

## Field Note

# LAIBACH AND ENJOY: SLOVENIAN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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## Abstract

*The writings of Slavoj Žižek have a disorienting effect on readers, and attempts to understand and utilize his ideas in cultural theory have often come to grief. One way into an interpretation of what Žižek is up to is to trace the cultural–political interventions of some fellow travellers still active in the production and disturbance of our ideological enjoyment. This commentary follows some of the contours of the landscape of Slovenian theory.*

## Keywords

Laibach; Žižek; Slovenia

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## Before we get to Z we need to go to L and back

“**L**aibach” is the German name for Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. It is also the name for a best-selling local band formed in the industrial coal-mining town of Trbovlje in 1980, the year Tito died. When I visited Ljubljana in September 2003, Laibach had just released their last album *WAT*, and played a launch concert in nearby Kranj at Castle Khislstein as part of their European tour. Articles about Laibach were featured in the September 9 issue of *Slovenia News* and in *The Slovenia Times* (August 28–September 17). A new book by Alexei Monroe, *Pluralni Monolit: Laibach in NSK*, had just been published in Slovene (Monroe, 2003), and I discussed the band with Alexei in “Metelkova”, which is the



base for alternative artistic and political movements in Ljubljana. Metelkova was celebrating its 10th anniversary and semi-legal existence in the buildings and grounds of an old Yugoslav army barracks, claimed by some there to be the largest squat in Europe. An anarchist space and library coexist with gay and lesbian spaces and a café space for people with disabilities. There is a Peace Institute in the barracks building that used to house the military prison.

Laibach is more than just a band though, and it is closely intertwined with a radical art movement NSK or *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (“New Slovenian Art”). NSK comprises Laibach, the IRWIN art collective and Cosmokinetic Theatre Noordung (previously the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre group). After the secession of Slovenia the NSK transformed itself into a complete parallel state apparatus “NSK State” – “A State in Time” – that from 1992 has had its own embassies in different countries and which issues its own passports. The NSK State operates as a transnational entity that anyone from anywhere in the world can join (and it coexists and overlaps with a number of other similar projects that met in a summit in Helsinki in summer 2003). The term “transnational” has particular resonances in ex-Yugoslavia, for it designates solidarity and exchange of ideas across the Balkans, between Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (Jeffs, 1995). When Laibach played in Sarajevo in 1995 – the culmination of their “Occupied Europe NATO” tour – the band publicly mocked the claims of NATO to be protecting the population and they distributed NSK diplomatic passports at their concerts, passports so realistic that some Bosnians were able to use them to get out to safety.

Laibach cannot be accused of being peaceniks, but the military drumbeats that run through their pre-WAT cover of “In the Army Now” turns it into something decidedly more chilling; unlike the original, it seems designed to make you not want to be in the army now. It is at least an antidote to the Status Quo version (which got heavy radio airplay in Serbia and Croatia when war broke out in 1991). As far as politics is concerned, Laibach is decidedly ambiguous. The song “Tanz mit Laibach” (“Dance with Laibach”) on WAT, which comes with a computer-playable video clip, is a striking example of this. The military-uniformed lead singer marches towards the viewer to a heavy beat and chorus of “Eins, zwei, drei, vier”. Most of their songs are in German or English, with one of the rare exceptions being the final WAT track, “Anti-Semitism”. This track is in Slovene, so a non-native speaker would not have a clue as to what was going on. Perhaps, in a Lacanian “message in reverse” to those in the West who so enjoy listening to “World Music” they cannot understand, Laibach confront us with fears of some impenetrable Slavic danger. The title poses a disturbing conundrum, and an uncertainty about what exactly is being evoked, especially as Laibach have never been into telling the audience what to think, what the correct line is. And the words of this track turn out to be no more reassuring: verses from the Bible about tribes at war and tales of revenge. Is this what a representation of anti-semitism is to be reduced

to (another bizarre symptom of which would be the enthusiastic following Laibach have in Israel), politics reduced to aesthetics? Or is it precisely the reverse?

### Needling the state

The opposition movement in Slovenia in the 1980s started with punk, and the Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek, one of the theorists of this radical movement in the region, is still alive and kicking around the margins there today. I was there to discuss the manuscript of my book, and since it is very critical, I thought he would have some nasty things to say (Parker, 2004). Žižek had things to say about Laibach, and everyone I met in Ljubljana seemed to have something nasty to say about everyone else. For example, Metelkova is on the opposite side of the same street (Metelkova ulica) of the block of flats where Žižek now lives. One guy in Metelkova expressed mock outrage when he discovered that this is where Žižek has moved to, because it is the expensive part of town where ministers and diplomats reside, and that just goes to show how he has sold out, sliding further down the slippery slope from those fateful days after independence in 1991 when Žižek stood on the Liberal Democratic Party ticket for the collective presidency of Slovenia (which he just missed getting by a few percent). The following morning, when I said that I had visited Metelkova, Žižek complained that those ingrates got state finance for a free plot of land in a lovely part of the city, that they were spoilt children of the old nomenklatura who hated him and that they spent all their time complaining.

Back in Metelkova I was also told that Laibach were not much in favour there because the band had now toned down their politics and gotten money from the state, and the following night there it was claimed that Laibach lived in the basement of Žižek's house for a while in the early 1980s. There is an uncanny crossover between some of the activities of Laibach–NSK and Žižek's cultural-political interventions, and now some dispute between the two as to who influenced whom (there are essays on the links between NSK and Žižek on [www.nskstate.com](http://www.nskstate.com)). For example, Žižek argued that the ideological apparatus in Yugoslavia required the phenomenon of “dissidence” as a kind of buffer zone between individuals and the state. When people could assume a “dissident” position, they would go along with the system because they were able to display to others (and themselves) that they had no real part in it. Overidentification, on the other hand, takes the system at its word and plays so close to power that it cannot bear your participation. In that way you are more dangerous. It is not a mere parody of totalitarianism but an obsessive identification with it, taking it more seriously than it takes itself. The motif of “overidentification”, as a strategy for dealing with ideology by exploding it from within instead of playing the game of cynical distance, is described well by Žižek, but NSK claim that he merely theorized their own practice (and that is partly what the NSK-State

project is still doing now). NSK members argue that overidentification “was first introduced by Laibach”, and describe the way that “Laibach’s use of it was the most total. Until 1986–87 they practiced their role everywhere, in coffee bars, in social spaces. They were always in uniform. The design of the uniform was an art in itself. This was very important for the urban, social climate, since it was a highly visible social ritual in a very small Ljubljana” ([http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors/nsktext.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors/nsktext.html)).

In their “10 items of the covenant and other statements” on the NSK State Electronic Embassy website ([www.ljudmila.org/embassy](http://www.ljudmila.org/embassy)), Laibach argue that “All art is subject to political manipulation ... except for that which speaks the language of this same manipulation” (item 3). If you read it right, you can actually find a lot of Žižek already there in Laibach.

If Žižek is one old Stalinist taken to the bosom of some Western leftist academics, in Slovenia Laibach now are the local bad boys made good. One of the glowing articles in the local press (*The Slovenia Times*, 28 August–17 September, 2003, p 14) includes a statement from the band that could have been penned by Žižek himself:

Democracy ensnares people through the Utopian injection of desires and fantasies into a social bloodstream. Its hypodermic needle is the entertainment culture industry. It’s a shared needle, and a shared needle leads to the spread of disease. In democracy there is no cure against its own disease. The East collapsed because it blindly believed in the Western utopian definition of freedom of the individual. The West only survives because it slyly established a system, which insists on people’s freedom. That is to say, under democracy people believe they are acting according to their own will and desires.

This quote is worth pondering a little. Many readers in the West imagine that Žižek, and these kinds of sentiment, are Marxist. In ex-Yugoslavia things look a little different. Colleagues from Belgrade were astonished a few years ago – and yes it was in the lead up to the NATO bombing endorsed by Žižek – that he was viewed by some of us as on the Left. In Ljubljana too there is a good deal of mutual suspicion between Žižek and his former allies; many times he told me that this or that person thought he was a fascist, but that, of course, he was not. When tackled about his explicit anti-Marxism – characterizations of Marxism as a form of “metapolitics”, counterposition of Marxism to “politics proper”, individualized examples of authentic political “acts” – he could only turn the charge around and demand that I tell him where in the world there was collective struggle of the working class against capitalism.

In fact, apart from Metelkova, some graffiti and stickers against NATO and calls on the walls “SADDAM RESIST”, the closest to the spirit of “socialism” I encountered was in some cautious nostalgia for the old times. Bad things that I reported to my friends there, such as unhelpful hotel reception staff, were gleefully greeted with the explanation that here was the old socialism still at

work. But both at Metelkova and with Žižek I heard the story that in some ways things were better before capitalism rolled triumphantly back into the Balkans, crushing any sense of mutual solidarity and historical progress. In Žižek's writing, there are strong residues of Marxism, but, as I argue in detail in my book, this figures out only in his attention to culture as a political-textured object upon which he can put his dear old Hegel to work. Laibach's take on cultural critique was always to mash together the imagery of socialist realism and national socialism and, perhaps, to open some political space for something different; as with Žižek's spontaneist vision of "politics proper", what this different thing would be is not to be specified. One of the politically disturbing aspects of Laibach concerts in the West is that Leftists and fascists will sometimes find themselves together near the stage and puzzle about what it is that the other finds compatible with their politics.

One of the most surprising things about Ljubljana was how much more there is in terms of radical politics and theory there than Žižek, and how little Žižek figures in all of that. Even most of the radical discussion about psychoanalysis in Slovenia now does not include Žižek. It is partly his choice, an effect of small circles, we might say. It is outside Slovenia, of course, that he has made his mark. What Žižek is still best at is in using Lacanian psychoanalysis as a conceptual framework to read Hegel – underneath his Lacan there is always Hegel – and along the way he has become one of the best-known popularizers of Lacanian theory in cultural studies. This has had some unfortunate effects for his readers, who often imagine that they have direct access to Lacanian ideas. In this respect, Žižek has come to operate as interpreter of Lacan for an English-speaking audience much as Kojève operated for French intellectuals as interpreter of Hegel. This means that the Hegel Žižek is homing in on has already been subject to some translation, and the version of Lacan we get in Žižek is tailored to fit Hegel and to be applied to cultural phenomena rather than clinical practice (which is what Lacan was really concerned with, with the training of psychoanalysts).

Nevertheless, this Lacan is still a theoretical resource for radical Slovenes to resist the "injection of desires and fantasies" into their social bloodstream. The NSK statements about desire at least give a second life to Frankfurt School critiques of ideology, but with a twist. Unlike the older Reichian notions of desire as necessarily subversive (notions popular for a while in early 1970s Yugoslavia, and made available to the West in films like *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*), Lacanian psychoanalysis attends to the way desire is laced into the law through the obscene superegoic injunction to "enjoy" (that the superego does not merely prohibit but glues us to fantasy and to the very transgression that we imagine to be escaping it). The NSK State Embassy puts like this, "We never speak of life as such but of the commandment of life". And, against the Anglo-American psychoanalytic hope that the "reality principle" might be better utilized by the ego to harness the pleasure principle, Slovenian popular

psychoanalytic culture operates on the assumption that the ego and the reality principle are suffused with fantasy, not at all to be trusted.

As all readers of Žižek will know, however, this does not mean that Lacanians want to rise up against the Law; to refuse the Law is to deny oneself entry into the symbolic order. To get some freedom of movement, some escape from the mirrored-prison of the imaginary, one must subject oneself to the Law.

### St Slavoj

Where do you go with this? Despite Žižek's provocative calls to "repeat Lenin" (which at other moments he is quick to insist does not at all really mean repeating Lenin), Marxism is consigned to the past, and there is no way that Laibach could be accused of indulging in any kind of "metapolitics". An attractive one-way street for too-many Slovenes now is religion, and in this respect Laibach are a little more canny (and uncanny) in their handling of religious imagery than Žižek. One of their recent albums was *Jesus Christ Superstars*, which one might imagine would have some appeal in Catholic Slovenia, particularly at a time when the Archbishop is making a big pitch on morality and family values. But regular church-goers must have realized pretty quickly that this album was yet another of Laibach's greatest overidentifications, and when you put the music and lyrics of even the most innocent clap-happy soundtrack on top of a thumping beat and sinister growling vocals, it all seems to come closer to the devil. After the launch of Laibach's latest album *WAT*, the audience were invited to attend a special ceremony at a nearby church, following which the leadership of the archdiocese decided that the church required reconsecration.

Žižek's own dabbling with religion has also been treated with great suspicion locally, and it may really be the case that Slovenian church leaders know that when he quotes GK Chesterton and CS Lewis in his recent writing (e.g., Žižek, 2003) he is in fact merely, as he insisted to me, "seizing ground from the enemy". When a German television crew wanted to film St Slavoj in front of the cathedral in Ljubljana, the church authorities refused, he said, slamming the phone down when they were told who the "philosopher" was, and then getting their bouncers to push him down the cathedral steps. Nevertheless, he has still been invited to contribute to a newsletter for priests in Germany, and there is a danger that with every example of Christ as the "fragile" God reduced to mere mortal, in which man may identify and find a "new beginning", it will be the theologians who will succeed in drawing Žižek onto their own ground. When Žižek tells us that it is possible to make a distinction between the "subject of the statement" as the subject of Judaism and the "subject of the enunciation" as the subject of Christianity, this is, of course, to privilege Christianity because in the Lacanian terms through which Žižek is framing this opposition, it is the subject of the enunciation who is really speaking the Truth (and Truth is speaking through them).

Slovenia expelled its Jews in 1515, and there are now, I was told in Metelkova, only about 40 living in Ljubljana. Perhaps Žižek has just absorbed enough early Catholic wisdom to unwittingly recycle some reactionary ideological images of the relation between the wrathful god of Judaism and Christian love. Or perhaps it is a more recent and deliberate choice for him. After all, there was no religious education in schools under Tito, and Žižek himself comes from a northern region of Slovenia with Protestant communities that escaped the effects of the Counter-Reformation. Now, in the immediate context of Ljubljana, to appeal to Christianity is to play with fire. On my last night in Metelkova, one of the performances was of Arabic music accompanying a slideshow of images of Jerusalem and Mecca. The growing presence of a Muslim population cannot be written off so easily by Žižek's comments to the effect that Islam is merely one of the "particularist religions" – not open to the Universal in the way that Christ and St Paul show us – or by the charge that what I was witnessing was a display of the wretched "multiculturalism" he so dislikes (e.g., Žižek, 1997).

### Peaceful coexistence

Žižek's Christ is the fragile man for every man, sign of the "singular universality" first enunciated by St Paul, but this Christ is also the figure who brings the sword of truth that will set brother against brother. Žižek is not interested in the ideological weight of Christianity – that indeed is part of the problem – but in what the example of Christ opens up as a new beginning. As NSK put it, "The essence of love is that privacy is sacrificed to the universal, thus becoming a universal principle". But how should we put this very tough love into practice? Žižek is always looking for some political "act" that will follow the heroic decisions of figures like Antigone, that will change the existing symbolic coordinates of a political system by touching and perhaps traversing the real antagonism that structures the fantasy-infused "reality" of the subject. As Laibach would have it, "Nothing really great in this world has been accomplished without passion or a cold-blooded intervention". Perhaps bombing Serbia would suffice as an instance of "politics proper" that would shake up some local symbolic coordinates and really touch the real. Laibach's *NATO* album anticipated the Western popular cultural–military dismemberment and reabsorption of Yugoslavia, and like the rest of the Slovene intelligentsia sympathetic to the Kosovans, they were not particularly sympathetic to the Serbs in 1999.

Laibach and Žižek are twin phenomena, even intertwined at moments of political crisis in Slovenia in the 1980s. Laibach have turned the activity of resignification into an art form that has already been recuperated in Slovenia, and perhaps it is even worse than that. As you listen to Laibach, you start to realize that even the most innocent or progressive social form can be injected

with reactionary content, but you also start to suspect that the reverse movement – the taking of nationalist imagery for the left, say – is not easy to put on the agenda, perhaps not even possible. The most optimistic reading of Žižek, however, would be one that embeds the particular contingent employment of French psychoanalysis and German idealism in an historical account of the formation and disintegration of Stalinism in Eastern Europe (Parker, 2004).

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