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*Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other
Troubles With the Neighbours* by Slavoj Žižek (review)

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McMahon's *American Exceptionalism Reconsidered* is an eminently clear and concise volume that raises many important questions about American foreign policy—both what it is and what it could be. Scholars and students alike will learn a great deal from this book.

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Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles With the Neighbours* (Melville House, Allen House 2016), ISBN 978-0-241-27884-0, 128 pages.

Discussions in Western political circles regarding terrorism and travel bans demonstrate that refugees comprise an important part of contemporary political conversations. On one end, there are those that oppose freedom of movement due to security; whereas others argue that humanitarian priorities need to surpass security priorities in the face of the refugee crisis. Hegelian philosopher

Slavoj Žižek seeks to craft a philosophical solution in his work, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours*.¹ At points, this work lacks analytical nuance; yet, the book's main contention regarding the problematic way refugees are discussed by all parts of the political spectrum in modern political, philosophical, and academic debates is of utmost importance in current work on citizenship and statelessness.

In this essay, Žižek initially wants to respond to those who argue for completely open borders as a solution to the refugee crisis. He notes that the "greatest hypocrites" are those who claim moral superiority over others by advocating for an open-border "utopia."² In doing so, Žižek asserts that liberals are using refugees as a non-human tool to achieve their desired ends, which is the same criticism they make of those engaging in the security discourse. This discourse becomes important when certain individuals prioritize safety of their own nation over humanitarian crises. Political theorist Michael Dillon notes that the security discourse is when powerful elites turn humans into a "species of calculation." Moreover, these elites then use this calculability to reduce individual freedom.³

Žižek's point, on the contrary, is that many leftist critics of those on the political right also use refugees as mere tools of humanitarianism—rather than security—and thus are equally guilty of dehumanization.⁴ Overall, the thesis of Žižek's work is that the only way to solve the refugee crisis is by attacking its root cause: global capitalism.

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1. SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *AGAINST THE DOUBLE BLACKMAIL: REFUGEES, TERROR AND OTHER TROUBLES WITH THE NEIGHBOURS* (2016).
 2. *Id.* at 9–11.
 3. MICHAEL DILLON, *POLITICS OF SECURITY: TOWARDS A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF CONTINENTAL THOUGHT* 26 (1996).
 4. ŽIŽEK, *AGAINST THE DOUBLE BLACKMAIL*, *supra* note 1, at 9–11.

This fits in with much of Žižek's other work where he attempts to criticize the societal negatives presented by capitalism.⁵ Additionally, he views culture as a significant variable in his work, and while he does not test it in the book itself, it is an addressed bias in his earlier essays.⁶ Yet, regardless of one's feelings concerning either of these two biases, it is important to examine the book given its own assumptions. Consequently, this review will begin by looking at the two core arguments presented by Žižek, and then it will examine three other theorists who have written on the same subject and place them in dialogue with Žižek. Finally, it will present two fundamental critiques followed by how the text could solve for those issues.

The first contention made is that refugees from the Arab and African worlds are not "people like us," and frankly, that should not matter. This stems from earlier work conducted by Žižek. For example, in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, he argues that the "clash of civilizations" is related to "global capitalism" and needs to be addressed globally, not locally.⁷ In his work on refugees, he notes, "while our Christian fundamentalists are more marginalized than those of the Muslim world . . . our liberal-secular critique of fundamentalism is also stained by falsity."⁸ Žižek later extends this argument by examining refugee integration into the West, specifically Germany, and posits that refugees may not want to be amalgamated in a different culture. That is, it is not just racist Westerners that prevent cultural understandings, but it is

also indeed the refugees themselves. This analysis provides evidence for Žižek's argument regarding the impracticality of open borders.

Nonetheless, outside of basic solutions, Žižek contends that the aforementioned degree of cultural clashing does not matter, and that all people should still have compassion for refugees. He notes this is not because refugees go uncounted—in fact, Žižek responds to Alain Badiou's classification of migrants as "not counted" by positing that migrants are the most counted, as they themselves seek to be part of Western hegemonic identity⁹—but because as "decent people" it is our ethical duty to do so.

Most importantly, Žižek argues that a refugee not being "people like us" is analytically meaningless, as "we ourselves are not 'people like us.'" Using less jargon, Westerners have an idealized view of their society, and they view themselves as separate from the global world. Consequently, this means that the duty to refugees is inherently an ethical one that requires critical self-reflection.¹⁰

The second core argument Žižek makes concerns solvency. Early in the book, he discusses Walter Benjamin's concept of "divine violence." This philosophical concept is a response to Carl Schmitt's understanding of violence as a necessary means to a clear end. Benjamin, however, posits that violence can indeed be a means without an end. Žižek argues this is the case for the Ferguson, Missouri protests; and further is also applicable to the contemporary statelessness crisis. Divine violence is neither

5. SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *VIOLENCE: SIX SIDEWAYS REFLECTIONS* 61–66 (2008).

6. *Id.*

7. SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *WELCOME TO THE DESERT OF THE REAL: FIVE ESSAYS ON SEPTEMBER 11 AND RELATED DATES* 41–49 (2013).

8. ŽIŽEK, *AGAINST THE DOUBLE BLACKMAIL*, *supra* note 1, at 38.

9. *Id.* at 92–93.

10. *Id.* at 90.

sublime nor emancipating, it simply begets more violence, and therefore the only solution to the crisis is a change in the economic structures.¹¹

In response to other theories, Žižek notes that the total right to free movement cannot exist because this will exclude the lower class people from ever escaping violence, and moreover, that a preaching of tolerance is not a solution because there will still be those who believe refugees can return to a “Nativia.”¹² Rather, the sole answer revolves around thinking about how to rid the world of the capitalist superstructure creating this crisis. By utilizing Giorgio Agamben’s argument that “thought is the courage of hopelessness,”¹³ Žižek argues that class and discourse analyses are the only way society can create a utopia free of the horrors that form the need to migrate. Specifically, any policy actions will be layered with problematic capitalistic intentions, and thus less impactful than a discourse which has the goal of ending capitalism.

One area where Žižek’s book lacked was its engagement with other literature. Outside of brief forays with single works by Benjamin, Badiou, and Agamben, Žižek tends to avoid other philosophical texts and completely ignores competing theories. One set of literature that would have helped this text is that which deals with refugees as biopolitics and bare life. First, Agamben’s book *Homo Sacer* ad-

dresses the issue of bare life and refugees. He posits that denial of rights to refugees, and in extreme cases infinite detention of such a class, results in dehumanization no different than the Nazi concentration camps, creating bare, unprotected life.¹⁴

Hannah Arendt’s text *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is perhaps the first work to examine the aforementioned relationship.¹⁵ In it, she posits that while refugees are one of the most vulnerable populations in the world, the Nazi death camps were exceptional, as they did not want to dehumanize, but rather, remove the concept of humanity entirely.¹⁶ Thus, for Arendt, while the refugee is a troubling form of biopolitics, it is not—as Agamben notes—the ultimate form. Finally, Patricia Owens has furthered Arendt and written a critique of the Agambian sense of bare life. She argues that Agamben’s idea of bare life as the ultimate biopolitics is wrong because humans are not given inborn rights, but are provided rights by a state or institution.¹⁷ Therefore, in her case, Owens finds refugees to be an inherent, non-unique part of international relations that can only be addressed by solving power structures.

These three works are important because they look at refugees in relation to biopolitics and bare life, which, by not addressing it, provide a refutation to Žižek’s contention regarding the “counted” nature of refugees. That is, refugees become less than human and

11. *Id.* at 41–48.

12. *Id.* at 77–78.

13. Jordan Skinner, *Thought is the Courage of Hopelessness: an Interview with Philosopher Giorgio Agamben*, VERSO BLOG (17 June 2014), available at <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1612-thought-is-the-courage-of-hopelessness-an-interview-with-philosopher-giorgio-agamben>.

14. GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *HOMO SACER: SOVEREIGN POWER AND BARE LIFE* 173–75 (1998). See *id.* at 126–80 for Agamben’s entire conversations surrounding refugees.

15. HANNAH ARENDT, *THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM* (1973).

16. *Id.* at 267–304.

17. Patricia Owens, *Beyond “Bare Life”: Refugees and the “Right to Have Rights,”* in REFUGEES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS 133 (Alexander Betts & Gil Loescher eds., 2011).

more of a calculable problem. Thus the humanitarian nature of the situation is entirely forgotten. As noted previously, Žižek postulates that refugees want to be part of Western hegemonic identity, and thus are very much political life. Yet, by not addressing the more nuanced arguments of Agamben, Arendt, and Owens, Žižek leaves one of his important claims defenseless.

This leads to the first important critique of Žižek's book. His argument is reliant on the concept of refugees as a secondary problem to that of capitalism, and thus he uses cultural and economic philosophy to substantiate his contention. However, if refugees are a symptom of biopolitics—as Agamben, Arendt, and Owens argue—the overall impact of the refugee plays just as much of a role in power structures as it does capitalism. More explicitly, if refugees are evidence of governments being able to control what lives are important, then the current crisis is something that must be addressed as an individual issue, and not by refuting capitalism. If this is not done and the focus continues to be on fighting capitalism, then the “minor” crises will magnify to unsolvable degrees.

The second critique deals with an issue of empirics. Žižek uses individual cases to frequently argue that, due to their religion and culture, Muslim refugees have issues assimilating into the West. This is important because it allows him to claim that open borders are an idea that will never practically work. Yet, statistics demonstrate a different reality. German government data demonstrates

that in 2015 there was a 42 percent rise in hate crimes against refugees perpetrated by right-wing ideologues, and in 2016 there were ten attacks per day against refugees.¹⁸ Furthermore, in a 2013 analysis of 63,000 Swedish residents, Jerzy Sarnecki and his colleagues—professors at University of Stockholm's school of criminology—found that 75 percent of the difference in foreign-born crime is accounted for by analyzing income and neighborhood, both indicators of poverty. Among the Swedish-born children of immigrants, the crime rate falls in half (and is almost entirely concentrated in lesser property crimes) and is 100-percent attributable to class. Put simply, migrants are no more likely to commit crimes, including rape, than ethnic Swedes of the same family income.¹⁹ Thus, while Žižek's argument about inclusion, wealth, and open borders is fair, his contention regarding it being unpractical is statistically false.

Even with these criticisms posited, however, *Against the Double Blackmail* raises crucial points for how we understand the current statelessness crisis. The first area where Žižek's work improves political-philosophical argumentation is through his analysis of language. While the security discourse regarding refugees is surely problematic, the left's usage of the stateless as a means to claim moral superiority is equally disturbing, as both cases exert noticeable power dynamics over the suffering. This is because parts of the humanitarian argument, where refugees are treated as numbers to claim moral superiority, dehumanizes the suf-

18. *Data Shows Hate Crimes Against Refugees on Rise In Germany*, VOICE OF AMERICA NEWS, 26 Feb. 2017, available at <http://www.voanews.com/a/data-shows-hate-crimes-against-refugees-on-rise-in-germany/3740712.html>.

19. Martin Hällsten, Ryszard Szulkin, & Jerzy Sarnecki, *Crime as a Price of Inequality?: The Gap in Registered Crime between Childhood Immigrants, Children of Immigrants and Children of Native Swedes*, 53 BRIT. J. CRIMINOL. 456 (2013).

fering in a different yet nearly identical way as the security discourse. Thus, Žižek demonstrates that it is important to discuss refugees in the milieu of a global capitalistic problem and not in that of political debates.

The second area where Žižek's book shines is its insistence on contextualizing the refugee crisis. Via his use of Walter Benjamin's theory of divine violence, Žižek asserts that without examining causal structures, debates on statelessness cannot effectively occur.²⁰ Attempting to address the problem of the refugee without tackling its broader causes therefore only serves to increasingly beget the problem. In levying this contention, Žižek attempts to provide a broad way of solving the dehumanization caused by statelessness.

Žižek's work, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours*, is certainly imperfect. The text lacks analytical nuance because it does not engage with the broader theoretical literature on statelessness, and it also focuses on individual stories instead of empirical trends. Nevertheless, by challenging his audience to criticize objectification of refugees in traditional discourses, as well as contextualizing the current crisis, Žižek hopes to move the world towards a solution for dehumanization of the stateless.

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***Desapariciones: Usos Locales, Circulaciones Globales* (Gabriel Gatti ed., Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores, Universidad de los Andes, 2017) ISBN 978-958-665-427-2, 288 pages.**

Reading a book on disappearances feels like sinking into shifting sands. While trying to get a grip on some of the darkest episodes of history, the reader is confronted with the fact that the present era keeps on generating new *desaparecidos* on a daily basis. Together with the other authors of this edited volume entitled *Desapariciones: Usos Locales, Circulaciones Globales* (*Disappearances: Local Uses, Global Circulations*), Gabriel Gatti tries to make sense of a concept full of paradoxes and of the methodological and ontological problems that surround it. How do you represent absence? How do you mourn without a grave? How do you remember the unknown? How do you punish without proof? The specific purpose of this edited volume is to understand the rapid transnational circulation and transformation of a concept that was originally associated with a specific phenomenon that took place in a particular historical and geographical context: the Latin American *detenidos-desaparecidos*, or detained-disappeared, during the Cold War. Is it useful to compare the political prisoners that disappeared in the ESMA in Buenos Aires during the seventies and eighties with the twenty-first century North-African and Middle-Eastern refugees that drown in the Mediterranean Sea on their way to Europe, or the Mexican women that are being murdered in Ciudad Juárez? What are, if any, the common characteristics of the times, spaces, and

20. ŽIŽEK, AGAINST THE DOUBLE BLACKMAIL, *supra* note 1, at 41–48.