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The Landscape of Post-transformation Institutions in Zagreb and their Political Impact

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Framework

This article is not intended to be another reflection on the meaning and history of institutional critique or its topicality in Croatia and in the countries of former Yugoslavia. Nor will we address the the nature of institutions themselves. In a sense, we therefore do not accept the strictly given thematic framework, because we prefer to turn our attention to

the analysis of the development of institutions in Croatia and their political impact. It also seems unnecessary to us to emphasize the ideological background of the institutions, i.e. the omnipresent and oscillating amalgamation of liberalism and nationalism. In other words, this is not an ideological analysis either. What primarily interests us is the question of how the configuration of NGOs that has newly emerged shapes a non-institutional political situation in and through its actions.

From the Trauma of Ideology to the Ideology of the Trauma

Speaking about the "condition" of some country or society is usually reduced to speaking of the dominant ideology. This ideology should provide the critique with all answers and solutions on the question of why a society functioned in this or that way in certain time periods, or why some people or the whole population acted the way it did. Is there really a kind of general regime of thinking that could provide us with answers to questions like these? And what would be the presupposition of this way of thinking? If somebody declares an omnipresent domination of the liberal ideology in the space of former Yugoslavian countries, for example, do they not except themselves from this kind of "condition"?

In that case they could claim, of course, that they are politically conscious, whereas the rest of the people aren't. But in that case they would also affirm their own intellectual authority: there are just a few enlightened people while the others still wait in the dark cave for the platonic liberation through Truth. This strategy of imposing intellectual power is perhaps still the most favoured in the countries mentioned.

So if we dismiss the argument of an intellectual superiority of the chosen, a talk on ideology itself is nothing but tautological: if the declaration of any ideology as the "condition of the possibility" for some region has shown itself fallacious because there

are people who can work outside of this condition, this presupposition is just re-doubted by itself.

But the function of the ideology discourse in the post-Yugoslavian countries is replaced by (or even combined with) another similar discourse – the discourse of the trauma. The thesis is: In a certain period of time (the war period) all people were traumatized, the limits of unconsciousness were shifted and consciousness itself was blurred. Therefore one cannot speak of any responsibility, because one needs time to come to terms with what actually happened. Of course, the subtleness of intellectual authority does not express itself in such a simple way – instead this basic

syllogism is derived from much more complex discussions and theories. This discourse has the same twist and the same result as the discourse on ideology: In good health I can normally talk about war time; the current situation is that all the others are traumatized, but not me.

But lets go back to the issue of "condition": The omnipresent use of rational deadlocks such as ideology and traumatic experiences does not just represent intellectual laziness, but is also the key to a general understanding of things. To avoid this approach one has to accept that we are living in dirty spaces, in a mixture of various ideological or other social influences, and also that there is nothing like a

"condition of possibility" that could prevent or block any kind of thinking or acting.

Genealogy of Post-Transformation Institutions

I would like to start with a fairly obvious statement that is repeated unanimously and again and again by all critiques of post-socialist institutions: the inherited cultural infrastructure remained completely retained in our post-socialist situation, as though the transformation process did not even touch cultural institutions. These cultural institutions, however, are completely apathetic, their logic is a logic of total passivity – yet these

are gigantic institutions with a great number of employees and a corresponding infrastructure, which are entirely dependent on public funding.

However, it is not that these institutions have not yet been (sufficiently) liberalized; because the systematic neglect of these once socialist institutions is already a consequence of neoliberal hegemony. The transformation process thus slowly and irrevocably suspended every structural function of art and cultural institutions as a site of social criticism.

On the other hand, a scene formed after the overthrow of communism and the beginning of the capitalist transformation in the 1990s, with new actors in the socio-

cultural field, that of the non-governmental organization. At that time the NGOs were the (very often only perceptible) opposition to the nationalistic discourse of the authorities; what these institutions involved was a (very marginalized) critical public of the actors in anti-nationalistic and anti-war activism. These organizations were funded by the Soros Open Society Institute, for which reason they were often stigmatized as "foreign mercenaries" and "leaders of imperialistic politics" in their country and systematically neglected by the state support policies.

After the international foundations had been the only investors and

financial supporters for years, thus helping the NGOs to achieve social significance, these foundations (such as Soros) withdrew from the region in 2000. This did not result in a collapse of the NGO scene in Zagreb, however. On the contrary: the dynamic remained and was even intensified. A law was passed providing for the founding of cultural councils, which were to be composed of politically independent experts and decide on proposed programs called for at regular intervals – this development also had an impact at the level of the city of Zagreb. The new funding schemata now do equal justice to the non-institutional actors. In this way the NGOs are taking a different, new place on the socio-

cultural map – and this changed positions requires their stabilization and professionalization.

Under such altered circumstances the local NGOs present themselves as legitimate actors in the cultural field; they take an active position and insist on the change and deregulation of the system. The new networking strategies that have prevailed in the NGO scene could thus be regarded as actually shaping political fronts. Unlike membership networks, whose main role often consists of fostering mutual acquaintance and an exchange of information among members, the new forms of networking (primarily at the local level of the Zagreb scene) involve

intensive collaborative platforms (or so-called tactical networks). Their main characteristics are the expansion of the field of cultural action and the development of new, collaborative production models.

Let's take a closer look at two of the best functioning networks and the chronology of the actions they have suggested and/or carried out.

The network *Clubture* was founded in 2002 with the idea of introducing a program exchange among the members and thus a decentralization of cultural production. In this way, **Clubture** is a new, participatory and especially dynamic model (membership in the network is tied to active participation in the

program exchange). Who can be a member of *Clubture*? Every organization that actively participates in the program exchange can be a member of *Clubture*, so that every member organization can in turn introduce new members into the the network through their collaboration. In the five years of its existence the network has brought together more than eighty organizations and initiatives from all over Croatia in this way, thus opening up new possibilities of collaboration among the different disciplines and suggesting new models of collective work, leading to more solidarity within the Croatian cultural scene. In addition, *Clubture* has led to a greater recognition for cultural

initiatives among a wider audience, thus supporting the network members in building up their financial structures and activating official cultural policies.

By organizing training seminars, from the beginning, but most intensively since 2005, *Clubture* has impelled an organization and stabilization of the entire scene. For the newly created networks this is the crucial development tendency and their most important field of activity after successful networking: on the one hand they convey to the member organizations the basic features of cultural policies and introduce them to non-commercial cultural management. (First and foremost, they attempt to forestall instability by means of

professionalization by transferring the Anglo-Saxon model of cultural management that operates with methods of strategic planning and organizational development.)

In one of the founding documents of this collaborative platform, it says: *"In the context of the transformation processes, cultural capital realizes the question of social action. If this transformation process has two meanings, subjecting oneself to the market on the one hand and abandoning social projects – or rather regarding society as a project – on the other, then the most conspicuous effect is that private interests participating in the shaping of the public sphere elude control and are no longer transparent. The*

obvious lack of social legitimation is evident in the wasting of public funding. Our fossilized institutional culture and its accompanying system of public funding make it clear that maintaining the status quo can only succeed by taking the lead in the aforementioned transition process. And whereas the only dynamic of change in the relationship between state and state-funded institutions – despite differently stated strategies in terms of cultural development – is currently the dynamic of individual interests, actors that are independent – in the societal sense and in the sense of development – are especially important, as they understand cultural activities as social action and social activities as critical culture."

In response to this,

Cultural Kapital offers intensive collaborations (the platform was initiated by four organizations that are outstanding in the independent cultural scene of Zagreb; four more organizations joined at their invitation later). Several interdisciplinary projects have been realized since 2003, which deal with collective strategies and new forms of working. The projects investigated the changes in the social conditions of cultural production and in the predominant regimes of cultural representation. The platform supported and intensified collaborations that had already long existed in the independent cultural scene by bringing together organizations from various disciplines and fields of interest, which were all

experimenting with different models of production and representation. The cultural-political activities of the platform were directed primarily to the reform of institutional structures to foster the presence and the possibilities of independent culture and its means of production.

The most important research themes of *Cultural Kapital* were: new group dynamics, new collective strategies, new forms of working in cultural production, copyright legislation, control of productivity, and protection of public property against increasing privatization, etc. The most important concerns, however, were the battle over spaces and the battle for recognition of the platform as a relevant

social actor. Particularly these very pragmatic demands strongly influenced the platform and all its activities and consequently overshadowed all the other themes.

Recognizing the Political Potential. And the Political Achievements?

The network *Clubture* achieved its greatest success in 2004, when the Croatian Ministry of Culture wanted to change the existing law on cultural councils in a very traditional direction following the change of power. There were plans to dissolve the council, which had been responsible for new forms of cultural production. The network reacted very quickly by assembling a critical mass of

protesters from all over the country in front of the parliament building in Zagreb, and by organizing a public discussion to develop a counter-proposal to the government plans. The protest was successful; the cultural council in question remained part of the new structure of the ministry. In addition, prominent members of NGOs are now involved in the work of this council and take responsibility in the process of defining tasks and criteria for evaluation.

The aforementioned battle for space came to a peak in 2005, when local (Zagreb) art and cultural organizations agreed on the demand for a solution to their space problems, since the majority of these organizations had

neither working nor presentation spaces or were working in unsuitable spaces. For this reason, the decision was made within the framework of the network to demand the founding of an independent cultural center for young people. Demanding space was not all, however. The requisite financial infrastructure was also to be provided at the same time, specifically through the establishment of a special foundation for independent culture. The members of the network thus entered into negotiations with the city authorities. In September of the same year, 26 organizations and initiatives from the independent cultural scene “occupied” abandoned and vacant spaces of the factory

complex Badel-Gorica. The occupation, which became known as *Operacija:grad* (Operation:City), lasted for ten days; during this time an intensive and broadly developed program – the product of joint programming by all the participating organizations and initiatives – was offered, which was used in the negotiations with the city authorities as the main argument for the demand for spaces and financial infrastructure. Important elements of the argument were the quantity and quality of productions, the numbers of visitors and the organization of collective programming. The promises of the city authorities – like the symbolic "opening" of the occupation with a speech by the mayor and the cultural chairman of

the city of Zagreb – remained no more than promises, however. The factory space itself was leased to a commercial enterprise in record time, so that the critical objection could be raised that the occupation had merely raised the visibility and attractiveness of the area and thus saved it from demolition.

However, these goals – increasing the visibility of non-institutional cultural production and negotiations with the city authorities about founding an independent center – were the only interpretation of the events of September 2005. General questions about public space or tactics for producing cracks in standardized urban spaces or even questions about organizational models

and the openness of these organizations were left aside and completely neglected in favor of a highly pragmatic way of thinking.

The development and the consequences of the *Operation:City* brought new dynamics into the scene, leading to an expansion of the battle field. In 2006 the initiative *Pravo na grad* (The Right to the City) was launched. In addition to the aforementioned organizations in the cultural field that were already active, this initiative also brings together many inhabitants of the city, who are not satisfied with the work of the city authorities and the predominant political programs. *Pravo na grad* also stimulated new networks, since the

initiative entered into a partnership with the largest environmental protection organization – Zelena akcija (Green Action) – and with the prominent organization GONG, which encourages citizens to actively take part in political processes. Several actions were carried within the framework of the initiative, which had a strong presence in the media and resulted in a strong public echo. The largest and longest lasting action was the protest against the building of exclusive flats and businesses in the protected city center; over 50,000 signatures were collected for the petition “End the Destruction of Cvjetni trg (Flower Square) and the Lower City”.

Unlike *Cultural Kapital*, which makes use of the language of cultural production by organizing conferences, art festivals, exhibitions, workshops, lectures and publication, the actions by the initiative *Pravo na grad* are usually accompanied by elaborate advertising campaigns, which have become the most common forms of political action in the last two years. The actions by the initiative *Pravo na grad* use the methods of classical marketing (flyers, posters, postcards, etc.) and have a strong media impact, because the conduct spectacular installations in public space, guerilla actions, etc.

Consequently there is great public interest in the initiative, which has lead to a large number of

city district initiatives and disgruntled residents joining together in the fight against city politics. Yet one cannot yet speak of real “achievements”, because despite the large number of signatures collected for the petition, it has already been announced that construction will soon begin in the square Cvjetni trg.

The Challenges of Ultra-professionalism

The typical ambivalence of this situation of ultra-professionalism is evident in a capacity for organizing huge NGO-networks in Croatia, a development I will now focus on. I would basically object to two things in this development, which

Vesna Vuković analyses more deeply and extensively in her text. First of all we can recognize something I would call “ultra-professionalism”, and secondly this development is nothing but a supplement to state politics. Let’s look first at what I mean by ultra-professionalism: I choose this concept to name the transformation of free and independent initiatives into rigid organisational structures that adopts processes of radical hierarchization and the enclosure of its external limits. Of course, nobody expects an eternal nomadism and voluntarism from the people whose initiatives have founded a stronger and more coherent civil society scene. But the concept of ultra-professionalism could be useful for reconsidering

the limits of professionalisation and to ask questions like: Should the civil society institutions be mirrored by state institutions,or even by companies? Where does the hierarchization of NGO institutions stop? In the platforms and institutions concerned we are witnessing a process of decision-making that is limited to a very small and privileged group of people. The largest portion of the members, associates and collaborators have no influence in the same institutions they work in. And often no change occurs in the leadership position since those institutions were founded. In my view, the reason for this is nothing but ultra-professionalism, which doesn't tolerate the basic

democratization of the organisation.

How Much Pragmatism is Necessary?

The other important and direct result of this process is pragmatic politics. Even if these platforms have succeeded with many of their intentions – from successfully gaining social visibility, gathering and binding institutions with similar profiles, to public manifestations like ”Operation City” and “Right on the City” – the balance sheet will still show a very pragmatic range of themes if we analyse precisely the issues raised as well as the interventions. In the first place, it was about an imposed struggle for public space; but this struggle was more like a

strategic move in another struggle – namely the struggle for providing space for the activities of the same institutions, for the big Cultural Enter that was planned by the networks concerned. This ambiguity – namely presenting actions in the interest of citizens, which always has a more pragmatic side – is one of the constant characteristics of the public interventions organized by these networks. Of course, I see no problem with these organizations fighting for more space, but the impossibility of concatenating the action with a public interest or articulating these actions in a more complex way, so that it could go beyond their pragmatic core, places these networks and institutions in the realm

of pure self-interest. But to come back to the issues raised by the networks and institutions in question, I would like to emphasize the persistent absence of any class, workers or poverty issues in their agenda. Although “Operation:City” revived and occupied an old factory and pointed out the natural capitalist development that consists in gradually replacing factory workers with cultural workers, only a few months later the same networks didn't recognize problems in a real factory (a tobacco factory in Zagreb), which was occupied by women working there, trying establish their own production. This case shattered the Croatian public and its politics for months, but the only

thing you could hear from the leading institutions within these cultural networks was that they were promoting the tobacco industry, that the strike was not legal, that the workers were populist, etc. And although this was the biggest opportunity to press ahead with social issues, the event was too much beyond the direct interest of the elite of civil management. This showed very clearly that the issues chosen by the networks in question were always those through which these institutions could be recognized as a “reasonable” political factor. But this also means they will never ask for something “impossible”.

Subversion that the Master likes

My short analysis could seem to be just another typical liberal critique of those institutions that are demanding more liberties, openness and so on. But my idea was completely the opposite: I was looking for a kind of structural determination that causes an ambiguity in the social practice of these networks. I think that the notion of ultra-professionalism can sum up this negative ambiguity: what it supposes is rigid hierarchization and political pragmatism that excludes more vital social issues (although these institutions present themselves as politically enlightened and deeply conscious of the “real” problems).

The questions that could sum up the effects of these activities are: What degree of "menace" to public opinion or mainstream politics is developed by these networks and platforms? Do they represent a relevant political factor that goes beyond the colonization of social space that was opened in the nineties? Every benevolent witness of this institutional evolution will probably say that the voice of the public is sometimes more coherent and stronger. Many citizens also joined the initiative "Right to the City". These platforms and networks have doubtlessly become powerful in the meantime: they can organize strong civil activity at any time in any social field, because they have a good

infrastructure for that. But, here also lies a problem: the citizens are being reactivated by all too convenient and non ambitious issues. Yes, these networks occupied a large social space, but I think this space is fully mirrored by official political representation. They share the political instrument of legitimized speakers and a convenient inventory of the issues. In short, we could say that they have learned the art of leading a peaceful cohabitation with the state. What else does this mean, if not a supplement of the state by means of civil society?

Parts of the text have been translated by Aileen Derieg.