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Re-Reading Benjamin's "Author as Producer" in the Post-Communist East

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Let us start with the widespread feeling that the perspectives of left-wing politics are much more exhausted now in the East than in the West. It has become obvious today that the practical experience of "really existing socialism" and subsequently the collapse of the entire communist system, have left behind a kind of "desert of the Left", so to speak: a historical, political and cultural space that is extremely hostile to every kind of left-wing idea or left-wing inspired political or cultural practice.
Like in a desert, there are a few remnants of the past bloom, which have only survived because of its readiness to adapt to the new post-communist conditions. Among them are, first of all, former ruling communist parties - or what is left of them - who have meanwhile identified ideologically with social democratic reformism and regained political importance mostly through an alliance with some sort of nationalism.
Of course, there are also few "freaks", who, either as individuals or within some kind of individually generated public projects (of cultural, artistic, social or otherwise character), haven't accepted what seems to be inevitable: a complete restoration or/and implementation of capitalism and Western type of parliamentary

democracy. However, these exceptions only prove the general rule: in the desert there is no fresh water, no means of life whatsoever for new left-wing initiatives. The consequence is that there appears to be nothing green to be found in this sea of sand.

Looking from this perspective, i.e. from the East, the phenomenon of the so-called "Western left" therefore appears as a kind of Fata Morgana: a green oasis of the anti-global movement or of the Social Forum discussions emerging out of the new multitude, out of the left-wing civil society initiatives, socially and politically engaged art and media projects, etc. One can even say that there is also a sort of left liberal hegemony in theory: feminism, for instance, has already become an ordinary part of academic curricula in the developed Western countries. The theoretical reflection that accompanies various art or cultural events is very often inspired by the left-wing intellectual tradition. Even a new interest in Lenin, who seemed to have completely disappeared with the collapse of Eastern block communism, is re-emerging again in the West, at least in what we can understand as some sort of leftist theory. Finally, the picture of Che Guevara, the old icon of the revolutionary left, who also seemed to be dead once and for all, is omnipresent once again.

In short, if there is something like a left-wing initiative in the East today, it must have had its origins in the West and has come to the East along with all the other influences that essentially inform the conditions of life in the East today: political system, capitalist economy, liberal ideology, mass culture, total consumerism, most influential forms of entertainment, hegemonic theoretical concepts, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, aforementioned feminism, analytical philosophy, deconstructivism, English language, etc. This is part of the same package in which we also find a left-wing-inspired art production and theoretical reflection of this art praxis. Here too, we find something we might compare with Che Guevara

on a T-shirt, probably produced in a sweat shop somewhere in Eastern Europe, but nevertheless as an exclusively Western brand. The same happens with Lenin. He too is completely new in the East and has nothing to do with that Lenin whose name still decorated so many streets, squares, institutions only a decade ago, and whose revolutionary theory was an essential part of the academic curricula in the socialist East. This new Lenin has yet to be learned in the East - in English of course and in a package with Lacan, Badiou and Negri, with Documenta, Manifesta and all of the Biennales.
To summarize: if there is some sort of a left-wing engagement in the East, it is necessarily a completely eclectic import from the West.

This is because the relation between the West and East today follows the same transitional pattern: the West is the subject, who is in possession of knowledge and therefore authorised to teach. The East, quite to the contrary, is the one who has to learn - to learn everything from the West including those left ideas articulated in today's art practice and cultural activism, which means, including its own Lenin.
The pattern I refer to here is actually based on the concept of the so-called "catching-up revolution" (die nachholende Revolution) invented by Juergen Habermas. This is how he has defined the democratic revolution of 1989. According to this concept the whole meaning of the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe consists in a need to catch up with the development that has been already made in the West. The East is, therefore, essentially defined by its backlog demand (Nachholbedarf) or, more descriptively, by what some theorists including Habermas call "belated modernism". What has actually happened since the collapse of communism is, according to this concept, nothing other than the process of an

accelerated modernisation. And this is how we should understand the reception of left-wing ideas and cultural practices from the West - as an element of this modernisation.
However, there is something very peculiar about this reception, about this re/learning of the left ideas from the West. It implies that there is nothing in the historical experience of the European East, that is, of the former communist societies that a leftist idea of today could catch up on or hold on to.
As we remember, Pol Pot had the idea that a new communist society has to start *ab ovo*, which means to start from scratch in a sort of a radically new beginning, as if there had been nothing before, no past, no historical experience whatsoever.
Are we supposed to believe today that the left-wing political, artistic and cultural initiatives in Eastern Europe - originating altogether in the West - have to take the same radical stance with respect to their own history, that is, with respect to the tradition of the left ideas and movements that authentically originated in the East and, echoing Pol Pot - in a parody of course -, to start from scratch as well?
This question is probably nothing but a rhetorical provocation, so there is really no need to answer it. However, it makes us aware of the fact that our re-reading of Benjamin's "Author as producer" in a post-communist society today happens under similar circumstances, in other words within an hermeneutic space that has been thoroughly emptied of any kind of a genuine left-wing historical experience, of anything in actual reality it could catch up on, could tie into, or refer to, as though our re-reading is done in a completely virtual space. For we know: there is no reality outside an articulated experience of this reality.

And yet Benjamin's text in itself refers to a completely different situation.

Benjamin, reflecting as a pronounced left-wing author (this is how he defines himself in the text in his faked quotation of himself) refers explicitly to the reality of what he at that time still experienced as a successful proletarian revolution, which - nota bene! -happened in the East, in "post-October Russia". What he refers to are actually the cultural and artistic experiments that had already been tested at that time in their historical reality - both in the West and East. He refers for instance to Tretyakov and to Brecht.

Benjamin also uses reflexive methods such as dialectic materialism, which are not simply means of critical thought or intellectual critique, but also the tools - if not to say weapons - of an actual, at that time very powerful international political movement and of an existing social organisation and institution, namely the Soviet state. His self-confidence and certainty in his argumentation in the text are clearly a reflection of this really existing power infrastructure of the proletarian movement, which is at the root of all these discussions. We should not forget that the text was actually a paper prepared as an address for the Institute for the Study of Fascism, organised by the French Communist party.

Benjamin also relies on the ideas and critical concepts of socially engaged art that he obviously believed still had a future at that time (the ideas of Louis Aragon, for instance).

The historical space in which his text was produced, in which he as an author and producer articulated his engagement, is all but empty of left-wing experiences, and it is certainly not divided into two parts, one of which possesses the knowledge that the other first has to learn. Benjamin would be the first to question this division and probably criticise it as an effect of a power or class relation.

This completely different historical context is what we should keep in mind when we repeat his crucial argument: the decisive moment is not the attitude of a work of art to the relations of production of its time, but rather its position in them By this Benjamin means the function that the work has within the literary production relations of its time. What is at stake here is actually the literary technique of works.

The usual way of re-reading the rhetorical question of Benjamin's argument today is to ask, what is the position of a work of art in the production relations of OUR time? This means in the age of the global market (also a global art market), of a commercialisation of art production, of an ever-deepening and ever-widening precariousness of the artistic work and of its production conditions and relations, etc.

I am not convinced that this reading would be productive. Benjamin's argument is articulated in the form of a question: What is the position of a work of art in the relations of its production? This argument is in fact an answer to the other question, which is actually posed neither by an author of a work of art nor by its critic, and least of all by Benjamin himself. The question is posed by the ideology itself or, in other words, by the iron logic of its method, namely by the materialist dialectic.

As it is well known, it is the materialist dialectic that in reflecting on politically engaged art - the so-called tendency of a work of art - asserts that it has to address the social conditions that people work and live in. For a genuine materialist critique, however, social conditions are of course always already determined by the conditions of production.
So is the final question posed by this materialist and dialectic critique necessarily this: How does the work stay vis-à-vis the

social relations of production of its time? This was originally the question to which Benjamin's argument is actually the answer. Can we repeat this same question today? Do we have something like the critical method of dialectic materialism at our reflexive disposal today? The answer is - un/fortunately no!

This is the reason why it is not enough to simply switch from the past to present and ask Benjamin's same question today: What is the position of a work of art in the relations of production of OUR time?

For this question has now itself become an answer without its genuine question. It is the general question of the material conditions of an artistic production that, under the given ideological conditions, has lost its whole meaning.

What we should ask instead is whether there are any other questions whose answer would make some sense of Benjamin's argument about the importance of the position of a work of art within the relations of its production. A re-reading is never a simple updating. Therefore there are no new answers to Benjamin's old question. What we need instead are new questions, provoked by his old answer.