

Boris Buden and Darko Suvin

# Only Intelligent Planning Can Save Us

01/07

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**Boris Buden:** Universalism is not an innocent concept. In “The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism,” published shortly after the fall of historical communism, Ágnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, former Marxist philosophers and disciples of Georg Lukács, accused Marx and his followers of turning the Hegelian concept of universalism into a philosophy of praxis, a “predictive and action-orienting device” applied to change the world. This, they say, is what then led to the gulag and all the horror of so-called communist totalitarianism – the burden of guilt that seems to fall on anyone who dares to still claim a universalist stance today. Still, you have never abandoned universalism.

**Darko Suvin:** I’m not too fond of the term “universalism,” but I accept it as a shorthand that respects the fact that today capitalism has, with its attendant technology, put *all* our lives – that is, the universal existence of *Homo sapiens* and probably all vertebrates too – into danger and doubt. I don’t want to discuss Fehér and Heller, understandably shell-shocked as they were by the particularly repulsive Hungarian Stalinist terror up to 1956, and then by the ensuing stasis of “goulash communism.” However, as Brecht remarks, the stone does not excuse the fallen, and Heller in particular is simply a full-scale renegade fleeing to postmodernist neoliberalism.

Any intelligent – that is, radical – left necessarily responds to total capitalism and must therefore itself totalize and globalize. It must also historicize, in contrast to capitalism, which lives only for the next profit, which exists imaginatively only in the immediate future – only as far as the next day or the next year, but no longer. The left, if it is to exist, must imaginatively exist in the wrongs of the past (as Benjamin stressed) and in all the futures – immediate, medium, and long-term – and then apply all of these to a much richer human present. To give just one example: the overwhelming evidence (see Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*) is that the capitalist-induced climate catastrophe is raising sea levels and will relatively soon create tens of millions of new “climate refugees” and force all the ports in the world to be rebuilt. This will of course result in new dictatorial powers for the exploiters, whether covert or quite overt. Therefore, only the neoliberal murderers of millions can afford not to universalize, and they can afford this because they make the 99 percent of us pay for it.

**BB:** But have they also succeeded in making universalism for us 99 percent definitely useless?

**DS:** Their anti-universalist arguments are generally feeble and disingenuous, for universal rule could theoretically be of any kind. It could be

02/07



An image allegedly taken after the destruction of *Monument to the Victory of the people of Slavonia* in Croatia, 1992.



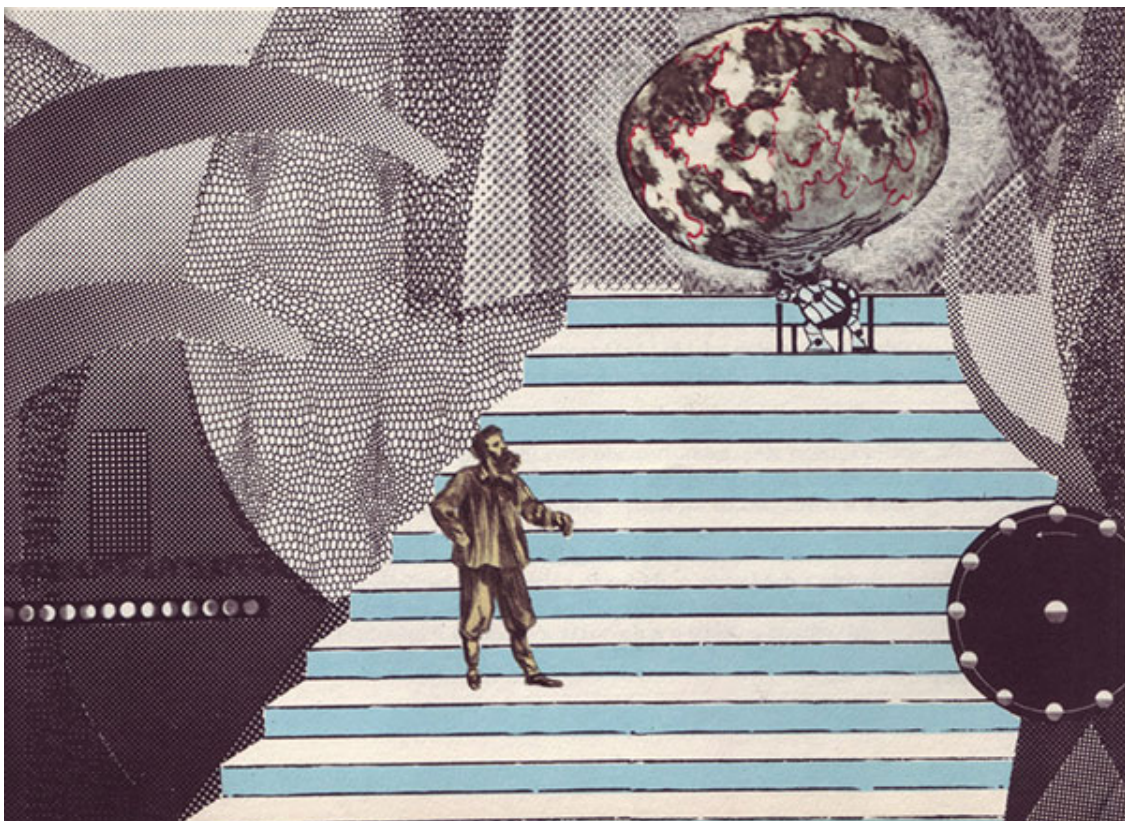
Stalinist, though this was evidently not in the cards. It could be the warfare-oriented dictatorship of financial capitalism plus a few Western armies, as today; this could, in the coming dire emergencies, easily evolve into neofascist rule, which a fraction of the present rulers have already prepared as a backup. There could also be, in theory and in a truly libertarian communist-oriented practice, a universal direct and associative democracy. It all depends on us, on how we use universalism: as a strategic horizon that *does not* deny today for tomorrow or the local for the global, but rather defends here and now better because of the interaction of the general with the particular. All such strategies exist, as a first sketch, in people such as Brecht, Benjamin, Gramsci, and Gayatri Spivak, of whom the shell-shocked do not speak. They speak of a self-constructed straw men.

**BB:** Your mentioning the necessity to historicize evokes today, in our allegedly post-historical age, the famous demand by Fredric Jameson: “Always historicize!” Is this what you wanted to achieve with your recently published book *Splendour, Misery, and Potentialities: An X-Ray of Socialist Yugoslavia* (2016) – historicizing, not as saving the past from oblivion but as the creation of a genuine historical experience, one

that, however particular and concrete, can still be totalized and globalized for the sake of the future?

**DS:** Yes, the book in that sense follows Jameson’s warning, and he even kindly supplied a very pithy introduction to it. True, I officially trained in literature and theater – and have from my philological training retained, I trust, an eye for shapes and an ear for the meanings of words and artifacts. However, I’ve also had a lifelong fascination with questions usually posed by philosophy, such as “what does this mean?” or “what values are present or absent here?” – all of them inextricably wedded to political economics as our Destiny. And I was born and bred in Yugoslavia, living my childhood under the fascists and my youth as a Titoist activist. I could not understand how something that had started so well, as a genuine plebeian and liberatory revolution, finished in the worst possible way, as misery, hatred, and fratricide, leading to a full counterrevolution. So I wrote a book on this subject because I would have liked to read one and there wasn’t any. And then I realized that in fact nobody inside ex-Yugoslavia was supposed to write about it; it was discouraged. Hypocritically, it was not explicitly forbidden; but nobody would finance it, nor could you make a

03/07



Illustrations by Adolf Hoffmeister for the 1964 Czech translation of *The First Men in the Moon* by H. G. Wells.

scholarly career if you insisted on pursuing the subject.

**BB:** During the war in the Nineties this oblivion took even more oppressive forms, targeting not only “a better past” but also the utopian dimension of the future, which was a constitutive element of Yugoslavian socialist modernity.

**DS:** “Oblivion” is too normal a term for what was and still is happening in “post-communism,” in that famous “transition” to primordial, predatory, or *Raub* capitalism without a human face in the whole of the ex-Soviet bloc plus Yugoslavia. The counterrevolutions may have in some cases (not in most of ex-Yugoslavia) been velvet ones, but for the most part they always had an iron fist consisting of military violence and financial reengineering toward scarcity and dependence on private funding: in brief, a violence dependent on tanks and banks.

This violence, the suppression of alternatives and indeed of the memory of what was good in the Socialist Federal Republic (SFR) of Yugoslavia, seems to be twofold, implicit or latent and explicit or manifest. I don’t know which is worse. I have mentioned the implicit (the withholding of funds for unwelcome research). It could be enlarged to include, for example, the Catholic Church’s steady and successful drive to take over all the key posts in Croatian higher education. As to the manifest violence, we all know about the open killing of people in the Yugoslav Secession Wars, but few know that, for example in Croatia, which is where both of us come from and know most about, hundreds of socialist monuments commemorating the Liberation War of 1941–45 were blown up *manu militari* by Tudjman, a couple of thousand if you also include the commemorative plaques – all of this without any law or public debate. This included some great works of modernist art and architecture. Some of the best of those monuments (by the great Vojin Bakić, for example) looked like futuristic spaceships taking off, probably towards the sun of freedom and openness. This symbolic example must be read as a deep hatred on the part of the new clerico-fascist rulers for anything that spoke of a radically different future.

The implicit and explicit violence fuse in the burning of books. All public libraries had to scrap not only all books printed in Cyrillic but also many in the approved Latin script that had an ideologically suspect horizon. This is quite equivalent to the 1933 Nazi burning of books. Yet Croatia was then admitted to the European Union as a virtuous member ...

Writing my book, I found out that the centerpiece of SFR Yugoslavia was an attempt at workers’ control over production and similar

ways of organizing in the cultural sphere. It was a half-hearted attempt and did not seek full control. Still, it produced remarkable enthusiasm and economic results up to about the mid-1960s, and it was certainly in all respects better for the great majority of working people than what they have today. Thence all the suppressions and damnations of memory!

**BB:** In his famous essay on freedom of the press, young Marx compared freedom to the solar system: each of its worlds, while turning on its own axis, revolves around the central sun of freedom (*die Zentralsonne der Freiheit*). As a young Marxist in what was then Tito’s Yugoslavia, you turned your intellectual interests towards the Universe – by discovering and exploring the imaginary worlds of science fiction (SF). Was it the central sun of freedom that you were searching for?

**DS:** Of course it was: freedom and its twin, knowledge, understanding, or cognition. As Giordano Bruno told us (which got him burned at the stake), innumerable worlds exist and are possible. Somebody in the 1950s optimistically called SF “a general staff of mankind, planning on paper its future battles.” Maybe the metaphor is too militaristic, but only intelligent planning can save us all. We must understand not only the most disparate potentialities of people – or intelligent species, SF calls them “psychozoa,” which I rather like – living together that slumber in our bosoms, but also, most importantly, the *price* each of these potentialities demands in human suffering. Thus all good SF unavoidably fuses the sweet hope of utopia (the good place) with the bitter but salvific draught of dystopia (the bad place, so near to the tendencies we see everyday): in the past it was Wells, Zamyatin, and Stapledon who wrote such stories; in the Golden Age of 1940–74 it was the generation of Heinlein, Simak, and so on, to that of Le Guin and the Strugatskys; and today it is writers such as Kim Stanley Robinson.

**BB:** We have already mentioned Fredric Jameson. In his *Archaeologies of the Future* he praises you not only for generically linking utopia with SF – meaning your definition of utopia as a “sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction” – but even more importantly, for having conjoined SF with the utopian critical tradition by means of the Russian formalists’ notion of *ostranenie*, or Brecht’s V-effect. You, however, have complemented these critical notions with a cognitive meaning (“cognitive estrangement”), which reasserts the realistic implications of literary texts. But today, in our brave neoliberal world governed solely by the TINA principle (“there is no alternative”), interest in the social critique and the utopian and future-oriented thinking of SF seems to have completely

04/07

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evaporated. It's as though Kant's Enlightenment slogan "The starry sky above me and the moral law within me" has been revised, via a horror vision of a world of global warming and neoliberal self-destruction, to say, "The burning sun above me and the predatory greed within me." Do you feel like you're among the last few who still remembers the future?

**DS:** If conceiving SF as a general staff for humanity is too optimistic today, at least it could be an early warning system. For the estrangement (Shklovsky's *ostranenie* or Brecht's V-effect) in SF is based on a critical distance from the norms under which we live, mobilizing an imagination of otherness. Thus, there are, as you say, realistic implications of SF texts or movies at their best (though SF movies are almost all hopelessly falsified by Hollywood). There are two interlocking components here: first, the reader must perceive a believable alternative world, aesthetically coherent, pleasurable, and interesting (whether dark or bright); second, her understanding necessarily compares that alternative world to the world in which she lives: through the aesthetics or the narrative, we cannot help but think of real science, of real politics, and of their utopian alternatives. Of course, postmodern capitalists

05/07

have no use for this alternative world, and drown it in a masochistic wave of safe horrors, zombies, vampires, and werewolves. As you say, it is as if Kant's old slogan has been replaced by its dystopian antithesis, the capitalist predatory greed within us. This results in a pitch darkness into which we are descending; you can even literally see it in the lighting of most horror and supposedly SF movies and TV shows – in the darkness, say, of *Game of Thrones*. We live in the anti-Enlightenment. Light has been degraded by military co-optation, beginning with the light of explosions caused by killer drones and bombs, and ending with the atomic flash that is "brighter than a thousand suns" – which we might well see again in North Korea or wherever.

**BB:** Do you remember Robert A. Heinlein's story "Universe," the first part of his classic two-part SF novel *The Orphans of the Sky*? It is the story of the so-called "generation ship" *Vanguard*, which is cruising without guidance through the universe. Long ago a mutiny killed most of the crew and their descendants have forgotten the purpose and nature of the ship. They have even regressed into an irrational, pretechnological culture dominated by superstition, and now mistake their ship for the whole universe. The picture weirdly resembles



Monument to the Victory of the people of Slavonia. Designed by Vojin Bakić, built in 1968, destroyed in 1992. (Photo: Javno Vlasništvo/Public Domain). This image was initially published in the book Drago Zdunić, ed. *Revolucionarno kiparstvo* (Zagreb: Spektar, 1977).



today's identitarian communities; whole normative identity blocks (like the West) have forgotten their modernist, universalist pasts and adhere now to more or less fundamentalist religious beliefs: they mistake what they think or their own unique cultures for the universe itself. Imagine now that we both meet as passengers on that ship and I, like Heinlein's hero Hoyland in the novel, similarly lost in space and time, ask you, "Hey! Shipmate! Where are we?"

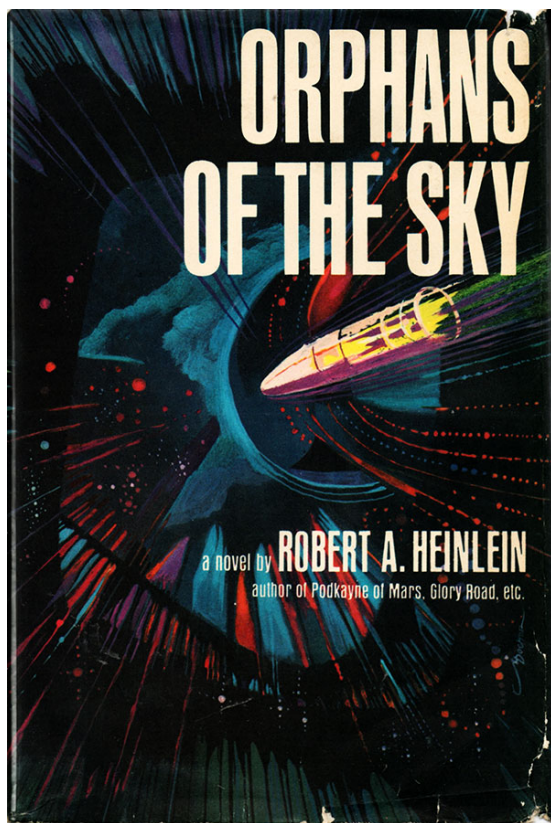
**DS:** Indeed. Our friends Srećko Horvat and Igor Štikš say in their book's title that we are "in the desert of post-socialism." Fichte might say that we are in a perfectly sinful anti-utopia that actively suppresses historical memory and truth. Our shipmates believe they are forsaking a partially mythologized socialism – that at least had a glorious emancipatory past in almost all of Marx and most of Lenin – for rock-bottom reality. However, what they live in (and force us all to live in) is a totally mythologized, violent, and vengeful neocapitalism, talking of democracy not only amid obvious frauds such as the money-driven US electoral system and the shamelessly ineffective elections of the European Union, but also – more importantly – amid the immiseration of the vast majority and the aided-and-abetted rise of neo-Nazism. We are in 1930 again but

without any organized left – whatever its drawbacks – to fight against this rise. So we might well arrive at Fascism 2.0 (rebooted – the enemies being migrants and the left instead of Jews and communists).

**BB:** It looks like those who have consciously abstained from historicizing are doomed to repeat the horrors of their past. Is the fear of grand narratives still strong?

**DS:** Doomed are those who have abandoned the courage to face the horrors of their present and who have allowed fear to command their minds. But good-old Kant knew it already – the problem is not our inability to think but our lack of courage to do so: "Dare to know!" he said. Back then, as today, one had to dare. So, what has been the essence of history in the last sixty years? Using the slogans of free trade, civil society, and globalization, the rich have organized bundles of radical interventions by major states and organizations of international capitalism to make themselves vastly richer, while multiplying the poor in their nations, eviscerating any middle-class prosperity based on stable employment, and upping the income gap between rich and poor countries from 10:1 to 90:1. Facing the few thousand billionaires, today possibly three billion people struggle to survive,

06/07



Cover of the first US edition of Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel *Orphans of the Sky* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964).

while more than half of them live in the most abject poverty, dying more or less quickly of hunger and attendant diseases; the hundred million dead and several hundred million other casualties of warfare in the twentieth century seem puny in comparison (though their terror and suffering was far from puny). It has been calculated that a 1 percent increase in US unemployment correlates with thirty-seven thousand deaths and an increase of four thousand inmates of mental hospitals, but the hidden psychic toll is surely greater. A large mass of chronically poor was thus created, then politically neutralized and turned towards neofascism by creating fear of even poorer immigrants. The purpose of the capitalist economy – profit – has led to mass death and unhappiness. For billions of people it means shorter and more painful lives. As the liberation theologian Franz Hinkelammert tells us, for everybody except maybe the richest 2 or 3 percent of the world, capitalism means disabling stress, gnawing want, and often utter despair.

It may well be that in the short term, our hope is realistically a hope without hope – *eine hoffnungslose Hoffnung* is the elegant German way of putting it (Kafka had some interesting things to say about this). The big difference from Heinlein's story is that this is compatible – as the Nazis proved once and for all – with the highest development of capitalist science and technology, thus multiplying the myth-masters' power by giga- or tera-factors, as they proudly say in bomb lore.

**BB:** Is all then lost?

**DS:** I think Mrs. Thatcher stole the TINA slogan from the left, very cleverly. But we can again say: socialism or barbarism, communist utopia or the collapse of civilization – TINA!

And nothing is ever finally lost – just look again at reborn Nazism. It depends on how people organize to change things for the better. But we better do it soon. Centrally, by using estrangement and cognition. Also much indignation, solidarity, and persistence.

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07/07

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**Boris Buden** is a writer, cultural critic, and translator. He studied philosophy in Zagreb and received his PhD in Cultural Theory from Humboldt University, Berlin. In the 1990s he was editor of the magazine and publishing house *Arkzin* in Zagreb. He is a board member of European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (eipcp), Vienna. His essays and articles cover topics related to philosophy, politics, translation, linguistics, the post-communist condition, and cultural and art criticism. Among his translations into Croatian are some of the most important works by Sigmund Freud. Buden's writings appear in numerous books, including the BAK publication *Concerning War: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art* (2006/2010) and *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (2009). He has co-edited and authored several books, including: *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* [Zone of Transition: On the End of Post-communism] (2009); *Übersetzung: Das Versprechen eines Begriffs* [Translation: Promises of a Concept] (with Stefan Nowotny) (2008); and *Der Schacht von Babel: Ist Kultur übersetzbar?* [The Pit of Babel: Is Culture Translatable?] (2004). He is currently Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Art and Design, Bauhaus University, Weimar. Buden lives and works in Berlin.

**Darko R. Suvin**, scholar, critic and poet, born in Yugoslavia, studied at the universities of Zagreb, Bristol, the Sorbonne, and Yale, taught in Europe and North America, is Professor Emeritus of McGill University and Fellow of The Royal Society of Canada. Was co-editor of *Science-Fiction Studies* (1973-81), editor, *Literary Research/Recherche littéraire*, ICLA review organ (1986-95); visiting professor at 10 universities in N. America, Europe, and Japan, and Award Fellow of Humboldt Foundation 1996. He wrote 24 books and many articles on Literature and Dramaturgy, Culture, Utopian and Science Fiction, and Political Epistemology; also three volumes of poetry. In the last years has been writing mainly on SFR Yugoslavia and communism.