

# For Srećko Horvat, ‘The current system is more violent than any revolution’

Tuesday 30 April 2019, by [ANTHONY Andrew](#) (Date first published: 21 April 2019).

**The philosopher and activist counts Yanis Varoufakis, Slavoj Žižek and Julian Assange as friends, and his new book calls for a global liberation movement to bring down capitalism.**

Up until the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, foreigners were not allowed to visit the beautiful Dalmatian island of Vis, then home to a major naval base. Two years ago it was the location for [Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again](#), doubling as the fictional Greek island of Kalokairi.

One way of looking at the transformation from military redoubt to Hollywood idyll is as a triumph of freedom of movement over draconian restrictions. But that’s not how the Croatian philosopher Srećko Horvat sees the resulting media attention, rising real estate prices and what he calls the “tourist occupation” of Vis, where he now lives, when he’s not travelling and organising.

“Where once there was a sustainable local community,” he writes in his new book, *Poetry from the Future*, “there are weekending easyJet tourists; where fishermen’s boats once rode at anchor, now luxury yachts are moored.”

You probably haven’t heard of Horvat, though you will have heard of plenty of people who have. He’s friends with the former Greek finance minister [Yanis Varoufakis](#), with whom he set up the [Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 \(DiEM25\)](#). He was a regular visitor to Julian Assange, before he was [extracted from the Ecuadorian embassy](#). He’s also in close contact with Assange’s friend, the former *Baywatch* star Pamela Anderson.

He is a staunch friend of [Slavoj Žižek](#), the maverick Slovenian celebrity academic (they co-wrote a book in 2013 entitled *What Does Europe Want?*), as well as being on good terms with one of Žižek’s most vituperative critics, the renowned American academic [Noam Chomsky](#). He also hangs out with the celebrated Mexican film-maker Alfonso Cuarón.

But at 36, Horvat is far from being some kind of right-on hanger-on. In fact he’s one of the busiest leftwing political activists in Europe. Aside from DiEM25, which campaigns to reform the EU into a “realm of shared prosperity, peace and solidarity”, and for whom he’s standing in the European elections, he is a founder of the [Subversivefestival](#), an annual jamboree in Zagreb of radical thought that has featured the likes of Oliver Stone and Antonio Negri, he set up the [Philosophical theatre](#) in the same city, whose contributors have included Adam Curtis, Vanessa Redgrave and [Thomas Piketty](#). And he has been involved in everything from Occupy Wall Street to the World Social Forum and protests about the 2017 G20 Hamburg summit.

Yet in leftist circles in the UK Horvat remains unknown. When I mentioned his name to several leading young British anticapitalists, I received blank expressions. His publishers are hoping that will change with the publication of his new book, *Poetry from the Future: Why a Global Liberation Movement Is Our Civilisation’s Last Chance*.

Despite the apocalyptic subtitle, the book is a series of discursive essays in the continental tradition: all ideas, epigrams and lyrical flourishes. Unafraid to mention *Mamma Mia!* and *The X-Files* along with erudite references to Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, Horvat is the kind of free-ranging thinker who reminds you of Sartre's observation on Nietzsche: "A poet who had the bad luck to be mistaken for a philosopher."

All the same, tourist occupation? Isn't that a little melodramatic in relation to an island that was literally occupied, and by Italian fascists, in the second world war?

And then there's the tone of mournful despair. "Today," he writes, "we are living in a long winter of melancholy, not only in [Europe](#) but across the world." Or this: "The past is forgotten, and the future is without hope. Dystopia has become a reality."

What's the good news?

As my bus pulled into Komiža, the more remote of Vis's two coastal villages, I wondered if I was going to be meeting some gloomily earnest revolutionary, bristling with disgust for western decadence and aching with the misery of it all. But the moment I was greeted by Horvat's beaming countenance, I was not just disarmed, but practically ready to take up arms by his side.

A passionate yet playful character with a patchy beard and high forehead that seems to forewarn of his formidable intellect, he bears a sparkling-eyed resemblance to a young Billy Crystal – if you can imagine the American comedian mastering the vocabulary of critical theory.

Horvat may lack Žižek's gift for comic provocation or Varoufakis's charismatic air of danger, but in person he more than makes up for it with an instantly infectious warmth and unaffected enthusiasm. As he leads me to the hotel he recommended I stay in, he sings its proletarian praises.

The Bisevo, he tells me, is an unreconstructed socialist-era hotel that represents a slice of the former Yugoslavia he fears has almost disappeared.

"This is the kind of place that all workers could come to each year for a holiday by the sea," he says, ushering me into the large crepuscular reception.

The near-empty building, with its long silent corridors, feels not just out of season, but out of time – a strange throwback to the dream of universal provision, when the concept of service culture was all but a crime of bourgeois deviationism. It may lack a few mod cons, but it's clean and quiet and yards from the gently lapping sea.

I drop my bag off and Horvat whisks me away to his friend's restaurant where we discuss how he came to adopt and develop his ideas. His book is a rallying cry for resistance to the rapacious forces of capitalism, an emotive argument against the complacent acceptance of "Tina" – the idea that "there is no alternative".

He takes as his inspiration the Partisans, the Yugoslav resistance fighters who made their base on Vis during the war and ousted the Italian forces.

"What the period of fascist occupation of Vis shows," he says, "is that resistance can acquire many forms and even a small number of determined people on a remote island can defeat a numerically and technologically superior army."

Their achievements were indeed impressive, gaining the respect of British military officers and ultimately Winston Churchill. But Marshal Tito, the head of the Partisans, was to preside for decades

over the authoritarian and increasingly sclerotic communist regime that ruled Yugoslavia until its demise.

Horvat's father was an opponent of that regime, a liberal who sought asylum in Germany with his family shortly after Horvat was born. The family didn't return until Horvat was eight, when the Yugoslav civil war started in 1991. In Germany he had been perceived as a Yugoslav; back in [Croatia](#) he was made to feel like a German. Because he was an outsider he turned to books, reading everything he could get his hands on. At that time, the new nationalist Croatian regime was busy getting rid of any books it deemed connected to Marxism, which included any books connected to Russia.

"Like Dostoevsky," he says, shaking his head. "It's a big scandal but I have most of these books at home, because I saved them."

Yet given that his father was a dissident, and had only returned because communism had come to an ignominious end, why was Horvat drawn to the Marxist end of the political spectrum, from which communist Yugoslavia had emerged?

"In the 90s," he says between sips of beer, "it was either nationalism or this dream of the end of history, in the sense that capitalism will solve all our problems and finally we can buy all this stuff we couldn't buy with communism. Those were the two alternatives."

He rejected both and found an outlet for his disaffection in hardcore punk music, travelling with his band around the different states of the former Yugoslavia, where he met like-minded teenagers. This anarchic scene spawned a lively fanzine culture, which took to publishing renowned revolutionaries.

"I translated [Kropotkin](#) at 16," Horvat says, a boast that I'm confident Sid Vicious was never able to make.

Of course, it's all very well denouncing the system when you're a teenager, and it's fine to celebrate the courage and commitment of the Partisans, but isn't the great lesson of socialist revolutions that they start out full of heroism and righteous conviction and descend into state repression and paranoid social control?

Horvat was just six when the Berlin Wall came down. It's a moment in history to him rather than a memory of long-awaited freedom. He's from a generation for whom opposition to capitalism, and even celebration of communist revolutionaries (Lenin and Che Guevara both receive favourable mention in his books), has little to do with the real-world communist regimes that immiserated hundreds of millions across the globe.

He duly distances his ideas from such regimes in *Poetry from the Future*, and insists he's "not a nostalgic for Yugoslavia". But we decide to save the nitty gritty of politics to the following day. In the meantime Horvat wants to take me to ŽŽ, his friend Čedo's bar, or *konoba*, which is tucked down a narrow side lane leading to the sea. Horvat describes it as a "cross between an atelier and a social centre", with room for about 10 people to sit. Apparently it's packed with tourists in summer.

Now in the off-season there are just a few old hands – the regulars are stonemasons, fisherman, painters – drinking rakia, the local hard liquor of choice, rolling joints, sharing jokes and lamenting the direction of the world. In common with many millennial revolutionaries, central to Horvat's political outlook is the belief that climate change is humanity's greatest existential threat since the last ice age.

It's a jolly scene, full of high spirits and low expectations. The talk, a little incongruously, is of rising

sea levels, growing nationalism and racism, like a shebeen for Corbynistas, though more entertaining than that sounds.

Despite a steady flow of drinks and snacks, no money is exchanged that I can see, and my offers to contribute are met with implacable dismissals. Later I ask Horvat how it works. "Most of it functions as exchange," he says, "on the principles of - using [Lyotard](#)'s term - libidinal economy. Or the micro-politics of desire."

I'm not sure what that means but if this is what a post-capitalist economy looks like, I can't complain.

At the end of the night, I stumble back to the Bisevo, ready to volunteer for the cause, even if I can't remember what it is.

The following day Horvat is keen to show me the island's sights. There's Tito's cave, in which the Partisan hero was said to have hidden - Evelyn Waugh, on an army mission, actually flew out to meet him. There's also an abandoned network of military bunkers and tunnels, and a secret submarine shelter. Before we see these delights we sit down for an interview.

I'm intrigued at how and why the shadow of 20<sup>th</sup>-century communism seems to leave so little mark on the anticapitalists of today, especially those living in former communist countries. For despite his reservations about Yugoslavia, Horvat doesn't want its strengths to be forgotten. He speaks glowingly of a recent exhibition at MoMA in New York entitled [Toward a Concrete Utopia](#), "which showed that Yugoslavia had a modernisation project that was also connected to arts, culture, architecture". And, he continues, Yugoslavia "had economic democracy, which came immediately after the break with Stalin [in 1948 Tito established independence from Moscow]. It was called self-management. Of course it had many problems. The biggest problem was that in practice it didn't really function."

He speaks in such an ecstatic rush of eloquent English that sometimes it's hard to work out whether or not he's making a joke. But he's serious when he suggests that the standard of living enjoyed by Yugoslavs was higher than that of Croatians today. Statistics don't bear this out, but Horvat bases his comparison on the experiences of his family and friends.

"Just the ability to go to the sea for vacation. In Yugoslav times almost everyone had this as a fundamental right. This architecture," he says, gesturing to the Bisevo behind us. "Hotels were built for workers - in that sense the living standard was higher. There was more equality of course but today healthcare and higher education are gradually being privatised and there is huge emigration from Croatia. There are no shipyards any more. Once we had the strongest shipyards in Europe."

What Croatia does have is tourism, which Horvat says accounts for a higher percentage of its GDP (18%) than any other European nation. Any economy that is reliant on such a large foreign presence will inevitably breed resentments. But as much as Horvat wants to preserve the livelihoods and lifestyles that have been subordinated to the tourist industry, he is also a fierce proponent of an open borders policy.

He rightly attacks the xenophobia that is growing in Hungary, Poland, Austria and Italy - not to mention elsewhere - and believes Europe must prepare for hundreds of millions of refugees. But how can a culture like Vis hope to contend with potentially vast numbers of migrants if its culture is so vulnerable to a much smaller number of tourists?

"We have to transform society so that it would be impossible that Buffett or Bezos can be

the richest person in the world.”

“First,” he says, “I’m not a naive leftist who advocates open borders and what happens happens. The policy of letting in people who are fleeing wars or, in the future, climate change is the only correct policy – in the way Germany welcomed me when we came from Yugoslavia. But that’s not enough. We are advocating a Green New Deal that’s connected to migration policy.”

This deal amounts to a massive investment in infrastructure which, he says, will guarantee jobs and therefore remove the perceived threat of migrants undercutting native workers.

Perhaps, I say, but it’s not just an economic question. There seems to be a growing anxiety about identity right across the political spectrum. In his book he talks about the importance of “shared values”. That’s the kind of language, employed with a different meaning, that’s used by his political opponents to describe what makes up people’s collective identities. Right or wrong, it’s the thing that many people fear losing.

“They’re not losing their identities because of migration but because of global capitalism. And this migration is also happening because of global capitalism,” he says.

Horvat rejects categories like communist or Marxist as self-descriptions, but he can certainly sound like one when he wants.

“The only identity that’s worth fighting for,” he concludes, “is one that comes out of the struggle and class solidarity.”

Interestingly, he barely touches on identity politics in his book. The whole fashionable discourse of intersectionality doesn’t get a mention. Perhaps it’s something to do with coming from a country that collapsed and reverted to religious identities – Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim – that were largely buried for half a century.

“I’m very critical of so-called cultural Marxism and identity politics,” he says. “I don’t think the solution to today’s problems is just to advocate more of your identity whether you are gay or vegetarian or whatever. I think we need something much deeper. The Greek worker and German worker have to realise they’re in the same shit even if the German worker has a better salary and lives in a more functional country.”

Is it better, I ask hypothetically, to have greater equality but a lower standard of living or to raise the base standard of living even if there are greater inequalities? He gives a long, thoughtful reply that doesn’t answer my question, finishing with an attack on simple redistribution: “Rutger Bregman and Thomas Piketty constantly talk about taxation, taxation as if the true solution of inequality lies in taking more from the rich and redistributing it. I think we have to radically transform society so that it would be impossible that Warren Buffett or Jeff Bezos can be the richest person in the world. I think taxation is not enough.”

At the time of my visit, Assange is still in the Ecuadoran embassy, where Horvat believes he is effectively held “prisoner”. I ask him what he thinks about the WikiLeaks founder, particularly in the light of the allegations, currently dropped or suspended, of rape in Sweden, his links with people like Nigel Farage and his preference for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton.

“Julian is my friend,” he says. “We often agree, and we often disagree. One of our disagreements was Brexit. He advocated the Leave option while me and Yanis campaigned for the Remain option. But I really think there is a character assassination going on.”

He is sympathetic to Assange's claim that the Swedish investigation was part of an attempt to frame him so that he could be extradited to America. But if the allegations haven't been put to legal test (because Assange avoided going to Sweden), what of the suggestion, explicit in Andrew O'Hagan's long *LRB* profile, that Assange had a "sleazy" attitude towards women.

"I never experienced that. And most of the collaborators at WikiLeaks were women. I know he's a controversial, divisive figure. But many important historical figures are like that. WikiLeaks should be appreciated."

A couple of weeks later, in London, with Assange now in custody, and many MPs suggesting that he should be extradited to Sweden to face the original allegations, I go back to Horvat and ask him where he now stands.

"Whether you like him or not," he replies, "we should be opposed to his extradition to the US, on the basis of protecting the freedom of the press. And if he is extradited to Sweden, Sweden should guarantee he won't be extradited to the US. I've been to the embassy plenty of times and can assure you that all these stories about his hygiene, or his cat spying, are lies constructed in order to further discredit someone who has suffered enough. The UK shouldn't be a puppet in the hands of Trump but a sovereign state protecting whistleblowers and publishers, and the basis of liberal democracy."

Back in Vis, it's time to go on our tour. We meet Horvat's girlfriend, Saša, and her friend Jelena, who are both originally from Novi Sad in Serbia. Horvat met Sasa at a political festival. She works for an NGO and, although she seems to share his ideological world view, she's clearly an independent spirit.

Horvat's previous book was called *The Radicality of Love*, in which, paraphrasing the French far-left philosopher [Alain Badiou](#), he wrote: "Love is communism for two. But love is as difficult as communism, and can often end up as tragic as communism. Like revolution, true love is the creation of a new world."

I can't say if Srećko and Saša amount to communism for two. But they seem quite happy together.

Tito's cave is rather underwhelming. It is just a small cave high in the mountains with an inconspicuous commemorative plaque. But Horvat is energised by the thought of resistance fighters hiding up here from the planes overhead, as though he can visualise their plight. We drive on to see the submarine base, a huge hole in the cliff that drops into the sea. I say that it looks like something from a James Bond film.

"Yes!" he exclaims indignantly. "We're not a *Mamma Mia!* island! We're a James Bond island!"

Later that night, Horvat attempts to persuade me to stay on in Vis. I want to, despite work commitments, because it's a truly lovely place. Indeed, it's such a paradise that I find it hard to imagine how Horvat can remember that the world is such a nightmare.

"I think it's paradise but I'm nostalgic for things that will disappear," he says. "I see things that are already disappearing and changing. The local population feels it even better than me. We need to be mad prophets who might turn out wrong. We need to shock the people with the dystopian facts. No sea fish, only plastics, no air."

In many respects, of course, he's not wrong. We do need to be aware of the dangers of climate change and environmental despoliation. And the inequalities he rails against are real and growing and require urgent attention. But Horvat writes in revolutionary terms and revolutions have a habit of quickly betraying their ideals. He seems to me the most gentle and benign of characters, the kind

of person who would probably not thrive in the ruthless power struggles of dramatic sociopolitical upheaval.

He confides that he's ambivalent about the prospect of becoming an MEP. A big part of him just wants to stay on Vis and write. But while I'm there, his phone keeps ringing – often it's Varoufakis – and he's dragged into the tiresome business of political management and internal conflict resolution.

Back in London, I write to ask him if he thinks the radical change he's calling for can take place without the use or threat of large-scale violence.

"I believe that the current system," he replies, "with its never-ending war against the majority of people, other species and nature, is already more violent than any revolution. That said, I don't like violence of any sort. But a revolution is not a dinner party or writing an essay. Although it often starts like that."

I disagree, because revolutions can be and certainly have been more violent than the current system, for all its injustices. But at the same time, Srećko Horvat is the kind of guy you'd never be disappointed to see at a dinner party.

- *Poetry from the Future* by Srećko Horvat is published by Penguin (£16.99). To order a copy go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £15, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99

- [Srećko Horvat will be live in conversation with Brian Eno at EarthH, London N16, 14 May, 7pm](#)

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## Andrew Anthony

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/21/srecko-horvat-poems-from-the-future-interview>