as more nuanced insights into the evolution of a notion of communism in his work. As regards the latter, the project has contributed to the ongoing discussion on the possibility of progressive politics, and how political ideas can be realized in the present political landscape, by examining how Žižek has used his idea of communism in order to critique a notion of left populism that saw some electoral success during the last decade (Syriza, Podemos, the Labour Party in the UK). Here, the project could show how Žižek, already long before populist movements inspired by Laclau and Mouffe's notion of populism had entered the political scene, had developed a critique capturing the limit of this approach.

3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

As Žižek himself has often noted, the tradition of critical philosophy to which he belongs has to a large extent avoided an in-depth analysis of the actual practices of communist ideology (especially when compared to how much attention has been given to analyzing the two other main ideologies of the twentieth century, fascism, and liberal/conservative capitalism). The same lack of attention can also be seen in the treatment of Žižek's own analysis of how communist ideology was practiced in Eastern Europe during the twentieth century, a topic which is either overlooked or even dismissed as unimportant. The project aim was to mitigate these shortcomings by not only laying out an often scattered and sometimes gnostic analysis by connecting the pieces to Žižek's larger conceptual apparatus. Since the project's starting point was tied to the conception that today's rise of authoritarian (populist) nationalism in Eastern Europe is linked to the ways in which communism was replaced by liberal democracy in many of these countries after the fall of the Soviet Union, there was also a need to draw connections between Žižek's analysis of communist ideology and his understanding of what is often referred to as the populist moment of the last decade. By giving proper attention to Žižek's analysis of communist ideology, the project has contributed to our understanding of a unique and practically useful conception of the role and function of communism as an ideology in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, by connecting Žižek's analysis of communism to his later development of his own, so called, idea of communism, the project has also contributed to lifting a severely underexamined perspective of the present political situation in Eastern Europe.

The project has also contributed to the knowledge of Eastern Europe more generally by studying what is arguably the most influential contemporary philosophical tradition hailing from this region. Slavoj Žižek and the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis has grown out of the communist and post-communist situation in Eastern Europe, and by studying how, in particular, Žižek's work has transformed through its confrontation with a changing political climate, the project has been able to capture the specificities of this philosophical tradition.

4. New research questions that the project has led to



Since the project was cut short, several aspects of the initial plan remain unexplored. Among the most important is the stated goal to bring together the broader analysis of communist regimes in (primarily) Eastern Europe within the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis into a more coherent whole. Here, it also remains to see if there are important differences and similarities in how its members understands the relevance of the communist idea today and how these analyses tie in with the School's more general political ontology as well as its analysis of the communist past.

Connected to the School's analysis of communist ideology is also, as was stated in the plan, the need to relate it to other perspectives on and analyses of Eastern European communist ideology. The project was focused on Žižek's relationship to Laclau and the latter's notion of populist logic, as it had an acute contemporary relevance, but it remains to be seen how Žižek's understanding of communist ideology (and the communist idea) stands up against other perspectives (save for those, like Hannah Arendt, whom Žižek enters into explicit dialogue with during his analysis). Here, much work remains to be done, especially when considering the lack of contemporary perspectives from critical philosophy on communism.

The project has also coincided with a renewed interest in the communist idea as the Covid-19 pandemic battered the planet. As Slavoj Žižek has been an important figure in this movement, publishing two books on the pandemic, the last two years have opened up a range of new questions, not at least since Žižek himself has been forced to rethink several of his earlier positions in the face of a world-wide pandemic. This has been cursorily treated in the popular science part of the project, but it demands more work, not least to connect Žižek's analysis of crisis with his writings on Lenin and the Russian Revolution (where the notion of crisis, for Žižek, plays a central part).

5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Presentations

- “Att skriva retorisk historia: Två forskningsprojekt [Writing Rhetorical History: Two Research Projects]” – Presentation at the Higher Seminar in Rhetoric (2021), Södertörn University.
- “Post-Communist Communism in Eastern Europe” – Presentation at the New Projects Symposium (2021), Centre for Baltic and Eastern European Studies, Södertörn University.
- “Irony and Catachresis: The Problem of the Populist Moment” – Paper presentation at the Higher seminar in Rhetoric (2021), University of Copenhagen.
- “Rhetoric and Ideology: Catachresis, Irony, and Fantasia” – Paper presentation at the Department of Literature (2021), Uppsala University.

Publications

Peer reviewed articles:



- Stagnell, Alexander. (forth.). “From Communist Ideology to the Idea of Communism: Transformations in Žižek’s Notion of Communism” accepted on September 15, 2022 for publication in *Filozofski vestnik*. ISSN: 0353-4510. [c. 8000 words]. To be published Open Access (link not yet available).
- Stagnell, Alexander. (forth.). “Ironier och katakreser – Populismens logik eller kommunismens idé? [Ironies and Catachresis – The Logic of Populism or the Communist Idea?]” accepted on November 2, 2022 for publication in *Rhetorica Scandinavica*. ISSN: 1397-0534. [c. 8000 words]. To be published Open Access (link not yet available).

Popular science publications:

- “Tre tänkare om coronakommunismen [Three thinkers on corona communism]”. A review essay discussing four then recently published books on the Covid-19 pandemic and communism: Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (Verso, 2020), Frédéric Lordon, *Figures du communisme* (La fabrique, 2021), and Slavoj Žižek’s *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World* (Polity, 2020) and *Pandemic 2!* (Polity, 2020). After failing to get my text published in any relevant outlet, I made it public on my own blog on August 25, 2021: <https://stagnell.se/tre-tankare-om-coronakommunismen/>