

Review

Srećko Horvat, Igor Štiks
**Pravo na pobunu (The Right
 of Rebellion)**

Fraktura, Zagreb, 2010, 179 pp.

Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks have written the book *The Right of Rebellion* in order to show that the 2009 student university blockade is the most important event in contemporary Croatian political history.¹ In order to prove that, the authors place the “blockade” into two related contexts – the first one is global, and the second one is national. At the global level, the student movement opposes the politics of global *laissez-faire* and the commercialization of higher education, which is understood as the result of imposing market logic on all social spheres, while at the national level the “blockade” is presented as a form of civil rebellion and is directly connected to the farmers’ protests and the protests of the citizens of Zagreb who tried to stop the privatization of public space through the action *Pravo na grad* (The Right to the City). Although the authors at the beginning of the book point out that the book is neither a theoretical discussion nor a detailed anatomy of the student protest, to some extent this text is both. At the theoretical level, the authors try to show the exhaustion of liberal democracy and point out that “neo-

liberalism” is a problem which connects the struggle at both levels, the global and the local. The first few chapters of the book deal with this task. The student protest is not analyzed at the national level, but the focus is on the plenum of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The greater part of the book is a polemic with the critics of the students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, which Horvat and Štiks use in order to explain the political potential of the students’ political fight. The book thus becomes some sort of revolutionary publicist writing with limited theoretical pretensions, which points out the significance of plenum as a form of direct democracy.

Even the most careless reader will easily notice that the word “neoliberalism” appears on almost every page. There are two reasons for that – the first one is the theoretical explanation of the necessity of direct democracy, and the second one is the disclosure of the common enemy of apparently unconnected groups of dissatisfied citizens. Štiks and Horvat start their story with the interpretation of the fall of the Berlin Wall and say: “At the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, instead of questioning the real balance of the ‘brave new world’, the majority of comments eventually became the new apotheosis of a purportedly unquestionable and unstoppable neoliberal process. Although the idea that neoliberal democracy will bring ‘paradise on earth’ came across much criticism and numerous empirical refutations, today it acts like the ‘living dead’: it still lives although it is in some way already dead” (p. 18). For Štiks and Horvat the victory of the so-called *free world* over the communist bloc is the vic-

¹ This review has previously been published in *Političke analize*, 2010, 3.

tory of the “neoliberal paradigm”, which claims that the market economy in combination with representative democracy represents the best political order on the planet. Transitional countries like Croatia are also “neoliberal”. In their opinion, SFR Yugoslavia crumbled because “neoliberal financial institutions”, like the IMF, had been forcing it to conduct “neoliberal reforms”. The “neoliberal” character of today’s Croatia is, among other things, reflected in the preferential political treatment of private investments in the case of Varšavska Street, as well as in the implementation of the “neoliberal Bologna Process”.

It is not hard to notice that the word “neoliberal” carries several rather different meanings. “Neoliberalism” thus means liberalism, capitalism, the Western world, global economy, the alliance of politics and capital, the market and the understanding of society in which property rights are fundamental rights. Such broad understanding of the notion is politically useful because it can be argued that the protests of farmers, students and citizens in Varšavska Street were all motivated by the common phenomenon against which they should all fight together. That is exactly what Horvat and Štiks claim. Farmers’ roads blockades, civil disobedience in Varšavska Street in Zagreb and the blockade of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences are diverse manifestations of civil resistance to the Croatian “neoliberal Regime”. The authors write the notion of “Regime” with a capital letter and give it a substantial meaning. “Regime” is an “oligarchical conglomerate” and consists of political elites regardless of their party affiliation, of “Capital”, the media, the state apparatus, parts of ci-

vil society and organized crime. Regime is therefore much more than government, and it brings together the winners of “neoliberal transition”. The vast majority of citizens are transitional losers whose loser status is being covered up by the media, religious associations and educational institutions. In such a constellation the student movement assumes a first-class political significance, because, according to the authors, it manages to shake an “ideological consensus” which is justifying the unbearable social injustice deriving from transition.

The central motif of the book is an attempt to show that a plenum represents a model of direct democracy and therefore is not a body designed for negotiations for free education, but becomes much more. For Štiks and Horvat, a plenum becomes some sort of a liberated territory within the “neoliberal state”, which, aware that it is an alternative form of a political organization, refuses to communicate with its surroundings by the rules of the surroundings. The goal of the blockade is not only free education, but the establishment of a plenum as a direct opposition to existing institutions, “not as a general advisory assembly in the context of protests and strikes, but as a rebellious ‘legislative’ body on the taken territory” (p. 57). Students thus become a sparkle of direct democracy, showing to the majority of citizens in postsocialist Croatia that resistance to the “Regime” is possible, as well as the final establishment of the new type of social order, both economic and political.

This requirement for a revolutionary action presupposes that there is not much sense in fixing the Croatian transitional state and transferring it into functional li-

beral democracy. The combination of market economy and representative democracy cannot have a human face.

The obliteration of the distinction between liberalism and neoliberalism done by Horvat and Štiks has numerous deficiencies, both theoretical and practical – if all orders with market economy and representative democracy are neoliberal, then there is no politically relevant difference between Denmark and Croatia, Sweden and the United States of America, Obama and Bush, Old Labour and New Labour. For Štiks and Horvat, political differences within liberal democracies, as well as the differences between market economies with representative governments, are only gradual. This insensitiveness to differences creates problems. First theoretical, because important distinctions are lost, and then practical, because the specific causes of objective problems cannot be recognized.

Neoliberalism in its real meaning is a branch of liberalism which claims that the fundamental human right is the property right and that the market guarantees the most rational allocation of resources. In its original version (Mises) it was a capitalist answer to the appearance of planned economy, and during the Cold War it became the means of the criticism of totalitarianism (Hayek), while in contemporary liberal democracies it serves as an ideological foundation of conservatism (Friedman and others). As an argument for small government, neoliberalism has played a crucial role in the criticism of Keynesian liberalism and in forming Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's politics. Furthermore, the attempt to establish the global free market is neoliberal by definition. Be that

as it may, the first and immediate enemy of neoliberalism in liberal democracies is liberalism (social democracy in the European political vocabulary).

Negating the difference between neoliberalism and liberalism also creates problems in the interpretation of normative content of the demands of the University of Zagreb students, who have more or less completely adopted the position of the International Student Movement, which Štiks and Horvat simply ignore. The ISM clearly defines the goal of its struggle – free and emancipatory education as a human right. The aim of that education is one's critical autonomy, education should be understood as a public good and academic freedoms should be protected. All this has been part of the classic arsenal of American liberal egalitarianism for the last 40 years. It is possible to fight for free education without the destruction of liberal democracy. Students in Europe and America fight against neoliberal policies within the frame of their legal systems without bringing them into question. The same goes for civil disobedience of the movement *Pravo na grad*. You can fight the government without bringing the entire political order into question. Disobedience breaks the law to ensure its lawfulness. Hayek would support them as well.

Unlike numerous authors, who saw in the collapse of the welfare state a danger to representative democracy itself, Štiks and Horvat, by saving the Croatian welfare state from neoliberalism, bring into question the sense of any state, especially a liberal-democratic one. Neoliberals advocate a minimal state, Štiks and Horvat are on the verge of saying that they are against the state itself. They never discuss norma-

tive contents of a direct-democratic action and the differences between anarchism and communism. Therefore, an interested reader cannot find out what their understanding of the state or property is.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the concept of omnipresent “neoliberalism”, in which this notion stands for almost everything that is in some way connected with market economy, shows its explanatory deficit at the first step, when defining a problem which the students should be the most familiar with – the Bologna Process. The fact that Dragan Primorac, who is responsible for the fact that Croatian bachelors are literally unemployable, is accused of “neoliberalism”, is laughable. The Croatian implementation of the Bologna Process is not shortening the 4-year diploma in order to force students to enter the job market sooner, it is doing exactly the opposite. In order to get a decent employment, students are forced to acquire a Master’s Degree. Mumbling about the neoliberal reform of higher education in a country in which the Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional the provisions of law providing for mandatory integration of the university is pathetic. Preconditions for any kind of reform have been buried in 2006. It is a sad fact that the wider academic community in Croatia learned that the Prague Communiqué explicitly determines that higher education is a public good only after the blockade had called it a “neoliberal commercialization”. If the Bologna Process should be tagged with political labels, then it is most probably a social-democratic manoeuvre, which is obvious from emphasizing the “social dimension” introduced in Leuven. The emphasizing of positive examples of free education in

Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway is also mysterious, since every single one of them is a liberal democracy.

“Neoliberalism” as “defined” in the book is not a “floating signifier”, but merely a simplification which is theoretically wrong and politically limited. A meaningful action presupposes distinctions which are blurred by an overblown notion of “neoliberalism”. This book cannot be recommended to the readers interested in fair financing of higher education, in a precise notion of neoliberalism, or in a theoretical discussion on the right of rebellion that would include discussions on the relation between the plenum and civil disobedience, or the differences between communist and anarchist criticism of transitional regimes. If, on the other hand, you are excited by the idea that the “capillary infected” unity of radical students, peasants and movements like *Pravo na grad* could create a mass of plenums large enough to eliminate transitional democracy in Croatia forever, and thus contribute to the disposal of liberal democracy into the dustbin of history, Horvat and Štikl have written a book for you.

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