

# **Welcome to the Desert of Transition! Post-Socialism, the European Union, and a New Left in the Balkans**

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The world's attention has been on the political transformations in the Middle East, the wave of protests from Tel Aviv to Madrid to Wall Street, and the ongoing Greek crisis. But in the shadow of this unrest, the post-socialist Balkans have been boiling. Protests displaying for the most part social demands broke out throughout 2011 in Romania, Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, and, most notably, Croatia. At the start of the Croatian protests Interior Minister Tomislav Karamarko described the protesters as "Indijanci," meaning Native American "Indians." He intended to belittle the protestors and their demands by describing them as a colorful carnival of politically irrelevant actors. Not only did this turn against the Minister himself—the protestors appropriated the intended slur and turned it into a satirical weapon against the government, so much so that later many talked about the "Indian revolution"—but it also revealed the essence of the Eastern European, and especially Balkan, predicament today.

In spite of the democratic promise of 1989 and the final arrival of "the End of History," post-socialist citizens—those "Indians" of the "Wild East"—today feel largely excluded from the decision-making process. Most elections have turned out to be little more than a reshuffling of the same political oligarchy with no serious differences in political programmes or rhetoric. During the privatization campaigns many lost their jobs, or had labor conditions worsen and pensions evaporate, and most of the guaranteed social benefits (such as free education and health care) have progressively disappeared as well. Additionally, many citizens are now highly indebted, owing money to foreign-owned banks that have spread around the Balkans and control its whole financial sector. [1] The devastating wars of the 1990s across former Yugoslavia claimed up to 130,000 deaths, and they were followed by another wave of impoverishment in the last decade. This time it was brought on by "euro-compatible" elites who implemented further neoliberal reforms portrayed as a necessary part of the EU accession process.

"Transition" is the name given to the process of turning the former socialist states into liberal democracies and free-market economies (which are apparently the inseparable twins of the new era). This name has brought into both public and political discourse quasi-biblical connotations of acceding to the "land of plenty." But even today, twenty years later, we hear that the Transition is incomplete. The wandering in the desert seems to be endless. In spite of the rhetoric of

incompleteness, we can observe that the free market reigns supreme; post-socialist Eastern Europe is fully incorporated into the capitalist world in a semi-peripheral role. In practice this means the availability of cheap and highly educated labor in proximity to the capitalist core, a quasi-total economic dependence on the core and its multinational banks and corporations, and finally the accumulation of debt. On the political side, liberal democratic procedures formally seem to be there. In spite of that, the notion of an incomplete transition still dominates the media and the academic discourse, and political elites are using it to justify yet another wave of privatization of state or previously socially owned assets. It is as if no one dares to say that Transition meant precisely bringing these states under the sway of capitalism. In this respect, the Transition as such is long over. There is nothing to “transit” to anymore. The rhetoric of incomplete transition has two causal explanations, however: avoidance of a full confrontation with the consequences of Transition, and preservation of the discourse and relations of dominance vis-à-vis the former socialist states. One of the underlying assumptions of the eternal transition is therefore the “need” for tutelage and supervision.

Observers often point out another transitional phenomenon, the appearance of “communist nostalgia.” The politically aseptic Goodbye, Lenin nostalgia is often seen with general sympathy, whereas one opinion poll showing that almost 61 percent of Romanians think that life was better under Ceaușescu is met with strong disapproval and even disappointment by observers. [2] Fervent liberals might point out that it is the “Egyptian pots of meat” story: the “slaves” are always nostalgic about their tyrants instead of being happy to be “free,” even when they are within close reach of the “promised land.” Reading “nostalgia” as the expressed “wish” to return by magic to the state socialist regime—as if anyone offered that alternative—means avoiding the questions that simmer behind these feelings: Why do people feel politically disempowered and economically robbed and enslaved today? Why and when did liberal democracy and the free market economy turn wrong? Was there any other possibility? Why is it not getting any better?

Since communist nostalgia does not produce a specific political movement or programme, the answer must be found in the widespread feeling that something does not work in the new system, and hence that there should be a return to the ideals associated with the generous social policies of ex-communist states. Slovenian sociologist Mitja Velikonja’s study on “Titostalgia” shows two strains of the communist nostalgia: the passive, which is oriented towards cherishing the symbolic heritage of the old system; and the active, which is trying critically to observe current reality through the lenses of the undisputable communist achievements in the economic and social emancipation of the masses in the twentieth century. [3] Those who cannot (or refuse to) acknowledge these feelings are turning a blind eye to the growing discontent and social demands that put Transition into question, both as a process of reform and as a teleological-ideological construct of dominance.

## **The EU’s Balkanpolitik**

The European Union is the main protagonist of the Eastern European Transition; according to its 1993 Copenhagen policy, it is supposed to educate, discipline, and punish while offering EU membership as the prize at the end of the bumpy road of Transition—where awaits, so the story goes, the democratic and economic pay off. However, the reality destroyed the fable: even when the goal was finally achieved, the promise was not fully kept. All but three member states from “old” Europe immediately imposed labor restrictions on free circulation for citizens of “new” Europe, breaking the promise of equal European citizenship. Moreover, there is even a need for further “monitoring” of the “Eastern Balkan” countries whose citizens (legally EU citizens as well) are often treated as third-class citizens, as demonstrated in the case of those Romanians (most of them Roma) recently expelled from France as illegal aliens. Economic well-being has not been achieved, nor has

democracy flourished.

The European Union has been the most powerful political and economic agent in a post-socialist Balkans, Europe's most varied political landscape. Nowhere as on this peninsula is the European Union's mission civilisatrice so evident. Though it has fully integrated Slovenia, the EU "monitors" Romania and Bulgaria, both of which have been heavily criticized and sanctioned for not being able to "catch up" (Bulgaria has lost millions in EU funds). Five years after integration, these countries have been hit hard by the economic crisis. [4] The European Union not only supervises the Western Balkan candidates ("negotiations" being a euphemism for a one-way communication amounting to little more than the "translate-paste" operations during the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*), but it actually maintains two semi-protectorates (Bosnia and Kosovo). The European Union developed varied approaches: disciplining and punishing (Romania and Bulgaria), bilaterally negotiating membership (Croatia and Montenegro), punishing and rewarding (Serbia and Albania), managing (Bosnia), governing (Kosovo), and, finally, ignoring (Macedonia blocked in the name dispute with Greece). Today, there is one common denominator in all these approaches—Crisis.

Social gloom reigns over the Balkans, but especially over the so-called Western Balkans, another geopolitical construct forged in Brussels which is composed of the former Yugoslav republics "minus Slovenia, plus Albania." This entity has complex attributes: it is not only a post-socialist, but also a post-partition and post-conflict region. It is entirely surrounded by EU members, making it a sort of "ghetto" around which the Schengen ring has been slowly deployed. Slovenia, Hungary, and Greece patrol the Fortress; Romania and Bulgaria have been, so far unsuccessfully, preparing for this role as well. One could see the Schengen's enlargement (instead of the EU enlargement) as a continuation of the 1990s containment policies, when the main aim was to prevent the war in the former Yugoslavia from spilling over. In this respect—and save for the "minus Slovenia, plus Albania" approach that hides the fact that Slovenia is still deeply involved with its southern brethren, and that Albania is primarily close to its Albanian kin in Kosovo—"Yugoslavia" has not disappeared as a geopolitical space. A sense of the region's unity, despite the conflicts, has led Tim Judah to invent the new term "Yugosphere," which quickly caught on. [5] This does not, however, tell us much, since these "spheres" are formed, not only by their internal centripetal forces, but more importantly by their external borders and isolation from other spheres.

Unlike other regions the European Union took direct action in the Balkans. Kosovo is effectively run by the European Union via its Law and Order Mission (EULEX), although five EU member states participate in the mission even though they still refuse to recognise the new state. This reveals the failure of the U.S.-led (and mostly EU-backed) Kosovo independence strategy, which left the country and its population in the limbo of partial recognition, preventing it from joining any international organization. Besides Bosnia and Kosovo, the European forces, led by Italy, intervened in Albania in 1997; EU militaries were present in Macedonia; and many EU members were involved in the NATO bombings of the then- Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The European Union in the Balkans is therefore not only a club that tests its candidates—it is an active player in transforming the region, politically, socially, and economically. Our survey of its Balkanpolitik demands an answer to the question: Why did it not succeed in its stabilization and integration policies?

### **The Empire's Balkan Crisis**

The United States in general, and the European Union in the Balkans in particular, dissimulate their dominance through "state-building" or "capacity-building" policies and local "ownership." This is precisely what David Chandler calls "Empire in denial," which offers a convincing argument about neo-colonialism disguised as state-building. [6] Bosnia and Kosovo have been the examples for some

time, but today there is also Iraq and Afghanistan, and now Libya, and tomorrow it will possibly be Syria or another Middle-Eastern country. In practice, the local ownership strategy means little more than implementing externally dictated reforms while nesting responsibility within the local elites. An “Empire in denial” does not govern directly, due to the cost and unpopularity of this mode of domination, but via friendly regimes that remain responsible for implementing (or not implementing) the state-building or “EU-member”-building strategies.

Problems arise, however, when elected local elites avoid cooperating in domains that would cut the branch on which their power sits, particularly that of the judiciary and the police. The problem is further exacerbated by the “Empire in denial’s” ideological inability to question these elected leaders, although the electoral process is prone to various manipulations by local oligarchies, both before and after the voting. It insists furthermore on continuous austerity measures and neoliberal reforms that are supposed to be undertaken by those very same “democratically elected,” hugely corrupt, and deeply undemocratic elites that are eventually the only ones to benefit from these reforms.

Turkes and Gokgoz point out that the European commission’s major strategy is precisely “neoliberal restructuring,” which in practice undermines democratic development (the stated goal of the EU’s actions) and allows for authoritarian practices. [7] The assumed causal relation between neoliberal economic reforms and the promotion of democracy appears, therefore, to be highly problematic. These two crucial elements of EU strategy towards the Western Balkans, as Turkes and Gokgoz emphasize, “have not fed one another.” Rather, they argue, “the opposite has occurred.” It seems that in a post-conflict situation—characterized by close ties between businesses, criminal networks, the state security apparatus, and political elites—the current EU strategy undermines its own stated goal of stabilizing and democratizing the region.

The trouble is precisely that neoliberal reforms are opening up more opportunities for corruption and predatory behavior by local elites, as the Croatian case amply shows. The privatization of infrastructure such as telecommunications, big industries, natural resources such as water, media outlets, and even public services, in addition to the foreign bank investments or devastating credit lines, are some of the many “opportunities” rising out of the neoliberal restructuring which is the first phase of the incorporation into the EU-sphere. The case of the former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, who was praised by the European Union but is currently imprisoned for widespread corruption charges, is a telling example of how the local elites can profit from the “restructuring” process.

### **The Winter of Croatian Discontent**

“Zagreb = Maghreb.” At first it seemed only as a jeu de mots employed by left-leaning media, but soon after the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian dictators the “Facebook protests” started in Croatia as well. [8] There is not a simple analogy with the Arab Spring and it would be erroneous to try and establish one. Nonetheless the situation in the Balkans exhibits commonalities with the Middle-Eastern discontent to some extent, but especially to the Greek situation. What is happening in Croatia is fertile ground for an analysis that aims to capture the current mood of discontent and rebellion at the borders of the West.

Since 1990 Croatia has gone through a series of transformations which have included a brutal war, a nationalist autocracy, and the “euro-compatible” behavior of post-Tudjman elites who are reluctant fully to clear the mess of the previous decade. This has finally brought Croatia to the threshold of the European Union. But what state is Croatia in as it knocks on the EU’s door? The \$3 billion foreign

debt it inherited from Yugoslavia is now around \$60 billion, which amounts to around 100 percent of the GDP (which in 2009 decreased by 5.6 percent and in 2010 by an additional 1.5 percent). [9] Once the most prosperous and developed of the Yugoslav republics, it now has almost no industry. The dodgy privatization of the 1990s, facilitated by the war and followed by the continuous neoliberal reforms of the 2000s, created enormous social gaps which include a 19 percent unemployment rate. As recently as April 2010 the Croatian government put forward the “Programme for Economic Recovery,” which basically adopted austerity measures by decreasing the number of public sector workers by 5 percent and the budget for paying them by 10 percent. It also announced the privatization of big state-owned firms such as the electric company, the woods and the water companies, and the railways—all of this on top of already privatized successful state corporations such as Croatian Telecom, the famous pharmaceutical producer Pliva, and the petrol company Ina. The tourist paradise of Croatia’s famous coast hides the destruction of one of Europe’s most advanced shipbuilding industries, the fourth strongest, which owns some 1.5 percent of the global market. It employs 12,000 workers and an additional 35,000 jobs are directly linked to it. [10] Croatia is being pressured by the European Union to stop state subsidies to shipyards. This will necessarily entail a huge reduction, if not complete closure, of one of the most successful domestic industries.

All contradictions from the capitalist core such as financial shocks, reckless consumerism, big media domination, elite-driven politics, democratic deficit, or commercialization of public services are visible together with all political, social, and economic problems of the post-socialist, post-partition, and post-conflict semi-periphery. Croatia is absolutely dependant on the core for matters related to finance (as mentioned, the foreign banks own 90 percent of the sector), the economy (foreign capital dominates all economic activities), and the military (Croatia joined NATO in 2008). Neoliberal hegemony is coupled with a conservative nationalism which has turned Croatia into little more than an unholy alliance of state structures, big businesses, and mafia. Until recently this all went unquestioned. But in winter, as if the Levantine echoes had found truly receptive ears on the other side of the Mediterranean, the streets were filled with protests.

### **The Spring of a New Left?**

It started primarily as a “Facebook movement” which gathered the younger, politically confused generation that was unsatisfied with the new government policies. The starting point could be seen as the February 26, 2011 protest in Zagreb’s central square, when war veterans and right-wing groups gathered to oppose the extradition and trial of a former Croatian soldier in Serbia. This ended in a violent conflict between a crowd of mostly football hooligans and the police. However, only two days later a different protest emerged. The “Facebook protests” started to become more specific about the reasons for discontent—namely the disastrous social situation, the lack of confidence in institutions, and the political system which breeds corruption and deepened social inequalities. It was a big surprise to see independent protests uniting groups of various political stripes. Even more surprising were the banners denouncing the European Union and capitalism as such, questioning the party system and, taking everything a step further, demanding direct democracy.

The unexpected emergence of what we could call a new, organized, and indeed original left in Croatia that is actively involved in, and even shaping, the current protest movement must be traced back to 2009. Then an independent student movement articulated a strong resistance to the privatization and commercialization of higher education. In a sort of Hegelian “concrete universality,” their protest against neoliberal reforms in education turned into what was probably the first strong political opposition to not only the government, but the general political and social

regime. During thirty-five days in spring and two weeks in autumn that year, more than twenty Croatian universities were occupied by students, who were practically running them. [11] In itself, this was nothing new under the sun, but the way the students occupied and ran the universities deserves attention for its originality in a much larger context than the one of the Balkans or Eastern Europe.

The students set up citizens' plenary assemblies—called “plenum”—in which not only students but all citizens were invited; they did not just debate issues of public importance such as education, but also decided upon the course of their rebellious actions. The most active plenum at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb each evening gathered up to a thousand people who would deliberate on the course of action. [12] This event gave rise to the movement for direct democracy as a necessary corrective (and possibly a true alternative) to electoral democracy and partitocracy. The new Croatian left, whose ideas quickly spread around the post-Yugoslav space, does not see direct democracy limited to the referendum practice, but rather as a means of political organization for people from local communes to the national level. The proof that it was not only an idea of marginal groups came very soon after the students' occupations. Between 2009 and 2011 Croatia witnessed a massive movement (under the name “The Right to the City”) for the preservation of urban space in downtown Zagreb which had been sold by the city government to big investors. This happened in conjunction with a wave of workers' strikes involving the textile industry, shipyards, and farmers' protests. Some of these collective actions used the “plenum” model developed at the universities, or a similar sort of directly democratic structure, and this came as a huge surprise to the political elite and the mainstream media.

### **This Is Not A Color Revolution!**

Although the new left was pivotal in shifting the nature of the protests, they did not turn into clearly marked leftist demonstrations, but instead remained a genuine people's movement. In February, March, and April 2011 up to ten thousand people assembled every other evening in Zagreb, and up to a couple thousand assembled in other cities. [13] Besides a rhetorical shift (a strong anti-capitalist discourse unheard of either in independent Croatia or elsewhere in the Balkans), the crucial point was the rejection of leaders, which gave citizens an opportunity to decide on the direction and the form of their protests. The “Indian revolution,” previously limited to public squares, soon turned into long marches through Zagreb. It was a clear example of how “invited spaces of citizenship,” designed as such by state structures and police for “kettled” expression of discontent, were superseded by “invented spaces of citizenship,” in which citizens themselves opened new ways and venues for their subversive actions, and questioned legality in the name of the legitimacy of their demands. [14] This was not a classic, static protest anymore and, unlike the famous Belgrade walks in 1996-97, the Zagreb ones were neither aimed only at the government as such, nor only at the ruling party and its boss(es). They acquired a strong anti-systemic critique, exemplified by the fact that protesters were regularly “visiting” the nodal political, social, and economic points of contemporary Croatia (political parties, banks, government offices, unions, privatization fund, television and media outlets, etc.). The flags of the ruling conservative Croatian Democratic Union, the Social Democratic Party (seen as not opposing the neoliberal reforms), and even the European Union (seen as complicit in the elite's wrongdoings) were burned. The protesters even “visited” the residences of the ruling party politicians, which signalled a widespread belief that their newly acquired wealth was nothing more than legalized robbery.

And this is precisely the novelty of these protests. It is not yet another “color revolution” of the kind the Western media and academia are usually so enthusiastic about (but who are otherwise not interested in following how the “waves of democratization” often do little more than replace one

autocrat with another, more cooperative one). The U.S.-sponsored color revolutions never put into question the political or economic system as such, although they did respond to a genuine demand in these societies to get rid of the authoritarian and corrupt elites that had mostly formed in the 1990s. The Croatian example shows that for the first time protests are not driven by anti-government rhetoric per se, but instead are based on true anti-regime sentiment. Not only the state but the whole apparatus on which the current oligarchy is based is put into question by (albeit chaotically) self-organized citizens. No color is needed to mark this kind of revolution which obviously cannot hope for any external help or international media coverage. It did the only thing the dispossessed can do: marched through their cities signalling the topoi of the Regime, which had almost cemented over the last two decades but is susceptible to cracking under the weight of its own contradictions and products, such as expanding poverty. The emergence and nature of these Croatian protests invites us also to rethink the categories used to explain the social, political, and economic situation in the Balkans and elsewhere in post-socialist Eastern Europe.

### **Conclusive Remarks: A New Dawn in the Balkans?**

This analysis shows how the very concept of Transition—as an ideological construct of domination based on the narrative of integration of the former socialist Europe into the Western core—actually hides the monumental neo-colonial transformation of this region into a dependent semi-periphery. The adjunct concepts of “weak state” or “failed state,” for example, paper over the fact that these are not anomalies of the Transition, but rather are one of its main products. The famous corruption problem poses a puzzle for observers and scholars, and many have concluded that, since the liberal system as such is beyond questioning, widespread corruption must be related to path-dependent or cultural behavior in the “East.” However, in reality corruption seems to be a direct consequence of the post-1989 neoliberal scramble for Eastern Europe, and, furthermore, is frequent behavior across the European Union itself. In order to understand the post-communist, “eternal transitional” predicament, and especially the current political and economic situation in the Balkans, one has to go beyond the analysis of the state’s failure and weakness. One must engage with the concept of Regime as a conglomeration of political elites, attached businesses and their Western partners, media corporations, NGOs promoting the holy union of electoral democracy and neoliberal economy, organized crime (itself intimately related to the political and economic elites), foreign-owned predatory banks and, finally, a corrupt judiciary and corrupt unions. Other “ideological apparatuses” of the Regime help to cement the results of the big neoliberal transformation.

Here lies the minimal common denominator between the Balkans today and the Arab Spring: all these protest movements, despite their clear differences, are profoundly anti-regime. Rebelling against post-socialist Regimes is all that much harder because they often do not have a single face: there is no dictator, nor governing families or royalty, and furthermore they are not characterized by open repression or censorship. And yet the anger is similar.

This logically brings us to the question: Is a new dawn in Eastern Europe politics, especially in the Balkans, announced in these protests? One does not have to be familiar with Balkan history to know that the possibility of a new and revitalized nationalism is not unrealistic. But, on the other hand, to dismiss a new people’s movement because it is heterogeneous and subject to all sorts of developments means not only to abandon the idea of “the will of the people,” [15] but it is also to cling to the old fantasy about precise mature moments for revolutions. The Arab example shows that the situation remains open even after the People give a significant—but not final—blow to the Regime. The example of Croatia demonstrates how a situation that has been initiated by right-wing elements can be turned into its opposite and can be co-opted by newly emerging and imaginative progressive forces. It also demonstrates that a new generation enters politics via direct democratic

actions and the street, and not through political channels of electoral democracy and party politics.

The new left we detected within this movement is dissociated both from the past of state socialism and from traditional social-democratic parties. Sometimes in unlikely places such as the Middle East or Croatia we can see a sudden explosion of original radicality from which many in the West, too comfortable in the structures of liberal “oppressive tolerance,” could learn a great deal regarding the forms and methods of subversive politics in the twenty-first century.

**Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks**

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## **P.S.**

\* From the Monthly Review, 2012, Volume 63, Issue 10 (March):

<http://monthlyreview.org/2012/03/01/welcome-to-the-desert-of-transition>

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—Eds. (Monthly Review)

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## **Footnotes**

[1] For example, 75.3 percent in Serbia, 90 percent in Croatia and up to 95 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina. See Yoji Koyama, “Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on the Western Balkan Countries: Focusing on Croatia,” a conference paper presented at “Global Shock Wave: Rethinking Asia’s Future in Light of the Worldwide Financial Crisis and Depression 2008-2010,” Kyoto University, Kyoto, September 25-26, 2010.

[2] See Rossen Vassilev, “The Tragic Failure of Post-Communism in Eastern Europe,” March 8, 2011, <http://globalresearch.ca>.

[3] Mitja Velikonja, *Titostalgia* (Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2008), <http://mediawatch.mirovni-institut.si>.

[4] Vassilev, *Ibid.*

[5] Tim Judah, “Yugoslavia Is Dead, Long Live the Yugosphere,” LSEE Papers on South Eastern Europe, November 2009, [www2.lse.ac.uk](http://www2.lse.ac.uk).



[6] David Chandler, *Empire in Denial* (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

[7] Mustafa Türkes and Göksu Gökgöz, "The European Union's strategy towards the Western Balkans: Exclusion or Integration," *East European Politics and Societies* 20, no. 4 (2006): 659–90.

[8] Toni Prug, "Croatia protests show failure of political promise," *The Guardian - Comment is Free*, April 2, 2011, <http://guardian.co.uk>.

[9] or an analysis of the Croatian economic situation see Hermine Vidovic, "Croatia: Difficult to come out of the crisis," in Peter Havlik, et. al., *Recovery—in low gear across though terrain*, *wiiw Current Analyses and Forecasts* 7, February, 2011, 77.

[10] See Koyama, *Ibid*.

[11] We have written extensively about the student and civic rebellions that involved occupation of universities but also a defence of public spaces in our book *Pravo na pobunu—Uvod u anatomiju gradjanskog otpora* [The Right to Rebellion—An Introduction to the Anatomy of Civic Resistance] (Zagreb: Fraktura, 2010). For an overview of the student movement see Mate Kapović, "Two years of struggle for free education and the development of a new student movement in Croatia," January 4, 2011, <http://slobodnifilozofski.org>.

[12] For a detailed overview of the student actions see *The Occupation Cookbook*, or the *Model of the Occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb* (London: Minor Compositions, 2011), <http://www.minorcompositions.info>.

[13] Up to 10,000 occupied the main Zagreb square on the October 15 worldwide day of action and held the first "people's plenum" there, but failed to turn it into a continuous occupation.

[14] See Faranak Miraftab, "Invented and Invited Spaces of Participation: Neoliberal Citizenship and Feminists Expanded Notion of Politics," *Wagadu* 1 (Spring 2004), <http://appweb.cortland.edu>.

[15] See Peter Hallward, "The will of the people: notes towards a dialectical voluntarism," *Radical Philosophy* 155 (May/June 2009): 17–29.