

'Poetry from the Future' won't solve Europe's crises

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Author and activist Srećko Horvat's new book is billed as a guidebook for building

"a new radical internationalism" that can help us transcend our current moment of "apocalyptic politics." Horvat's claims to radical novelty are ironic, however, since his work seems to be a poor imitation of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek.

Poetry from the Future: Why a Global Liberation Movement Is Our Civilisation's Last Chance
by Srećko Horvat
(Penguin Random House, 2019, 35.99)

Horvat's first book, ***What Does Europe Want? The Union and Its Discontents*** (<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/what-does-europe-want/9780231171069>), was co-authored with Žižek. He has since modelled his writing style after Žižek's, and ***Poetry from the Future*** (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/598860/poetry-from-the-future-by-srecko-horvat/9780241337325>) is no exception. It makes constant cinematic allusions; it relies heavily on jokes, Eastern European jokes in particular, purposefully catered to a Western audience; it invokes random encounters from his travels; and it unimaginatively uses the same old **Žižekian** (<https://www.versobooks.com/books/348-the-sublime-object-of-ideology>)-inspired jargon to talk about the **real, the imaginary** (<https://www.versobooks.com/books/348-the-sublime-object-of-ideology>) and any adjacent theories of **insurrections** (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/243017/event-by-slavoj-zizek/>) that have for so long been regurgitated by Frankfurt-school-wannabee leftist theorists.

The Frankfurt School philosophers, gathered at the Institute of Social Research in the interwar period, included Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin. Their ideas formed



century capitalism, Žižek generally argues that capitalism got so big, continually re-inventing itself, that we need a universal logic to tease out its multiple contradictions.

More or less, Horvat could be considered one of Žižek's disciples, also situated in the field of critical theory. It is no surprise that Horvat ends up using Žižek's style in *Poetry from the Future*. Horvat argues, for instance, that European values are not solely about maintaining Eurocentrism (i.e., by protecting borders and setting up concentration camps) but also about advancing enlightenment. Žižek **stated this explicitly** (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/550756/refugees-terror-and-other-troubles-with-the-neighbors-by-slavoj-zizek/>) in one of his more recent books, where he argued that at a time when the European-created values of egalitarianism and human rights are most needed, Eurocentrism should not be simply rejected.

Žižek has used such dialectical logic throughout his work: one should stand against both antisemitism and Islamophobia; one should condemn both the NATO invasion of Yugoslavia and what the Serbs did in Srebrenica; if one criticizes fascism one should equally criticize capitalism, and so on and so on. These are exactly the kinds of analogy adopted by Horvat. Certainly, if you read an author closely, you might involuntarily find yourself adopting their ideas as your own, but in an over-saturated knowledge-production market, there is little value in regurgitating Frankfurt-school metaphors.

The book opens with an inviting description of Vis, the Croatian island which, during its history, has been occupied by the Greeks, the Romans, the Venetians, the Italians, the Austrians, and again by the Italians, prior to being ceded to Yugoslavia in 1920. During the Second World War, Vis was occupied by Fascist Italy, yet the island was a bastion of resistance. Nowadays, it is a tourist mecca, just like many other islands in southeastern Europe, and its resistance past has been erased.

Horvat's description of Vis, and of the island's life philosophy of *pomalo* -- defined as a carefree way of being unlimited by time -- invites one to the imaginary realm. Yet besides poetic advice that the "stones must start talking again," and that "our strength must come from the future," Horvat offers no ideas about walking out on the consumerist *real* to keep *pomalo* alive.

Horvat also scratches the surface of anything and everything (another feature of Žižekian style): the G20 riots in Hamburg, the 2015 refugee crisis, the Greek Spring and the *OXI* vote, the rise of authoritarian capitalism. These accounts are embellished with a rhetoric used to make obvious points: populist forms of violence are reactive to structural, systemic violence; or alter-summits are limited in providing alternatives to global capitalism.



Europe want? (<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/what-does-europe-want/9780231171069>), Horvat and Žižek argued, with reference to the 2015 referendum in Greece, that the future of Europe lies in the choice between *avenir* and *l'avenir*. The same *l'avenir* is tacitly implied in this book, but in the intervening four years, little of system-changing political struggle has materialized on the continent.

This is not to say that *Poetry from the Future* is devoid of insight. For example, in discussing the alter-summits like the World Social Forum, Horvat identifies the systemic flaw of these movements: their "fetish of horizontality" and their weak decision-making structures, resulting in leaderless movements with limited ability to destabilize the system. Such a tendency to "horizontalism" has also been criticized by the well-known community organizer Jane McAlevey for leading to the obliteration of "**powerful mass-scale movements**" (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/no-shortcuts-9780190624712?cc=ca&lang=en&>)."

In problematizing the artificial distinction between refugees and economic migrants, Horvat puts the focus on human rights: "In times of economic warfare what is an economic migrant but a refugee? And vice versa. Every refugee is already an economic migrant, because the refugee crisis is a product of the global capitalist economy." And in referring to the French and Catalan communes and their potential for creating allegiances across national boundaries, Horvat problematizes the sustainability of such communes when they are located in places that "attract thousands of tourists daily," where "speedboats," "Uber-boats" and "drones" become regular daily features.

Horvat's book might be useful to progressive readers who are interested in short summaries of contemporary political pulsations; to readers wanting to know about the G20 protest escalations in Hamburg in July 2017; about the 2011 Spanish demonstrations; the lost battle of SYRIZA that started in Greece in 2015; about the rebel cities of Barcelona and Naples, acting as pockets of anti-systemic resistance.

It is less useful, however, for those interested in left-wing strategy, hands-on organizing efforts, or international forms of community mobilizing. Horvat's question, "How can a protest movement in Egypt or Guatemala reinforce a movement in Greece, Croatia and vice-versa?" remains quite futile beyond its rhetorical attributes.

Poetry from the Future (<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/308/308396/poetry-from-the-future/9780241337325.html>) is a pleasant read and is short enough to get through in a couple afternoons. But its potential to contribute to any revolutionary movement is doubtful. It provides few answers in terms of creating a new radical internationalism, of constructing alternative forms of political

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