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The post-Yugoslavian Condition of Institutional Critique: An Introduction

On Critique as Countercultural Translation

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The question about the post-Yugoslavian condition of institutional critique is obviously the question about this condition itself. Does it have a historical character of its own? Aren't we actually talking here about the so-called post-communist condition or the historical process also known as the post-communist transition? How then to distinguish the specific post-Yugoslavian character of this condition?

But first there is a problem with the post-communist condition itself. As it is well known, one of truisms of the post-modern discourse, actually one of its corner stones is the famous plurality of narratives, that is, the alleged absence of a major historical narrative, of the so-called master narrative. Interestingly, the post-communist discourse seems never to have heard of this. In its hegemonic version it operates, in fact, as a sort of historical master narrative: the well-known story about the collapse of communism in 1989 and the final victory of capitalism and liberal democracy.

According to this narrative, after having overthrown totalitarian rule the societies of former Eastern Europe don't enter directly into the world of developed capitalism and Western democracy, but rather must undergo first the process of transition to this final condition, which poses as normality, that is as the universal norm of historical development in general. The process of transition is accordingly understood as the process of normalization. So everything that happens during this process automatically gains the teleological meaning intrinsically tied to the transitional narrative. This also includes the logic that before things get better – normal, capitalist, democratic, etc – they must first get worse in comparison to the former situation, concretely to the state of actual socialism. But the problem is that the transition process can turn into a real disaster. This is precisely what happened in former Yugoslavia: collapse of the state, civil wars with horrible destruction, ethnic cleansing, atrocities, human loses, economic breakdown, political chaos, etc.

Although this case openly contradicts the hegemonic narrative of the final victory of democracy and prosperity, it has never been able to call this general narrative into question. Moreover, it has never cast doubt on it. The ideology of the post-communist transition has managed to symbolically include all its contradictions – even the worst of them, like the siege of Sarajevo or the Srebrenica massacre.

These events have been generally explained as temporary regressions into the state of nature, that is, according to the Hobbesian myth that is still held about the pre-social condition of the so-called bellum omnium contra omnes – in short, according to his theory of social contract, or, to put it more clearly for our purposes, according to the logic of sovereignty: the social contract based on communist power, on the communist party as sovereign,

had been canceled and social order dissolved. This caused the civil war, which would last until the new social contract is concluded and the new sovereign – nation in terms of its democratically elected representatives – takes on responsibility and restores order and security.

The reasons for the regression into the state of nature have been found either in an alleged cultural backwardness or in the former communist rule that had caused a delay in historical development. Habermas' notion of "belated modernism" and consequently his understanding of the revolution of 1989 as a "catching up revolution", i.e. a revolution whose primal goal is to catch up with the West, are the best examples of this logic.

In both cases we have to deal with new differences: a difference between those who are the embodiment of the historical standard and others who are behind them, that is between developed and underdeveloped societies in historical, political and cultural terms; a difference between the regressive state of nature and a valid social contract, or rather the functioning order of sovereignty; a difference between normal and abnormal, etc.

All these new differences that have replaced the old ideological difference between capitalism and communism and its historical form of the "Cold-War-Divide" are best expressed in terms of the difference between West and East, which has surprisingly survived the fall of the Berlin wall. The persistence of this West/East divide is the major feature of what is today almost unanimously understood as the post-Yugoslavian condition.

Of course, this has a primarily ideological function – it makes it possible for the winner of the Cold War to completely control the inclusion and exclusion of the loser. Thus it was possible for the

bloody dissolution of former Yugoslavia to be simultaneously included and excluded without producing any sense of contradiction.

What makes this logic function well is the hegemonic liberal ideology, that is, the core of this ideology, the myth of the social contract, actually the fairy tale about people who cannot live together peacefully and normally, moreover, who cannot build a society without abandoning part of their freedom for the sake of security and order.

This condition, marked decisively by the ideological reproduction of the cultural difference between East and West, determines the core of what is practiced today in former Yugoslavia as critique of the institutions.

Roughly speaking: institutional critique proceeds almost exclusively in reference to this difference. The institutions are criticized in terms of their developmental deficit. They are allegedly underdeveloped, not yet fit for the market, corrupt, passive, not self-sustainable, too traditional, patriarchal, ... in short: what is wrong with the institutions in former Yugoslavia is that they are not yet Western. The criticism thus focuses on one major deficit, the gap between the reality and the norm that is already realized in the West.

The strongest and the most active critic of the institutions under the post-Yugoslavian condition is therefore the European Union itself, or respectively its institutions directly managing the so-called enlargement process. The liberal, enlightened, progressive public on the ground – as far as it becomes the subject of the institutional critique – is basically the local personification of the EU demands, completely identified with the task of catching up the West.

In this respect all domestic liberal critique of the institutions is a sort of compradorial critique. This automatically implies the necessity to explicitly identify one major subject/institution of critique, which in this case is the EU itself.

If we recall Althusser's well known claim that ideology always has a material existence and that this material existence of ideology is embodied in institutions, than we might conclude that Europe appears as an ideology precisely in being itself an institution of critique. In this respect the notion of the East is nothing but an effect of Europe as ideology, that is, a product of Europe as the institution of hegemonic critique.

The same constellation – the ideological hegemony of Europe, i.e. its role of being the major subject/institution of critique – explains the conservative or right wing critique of institutions under the post-Yugoslavian condition. It is a kind of secondary effect of Europe as an ideology, in short, the reverse side of the liberal compradorial critique: it is an anti-European, anti-Western critique of institutions, even if it is completely ambivalent, for instance when it claims to be more western than the West, which is very often the case, for instance in Croatia, or today in Poland.

The conservative critique of the actually existing institutions in former Yugoslavia is usually labeled by its counterpart, the liberal critique, as nationalistic, anti-modern, originating in the 19th century, in short as belated. In fact it really stands for the protection of the alleged original cultural identity, for an uncompromised ideal of people's sovereignty, for the old conservative values that are part of the so-called European identity, for its traditional family values, for its Christianity, etc. At the same time it opposes the values of liberal modernization including the so-called culture of tolerance, multiculturalism, individualism,

liberalization of gender relations, etc. On the other side, the conservative critique identifies more and more with some elements of the contemporary critique of neoliberal globalization. Its protectionism resembles the pattern of an old anti-colonial struggle, which means that it echoes some elements of the formerly universal emancipatory narrative.

Precisely in merging with the left critique of globalization, that is, in blurring the clear boundary between left and right, the conservative critique of institutions serves perfectly the ideological hegemony of liberalism. It helps the proponents of liberal ideology to appear as equally distant and equally opposed to both left and right critique of existing reality. So both appear now from the liberal angle as an equal threat to democracy, pluralism, human rights, prosperity, modern values, etc. In this context liberalism can offer itself as a third way, more precisely as the only solution to the conflict between left and right, and claim its authentic anti-totalitarian character not only today but retroactively as well – as being a post-totalitarian phenomenon equally innocent of both the communist and fascist past. It is precisely from this liberal angle that both communism and fascism appear as equally guilty for everything what has gone wrong in the past, including the aforementioned historical delay.

This is, generally speaking, how the battlefield of today's institutional critique strategically looks like, not only under the post-Yugoslavian but rather under an overall post-communist condition.

However there are other understandings of the post-communist condition radically diverging from the hegemonic one. There is, for instance, an important remark that Giorgio Agamben made in his *Homo Saccer* about the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia and

generally about the chaotic dissolution of the systems in Eastern Europe following the collapse of Communism. He has openly challenged the hegemonic narrative essentially based on the story of a temporal disruption of the otherwise – in the West for instance – normally functioning social contracts. Agamben argues that we shouldn't understand these events as a sort of temporary regression into the state of nature, which will sooner or later return to normality, which in other words will be followed by the restoration of the social contract – as it is suggested within the concept of transition – but as a sort of bloody messengers of the new *nomos* of the earth, which is going to spread all over the globe.

The crisis he indicates has a global dimension. Thus, what has been experienced in the last fifteen years in former Yugoslavia could be described as a mere symptom of much deeper historical change – the dissolution of more than three hundred years of international order – the so-called Westphalian order, in short, the fading away of the picture of a world divided into sovereign nation states that can be clearly located in a certain territory and are supposed to politically represent different peoples. With the collapse of this order the whole normative dimension of international politics is disappearing. What is replacing it now is a chaotic pragmatism, whose rationality doesn't claim any universal validity. Nation-states continue to exist, but the meaning and extent of their sovereignty depends strictly on their particular power-position and the role they play in the process of neoliberal globalization. Another symptom of the collapse of the Westphalian order is the proliferation of the state of exception – more and more people end in the clandestine spaces of lawlessness that are excluded from the existing regimes of representation and juridical security.

It is not difficult to recognise similar symptoms in the process of the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia and its direct consequences.

This too must be considered in evaluating the post-Yugoslavian condition of institutional critique. Instead of settling down in a stable regime of sovereignty, as promised by the teleology of transition, the institutions on the ground face the chaos of an uncontrolled globalization they are no longer able to escape. The conditions of their reproduction undergo a similar sort of precarization as the conditions of individual reproduction, of the reproduction of the globalized labour force, of migration, brutal competition on the market, etc.

I am arguing now that we cannot think of the specific post-Yugoslavian condition without taking into account these and similar symptoms that are more or less effects of the neoliberal turn in world's economy and politics. In other words, what we describe as the post-Yugoslavian condition (of institutional critique) must be radically reconsidered in terms of this neoliberal turn.

Slovenian philosopher Rastko Mocnik has recently[1] put forward the thesis that the practices of the institutions under the post-Yugoslavian condition have in fact a neoliberal character. Moreover, he argues that classical liberalism is in fact the ideology of this neoliberal practice. This implies of course a critical awareness of the ideological character of political institutions of representative democracy and institutions of civil society that are based almost exclusively on liberal ideas – and one can claim that this is today the case of all these institutions in former Yugoslavia, as long as they have undergone the post-communist transformation.

Let us now raise the crucial question of whether there is, under the condition we have described, a possibility of such a critique of institutions, which will go beyond both the compradorial critique from the liberal positions as well as the conservative, protectionist critique.

We have already suggested that the notion of the East should be understood as the product of Europe as ideology. As such it also has an ideological use-value. For Rastko Mocnik the notion of the "East" performs a historical amnesia.[2] It "erases the political dimension from the eastern past, and achieves likewise effects in the present."

In the same context he talks of a new Orientalism that is culturally forged and that this culturalization "accomplishes the work of political amnesia erasing the past political struggles which carried an alternative potential to confront the crises of world capitalism."[3]

It is obviously this culturalization of the political, ideologically condensed in the phantom of the East, that blocks the memory of these past struggles and consequently obliterates the very ground from which the new critique (of institutions that would go beyond both the liberal and the conservative one) could be launched. This critique remains groundless, that is, it seems as though it should be induced ex nihilo. But the problem is that far from not being able to catch up with the West – as the liberal critique claims – we are actually not able to catch up with our own past, as far as it concerns an experience that has been common to both sides of the West/East divide. We are simply not able to recall the past of the common political struggles Mocnik is talking about, as though they have left no traces in our social experience.

How than to recall them? How to reclaim the memory of the past political struggles from cultural oblivion? This is the challenge of a new institutional critique.

At first sight the solution to the problem seems to be within easy reach. We should rearticulate our social experience, which must have somehow remembered the past and condensed its political meaning.

But what is offered here as the solution is actually another, even bigger problem: how to grasp our social experience today, how to reflect on it and rearticulate it? Should we try to extract it from what we usually call the public sphere?

In their *Public Sphere and Experience* Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge showed that marginalized groups, excluded minorities, or suppressed political subjects – and precisely this is the human substratum of a possible subject of a new anti-hegemonic critique of institutions – always face a certain blockage of experience, a sort of atomization and fragmentation that obscures, distorts or even erases the social character of their experience.[4] The problem is that "what is blocked today is not simply the articulation of social experience but the very possibility of this experience itself."[5]

How can we then recall the past struggles from social experience, if this experience itself is heavily damaged or even erased? The same applies for the subject of a new critique of institutions that would transcend both liberal and conservative critique and focus on their neoliberal practices. This subject too might be lost together with the social experience from which it is supposed to emerge.

The major form of damage done to the social experience is, as mentioned above, culturalization. What appears as a cultural sublimation of the social experience is in fact its distortion or

worse, its evaporation. It is not difficult to recognize in today's obsession with cultural memory a desperate attempt to restore our social experience and revive the original meaning of the past social and political struggles. Regrettably, there is no way to reconstruct the original out of its translation. The only social experience available to us today is the one contained in different forms of its cultural articulation or rather its cultural translations. In other words, there is no original experience of society as society except the one that is made in its cultural translations. The only thing we can do about it is to keep on translating – critically aware of the trap we have found ourselves in, the trap of culturalization with its primal ideological effect, de-politicization.

However, if there is still a strategy of a critique (of institutions) to be suggested under these conditions – that are by no means only post-Yugoslavian conditions – I would call it the task of countercultural translation. It openly echoes the old notion of counterculture, for it willingly inherits its antagonistic character, its subversive motivation and its intrinsic hostility to the mainstream, yet without cherishing the illusion of automatically having a political impact. Quite the contrary, the countercultural translation opposes the very notion of culture – including the so-called counterculture – as far as it claims direct political meaning. In fact it opposes the culturalization of what once was genuine social life. This is how it wants to become political, namely as a cultural critique of culturalization. Is this an impossible task? Aren't we suggesting a sort of Baron Munchausen's trick: after being stuck in culture like in the mud, we should pull ourselves up out of it by our own pigtail? But instead of answering these rhetorical questions, let me paraphrase one of Althusser's definitions of ideology, replacing it with the notion of culture: culture in itself has no outside, whereas at the same time (for the

critique of culturalization) it is nothing but an outside. In short: what once used to be ideology critique can be rearticulated today only as a cultural critique of culturalization. But what this has to do with the institutional practices? Again an Althusserian answer, paraphrased in the same manner by replacing ideology with culture: every practice is possible only through culture and within it.

Edited by Aileen Derieg

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[1] In an unpublished paper.

[2] I am referring again to an unpublished paper with the title "Europe as a Problem".

[3] The best example is the revolution of 1968. Mocnik: "Retroactively, the revolution of 1968 now appears as the first world-wide attempt to confront the crisis (of capitalism) that had only been announcing itself at that time."

[4] In: *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1972. See the interpretation of this problem in Stefan Nowotny, "Die Bedingung des Öffentlich-Werdens", in Gerald Raunig (Hg.), *Bildräume und Raumbilder, Repräsentationskritik in Film und Aktivismus*, Wien: Turia und Kant, 2004, p. 54-65.

[5] Nowotny, ibid., p.63.