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Past the Last Revolution

Some Notes on Belgrade

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The basic problem with the anti-Americanism that is popular nowadays is that it not only targets US foreign policy, but also idealizes "old Europe". And any meta-ideological conflict or a realistic understanding of international politics actually displaces inner social conflicts. The enemy is never "out there". "We" are it. Empire is not supposed to mean that the world is governed by the CIA or Bush Junior; saying that the local reflects the global should rather imply that the power apparatus functions in similar patterns. Although it is impossible to localize the oppression associated with power in a single social-political apparatus as it is dispersed within a complex network of social control, certain aspects prevail. Since I was in Belgrade a couple of weeks ago, several stories might be illuminating.

I was first shocked to hear, as the main news from the allegedly progressive TV station B-92, that on that very day Jesus Christ had been resurrected. After that the Patriarch explained in his address that despite some (evil) people who would like to reform the church, we would continue as though nothing had changed in past two thousand years (especially concerning civil liberties, I suppose).

The next news item was clerical hard-liner Amfilohije comparing Montenegrin authorities with Pilate. Belgrade's mayor Radmila Hrustanovic then explained the meaning of Easter to orphans, and the royal family had another opportunity to express their pious generosity by donating toys. It is beyond stupid to think that religious fundamentalism is an Islamic phenomenon. As seenworldwide (especially after 9/11), the alliance of big capital and fundamentalists is the general trend.

War in Iraq basically never happened. It was rather a hygienic operation explained to TV audiences by military expert Miroslav Lazanjski, in previous years famous for convincing Serbs that NATO aggressors couldn't possibly win, because our army was highly motivated, righteous and invincible. Not surprisingly, he is now once again in line with the official position - namely that of being in love with Bush and appreciating his noble mission of democratizing the Middle East. When asked about the rumor that American soldiers only get one meal per day, he started drawling and said: "But you don't understand, those are American meals."

Other international news was more than bizarre: bus hijacking in Bremen or SARS epidemic in China. Knowing that the state structure is essential in order for capitalism to accomplish the surplus of value - or capitalism was never liberal but a capitalism of state - it becomes clearer why it is necessary to limit the flow of information.and to pose our problems as always too great or only imaginable. At the moment it came in handy that Prime Minister Djindjic was assassinated. Apart from the tragic dimension of it, there were lots of things I found extremely funny.

First of all, it was a fine opportunity to modify biographies. In neo-liberal hysteria some remembered Djindjic as the guy who, even as a student, had already proven not only that Marx was not the

greatest, but also that he was not even important. Even old Habermas was taken out of the closet to explain how they had long and fruitful conversations in Korcula. Unfortunately the Korcula school had ceased to exist before Djindjic even started studying. As a student he personally insisted on having Marxism as a separate subject (while the Philosophy Department managed to avoid it by saying that contemporary theory was sufficient). He graduated with a thesis on the renaissance Marxism of Karl Korsch with the main argument as follows: "The path of Revolution is long and hard, the path of counter-revolution is short and easy, and ends with the bullet in the head" - if one really wanted to be cynical, he was almost right: the bullet just missed his head.

With Martial Law in effect (a measure otherwise never mentioned in the Constitution, but legal documents are always subject to political interpretation - whoever believed that law was beyond politics had a final reality check with the election fraud in the US), the government had unlimited power to arrest and detain whomever it chose, up to sixty days without due process, with no lawyer. If on the fifth of October angry masses had decided to confiscate or burn the houses of the Mafia/businessmen/Milosevic's political elite, I wouldn't have had a big problem with that. However a State conducting a revolutionary court is something completely different - the word fascism might come to mind.

Among others arrested was a friend of mine - one of the few anarcho-syndicalist activists in Belgrade. He personally insulted the Minister of Work and Social Affairs Milovanovic (who is at the same time head of one of the two trade unions close to the government) by distributing "radical" press in front of "his" factory. The immediate reason for the arrest was sending a public announcement saying that the organization would continue with activities despite Martial Law. The fact that this was not only

perfectly legal, but had furthermore nothing to do with killing the Prime Minister did not change much.

In the meantime Milovanovic established a Labor Party. The name sounds absolutely ridiculous knowing that the word 'rad' exists in Serbocroat, with the logical form 'Radnichka Partija' (Workers Party), but good contacts with Blairists are certainly more important than using words workers might understand. They are not the privileged (revolutionary) subject anyway. Red color was out of the question of course, even as a matter of decoration. Asked about plans for the First of May, he calmly answered that he didn't care about "communist holidays".

Assassination finally revived the cult of personality up to a point of forgetting that Djindjic was not Tito. This probably explains the fact that with all the church kitsch and military platoons, they accidentally played the "Lenin march" when putting down the coffin. There were not many people who noticed - newly religious and allegedly convinced anti-communists ever since they could hardly know that the tune was exclusively a part of ritual communist burial.

The main street (once called Marshal Tito, then Serbian Rulers, and now King Aleksandar) is being renovated. Rumors say that not only is the "construction" firm chosen to do the job with no public contest owned by Mafia/businessmen, but they didn't even have the machines before the late Prime Minister invested taxpayers' money into purchasing them. Although there would be dozens of other streets that desperately need renovation, the main one is of capital importance, because foreign diplomats wouldn't walk further and a good image is the top priority of "national interest". That helps to get closer to NATO , and then the ban on importing arms gets lifted and Serbs can play with beautiful and hypermodern

new toys. For instance, why not once again "liberate" Kosova or Bosnia from civilians. Juridical "democracy" and "publicity" turn out to be inadmissible [incompatible? inseparable?], due to a lack of distinction between criminals and the financial system.

Like anywhere else in the Balkans or Eastern Europe, the first foreign investments are usually the dirtiest. Yet finally having credit cards makes concern about the financial scandals of both *Raiffeisen Bank* and *Société générale* in recent years fully inappropriate. Billboards with identical *Ballantine's* adds in genuine national languages all around former Yugoslavia definitely show the absurdity of sovereignist claims and the necessity of precise territorial demarcations that were used as justification for wars. At least ¾ of the population certainly can not afford whisky, but that doesn't exclude them from the marketing target group. "Go play!" can be taken metaphorically.

It is worth mentioning in passing that one of Djindjic's first international activities was a visit to Bill Gates. Obviously a respect for copyrights is essential for being a part of the "decent" world. One couldn't possibly expect diplomats to insist on the right to information for all, social wages or universal citizenship. The fact that the Serbs are as much nationalists as they were ten years ago or that the new political elite was as enthusiastic for war as Milosevic was should in no way disturb the "democratic" paradise. The fact that fascism turns people on is not modified at all with the "free media", and the meaning of Enlightenment remains as doubtful as ever.

The history of the twentieth century is finally totally revised. The petty bourgeoisie is reinstalled and all traces of socialist heritage abolished. Privatization is unquestionable and brutal. Politics are reduced to an affair of culture - namely the conflict is that of

civilized Belgraders against the Asiatic primitivism/barbarism. The "Be neat" campaign (rediscovering the importance of using soap and not throwing litter in the street) and the exorcism of turbo-folk additionally criminalize poverty.

Work is progressively precarious for a mass of people regardless of their class status, so is life itself for the poor. A few days before the First of May, Branislav Canak, head of the other main trade union, mentioned that the workers were not satisfied and that the government should thus rely on the unions to absorb the social tensions and possible unrest. Not underestimating the power of unionist manipulation, lack of intuitive identification with the notion of class and national homogenization around Milosevic's trial, it seems that the social gap is widening, though and developing towards the Argentinean scenario. Or, each crisis is an open space for subversion.

Like elsewhere, institutions that constituted the society of discipline (factory, productivity, property) are superseded by services, marketing and exchange. Apart from banking, the only flourishing line of work is professional NGO activism. Various training courses and training for trainers courses are multiplying, with a perverse level of political correctness and precision found in their naming. Some of the focuses are on family violence and the empowerment of women. I do not want to imply that these issues are not important; the problem is rather that the underlying structural problem of unemployment, precariousness and poverty remains unquestioned.

Local changes do not need holistic revolution, and the demands of politically organized groups can lead to systemic modifications, but capitalism has an incredible capacity for recuperation, including markers of class, gender, etc. in consumerist culture. However,

functioning capitalism/consumerism does not mean it is unchangeable: reversal is of course possible, or invention instead of imitation - it's but a matter of experimenting with no pre-given knowledge.

Furthermore, I found it scary when the vast majority of civil society was incredibly eager in expressing support for the police in fighting organized crime. Not only because there were procedural scandals, and even criminals have certain legal rights despite popular resentments - more importantly, it was too easily forgotten that the same police was/is a part of organized crime and directly responsible for several genocides in the nineties. Although it is more than obvious that the State as such is criminal, only the power decides who is the criminal/terrorist. Or more generally: expecting liberation from the State is as naive as wanting better cops.

Speaking of intellectuals, public activities are apparently passé - as long as the comfortable position of lecturer is not endangered by a "dictator" (it could be argued that Milosevic was never a dictator, but had enormous popular support, especially from the nationalist opposition and the intellectuals), one could continue discussing issues of culture. Unsurprisingly, political developments have their correlative trends in the academic community. There is namely not a single person in Belgrade' Faculty of Philosophy dealing with continental theory, not to mention post-structuralism. Those who did were made to leave - and by colleagues, not Milosevic.Power is far more complex. Conservatives still do phenomenology, while the predominant liberals insist on the analytical school.

Education is no longer free and for all (even in principle), but rather becomes an additional privilege for those who can afford it. Anything remotely reminiscent of communism (equal chances for

instance) is embarrassing, and many consider themselves progressive left by supporting the liberal government as a lesser evil than fundamentalism. That these two phenomena are inextricably linked goes unnoticed. While I used to think that the country had slim chances as long as Milosevic's opposition continued to exist, now I'm sure that the same goes for his civil society. If at any point some considered getting rid of the "dictator" as the only prerequisite for overcoming injustice, it has meanwhile become evident that any attempt at a final solution produces a political void; realizing "justice" would equal death. All "revolutions" get betrayed, or are stillborn, but have to be repeated nevertheless.

Instead of regretting the lack of representationalism, counseling the masses, or lending a voice to the oppressed, it seems that only the disappearance of talking heads dependent on/addicted to media attention allows politics. No one is responsible for anyone else any longer, and the "multitude" does not require the usual suspects. A shared feeling of unbearable closure cuts through the social field (including individuals from parties, NGO's, unions, ... and all other imperfect but real agents). Capitalism continually transgresses its limits, displacing the frontiers but also opening revolutionary lines of flight. There is no need to fear or hope - one only has to look for new weapons. Its not a matter of adaptation, unification or totalizing, but of connecting desires in a common field of oscillation. Only the liberals keep weeping: "Why can't we all work together?".

Anti-fascism was always unpopular, spaces of the political are rare and a matter of transgressing the norm. Yet there are moments of liberated desire or joy in disturbing the mechanism, consciously minoritary and not ever wanting to be a majority. To quote from Deleuze and Guattari: "Being a traitor of one's gender, class, majority, which other reason for writing could there be". Direct

action and D.I.Y. are available to everyone. The failure of any political agenda aiming for total emancipation turns localized strategies and shifting alliances into a practical necessity. This not only concerns resistance, but is as much creation. And we know that work always sucks, while inventing new possibilities is extremely pleasurable.

It sounds silly to rely on the biological fact of changing generations. Yet with the aforementioned capacity of the system to recuperate, new marginalizations in the given power structures reconfigure the political landscape. And dissatisfied young people cannot be ignored forever. Despite the mostly successful pacification, some capital investments turn out to be risky. Unexpected ways of writing or socializing are sometimes far more disturbing than a revolutionary political stance expressed in traditional academic form. "Revolution" happens in all lived escapes from disciplinary and normative institutions - or self-inventions from scratch. One could hardly write anything new, but repeating differently still constitutes political action. And obviously enough, such action does not need a transcendental subject as a legitimization.