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# FORUM

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University of Edinburgh  
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts  
Issue 23 | Winter 2016

<b>Title</b>	Book Review: Slavoj Žižek, <i>Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours</i> . London: Allen Lane, 2016. 117 pp.
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<b>Publication</b>	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
<b>Issue Number</b>	23
<b>Issue Date</b>	Winter 2016
<b>Publication Date</b>	09/12/2016
<b>Editors</b>	Matthew Tibble and Anahit Behrooz

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## **Book Review: Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours*. London: Allen Lane, 2016. 117 pp.**

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*Of interest to few beyond the fellow specialist and often uncritically aligning with harmful clichés, the new book on Europe's refugee crisis by the radical Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek ultimately fails in its attempt to emulate the proud tradition of scholarly writing that has intervened effectively in public life.*

Academics are keen to point to texts such as Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* (1848), and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), as evidence of the potential for the written word to play a crucial role in socio-economic transformations the world over. Yet, as Edward Said reminds us in his examination of the role of the intellectual in society, political writing can only hope to achieve such earth-shaking status if it successfully resists falling prey to one, or both, of the ever-present dangers of "loneliness and alignment" (1996, 22).

For whilst a degree of scholarly expertise is necessary in order to author texts that unsettle dominant narratives, the writer's lonely retreat into academic research can also result in a disregard for any potential wider readership beyond that of the fellow specialist. Equally, whilst impactful political writing must *begin* from the common sense of the day to be intelligible to its audience, this can also rapidly slide into a parochial alignment with the status quo, and the uncritical restatement of what Said calls "stereotypes and reductive categories" (1996, xi).

At first glance, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours* seems to steer clear of such pitfalls. Its author, after all, is often affectionately referred to as a 'rock star' academic. Originally known for his provocative renewal of the critique of ideology, a re-reading of Marx that drew upon the thought of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek has since become one of the West's most recognizable public intellectuals, a thinker seemingly as at home on our screens as in the pages of academic journals.

There can also be no doubt that the debate into which Žižek has chosen to interject cries out for the addition of considered political writing. Unrest across the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa is currently driving an unprecedented number of people into making treacherous journeys across the Mediterranean or up through Southern Europe, resulting in the biggest humanitarian emergency since World War II (Kingsley, 2015). All too-often, however, the debate surrounding this crisis is dominated by short-sighted politicians fearing electoral oblivion and a media that seeks only to increase its revenue, hence offering of little more than a contradictory jumble, with little coherent grasp of the fundamental causes and effects of this catastrophe.

Sporadically, buried in amongst brief, inconclusive examinations of international trade treaties (14), violent riots (35) and the so-called “obscene underside of religion” (28), Žižek’s book does seem to gesture at political writing’s aforementioned capacity to unsettle such narratives, as in its analysis of what he calls “the political economy of refugees” (43). Here, the author makes a convincing case that the dynamics of twenty-first century capitalism, with its relentless search for profit, and in particular its insatiable appetite for natural resources, are a significant contributing factor to the mass movement of peoples (46): this is a welcome intervention in a debate wherein often, as he writes, “it is more or less as if beyond Greece there is a kind of black hole spewing out refugees” (49).

This promising start however, soon falters, with capitalism ceasing to be for Žižek merely an overlooked explanatory factor and rather becoming the “ultimate cause” of *all* of societies’ woes (101). This leads the author to dismiss those who choose to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees as both more concerned with appearing “superior to the corrupted world” (8) than genuine political problem-solving, and “ultimately naïve” individuals (90) for supposedly believing that charitable assistance is the solution to the crisis. Any sophisticated engagement with the motives of those actively engaged in the refugee aid effort, however, reveals this to be little more than a caricature. Interviews regularly reveal that aid workers understand in a particularly visceral way that what they are doing offers nothing in the way of a solution to the refugee crisis and can merely alleviate its worst effects (see, for example, Fishwick).

Rather than engaging with these first-hand accounts, *Against the Double Blackmail* instead chooses to characterise those seeking to assist the distant needy as thoroughly sanctimonious individuals. This interpretation bears striking similarities with the pejorative terms like ‘social justice warrior’ that abound in popular culture to describe those committed to progressive political causes. Žižek here falls prey to the latter of the two dangers identified by Said, uncritically aligning with harmful clichés, and passing these off - with a great deal of intellectual arrogance - as innovative philosophical analysis.

This arrogance is also perceptible in the penultimate chapter of the book, which attempts to explain the reports of attacks by migrants on European citizens as the result not, as the conventional narrative assumes, of the migrant’s ignorance of “Western values”, but rather as a “carnavalesque rebellion of the underdogs” (95). For Žižek, the perpetrators “are well aware that what they are doing is foreign to our [i.e. European] predominant culture, and they are doing it precisely to wound our sensitivities” (96). Leaving aside this perhaps dangerous construction of an uncomplicated opposition between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, the argument here is that the attacks allow the perpetrators to momentarily satisfy a repressed envy of the privileged European economic position (92).

This interpretation is highly provocative, and whilst it certainly makes for engrossing reading, little effort is made to explain why this interpretation of the motives of the perpetrators is superior to any of the other numerous potential conclusions one could draw: that those carrying out the crimes are doing it without giving even a moment’s thought to “our sensitivities” at all, for instance. To accept the validity of Žižek’s assertion, one must therefore accept beforehand the rather questionable claim that

the author possesses some special, undisclosed insight into the psychological workings of the perpetrators of these crimes.

Here then, Žižek's text seems to lapse into a hermetic loneliness, as it is unclear how his line of argument is capable of persuading anyone who does not already agree with it. Psychoanalytical and philosophical theory is deployed first and foremost in order that those amongst the author's readership who already share his underlying presuppositions can enjoy a certain *frisson* from seeing the literature twisted in new ways, rather than to offer an accurate account of the attacker's motives.

The temptation of those who cling to the prospect of a twenty-first century text that can be mentioned in the same breath as the nineteenth century's *Communist Manifesto*, or the twentieth's *Feminine Mystique*, will thus no doubt be to immediately cast Žižek's latest book aside. Despite its frequent assertions that it is action-orientated (the final chapter, for example, is entitled "What Is to Be Done?" (97)), the book's dismissals of those engaged in assisting with the refugee crisis, and its use of critical theory as a type of niche entertainment seemingly shorn of concern for the real-world, have the overall effect of dissuading one from action, rather than propelling one to it. The work should, however, perhaps not be dismissed so rapidly, in that it provides an interesting case study of the potential dangers bound up with the vocation of political writing. Whilst it clearly seeks to propel its readers to act in a certain way, the result of writing like *Against the Double Blackmail*, is in fact to excuse, or even actively promote the inaction of its audience, which, given the scale of the political problems and crises we collectively face, is a very troubling consequence indeed.

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## Author Biography

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Cain Shelley has just graduated from the University of Leeds with an MA in Political Theory. He is currently in the final stages of assembling a PhD proposal that seeks to assess the 'realism' of the various condemnations and justifications of capitalism made by influential liberal and libertarian political philosophers.