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Criticism without Crisis: Crisis without Criticism

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Why do we talk today about institutional critique in the field of art? The answer is very simple: Because we (still) believe that art is intrinsically equipped with the power of criticism. Of course, we don't simply mean art-criticism here but something more than that, the ability of art to criticise the world and life beyond its own realm, and even, by doing that, to change both. This includes, however, some sort of self-criticism, or more precisely, the practice of critical self-reflexivity, which means that we also expect of art - or at least used to expect - to be critically aware of the conditions of its possibility, which usually means, the conditions of its production.
These two notions - to be aware of the conditions of its possibility, respectively, of the conditions of its production - point at two major realms of modern criticism: the theoretical and the practical-political realm. It was Kant who first posed the question about the conditions of possibility of our knowledge and who understood this question explicitly as an act of criticism. From that point on we may say that modern reflection is either critical - in this self-reflexive way - or it is not modern.

But we are not going to follow here this theoretical line of modern criticism. We will concentrate instead on its practical and political

meaning, which can be simply described as a will for radical change, in short, the claim for revolution, which is the ultimate form of practical and political criticism. French Revolution was not only prepared through the bourgeois criticism of the absolutist state. It was nothing but this criticism in actu, its last word turned into political action. The idea of revolution as an ultimate act of criticism has found its most radical expression in Marxist theoretical and political concepts. Just to remember: young Marx called his own revolutionary philosophy explicitly "the critique of everything existing". He meant this in the most radical sense as a criticism that "operates" in the very basement of social life, that is, in the realm of its material production and reproduction, something we understand today, quite simplified, as the realm of economy.

In this way criticism has become one of the essential qualities of Modernity. For almost two centuries to be modern meant simply to be critical: in philosophy as much as in moral questions; in politics and social life as much as in art.

But there is also another concept, which - as a sort of its complement - has accompanied for a long time the idea and practice of modern criticism, the concept of crisis. A believe that both, crisis and criticism, have something in common, that there is an authentic relation, or better, an interaction between them, equally belongs to the modern experience. Therefore, an act of criticism almost necessarily implies the awareness of a crisis and vice versa: a diagnosis of crises implies the necessity of criticism. Actually criticism and crisis didn't enter the historical scene at the same time. Criticism is the child of the 18th century enlightenment. It was born and developed out of the separation between politics and morality, a separation that criticism has

deepened and kept alive all along the modern age. It was only through the process of criticism - the criticism of all forms of traditional knowledge, religious believes and aesthetic values, the criticism of existing juridical and political reality and finally the criticism of the mind itself - that the growing bourgeois class could impose itself (its own interests and values) as the highest instance of judgement and in that way develop the self-confidence and self-conscience it needed for the decisive political struggles to come. In this context one shouldn't underestimate the role of art and literary criticism especially in the development of the modern philosophy of history. It was precisely art and literary criticism that produced at that time among the intelligentsia the awareness of a contradiction between the "old" and the "modern" and in that way shaped a new understanding of time capable of differentiating the future from the past.

But at the end of this period arises also the awareness of the approaching crisis: "Nous approchons de l'état de crise et du siècle des revolutions," writes Rousseau. Whereas for the thinkers of enlightenment revolution is a synonym for an inevitable historical progress, which occurs necessarily as a sort of natural phenomenon Rousseau understands it as the ultimate expression of crisis, which brings about the state of insecurity, dissolution, chaos, new contradictions, etc. In connection with the crisis - which it has prepared and initiated - criticism loses its original naïvety and its alleged innocence. From now on criticism and crisis go together shaping the modern age of civil wars and revolutions, which instead of bringing about the expected historical progress, cause chaotic dissolutions and obscure regressive processes, often completely beyond rational control. The interaction between criticism and crisis is one of the major qualities of what later has been conceptualized as the dialectics of enlightenment.

In the meantime the interplay of both notions became a sort of

terminus technicus of modernist progress introducing a difference - and simultaneously a relation - between "old" and "new". To say that something has come into crisis meant above all to say that it has become old, that is, that it has lost its right to exist and therefore should be replaced by something new. Criticism is nothing but the act of this judgement, which helps the old to die quickly and the new to be born easily.

This also applies to the development of modern art, which too follows the dialectics of criticism and crisis of its forms. So we understand for instance realism as a critical reaction to the crisis of romanticism, or the idea of abstract art as a critique of figurative art, which has exhausted its potential and therefore came into crisis. Also the tension between art and "prosaic reality" was interpreted through the dialectics of crisis and criticism. So was modern art -especially in romanticism - often understood as a criticism of ordinary life, of ordinariness as such, which means, of a life that had lost its authenticity or its meaning - that is, a life that had also entered some sort of crisis.

Let us now go back to the question, whether this dialectics of criticism and crisis still makes some sense to us today.

A few months ago in Austria I had an opportunity to ask directly this question. I moderated a discussion, whose topic was the legacy of the artistic avant-garde today in the post-communist Eastern Europe.

I hoped everybody would agree when I said that the avant-garde is still the most radical case of modernist art criticism - both in terms of a criticism of traditional art of its time and in terms of a criticism of existing reality, precisely in the moment of its - widely recognized and acknowledged - crisis.

After 5 hours of debate the conclusion was, that there is no use whatsoever of the critical experience of avant-garde art today, at least not in Eastern Europe.

The participants in the discussion were mostly younger artists from Central and South Eastern Europe, Czeque Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Romania, but also Turkey. Actually only the representative of Turkey was prepared to take the topic seriously and believed that the critical stance of the avant-garde still makes some sense to us today.
The most open and most radical in his refusal of the avant-garde question was the representative of the Czeque Republic. He argued that the avant-garde experience is actually a problem of generations. For him, it is an older generation of artists and art historians which still sees some challenge in the avant-garde and is bothered by this question. The younger generation, as he believes, is already beyond the problem of the political meaning of art, or relations between politics and aesthetics. The old generation, he gave an example, still discusses vehemently whether we should consider the political meaning of Leni Riefenstahl's work or not. For the young generation, on the contrary, this simply doesn't matter any more. They have so to say a direct insight into her art without any political connotations. They see it as what it really is - a pure art in its pure aesthetic value and meaning.
In fact I was not interested at all in this topic, since I know these people and their interests, so I didn't actually expect them to be really interested in the avant-garde.
However, there was another issue I found much more interesting there.
The participants were actually all members of the so-called Transit-Project. This is a project that was launched a few years ago by an Austrian bank with the purpose to help art in Eastern

Europe. The participants were representatives of the project in their countries. Since I know that this particular bank has earned an enormous amount of money in Eastern Europe, I was curious whether they would have any opinion on that fact, that is, on the way they are paid for their artistic work, or on the role of art and art funding under these circumstances.

I was also motivated by an article, which was published those days in the Viennese daily newspaper *Der Standard*. It was an article about the profits of Austrian banks and insurance companies in Eastern Europe. One could read there for instance that the result of the so-called business activity of the Generali Holding Vienna (an insurance company) had tripled the year before. The annual net profit had doubled in the same year. One can only wonder how this had been possible? The answer was given in the same article by the subtitle: "The growth engine Eastern Europe". It is due to the eastern expansion of the holding - and Austrian banks too - that they can make such profits.
I wanted the participants to tackle somehow this issue, or speaking more openly, I wanted to provoke some sort of criticism. Unfortunately, it didn't work. Nobody found the economic, material conditions of their art making worth mentioning.

It seems that the critical legacy of the avant-garde in post-communist Europe is finally dead. Moreover, it also seems that there is no authentic interest among young artists in institutional criticism, that is, in what we have called above self-criticism: critical awareness of the conditions of the possibility of their art, which means, of the conditions of its production.

The reason for this is obvious: our perception of avant-garde criticism is essentially framed by the historical experience of Communism. This means that the experience of the avant-garde,

as much as the experience of radical criticism appears to us today only from our post-communist (post-totalitarian, or post-ideological) perspective, which means, as being a phenomenon of our past, as being a phenomenon, to use Fukuyama's notion, of a lower level of the ideological evolution of the mankind - as something, that as a problem belongs, to use words of the Czeque colleague, to an older generation which is, sooner or later, going to die out.

But let me, at this point, pose an "impossible" question: is communism really dead? As far as I know, it is not only still alive, but also proves, in some fields, its superiority over capitalism. Yes, I really mean today's China. (Please don't tell me that this is not the real communism. There has never been a real communism. I can remember very well that from the perspective of Yugoslav communism - also often dismissed, due to the market economy, as not being an authentic, real one - the Soviet and whole East-block communism was defined as a sort of state-capitalism).

Why don't we then learn about radical criticism and self-criticism from Chinese communists who obviously seem to have been more successful than their western comrades?

But before we ask the highest theoretical authority of the Chinese communism about the true meaning of criticism and self-criticism, let me remind you of a historical fact: In the historical reality of the nineteenth and twentieth century the idea of communist revolution became itself an institution - in the form of the communist movement, that is, in the form of communist political parties. As an institution, the communist movement also developed its own institution of criticism, the institution of so-called self-criticism, which played an extremely important role in its history: to inform the self-conscious subject of revolutionary action and later of a socialist community.

For Chairman Mao, conscientious practice of self-criticism was one of the most important hallmarks distinguishing a communist Party from all other political parties. Let me quote him: "As we say, dust will accumulate if a room is not cleaned regularly, our faces will get dirty if they are not washed regularly. Our comrades' minds and our Party's work may also collect dust, and also need sweeping and washing." Therefore, self-criticism is for Mao "(...) the only effective way to prevent all kinds of political dust and germs from contaminating the minds of our comrades and the body of our Party."
Today, this sounds very funny for us, like an infantile ideological fairy tale, but let me point at a crucial contradiction in Mao's concept of self-criticism: it has nothing to do whatsoever with the crisis of capitalism or with any sort of crisis. Although Mao describes communist self-criticism as the most effective weapon of Marxism-Leninism, he doesn't justify it with the ideological principals of Marxism-Leninism. On the contrary, his definition of self-criticism seems to be completely non-ideological, simply a matter of trivial common sense: a clean face is better than a dirty one, a clean room better than one full of dust, germs are bad for health, etc.

Why this trivialization? And, what is even more important, where is the crisis, where has it gone, why has it suddenly disappeared? Why this particular form of communist criticism - a self-criticism that is not related to any sort of crisis?
In the guise of the communist political movement both the crisis of capitalism and its criticism have merged into one single institution in which there is no possibility to differentiate between them. In other words, precisely in merging together they have become each other's outside. For the communist movement the crisis of capitalism was suddenly out there, in the outside of its

own institution. But for capitalism too, the criticism of its crisis can now be perceived only as coming from its own outside.

The result is that communists couldn't see themselves as being part of the capitalist crisis and therefore, instead of resolving it, through their criticism, they have finally succeeded in making it stronger, more efficient, which means, in making the crisis more sustainable, or simply, permanent.

The problem was that communism and capitalism, or if you want, capitalism as crisis and its communist criticism have never reached the point of a radical mutual exclusion, but on the contrary, were helping each other in moments of crises.

Why should we forget that it was precisely American capital which helped the Bolshevik Russia to recover from the destructions of the civil war? Why forget the role of art in this story? The Soviets, as it is well known, were exchanging some of the most precious and also most expensive art works, mostly French paintings from the nineteen century, for new industrial technology from the United States. In our liberal jargon we would call it today a perfect win-win situation. The one side could get rid of what it considered at that time meaningless and historically obsolete, that is, of the bourgeois art, whereas the other side could expand its markets, push forward employment and consequently stabilize the social situation, pacify its working class, that is - prevent the crisis. This was not possible because, as many stupid anticommunists believe today, Bolsheviks were primitives who couldn't recognize the real value of art works they possessed. Far from that. They knew very well, and this according to the pure capitalist logic, about the market value of those art works. They treated them exclusively as commodities. But this became possible only after these art works were artistically devaluated, after they had lost their

artistic value as a consequence of an authentic art-criticism. It was actually the avant-garde art that stated the crisis of traditional art and - within what we today understand as pure history of art - radically criticised all these French paintings and destroyed their artistic value.
Moreover, it was now the avant-garde art itself which needed factories and working masses - in order to articulate its artistic principles and produce its own artistic values - instead of museums and depots to collect its works of art there and present them to an audience they didn't care about and were actually disgusted with. And who could provide these factories and this working class that it needed? - American industrial technology, that is, capitalism. This is a wonderful example of how crisis and criticism of both capitalism and art can successfully work together, of course within an overall capitalist setting, in order to produce - normality! Another example of how capitalism and communism can function in harmony is of course today's China. It is - to translate the reality into the dialectics of crisis and its criticism - precisely the rule of an institutionalized criticism of capitalism, that is, the rule of the Chinese communist party, that today helps the capitalist crises to survive, which means to persist. Not only by opening the world's largest market to the global corporate capital, but also by providing it with cheap and highly disciplined labour.

This doesn't happen, as so many believe, because today's Chinese communists have betrayed the very principles of the communist idea, that is, stopped to criticise capitalism and started to improve it. They have not betrayed Mao. On the contrary, they stick faithfully to his true legacy.
Let me quote again the Chairman, when he, talking about the necessity of self-criticism, advocates the need for personal sacrifice: "As we Chinese Communists, who (...) never balk at any personal

sacrifice and are ready at all times to give our lives for the cause, can we be reluctant to discard any idea, viewpoint, opinion or method which is not suited to the needs of the people? Can we be willing to allow political dust and germs to dirty our clean faces or eat into our healthy organisms? (...) can there be any personal interest (...) that we would not sacrifice or any error that we would not discard?"

Just to remember: Famous Stalinist mock trials would have never been possible without the institution of self-criticism and personal sacrifice. As it is today well known, they were introduced at the beginning of thirties, precisely at the moment when the collectivization started to bring about catastrophic results, that is when Soviet society came into deep crisis.
It was the self-criticism that then helped to project this crisis into an outside, to present it as an effect of the subversion from the outside, a work of imperialist spies and agents. It was therefore completely understandable that the institution had to be cleaned up from all those "germs and parasites" which had eaten into the healthy organism of Soviet society.
Criticism - in the guise of communist self-criticism - was used (or if you like misused) - not to disclose the real crisis and its antagonisms, and to intervene in it (which would have been a classical Marxist approach), but on the contrary to hide it and in this way to make it permanent, that is, to transform or translate crisis in some sort of normality.

This is typical for today's situation: neither are we able to experience our time as crisis nor do we try to become subjects through an act of criticism.
In the time of classical modernism, crisis was always experienced as an actual possibility of a break and criticism as this break itself. Today we are obviously not able to make such an experience any

more. There is no experience whatsoever of an interaction between crisis and critique.

One cannot simply ignore the warning of Giorgio Agamben - that one of the most important experiences of our times is the fact that we are not able to make any experience of it. The result is a permanent criticism, which is blind for the crisis, and a permanent crisis, which is deaf for the criticism, in short - a perfect harmony!

Literature:

Mao: see Internet
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