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Invented Religion, the Awakened Polis, and Sacred Disestablishment: The Case of Slovenia's "Zombie Church"

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Abstract: The Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing is a religion that emerged in the context of a period of political uprising in Slovenia in 2012–13 and later consolidated into a church that now claims 12,000 members. We use the lens of invented religion and interviews conducted with observers and participants in 2017 to demonstrate ways in which the Zombie Church has been an unusually effective actor in contemporary Slovenian political discourse and, indeed, has broken ground by spotlighting challenges in the young republic's negotiation of the legal and cultural relationships between church, state, and civil society. Part 1 explores the context that led to the mobilization of Zombie as a multivalent symbol for political critique. Part 2 looks at the church's tenets, its success in compelling changes in Slovenia's registration process, and the challenge is its advocates raise to Slovenian church-state structures and practices.

In early 2013, the southeastern European country of Slovenia made global headlines with the emergence of a popular movement brought to life under the banner of the "Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing." The Associated Press broadcast images of thousands of protest zombies, some in ghoulish face paint, others behind white paper masks, and joined by towering theatrical zombie puppets (Maza 2013; Novak 2013). Through public demonstrations that ignited in Maribor 2012 and spread across the country, the Slovenian zombie broke onto

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FIGURE 1. Photo credit: Jang Wan, Waging Nonviolence: https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/slovenia-rises-in-artful-protest/

the political scene as the face of an angry undead populous uprising (Figure 1).

The period of protests within which the Zombie Church was born came to be coined the All-Slovenian Uprising. The Uprising attracted a wide range of citizens frustrated with right-wing policies in Slovenia under Prime Minister Janez Janša's administration (Tomšič 2013; Kavcic 2014; Korsika and Mesec 2014). Protesters targeted a list of long-simmering political and economic grievances and advanced a vision for a more democratic Slovenia. At the Uprising's apex, the zombie figure served as the central metaphorical vehicle through which protesters articulated a political critique and an assertion of popular defiance. After the Uprising achieved substantive victories in March of 2013, the Zombie Church (for short) consolidated into an official religion, registering with the Slovenian government (Kavcic 2014). Today, with over 12,000 people signed on as members through social media, the Church is Slovenia's fifth largest

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religion. Its leaders work to challenge the state on matters of church/state separation, cultural representation, and religious equality.

The Zombie Church is a new and notable entry in the growing catalog of what religion scholar Carole Cusack (2010) calls "invented religions." Invented religions are "exercises of the imagination that have developed in a creative (though sometimes oppositional) partnership with the influential popular cultural narratives of the contemporary West, particularly film and science fiction" (7). Like conventional religions, invented religions can produce rich sites of identity, belonging, meaning-making, ritual, and public engagement. Examples include Discordianism, the Church of the Jedi, The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (Pastafarianism), Kopimism, and the Satanic Temple. The Internet has been crucial, especially for third millennium religions, for disseminating ideas and generating community. Often leveraging humor and performance to spark dialogue, invented religions tend to be most potent when propelled by a narrative that engages people to join, to engage, or perhaps just think differently about something in the home culture (Cusack 14, 22).

So far as we know, this article will be the first scholarly analysis of Slovenia's Zombie Church in relation to the intersection of politics and religion.[1]

Our argument advances in two parts. In Part 1, we review scholarship from monster studies and invented religions to explain how the Uprising's embrace of *zombie* as a central metaphor birthed the notion of public zombies as both a collective force and potential spiritual community. This emergence of an invented religion from a confluence of politics and popular culture built on precedents from other invented religions, but also innovated in notable ways. The Slovenian Uprising is one of the first and most provocative instances in which the zombie figure crossed the boundary from filmic icon to real-time vehicle for engagement in public space. The Uprising's embrace of zombie as a *multivalent political metaphor* provided a potent vocabulary for political critique that disarmed—indeed, ultimately dislodged—a powerful opposition. Through its initial, movement-period assertions as a *collective*, the Zombie Church offered visions of spiritually nurturing, radically inclusive, humor-filled community that contrasted with stagnant politics-as-usual (and indeed religion-as-usual) operations in Slovenia. We draw on interviews with activists, leaders, and well-positioned observers to track how protesters conceptualized the political potential of the zombie metaphor, first for strategic political aims and then to activate community.[2]

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Subsequently, in its post-movement period as the Zombie Church consolidated into a community (not just a protest vehicle) it joined other religious minorities in democracies by challenging Slovenia's young republic to clarify the legal and cultural relationships between church, state, and civil society. Part 2 examines some of the unique tenets of the Zombie Church as it developed into a religious community, its rationale for registering with Slovenia's Office for Religious Communities, and the challenges its advocates raise to Slovenian church-state structures and practices. The Zombie Church is, to the best of our knowledge, only the second invented religion in Europe to have secured official recognition from a state bureaucracy. Its registration was a political victory, as it forced the state to clarify that its government cannot assess the content of a religion to officially recognize it. Through ongoing engagement with bureaucratic agencies like the Ministry of Culture, and through legal advocacy for equal rights for religious minorities, the Zombie Church challenges the state to extend the same cultural accommodations the historically dominant Roman Catholic Church enjoys. The Church has had mixed success in becoming an ongoing agitant to the state, but nonetheless has made an impact in Slovenia through its assertion as a viable religion and the attention it draws to matters of religious privilege, equality, and exclusion in a putatively secular democracy.

The case of the Zombie Church draws scholars' attention to several important dynamics at the intersection of religion and politics. Under the right conditions, social movements can give birth to new religious communities. These religions, in turn, can become civil society actors with the capacity to interrogate how democratic societies define, register, and regulate religion(s) and address the power constellations around them. Even seemingly outlandish religions can shine a critical light on the dominant center from the margins. The Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing adds a vivid and interesting new illustration of how invented religions can be critical public interlocutors, raising sometimes irritating but nonetheless important questions about the proper relationship between the state, religious communities, and civil society in a liberal democracy.

SLOVENIAN SOCIETY AND THE UPRISING

Modern independent Slovenia emerged in 1991 after the dissolution of Yugoslavia; however, unlike other parts of the former Republic, it is ethnically, linguistically, and religiously fairly homogeneous. Most of its two

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million inhabitants are of Slovene ethnicity, and the Roman Catholic Church, which has been a major presence in the area since the 9th century, has accounted for between 60 and 80% of citizens since independence. Longitudinal data collected by the Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research Centre at the University of Ljubljana shows that self-described Roman Catholics accounted for about 75% of the population in 1992, but had declined to 58.9% by 2019 (see Table 1). The second largest demographic (which, as in the rest of the developed world, is fast-growing) is the "no religion" ("nones") group, rising from about 15% of Slovenians in 1992, to 32.3% in 2019.

Slovenians have been accustomed to at least some religious difference and the presence of nonhegemonic religions, although all non-Catholic communities combined account for less than 10% of the total population (Črnič and Lesjak 2006).[3] At this writing, 59 religious communities have registered their existence with the state. Non-Catholic Christians (e.g. Lutherans and Serbian Orthodox) comprise an estimated 4–5% of the population. Muslims, who constituted just under 2% during the protests, represent an estimated 3% of the population today.

Despite Catholicism's dominant presence, Slovenia has had a notable history within post-socialist Yugoslavia (and indeed all post-socialist Europe) of hosting religious minorities.[4] Most alternative religions in Slovenia began functioning in the 1990s during and after the political regime change. However, a vibrant new alternative religious scene had begun developing within socialist Slovenia even earlier. During the 1980s, more than a decade before independence, Slovenia was welcoming a number of new religious groups, including New Age religions, Hare Krishnas, and others. Slovenia's relative long-term tolerance of religious

Table 1. Which religion do you belong to? (%) Cite: Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research Centre at the University of Ljubljana

	1992	**1996**	**2000**	**2003**	**2007**	**2012**	**2018**	**2019**
Roman-Catholic	75.0	70.2	72.1	68.9	66.3	63.1	57.0	58.9
Lutheran Protestant	1.5	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.8	1.1	1.1	1.2
Serbian Orthodox	3.1	1.7	2.7	2.4	1.7	1.6	3.6	2.6
Muslim	2.0	0.5	2.1	1.5	1.9	1.9	2.6	3.4
Other Christian	0.5	0.9	1.4	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.2
Other Non-Christian	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.8	0.6
Belongs to no religion	15.4	19.7	17.7	23.4	18.3	30.2	33.4	32.3
No answer	2.2	5.9	3.0	2.3	9.6	1.8	1.4	0.8

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minority communities compared to other post-Yugoslavian nations like Serbia and Bosnia seems to have facilitated the state and society's capacity to absorb a new invented religion like the Zombie Church (Črnič and Lesjak 2006, 149).

Three other aspects of modern Slovenian religious history bear on the Zombie Church's emergence. First, religious minorities appeal to church-state separation principles codified into law when religious freedoms were restored following independence from Yugoslavia. Second, as the young Slovenian republic formalized the principle of disestablishment, the state was required to return Catholic Church-owned property that was confiscated by the socialist regime after the Second World War. Legislation like the 1998 Denationalisation Act made the Church a sizable landowner, as it had been before the ascent of socialism (Črnič et al. 2013, 216). This bears on arguments Zombies make about the ongoing presence and privileges of the institutional Catholic Church across Slovenia. Third, even as the Religious Freedom Act of 2007 proclaims the neutrality of the state in matters of religion, it also defines churches and religious organizations as "organizations of general benefit," which may be eligible for state financial support for certain non-religious elements, such as humanitarian outreach services and a portion of health and pension insurance costs for religious employees.[5] However, "dissimilarity in the sizes of the various churches active in Slovenia, which is itself a consequence of the centuries of Catholic pre-eminence, ensures that such funding applies almost exclusively to the Roman Catholic Church" (217). Zombies draw attention to inequalities between the material and cultural privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church and less-established religious minorities.

Context for the Uprising

Before the All-Slovenian uprising of 2012–13, Slovenia had not seen as much political volatility and public protest as some of its post-Yugoslavian counterparts. For almost two decades, Slovenia enjoyed its status as the veritable poster child of post-Yugoslavian transition and indeed the whole post-socialist Central-Eastern European area. It was the first post-socialist republic to avoid prolonged war, join the EU and NATO, and largely preserve its national wealth into the new century. Slovenia had achieved political stability as a parliamentary republic, despite a wave of protests during the first government of Prime Minister Janez Janša (pronounced YAN-sha) in 2004–2008, as neoliberal privatization policies began to disable unions and other stakeholders. But in the

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wake of the global financial crisis that began in 2008, the country was feeling the pressures of so-called "austerity" policies that had sparked mass protest in Italy, Greece, and elsewhere. Between 2008 and 2012 under Prime Minister Borut Pahor, the social democrats led the coalition centrer-left government. They were moderately successful in fighting the economic crisis but due to a combination of right-wing pressures and intra-party tensions did not finish the whole term.

Janša was reelected early in 2012 and established his second conservative government just as Slovenians were feeling economically stressed. Leveraging threats of a European troika, Janša returned to the neoliberal (hypercapitalist) handbook he and eager corporations favored for transitioning post-socialist countries. This included working to privatize and, where possible, sell off the nation's industries and other sectors such as banking, the healthcare system, universities, etc.; shrink benefits for workers; reduce the social safety net; reintegrate traditional religion and "family values"; and attack the media and universities as cauldrons of leftist ideology. But with multiple generations of Slovenians still living who remembered life under Yugoslavia's more generous safety net, and political corruption seemingly rampant, by late-2012 many Slovenians were fed up.

The Uprising was sparked by events in late-November in the second largest city of Maribor, where a news exposé revealed that five million euros of public funds had been spent in a "public-private partnership" to install a high-tech traffic monitoring system. The system charged drivers with expensive speeding fines, while a private corporation pocketed the lion's share (93%) of revenue (Korsika and Mesec 2014, 80). The traffic scheme became a galvanizing emblem of injustice. "When someone…gets a fine for going 70 kilometers per hour," said one protester, "he's paid 600 euros per month and gets a penalty for 200 euros—a huge amount of money—and he sees on TV that [politician] who stole 1 million euros and nothing happens to him—it's too much" (Int. 6, 31,317). After the story broke, eleven radars were vandalized, and on November 29, 10,000 outraged Mariborans (about 10% of the population) flooded the streets to brand their conservative mayor, already facing corruption charges, a public enemy (Maza 2013).

The Maribor demonstrations soon broadened to include political and economic grievances across the country, which were coordinated from Ljubljana, the capitol (pronounced Leeu-blee-AH-nah). In December, the Mariboran mayor was deposed for corruption, and on the 21st the first "All-Slovenian Uprising" action occurred in solidarity in Ljubljana. Protesters also targeted Ljubljana's liberal mayor, Zoran Janković, but directed the bulk of their ire

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at Prime Minister Janša. A series of demonstrations in December and January attracted as many as 20,000 participants—with nearly 70% of Slovenians reportedly expressing support (KOKS 2013; Novak 2013). The state responded to the largely peaceful gatherings with overwhelming force, employing riot police, fences, horses, water cannons, and helicopters, effectively shutting down the city center.

Activists were nonetheless nimble, using public squares to convene what they called "protestivals"—protests enlivened by art, performance, music, and community gathering. These attracted a variety of Slovenians, from punks to environmentalists, intellectuals, artists, retirees, LGBT communities, anarchists, veterans, and youth. As encounters between protestival attendees and police forces drew increasing media attention, Janša's SDS party tweeted a casual dismissal of the protesters, implying that they were left-fascists and Communist zombies (Korsika and Mesec 2014). (We dissect the exchange in a subsequent section.) Instead of responding defensively, protesters deftly reappropriated "zombie" to leverage vivid meanings of the metaphor in public space, maximizing its political potential and leaving Janša with the proverbial egg on his face (Kavcic 2014). During the subsequent phase of generative activism, the concept that became The Zombie Church also began to take shape.

Invented Religion and the Redemptive Undead

The Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing, as a title, playfully asserts harmony between two categories that seem unrelated and possibly antonymous: "zombie" and "church." But, scholarship on (a) invented religions and (b) zombies in popular culture helps illuminate how these terms could combine to mobilize political iterations of "zombie" in the short term, and to inspire a compelling religious community in the longer term.

Cusack (2010) explains that as populations in developed nations began to drift from traditional religions after the mid-20th century, an array of "niche products" proliferated in the religious marketplace of a more fragmented and secularized society (Cusack 13). Among these, *invented religions* are new religions that "announce their invented status," rather than linking themselves to an existing religious tradition or claiming divine authorship (1). Invented religions refuse strategies of legitimation that would render them legible to dominant religions, asserting that even as products of human imagination, they deserve the designation of religion

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(1). Some invented religions may also be *mock or parody religions*, which either highlight the deficiencies of existing religions or deliberately mimic in structure and content traditional religions such as Christianity, as a mode of criticism (Cusack 2018). However, many invented religions assert an authentic religious community. (Zombie Church members insist that they do not mock or parody other religions. We may disagree, but we don't doubt the sincerity of members' belief in the Church.) Cusack argues that invented religions are neither trivial nor invalid and that "when their historical and social context is investigated and their teachings are examined, they can be seen to be functionally similar, if not identical, to traditional religions" (3). As with traditional religions, some are more successful than others at attracting attention and members.

Invented religions have been vehicles for critiquing illiberal and undemocratic aspects of traditional religions, using popular culture memes, fictional worlds, humor, and other resources to tease or rebuke dominant religions in a given culture. In that sense, they can be reactive. But they can also be generative: creating conceptual alternatives, new narratives, and bases for meaning-making and community-building inspired by imaginative innovation on ideas already circulating in the culture. Sometimes what starts as a parody becomes the source of authentic inspiration. As Cusack puts it, "even those founders who deliberately employed fiction to create a new religion may be gradually convinced of its value, reality, or truth through their experiences of its success, and in communication with like-minded people" (2010, 23).

In these ways, invented religions often "both reflect the host culture in which they originated, and yet also stand in opposition to it" (24). What makes them consequential is their ability to create community from the building block of explanatory narratives. The most effective invented religions are crafted upon compelling stories that "replicate the conditions of traditional religious forms (myths, sacred histories)," create culture through social processes, and then, like traditional religion, take on an independent existence (2010, 25). Jediism, which began in Britain in 2001 in defiance of self-identifying religion in the national census, is a good example (Bainbridge 2017).

What About the Zombie Figure Might Lend to its Usefulness in or as Religion?

First, having long circulated in popular culture, the zombie concept is familiar and accessible. Variants of the undead human monster

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bearing vestiges of human appearance and behavior exist in many cultures, and new iterations are born with each generation (Collins and Bond 2011; Cook 2013).[6] The circulation of American-made zombie productions around the world has produced several generations of zombies, often signifying sociopolitical predicaments. The zombie figure has served as a stand-in for white Western fears of animism, voodoo, and Black bodies in the 1930s; the urban underclasses in the 1960s; consumerism in the 1970s and 1980s; AIDS scares in the 1990s; and, in the early 21st century, specters of global infestation, from viral contagion to mass migration to climate catastrophe (Platts 2013).[7] A revival of the zombie apocalypse genre in the mid-aughts produced films, television programs, and literature exploring prospects of modern apocalypse that enjoyed broader popularity than any previous wave (Canavan 2017; Dendle 2011).[8] By Slovenia's 2012 Uprising, AMC's cable series *The Walking Dead* had become the most popular show in the coveted 18–49 years old age group in the United States, and was garnering global audiences (Schneider 2013). The broad familiarity of zombie provides a rich vocabulary for crisis and community.

Second, like many conventional religious figures, the zombie is liminal, a creature that exists between worlds. Zombie slips the binaries of life and death, the individual and the multitude, impotence and agency (Bishop 2015; Wadsworth 2018, 190). Not unlike a Christ, the zombie embodies paradox: it is technically beyond life, but somehow a moving agent in the world; unconscious, yet driven by a primitive will; in form, but decaying; necrotic but ambulatory. In this sense, we might see the zombie as a dark twist on the resurrection figure, a human being risen impossibly from the dead, and driven by a powerful mission (to feed or kill). As a proselyte spreads the good news, the zombie creates converts, its bite raising bodies from the (putative) grave (Lauro 2011). While a single, slow-moving zombie may seem laughable, a horde of the undead is, like a great awakening, an impressive prospect. Even in its morbidity, the zombie bears miraculous qualities.

In sum, the zombie's central asset, at least in public space, is inherent multivalence. As a metaphor, its varied meanings can be customized for the particular moment. Zombie mirrors the dimensionality of the modern citizen: singular, but also collective; apathetic, but mobilizable. Its rich range of meanings provides a potential vocabulary with which to build a compelling narrative—and Slovenian activists did so, thanks to the gift (as it turned out) of Janša's derogatory tweet. But to expand from the zombie's rhetorical power in a short-term political battle, to

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something substantive enough to ground an invented religion would seem to require more. Zombie-as religion would have to reveal positive resonances of zombie—its potential power, agency, visual impact, etc.—but also render it a site of ideas, a worldview, and a source of community and/or communion.

Birth of the Zombie Agent

The salience of zombie as a political metaphor became tangible the moment on December 21, 2012, when Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) chided the protesters via Twitter. Slovenian media outlets had begun to describe the protests in terms of a popular or national uprising, which was a virtually inevitable framing given the protesters' moniker, All-Slovenian Uprising. Deriding this frame, the SDS tweeted: "Communist International, Civil War Rhetoric, Totalitarian Symbols? A zombie uprising, not a nation uprising!"

With the tweet, Janša and his party launched what it probably hoped was a poison arrow. It was obvious to protesters that by denigrating them as zombies, the prime minister meant to indicate products of a discarded way of thinking under Yugoslavian socialism. "He meant resurrected communists," said one interviewee. "What he wanted to say, basically, was it's a resurrection of the old system. All of these people are communists! Which [system] should be dead and is dead; all of them are just communists who are haters of our liberal freedoms and stuff" (Wadsworth, Int 1). Luka Mesec, a young progressive leftist member of Parliament elected after the Uprising, pointed out that the SDS had long been claiming (absurdly, in his view) that Slovenia was "besides Belarus, the last standing communist country in Europe" because center-left parties had held considerable power after independence (Int 7). Paraphrasing the tweet, Mesec transcribed the intention as "the protesters are zombies because socialism died twenty-five years ago. Now we [the right-wing] are in power and the remnants of socialism are being removed, and the people that appear on the street are dead people that don't want to die." Another activist saw the tweet as a flagrant dismissal: "that we don't stand a chance anyway, like we are a group of people standing here, but tomorrow we're dead. Already we're dead" (Int 4).

The irony of the former committed member of the Communist Party and high official of the Socialist Youth of Slovenia calling the protesters

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communist was laughable and, for many, outrageous. As one put it, "[His worldview is] basically religious. Black and white, good and bad, and bad is Communism." Another: "He said, literally the walking dead; you are walking the streets, you don't have a mind of your own, you are somebody else's puppet, and so on…So this was the final insult that …you're just whining on the streets and nothing's wrong" (Int 5).

Nor was it lost on protesters that, more than anything, the pressures of the version of capitalism Janša's party advanced were what made ordinary Slovenians feel deadened, doomed to toil under an economic system that abandons people to the market while starving the public sector and lining enriching elites.[9] In that context, as these witnesses recounted it, the tweet sparked an epiphany: "We were like, 'ok, let's be zombies!'" Another recalled, "[The tweet] struck against him because the protesters took this as a badge of honor and said, 'Yeah, we *are* zombies.' And then these masks started and stuff, and it became huge." (Int 1) "Ok, we are the zombies," one Zombie Church leader remembered thinking, "We are the scary ones, and we want changes…We want these things to stop, the corruption, the putting people down" (Int 7).

SDS's tweet gestured to one valence of zombie, the ravenous, brain-dead horde. It framed the protesters as lazy post-socialist subjects seeking state handouts. The protesters, though, employed a kind of discursive judo to intercept and reverse the arrow Janša's party had launched. They laughed at the ideological insinuations and recast the main figure of insult—zombie—through the valence of the civically dead *waking* from its stupor. These moves disabled SDS's insult. An academic who attended the protests noted, "[The tweet] was [Janša's] wrong move… and this metaphor played a very important role. Because it was amazing to see, you know, thousands of people appearing as zombies, using masks—it was really powerful. We're not used to these things [in Slovenia]" (Interview 91719).

Overnight, mask-making workshops convened, enabling the swift proliferation of the zombie horde visual and the creative incorporation of the zombie image into the protests. TV cameras and international news outlets now captured officials facing down a zombie horde enlivened, as it were, by the movement. The protestors effectively reconfigured Janša's insult into a catalytic political visual, an embodiment of community dissent. This was the beginning of the end for the prime minister. One interviewee, remembering zombie's entrance at the first protestival, noted this multivalent move, saying it felt like "We are zombies, but very, very much alive, actually" (Int 3) (Figure 2).

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FIGURE 2. Image courtesy of Rok Zavartanik and Bojan Stepancic via © Protestival official facebook page https://www.facebook.com/pg/Protestival-230201397114552/photos/?ref=page_internal

The serendipity of the SDS's "communist zombie" tweet and the protesters' conversion of "zombie" into an evocative political visual enabled Slovenians to assert a political defiance that had often eluded them. Social anthropologist Irena Šumi (2012) has argued that Slovenians have long evinced a collective fatalism that takes different forms in different eras (155). Across the drastic regime changes that modern Slovenia has endured—from the Austro-Hungarian empire to (multiple) World War II occupations, to Tito's Communist Federation, to republican independence—a refrain persists among Slovenians that no amount of public criticism can defeat the "demonstrably incapable" people who perpetually rise to power under whichever system prevails.[10] The resulting fatalism lives on in folk wisdom:

> For example, the most cherished proverbs insist that: the Slovenians are serfs by nature; the Slovenian "national character" is lacking in pride, courage and self-esteem; power corrupts, especially in the circumstances most frequently detected in Slovenia which proverbially involve an ignoramus risen to a position of power and wealth; Slovenes never had a state, and do not even know

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> how to go about creating one; and, finally and irrefutably, nothing can be done about any of these things. The state and local powers, the newfangled capitalists and autocratic directors of state-owned monopolies who harvest a mythical income in defiance of state norms on the salaries of public servants, political parties in power and, as of late, academic monopolists are all seen as essentially unstoppable in their frivolousness (155).

For Slovenians, Šumi argues, discourses of "blood and history," of collective pride and identity are understandably uttered in the same breath as "discourses of disempowerment" (157). The end result is a cyclical shuffling of political elites in power, with the public polarized in two perpetually divided teams clutching old grudges (173).

If Šumi is right about these discourses of disempowerment, when the zombie launched into public space it became a rare figure with the capacity to harness the routinely suffocated rage of Slovenians facing another set of corrupt leaders and systems. As Janša's economic austerity program began to impact Slovenians across labor sectors, and as more corruption was exposed, the real zombie, the *resonant* and *resident* zombie, became recognizable to Slovenians as the ordinary, isolated citizen expected to passively endure substandard wages, a shrinking social safety net, political corruption, and the selling off of public industries for profit. With frustration just under the surface of the collective unconscious, the spectre of a collective zombie uprising, which the tweet triggered, was ripe for actualization in public space.

The protestivals and zombie conflagrations that ensued were not merely negative symbolism, vehicles for critique. More importantly, they helped materialize a political counter-context, which, like the Occupy Wall Street encampments that cropped up in cities around the globe just a few years before, sought to proliferate more life-affirming, diverse, democratic spaces for community expression. In those arenas of public counter-community, the zombie had also fleetingly appeared—in flash mobs where protesters performed Michael Jackson's Thriller routine at Occupy camps in London and Los Angeles (Nyong'o 2017). Within the Slovenian protestival space, people brought paper, fabric, paint, and glue to the public square and, in a sort of festivus of ingenuity, constructed the Slovenian protest zombie writ large as a counterforce, a kind of holy adversary, to the neoliberal regime. This was, to our knowledge, the first instance in which a full-fledged political zombie emerged to leverage the zombie metaphor for sustained dissent in political movement space. A few years later, in 2017, politically salient zombies again surfaced at the

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Hamburg G20 summit for a 1000-person performance piece in a public square, but Slovenia had done it first (Wadsworth 2018).

In the confrontation between dystopian and utopian visions of Slovenianness, fresh civic possibilities erupted and a figure of death became a visage of collective redemption. Political scientist Jasmin Mujanović (2018) argues that to challenge patterns of corruption that demoralize the population and harm democracy in the Balkans, citizens need to cultivate "antagonistic, popular opposition to the existing elite" (133). The protestivals and their zombie iconography exemplified that. Although Mujanović did not analyze the zombie symbolism in Slovenia's 2012–13 Uprising, he described the protests as a rare instance in the modern Balkans in which a "series of ruptures and inversions" in Slovenian civil society created the possibilities for greater democratization and focused challenges to political elites (132). Put differently, the reappropriation of the zombie epithet facilitated a space for the political—what political theorist Sheldon Wolin described as a space for the people to realize their potential as political agents for the common good and defy Slovenian politics-as-usual. An uprising of the heretofore civic dead raises obvious religious symbolism and must have felt, in the moment, uncannily inspired.

In an interview with Rok Gros, Zombie Church priest and Keeper of the Pot and the Pan, Gros repeated some of the tropes about Slovenian collective fatalism identified by Šumi. Describing the early protests, he stated that Slovenians tend to be "passively aggressive," and will put up with a lot of offenses. But when they are finally pushed to the edge, "they snap." This, he said, was the case with the radar scheme in Maribor, where the high fines were contrasted with shrinking incomes and reduced public spending. Turning Janša's zombie tweet against him was a way of signaling that the public would insist on "capital change, not cosmetic change" (Int 5).

After weeks of continuous mobilization the Slovenian news daily announced the current government "clinically dead" in January 2013. On February 27, Janša was ousted in a no-confidence vote in Parliament and was later jailed on corruption charges (Maza 2013). In mid-March, a center-left coalition agreement was signed and endorsed by Parliament. Alenka Bratušek was designated the new prime minister, and, in line with protesters' demands, she pledged to ask for a confidence vote a year after her swearing in, to gauge satisfaction (Novak 2013). The following fall, after a power battle between Bratušek and Janović, the mayor of Ljubjana, a new centrist party led by Miro Cerar emerged and won the election overwhelmingly. Bratusek, secured a parliamentary

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seat under Cerar's government, and a new period of center-left coalition leadership began. The All-Slovenian Uprising and its zombies had influenced a shift in political power in Slovenia.

BIRTH OF THE ZOMBIE CHURCH

As Gros describes it, the idea of the Zombie Church as a consolidation of the type of spontaneous community that occurred during the initial protests emerged during the Uprising as a way of supporting the protesters. "If you have protests, you need everything," he said. "You need people with cultural background, you need people molesting [the authorities], you need people who protest peacefully, you need people who are good at television, and so on…The church was brought up because many of the people really need some support" (Int 5). According to Gros, the dominant churches in Slovenia "were with the government" (meaning, aligned with the conservatives) and "were quiet at the time of the protests." Thus, he and his wife Andreja had the idea of making "our own church with what we believe in," to provide radically inclusive spiritual support during the Uprising. It helped that at that time the Roman Catholic church in Slovenia was teetering toward bankruptcy, having fallen nearly 1 billion euros in debt due to bad financial speculations, and therefore at low point in public esteem.

The Groses and their friends seized on the zombie metaphor to and, in a moment of spontaneous improvisation, invented a religion. In the Holy Book of the Zombie Church released in late 2014 by Slovenian publishing house Sanje (Dreams), this moment is referred to as the "Great Uprising." "Every Zombie in the Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing counts the year of our uprising as the year 0" (2014, 4).[11] According to the Groses, during one of the protestivals, people began suggesting articles of Zombie Church belief. These shared beliefs were worked out further in Facebook threads, and, after a two-month period of debate among participants, the core articles of faith were designated for publication in the Holy Book, though church members say the religion remains a work in progress. Beliefs in the Holy Book range from serious tenets like non-discrimination of members by race, religion, or background and ejection of anyone guilty of child molestation, to the tradition of "marrying Kobe beef," which is a joking riff on a typo that changed the word "eat" to "marry."

The original name for the church, "for about ten minutes," according to Gros, was the Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing without the "Trans-

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Universal" modifier. "Blissful ringing" is a multilayered rhetorical move. On the surface, it refers to the banging of pots and pans that was part of the "music" of the protestivals, which, Gros said, "our members find is blissful." (Pan-banging was a practice borrowed from Iceland's post-recession social unrest in 2009–11.) According to the Holy Book: "Day 9, the Bell created the Worker Without Rights!" And on the 10th day he said, "Go before the temple of corruption and original sin, and ring. Bong!" (Article 10). The Zombies embraced the cacophony of the protests and afterwards continued the ringing of pots and pans at zombie-themed demonstrations in front of Parliament on Wednesdays, actions they framed as *rituals* of belonging and belief. Indeed, they call them holy masses. "It is the duty," the Holy Book reads, "of every believer in the Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing to ring the bells and create the blissful sounds of the pans and holy pots" (Article 20). However, the legal right to have these "holy masses" in public places is in dispute.

"Blissful ringing" conveys a second, politically edged reference: it gestures ironically to the prerogative that the Catholic church has long enjoyed to ring church bells in nearly every little hamlet in Slovenia. Because some of these bells clang as often as every quarter hour, Slovenians have argued about the noise and the assertion of religious presence the bells convey. Janša's government, hoping to appease Church authorities, had pronounced the ringing of the bells to be not "noise" but rather "music," and wrote this into legislation, thereby protecting the bell-ringing from the reach of municipal noise ordinances. Zombie Church participants seized on this definition of religious noise as music, asserted their pot-banging as religious. This is one way in which they "sacralized…the tools of social unrest."[12]

Through the assertion of "blissful ringing" rights, we see Zombies employing invented religion to conduct three interventions at once: first, to critique the privileges granted to the dominant church by the state; second, to draw attention to Catholicism's hegemonic and often invasive cultural presence, to which, Zombies point out, not all Slovenians have assented; and, third, to challenge the state to recognize an analogous ritual of a religious minority. All of these are interventions at the intersection of politics and religion, which also call attention to power structures embedded in culture.

Public gatherings in Slovenia require prior announcement a few days in advance, the only exception being traditional religious rituals. Zombies have refused to announce their masses before Parliament, asserting that

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they are practicing a religious ritual and therefore should not require what they consider prior permission. As Gros put it in our interview:

> I don't think there is a church in the world that the state doesn't allow to have holy masses. We are such a church. We have a judgment from the court that says that we have to ask the state for permission that we could worship freely. For every mass on public place we [Zombies] have to have permission from the police. It is the law, by us [Slovenians], that churches are [allowed] to do that. Not just in the constitution; it's in our law. The law said that churches are excluded from [the need for permit]. You could have a regular holy mass whenever you want, without a permit. But they say "it's not for you."

This conflict has brought the Church into confrontation with police and other state officials charged with such matters. Zombies use such occasions to assert that if Catholic religious parades and church bells are permitted, the music of their pots and pan-banging should likewise be. If not, the Catholic Church has an unfair advantage over religious minorities. Although Zombies have not explicitly won this argument in court, they draw the public's attention to the issue in media interviews, online, and in print profiles.

The modifier "Trans-Universal" was added after a "period of public debate" on Facebook among those interested in establishing a zombie church. The Holy Book explains that whereas traditional churches claim to be universal, applicable across time and space, "the trans-universal church has no competition, because all the churches are self-limiting to the universe, and the universe is expanding into nothingness, and therefore only the trans-universal church maintains the hope of eternal blessing in the name of the almighty bell" (Article 8). Members may even include those not yet aware of the community: "[E]very immaculate soul of the enlightened kingdom of trans-universal wisdom that feels the influence of the holy pan, the power of the pot of grace, and worships the sound of the blissful bell will be a member of our redeemed community *even though they may not yet be aware of it*" (Article 6). The "trans-universal" modifier is in implicit dialogue with the Catholic Church's assertion that its doctrine applies to all.

The Holy Book includes a number of dogmas, but as mentioned, more are still being added and, Gros says, only a couple of these, such as the antidiscrimination tenet, really count as hard and fast rules. While some dogmas are playful and meant for laughs, others are effectively in

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conversation with nodes of power in Slovenia. For instance, Zombie Church high priests are forbidden to "shear the sheep" (Article 11).[13] Gros explained it this way: "The shepherd has to be a good shepherd… If you are the one who manipulates the people for your own gain, you are shearing the sheep. This is wrong…you're not allowed to do that as a high representative of our church." Likewise, he said, the government should not exploit the people.

The Church also asserts a number of recognized holidays, perhaps the most interesting being the "Holiday of the Stolen Holiday" (Holy Book 2014, 32). This, said Gros, "is the day we remember all the holidays that were stolen"—meaning, days off from work under the Yugoslavian socialist system that the contemporary government has cut "to make people work more." Such statements, even where parodic, assert a democratic ethics authorized by and accountable to a sovereign body and in dialogue with the apparatus of political power.

After identifying itself as a religious body with a set of dogmas, and conducting religious rituals outside Parliament, both of which began during the All-Slovenian Uprising, the Church's next move was to register as a religious community with Slovenia's Ministry of Culture, which it did in April 2014.[14] Slovenia's constitution, established in 1991, has a church-state separation clause (Article 7), freedom of conscience protection (Article 41), and a number of guarantees of religious equality, but as the modern independent state is young, its separation doctrine is still developing through the judicial and, to some extent, the bureaucratic process governing religious registration.[15] Gros reports that in the Church's first year, members were mostly "joking" about registering officially and becoming a legal entity, and Gros even considered closing the church. But other members insisted it was a good idea, so Gros began to sit down with the director of the Office for Religious Communities and work out the Zombies' bureaucratic existence.

For a period between 2000 and 2009, the director of the Office for Religious Communities, a right-wing politician and devoted Catholic, refused to register several religious communities who applied with the state, claiming he couldn't find proof of authentic religiosity. But substantive public pressure and personnel changes around 2004 led to a more expansive approach. According to Gregor Lesjak, the director of the Religious Communities office at this writing (and a religion researcher himself), the state does not evaluate the content of a group's religion or what counts for religion, nor should it. Lesjak notes that no shared

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authorities exist to evaluate the nature and role of religion in 21st century societies, nor could state officials be trained to distinguish between genuine and false/fake religions, especially since scholars refuse to make such distinctions. Therefore, Lesjak's office registers any religious communities seeking state recognition provided only that they (a) can claim at least 10 members who are either Slovenian citizens or legal permanent residents, and (b) pledge not to advance or condone violence, intolerance, or other hatred.[16] State recognition pertains permit applications for public activities (such as processions), protections for property tax exemption for churches, registration of religious nonprofit entities, participation eligibility in forums for dialogue sponsored by the office, and appeals regarding claims of religious discrimination. But recognition, notes Lesjak, is largely a matter of legal subjectivity rather than substantive material benefits.

Even so, registering enables religious communities to be in more direct conversation with the state and, from the Zombies' perspective, to test the state's commitments to church-state separation and religious equality. For instance, because churches do not pay property taxes, members of the Zombie Church endeavored to declare their homes as sacred places where they practice their religion, and receive exemption from property taxes. During Lesjak's interview (2017), no statute specifically prohibited claiming homes as churches, so Zombies were receiving inconsistent answers from government organs. (They were not, in the end, granted tax exemption for homes as religious sites.) Such tests challenge the state to clarify what legally counts as a religious community, potentially generating further public discourse in the process.

As far as we can confirm, the Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing is only the second invented religion to be officially registered as a bona fide religion by any state authority since Sweden registered the Missionary Church of Kopimism in 2012 (Nilsson and Enkvist 2016). We emphasize that while the Zombie case did not force a revision of Slovenian *legislation*, it compelled the state to change its registration *practice*. During the debates surrounding the Church's registration, the state conceded that it has neither mandate nor capacity to assess groups according to dogma.[17] This marked an important change in administrative practice (in ways that are not self-explanatory in western legal and political and religious traditions): the state was forced to clarify that within its religious registration procedure religiosity is not tested. Consequently, the state authority established an ongoing presumption that religious community registration does not require obtaining a certificate of adequacy,

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correctness, acceptability of doctrine, or practice(s) of a group. Rather, the legal status of a religion is available to all on equal terms.

Two other areas in which the Zombie Church has attempted to push the state are representation in the chaplaincy (an issue commonly pressed by invented religions), and the right to apply for state funds to support nonprofit humanitarian organizations. Regarding chaplaincy, most chaplains available to Slovenians in the military, police, and prison are from dominant churches (overwhelmingly from the Roman Catholic Church). Zombies argue that they and other religious minorities have a constitutional right to call their own representative, but according to Gros, Zombies lack the resources to wage a legal battle over chaplaincy.

Members have, however, built small community operations since the Uprising—to support flood victims in 2015, Syrian refugees during the immigration crisis, to raise money for economically struggling Slovenian families, and to sponsor a pro bono health clinic for those without medical insurance. Two Zombie Church high priestesses, a nurse and a lawyer, organized The Hugo Chavez health clinic in Nova Gorica, a town near the Italian border, as a health clinic run on pro bono volunteer hours from doctors, to provide medications and minor treatments for those unable to afford them. The Zombie Church has petitioned to receive the same humanitarian organization status that traditional church charities enjoy, so as to be eligible to apply for public funds.

The Office of Religious Communities, which regards the issue of nonprofit status as outside its jurisdiction, argued that although they may have a good case for discrimination, Zombies would likely have to fight through the court system to win recognition of an equal constitutional right in this area, relative to dominant churches. Zombies seem to have taken up the challenge with regard to at least the right of the health clinic to operate like a religious nonprofit. Although initially denied the status by the Ministry of Health, in October 2019, a Church member posted on Facebook that a court judgment "upheld our argument against the decision of the Ministry of Health (which denies [sic] us the status of charity of Pro bono ambulance in Nova Gorica), and ordered the Ministry to make a new decision and reimburse the costs! In doing so, the court specifically noted that there was no reasonable explanation for such a decision by the ministry. This is the second judgment in our favor and we hope that no third will be needed …."[18] Zombies appear to be continuing to fight this battle, as resources allow.

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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The All-Slovenian Uprising galvanized a rich set of engagements at the intersection of religion, politics, global popular culture, and civil society. Although the Slovenian political zombie emerged spontaneously in response to a rhetorical attack on protesters by a political regime, as it rendered its first groan it became a multivalent metaphor for the frustrations a movement sought to address, and the collective defiance it mobilized. Protesters' clever reappropriation of an epithet intended to describe a degenerate group of "low-lifes" inadvertently birthed the opposite: "Zombie" became a vehicle for focusing citizens' ire, galvanizing public attention, embarrassing the Janša regime, and physically performing the specter of a collective popular threat. And in the heady days when spontaneously constructed zombies multiplied in the public square to sing, bang pots and pans, and rail against the political elites, the uprising of the undead fostered a kind of spiritual communion amidst the political awakening.

The Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing crystallized from this moment of vibrant political community and consolidated into an invented religion with a compelling narrative. Slovenia's zombie protests marked one of the first known applications of popular culture zombie tropes in a political movement and broke ground in advancing the zombie figure from a silver screen monster, a recreational digression or apolitical specter of alternative community play (as in urban zombie crawls), into real-time political space. In these ways, it innovated on the zombie tradition as a mode of political critique.

The Zombie Church's birth in political circumstances is distinctive but also clearly resonant with other invented religions tracked by scholars. Pastafarianism arose in 2004 out of school board debates in Kansas over teaching intelligent design (a version of creationism) in public schools alongside evolution (Martin 2019). Jediism arose from a campaign against structural links between church and state(s) during the 2001 National Censuses. As a result of Jediism's influence, more than 390,000 Britons, 70,000 Australians, 53,000 New Zealanders, and 21,000 declared their religion to be Jedi Knights (Bainbridge 2017). In the United States, the Satanic Temple, while controversial, has provoked productive debates about religious freedom, pluralism and tolerance, disestablishment, and government overreach (Laycock 2020). And like Sweden's Kopimism, which aims to "sacralize the information" by defying copyright laws (Walker 2018), the Slovenian Zombies seek to

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"sacralize the tools of unrest" by honoring the 2012 All-Slovenian Uprising as their origin moment, and conceiving ongoing political engagement as a matter of religious practice and legal right.

As an invented religion, the Zombie Church asserts an expansive religious community, unrestricted by the boundary-policing of traditional religions; it embraces a spirit of public citizenship, asserting regular protest against corruption as a pleasurable spiritual rite and a political right; and it draws attention to the uneven cultural privileges and practical acommodations enjoyed by hegemonic religion. Though the Church plays with parody, mockery, and the definition of religion itself, its members insist on defending the equal rights and prerogatives of *all* religions in a democratic society and are willing to spend resources in official pursuit of these.

Especially in their interactions with the state bureaucratic apparatus, Zombie Church members raise legitimate questions about the nature and role of religion in 21st century societies. Observers might (and do) critique Zombies and other invented religions, arguing that they offend traditional believers, that society must not sanction unconventional religious activities, that their doctrines are absurd or incoherent, or that dominant religious traditions are important to the historical, cultural, and national identity of particular societies. But in the post-Enlightenment era all putatively democratic societies embrace a concept of religious freedom that must be guaranteed to every religion, no matter how small, exotic, funny, or ridiculous. While political communities seek different ways to register and recognize religions (and we see diversity across continents on these questions), regulation of them is a delicate business if we believe, as we claim, that robust religious freedom is crucial to democratic societies.

The Slovenian republic is still young and developing its constitutional and legal church-state paradigm, and is not always prepared for the challenges Zombies raise. The Zombie Church may sometimes be an irritant. But the state is fortunate to have religious minorities asserting these challenges, without which no democratic society can secure its most sacred commitments. And, indeed, the environment for new religions remains fertile: almost exactly seven years after Janša was driven from the prime ministership, in early 2020 he was reelected. Within weeks, protesters were back in the streets. Zombie Church activity on Facebook ticked up during the Friday protests of 2020 (Tavčar and Bezlaj 2020), and Zombies closed the 13th week of protests on July 17 with a public mass, confirming that the Church remains at least a potential long-term player in Slovenian public life. Apparently not having learned his

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lesson, Janša responded to an early rally with a tweet describing the protesters as "cannibals." Perhaps this will galvanize another provocative religion in Slovenia—in which case, the imperative of academic studies will continue to maintain methodological agnosticism toward all religions and work toward understanding.

NOTES

1. The only other scholarly article we have found on the Slovenian Zombie church is Trivunnža 2015, but his focus is on rhetorical framing devices.

2. Interviews were conducted by Nancy Wadsworth in March 2017 in Slovenia under permission of the University of Denver Institutional Review Board (exempt status). Unless otherwise noted, interviewees are quoted anonymously. For more information or transcripts, please contact author.

3. Full listing of religious communities can be found at https://www.gov.si/teme/verske-skupnosti. Accessed February 23, 2020.

4. These are not solely constituted by traditional non-Catholic Christian (like Lutheran Protestant or Serbian Orthodox) and Muslim communities, but also by other Christian communities like the Pentecostal Church, Baptists, and the Christian Adventist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses, and numerous new religious movements. These include esoteric groups such as the Theosophical Movement, Ordo Templi Orientis, and International School of the Golden Rosy Cross—Lectorium Rosicrucianum, and the largest "family" of new religions in Slovenia is represented by several Hindu and numerous Buddhist groups (Hare Krishnas and Soka Gakkai being the ones with the oldest tradition in this category). We include some well-known controversial new religious movements, based on a variety of more or less radical religious innovations—for example, the Church of Scientology and Raelian Movement. A handful of genuinely Slovenian religious and spiritual innovations is also visible in the country's spiritual landscape (see Črnič and Lesjak 2006, 150–51).

5. The majority of this funding, over 1.34 million euros out of 1.4 million, went to the Roman Catholic Church in 2014. https://bit.ly/3b6ODQX

6. Antecedents to the modern zombie originate from African spiritual traditions transported through slave populations to Haiti, where the zombie signaled the civically and/or mentally dead figure that nonetheless moves through the world with lethal agency and insurrectionary potential (Moreman and Rushton 2011, 2). During the 1804 slave revolution, Jean Zombi, who led a massacre of white Haitians, became a prototype for the modern zombie who wages vengeance on behalf of the walking dead (Dayan 1998, 36).

7. Although a number of other societies in Asia, Europe, and Latin America have produced zombie products tapping into some of these themes (see, for instance, Alejandro Brugués's *Juan of the Dead*), U.S. popular culture has been at the center of zombie productions' popularity.

8. Films like *28 Days Later*, *District 9*, *Warm Bodies*, *World War Z*, and *Zombieland*, all set in some version of zombie apocalypse where military authorities have replaced the liberal state, drew audiences with visions of social contract-busting scenarios and meditations on human resilience in the face of a rabid threat.

9. Marxists have long recognized the capitalist drone of alienated labor as a zombified being, its consciousness disabled through forces of production that own his body and time (Lauro and Embry 2008; Comaroff and Comaroff 2017). More recently, the neoliberal subject has been described as a kind of living dead creature, doomed to survive under a system that expects all individuals, including children and the elderly, to become "little capitals" responsible for all needs and measures of success, and blames those who fail (Giroux 2011; Brown 2015)

10. Jasmin Mujanović (2018) refers to this pattern as the "elastic authoritarianism" of the Balkans.

11. Sveta knjiga Čezvesoljske zombi cerkve blaženega zvonjenja.

12. Phrase borrowed from Wadsworth interview with Gregor Lesjak, March 2, 2017.

13. [Translation:] "In the … church all high priests are strictly forbidden to sheep shear. Lawn mowing is allowed, and about the grass growing the Bell awaits a holy discussion and referendum."

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14. Wadsworth interview with Gregor Lesjak, March 2, 2017. Also to note: From March through September, 2013, co-author Aleš Črnič was a Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Culture within which the Office for Religious Communities operates. (Lesjak ran this office at the time of the interview, and as this article went to press.) Thus, Črnič was Lesjak's superior when the Zombie Church was registered.

15. https://www.us-rs.si/media/constitution.pdf

16. One may *not* register a religious community under the following conditions: if the purpose or manner of performing religious teaching, mission, rituals, and other activities is based on violence, uses violent means, and endangers the life, health, and freedoms of members of the religious community and other persons; or if the religion encourages national, racial, religious, or other inequality, intolerance, incitement to national, racial, religious, or other hatred or incites violence or war.

17. During this the director of the office who lead the registration process of the Zombie church received a legal complaint (allegedly from the Association of Catholic Lay People) for his negligent work in the service (directly related to this registration). He was even questioned by the police in this regard, but as nothing has happened to date, we conclude that the complaint was dismissed.

18. Zombie Church Slovenia Facebook Page October 15, 2019 https://www.facebook.com/CZCBZ/posts/2503203346568416?__tn__=-R.

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