

## A response from Leigh French of Variant



Gordy (cc-ed) & I would've like to have commented together, but he's snowed under, so here's some (delayed!) initial thoughts from me in response to the review that would likely benefit from being edited. I'm not satisfied with the tone of what I've written, and still maintain there's more we would likely agree on than disagree -- at some point it would be good if I focused on commonalities and not just emphasising likely differences! So I agree with much of what you've written, that it's increasingly important to define/defend the IndyRef historical record for all the anti-factional & counter-manipulative reasons you indicate, but there are a couple of aspects I do find problematic in the review, both being complex in their own right

- 1) The recurring erroneous charge of 'academia' seems to have two inter-related functions.

*Firstly*, as an evasive, disparaging substitute for more accurately situating the politically aloof / arrogant tone -- "semi-detached, academic position" etc. An easy off-the-shelf riff but having little specific connection to the actual conditions of academia. More importantly, it's an unnecessary misattribution as there's a perfectly valid critique available on the left against this form of opaque

authoritarian leadership, that of *vanguardism*-- which constitutes the actual hierarchical position being critiqued and is the more fitting framing through which to address that organisational form and its behaviour, it being the actual political 'tradition' on display rather than that of the New Left (we'd be so lucky!). While that charge forms a neat segue with *Verso*, I find the thesis remains somewhat of a forced, historically unmoored claim to continuity of 'left' publishing, at the very least it goes unsubstantiated and would need to be shown rather than wielded for the sake of argument. Seems an unnecessary side-dig missing analysis of how *Verso* actually contributes to / functions in today's economic conditions.

*Secondly*, the charge of detachment from a reality that exists beyond the closed walls of the ivory tower of academia (sic) also requires the invention of a milieu so as to function as guilt-by-association -- "appears to be an appeal to Left academia" etc -- with the implication that the now decades old massification / debtification of higher education constitutes closeted, envious conditions denied the rest of us but which those who labour under it must be freed from. (Instead, Conter can be seen aping an RCP / LM Network / Spiked! strategy in securing various media gigs, which this forms but one facet of.)

This leans heavily into a class-reductionist cliché that does not reflect the actual class composition or conditions of alienated academic labour, also at a time of unprecedented industrial action (in part) against extreme right political coercion -- Henry Giroux has written extensively about right-populist anti-intellectualism in the North American context [[link](#)]. Importantly, it's also a charge that's at odds with the otherwise inclusive and interrogative tone of a critical review which is itself 'academically' rigorous and should be celebrated as such.

2) I'm not sure what the intention is of bringing Russia's invasion of Ukraine into the argument, other than as another form of strained guilt-by-association. Understanding the actual conflict comes across as secondary to over-rehearsed factional jostling.

It does, however, function as a vehicle through which to inject the fiction of undifferentiated nation wholes, when in reality all states and borders are artificial, hybridity being the lived actuality of the working class -- there never was any primordial national group-subject nor should we countenance mourning the loss of that illiberal fiction of a 'single people'.

Rogers Brubaker's work [[link](#)] on the state ethnic violence that is de-Russification in Estonia is worth reading, not least as Latvia is now pursuing similar ethno-nationalist pogroms as had been pursued in Ukraine too. (I worked for publishing projects in Estonia that insisted on trilingual inclusivity

precisely because Russian language had been expunged from *all* state communication.)

Redefining national-states along lines of increasingly restrictive ethno-cultural fever-dreams is a much wider contemporary phenomenon -- a racialised exclusionary appeal manifesting in the UK as Brexit -- that reflects struggles between differently positioned titular elites (as claiming to represent the 'organic' titular population) and those claiming to represent (not only) minority populations.

Therefore any discussion of 'agency' must begin by asserting the state as being for-and-of *all* residents, not that of a reified ethno-culturally defined core-nation. The various Ukraine peace plans put forward facilitating actual territorial stability via inclusivity have recognised this complex democratic norm, an approach NATO's also taken with Kosovo, so it's entirely possible. It's not clear that Ukraine's power-brokers *are* seeking to fulfil EU accession. There was no bottom-up 'agency' in the criminalisation of political opposition or of workers' organisation, all under the cover of anti-Communism. Which looks less like working towards meeting EU membership criteria so much as carving out an exceptional exploitative enclave for capital -- "fuck the EU" being an unambiguous US foreign policy statement. With US / EU funding assured due to Ukraine's (unmentionable) strategic military position, Ukraine's accession has long been to NATO, with Ukraine military engaged in *Operation Enduring Freedom* (sic) and *Resolute Support* (sic) in Afghanistan and the KFOR mission in Kosovo.

As to kleptocracies, the EU reports that "Grand corruption and state capture are still widespread in Ukraine." [[link](#)] Which includes Ukraine's political connections to corruption in Georgia.

One apparently must genuflect in order to avoid any confusion, so quite obviously there is no justification for Putin's invasion, but this isn't some fundamental civilisational cleavage either.

As you say, and I would agree, genuine non-alignment would have already recognised and reflected on this, so as to better understand the reality that: "Almost eight million people have fled to neighbouring countries, three million of them to Russia. ... The civilian victims are largely borne by eastern Ukraine, while in the western city of Lviv property prices have doubled since the war began." [[link](#)]

There's more I could say but, as I began by outlining, I don't think this is the appropriate framework. There is, however, a discussion needing to be had about

the palpable right-populist turn in Scotland and those facilitating it, with actual blood-and-soil xenophobes again leading an AUOB march...

I've tried to be concise, so the tone is also likely to be more curt & clunky than I would have wanted, and the 'brain fog' doesn't help, but hopefully this goes some way to sketching my concerns regarding those two aspects of the review in what was otherwise a much needed corrective — it was also refreshing to read someone saying similar things of Neil Davidson (and doing so in his same generous spirit) as Gordy & I had been discussing.

all the best for now & thanks again,  
Leigh