

POLITICS OF INDIGNATION:

Spontaneity and conscious direction

INTERVIEW CARRIED OUT BY HRVOJE SIMICEVIC FOR *NOVOSTI* (CROATIA) and just published in *COUNTERPUNCH*

1. The range of topics in your latest book is broad and includes the Arab Spring, the Pinochet coup and September 11th, migration in the Mediterranean, labor issues in Europe, neoliberalism in education and protests in the West, from New York to Rome. What is common to all these issues?

I would say the struggle for human emancipation against the violence, symbolic and/or physical, that characterizes the universe of capital. It is also about the struggle for human dignity and the carving up of greater democratic spaces, often collectively. Another common element is the quest for the safeguarding and amelioration of workers rights, including the right to work and to protest collectively against inhuman structures of oppression, economic, social and imperial –the three are often intertwined.

2. In your book, *Politics of Indignation*, you devote importance to migration from the South towards Southern Europe. How do you explain this phenomenon?

I suppose Walter Rodney's classic *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* provides some of the answers. Why do we receive so many immigrants in our part of the world? The reasons are legion. Common reasons would include civil wars fuelled by an arms industry and an exacerbation of tribal conflicts often resulting in rape and being disowned by family, the attempt among women to avoid female genital mutilation, the negative effects on African farming of subsidies provided to farmers in other continents, the negative effects of climate change, an impoverished environment (the ransacking of Africa) and a colonial ideology which presents the West as the Eldorado and a context for the 'good life,' structural adjustment programs, the quest for better employment opportunities ... and one can go on, perhaps falling prey to western stereotypes and constructions of 'Africa', as a friend, Handel Kashope Wright of UBC, originally from Sierra Leone, recently wrote. There is however one major global reason, as provided by David Bacon with regard to the US and Mexico, namely the quest for low cost labor by corporations and other businesses alike which serves as a 'push and pull factor.' As he argues, hegemonic globalization necessitates migration, but it is the same victims of this process who are

rendered illegal and criminalized as a result, often victims of the 'carceral state.'

3. You paraphrased Slavoj Žižek who said that 'in the much-celebrated free circulation opened up by global capitalism, it is "things" (commodities) which circulate freely, while the circulation of "persons" is more and more controlled'. Why is that so?

Quite simply, we are under the illusion that everything moves freely under conditions of hegemonic globalization but ask immigrants and that is not quite true. While financial capital moves freely and fast and so do goods (although much depends on their provenance, as any Palestinian would tell you; Palestinians cannot move their own local produce in their own country), labour power embodied by breathing human subjects has to face several hurdles to move from one context to the other. It encounters multiple hurdles, ranging from tedious visa applications and refusals, detention centres -closed and open- and the whims of the security forces who oscillate between either strict refusals or turning a blind eye when it suits the authorities to depress local wages. Even so, those who travel or are smuggled in are kept outside the boundaries of citizenship and therefore suffer lots of exploitation as a consequence, with the threat of being discovered and deportation hanging over them. And there are those like Palestinians who are severely impeded from moving within the land of their birth, through the infamous wall and several checkpoints. As I said, even their goods cannot move freely.

4. Can you explain what the metaphor of 'carceral state' means in the context of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa knocking at the gates of "Fortress Europe"?

The carceral state is a notion I gathered from the work of Henry Giroux who in turn borrowed it and developed it from Michel Foucault's notion of a carceral society. It is used in the context of surveillance, of the heavy handed guarding of public schools as in the USA, the increasing culture of militarization and the criminalization of specific sectors of the population such as Afro-Americans in the USA where more find themselves languishing in a privatized prison industry than in public education and often for the flimsiest of reasons. The same applies to the many young Palestinians who lose many school days because of imprisonment for participating in the Intifada or even for being caught with carrying a petard (petards are a common feature of Arab festivities). I use 'carceral state' with reference to the criminalization of immigrants from the South seeking new pastures outside their country and who are placed in detention centres, especially closed centres where they are left for long stretches in what are cages that can easily render a human being insane. Fabrizio Gatti's *Bilal* which deals with the situation on the island of Lampedusa captures the meaning in which this phrase is intended. Even my country has been accused of such carceral treatment of immigrants, as many local activists and international observers have pointed out.

5. Governments and parties inflate talk of immigration for populist reasons indicating that they are part of the problem with regard to the economy and society in general. Yet, they serve an important economic purpose and are an important Capitalist pawn in the struggle between Capital and Labour? What do you think?

Certainly. Those involved with any potentially educational agency, including the media, need to make everyone aware why people have to emigrate. We have to understand the current situation concerning the intensification of what we fashionably term globalisation which has brought in its wake not only the mobility of capital but also mass mobility of potential workers across the globe - two types of mobility which, of course, as I have just explained, do not occur on a level playing field. This situation is certainly evident throughout the Mediterranean, which has frequently been described, owing to the migration of people from its southern shores to its northern ones, as the 'new Rio Grande'.

Who is to say that these people are unwanted in the receiving countries? It has been argued that the economy of certain countries requires certain types of labor and these requirements cannot be met or are deliberately not met (to minimize labor costs) by the internal labor market - and all this despite the high levels of unemployment experienced within a number of the receiving countries. Put crudely, rather than these immigrants being 'unwanted,' the presence of immigrants can suit unscrupulous employers in the receiving countries fine; these employers can avail themselves of a pool of potential workers who can perform the job at hand at a rate substantially lower than that paid to the local workers. So all this nationalistic fervour is complete nonsense. It serves to pit worker against worker, a new form of labour market segmentation along ethnic lines. I have been arguing against this for years. As I argue in my book, *Politics of Indignation*, and something I also argued in a paper on 'Gramsci, the Southern Question and the Mediterranean', with its implications for today, the notion of worker solidarity in this day and age should traverse national boundaries and encompass the plight of immigrants as well as that of the many self-styled or actual autochthonous population. When I was invited in 2008 to speak on the significance of Workers' Day at a seminar organized by the largest trade union in my country, I emphasized this aspect of worker solidarity. The kind of worker solidarity called for is international - not national. The latter is very much the hallmark of National Socialism with its racist, ethnocentric underpinnings. Readers need no reminding of that approach's historical outcome. This is one of the greatest challenges facing those committed to a genuinely democratic socialist politics in this region. Work of an unmistakably educational nature is required, and the kind of educational work in which one must engage, in the contemporary context, is a lengthy one. With local working class people living in a state of precariousness being the ones most likely to suffer from the devastating effects of neoliberal globalization policies, this work becomes ever more urgent. Unless such an educational strategy is developed, it is more likely that working class people become attracted to the kind of populist right-wing and often neo-fascist discourse that plays on their fears and leads to further segmentation and antagonism among workers on ethnic or other lines of division. This can result in misplaced alliances (the false alliance between so called national capital and labor against

the 'competition,' as if capital has ever been just national!) and obfuscation of the fact that both they and immigrants share a common fate: that of oppression and being subaltern victims of a ruthless process of capitalist exploitation. There have been cases in which traditional socialist parties, once champions of the laboring classes' cause, have been accused of shunning the responsibility of working toward fostering interethnic solidarity among workers. Their apparent rationale is fear of losing electoral votes, a situation which bodes ill for a genuinely democratic politics predicated on worker solidarity across ethnic and national, and not only class and gender, lines.

6. A few months ago Alain Badiou accused all the French governments (especially those on the left), from that led by Mitterrand until the present, for deliberately inflating the problem of immigrants to conceal that they "primarily serve the economic interests of the oligarchy." He also accused intellectuals of shamelessly filling the void, caused by low currency of communist ideas, with racist nonsense about the "Islamic threat and the destruction of our 'values'." He claims: "This helped the mental development of fascism which is now spread to alarming proportions and therefore they should be called to account". What are your thoughts on this and do you see this problem in other European countries?

Badiou is talking about France but I have seen this occurring in other countries especially among the Left and parties once referred to as Left - parties engage in this kind of populism to win over the electorate which in turn are fed myths that increase their insecurity. Security therefore becomes an issue on which parties strive to score points. As I said earlier on and have written - see once again my article on 'Gramsci, the Southern Question and The Mediterranean,' first published in the open access *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* in 2007 (http://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/39379/24_MJES_1222007.pdf) - I have seen traditionally socialist parties avoiding the responsibility of working toward fostering interethnic solidarity among workers. Badiou goes a step further and states that they fan the flames of xenophobia and ethnic prejudice, abetted by intellectuals. One of their apparent rationales is fear of losing electoral votes, a situation which bodes ill for a genuinely democratic politics predicated on worker solidarity across ethnic and national, and not only class and gender, lines. The issue that arises is whether there can really be a genuinely socialist programme, predicated on inter-ethnic solidarity, within the context of a state whose primary function is the accumulation of capital. This is a question that disturbs me but it is one that needs to be posed.

As for values and identities, those are contentious terms. Whose values? Whose identities? I argue in the same 'Southern Question' paper that these are tied to relations of hegemony where national identity is nothing but the identities of a dominant set of groupings articulated, thanks to a variety of intellectuals, conceived in the Gramscian

sense, as universal when they are actually very partial.

7. You have just said that, unless an educational strategy is developed, it is more likely that working class people become attracted to the kind of populist right-wing and often Neo-fascist discourse that plays on their fears and leads to further worker divisions on ethnic or other lines. You are actually talking about the populist conversion of the obvious class issues into nationalism? What are the risks and possible consequences of the spread of this discourse in Europe during the current financial crisis?

Well I have been observing so called socialist parties or one time socialist parties lapsing into this kind of populism to win over the electorate. At the risk of sounding somewhat elitist, I detect an element of anti-intellectualism being rampant in this age of 'dumbing down' media and infotainment, and also parties moving to the centre in a way that creates a situation when the only contrast is not ideological (mainly where they stand on crucial issues) but simply centers around who has the least scandals and who is the better manager. This renders populism even more of a palatable option for our power seeking political class, or many of them since I do not like to tar everyone with the same brush. And this is why I feel people are looking for new forms of doing politics, having lost hope in party representative democracy. Even the so called left-liberal press in the west has indulged in this form of populism serving the interests of capital as a recent book by Stephen Harper called *Beyond Left and Right. The Communist Critique of the Media* so cogently argues - a scary and demoralizing situation. By left he is referring to not any obsolescence of a real Left, far from it (I would never subscribe to that) but what he rightly calls the liberal left that dominates the discourse left of centre in the Western press. He refers to *The Guardian*, *The Nation* and the *New Statesman* among these.

8. You write that the state is an active player and central to the neoliberal scenario and that we underestimate its centrality at our peril. How can we see this connection in the context of (public) education, especially in Europe, and is there any efficient way to fight against it in future?

The state has in many ways used public funds to support private interests. It plays an important role in providing would be investors with the conditions which make things profitable for them.

But back to your central point: the state plays an important role in blurring the divide between public and private always skewed in favor of the private. Let's take higher education as an example and so called public Higher education at that. Nowhere is the role of the state as economic player more evident than in this sector. So-called "public universities" are exhorted to provide services governed by the market and which have a strong commercial basis. Furthermore, the state engages actively through direct and indirect means, sometimes including a series of incentives. It does this to create a higher education competitive market as part of what Philip Cerny calls the "competition" state -

it helps foster competition between different entities as part of sustaining a market in this and other fields, all in keeping with the neoliberal ideology. In short, the state is an active player and has not gone away. It is central to the neoliberal scenario and we underestimate its centrality at our peril! And if there had been any lingering doubts about this, they should have been dispelled by the role which the State played in many countries in bailing out banks and other entities during the credit crunch, using taxpayers money to make good for the gross theft of the filthy rich carried out at the expense of the rest of the population in the first place. Paulo Freire was prescient when he stated that when the stock market falls in a country far away and we have to tighten up our belts, or if a private national bank has internal problems due to the inability of its directors or owners, the state immediately intervenes to 'save them.' And, to add insult to injury, it pays the CEOs of these same entities obscene bonuses while shifting the austerity measures onto the rest.

The state has simply changed its guise but its role in terms of capital accumulation remains intact. The idea of the state having receded into the background is a neoliberal myth.

9. And, what is the long term legacy of the massive student protests during last few years in Europe, including the one in Zagreb, Croatia?

I am not prepared to stick my neck out and make all kinds of predictions. Others have been doing this and I fear we have too much of this going on. Some, like Saskia Sassen, commenting on the riots in Britain, have even suggested historical analogies with the transition from the Middle Ages to Modernity. I am one of those who have witnessed too many false dawns to endorse such assertions. What I am prepared to say at this stage is that there is a groundswell that indicates that people, students and others have been penetrating the ideological surface of neoliberalism and capitalist triumphalism and are mobilizing, making important alliances in the process. The question remains: are these just spontaneous responses or is there conscious direction. If it's the latter, where is the conscious direction coming or likely to come from? This is a question which Gramsci constantly posed: "Spontaneita'" and "direzione consapevole." Nevertheless it's the sort of action with which any forward looking movement must connect.

10. Let me repeat the question from one of your interviews from the past: How do you see radical adult education and radical scholarship developing in future?

The role of education is to not simply integrate people into the logic of the present system but to enable people to develop the acumen and attitude to be able to change the system both individually and collectively. It is about forming people as social actors rather than simply reducing them to two dimensional human beings (thankfully, people will always be more than that), namely consumers and producers. Critical literacy is the key element of a genuine education, in my book, very much that element which is often conspicuous by its absence in dominant policy discourses. I have often criticized the Lifelong learning discourse in Europe and specifically within the EU because of this. Education is not simply to earn but to learn to live fully and to contribute to the development of democratic public spaces, spaces which alas are being eroded by the onset of privatization and commodification. The final chapter in my book

deals with this and gives prominence to the kind of pedagogy I embrace: critical pedagogy. This draws inspiration from Paulo Freire, Lorenzo Milani, Maxine Greene, Henry Giroux, Paula Allman, Michael Apple, Antonia Darder and, luckily, a host of others, including the very influential writer and teacher Roger I Simon, formerly of OISE/University of Toronto, who alas just passed away. It draws from a great intellectual tradition including members of the Frankfurt School, the British Cultural Studies tradition and the best of independent working class education, as well as Latin American popular education and subaltern southern social movements. Where is this heading? I trust that the recent struggles as manifest in the Arab world and among the Occupy movements and indignados will bring social class issues back into the equation. As Michael Apple once put it, class is not discourse. It has never gone away. It is real. It matters. And yet many people who subscribe to the 'post' word have done much to throw out the class baby with the class bathwater. This does not mean that the other issues of difference and oppression are not important but I feel that we will now witness a greater appreciation of the way capitalism serves as a totalizing force, structuring different forms of entities on gender, ethnic, and nationality lines, with class having a transversal presence. I take my cue from Antonia Darder on this. This is my hope for the future of radical critical pedagogy, and of course many have been espousing this view all along.

11. You also co-wrote an interesting piece called 'The promise of Cuba' where you said that, 'if left to freely develop its socialist vision of democracy, Cuba might serve as a credible and more viable alternative to US-led capitalism'. What do you mean by that?

Well I recall a conversation on a plane from Frankfurt to Los Angeles as I was stretching my limbs. An American passenger courteously asked me about the purpose of my visit to LA. My response was that I was meant to give a few presentations at a Freire forum at UCLA. I anticipated the follow up question: who is Paulo Freire? I said he was a Latin American educator. The quick response was: will those guys down there (i.e. Latin America) ever get their act together? Typical 'common sense' crap, I thought. My response was: if you guys allow them to do so! I was of course referring to not all Americans and the many decent ones at that – I have many wonderful American friends, many of whom have and continue to inspire me in my work-but, as you would imagine, the US government, be it Republican or Democrat, and the interests it historically represented and continues to represent. I do not romanticize Cuba and there is much that I criticize. But there are some important principles which are worth taking on board, especially the notion of international exchange in a delinking fashion, its investment in education, health, sport and science and its sustainable development track record recognized by WWF. But of course no state in this US sphere of influence is allowed to develop the way its people (I mean majority) want. There is simply too much at stake for multinationals and the political forces that advance their interests. Chomsky and several others have been revealing this for donkey's years.

12. Last year, on the 38th anniversary of the Pinochet's CIA assisted military coup in Chile, you characterized this event as the first, symbolically speaking, September 11th. What have we learned from this case? Or, more accurately, what haven't we learned from this infamous historic event?

We should have learnt that there is a ruthless and violent streak in Capitalism and that Neoliberalism was born within the context of brutal fascist regimes. I recently wrote another piece focusing on the September 12 (practically a second September 11) in Turkey. Once again, this was a military coup which was a catalyst for the onset of neoliberal policies in the country. Human rights were abused, people disappeared or were brutally beaten to death sometimes in custody etc. What we should have learnt is the extent of the forces of reaction whenever change based on principles of social justice is being attempted to be carried out. We should also have learnt that, despite the semblance of consensus democratic politics (Chile had the longest tradition of parliamentary democracy in the region), one must not underestimate the forces of coercion that are always present. Allende underestimated this, despite alleged warnings in this regard from Castro.

Recent reflections on September 11 lead us to focus on what is valued in society, who is deemed worthy of living or being disposed of, what is it that is fundamentally repudiating about western imperialist politics and what is it that breeds so much resentment against western imperialist powers in many parts of the world to lead to such a barbarous and callous attack on ordinary civilians as happened on that particular day in 2001. But it should lead us to reflect on the earlier September 11 and what it represents in terms of the way western economic interests are safeguarded at the expense of so many innocent lives as was the case in Chile, with the creation of the right (if you can excuse the pun) conditions (toppling an elected government which had been nationalizing services), and the rest of what we call the 'majority world' including Africa, Asia and Latin America – the tri-continental world.

These infamous September 11/12ths and their immediate aftermaths lead us to reflect on how critical thinking, dissent and the construction of plausible democratic alternatives become the first casualties in these situations - when economic interests, at the expense of human rights, occupy centre stage in the foreign policies of western nations. I am sure that critical thinking, dissent and the construction of plausible democratic alternatives figured in the dreams and narratives of the many persons, young and old (including high school children in Argentina during the 'night of the pencils'), who disappeared and lost their lives in Chile, Argentina and later East Timor and Turkey. This makes a mockery of the exaltation of these very same democratic virtues in these western nations' discourses regarding the basis of a democratic education.

The connection between the Pinochet regime and the destruction of any semblance of a democratic education was reinforced last year as a result of massive student protests in Chile which earned the support of other sectors of the population. The Chilean coup d'état brought to an end not only a long democratic tradition in the country but also the idea of education as a human right. At all levels, including state provision at elementary and secondary schooling, education was rendered a consumer good. Students together with a host of other sectors of society, social organizations and trade unions, such as the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Chile* (CUT), came together to clamor for the right to a free education in a country where one must pay for public education and where university fees are quite steep, leading families into huge debts, legacies of the Neoliberal restructuring occurring since the time of the Pinochet dictatorship. Chilean students have

been clamoring for an end to this most undemocratic of measures calling for the right of every citizen to an education, irrespective of means, to be enshrined in the constitution and therefore putting an end to a shameful legacy of the Pinochet rule. Fancy, having to pay for state sponsored elementary and secondary education! This represents the case of stretching the neoliberal thinking with regard to service provision to its extreme. Not that other countries fare much better since any free provision is often poor, underfunded and often of despicable quality which renders the whole issue of choice a farce. Either pay or be fobbed off with a poor quality service - such is the Neoliberal mantra.

13. Is the brutalization and militarization of American culture and education actually one of the truly long-term consequences of the 9/11 terrorist attack, bearing in mind all the extraordinary measures taken by the U.S. government from Bush to Obama? And is it true that, as Henry Giroux said, 'war has become one of most vaunted and cherished national values in USA?'

All the signs available to me seem to suggest that this is very much the case. As an American, Giroux is in a much better position than me to make these observations. My sense, expressed by many others, is that 9/11 has provided successive governments in the USA and elsewhere with a carte blanche to impinge on all kinds of civil liberties in the interest of the war on terror and to fuel further interests of the military-industrial complex. We have seen this in many of the senseless wars being carried out not least the war in Iraq which was based on what hitherto comes across as a fabrication, the presence of WMDs. It also led to the global enforcement of an established world order which brooks no deviation and possibly dissent, one in which blood is traded for oil.

14. Tariq Ali has described the right and (nominally) left governments in most countries today as "extreme centre", that are focused on adopting programs of neoliberal reforms, while, at the same time, they wage wars against other countries and oppress their own people with austerity measures. What are your comments on this?

I partly answered this question earlier on and we see little difference in terms of what parties opposing each other within bourgeois representative democratic politics stand for. I see this in my home country as well as in many other parts of the world. This probably has much to do with the end of the Cold War and the presence of one hegemonic body of political and economic thinking. Part of the groundswell and reactions of the electorate in countries like Greece voting in the latter case for small but ideologically markedly different parties is a dissatisfaction with centrist, accommodating politics which has sold them short, to put it mildly. Hence the quest for new forms of doing politics in various parts of the world through a variety of grassroots movements or networks of social creation in say Italy and other countries...disenchantment with traditional party politics. Of course this disenchantment does not guarantee any particular political trajectory. The issue of who provides the conscious direction if any to the indignant movements remains a central one in my view.

15. Some of the most prominent Western media strongly attacked Argentina for nationalizing the corporation REPSOL . The *Wall Street Journal* and *Financial Times* declared their move as "economic piracy" and the *Economist* proposed the exclusion of this "pirate state" from the G20 and the introduction of visas for its citizens. A similar thing happened before the elections in Greece, when some European mainstream newspapers openly railed against the political options that were put forward as alternatives to the austerity measures. To what extent do you think the mainstream media are responsible for globally maintaining the political and economic status quo?

Once again this brings me back to the point I made regarding Stephen Harper's book on the nature of the media, not so much your obviously outrageously right wing sources such as Fox News but the more authoritative, much revered and perhaps even ostensibly left leaning media. The former is very much 'in your face', easy to see through, banal if you will. The latter is more insidious and therefore more effective in hegemony building, and Harper is not talking about the Wall Street Journal here but, as I said, ostensibly left leaning papers or simply papers respected for their 'balanced' and 'authoritative' views. Harper suggests that the latter type of media, despite the left wing posturing of some of them, cement capitalist hegemony, gesturing in the direction of the actions you describe.

16. Last question: How much are important mass movements like *Occupy Wall Street*, or Spanish *Indignados* confronting, head on, most of issues mentioned in your book (like racism, privatization of education, corporate capitalism, austerity measures ...)? Did the social media help in raising international awareness of and mobilizing to confront these problems? Can we expect an increase of international solidarity in the future?

Yes I think they carry part of the fight and have served as an inspiration for my writing articles in *Truthout* and *Counterpunch* which provide the basis of my *Politics of Indignation* book. The book's title indicates an inspiration from one of the movements you mention. 'We are not merchandise in the hands of bankers and politicians' was one of the cries in Spain which gets to the heart of some of the issues dealt with. The book is very much based on critique but also explores possibilities based on inter-ethnic understanding, without, I hope, obscuring the different power dynamics involved. It foregrounds issues of anti-racism and social class both of which, in Cornell West's terms, continue to 'matter.' My hope is that there will continue to be political struggles for greater international solidarity first and foremost among subaltern groups on both sides of the North-South global divide. This is an ongoing struggle without any point of arrival. It is part of the struggle for a 'democracy in process.'