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The New Trials of the Young CW [Cultural Worker]

Or: Cultural Political Responsibility in the Age of Globalized Neo-Liberalism

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Radical changes in the image of the artist have been emphatically prophesied for decades now. "The author" has already died countless deaths, numerous legends of "the artist" have been superseded by no less pious tales of his demise. (Zobl/Schneider 2001, 28) In many discourses the "Cultural Worker" is currently traded as an up-to-date prototype, the proletarian form of the impoverished aristocratic "artistic genius", so to speak, which still leaves plenty of room for new elevations - such as in the style of Soviet worker monuments.

The Cultural Worker (referred to in the following as CW) owes his emergence to the assertion of wide-ranging social changes, which circulate under the buzz words globalization - economization of culture - culturization of the economy. What do these

developments involve, how new are they really, and what impact do they have for artists? These are the questions that this essay addresses.

Globalization

> "(...) Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow." (Hardt/Negri 2000, xii)

This is, in brief, the thesis that Hardt and Negri posit in their bestseller "Empire" on the current world order and lines of development to be expected in the future: capitalism has reached its proper destination. The nation-state, which was necessary for economic development in a certain phase of development, yet nevertheless hindered it in its tendentially global activities, has been overcome. The political sphere has finally evaporated into the economic sphere; capital flows unhindered by spatial and political borders. Just as in the Marxian version of the analysis of capitalism, with Hardt and Negri capitalism still functions as its own gravedigger by producing the class that will do away with it: the industrial working class with Marx, the social laborers with Hardt and Negri - both called proletariat in their revolutionary function.

This is quite obviously a case of either a model of the world that is strongly reduced to its innovative traits, or an extrapolation of

current developments into the future. For so far, the national colors of the world map, even in a united Europe, are quite clearly separated from one another. Even though nation-states, primarily in Western Europe, have transferred competencies to international and supranational levels in recent decades, key areas, especially those such as internal and external security and/or integration policies are still firmly in national hands, even in the EU member states. In Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, just as in the states of the former Soviet Union, the idea of the nation-state was first fully developed after 1989 and is currently in full bloom. If there were ever any doubts about unbroken US patriotism, these have been thoroughly dispelled since September 11, 2001 at the latest. Even in the so-called "Third World", there is hardly any evidence of a hybridization of national political identities. And the relations between the "First" and the "Third World" can still be adequately described with differentiated center-periphery models in terms of both politics and economy. Thus there is little empirical evidence to be found that collective identities are no longer nationally defined or that they are generally becoming more fragile, more hybrid, than psychological constructions of this kind always are anyway. On the contrary, there is much that speaks for a comeback of national consciousness - such as the election successes of extreme right-wing parties in Austria, Italy, Denmark, France and the Netherlands, which are certainly partly to be understood as a rejection of European integration and globalization for nationalistic reasons. This is also evident in the Austrian reaction to the EU sanctions, the invention of homeland traditions through immigrant children in West Europe, the (re-) intensification of Muslim and Christian fundamentalisms, etc. Constructing models, such as Hardt and Negri have undertaken, is indispensable, in order to promote political, theoretical discussion, particularly through the contradictions that they provoke. These models are

problematic, however, if they are taken as practical political guidelines for action or as true-to-scale representations. For the large and fuzzy concept of Empire and the even more unclear terms of economy or free market determining world events behind it, anonymize social realities and leave out concrete actors and their interests. This also means that an analysis of the potential of political resistance is only possible at a very abstract level. To Marchart's correct diagnosis[1], that the identification of a completely unorganized multitude of intellectual service providers as potential political subjects sells the diagnosis of the problem as its solution, it should be added that Hardt and Negri do not offer this political subject any counterpart, no actors, against whom their political struggle could be directed. "The Market" or "Empire" are structures for ordering the world or parts of the world; if they are to be changed or replaced by other structures, then those who would oppose such a change have to be identified.

The fact that problems arise from this, due to numerous interdependencies between economy and politics on the one hand, and between those in power in various parts of the world on the other, is certainly correct, although Hardt and Negri's diagnosis is hardly new. As early as the 60's, Raoul Vaneigem posed the question in the "International Situationist Bulletin": "Who is responsible, who should be shot?" The only answer: "We are dominated by a system, by an abstract form." (Vaneigem 1963) This abstract form, Capitalism in the words of Marx, the Society of the Spectacle as defined by the Situationists, and Empire according to Hardt and Negri, is propelled by the demands of the "total market system" (Kurz 1999, passim), to which everything societal must be subordinated, so as not to disrupt the economy and thus general prosperity.

Economization of Culture

"Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind." (Marx/Engels 1848/1995, 5)

This description of a comprehensive economization of culture is not taken from the new political bestseller by Hardt and Negri, but rather from the "Communist Manifesto", which was first published, as is well known, in 1848. The economization of the whole of societal life is an essential part of Marx' understanding of capitalism - he criticizes its inherent alienation between human beings and living labor, and at the same time, he understands this economization as the central foundation for the rationalization of human life and thus for social progress, for the precondition not only of capitalism, but also of communism.

Marx had few regrets for vanishing cultural resistiveness; he despised the Luddites and others who attempted to preserve their style of life against capitalism as romantics. He was ambivalently fascinated by the all-encompassing new economic system and its power of definition - a fascination that Hardt and Negri obviously still succumb to over 150 years later.

A fundamentally different personal standpoint was the basis for Horkheimer and Adorno's judgment of the commercialization of

the cultural in the 40 pages of the "Dialectic of the Enlightenment" (1994/1944), which they dedicated to the culture industry. The two left-wing intellectuals, whose flight from National-Socialism took them to Los Angeles, the center of the capitalist dream factory, were horrified by what they saw there: the areas of the private sphere, of the interpersonal, of pleasure and of thinking, in other words large portions of what they considered culture, were appropriated and standardized by capitalism in the form of cultural industry; feelings and deeply felt human needs were arbitrarily aroused and dampened; repose as leisure degenerated into a parallel world of alienated labor. "Amusement is the extension of labor in late capitalism" (ibid., 145), they wrote, "the cultural industry perpetually cheats its consumers out of what it perpetually promises." (ibid., 148) For freedom in the commodity society is "freedom to perpetual sameness." (ibid., 176) So the mutual attraction between business and culture in the form of "Cultural Industries", currently acclaimed by "Cultural Studies" proponents to Franz Morak, was already noted about sixty years ago, although it was judged completely differently then.

The rage and disappointment that are evident in the way this text is written are explained by the hope that the authors placed in culture's potential for resistance. However, it was not popular culture that concerned them, which was to elude being taken over in industrial manufacture - they were nostalgic for the autonomous elite art with its independence from the efficiency logic of the bourgeois society, from which they expected potential resistance.

Horkheimer and Adorno thus drew a sharp - and heuristically hardly tenable - dividing line between culture, which had always contributed to "the taming of both revolutionary and barbaric instincts", and autonomous art. This normative stance is probably better understood from the perspective of their personal position

and history than as a stringently scientific deduction. For culture, taken as the norms and values of communities, does not necessarily serve only the "taming of revolutionary instincts", but rather offers resistance to the economic demands of the predominant political system in certain situations. The undialectical and static description of the relations between economic-technological substructure and social-political-cultural superstructure from Marx and, even more so, Lenin (socialism = nationalization + electrification) was countered by Antonio Gramsci with a differentiated analysis of the connection between economy and culture. According to Gramsci, neither the preservation of power nor a change of power is possible without cultural hegemony, revolutions do not emerge quasi inevitably because of economic and technological progress, but instead require an adequate "ideology", which is, in turn, not automatically - as it is presented in some of Marx' writings at least - the outcome of the subject's class position, but instead needs mediation. (Gramsci 1980, passim, e.g. 219) For cultural influences are long-lived and determined by manifold factors, so changing them is consequently not a matter of merely replacing one ideological structure with another, but rather of shifting emphases, new narrative forms, coming up with new ideas that are able to tie into old ideas.

Gramsci's ideas have had considerable significance in deepening the Marxist understanding of society and have also been picked up with interest by the "New Right"; politicians in the mainstream of capitalism, on the other hand, have never had need of these theoretical explanations, because since the times of early capitalism, this economic system has succeeded in prevailing at every level of human existence. Substructure and superstructure, economy and culture, market and ideology have never been so sharply divided in capitalist everyday life, as in the Marxist analysis. Since Adam

Smith, adequate images and forms of discourse have been supplied along with and parallel to economic development.[2] The economization of culture began, in other words, like the culturalization of the economy, as early as the 18th century - traditional cultural forms were to be adapted to the new economic demands, while these economic demands had to be simultaneously integrated into the human being's world of meaningfulness, in other words culturalized. Meanwhile, in the last decades, the culturalization of the economy has taken a qualitative leap due to the successive replacement of commodity production through the production of meaning/symbols.

Culturalization of the Economy

"Having from the workshop to the laboratory emptied productive activity of all meaning for itself, capitalism strives to place the meaning of life in leisure activities and to reorient productive activity on that basis. Since production is hell in the prevailing moral schema, real life must be found in consumption, in the use of goods. (...) The world of consumption is in reality the world of mutual spectacularization of everyone, the world of everyone's separation, estrangement and nonparticipation." (Debord 1994/1960, 698)

Like Gramsci, the Situationist International continued the development of the relation between economy and ideology described by Marx. More essentialistically than Gramsci, it centrally refers to the concept of "false consciousness", to which all classes succumb, not only the losers, but also the winners of the system, due to the penetration of capitalism into all areas of society. All forms of social life, all cultural expressions, all forms of political

organization are grasped as part of the spectacle, which serves to distract people from their real, unmediated, present interests.

The spectacle undoubtedly plays an increasingly important role, the more the vital basic needs of the population (with money to spend, from the "First World") are covered and the farther the movements of financial capital are removed from the production of real goods. It is not covering existing demands through the production of offerings, but rather the creation of demand that is at the center of the economy. As Hardt and Negri explain, by no means the first, but very concisely, immaterial and communicative work today has assumed the significance in the production of surplus value that mass labor in the factories had in early capitalism. At the same time, communication forums and possibilities in their expanded and deepened areas of application play a central role in the development from the disciplinary to the control society, in which external compulsions are replaced by internal disciplining mechanisms. In their constant striving for optimization, people function as their own tamers.

In summary: since its early days, the economic system of capitalism has successively penetrated every area of life and every geographical region and tendentially unified them. This has been possible to varying degrees in different eras; more recent economic and political developments have had an accelerating effect here, which leads not only Hardt and Negri to assume that we find ourselves in an era of a fundamentally new world order. Broad sections of the art and culture political and theoretical discourse presume that this new world order will also result in a fundamentally new positioning of those involved in the creation of culture. Key words: Cultural Workers and Cultural Industries (CI).

Yet the subsumption of all those who work in the cultural and media sector or in parts of other business sectors concerned with symbol production under the header "Cultural Industries" not only appears to be in no way imperative, it is also not heuristically helpful. It is neither empirically evident that those who have previously worked in the cultural sector in the narrow sense should now populate the CI, nor do all the professions listed in the international CI definitions have enough characteristics in common to justify a classification of this kind. Nor does it appear very valuable to gather together all the areas with the common denominator of no longer fitting into the usual schemata on the one hand and vaguely having something to do with the "symbolic" on the other.

On the basis of what has been said so far, it appears evident that there are social developments that can be summarized under the buzz words globalization, economization of culture and culturization of economy, but neither their precise place in time (entirely new? always already there? something in between?) nor their radicality are clear. Contrary to these vague findings, however, it may be asserted with some certainty that the *discourse* about society in general, and in particular the position of those involved in culture in it, is substantially influenced by these buzz words.

In terms of the position of artists, the implication of this discourse consists particularly in the expectation that those involved in culture can also survive without state financing and, even more, that their activities contribute substantially to economic development. The discourse that interests us here is, therefore, primarily a culture-political one, which is paradoxically distinguished by the denial of the possibilities and necessities of culture-political agency in light of the unlimited and uncontrollably operating free market. For those involved in culture

themselves, being released from state care into market economy self-responsibility allegedly offers the possibility of conjoining one's very own creative interests with a bread-winning job - e.g. transferring directly from youth subculture into an entrepreneurial career without ever having to experience alienation through imposed working conditions. However, the "self-employed" Cultural Workers still do not escape alienation in the classic Marxist sense, the dispossession of the surplus value of one's own work; on the contrary, they are much more exposed to the exploitation of their labor through the complete lack of traditional forms of political and economic organization than people in regular working situations. On the whole, these factors lead to the frequently cited image of the "Cultural Worker", who is young, dynamic, flexible and able to cope with multiple more or less creative jobs within an 80-hour working week, and who feels content in doing so. Those who are left behind are naturally the ones that especially need the protection of traditional labor law agreements and union measures, such as mothers with children or people who are not able to work to an unlimited extent for reasons of age or health. In this way, the Cultural Industries become the prototype sector of the "autonomous alienation" (Hardt/Negri) of the control society.

Political responses to the concrete situation of the Cultural Workers are not (yet?) forthcoming. Traditional labor organizations such as the unions, in particular, seem to be neither willing nor able to address the problems of atypical employment situations; on the other hand, those affected seem to find the appeal of these kinds of traditional forms of organization limited. Instead, everyone hopes for an extraordinary career for him or herself, despite all statistical evidence to the contrary, which will turn them into a high earning and celebrated star over night. The

old US fairytale of the dishwasher who becomes a millionaire celebrates a triumphant comeback here. Against the background of the dominant form of discourse described in this article, this attitude does not seem very surprising. Who would seriously dare to confront the Empire with a strike, to break the omnipotence of the market with collective agreements?

This highlights the political danger that lies in grand theoretical drafts such as Hardt and Negri's. Too many essential details are sacrificed to the generalization, which paves the way for the demonization of the existing situation in its abstractness. Even if it is conceded to theoreticians from Marx to Negri that they are right that economic conditions represent the most essential dispositions of all other areas of society in capitalism, points of attack have been found again and again over the past 200 years to at least disrupt and/or correct the structures of society as a whole, if not to overthrow them. An essential pivotal point for a thoroughly fundamental political criticism were the promises of liberal democracy that were never fulfilled, because they were always broken by the demands of the economic system, but which had a political impact again and again at the same time. Countless political movements have appealed to the three great values of the French Revolution in their demands and achieved partial political victories in this way. When Hardt and Negri now assert the end of nation-state democracy and its displacement by the unseizable network of Empire, they thus deprive political criticism of its adversary - and they do so, as explained in the first part of this text, too soon at the least, for nation-state power is still far from its demise. There is much that suggests that the actors of world order have hardly changed in recent decades: they still include internationally and transnationally operating corporations and national governments - even if the latter now sometimes appear in

double or threefold roles, in which they also determine transnational agendas through the UN or the European Council, for instance, or are themselves representatives of corporations. If it is the case that this diagnosis is correct, then there is no reason not to continue to direct resistance and protest to and against those whose legitimacy in this system still depends on their acceptance within the national framework, which is manifested in elections - specifically national governments. It is to be demanded of them that they should carry out their international and transnational roles in the sense of their democratic mandate, i.e. that in many concrete cases they must first introduce democratic structures. It is also to be demanded of them that they prevent the area of economy from dominating the area of politics, that they draft culture-political programs, pose them for discussion and work on their implementation, instead of shrouding their lack of concepts in empty phrases like "Creative Industries". And since experience has shown that many of these demands will go unheard, it is these national politicians whose legitimacy is to be rescinded - instead of releasing them from responsibility as pawns of the worldwide Empire and thus ultimately joining the hegemonic discourse of the primacy of the market economy. In which form and in which arena this kind of protest can be carried out, cannot be decided *ex ante*, for example with an artificial devaluation of the local in favor of nomadism, but rather has to depend on the concrete conditions that affect those who work in the creation of art and culture.

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[1] Cf. O. Marchart, "Der durchkreuzte Ort der Partei", in: G. Raunig (ed.), *Transversal. Kunst und Globalisierungskritik*, Vienna: Turia + Kant 2003, pp. 204-210.

[2] See for instance the "invisible hand", which has ordered the world in such a way, according to Adam Smith (1976/1776, 456), that the egotistical striving of human beings leads to general prosperity.