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David S. Moon

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Review

Comradely Greetings: The Prison Letters of Nadya and Slavoj

Nadya Tolokonnikova and Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 2014.
112pp.

David S. Moon^{*}

In October 2012, Nadezhda (Nadya) Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, both members of the punk-protest group Pussy Riot, were sent to separate Russian penal colonies, charged in relation to an anti-Putin performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour the previous February. During her time in the Mordovian Penal Colony No. 14—and briefly afterwards—Tolokonnikova engaged in the exchange of letters with philosopher Slavoj Žižek collected in *Comradely Greetings*, alongside Tolokonnikova's open letter that details her harrowing experience in the camp and announced her hunger strike, just under a year into her sentence. The richness of Žižek and Tolokonnikova's correspondences—and the nuance of the flow of their back-and-forth debate—cannot be adequately summarised in the few words here. Instead, this review seeks to provide a brief overview of the key debates and disagreements between the two regarding the central questions of global capitalism and resistance to it—in particular Pussy Riot's resistance.

Žižek, for his part, identifies Pussy Riot's message as being “that, in Europe today, the blind are leading the blind,” describing Tolokonnikova, “sitting there in prison,” as an embodiment of “the World Spirit,” who “embod[ies] nothing less than the

^{*}David S. Moon is lecturer in politics in the Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies at the University of Bath, UK, where he teaches courses on political ideologies, European political thought, and contemporary critical thinkers. His research has an overarching focus upon ideological power relations within political parties in multi-level systems of governance, studied through rhetorical analysis. His publications include “Autonomy and Alienated Subjectivity: A Re-Reading of Castoriadis, through Žižek,” *Subjectivity*, 6 (4), 2013; and *Democratic Orators: From JFK to Obama* (co-edited with Andrew Crines and Robert Lehrman; Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

critical awareness of us all” (38). As Žižek sees it: “Beneath the dynamics of [Pussy Riot’s] acts, there is the inner stability of a firm ethico-political attitude” and “rather than proposing a destabilization of the existing static order ... it is Pussy Riot which de facto offers a stable ethico-political point”; indeed, the group’s “very existence communicates to thousands the fact that opportunistic cynicism is not the only option, that we are not totally disoriented, that there still is a common cause worth fighting for” (62). This stable, universal position of resistance, takes form, for Žižek, in the concept of a “true Master”—that is, one who “doesn’t try to guess what people want; he simply obeys his own desire and leaves it up to others to decide if they want to follow him” (79). While he does not directly attach the label to Pussy Riot, Žižek counterpoises such a “Master” with Nelson Mandela, arguing that the latter’s “universal glory is but a sign that he didn’t really disturb the global order of power—which certainly cannot be said of Pussy Riot” (83). For Žižek, however, “the true and most difficult task of radical emancipatory movements” such as Pussy Riot, is “not just to shake people out of their complacent inertia, but to change the very coordinates of social reality” (48)—offering “the prospect of a new order?” (62). He thus poses the question for any true Master: “how to go further than Mandela without becoming Mugabe?” (82).

Tolokonnikova views Pussy Riot’s role—and the role of resistance generally—differently, claiming “we’re the children of Dionysus, floating by in a barrel, accepting nobody’s authority. We’re on the side of those who don’t offer final answers or transcendent truths. Our mission, rather, is the asking of questions” (40). Accepting Žižek’s identification of their message as “the blind are leading the blind,” she specifies that “[t]he main thing is to realize that you yourself are as blind as can be. Once you get that, you can, for maybe the first time, doubt the natural place in the world to which your skin and bones have rooted you, the inherited condition that constantly threatens to spill over into feelings of terror” (41). For Tolokonnikova, unlike Žižek, the role of resistance is indeed to disrupt existing power relations, not replace them with a new universal settlement, writing, towards the end of their exchange, of Žižek’s “perplexing questions about the creation of a stable, ethico-political feeling that can unite winds of discontent” (65).

Tolokonnikova and Žižek’s different positions on resistance may be explained by their different conceptions of global capitalism. Žižek justifies his claim—of the need for a stable universal core to resistance—by asserting that “today’s capitalism has already

overcome the logic of totalizing normality and adopts a logic of erratic excess,” meaning it is “no longer disciplinary institutional power that defines everything, it’s capitalism’s power to produce variety—because markets get saturated” (48–49). This, he claims, is why “one can no longer play the game of subverting the Order from the position of its part-of-no-part” and what is required is “the critique of capitalism, from a ‘stable’ ethical position” (50).

In her replies, Tolokonnikova rejects this analysis: “You really think ‘today’s capitalism has already overcome the logic of totalizing normality’? I say maybe it hasn’t—maybe it just really wants us to *believe* it has, to accept that hierarchization and normalization have been exceeded” (53). Late-capitalism, Tolokonnikova argues, may “*appear* loose, even erratic,” but this “anti-hierarchical and rhizomatic posture” is simply “good advertising,” masking how “the logic of totalizing normality still has to continue its work in those places whose industrial bases are used to shore up everything dynamic, adaptable, and incipient in late capitalism.” In these “hidden” places (such as the one she, as a prisoner inhabits) “the governing logic is one of absolutely rigid standards, of stability reinforced with steel” and “[e]rratic behaviour is not tolerated from workers here; homogeneity and stagnation rule” (54). Hence her rejection of the view that resistance against “late” capitalism requires “stability” and “universalism” and her avocation of protests that disturb and bring into question what she sees as the hierarchical structures that underpin capitalism, and which it seeks to hide. Rather than reiterating the latter’s narrative, she asserts, people such as Žižek, and herself, “have an interest in exposing this deception” (52).

The problem, as Tolokonnikova views things, is that, “western” theorists have mistakenly bought into capitalism’s advertising, and in so doing, have “unreflectingly” fallen “into the classic trap of exclusive and discriminatory universalization” (63). This is because of a “colonial perspective” (*ibid.*), which overlooks the distinction between how “what you call ‘global capitalism’” operates in places such as Russia, in contrast to the “west.” “I think it would be helpful for Western theorists,” she states, “to set aside their colonial Eurocentrism and consider global capitalism in its entirety, encompassing all regional variants” (68); going further, she demands that “public critical theorists, inasmuch as they’re engaged in critique rather than PR for ‘late’ capitalism, should be studying the workings of this silence, exposing it to the light of analysis (rather than unreflexively parroting as their own theories global capitalism’s image of itself” (68–69).

In response to these arguments, Žižek emphasised his agreement that theorists must recognise diversity within global capitalism, but adds “that this very diversity has to be located within the totality of global capitalism,” meaning the inclusion, within the system, of “all its distortions (‘symptoms’, antagonisms, inconsistencies) as its integral parts” (71–72). Thus, anyone who wants to talk about global capitalism has to talk about places such as Russia (a “rotten” symptom) but in recognition of how, within the totality of global capitalism, such hierarchical elements make possible the less hierarchical capitalism elsewhere.

Whether the two find agreement on this point, we do not know. Between the writing and receiving of the letter in which Žižek wrote these words, Tolokonnikova was released from prison and her final correspondence, three months later heralds a change in tone. Global capitalism goes undiscussed; instead, the focus is on her new, practical work post-prison—in particular founding a new group, “Zona Prava,” to support female prisoners. What also goes unwritten here—noticeably so—is how, one month earlier, a statement from the group’s other members declared Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were “no longer Pussy Riot.” This statement described the group as “an all-female separatist collective” who “belong to leftist anti-capitalist ideology,” while Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were “so carried away with the problems in Russian prisons, that they completely forgot about the aspirations and ideals of our group,” having become “institutionalized advocates of prisoners’ rights” (Hudson 2014). When asked about the claims, Tolokonnikova’s reply was that, following the arrests, Pussy Riot “turned from just a group to essentially an international movement” stating that now “[a]nybody can be Pussy Riot, you just need to put on a mask and stage an active protest of something in your particular country, wherever that may be, that you consider unjust” (Kemdey 2014).

The fact that this split goes undiscussed is notable, as it gets to the very heart of the questions both Tolokonnikova and Žižek were discussing about resistance and the concept of a stable, universal stance. Žižek himself does not mention this split in his (and the book’s) final reply, though he may indicate it in a discussion of Edward Snowden. Asked by Žižek to discuss Snowden, Tolokonnikova noted that this was not easy when he lived under the protection of “the same intelligence services that have ordered and overseen physical violence against you and your friends . . . [and] his presence inevitably conferred legitimacy on the Kremlin’s information policy” (88). Within that context, she described Snowden’s position as “dismal” and “horrible to watch” and his persecution “a

drastic misstep by the US” (89)—but went no further. Replying, Žižek agrees that Snowden “is exploited and manipulated” but adds that this is “in the same way (and much more so, undoubtedly) that human rights liberals try to manipulate Pussy Riot” (95)—a pointed comparison given the context. Yet, Žižek’s point here remains the same as before, that “it is absolutely crucial to insist on the universality of our struggle,” that “[t]he moment we forget that Pussy Riot and WikiLeaks are moments of the same global struggle, everything is lost, we have sold our soul to the devil” (99).

Does Tolokonnikova agree? The answers may appear outside the book. A September 2014 *Guardian* interview (six months after Žižek’s final letter) states that “Tolokonnikova does not want to talk much about the letters; she wrote them 18 months ago, and says she has largely forgotten what was in them” (Gentleman 2014). Any follow-ups seem unlikely then and Tolokonnikova—co-recipient of the 2014 Hannah Arendt prize for philosophy—apparently holds little attachment to their arguments. Nevertheless, *Comradely Greetings* is an important addition to the canon of contemporary radical politics—even as the discussion ends on a curious, unresolved note. For Žižek, “every true philosophical dialogue, is an interaction of two monologues” (Žižek, 2009: 235), a description that *Comradely Greetings* lives up to.

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