

JUST DO IT, BUT NOT IN THE PARK: THE STORY OF THE ACTIVIST

Skeptically, the experienced activist from the Balkans followed developments surrounding the uprising popularly known as Occupy, led by US students and academics. He was not surprised when at a certain point Slavoj Žižek, Chantal Mouffe and Alain Badiou began to criticize the movement. In their critical articles the activist read that the Occupy movement did not have a “general intellect”; that their collective “performative event” in the Zuccotti Park would be unlikely to last long; that they did not have a solid party; that they were anarchic. The problem, wrote Slavoj Žižek and others, is that the utopia of democratic horizontality and libertarian individualism impairs the strength of the very political project that would unite them. Therefore they would fail to produce an avant-garde that, in the classical sense, could take a political step forward. Jodi Dean (1) stated that no coalition was being created with wider social strata, and that matters remained at the level of culture and civil society, something inherent to the conservative environment of the United States.

The problem, reflected the activist, is that Occupy lacks proper tactics and strategy. The citizens’ dream of social justice and freedom will never be achieved within such a setting, he concluded -- having lost his belief in the ideals of his younger days.

The activist remembered his deceased father, who had worked for a Yugoslav construction company in the Middle East in the 70s. He earned well thanks to Tito’s policy of cooperation with the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (2). Back then, Marshall Tito’s Socialist Yugoslavia had helped promote social changes in the non-aligned countries, supporting the anti-colonial struggle. Back then everything was done without Facebook or Twitter. Radio was the main medium, and propaganda material against the colonial rulers was often created in Belgrade. In Egypt, Tito helped Nasser establish himself as president. The two of them, joined by India’s Jawaharlal Nehru, were the key figures at the 1st Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961.

Ironically Belgrade, as the capital of Serbia, lost membership during the wars of the 90s for supporting war crimes in Bosnia. But the crisis started earlier. Tito died in 1980. His great friend, Emperor Haile Selassie had already been murdered in 1975 and famine reigned in Ethiopia. Bob Geldof organized concerts for the hungry while Margaret Thatcher launched her campaign against the British workers, introducing deep cuts and promoting a new ideology of neoliberalism, which would become globally hegemonic over the next three decades. British pop, an export industry, sang the decline of the production worker and the carefree life of cultural industries. In the late 80s the activist, his friends and much of the youth of Yugoslavia were enthralled by these songs. Brit Pop and punk spilled out of local loudspeakers in Yugoslav variants: the soundtrack of future members of the Serbian *Otpor!* movement (3), which the activist was to join in the late 90s.

The activist was aware that the main sympathizers of the Occupy movement, US students, were on average about one hundred thousand dollars in debt each. They had to pay enormous tuition fees for years on end. The activist himself had studied for free in Milošević’s Serbia during the 90s. Still, he called Milošević “Slobo-Saddam”, an allusion to Saddam Hussein, and considered Milošević the source of all evil in the Balkans, agitating for his resignation. It was his second year at the University of Belgrade when he was

part of the student protest against Milošević’s alleged theft of electoral votes in 1996/97. Led by the youthful radio B92, civil society was flourishing, and pushed for the removal of Mira, Milošević’s wife, and Sloba himself. Somewhere in the middle of this protest movement, the activist and his friends left it. They could not support the way the majority of them decided, on a religious feast day, to join in symbolically carrying bread to the Serbian Orthodox Church for blessing. It was in the context of these protests that the seeds of *Otpor!* were sown.

Through various channels, occasional visits to Washington were organized for the brave anti-Slobo activists, and they were trained using certain video games that simulated political strategies and tactical moves on the basis of statistics and calculations. In short, the activists were drilled in techniques to bring down their local dictator. In 1999, when NATO began bombing Yugoslavia, *Otpor!* got serious. After the bombing, Milošević’s regime tried rebuild the country, yet the depression was horrible, almost every factory that could produce anything had been hit. The bombs had destroyed all of them. The coup of October 5, 2000, finally brought success. Members of *Otpor!* entered the parliament. But the activist didn’t give a damn about anything, as he was not among the delegates. Still he bore a strange hope inside him for a better tomorrow, a hope closely related to joining the European Union.

A few years later, the activist was infuriated when he read that some academic leftists had criticized *Otpor!* in an article published in their magazine. The author pointed out that *Otpor!* spread anti-Islamic sentiment, touting European values as a bunch of convenient ideologies, mixing them as useful discourses in order to gain popularity among Serbs (4).

At one public debate, our activist felt pushed to defend his revolutionary past. No! the activist shouted, *Otpor!* was not something imposed from above by the US and the EU. Absolutely not! (5) It’s simply not true, the activist would angrily retort to anyone who characterized them as foreign agents. He loved to say, instead, that the resistance was a group of young rebels listening to British pop and fighting for their future. Milošević had butchered their youth and Yugoslavia, and they saw the Balkan butcher punished.

In 2005, the activist found himself in a non-governmental organization that had recruited him to come to an activist festival in Tirana. With a smile on his face, he would later reminisce about this experience with his companions. The National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House and their German satellite organisations had funded this gathering of youthful eastern European activists, who were organizing to overthrow their dictators. The activist and his team from *Otpor!* were there to mentor the others. The local organizer, *Mjaft!* (6) had fought against corruption in Albania (attributed to the communist legacy). Female participants from Tirana were perfectly made-up, and addressed the president of *Mjaft!* as “our leader”. Kmara (7), Zubr (8), Yox (9), some Russians, as well as colleagues from Pora (10), Ukraine, were there. Our activist and the others from *Otpor!* had come to organize training sessions to pass on their experience. The goal was to develop precise strategies and tactics for a successful revolutionary movement. To achieve the next success. As they liked to say, to spread the “Just do it” mentality. And *Otpor!* communicated their knowledge well: Pora “drank their orangeade”, as the phrase has it. In this town of

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Skenderbeg, Kruja, Albania, under the auspices of Freedom House, the activist youth celebrated together their devotion to democracy and anti-totalitarianism.

Not long after, *Otpor!* re-registered as the so-called Agency for Nonviolent Action – CANVAS (11), and began conducting similar training sessions all around the globe. When at end of the 2000s the new dictator of the Maldives fell, we knew who was responsible. As a gift from the new local democratic government, CANVAS was honoured with their own private island. Indeed, *Otpor!* / CANVAS became Serbia’s most respected export brand (12). It was a success story, and the fascination hit the contemporary art scene, as well. The Polish curator of the Berlin Biennale 7 (BB7, 2013) burned with desire to meet them. They were invited to deliver a speech and to share their experience and at BB7 as

well as Truth is Concrete in Graz, CANVAS presented their successful concept of “Laughtivism” or how to overthrow your dictator with laughter, jokes and fun (13).

The *Otpor!* legend lives on. Popular revolutionary movements across the globe refer to its success. The activist could vouch that one needs just “the financial means, pop music and grass-root rebels” to overthrow a dictator or government in a politically and economically weak country. Art, media and political activism have melted together into a virtual hegemonic orchestration. No wonder our activist did not believe in spontaneous occupations of the park, at the epicentre of world hegemony. Wall Street won’t stand for uprisings in its own backyard. Others backyards are definitely more appropriate for that.

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Image here and front page:
Vladan Jeremić & Rena Rädle, 2014

(1) Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, Verso, London, 2012, p. 207-250

(2) “The Non-Aligned Movement is a Movement of 115 members representing the interests and priorities of developing countries. The Movement has its origin in the Asia-Africa Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955...The first Conference of Non-Aligned Heads of State or Government, at which 25 countries were represented, was convened at Belgrade in September 1961, largely through the initiative of Yugoslavian President Tito...” Source: <http://www.nam.gov.za/background/history.htm>

(3) *Otpor!* (Resistance!) was a movement in Serbia that existed between 1998-2004. *Otpor!* led the protests that overthrew Slobodan Milošević in 2000. Some members of *Otpor!* joined the Democratic Party in the Serbian Parliament while some of them such as Srdja Popović have created NGOs for nonviolent struggle. CANVAS was founded in 2003 and has trained activists in 37 countries, including Zimbabwe, North Korea, Belarus and Iran.

Courtney Brooks, *Exporting Nonviolent Revolution, From Eastern Europe To The Middle East*, Free Europe, 2011, see: http://www.rferl.org/content/exporting_nonviolent_revolution_eastern_europe_mideast/2316231.html

Srdja Popović, Andrej Milivojević, Slobodan Djinović, *Nonviolent Struggle - 50 Crucial Points, A strategic Approach to Everyday Tactics*, CANVAS (Center for Applied NonViolent Action and Strategies), Belgrade 2006; See: http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/nonviolent_eng.pdf

(4) Vladimir Marković, *Od Ljotića dva puta: “Novi društveni pokret” u Srbiji krajem devedesetih i slika njegove ideologije*, PRELOM, Časopis Škole za istoriju i teoriju umetnosti CSUB, Belgrade, 2001, p. 27-43, (*Prelom* is a periodical for images and politics.); See: <http://www.prelomkolektiv.org/pdf/prelom01.pdf>

(5) Ivan Marović, *In defense of Otpor*, Open Democracy, 2013; See: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/civilresistance/ivan-marovic/in-defense-of-otpor>

(6) *Mjaft!* Movement, (Enough!) is an organization from Albania; See: <http://www.mjajt.org/en/organizata.php>

(7) *Kmara* (Enough!) was a civic movement in Georgia, active in the November 2003 Rose Revolution, which toppled the government of Eduard Shevardnadze. See: Giorgi Kandelaki, *Georgia’s Rose Revolution a Participant’s Perspective*, Unite States Institute of Peace, 2006; See: <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/sr167.pdf>

(8) *Zubr* was a civic organization backed by the west in opposition to Lukashenko in Belarus. *Zubr* was not as successful as *Otpor* and *Kmara* were.. Jean-Christophe Peuch, *Belarus: Protesters Hold Vigil Amid Continuing Crackdown*, Free Europe, 2006; See: <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1066967.html>

(9) *Yox!* (No!) is an NGO from Azerbaijan, designed in a similar way as other color revolutionary organizations, such as *Otpor!* and *Kmara!* or *KelKel* from Kyrgyzstan that gained importance during the Tulip Revolution against the Akayev regime.

(10) *Pora!* (It’s Time!) was an organization founded in Ukraine in 2004 in order to struggle against the Kuchma government and that led to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

(11) The Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) is a non-profit, non-governmental, international network; See: <http://www.canvasopedia.org/index.php/srdja-popovic>

(12) Aleksandar Apostolovski, *Otpor dobio ostrvo na Maldivima*, (*Otpor* has got Maldivi island), Politika, 2011; See: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Drustvo/Otpor-dobio-ostrvo-na-Maldivima.lt.html>

(13) Berlin Biennale 7, *No Revolution without Innovation* - a workshop with Srdja Popović and Anna Jermolaewa, 2012; See: <http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/events/no-revolution-without-innovation-a-workshop> and *Laughtivism*, A lecture by Srdja Popovic / Canvas at Truth is Concrete - A 24/7 marathon camp on artistic strategies in politics and political strategies in art, 2012; See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLorYo3BSCU>