

Where Does Resistance Begin? The Politics of Solidarity

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Povzetek

Članek ponudi alternativo monadičnemu sebstvu, temu trdoživemu potomcu moderne dobe, katerega glasovi še dandanes odzvanjajo v naših ušesih. Vprašanje, ki opazno umanjka konceptu ontološke zaprtosti jaza, je vprašanje skupnosti. Zato pokažemo na nujnost pojmovanja subjekta kot relacijskega in soodvisnega. Članek zagovarja tezo, da do organiziranega upora proti zatiralskim strukturam pride predvsem skozi ponovno rojstvo solidarnosti. Ko se spinozistični *conatus* obrne na glavo in postane epicenter nenasilnega upora, je mobilizirana politična sila za obnovo družbe. V zaključku pokažemo, kako javno in zasebno nista dve ločeni sferi ter analiziram, kaj je v aktualnem študentskem uporu v Srbiji avantgardnega in kaj reakcionarnega.

Keywords: subjekt, upor, solidarnost, ranljivost, *conatus*, Drugi, delitev javno/zasebno

Summary

This article offers an alternative to the monadic self, that resilient offspring of modernity whose voices still ring in our ears today. The question conspicuously absent from the concept of the ontological closedness of the self is the question of community. Therefore, we point to the necessity of grounding the subject as relational and interdependent. The article argues that organized resistance to oppressive structures arises primarily through a renaissance of solidarity. When the Spinozist *conatus* is turned upside down and becomes the epicenter of nonviolent rebellion, political force is mobilized for the renewal of society. In the final section, the article shows how the public and the private are not two separate

spheres and analyzes the avant-garde and the reactionary aspects of the current student uprising in Serbia.

Keywords: subject, resistance, solidarity, vulnerability, conatus, the Other, the private/public divide

Resignifying the Notion of Subject

The modern era has saddled us with an inheritance of atomised selfhood; self-sufficient, disconnected, shut in. Such an autogenic outgrowth is without relation (or rather, relation is entirely secondary to it). Descartes has reduced our “I” to empty, self-referential mental capers. He introduced an unsigned selfhood (without age, race, culture, gender, etc.) which remains as a merely formal act of knowing the certainty of its existence, and from this base derived all philosophically relevant ‘truths’. This is not merely a crude description, but a dangerous one to wit. Metaphysics has never been neutral or tame—it has always carried ethical and political implications. Their echo is heard in the isolated, self-interested Hobbesian subject, which steps into society only as a means of realizing its own narrow, private interests (while every human interaction is understood as inherently antagonistic). To this day this project of fragmentation has not been overcome: the competitive individualism of capitalist ideology goes hand in hand with the alienated rivals struggling to maximize market profits.

With what tools are we to subvert this pathologically splintering vision, which declares selfishness a self-evident and natural occurrence, while regarding the continuous struggle for upward mobility within the hierarchy as imperative? We firstly require a resignification of selfhood, ceasing to view the I as a singular and autonomous entity. We must accentuate its relationality and interdependence: interconnectedness precedes the very emergence of interiority. For Levinas, the presence of *the Other within the same*¹ is not a contingent or arbitrary possibility, but an inevitability. In place of the encapsulated subject stands the inseparability of *I–Thou*. Levinas suggests we understand the subject as sub-jectedness (from the Latin *sub-jectum*), where the word “I” originally means: *here I am, present, responsible for everyone and for everything*. Yet, does an ethics confined to the immediacy of face-to-face encounter—along the *I–Thou* axis—offer the conceptual resources to think solidarity or the struggle for a more just society? If I extend care only to the singular Other, the concrete individual, and never to a group, to

1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, p. 111.

an abstraction with which I have no one-to-one contact, the scope of my ethical action is drastically reduced—restricted to those with whom I coincide in space and time. Moreover, for Levinas, “judgment and justice are required from the moment the third party appears,”² and unconditional devotion to the Other entails acting as though the *I* and the *Thou* were utterly alone in the world. Therefore, the universality of justice places the Other in the accusative: the face becomes the object and instrument of an order, rather than occupying the vocative—the one addressed in the direct encounter, with infinite responsibility. Levinas thus privileges the relation of *I–Thou* over the one of *I–We*. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, Levinas’s insistence that one becomes a subject only through ethical practice—rather than taking subjectivity as a given starting point for philosophy (Descartes³)—offers a good starting point from which to dismantle the model of the self-coincident, autarkic atom. The next step, however, is to show that we are already and always within a network of relations. There is no autonomous decision to “enter” the community as though it were a pragmatic contract, undertaken because it ultimately benefits us most. This is a mechanical and instrumental conception. To articulate what our “I” is at all, we require ongoing interactions within a community. Caring for others, taking responsibility for them, is not an arbitrary choice, but the inescapable consequence of our rootedness in a world shared with others. Subjectivity emerges by opening toward the *we*, rather than remaining enclosed within the *I*.

Solidarity as a Disentanglement from the *Conatus*

What is the *conatus*? In Spinoza, the *conatus* designates the tendency of each individual thing to maintain its own being—an impulse toward self-preservation, toward sustaining.⁴ *Conatus* is affirmed through active affects (such as joy) that enhance life-power, and is diminished through passive affects (such as sadness). Therefore, for Spinoza, the task of ethics is to transform passive affects into active ones: to overcome inertia and resistance, and to increase one’s powers and capacities. Moral judgment does not occupy a primary position: we do not desire something because we judge it to be good; rather, we judge it to be good because we desire it. Accordingly, moral demands are not imposed upon *conatus*; on the contrary, it is the vital force itself that constitutes the moral criterion—similar to

2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 202.

3 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, p. 18.

4 E3p7d.

Nietzsche's claim that "the good" is everything that enhances the feeling of power, the Will to Power, the power itself.⁵

However, does the *conatus* ever encounter a wall it cannot break through? What is the force opposing it? My thesis is that it is the cohesive power of solidarity. With it we say: *I am ready and able to help others*. To disentangle from the *conatus*, to invert it, means accentuating a bond with others before a bond to my own body. Is this not what happened at the student protests in Serbia in 2024/25? A recognition of the other in its vulnerability and a mobilization of solidarity as a political force? Nevertheless, for whom is it that we have solidarity, and why? Is it a question of identification with a particular social group, and hence a signaling that *an attack on one of us is an attack on all*? The mere recognition of one's self as belonging to some collective cannot be enough. It is of vital significance that I bracket myself, and commit to the common goal.⁶ To have solidarity is not the same as being a canny, calculating agent operating with a logic of exchange in the background ("a favor for a favor"). Caring for another is not equivalent to a reciprocal exchange of good will. Furthermore, a narrow reduction of solidarity to a belonging to a particular social group remains politically impotent—without the inclusion of a broader social front, it makes no sense to speak of serious changes. Thus, for example, student protests must evolve into broader, civic protests. A space is needed that is hospitable to difference, rather than merely remaining within an identity core. To demonstrate that we care even when what is at stake does not impact us directly is the true meaning of engagement.

Why Demonstrations?

The regime in Serbia aims to naturalize corruption, to turn politics into a reality show, declare knowledge elitist, while casting a party membership as the equivalent of a university diploma. To build, in the face of such a regime, a front of continuous resistance, erasing all leaders and establishing mutual protection and aid as priorities is material proof that *another way is possible*. To capture a public space is to show that democracy does not begin and end with the act of voting. It is the revitalization of an idea of collective action and an unconditional demand for justice. A protest gathering is not only an expression of civic dissatisfaction or a plea to those in positions of power to realize conditions for a more livable life. Participants, without the institutions (which are by now in a terminal

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, p. 42.

6 Andrea Sangiovanni and Juri Viehoff, "Solidarity in Social and Political Philosophy."

stage of hibernation), create an alternative world in the streets, one in which they resist injustice, stand alongside one another, and build non-oppressive modes of life together. The principal instrument of survival for the ruling party is coercion: private business owners who supported the movement had their shops shuttered; professors who stood with the students saw their salaries docked; public sector employees face dismissal should they speak out against the regime. In response to these mechanisms of enforced obedience, funds were established to collect financial donations, while lawyers offered free legal aid to those targeted by disciplinary proceedings and to arrested demonstrators. The practice of selfless sharing has become virtually emblematic of the 2024/25 uprising (for instance, during extensive marches across Serbia, local residents welcomed the marchers as liberators and heroes, offering them food, water, and shelter). Through the mobilization of solidarity, a world beyond the reach of fear is being built. That is the litmus test when it comes to the question of whether one ought to have faith in a movement: do its methods, actions, and internal organization embody the principles with the lack of which it charges the present regime? Does it present a rupture of the political imagination, pushing the boundaries of what is thinkable and possible, or is it merely an attempt to replace one oligarch with another?

Vulnerability and Resistance

To take part in the demonstrations means voluntarily intensifying one's vulnerability by exposing oneself to possible violence. As Judith Butler notes, *vulnerability and resistance occur simultaneously*.⁷ The protester at once feels endangered and struggles against this endangerment. I will note here that violence is not exhaustively accounted for by its dramatic physical manifestations (which were abundant in Serbia, spanning police brutality, beatings, all the way to people being run over by cars as a means of forcibly breaking up a road blockade).

Violence possesses a virtual dimension—as a threat, as the potential for its actualization. Graeber interprets the notion of “force” as a euphemistic way to refer to violence: “the ability to call up people dressed in uniforms, willing to hit others over the head with wooden sticks.”⁸ This endows power with efficacy even without its immediate exercise. In the context of confronting demonstrators, the arbitrariness of targets is what amplifies fear. There is no clear causal chain; it is enough simply to have been in the “wrong place at the wrong time.” By resisting injustice,

7 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 141.

8 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, p. 56.

we ourselves become the targets of that injustice in the form of arrests, political prosecution, deportation, redundancy or the docking of pay. But to retreat from the resistance is the same as saying *yes* to the *status quo* and to the prolonging of an uncertain existence. When it comes to organizing against systemic repression, the border separating the *I* from the *We* becomes foggy. The agony of separation and pseudo-autarkic individuality is overcome. Butler offered a remarkable illustration: “there are certain photographs of the injury or destruction of bodies in war, for example, that we are often forbidden to see precisely because there is a fear that this body will feel something about what those other bodies underwent, or that this body, in its sensory comportment outside itself, will not remain enclosed, monadic, and individual.”⁹

Was it not precisely that visceral apprehension of injustice inflicted upon another’s body that ignited the wave of university blockades across Serbia? In its initial gesture, the catalyst was not so much resistance to a corrupt regime as it was an expression of solidarity with the students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts who, during a peaceful commemorative gathering in honor of those killed in the collapse of the Novi Sad canopy, were assaulted by officials of the ruling party and hired thugs.¹⁰ Following their decision to initiate a blockade, students from other higher education institutions joined them in an act of support. To refuse silence in the face of violent crackdowns on demonstrators is to defend the very right to peaceful assembly. In such circumstances, suspending the educational process becomes a declaration that the values championed by the academic community are not merely professed, but enacted.

The Public-Private Continuum

If we graft the modern meaning of the word *idiot* (“ignorant, stupid person”) onto the ancient meaning of the word (gr. ἰδιώτης, “a private person, one who does not engage in politics”), we get a suggestive marker for dismantling the private/political difference, i.e., the public/private divide. Why is it important to demonstrate the vacuousness of the illusory disparity between these concepts? Let us consider the side-effects of Kant’s demarcation between the private and the public use of reason. In “What Is Enlightenment?” Kant writes that, within the confines of our duties, we ought to be obedient (privately), and that if we disagree with some order,

9 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory*, p. 149.

10 Akademija za likovnu umetnost i dizajn, *Statement of the Plenum of the Faculty of Fine Arts*, p. 1.

we are free to write a text (publicly).¹¹ Let us translate this to the context of certain contemporary occasions: a policeman receives an order to invade a university space and break the student blockade. He is not allowed to opine openly whether this is right or not. The task is to be completed without further comments. Kant's suggestion, however, is that, having beaten both students and citizens with his nightstick and having vacated the workplace, it is that policeman's *civic duty* to take up a paper and pen and write a text about how all of this was wrong and how it is actually the role of the police to protect citizens. This illustration exposes the full extent of the absurdity into which one inevitably descends when following the logic of division into two autonomous regions. Perhaps even more importantly, it demonstrates how the insistence on a strict divide between the public and the private undermines the very possibility of resistance. As long as we merely reason as much as we like but remain obedient,¹² i.e., we are *just doing our jobs*, without direct ethical decision-making (except for the *post-festum act* of idle scribbling), the prospects for challenging systemic injustice are reduced to a minimum.

The decisive feature of the democratic process is, as Rancière notes, precisely its overcoming of the rift between the particular and the universal, the private and the public.¹³ What would this mean? We know how this distinction has served as a tool to systematically exclude women from politics—they were members of the family circle, the home, reserved for the kitchen and the raising of children, i.e., a source of ceaseless unpaid and unacknowledged labor, relegated to the “private” sphere and denied inclusion in the “universal” sphere of citizenry. Furthermore, this very separation presupposes that togetherness, touch, and entanglement with others is a surplus, an emergent state. But we find ourselves in inter-connect-edness even before we gain self-consciousness. The picture of an enclosed and apolitical, independent and private field which precedes all contact with society, ideology, or the public is unconvincing, to say the least. Let us recall a few scenes from the 2023 film *The Zone of Interest*. A married couple building their family idyll right next to Auschwitz: a neatly mowed lawn, a pool for the children and but a single thin wall covered in a rose bush, which separates this blessed exclave from war crimes. At first glance, they've successfully delineated the spheres of interest: the husband returns from his genocidal activities into the private space. However, scenes in which the family remains stubbornly indifferent to an infant's unceasing cries, or in which a younger brother is locked in the greenhouse while his siblings imitate the hiss of the gas chamber serve to suggest that perhaps the

11 Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What Is Enlightenment?’,” p. 55.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

13 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, p. 62.

barrier of the wall is not so air tight. It creeps in and erodes the everyday banality, demonstrating the impossibility of insulating oneself from the political.

Toward a Conclusion—Are We the Avantgarde?

Rawles defined civil disobedience as the “public, non-violent, yet consciously political act against the law, which is usually carried out with the aim of bringing about change in the laws and policies of the government.”¹⁴ Can we say that the ongoing struggle in Serbia is a form of civil disobedience? No. What’s more, the demand is so elementary: for the existing laws to be carried out, for the guilty to answer for their crimes. Hence, it is a project of reanimating the constitution, not of reconfiguring it. Further, the students are not a univocal group, with certain quarters courting right-wing jargon, the ideology of blood and soil, nationalism, a return to the Kosovo myth (most clearly seen in the speeches delivered at the Vidovdan protest on 28 June 2025). The movement is also reactionary insofar as it is not immune to the effects of the prejudice (which the regime champions and proclaims loudly) that all members of the opposition are dirty and corrupt. Why are they unclean? Because contact with politics *per se* is stigmatized. If the students were to enter that arena, then they would no longer be truthful, honest or just—they would become contaminated. In this way, their hands are tied, and the movement reaches a stalemate.

But is there any subversion within the confines of this rebellion? Absolutely. First, the plenary processes,¹⁵ as well as the citizens’ assemblies, have become sites which demonstrate *that representational democracy is not a pleonasm but an oxymoron*.¹⁶ Where there is no shepherd, power diffuses. The method of collective decision-making and free discussion legitimizes the actions themselves: these are not the whims of an elite but rather the result of joined forces. Resistance against corrupt despots has become the basis for an awareness of the possibility for rethinking political spaces. This is the understanding that we are not inactive contemplators and impotent critics of the *status quo*, but rather those actively and purposefully participating in the construction of social reality. What is the most precious legacy of the student rebellion of 2024/25? The awakening of a political enthusiasm,

14 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 320.

15 The plenary is a tool of direct democracy. It is an assembly in which students participate equally in discussion and decision-making. Horizontally structured and leaderless, the plenum is conceived as a practice of self-management. It enables localized engagement in the articulation of strategies for the continuation of the struggle.

16 Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, p. 53. Emphasis my own.

activism, an ethos of resistance, the desire to take our political destiny into our own hands, the blooming of a consciousness which sings: *Let the future in a few words lie, and let those words be: no master have I!*¹⁷ We do not know what the epilogue will bring, but even this intermezzo has seen a departure out of collective apathy, a recognition of vulnerability as an ontological givenness, one which we do not strive to overcome, but to render livable through solidarity and networks of mutual aid.

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17 "Sa dve reči budućnost se stvara, a te dve reči su: nemam gospodara." This verse, attributed to J. J. Zmaj, became one of the emblematic slogans of the student protests in Serbia in 2024/25. Trans. ed.