

# BASTARDS OF UTOPIA

LIVING RADICAL POLITICS AFTER SOCIALISM

MAPLE RAZSA



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# BASTARDS OF UTOPIA

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## GLOBAL RESEARCH STUDIES

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BASTARDS

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OF UTOPIA

MAPLE RAZSA

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Aleksandar "Aco" Todorović (1955–2014)  
Founding president of the Association of Erased Citizens of Slovenia

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## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
GUIDE TO VIEWING COMPANION VIDEO ONLINE	xv
Introduction	1
1. Grassroots Globalization in National Soil	28
2. Uncivil Society: NGOs, the Invasion of Iraq, and the Limits of Polite Protest	62
3. "Feeling the State on Your Own Skin": Direct Confrontation and the Production of Militant Subjects	99
4. "Struggling for What Is Not Yet": The Right to the City in Zagreb	148
5. The Occupy Movement: Direct Democracy and a Politics of Becoming	174
Conclusion: From Critique to Affirmation	204
NOTES	223
REFERENCES	249
INDEX	273



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Spending years with activists who embraced “mutual aid,” “copyleft,” and “commoning” as core political principles—principles to be put into practice in everyday life whenever possible—made me acutely aware that I have relied on the work of others at every stage of this project. This book certainly could not have been written without the activists I call “Rimi,” “Pero,” and “Jadranka,” or the main “characters” of the feature documentary, *Fistra*, Dado, and Jelena. Their creativity and commitment mark every page that follows. They shared their lives and activism with me, deeply influenced my analysis with their own, and fundamentally changed what I think of as a life well lived. While these activists bore the brunt of my constant presence and relentless questions, there were many activists in Croatia, Slovenia, and beyond who contributed to this research. They patiently and impatiently corrected my misconceptions. They demonstrated to me time and again that their stories of creative struggle could be a vital resource with which to confront the political crises of our era.

Mindful of my collaborators’ safety, not least the constant fear of police surveillance and intervention that marred their lives, I will resist the strong urge to acknowledge the individual activists who have given me so much over the years. I offer instead a partial list of the initiatives, organizations, networks, and movements around which my fieldwork was organized: Abolishing the Borders from Below, the Anarcho-Syndicalist Initiative of Serbia, Antifašistička akcija, Antiratna kampanja Hrvatske, Arkzin, the Belgrade Circle, Balkan Anarchist Bookfair, the DHP Collective, the Association of the Erased, Časopis za kritiko znanosti, Disobedienti, Dosta je ratova!, Dost je!, Fade in, Gmajna, Hrana a ne oružje, IndyMedia Croatia, Invisible Workers of the World, Metelkova, Multimedijalni institut, Occupy Slovenia/15o, People’s Global Action, Reciklirano imanje, Rijeka Anarchist Initiative, Social Center Rog, Što čitaš?, Što gledaš?, Take it or Leave it, Tovarna Rog, Tute Biance, Urad za intervenciju, the Wasp’s Nest Collective, Ya Basta!, Zagrebački anarhistički pokret, Zelena akcija, and many others.

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This book, as well as the film of the same title, began with my graduate training in the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University. I enjoyed the support and friendship of many across the institution, including mentors, fellow students, and fellow travellers. A very partial list of those who helped keep Harvard’s malevolent forces at bay during my years in Cambridge and Somerville: Aaron Bartley, Naor Ben-Yehoyada, Ted Bestor, Elaine Bernard, Eric Beverly, Curtis Brown, Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn, Melissa Caldwell, Steve Caton, Matt Daniels, Ann Falicov, Brett Gustafson, Tracey Heatherington, Yuson Jung, Smita Lahiri, Lilith Mahmud, Thomas Malaby, Benjamin McKean, Vasiliki Neofotistos, Claudio Sopranzetti, Sue Hilditch, Matthew Skomarovsky, Noelle Stout, Lindsay Smith, Ajantha Subramanian, and Kay Warren. Diana Allan and Jessica Mulligan were thoughtful and giving readers of the manuscript-in-progress—and wonderful friends and confidantes. I thank the members of my committee, Mary Steedly and Lucien Taylor. As Director of the Film Study Center, Lucien provided essential moral and material support during the lengthy process of producing the documentary film version of *Bastards of Utopia*. While writing, I enjoyed a year of support from the

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As will soon be clear, this book cannot be disentangled from the feature and interactive documentaries, also titled *Bastards of Utopia*, which were produced during the same fieldwork on which this book is based. The films, in turn, cannot be disentangled from my years of filmmaking collaboration with Pacho Velez. I thank him for persevering in the face of all the barriers we encountered making *Bastards*. Sever Hall's video editing suites swallowed more of our lives than either of us probably cares to recall. There are too many others to thank for their contributions to the film, but I will try to name some who should not go unnamed: Ernst Karel, Jose Klein, Irene Luszczig, Ross McElwee, Robb Moss, Richard Porton, Benjamina Dolinšek Razsa, and James Razsa.

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eral new research projects. It is my colleagues who make Colby an exceptional scholarly and personal home. There are many anthropology departments at far larger research universities where I would not find interlocutors like Jeff Anderson, Catherine Besteman, Chandra Bhimull, Mary Beth Mills, David Strohl, and Winifred Tate. The mentorship of Catherine and Mary Beth, as well as my Global Studies colleagues Patrice Franko and Jen Yoder, has gone far beyond what I might have reasonably expected.

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Researching and writing this book has required personal sacrifices that have necessarily also affected those closest to me. My friends, especially Chris Colin, Amy Standen, and Jose and Rosa Klein, have been supportive throughout. My brother James read every chapter and asked challenging questions that improved each one markedly. My parents, if always a little skeptical of the apparent scam I was running with a career in the academy, were always encouraging. I am eternally grateful to them for so many things. Here it is appropriate to remember that they accepted and even encouraged my own rebellious and antiauthoritarian tendencies from a young age. This was by no means a painless approach to parenting. Milos Val, my three-year-old son, will be disappointed that Indiana University Press, though generous, did not allow more illustrations. *Bastards of Utopia* is not what he had in mind, I imagine, when he said, with pride, that his dad was writing a book. In any case, I am deeply thankful that he reminds me every day that we humans have deeply rooted proclivities for collaboration and empathy—but that we are also staggeringly open-ended, capable of being many different kinds of people. How can I possibly thank my partner Benjamina? From our first months living together on the Square of the Victims of Fascism, through smuggling videocassettes to her out the rear window of a squatted factory surrounded by riot police, to those long years when it seemed this book would never be written, she was with me through every stage. Benjamina and I are woven together throughout this book and across every aspect of our common life. I would not want it any other way.

This book is dedicated to all the rebellious and unruly subjects who have resisted the imposition of “transition” in the former Yugoslavia, especially Aleksandar “Aco” Todorović (1955–2014). The founding president of the Association of Erased Citizens of Slovenia, Aco never compromised with authority—and he paid a bitter personal price. *Slava padlim borcem!*

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## GUIDE TO VIEWING COMPANION VIDEO ONLINE

The book you hold in your hands forms one panel in a broader *Bastards of Utopia* triptych. In addition to this written ethnography, there are two documentary film projects: a traditional feature documentary and an online interactive documentary. Instructions on how to purchase the feature documentary are available at [www.bastardsindex.com](http://www.bastardsindex.com). The interactive, or “remixable,” version of the film—a new form that some have described as a choose-your-own documentary—is tightly integrated with this book and is available free of charge online. The remixable version includes scenes from the feature film, videos shot by local activists, and additional scenes from the two hundred hours of footage my co-director and I shot in the field. Many episodes in the book are direct descriptions of, or are closely related to, scenes in the remixable documentary. Relevant videos are referenced in the book by their title in parentheses, such as (watch “Down with Fortress Europe”). You can access a full list of these videos at [www.bastardsindex.com](http://www.bastardsindex.com). Simply scroll through the list or use your browser’s search function to find the specific video title you would like to watch. This book can stand alone without reference to the parallel video ethnographies, but text and video complement each other and make possible a richness and complexity of representation that remains largely unexplored within anthropology.



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## BASTARDS OF UTOPIA

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## INTRODUCTION

In May of 2003 an unruly “bicycle caravan” snarled midday traffic in Zagreb. Before police could respond to the unannounced protest, a few masked activists scarred the façade of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with antiwar graffiti. Numbering no more than forty, the caravan was the latest in a series of actions protesting Croatia’s support for the ongoing U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Official Croatian support allowed U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to include Croatia in both the “Coalition of the Willing” and “New Europe”—those compliant once-socialist states he contrasted favorably with the “Old Europe” of (antiwar) France and Germany. Before the caravan could reach the U.S. Embassy, armored Range Rovers blocked its forward progress. Activists bunched together, ringing their bikes to form a flimsy defensive barrier. As a plainclothes officer pointed out whom to arrest, a dozen police in riot gear waded into the small crowd. Soon bulky “RoboCops” were dragging protesters toward a prisoner van. Pero—one of my most important collaborators—was detained (watch “Down with Fortress Europe”).

Shortly after his release, I spoke with Pero at his jam-packed apartment. He sat among stacks of silk-screened T-shirts (“No War Between Nations, No Peace Between Classes”) and large rolls of “Enough Wars!” campaign posters that read, “We’ve been through war and we wouldn’t wish it on anyone else.” Pero reported, “They knew almost everything about me.” During his interrogation, police confronted him with a bulging security dossier. They knew Pero was affiliated with the Antifascist Front, the Zagreb Anarchist

Movement, and Food Not Bombs. They knew he played bass in the anarcho-punk band AK47. They even knew he was sleeping with Vanja. At this, Pero smiled slyly and noted, “That is not current information, however, and reflects badly on the capabilities of the state security apparatus.” Furthermore, despite all the intelligence gathering, he concluded, “They did not understand anything about my politics.” The detective just kept demanding: “What political party are you affiliated with? Who are your leaders? How many of you are Serbs? Which embassy is funding your activities?” “It was,” Pero said, “like he thought I was one of those fucking NGO-niks!”

In other words, though Pero is a declared anarchist, the police did not seem to understand that their questions were utterly at odds with the way that he and his fellow activists conceived of their politics: informal, antiauthoritarian, antinationalist, and self-organized. The misguided interrogation reflects more than a police force poorly trained in radical political theory. The fundamental gap between Pero’s politics and the police’s understanding of that politics highlights the emergence of an activism in the former Yugoslavia with aspirations and practices starkly different from those familiar to the detective. Their radical<sup>1</sup> political commitments made these activists the unanticipated—and unwanted—offspring of the preceding socialist and contemporary neoliberal-nationalist eras.

This narrative ethnography—and the interactive video archive that accompanies it, including scenes like Pero’s arrest—embodies the experiences and political imagination of this generation of radical activists in the former Yugoslavia. Following individual participants from the dramatic rise and eclipse of transnational globalization protests in the early 2000s through the Occupy Movement of 2011, the book asks what it means to be a leftist after socialism. In a territory one activist described as the “ground zero of leftism’s defeat,” activists’ responses to this question articulated fundamental critiques of the transition from socialism to market-oriented liberal democracy, including the ambivalent role of NGOs in this transition. This book is also an ethnography of postsocialism in a wider sense, one not limited to “New Europe.” The collapse of state socialism, which oriented much of the international left during the twentieth century, precipitated a crisis of radical politics globally. Around the world new movements struggled to fundamentally reimagine radical politics. My collaborators’ response was to shun utopian ends and centralized authority of any kind. Instead, they embraced forms of direct action that modeled change “here and now”; experimented with new forms of direct democracy; and devoted much of their energy to developing indi-

vidual and collective subjects with radical social and political desires. Just a few years before Pero's arrest, I would have been as puzzled as his interrogator to encounter radical activists—especially ones highly critical of NGOs—in what was Yugoslavia. How had activists broken with the dominant rightist politics I had come to expect from the region? How had they developed radical left political sensibilities and desires in such a territory?

### The End of Socialism and the Formation of New National States

To explain why I pose these particular questions, and why I look for answers in the specific places I do, I must return to late July 1990 and my arrival in the central Serbian industrial town of Svetozarevo, where I was to spend a year as a high-school exchange student. A relatively modest provincial city of forty thousand, Svetozarevo was best known for its heavy cable factory.<sup>2</sup>

In stubborn reaction to the anti-communism of my U.S. public education, I went to Yugoslavia because I was captivated by socialism. I was convinced—certain in my thin knowledge of Yugoslavia—that the country's relative personal freedom, "socialism with a human face," and "worker self-management," made it preferable to the Soviet satellite states of the Warsaw Pact. I learned my first phrases of what was still, just barely, the unified Serbo-Croatian language—not yet divided into Serbian and Croatian and Bosnian and Montenegrin—on the final leg of the journey, flying from Prague to Belgrade. At age 18, I knew just enough to hope I was going to a socialist utopia.

So I was caught off guard when, shortly after I arrived, images began to flicker across the family television screen of armed Serbs setting up roadblocks and seizing control of rural sections of Croatia, one of the six federal republics that constituted the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Nor did I know how to respond when my host father explained that Serbs were victims of a vast anti-Serbian conspiracy within Yugoslavia. Only when I attended a November rally in the town center, organized by Vuk Drašković's Serbian Movement of Renewal (SPO), did this growing conflict begin to seem like more than a strange abstraction, more than images from somewhere far away.

My classmates from gymnasium skipped school en masse to attend. They translated the promises to defend ethnic Serbs in Croatia to me. They translated the chants: "Vuk: bring the salad, there will be meat—we'll slaughter the Croats!" (*Vuče, daj salate—klaćemo hrvate!*). Some in the crowd waved knives overhead.<sup>3</sup> The massacres did not begin, however, until spring. By the time

I boarded a plane for Frankfurt on July 5, 1991, the country I had grown to love—and, if I am honest, also to hate—was no more. As I flew from Belgrade, fighting was at its peak in the northwestern republic of Slovenia. That first ten-day war, the least destructive of the armed conflicts that marked Yugoslavia's dissolution, was almost over. Croatia, Bosnia, and then Kosovo would follow. More than one hundred thousand would be killed. Millions would be driven from their homes.

Since that year, I have spent a good part of my life trying to grasp what happened to Yugoslavia. I have wondered how I, and others around me, ought to have responded to the crisis. Initially this involved collaboration and research, both in Yugoslavia and abroad, with what is usually called civil society. In 1992, I volunteered with a support and mutual aid network for young conscientious objectors from Yugoslavia who were living illegally in Amsterdam. In 1993, I worked with Veterans for Peace—an antimilitarist organization of U.S. veterans—on a program to evacuate injured Bosnian children to Portland, Maine. The hope was to highlight the human cost of the war for Americans who otherwise experienced the war as a set of images from somewhere far away.

During 1995, I collaborated with and researched the Belgrade Circle, an association of antinationalist intellectuals in Serbia, who, at the height of the Serbian siege of Sarajevo, openly opposed Serbian aggression. Unable to return to Serbia because of international sanctions, in 1996 I headed to Zagreb, Croatia, where I have continued to conduct much of my research ever since. The war had ended only a few months earlier, and the Anti-War Campaign of Croatia was supporting minority Serbs' return to the rural homes from which they had been driven only a year earlier. Throughout these years, I was consistently struck by the courage of those Serbs and Croats who resisted the overwhelmingly dominant logic of ethnic war. They were a small minority swimming against a riptide of nationalist exclusion, sometimes at great personal cost. For the founders and staff of these human-rights and peace organizations—what were collectively known as “civil society,” or sometimes more modestly as the “civil scene” (*civilna scena*)—NGOs were the embodiment of all that was hopeful in their societies' politics.

Like many left-leaning ex-Yugoslavs, however, I was dogged by a nagging sense of ineffectiveness during those years. The problem was not only that antiwar initiatives were too weak to prevent the unfolding tragedy. Only the most delusional optimists in the region believed—once the wars had begun in

earnest—that they could do much more than set a counterexample. Most felt they could only challenge the widespread belief that *all* Serbs, *all* Croats, or *all* Bosniaks were advocates of war and intolerance. The sense of inadequacy was of a different order. My misgiving was that dissidents often shared fundamental assumptions with the political forces they criticized, even shared some of the key beliefs underpinning the ethnic conflict against which they were deployed.

First, while some dissidents developed unflinching critiques of the dominant politics of nationalist hatred—despite being treated as traitors in their societies' mainstream media—they did not typically challenge the underlying conception of “the people” and “the nation” on whose behalf the nationalists claimed to act. Ironically, critics of nationalism sometimes asserted that the nationalists had betrayed the nation's true interests. In this and other ways, they reinforced the idea that there *were* national interests. Indeed, at times, antinationalists seemed to be an alternative national elite waiting in the wings for their opportunity to rule (Razsa 1996).

Second, most opponents of extreme nationalism, war, and ethnic violence believed that these phenomena were retrograde, primitive, rural, and “Balkan.” What was needed, most agreed, was to “return” Croatia to its rightful path toward Europeanization. They blamed the nationalists for their country's isolation from the West. Ironically, most critics shared with most nationalists the sense that their country was, or at least should be, European. Nationalists, for their part, often saw their states as bulwarks against the East, the last wall of defense against a Muslim—or a Muslim and Orthodox—East. In the classic formulation they were *Antemurale Christianitatis*, the protective walls of Christian Europe against the barbarians. I was troubled by how even critics' formulations reinforced the hierarchies implicit in this central opposition between Europe and the Balkans, the very hierarchies around which much of the violence was organized (Todorova 1997; Razsa 1997a, 1997b; Bjelić and Savić 2002; Razsa and Lindstrom 2004).

Anthropologists have long viewed such hierarchies with considerable skepticism (Douglas 1966; Fabian 1983). And with each return to the former Yugoslavia, I was less convinced by explanations of the crisis that drew on a series of related oppositions: Europe/Balkan, West/East, urban/rural, and civilized/primitive. I was becoming increasingly discomfited by Western analyses of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia as rooted in the innate ethnic hatreds of the Balkans (Kaplan 1993) or their underlying civilizational



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