07 2007

What is the eipcp?

An Attempt at Interpretation

Boris Buden

Translated by Gene Ray

eipcp: what an ugly name. Not only because the tongue suffers, trying to say it out loud. It's also that the terms and concepts hidden behind the acronym seem not to want to say anything, either individually or configured together: *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*. This sounds more banal than ambitious. What does it mean, this "progressive cultural policy"? That one wants to reorder today's hegemonic cultural politics in a progressive manner, and do it on a European scale? An apparently ambitious aim for a little grouping of free-floating cultural workers who hope that the whole enterprise can be financed through the calculations of the very cultural politics they want radically to change. And a "European institute": how should one understand this? In any case, not as two corners in a rented room that at the same time also serves as a way-station for Albanian artworks traveling through Europe!

We admit it openly: this child is ugly, doesn't make an intelligent impression, seems to have a defective sense of reality, and shows no promise of future success... Still, it's there and it's ours, which is why we can hardly do otherwise than to stand by its side and help

it get to its feet. Despite everything, this child, too, deserves its chance.

And therein exactly lies the challenge. Those who want to strengthen what is weak today must first of all want to put themselves in question and to radically change their own way of thinking. They must be ready to expose themselves in all ugliness and oddity and to deviate from norms camouflaged as reality. It already belongs to the logic of normality that what is weak grows weaker and what is strong, stronger. Whoever wants to defy this logic cannot remain normal.

The Activity (*Tätigkeit*)

What does the eipcp do? By what activity does it legitimize its existence? It's not difficult to answer this question in a purely descriptive way. It's first of all about a kind of networking of European cultural and art institutions with the aim of jointly realizing art projects and organizing discursive events to go with them. Secondly, the eipcp itself generates discourses; that is to say, it participates in the discourse production of others, including publishing activities. This dual activity is in no way "free of ideology" or politically neutral. Quite the opposite: the eipcp explicitly understands this activity as a form of commitment whose context is a transnational struggle against neo-liberal hegemony. So there is also an activist motivation, one that clearly refers to the concrete activism of a leftist "counter-globalization" movement, and this is a crucial element of the aforesaid activity. Expressed traditionally, it comprises three fields of activity: art, theory, and politics. Yet it claims to be more than merely their mechanical sum. What does "more" mean here? To begin with, it would be a misleading simplification, to understand this new quality as a

symbolic profit, a kind of symbolic gain or increase which accrues as the product or result of the so-called interdisciplinary character of the eipcp's activity. Any such assumption necessarily reduces the said activity to a notion of the accumulation of symbolic capital, as if it were nothing other than a symbolic investment... The eipcp clearly wants to be more than that. There's also another way to interpret it: the eipcp's interdisciplinary mode of production can be understood as a kind of qualitative sum of the shortcomings of each of its own component fields. For example, an art that shies away from theoretical reflection or any reference to political praxis is already for the eipcp a deficient art. This is to be understood as a "purely aesthetic" statement – and not a merely political one. An art that today would like to remain or become "pure art and nothing more" would also be no art at all. It's precisely the absence of the political and discursive that invalidates its aesthetic status.

In other words, the activity of the eipcp is never artistic in just one of its aspects; it is an *art-supplementing* activity in all of its aspects – political, reflective, and cultural. It brings to art exactly what it lacks, in order to remain or become art.

It's similar for theoretical production, for political activism, and for what we call "cultural policy." The aim of the eipcp's activity lies in providing what each of these fields lacks; that is, in overcoming the specific insufficiency of each that first becomes meaningful in relation to the other fields. The hybrid character of this activity consists in this, and not in some mere overlapping of different spheres of activity.

Still, one shouldn't subsume this hybridity under spatial metaphors. The activity of the eipcp sets up no *in-betweenness*, no symbolic interstice, no so-called third space in which something culturally and politically "new" can take form and where its specific

creativity can find expression. It is post-essentialist, but not in a spatial or topographical sense. The insufficiency or shortage in question is at the same time both the object and the product of this hybrid activity: the shortage of the political that is produced in an artistic practice; the shortage of a cultural politics that art exposes and theory conceptualizes; the shortage of reflection that reflects itself in the political, and so forth.

Formerly Known as Critique (*Gewesene Kritik*)

The activity of the eipcp does not aim at a symbolic gain, then, but rather at the articulation of a lack. Thus one can also understand it as critique. This has above all a genealogical meaning. We can follow the roots of this activity back historically. It derives from what one used to call, in the general modernist as well as the more narrow sense, the critique of society. Of course, this doesn't mean that what the eipcp does is, simply and without complication, critique. It means rather that the experience of the lack that one has by means of this activity emanates from the practice of critique that first marked off all the fields of the modern. And so one can say neither that the eipcp performs a critique nor that it doesn't. More precisely, the eipcp performs a "no-longer critique" or, better still, a *formerly-known-as critique* ("*gewesene Kritik*") – and this is the essential point for the determination of its activity.

Moreover, one can make fun of this and perhaps say that the eipcp doesn't even know what it's doing but can easily show where, in the graveyard of the modern, its ancestors lie. Without doubt, the tomb of critique is by far the most important tomb there. It commemorates not only the glorious deeds of the so-called weapons of critique, but also the (criminal) deeds of the critique of weapons. The reference of course is to the famous demand of Karl

Marx, that the weapons of critique must be replaced by the critique of weapons. And so it's a matter of a critique both in the tradition of Immanuel Kant and also that of a Robespierre – that is to say, also the tradition by which radicality eventually articulated itself as revolution.

Why is this genealogical reference actually important? Because among other things it explains the meaning of at least one element in eipcp's name. In this word "progressive," one hears distinctly the echo of the formerly known as critique. Progress – progressive development in its originally modernist sense – is never merely the result of some symbolic accumulation; instead, it is above all the accomplishment of critique. It was by critique that the bad and old were recognized, in order to replace them with the better and new. And so if we say today that we are progressive, then we mean nothing other than that we follow the trace of this modernist critique. Still, we are not that of which we follow the tracks. We can no longer bring forth the better and new in this old way – the way of critique.

Nevertheless, it is possible to describe the activity of the eipcp in the old language of critique: the eipcp produces a political critique of art, a theoretical critique of politics, a cultural critique from the standpoint of new artistic practices, and so forth. In its entirety, however, this activity is not critique. Such a thing could only take the form of a critique of society, but historically it is too late for that.

The historically irrevocable culmination of the critique of society – in the double sense of a total social critique and a critique of society in its totality – was the idea and praxis of a communist transformation of the world: critique from the perspective of a classless society. This can no longer be repeated today. Critique

today is no longer performed in the name of a classless society, but in the name of a class without society. Thus critical activity – including that of the eipcp – can no longer adopt the form of the critique of society. Even if it still retains the motivation of social critique, it lacks the needed object; namely, a society that is circumscribable and can be located clearly, engaged politically, and evaluated morally. It also lacks the traditional medium of social critique; namely, a public sphere that is normatively developed, independent, "critical," and finally bound to a specific society.

Formerly Known as Society (*Gewesene Gesellschaft*)

"There is no such thing as society," proclaimed Margaret Thatcher, "only individual men and women and their families." Today, many still forget that the subject of this statement is not Thatcher the social scientist, but the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher the politician, whose words had above all a performative meaning. When she said this, society perhaps still existed. But does it still exist, thirty years later?

Our historical reality appears to us today in the shape given to it by the victorious neo-liberal revolution. This has largely realized its goals, in fact to a greater degree than we want to admit. Not only have the basic forms of social solidarity been dissolved, but so has the very idea of society. And therefore the defensive strategy of social resistance is doomed to fail. Who should defend society? The subject of its own dissolution?

When Thatcher said that there is no society, she meant – speaking as a politician – that society as such is not capable of ideology. Society in its abstractness "hails" no one as a subject, "interpellates" no one, to put it in Althusser's terms. It's completely different for

individuals and families. While as individuals we are being hailed as the first subjects of freedom, as families we are being hailed as the subjects of conservative values and a politics of restoration. The same is true for the nation and every basis of identity: ethnic, cultural, religious, gender, etc. They are all sites of ideological interpellation and political mobilization. Not so, however, for society as such. All of these identities can still become society, but precisely in the form of its ideological and political breakdown. Today it is the absence of society that hails us as the subject of critique and radical transformation. Society collapsed with the neo-liberal destruction of social solidarity. This social solidarity – the loss of which we bemoan today and ourselves feel as the loss of society – was in fact a form for articulating class consciousness. That is to say, it was an effect of class struggle. This is the solidarity that fails us today – or that we abstain from. Other forms of social solidarity – based in the family, in the nation, in identitarian communities, and so forth – are flourishing under the conditions of neo-liberal hegemony. But their effects are antisocial; they decompose that historical form of human collective life that we used to call society. In other words, society has collapsed in the very moment when we can no longer reinforce it by referring to a class relation. A society that is not comprised of class relations is not comprised at all. This loss is definitive, which is why all the strategies of resistance wanting to counteract it are wrong. History, Karl Marx once wrote, most of the time progresses by its negative aspects. And so it makes no sense to want to hinder or hold back the loss of society. It makes much more sense to make out of this loss a new class relation. The society-less class, the class of those with no society, lives neither without nor outside of society, but rather within the formerly-known-as society. It thereby articulates its solidarity, namely

through its antagonism to all the socially destructive agencies (*Soziophagen*) of neo-liberal hegemony.

Agency (*Instanz*)

It is also this condition of being society-less – and not merely the plurality of critical forms and field-based critiques that correspond to them – that determines the hybrid character of the eipcp's activity. This activity is hybrid because it is no longer socially rooted; it no longer has its *origin* in a concrete society (nor in a visionary and classless one).

That's another reason for the impossibility of grasping this activity by means of spatial metaphors. It derives neither from an originary nor from a hybrid sphere, neither from a social nor a cultural one, and so on. It no longer lets itself be bordered off clearly from other forms of activity. No wonder, then, that it is so difficult to define and circumscribe in one form – which is always to say, one field, one sphere, one territory.

In the history of science, there's a famous case in which knowledge progressed through a transcendence of spatial representation – that is, from a transgression of spatial logic. As is well known, Freud explained the functioning of the psychical apparatus by means of two representational models: a "first" and a "second" topology (*Topik*).

According to the first topology, formulated in the seventh chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, psychic life is divided into three areas, which Freud also calls "systems": the conscious, the unconscious, and the preconscious. Nearly a quarter century later – in the text *The Ego and the Id*, from 1923, to be exact – he

developed the second topology, also known as the "three agency model": the ego, the super-ego, and the id. This new invention was necessary because it was clear to Freud that psychic life doesn't play itself out according to a spatial logic. In short: one can't spatially locate the super-ego (*Über-Ich*), for example by positioning it *above* (*über*) the ego, because it is also unconscious and thus is to be found under the ego, in the id. And so he named these elements "agencies" (*Instanzen*) of the psyche, rather than spheres, systems, regions, or some similar term.

Freud described the first topology as topographical; in contrast, he described the agency model as dynamic. Agencies are powers (*Kräfte*); they are capable of self-subjectivation and can become antagonistic, they perform resistance and attack, they are mixed in with the others, the borders between them blur, they let themselves be anthropomorphized, one can even attribute certain character traits to them, and so forth. So for example one says that the super-ego behaves sadistically toward the ego and that this actually is its function. One can't say that about a space.

Similarly, one can propose that the concept "European" in the eipcp's name be understood in the sense of an agency and not of a space. This way, "European" means nothing other than to be standing in a dynamic relation to Europe, and not inside European boundaries. One is European, not because one has a European identity or lives in Europe considered as a geographical, cultural or political space, but because one cannot avoid Europe as an agency. That is, one must deal with it.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the expression "agency" is introduced in comparison to tribunals or authorities that judge over that which seeks permission and allowance. The same holds for Europe as agency. Let's take an example: the artistic project

The List, which consisted in the list of the names of people who lost their lives trying to enter Europe illegally (approximately 6000 names). The project was unable to find financial support in Europe and was in the end financed by an American foundation. In this case, Europe, too, acts in the roll of a censoring agency, much as in Freud, who by the way also used the concept of agency in reference to the function of censorship.

And it's not only Europe that should be understood as an agency. One can also speak of the activity of the eipcp as the activity of an agency. Agency would then be the form of subjectivation that emerges from these activities and articulates itself through the dynamic relation to other agencies – to Europe, for instance. Moreover, the concept of agency has a curious meaning in the world of computer games. In one game, agencies are separate sectors that can only be explored by one's own group. They were introduced in order to give more groups the opportunity to successfully finish the game at the same time – to be the hero, slay the monster, rescue the princess, or win the magic sword. In any sector, the specified group is the only one active. In fact, this means that more groups never enter the same sector – the same space, same territory, same region, etc. Instead, they are themselves this territory. In other words: as an agency, the eipcp perhaps never finds itself with other agencies in Europe. It's rather that this Europe is the eipcp's own sector, its own Europe, its own agency. The territory is not something that exists outside, independently from us and into which we can enter. It is instead the product of its own mo(tiva)tions (*Bewegens*).