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Philosophical Reflections on the Social Bond in Tito's Yugoslavia: Žižek's Critique of Ideological Unity and the Principle of *Agapè*

Abstract: *This article written as a philosophical dissertation examines the concept of social bond as a central question of collective existence, using Tito's socialism as its historical and ideological framework. It analyzes how Yugoslav socialism sought to produce unity through the political ideal of "Brotherhood and Unity," aiming to establish an inclusive social bond as the foundation of its social order. However, as Slavoj Žižek demonstrates, this ideology of fraternity used a mechanism of exclusion and assimilation that erased singularity and transformed the idea of inclusion into conformity. The study explores Žižek's philosophical critique of this socialist model of cohesion and his redefinition of the authentic social bond through the concept of agapè, a universal and unconditional love that respects differences rather than suppressing them. Through Žižek's reading of Christian love and its political implications, the article offers the only possible foundation for a genuine social bond, one that unites individuals without abolishing their singularity. By contrasting the ideological illusion of unity in Tito's socialism with the inclusive universality of agapè, this study seeks to clarify the philosophical necessity of an ethics of love as the true principle of political and human community.*

Keywords: *social bond; socialist Yugoslavia; Slavoj Žižek; agape; inclusion.*

Regret over the disappearance or dissolution of a certain "social bond" in contemporary societies is not an extravagant concern. The social bond can commonly be defined as what pertains to the connection

between citizens, their relationships, and thus their impact on society. The entity called society that they create by coexisting in relation to one another. Bond is often subject to various ideologies, even utopias, and while it is diversely interpreted as a concept and generates much debate, it is interesting to identify precisely what defines its essence, what makes it ultimately desirable to maintain and promote a social bond. If the concept and the idea are ultimately desirable, then they must be clarified in light of socialist regimes that have extensively used them.

If the social bond is commonly criticized for its failure, it is because individuals imagine or know what it is when its existence is effective, when the social bond is evident, present, and widespread. For the social bond to be authentic, it must by definition be the bond between all citizens, without discrimination or marginalization; it naturally conveys the concept of citizens' union, unity, and inclusion. Given the political nature of human life and the omnipresence of society and others, the social bond appears as an existential question. To make coexistence and communal life inspired by, or even governed by, the existence of a social bond possible, it is necessary to consider the foundation and the conditions of possibility for the feeling of citizens' union. If citizens live under the acceptance and recognition of their union, then the tendency towards collective life becomes possible, insofar as different individuals, the "I"s, reciprocally feel a connection that attests to a shared character, a kind of common similarity that unites them and encourages them to assign symbolic value to the "we" they create simply by coexisting together in the form of a political state, civil state, or society. The political body that citizens create together through their collective life acquires a particular pronoun and becomes a subject, becomes a being; a "we" is born from the social bond.

However, the practical action of the social "we", meaning precisely the collaborations and actions necessary for survival, the "doing", does not always testify to the presence of the social bond, that is the feeling of sharing a common character in the "we" among all the "I"s inspiring life together. Beyond sharing a common character, the social bond that enables the "we" testifies to a common pronoun, a shared identity, and thus is rooted not only in some collective action but in the existential essence of individuals. Indeed, if one focuses only on collaboration and cooperation, one is simply talking about the actions of individuals interacting with each other. These actions may be unreflective, mechanical, and it is possible to collaborate or create among indi-

viduals without them having any sense of togetherness, union, or symbolic contribution to a whole. Within the social bond, there is another dimension of relation with others that does not reduce to practical interaction. It is a matter of identifying, within the concept of the social bond, what truly motivates the feeling of the common, of the union of all into a social body of shared characters. What is the shared character of the "I"s operating as the foundation for the possibility of the social bond?

In Tito's Yugoslavia, it is undeniable that the feeling of a collective identity wasa central ambition of socialist ideology. The issue of "brotherhood and unity" [*bratstvo i jedinstvo*], in Tito's motto focuses on the necessity to create and to bring forth a collective identity. This principle was most forcefully applied from the end of World War II through the 1960s, when the regime sought to build a supranational socialist identity and suppress nationalist divisions. The 1963 Constitution marked its institutional consolidation. From the 1970s onward, despite its continued rhetorical prominence, the slogan's integrative power weakened with the growing decentralization of the federation. This shared, united identity naturally gives rise to collective action, then perceived as a driving force of beneficial collective movements for the "we". In other words, this "we" stemming from the ideology of "union" operates not only as a feeling of identity belonging but also as a ferment that drives collective action, a necessary operational force for socialist work, for the construction of the socialist state. In the context of Yugoslav self-management, aiming both at political and ideological independence as well as agricultural and somewhat economic self-sufficiency, a dual strategy is observed in the implementation of this ambitious project: a reorganization of production and collective life based on worker participation, distinct both from liberal capitalism and the Soviet model. Thus, collective action becomes a priority, a condition, and its motivation lies in the ideology of the "we". The creation of this "we" emanating from the political body is then a pioneering challenge of Titoist ideology.

Clarification of the Concept of the Social Bond and its Conditions

The social bond appears to demand more than mere coexistence and collective action derived from cooperation; it belongs to another dimension.

In the effort to create or identify the possible origins of the social bond, it is insufficient to rely solely on a society in which coexistence and collaboration are present, that is a merely tolerant, peaceful, even passive society. The question becomes what, in a society already at peace and tolerant, goes beyond these principles and testifies to a real and active social bond. We are not seeking to bring peace and tolerance out of a society at war or one in which coexistence is impossible or conflictual. A society must first have a credible foundation of stability before one can require the construction of a social bond. This may explain the "brutalizing" character of the establishment of socialist ideology and politics in Yugoslavia, as Sacha Markovic notes (2024, 145). Hence the importance of an outlook that seeks to make a clean slate of the past and rebuild social relations from a new, modern, innovative, and socialist beginning.

If tolerance and peace are already somewhat established, to go further and push these principles toward union and the social bond, it becomes necessary to identify what unites individuals, what precisely makes them be together, in common, sharing a collective identity. This insistence highlights a distinction from practical collective action, which alone cannot serve as a true sign of a social bond. A collective action testifies merely to the coexistence of simultaneous participation; it shows that something has been done together with others, but it does not necessarily carry existential meaning or transform the participants' sense of belonging. Indeed, it is possible for political enemies to collaborate temporarily under political compromise while continuing to consider one another as adversaries (Badiou and Truong, 2016, 59-78). No collective action can, by its practical nature, fundamentally testify to a true social bond. The existence of the social bond therefore seems to precede such actions, providing the foundation for genuinely authentic collective acts directed toward unity and common prosperity. Yet, this sequence should not be understood too rigidly: the bond does not necessarily emerge fully formed prior to political action, but is often co-constituted with it, shaped and reshaped through collective mobilization itself. In this sense, the social bond and political action are deeply intertwined, their temporal relationship less linear than reciprocal.

If there exists a natural principle according to which individuals share something in common, something that might serve as the foundation of the social bond, this foundation would be undermined by regimes that promote disunity, those that discriminate against or marginalize dissident individuals. To allow and honor the social bond means

therefore to promote a certain shared nature, a shared characteristic, a common identity that manifests the existence of a "we" formed by individuals into a united political body, a totality consciously created by the consent of individuals, who recognize and accept the pronoun "we" as the social counterpart of their individual pronouns "I." The social bond would thus be found wherever there exists a sense of union, a shared element of identity or nature among the "I"s, making possible coexistence and harmony with the "we," in balance with the integrity of both the collective and the individual. The tolerance of the "I"s is therefore an essential point in recognizing an inauthentic or authoritarian social bond. The core of a true social bond lies in the principle of inclusion, the inclusion of all the "I"s within the "we," along with the respect for the integrity of each of these numerous and diverse "I"s. If the "I"s prevail over the "we," society becomes disunited and individualistic; collective interactions and participation are limited, and the social bond is nonexistent.

Conversely, if the "we" suppresses and nullifies the "I"s, the resulting social relations, however omnipresent and necessary, reflect not a true social bond but a mere illusion of interdependence rooted in ideological and authoritarian origin. It thus becomes essential to identify the essential consistency of the social bond, the feeling of sharing and possessing a collective identity that respects the integrity of its individual parts while illuminating the political conditions most conducive to its flourishing.

Imposed Social Bond and the Danger of Identity Ideology

The Titoist slogan "Brotherhood and Unity" appears at first glance as the expression of a noble fraternity, a moral commitment to shared life and the rejection of nationalist division. However, upon closer inspection, this call for "unity" functions as an ideology of inclusion that simultaneously conceals an ideology of exclusion. What pretends to unite individuals often excludes them in practice. Behind the image of universal love and unity hides an authoritarian injunction to identify with the collective body. Under the guise of fraternity, this unity becomes an obligation to belong to a homogeneous political subject, to the detriment of individual differences.

The logic of identity that underlies this type of unity was not particular to Yugoslavia. It reflects a more general tendency in socialist regimes to conflate political cohesion with moral conformity. This ideology of identity seeks to impose a model of the collective body in

which the individual "I" loses its singularity in order to become a component of the "we." The "we," in turn, becomes a totalizing figure that admits no exteriority or divergence. In this sense, the social bond, rather than uniting through inclusion, transforms into a mechanism of assimilation and control. Žižek was the first philosopher to theorize the socialist ideology of union in Yugoslavia and to expose its corruption of the social bond. In his critique, the Yugoslav project of unity appears not as genuine inclusion but as an ideological construction that conceals exclusion beneath the language of fraternity. As Slavoj Žižek points out, ideology often operates by presupposing a universal foundation for humanity, a mysterious "factor X" that supposedly expresses what all humans share in common (2007, 102-103). This "factor X" functions as a theological placeholder: it names an essence that can never be defined but that everyone must nonetheless embody. In socialist Yugoslavia, this universal element was articulated through notions of the "people," the "worker," and the "comrade." These abstractions allowed the regime to claim an inclusive universalism while enforcing a very specific image of what counted as truly "human" or "Yugoslav." Those who did not conform to this official image, such as ethnic minorities, political dissidents, or independent intellectuals, were implicitly or explicitly excluded from the collective "we." In *The Fragile Absolute*, Žižek interprets this paradox as intrinsic to the ideological functioning of socialism itself (2006, 79-81).

Every ideology of equality risks producing its own hierarchy by determining what constitutes the legitimate form of the universal. By pretending to dissolve all difference, it must first define which differences are acceptable and which must be erased. Thus, the supposed universality of the socialist social bond was in fact based on exclusion: one could only belong by renouncing one's singularity and aligning with the official image of the collective.

This process of assimilation was masked by the rhetoric of love and fraternity. Love, in socialist discourse, became a political instrument, a means of integration. To "love one's comrade"[2] was to submit to the shared ideology. The emotional register of love replaced the legal and rational structures of inclusion, transforming an ethical feeling into a political command. Such a mechanism of imposed love is precisely what Žižek identifies as the ideological perversion of Christianity in

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[2] Loving one's comrade means recognizing in the other not only an individual, but a political subject engaged in a shared cause ; it is a form of political love structured by socialist fraternity and equality.

modern politics: the translation of the command to love into an obliga-
tion to belong. In other words, love ceases to be the recognition of the
other in their difference; it becomes an order to recognize the other only
as an identical reflection of oneself.

Consequently, the Yugoslav model of unity appears not as the re-
alization of the social bond but as its negation. Instead of inclusion, it
produces a form of symbolic violence that denies individuals their par-
ticularity. The social bond is replaced by ideological cohesion, and fra-
ternity becomes a moral disguise for political conformity. By erasing
the singularities of its members, this collective body destroys the very
condition of the social bond: the coexistence of difference within unity.

Žižek criticizes the establishment of this "X factor," which he de-
scribes as highly abstract and even metaphysical, arguing that it does
not exist and that once the masks fall, nothing remains but emptiness.
This false information, belonging to the order of fantasy, lies at the
origin of the socialist illusion, an illusion that defends equality through
the imposition of identity and uniformity, thus producing a radical and
alienating equality. In this sense, this factor functions as the primary
principle, the absolute axiom of the socialist regime and of the social
bond it claims to promote through fraternity and unity as its ultimate
aims. According to this logic, one would need to conceive and establish
a new regime founded on radical union, more precisely on homogeni-
zation and uniformization, which in turn results in the total exclusion of
subjective differences, of the "I"s, and in an extreme dependence of the
"I"s upon the collective "we" of the socialist people. The concealment
of subjectivities in favor of the glorification of the X factor becomes an
enterprise directed toward emptiness. The social bond is therefore
forced and imposed by the regime, which, through the erasure of the
past, proposes a new figure of citizenship, of collective life, and of mo-
rality, embodied in the figure of the socialist man: "Is he not the em-
blem of the so-called 'totalitarianism' that seeks to free itself of the con-
tingent layer of 'inessential' history in order to free the 'essence' of
man?" (Žižek, 2006, 192).

Žižek describes this system as a "regime-army" to characterize
the way the socialist order operates. In doing so, he marks an essential
difference from the principle of inclusion, which represents what should
truly be sought in order to allow, within society, the expansion of indi-
vidual tolerance and the creation of an inclusive and authentic social
bond. In an army, soldiers function according to the following princi-
ple: "We against Them, under the banner of egalitarian universalism

(we are all equal before the enemy). The army is fundamentally exclusive; it seeks to destroy the other." (Žižek, 2010, 180). The army therefore has an authoritarian character, as it dominates a territory by force and by annihilating whatever does not align with its model of citizenship and morality, whatever it identifies as its enemy. The presence of individual differences, the variations among the "I"s, is thus perceived as undesirable, harmful, and dangerous for unity, which explains the desire to erase them in favor of a suffocating new socialist "we."

Agapè as the Foundation for the Principle of Inclusion in Society

Despite his critique of Tito's regime and of the Yugoslav socialist illusion of fraternity, Slavoj Žižek remains a committed communist thinker who seeks to recover the original meaning of inclusion that socialism claimed to defend. Far from rejecting the idea of the social bond, Žižek redefines its authentic foundation. In his interpretation of Christian love, particularly through Saint Paul, he discovers a model of universality that does not depend on identity or assimilation but instead on unconditional inclusion, *agapè*. This notion of love offers a radically different foundation for the social bond, one that is inclusive not by erasing difference but by affirming it as the very condition of coexistence (Ibid.).

For Žižek, the Christian concept of *agapè* is not just sentimental but structural and universal. It is not love for the similar or for the neighbor in a moral sense but rather the recognition of the singular other beyond all symbolic categories (Ibid., 195). The "factor X," which ideology claims to embody as a universal substance of humanity, does not exist. In *Fragile absolu*, Žižek argues that the universal emerges only through the singular rupture that escapes ideological identification (Ibid., 197). True universality is not based on a shared essence but on the act that transcends every established identity (Ibid., 183).

In *La marionnette et le nain*, Žižek develops this insight further by showing that Christianity, in its most radical form, is not an ideology of unity but the very negation of ideological community. It breaks the organic totality that binds individuals through imposed roles and symbolic identifications (2006, 196). Only by detaching from these artificial ties can human beings truly honor humanity itself and avoid the fundamentally immoral atrocities, such as wars and genocides, that result from collective illusions of unity. Žižek therefore maintains that *agapè* is not the love of sameness but the love of difference. "We

are all different" (Ibid., 193), he writes, and this difference is the only authentic foundation of equality.

In *Fragile absolu*, Žižek describes *agapè* as a crucial intermediary term between faith and hope: "*Agapè*, a pivotal term between faith and hope: it is love itself that calls upon us to 'disconnect' from the organic community in which we were born." (2010, 176).

Through *agapè*, the subject becomes free from the ideological totality that defines individuals by the functions assigned to them by society: occupations, family roles, and social obligations. Love, in this radical sense, is an act of subtraction, an interruption of the symbolic order that determines subjectivity (Ibid,). By freeing the subject from these external determinations, *agapè* allows the emergence of an authentic universality founded on the recognition of each person's singularity. For Žižek, this is exemplified in the demonstration of *agapè* for the figure of the father: love that suspends the symbolic function of authority in order to encounter the father as a vulnerable human being, beyond his social role. He writes : "That is, the purposes attributed to individuals by society in order to make it function, such as a profession, or a family role. The role of the father is then a function in the socio-symbolic structure of the family" (Ibid., 183). Žižek explains that one ceases to hate the father when looking beyond his symbolic role of familial authority and encounters him as the unique subject that he is. In that moment, one can only love him unconditionally, for the core of his singular subjectivity is "disconnected" (Ibid.) that is, removed and set apart from any social framework that might make it appear displeasing.

Thus, *agapè* becomes a principle of inclusion precisely because it suspends the hierarchy of symbolic positions. It invites subjects to relate to one another not as functions within a social system but as singular beings capable of mutual recognition. The universality of love, then, is not imposed from above but created through acts that acknowledge difference. In contrast to the ideological "brotherhood" of Yugoslav socialism, *agapè* forms, as envisioned by Zizek.The foundation of a genuine social bond, one that includes by recognizing the irreducible uniqueness of each subject.

Conclusion

Despite its common usage, the concept of the social bond remains ambiguous and open to misuse. Under an intolerant and authoritarian regime, it becomes alienated and inauthentic as it is imposed and assumes an exclusive character, seeking to eliminate whatever does not

conform to the identity and homogeneity promoted by ideology. The very essence of the social bond is to preserve the "I" within the totality of the "we" in a harmonious dynamic of respect and co-creative, non-annihilating participation. Beyond mere tolerance, the social bond involves a genuine relationship of recognition toward the other insofar as something is shared with them, a common attribute exists. Without falling into a false ideology of equality that encourages the homogenization of individuals in the name of a supreme "we", defending what is truly shared within a "we" means placing the principle of inclusion at the center of a more nuanced appraisal. It is only in accordance with this principle that a genuine social bond becomes possible, one that regards the necessary subjectivity of the "I"s constituting the "we" as the ultimate shared principle, characterizing all individuals. Indeed, if there is one thing all individuals have in common, it is their respectful singularities. In the full acceptance of these singularities and differences lies *agapē*, which embodies the recognition of the "we" as a whole, powerful and meaningful, through the richness of the diversity of the "I"s it includes.

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