



POLITICAL CHAOS: THE SENSE OF MARTIAL DANGER IN KURT VONNEGUT'S *CAT'S CRADLE*

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Abstract: This study focuses on the political chaos in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963). While the main scholarly studies focus on the postcolonial peculiarities of the novel, this study will focus on the post-nuclear characteristics and will render the novel's position distinctive within the discourse on political and social affairs. The study's significance is its emphasis on the role of human beings, which brings dangers and devastation to the human race. Though the study will allude to some apocalyptic visions regarding the existence of the human race, the study tries to offer profound understanding of how human weaponry used in the nuclear age might threaten the human health and future existence. During the sixties and seventies, the arms race was severely critiqued by contemporary literary works. Among these works is Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* which depicts the chaotic politics of the time. Hence, this study will solely accentuate the portrayal of political chaos and how it threatens human social stability and peaceful lives. Political threat causes harmful effects to humanity's health, mentality, and psyche which is exemplified in the novel's characters. The fictional characters embody the real human sufferings. Thus, there will be no discussion on specific political powers which compete with each other to gain martial success over the other. Instead, the study will focus on how the fictional characters suffer from the consequences of war and how they behave after them. The analysis of such feelings will be discussed by applying two concepts, namely, Slavoj Žižek's concept of power reductionism and Jean-François Lyotard's concept of critique of the existing order.

Keywords: chaos, existing order, politics, power reductionism

Özet: Bu çalışma Kurt Vonnegut'un *Cat's Cradle* (1963) eserindeki siyasi kaosu incelemektedir. Çoğu akademik çalışmanın bu romandaki sömürge sonrası özelliklerine odaklanmış olmasına rağmen, bu çalışma nükleer sonrası özelliklerine odaklanacaktır ve siyasi ve sosyal ilişkilerle ilgili söylemdeki kendine özgü konumunu açıklığa kavuşturacaktır. Bu çalışmanın önemi, insan ırkına tehlike ve tahrip oluşturan insanların rolünü vurgulamasıdır. Her ne kadar insan ırkının varlığı ile ilgili kıyamete ait görüşlere kısaca yer verilecek olsa da, bu çalışma insanların nükleer dönemde kullandıkları silahların insan sağlığını ve gelecekteki varlığını nasıl tehdit edebileceği ile alakalı derin bir anlayış sunmaya çalışmaktadır. Altmışlar ve yetmişler dönemindeki silahlanma yarışı modern edebi çalışmalar tarafından şiddetle eleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışmalar arasında dönemin kaotik siyasi yapısını tasvir eden çalışma Vonnegut'un *Cat's Cradle* eseridir. Bu yüzden, bu çalışma politik kaos ve onun insan sosyal dengesini ve barışçıl hayatını nasıl tehdit ettiği üzerinde duracaktır. Siyasi tehdidin insanlığın sağlığına, düşünce yapısına ve psikolojisine zararlı etkileri olmaktadır ki bunlar romanlardaki karakterlerde örneklendirilmektedir. İmgesel karakterler gerçek insan sıkıntılarını içermektedirler. Bu sebepten dolayı, askeri başarı kazanmak için birbirleriyle rekabet halinde olan bazı siyasi güçler tartışılmayacaktır. Bunun yerine, bu çalışma imgesel karakterlerinin savaş sonuçlarından nasıl mağdur oldukları ve savaştan sonra nasıl davrandıkları üzerine odaklanacaktır. Bu duyguların analizi, Slavoi Žižek'in güç indirgemeciliği kavramı ve Jean-François Lyotard'ın mevcut düzenin kritiği kavramı olmak üzere iki kavram üzerinden tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: kaos, mevcut düzen, siyaset, güç indirgemeciliği

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1. Introduction

The study of human powers has been a subject within different critical fields. There has been much interest in the way powers and human political affairs are treated. Yet, the treatment of human powers and political issues depend on the way in which politics and human affairs are treated. Hence, the main concern with power and politics comes out of the feeling that they have a close relationship with human existence on earth. They are vital for the presence of human beings in their surroundings. Any threat engulfing human existence or the environment would threaten the existence of human beings and their future life (Anatol 2011: 26). Consequently, the threat regarding politics and human affairs are approached in terms of a martial problem, namely, the arms race. The inherent interest in the problem of political phobia has been directed towards the human practices which would threaten nature and environment, putting them in critical situations (O'Brien 1985: 76). Accordingly, there have been different cultural and literary approaches focusing on the issue of the arms race and its immanent dangers. Culturally, many practices have been put forward to face the dangers of this. For example, human eradication and annihilation which demolish the vitality of the human mutual existence (Alex et al., 2014: 93).

On the other hand, literary works exposed the issue of the arms race by depicting the human practices which threaten human beings, nature and the environment at the same time. Several literary works tackled the issue of arms and how they may destruct the existence of human beings. For this reason, this article focuses on Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) as a satire of the arms race. The essay will apply two main concepts to discuss the issue of the arms race. These concepts are power reductionism and a revolutionary critique of the existing order. The first concept is power reductionism. It means that all institutions, human relationships, moral values, and human creations are expressions and masks of the primal will to power. The concept will be elaborated on through Slavoj Žižek's *The Reality of the Virtual* (2004). Second, the concept of critique of the existing order encompasses the modern society with its rationalism, order, and unitary view of truth which needs to be replaced by a new world order. The old order must be put away to be replaced by a new, as yet unclearly defined, mode of communal existence. This concept will mainly be cited in Jean-François Lyotard's *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1991).

2. Power Reductionism

Vonnegut (1998: 13) shows the idea of power reductionism through Angela and her father's fear of war:

When Angela got me out from under the bush, she asked me what had happened between Father and me. I just kept saying over and over again how ugly he was, how much I hated him. So she slapped me. 'How dare you say that about your father?' she said. 'He's one of the greatest men who ever lived! He won the war today! Do you realize that? He won the war!' She slapped me again. (13)

Angela is afraid of the negative consequences of war in her life. Power reductionism "seems permanently suspended between opposite meanings and uses. For many, it has come to serve as an umbrella terminology for any critical procedures or creative practices involving a relation between human beings, reality, and literary texts" (Žižek 15). Others try to limit its application to "the radical theory of textuality that the term was originally devised to express. However, there has been a common consensus on the "loss of reality" in power reductionism's literary allusions.

Such claims underscore “texts [which] actually illuminate the transition to a new type of power reductionism society, and provide perspectives that might be of use for critical social theory and for projects of political transformation” (Kellner 84). Such a kind of power is incarnated in P.P.S. in Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*:

P.P.S. You call our family ‘illustrious,’ and I think you would maybe be making a mistake if you called it that in your book. I am a midget, for instance--four feet tall. And the last we heard of my brother Frank, he was wanted by the Florida police, the F.B.I., and the Treasury Department for running stolen cars to Cuba on war-surplus L.S.T.’s. So I’m pretty sure ‘illustrious’ isn’t quite the word you’re after. ‘Glamorous’ is probably closer to the truth. (14)

In this quotation, the P.P.S. is responsible for imposing force over the residents of Florida where the narrator’s family lives. The P.P.S. and the police are the effective power used to subjugate these residents. In line with this, Žižek (remarks on power reductionism’s “transitional” predilection towards a “new type” of prophesy, and a radical departure from reality’s artifices, especially the technical aspects. Consequently, written texts “constitute perhaps the first high-tech new wave social theories” (19). As such, power reductionism involves what is perhaps the first self-consciously produced science fiction as a social theory to project futuristic anticipation for the world to come, the “world right around the corner” (84). Here, the apparent peculiarity of such fictional writing is the unprecedented “model” which undermines the status of reality. There is no “reality,” or at least, “even potentiality, in the name of which oppressive phenomena can be criticized or transformed, because there is nothing behind the flow, codes signs and simulacra” (83). In *Cat’s Cradle*, talking about death and skulls is a representation of the arms race caused by power reductionism:

“It wasn’t the Cape Cod Room then,” he said. “We didn’t have all these fugging nets and seashells around. It was called the Navajo Tepee in those days. Had Indian blankets and cow skulls on the walls. Had little tom-toms on the tables. People were supposed to beat on the tom-toms when they wanted service. They tried to get me to wear a war bonnet, but I wouldn’t do it. Real Navajo Indian came in here one day; told me Navajos didn’t live in tepees. ‘That’s a fugging shame,’ I told him. Before that it was the Pompeii Room, with busted plaster all over the place; but no matter what they call the room, they never change the fugging light fixtures. Never changed the fugging people who come in or the fugging town outside, either”. (18)

In post-nuclear literature the connection between self-consciousness and power reductionism inscribes a fundamental human phenomenon. Žižek ascribes this phenomenon to the “revolutionary ferment in the intellectual world exploded in the political and social sphere” where this “period was a time of ferment, experimentation, novelty and synthesis that combined theories from diverse fields” (5). This notion is fictionalized by Vonnegut in the following quotation:

So I [the narrator] took a look. I found that the picture was of a humble little war memorial in front of a small-town courthouse. Part of the memorial was a sign that gave the names of those villagers who had died in various wars, and I thought that the sign must be the reason for the photograph. I could read the names, and I half expected to find the name Hoenikker among them. It wasn’t there. (35)

Moreover, Krebbs embodies this idea:

Krebbs was a bearded man, a platinum blond Jesus with spaniel eyes. He was no close friend of mine. I had met him at a cocktail party where he presented himself as the National Chairman of Poets and Painters for the Immediate Nuclear War. He begged for shelter, not necessarily bomb proof, and it happened that I had some. (47)

Krebbs' case corresponds to the notion of power reductionism interpolated in Vonnegut's novel. Vonnegut, being the authorial rejection of real negative power, intersects his predilection to power reduction in the novel. In so doing, he utilizes the characterization of Krebbs who is the fictional replica of Vonnegut himself. Krebbs' decency and calmness indicate a call for peace and power reductionism which might destruct the whole world.

In *Postmodern Theology* (2003), Kevin Vanhoozer discusses the ideological dichotomy between power reductionism and nuclear society; "nuclear societies are also incredulous toward narrative that purports to recount universal history of power reductionism" (11). Additionally, the armed forces of the time responded to the truth on this view as a "compelling story told by persons in positions of power in order to perpetuate their way of seeking and organizing the natural and social world" (11). In *Cat's Cradle*, Angela's father represents the notion of the arms race because he was not educated before or after World War II, especially after:

His education was interrupted by the First World War. He enlisted in the infantry, fought with distinction, was commissioned in the field, was mentioned four times in dispatches. He was gassed in the second Battle of Ypres, was hospitalized for two years, and then discharged. And he set sail for home, for Tobago, alone in the Lady's Slipper again. When only eighty miles from home, he was stopped and searched by a German submarine, the U-99. He was taken prisoner, and his little vessel was used by the Huns for target practice. While still surfaced, the submarine was surprised and captured by the British destroyer, the Raven. (62-63)

Vonnegut is conscious of the fictional fabrication of Angela's father who is one of the First World War veterans and witnessed human devastation and marginalization. The cause of this marginalization is the negative power used in the war. The world's politicians did not consider the harmful sequences of the war. They neglected the very essence of harm which power has. Therefore, the result was tremendous. It demolished human hope and aspirations for peace and co-existence.

Power reductionism features, says Žižek, have significance in the political nature of narrative in a period with exuberant literary theories: "given the centrality of narrative and language in accounts of power reductionism condition, it will come as no surprise to learn that some of the most important contributions to postmodern thinking have come from the domain of literary theory" (13).

Although there is a power reductionist discontinuity with peaceful human life, there is an implicit relation between them. For example, nuclear age literature puts humanistic literary modes into practice. Just as, nuclear age literature synthesizes human affairs of literary forms into a real depiction in literary texts. Ihab Hassan contends that power reductionism is the sense

of supervention which “may express some cultural urgency that partakes less of hope than fear” (3). This chaotic power reductionism is foreshadowed by different characters in *Cat’s Cradle*:

During that time, he glimpsed many distinguished guests of the Rumfoords, among them, J. P. Morgan, General John J. Pershing, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Enrico Caruso, Warren Gamaliel Harding, and Harry Houdini. And it was during that time that the First World War came to an end, having killed ten million persons and wounded twenty million, Johnson among them. (63)

Such reductionism involves the predilection towards peace and stability in the novel. Power reductionism, accordingly, encompasses a different representation of literary realities. These realities can be exhibited in multiple ways of textual representations. Hassan, furthermore, writes on this representation stating “My point here is double”; whereby through the question of power reductionism, “there is a will and counter will to intellectual power, an imperial desire of the mind, but this will and desire are themselves caught in a historical moment of supervention, if not exactly of obsolescence” (3). This is clear in the war’s end in *Cat’s Cradle*:

When the war ended, the young rakehell of the Rumfoord family, Remington Rumfoord, IV, proposed to sail his steam yacht, the *_Scheherazade_*, around the world, visiting Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Egypt, India, China, and Japan. He invited Johnson to accompany him as first mate, and Johnson agreed. (63)

Power reductionism, apart from the written aspect of literary texts, carries out fictional realities which can find their path within the confines of avant-garde nuclear texts in which “there is already some evidence that power reductionism, and political chaos even more, are beginning to slip and slide in time, threatening to make any diacritical distinction between them desperate” (Žižek 46). Moreover, within the limits of power reductionism, reality depiction is the appropriation of self-consciousness, or as widely accredited “reflexivity.” It breaks the traditional narrative reality and alludes to the authorial critique in the story. In its ultimate premise as an authoritative fictional faculty, reflexivity can bring about “intertextual” elements. Žižek claims that “reflection” is a representative mode by which “discourse” plays intertextual roles in the text: “in arguing that the discourse of history (like science) is not a direct reflection of past realities, they have therefore emphasized that it is essentially a dialogue with other historians: history texts talking with other history texts (intertextually) about competing representations of the past” (21). This self-reflexivity is carried out by Nestor Asmons in *Cat’s Cradle*:

Nestor Aamons was captured by the Russians, then liberated by the Germans during the Second World War. He was not returned home by his liberators, but was forced to serve in a Wehrmacht engineer unit that was sent to fight the Yugoslav partisans. He was captured by Chetniks, royalist Serbian partisans, and then by Communist partisans who attacked the Chetniks. (70-71)

This quotation portrays the fierce clash in the war waged by the opposing forces fighting in order to win. More interestingly, Nestor Aamons is the victim of this war. He is caught by the Russians. The Russian power is bound to be able to harm humanity, including the case of Nestor Aamons. Just so, Vonnegut opposes negative power in all its aspects, and it should be reduced in order to set humanity free of danger and devastation. Here, “he was liberated by Italian parachutists who surprised the Communists, and he was shipped to Italy”. (70-71)

Žižek also reasserts reflexivity's control on the reality of the arms race. This assertion expresses a "paradox:"

an awareness of reflexive paradox [which] should also lead to the recognition that even 'postist' styles of thought never completely transcend that which they 'come after' (the modernist paradigm of history sets the terms of postmodernist critique). (57)

A central insight to nuclear age literary self-reflexivity has been that fictional perspectives are contingent, and "hence, even power reductionism histories will inevitably be pastiches of familiar and innovative ways of seeing and speaking of the past" (Cvitanovic 62). The sense of the historical arms race is uttered in Minton's remembrance of people who died from the catastrophe of war: "Minton now spoke of the so-called Hundred Martyrs to Democracy, and he told a whooping lie. There is not an American schoolchild who does not know the story of San Lorenzo's noble sacrifice in World War Two" (84).

Throughout the power reductionism textuality, Umberto Eco oscillates between a position of "reductionist" power to that of powerlessness, temporarily occupying the subject-agent position, chaotic, that of "suspicion." The postulations within the "preliminaries" world illustrate the relational nature of political construction of literary works dealing with arms race issues. The text's "fabric" foregrounds the similarities between fiction and reality in order to highlight the reflexive consequences of the authoritative intentionality in the political world. This device also encourages readers to think about the implications of their own reading about power reductionism; Eco Comments:

A related point is one I made in the 'Preliminaries' concerning the postmodernist suspicion of 'intentionality': the confidence with which conventional scholars assume that authoritative politics (with regard to the meaning of texts) can, confidently and definitively, be known through the capacity of chaotic power reductionism in the text. (22)

Eco argues the postmodern insinuation of power, and that the meaning of power fits into the text. The fictional characters remember tragic events caused by power. In this sense, power reductionism is inferred from the fictional text's opposition of power. In *Cat's Cradle*, the narrator's remembrance provides a grim picture of war and how its negative power could affect humanity. Remembering wars is a token of power reductionism in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*:

Perhaps, when we remember wars, we should take off our clothes and paint ourselves blue and go on all fours all day long and grunt like pigs. That would surely be more appropriate than noble oratory and shows of flags and well-oiled guns. I do not mean to be ungrateful for the fine, martial show we are about to see--and a thrilling show it really will be . . . He looked each of us in the eye, and then he commented very softly, throwing it away, "And hooray say I for thrilling shows. (147)

Here, the convention of the authorial intrusion into textual boundaries to express power reductionism is a thematic device addressed by nuclear age critics. They associate power reductionism with real events. These events happened in reality, but they are fictionalized (Glover 94). Such convention is integrated with the historical dimension of power reductionism and its critique of the existing political order. Henceforth, the following section will focus on the revolutionary critique of the existing order in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*.

3. Revolutionary Critique of the Existing Order

In *Cat's Cradle*, the revolutionary critique of the existing order is conveyed by the characters' complaints about harmful powers: "I [the narrator] suppose it's high treason and ungrateful and ignorant and backward and anti-intellectual to call a dead man as famous as Felix Hoenikker a son of a bitch" (42). The revolutionary critique of the existing order accentuates inherent problems in narrative texts. It provides a proposal that the authorial intentionality goes concomitantly with political chaos, and that these kinds of problems underpin the political stance towards the existing political order. Here "The revolutionary critique of the existing order demands also that we address a number of conceptual problems that both conceal and constitute politics itself" (Lyotard 4). This is evident in Frank's job:

Frank's servants brought us gasoline lanterns; told us that power failures were common in San Lorenzo, that there was no cause for alarm. I found that disquiet was hard for me to set aside, however, since Frank had spoken of my zah-mah-ki-bo. He had made me feel as though my own free will were as irrelevant as the free will of a piggy wig arriving at the Chicago stockyards. I remembered again the stone angel in Ilium. And I listened to the soldiers outside--to their clinking, chunking, murmuring labors". (110)

In the long run, the revolutionary critique of the existing order results in alienation within human societies suffering from war sequences which exhibit the "avant-garde" fictional forms during the nuclear age. The conspicuous nuclear age feature is the realistic appropriation of the bad human conditions during the war (Kitchen 15). This appropriation is dubbed as the nuclear age literary avant-gardism and comes out in the light of the revolutionary critique of the existing order (Rogers 118). Accordingly, nuclear age fiction can be a reactionary "movement"; Hayden White comments, "By the revolutionary critique of the existing order, I mean those movements that agitated the earlier part of our century" (5). In *Cat's Cradle*, Angela and her father experience this critique:

We all stopped short, sheepishly analyzing the nightmarish sounds around us, sorting them out as coming from a radio, from an electric dishwasher, from a pump--all restored to noisy life by the return of electric power. The three of us awakened enough to realize that there was humor in our situation, that we had reacted in amusingly human ways to a situation that seemed mortal but wasn't. And to demonstrate my mastery over my illusory fate, I turned the radio off. (111)

This quotation offers a real depiction of electric power. In the First World War, there had been many power forms used by combatants to attack each other. Electricity is one which frightened the narrator. Thus, the quotation holds a critique of this power. According to Lyotard, the revolutionary critique of the existing order is "a mode of generic transgression simultaneously foregrounding realist poetics and elements of theology, for example, fictional realism is particularly apt to articulate ideological and cultural dissent," and many nuclear age "writers have relied on its defamiliarizing mechanisms to affect "real reflections" of the dominant power system" (96). Through this critique: "one can see that the iconoclasts, whom one accuses of disdain and negating images, were those who accorded them their true value, in contrast to the iconolaters who only saw reflections in them and were content to venerate a common sense of devastating wars" (Anderson 5). Thus, the revolutionary critique of the existing order is about human visions of future war sequences (Cahoone 39). In *Cat's Cradle*, the narrator talks about the millennium which might include some futuristic anticipation of other wars: "But then I

understood that a millennium would have to offer something more than a holy man in a position of power, that there would have to be plenty of good things for all to eat, too, and nice places to live for all, and good schools and good health and good times for all, and work for all who wanted it--things Bokonon and I were in no position to provide” (131). The millennium expressed in this quotation refers to a different perception of a critique of the existing order.

Furthermore, the revolutionary critique of the existing orders can be seen as a “hyperreal” fictional practice that operates as a corrective form to various kinds of political enforcement and ideological dominance” (Ciccoricco 84). In this sense, “hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle and every objective, they turn against power the deterrent that it used so well for such a long time in the revolutionary critique of the existing order” (Culler 23). The revolutionary critique of the existing order is the true incarnation of different countries involved in waging wars.

4. Conclusion

This study has focused on the political chaos and the sense of martial danger in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* (1963). This study has tried to unearth the political chaos in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* in light of the arms race depicted in the novel. The study has also focused on the post-nuclear characteristics and will give the novel a distinctive position within the discourse on political and social affairs. As such, there has been an emphasis on the role of human beings which causes dangers and devastation to the human race. It has attempted to provide an analysis of how human weaponry used in the nuclear age might endanger the human health and future existence.

Such issues have been discussed by applying two concepts; Slavoj Žižek’s concept of power reductionism and Jean-François Lyotard’s concept of critique of the existing order. From the discussion above, it is clear to see that the arms race in the nuclear age has brought many effects to the world’s societies, and it affects every community. By examining the elements of chaotic politics in the novel, it could be inferred that the arms race is a type of devastation that mainly affects the arms race societies.

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