

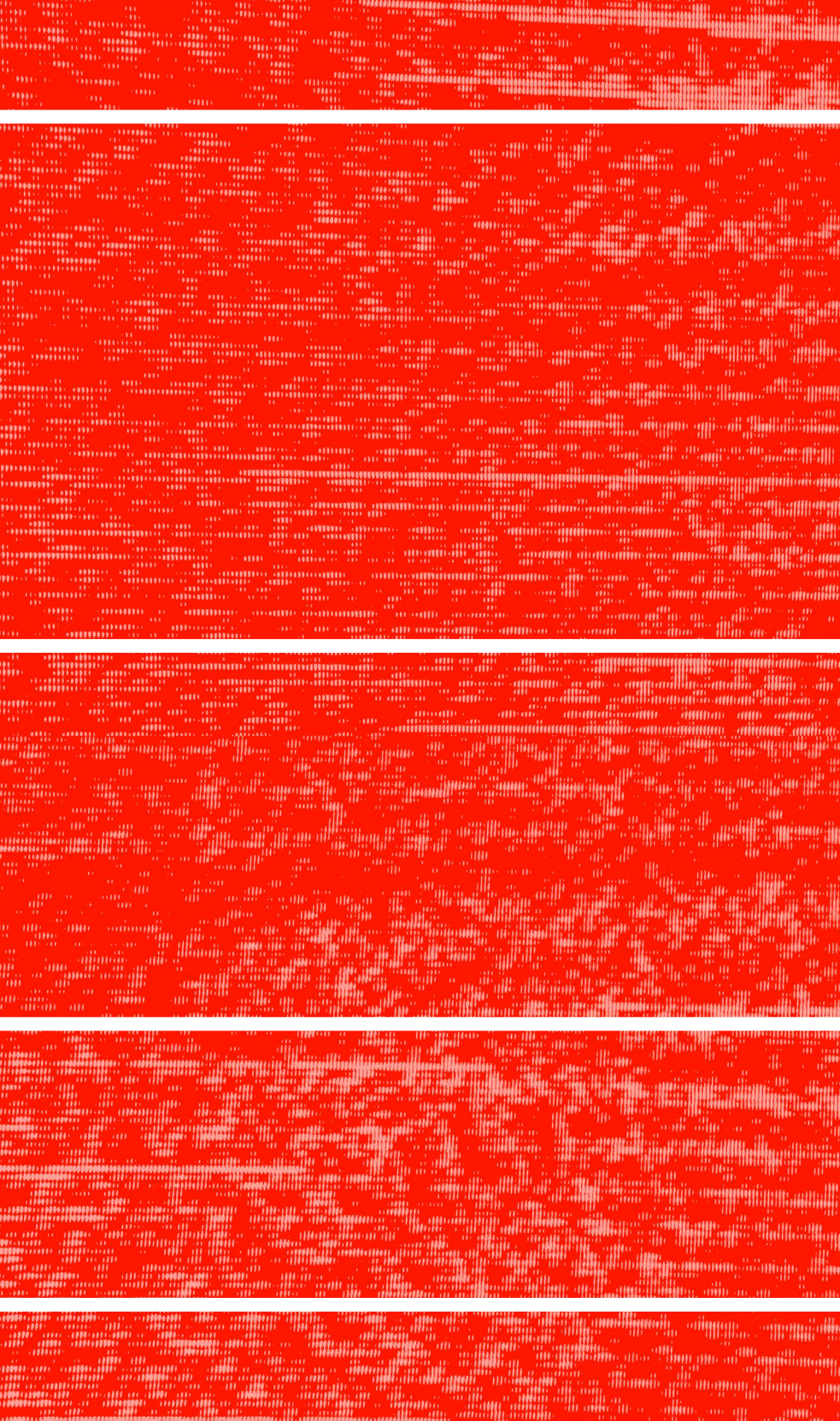
PERSPECTIVES

Boris Buden

TRANSITION TO NOWHERE

Art in History
after 1989

ARCHIVE BOOKS



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[Preface]

I.

It is time for closure. An epoch repeats itself ad nauseam: democracy, democracy, democracy... Each time the word is uttered, yet another piece of its truthfulness becomes lost. One does not know what is worse: hearing it from the mouth of the ruling elites who still preach democracy only to expand their power, secure their privileges and grow their wealth, or listening to its sworn enemies who loudly call out this word only to mobilize masses against any of its positive values. It is quite possible that the emancipatory meaning of the word “democracy”, one that reached its highlight at the turn of the century with the so-called “fall of communism”, making it the only political option on our historical horizon, has by now been completely exhausted. The time when democracy was moving freely throughout the globe, easily overcoming the social and cultural obstacles it would come across and even entering its most hostile territories, the glory days of its universal translatability, when it was able to win the hearts and minds of people in any of the world languages, is over. Those who invested all their hopes in its promises are today turning, disappointed and discouraged, their backs on it. Others, who mistook democratic values for their “way of life”, a property of their single and unique “culture”, are retreating now behind walls they hastily erect around their scared and lonely societies in the mistaken belief that they can have democracy only for themselves and enjoy its benefits behind closed doors.

There are also some who still put all their trust in its emancipatory resurrection. The noblest ideals of democracy, they hope, will once more enchant the broad masses and change the world for the better. While their hope is, for sure, worth all our practical support, it is nevertheless of no empirical or cognitive value. Moreover, taken for granted, it might prove to be a dangerous illusion that keeps us blindly following a path that gets us nowhere. This is why this book refuses to remain loyal to this path. Rather, it goes from a more reasonable assumption that the epochal opportunity for democracy that was opened up in 1989 is now closed forever.

A closure, however, means more than simply the end of something. We find closure when there is some sort of resolution from the past. In our case, in the case of the world after 1989, this is the past of an illusion that has lasted for almost three decades. It does not matter how we define this time, whether in more general terms as “post-history” or with regard to concrete social and political processes as “post-communism”, it was a time of undoubted certainty. Not only the general course of world history appeared clear and easy to follow; also more particular questions as to which political system to implement, which economic principles and measures to apply or which cultural values to pursue seemed to have been answered once and for all. Whatever the difficulties or, as it was believed in those days, “temporal” setbacks, the bright future ahead appeared assured. Even the worst social catastrophes, breaking up of whole states or total collapse of social order including civil wars and the enormous human suffering they caused, were automatically blamed on the persisting remnants of an evil past that would sooner or later be gotten rid of. Once again, it seemed back then as though nothing could shake people’s faith in the future. It is in this sense, the sense of absolute historical certainty, that life in those years after 1989 can be viewed to a certain extent as “blessed”.

But those days are now over. And while the ensuing loss of certainty might still be felt as painful and cause fear of the future, it can also bring relief. So does the recognition that things cannot stay as they are. What yesterday were self-evident truths of a fully transparent historical reality, signposts

to be followed and not questioned or debated, have today become mere delusions that weigh like a nightmare on our minds, getting us nowhere. To shake off this burden of empty promises and naïve self-deception is what is actually meant here by closure. It can bring about the sense of resolution and finality that is much needed today, not simply to close a chapter of history, which has ended anyway in stalemate, but rather to clear the way for the new. And it can give us strength to face the total openness of this new, the recurring contingency of history that has been for too long effaced from our experience and kept out of our minds. It will bring with it, for sure, an anxious feeling of uncertainty. But, however frightening an encounter with the unexpected may be, it is the only way to re-discover freedom in the history itself, so as to get our hands on it. Whether this freedom will still need democracy is today an open question. It is indeed quite possible that freedom and democracy have in the meantime parted their ways and may even clash in the future. In this case too, choosing the right side will require a final closure with the past.

This book is an attempt at such a closure. What links together the included essays is some form of the work of mourning. Each essay, in its own way and on its particular occasion, revives the most diverse elements of the past, reinvests them with libido, as Freud would put it, so as to bid farewell from the object of loss once again. Which object? Let us call it the post-communist condition. What loss? The better future it once promised, or more concretely: the epochal process of the so-called post-communist transition to democracy that was initiated immediately after the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, which has failed. In fact, its very teleology—based on a quasi self-evident belief that Western-type liberal democracy in harmony with neo-liberal global capitalism is the only option on our historical horizon—has broken and with it the entire historical condition. We no longer live after the collapse of communism, but rather after the collapse of post-communism.

II.

The essays collected here do not present conclusive arguments for the above claim in any systematic way. Rather, they disclose early signs of the coming failure, the flaws and paradoxes of the “great historical turn”, false assessments and misconceptions of its thinkers and strategists. Together they point at the compromising continuity of the post-communist present with its disavowed past, at the persistence of old relations of domination and the progressive instalment of the new ones. They expose the empty arrogance of a time that, at least for a moment, vainly imagined itself not only widely superior to its past but also greater than history itself.

All these symptoms are spread inconsistently throughout the book as a whole without at any point accumulating into an objectively valid diagnosis. Taken together, they nevertheless provoke such a diagnosis, leaving it to readers to detect its many aspects and reflect upon them from their own perspectives. This also implies that the cognitive content of the book eludes any disciplinary enclosure. It is not a historiographical inquiry, nor does it aim at contributing in any way to contemporary political theory. This holds equally true for cultural theory, social science or philosophy. Even art history or art critique is not addressed directly by the book. However, art has received a sort of special treatment here. Indeed, the subtitle reads, “Art in History after 1989”.

At the moment when the first of the essays were published, precisely at the turn of the century, in 1999, both art and history already had the experience of their end behind them, yet in quite different ways. While art was at that time already long searching for its afterlife (since more than forty years), history had just started to do so, at least in the then worldwide popular vision of Francis Fukuyama. Fredric Jameson, who pointed at this time lag between the two, also stressed a political difference. Behind the theory of the “end of art” is a left-wing motivation, critical of the complicity of art with power structures, ideological apparatuses of the state and, in geopolitical terms, with imperialist domination. Just as a reminder, “the end of art” was proclaimed in the sixties during the student protests against

the establishment, the authoritarian order in general and growing militarism. The war in Vietnam, for instance, was at that time legitimised as a defence of Western values, which also implied, as their essential feature, high culture and art. By contrast, in the concept of the “end of history”, which attracted wider public attention much later, was rather, according to Jameson, the right-wing spirit at work. In fact, besides the Hegel-inspired vision of an end of history, not only in terms of Fukuyama’s capitalist triumphalism, but also in a theoretically more demanding version by Alexandre Kojève, there was also the discourse on *posthistoire* (in French) that was developed in post-war Germany by ex-Nazi, conservative intellectuals.

So to put it very briefly, at the moment when these essays were written art and history met without having clear perspectives on their demarcation or their role in each other’s domain, at a time of being deeply uncertain about their very existence. Moreover, they met on a terrain that has profoundly changed with the global expansion of capitalism and the ultimate commodification of all spheres of human life and nature. This new terrain in which the traditional differentiation of fields is no longer possible or where, in other words, these fields come to overlap, Jameson conceived of in terms of a limitlessly expanded field of culture. In the world of, to use his words, “late capitalism”, everything has become cultural. So too is an encounter of art and history in this world—and in the essays collected here—also a cultural event. The fact, however, that the culturalization of everything is itself made an object of critique in this book, is simply an admission that such an encounter can never take place on a politically neutral terrain. One always becomes politically involved, either from the left or from the right wing.

But what in fact has art searched for in history after 1989? An honest answer to this question must necessarily be personal. I am neither an artist who addresses historical praxis in the hopes to affect it, for instance, to change it for the better, nor am I one to have ever addressed art so as to, say, engage it with this same historical praxis. It was rather the other way round: the art approached me in order to get in touch with history.

A majority of the essays in this book were directly commissioned by artists, curators, artistic events or art institutions. What did they want of me? Most probably something they were lacking. Was it a knowledge, a particular experience, a political or moral statement or rather something more authentic like a testimony? Certainly, however, I was not invited to make an art critique or to write an art history. In fact, the best answer to this question would be another question: why me? Why was I invited to participate in Platform2 of Documenta11 in New Delhi (“Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation”); why asked to write on two Ex-Yugoslavian filmmakers, on the Balkans, or on the works of many Eastern European artists; why was I expected to reflect upon the historical condition called “post-communism”, or upon political conflicts in the “East”? There is a simple but uncomfortable answer to these questions: in all of these cases, and they apply to most of the texts in this book, I was hired by art as a “native informant”. This figure, as is well known, originates from anthropological fieldwork. The task was to supply “indigenous knowledge” to colonial subjects, and thus to facilitate exchange between the metropolis and the nation or “area” of origin.

In her 1999 *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Spivak writes of the “foreclosed native informant” as a necessary complicity in the humanist knowledge production. It is a character that stands for an imaginary or absent figure, which in our case would be something like “a true East European identity”. Indeed, my task was to epistemically represent the post-communist Eastern Europe, or more precisely. to provide the image of a particular but all the more genuine and authentic knowledge on a historically and culturally predefined and clearly demarcated area—of course, in a pre-formatted form, that is, a format already adopted to the prevailing topics of interests, general concepts and methods of the hegemonic Western knowledge production. And I did what I was asked (and paid) to do, which is only to say that there is no such thing as innocent knowledge production. This, however, applies to both sides, the one that commissions and the other that provides this knowledge. It is in this sense that I cannot but admit my complicity in what might be

called the Western epistemic and, in more general terms, cultural enclosure of the post-communist East, a sort of primitive accumulation of symbolic capital, a great deal of which went into the pockets of contemporary art.

It would be naïve to think that one can easily escape the role of native informant and the complicity in neo-imperialist projects it necessarily implies. Nevertheless, there is also something to be gained from it. Like the slave in Hegel's famous fable who, by working for the master, acquires skills and knowledge, making himself increasingly independent and creatively transforming the world, so too is the native informant far from being merely a helpless victim of epistemic violence. In my case, for instance, supplying the art world with an "indigenous knowledge" proved very productive. Concretely, I have discovered in art precisely what I was supposed to provide to it—historical experience. This is in fact what many of the essays in this book are about: searching for an extraction of a concrete human experience of history that seemed to have completely disappeared from the horizon of social life. The subtitle of the book might as well have been "History in Art", meaning the traces of historical experience preserved or recreated in art works and the discourses that surround and inform them.

III.

There are several leitmotifs that recur throughout the publication. One of them is, for instance, the notion of a "catching-up revolution" (*die nachholende Revolution*), coined already in 1990 by Jürgen Habermas to characterise the events that brought Eastern European socialist regimes to collapse. Rarely a name given to an event seals in one single word so fatefully its historical meaning as was the case with this definition. The enormous amount of utopian energy discharged by an act of revolution, its total openness towards the future and the irreducible potentiality of freedom it activates were degraded, if only for the moment, to an opportunistic catch-up move along an already determined path long since made by others and reduced to a miserably belated imitation of a life already existing and brought to perfection somewhere else.

At stake, however, was more than a simple misconception or underestimation of what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989/90. The “catching-up revolution” denied not only the historical importance but the very historicity of these events. The peoples of Eastern Europe, who brought down the communist regimes without any help from outside, have made neither their own history, nor history as such. Instead, they were just cloning the West.

A reference to or commentary on Jürgen Habermas’s “catch-up revolution” can be found in many places in this book, probably too many. The reason for my fixation on it cannot be, however, reduced to its objective importance. There is, unfortunately, something very subjective in this fixation, or shall I say, a certain neurotic trait that resembles Freud’s *Wiederholungszwang*, the repetition compulsion. I remember sitting with Habermas and a few colleagues, also philosophy students, in the studio of a youth radio station. It was in Zagreb in the late eighties. We were conducting a live interview with the famous philosopher. I have forgotten what precisely we were talking about, but I remember well how much trust we put in him and his ideas. It looked like he was showing us the general direction of history. In his parlance, the way to be followed was one decided by the communicative rationality generated from free and open debates in an ever-broadening public sphere, of course, under the rule of law and in accordance with Human Rights, in short, democracy, plain and simple. The rest was, we believed, history. And the microphones were already in our hands.

One or two years later we found ourselves in war. Democracy has become “a democracy to come”, forever. If, in the aetiology of repetition compulsion, there is always an unresolved trauma, then this trauma can most probably be traced back to my own complicity in blindly following hegemonic paradigms. Needless to say, the hegemony was already then a Western hegemony, although at that time and in that place, the former Yugoslavia, the notions of West and East had not yet developed their full impact on all spheres of social life, culture and politics. Not only did one feel to be somehow in between or even beyond this binary, one was also aware of another no less important one, of that between South and North.

With the arrival of democracy this free floating in a non-aligned ambiguity came to an abrupt end. One was left with no choice: either you catch up with the West or you are lost. Moreover, the West became a battle cry invoking a supreme value in whose name now the barbaric destruction of civilizational goods, criminal dispossession of public property and the worst war atrocities were committed. Perceived as an actually existing paradise on Earth, it exerted such an irresistible attraction to the masses that any doubt about it, let alone a critique of the West—for instance, of the egoistic interests of its capitalist economies—would have been immediately dismissed. In an ill-fated synergy with local nationalisms it blew up the minds of people to such an extent that any call for (communicative!?) rationality sounded like a bad joke. And yet, shortly before, in that small studio with the Great Philosopher I was a true believer in the catch-up revolution even before he coined the notion.

Another motif that in a similar manner, and probably for no less neurotic reasons, recurs in the book is the one of “innocence”. Often it is addressed by a reference to Hegel, who in his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* spoke of innocence as the epitome of non-action (*Nichttun*) and compared it to the mere being of a stone, adding: “not even that of a child”. In this book, I argue that “child” is a political concept closely connected to the ideology of the post-communist transition in whose jargon I detected an abundance of curious metaphors like democracy that is “still in nappies”, “taking its first steps”, “having teething troubles”, “growing and maturing”, “sitting in the classrooms”, “passing exams”, etc. These metaphors clearly stand for the idea of a new beginning and an intrinsic “innocence” of “democracy rediscovered”, as the revolutions of 1989/90 are often described. On the other hand, they also stand for the infantilism projected onto post-communist societies and for a process of coming of age they have yet to undergo. A great democratic future may lie ahead for the “children” of post-communism, yet at the same time, and for that very same reason, they are in need of cosseting and guidance. We might remember

here that Immanuel Kant spoke of Enlightenment as an exit from a self-incurred immaturity, which he saw in the inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another. However, such a projection of immaturity onto the post-communist state of mind points at more than its historical regression into a pre-enlightenment condition—at an infantile innocence, which precisely in the sense Hegel ascribed to it, implies an absolute passivity, a “mere non-action” in his words. This can mean only one thing: ahistoricity. A post-communist condition is post-historical in that it is ahistorical. If, however, there is still a historical time, one, like a stone, does not move in it, which is why one cannot make him or herself guilty of anything. Precisely as such it is also a “blessed” condition in which everyone has obtained a sort of general indulgence, a world of pure victims of history. This is what makes “innocence” the most precious currency in the ideological trade of post-communist identities.

IV.

Most of the essays in this book were originally written in English. A few of them were first written in German and subsequently translated into English either by myself or by other translators. In some essays, however, there are traces—some thoughts, motifs or references—of various texts, stemming mostly from the 1990s, which I wrote and published in the so-called mother tongue, that is, in Croatian (which I, by the way, do not differentiate from Serbian, Bosnian or Montenegrin). It would therefore be a mere simplification to say that this book was written in English. Not only is my use of English decisively influenced by the experience of writing in at least two other languages, my “mother tongue” and my German, it has also been constantly transforming throughout the almost two decades that separate the first (published in 1999) from the last (from 2018) of the essays collected now in this book. These changes—or shall I call them “improvements”?—were mainly initiated by various copyeditors of whom almost all were native speakers either of American or British English and who were each in his or her own way trying to make,

with more or less success, out of the raw material of my English-as-a-foreign-language some sort of English standard. Some of them were rigid in following what they claimed to be the unquestionable rules of the English language and adamant when it came to my personal style—this tiny space of freedom each of us enjoys in his or her individual use of language, freedom that is granted to us by the language itself, meaning the one that is larger, stronger and older than any of its narrow, nationally enclosed standards. “This is not how we say it in English,” is the phrase we usually hear in such a case. It is frustrating, but survivable. Others, however, were rather patient, full of understanding, permissive, and, I dare to add, willing to learn—something new about their own mother tongue from its non-native speaker. To be quite honest, however, I don’t give a damn about these notions “mother tongue” or “native speaker”. I even don’t feel comfortable when I hear “foreign language”. These are highly ideological phrases that sound to me like “our dear leader”, or “the leading role of the Party”. What once happened to those phrases, is now happening to our linguistic *ideologems*—they too are increasingly losing touch with reality.

So, to make long story short, this book is written in a very specific and highly personal form of linguistic praxis, which only descriptively and rather for the sake of institutional indexing and marketing might be called “English”. It has been generated through the process of constant translation both by the author himself and others as well as stylistically refined and cognitively improved by many copyeditors, which is why the language of this book and the book itself is to a great extent also a collective product. Having this in mind, as well as the fact that the essays of which this book consists were written on different occasions, for no less different purposes, addressing various audiences and adopting to diverse media formats, it would be highly unfair of the reader to insist on a consistency of its content, purity of its language or unity of its styles. This also applies to the structure of the book. In fact, its chapters cannot be clearly separated, which means that some of the essays would also fit perfectly into another chapter.

Saying all this, I am not asking for mercy from those who will read and judge this book. Rather, I claim the right not to hide the linguistic, cognitive and, as mentioned before, disciplinary heterogeneity of its intellectual genesis; not to suppress the impact of the ever-changing historical conditions in which this book has been developed, including for instance the economic motivation, i.e., the fact that almost all of these essays were written to earn money; finally, not to deny the fact of migration, the author's constant moving through languages, societies and their different spheres, the so-called cultures, various art spaces and disciplines of knowledge.

The title too deserves a few words. It is reminiscent of Viktor Pelevin's novel with the original title in Russian *Диалектика Переходного Периода (из Нюоткуда в Нюкуда)*. There are several versions of this title in English that can be found online, mostly on commercial sites of the booksellers. While there is more or less no disagreement on how to translate the first part of the title—*The Dialectics of Transitional Period*—the second part in parentheses appears in different translations, for instance, “*from Nowhere to No Place*”, “*from Nowhere to Nothing*”, “*from Nowhere to Anywhere*”, but also as “*from Nowhere to Nowhere*”. My title, *Transition to Nowhere*, was coined independently of Pelevin's and points, as mentioned at the beginning of this preface, at the general collapse of the historical teleology of the post-communist transition. It does not reflect so much upon the question of where precisely this transition starts. An ideological teleology, however, invents its starting point itself. Thus, it could have also been “*from nowhere*”. In this sense Pelevin's title appropriately complements mine.

At the end I would like to thank those without whom this book would never have been published: Naomi Hennig, who helped me decisively in making the final selection of the included essays; Lina Dokuzović, who copyedited several of the essays; Paolo Caffoni of Archive Books, who knew well when to patiently wait for the texts and, even more, when to exert pressure on me to finally deliver

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[Instead of a Prologue]

The Post-Communist Robinson

As it is well known, “robinsonades” are stories in which people imagine the alleged origin of their societies. They take their name from Daniel Defoe’s famous novel *Robinson Crusoe*. As Karl Marx once wrote, such illusions are typical of every new epoch. No wonder that socialism also has one. It was written by Soviet prose authors Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov under the title: *How Robinson Was Made*. The story takes place in the early thirties in the Soviet Union. Here, a short summary:

In order to bind its audience to the publication, the editors of a youth magazine came up with the idea of serializing a novel, a Soviet robinsonade. They found a writer and soon they had the result: a story of a young Soviet man, who after being shipwrecked found himself alone on an uninhabited island. Of course, he overcomes all obstacles—wild animals, exotic plants, rain forest, etc.—and after three years is finally rescued by a Soviet expedition. The writer really succeeded in delivering a story that is almost as exciting as the original Robinson Crusoe, but the editor-in-chief was still not satisfied. He found the story not truly Soviet. The readers, he objected, don’t feel anything of Soviet reality. “Where is the Party committee, the leading role of the trade union is not visible at all,” etc.

So the novel had to be rewritten. In a new version two men survive the shipwreck, the Soviet Robinson and the president of the local Party committee. But the editor-in-chief is still not satisfied. He wants more people on the island, at least two more Party members and a woman in the role of the treasurer to collect the membership fee. The writer accepts to make these changes, too, but he insists on a love story between Robinson

and the young treasurer. However, the editor-in-chief vehemently opposes it. He is strictly against, as he calls it, cheap boulevard-eroticism, but insists unconditionally that the money from the membership fees is secured in a fireproof cash box. So the writer somehow manages to come up with a scene where a wave washes ashore a fireproof cash box. Unfortunately the novel is still not good enough. The Party meetings on the island must be held regularly. For that reason one needs a table, a tablecloth, a water jar, a little bell, etc. But it is still not enough. The editor-in-chief lacks the masses, “all layers of the working people.” An uninhabited island becomes a peninsula. One eventually has to give up on the shipwreck and, finally, on Robinson himself because “he was anyway an inappropriate gestalt of an unsatisfied man.” The editor-in-chief is now pleased. He finally gets a really adventurous text that is also, beyond that, an excellent piece of art.

If it is true what Marx wrote about robinsonades—and sometimes even he was right—namely that each epoch invents its own one, then we should also be able to imagine a story of a post-communist Robinson.

Such a story could eventually take place in the office of a men’s magazine, a local edition of a world-famous brand from the palette of products of an international media corporation, whose head office is situated in one of the Western metropolises. Against the wishes of many of those working in the post-communist media to launch a new beginning after the collapse of the *ancien régimes*, as though there had been nothing before, their media project often had a dubious pre-history. So our men’s magazine also has what we could call its own communist past. Originally, it was a weekly of the socialist youth whose main purpose was to promote healthy socialist values, culture, sports, socially acceptable and useful entertainment and of course the Party. Immediately after the regime change the magazine was privatised under never-clarified circumstances. The new owner was quite a shady character who had worked earlier in the so-called ideological commission of the Party where he had been responsible for propaganda-questions and played a significant role in the former socialist press as a sort of grey eminence of the state censorship.

In the meantime, he has changed his political attitude and has become a PR adviser of a new, recently also ruling-party that has found its place in the political spectrum on the far right, nationalist-populist end. Whether this guy actually bought the magazine and if he did, the amount he paid for it, wasn't known to anyone. However, according to rumours, the old/new secret service was heavily involved in the deal. But times were not easy. Shortly after the democratic change, civil war broke out in the country. The former youth magazine immediately recognized a new chance in carrying out its patriotic duty and transformed itself into a smear-sheet attacking the local minority. The new editor-in-chief, a former dissident who had recently returned from exile, was appointed. As a matter of fact, he didn't have any journalist experience whatsoever. But this was actually no problem at all, since his militant nationalist and anticommunist editorials had succeeded almost instantly in changing the old socialist image of the magazine. Additionally, thanks to his close connections with the new rulers, they were swimming in money. At that time the magazine also allocated whole pages to letters to the editor. Although the readers didn't have any interesting ideas except some very mean ones about the neighbouring nation, the audience and especially the politicians liked their letters very much. The voice of the people always sounds good even if it has nothing to say. From this time comes also a very dark story that is today only reluctantly remembered. The magazine published regularly lists with names of alleged enemies of the people. Unfortunately some of those poor guys were later found in a nearby river, dead of course. It is a very sad story, but was there anything one could do about it? The times were hard and the birth pangs of democracy are sometimes very, very painful indeed.

Later in the course of normalization, as the post-communist transition was also called, when the young democracy had gone through a certain process of maturing and started to bear its first fruits, that is, when there were no more corpses swimming in the abovementioned river, the magazine changed owners. The new owner was a not-very-well-known but obviously quite powerful Western media corporation which at that time already owned almost all other media not only in the country but in the neighbouring countries as well.

Again, nobody knew how much, if anything at all, the new owner paid for the magazine. Around the same time, the old owner suddenly disappeared. According to some rumours he started a new life with his family in a villa in the Swiss Alps. However, there was also another version of his disappearance. Some believed that he lay, set in concrete, in the basement of a new shopping mall on the outskirts of the city. But at that time nobody was actually interested in his fate. Whether the mafia was to blame for privatization or the privatization for the mafia had in the meantime become an academic question. On the other hand, the new big boss was much more interesting. On the top of the Western media corporation was sitting a former, very influential European politician who became well known in the region during the war as the head of an international stability program. His prestige and connection he used, obviously, to build the biggest media monopoly in the region, an empire of power and influence that in many respects dwarfed the classical agitprop machinery of the collapsed communist regime.

As consequence of this second privatization, the former magazine of socialist youth finally became a modern men's magazine—an already proven brand in the West with which the corporation had a special contract. An experienced journalist from the house was appointed editor-in-chief ("Finally a true professional"). Actually, he already used to be the editor-in-chief. Even under the terms of socialist market economy, he succeeded in selling the socialist youth magazine surprisingly well. His formula of success was simple: a little bit of sex & crime, much more pop & rock 'n' roll and never enough good photography. Already at that time nobody cared much about the ideology. However, certain ideological aspects were still making an impact on the professional consciousness of the old/new editor-in-chief despite all the post-communist brainwashing. He believed that a means of public communication, even if it was in private hands, still had a social role to play. Such a role, as he was convinced, mustn't necessarily contradict private interest.

And what could be a social role of a commercial men's magazine in the time of post-communist transition? To forge the vision of a new man who embodies all those values that would

put a post-communist society on the road to economic prosperity and liberal democracy and liberate it from old socialist fallacies, [such as] the belief that individuals don't have to be concerned much about their own fate, since there is the society to take care of them. The man of the coming democratic society should be a strong individual, autonomous, enterprising and willing to take a risk, a person full of character who is always prepared to accept a new challenge and to react promptly to ever-changing circumstances. He must be able to create a new world from the ruins of the collapsed system. Who if not Robinson Crusoe could provide a good role model for the new man of post-communist transition? So the idea was to create in the form of a serialized novel a new hero—the post-communist Robinson.

The editor-in-chief quickly found an appropriate author—a young, ambitious female writer (gender balance) who had recently returned from the United States, where she got her PhD in postcolonial studies from a prestigious university.

Her first suggestion that Robinson could be a woman was not accepted: “The men are our target audience, dear colleague.” However, they agreed quickly on a further change in the story. Now, Robinson survived a plane crash.

Soon there was a first version of the story on the desk of the editor-in-chief. The hero was a young manager, also educated in the West, who was flying to the southern hemisphere for his first winter holidays after an exhausting but very successful year in the office of an international company. After he saved himself, as the only survivor from the plane, on a desert tropical island, he struggled with the forces of nature, with wild animals, hunger, loneliness, etc. Thanks to his extraordinary intelligence, wit and endurance he managed to survive until he was rescued three years later. There was especially one detail in the story the editor-in-chief was thrilled with: the young man, who, like so many others from his generation, was raised during communism as an atheist, suddenly—on a dark, stormy night on the desert island—discovered God. So he was rescued as a deep believer, or, as the story suggested, he was rescued precisely because he was a believer.

“I like the story,” said the editor-in-chief, “but we should work more on some details.” First of all he found all the items Robinson rescued from the wreckage of the plane—an axe, a fishing-set, a pistol, compass, a box with various drugs, etc.—not very convincing. It looked like Robinson was provided with a survival kit. Instead of that, he gave the writer a list of other items that should be washed ashore after the plane crash. Among them: a tie, a famous men’s fragrance, golf clubs, an expensive watch, an exercise machine and—the writer couldn’t believe her eyes—a private TV channel and even a cabriolet. “What for God’s sake could one do with a cabriolet on a desert island,” she asked desperately. “I don’t know, you are the writer, not me,” returned the editor-in-chief.

In fact, all these items belonged to very famous brands with which the magazine and the media corporation, as its owner, had advertising contracts. So a place had to be found for them in the story. The writer tried really hard and found some use for all of them, even for the TV channel: at the end of the story Robinson was rescued by a TV-team that came to the island to shoot a reality show there. Only for the cabriolet did it seem that there was no solution. However, her talent and diligence bore the palm again. Robinson found on the beach only the logo of a famous car producer. Moreover, on the neighbouring island he bartered it for a good deal of gold and pearls. The natives recognized in this little piece of glittering metal the embodiment of their godhood.

Very proud of her literary achievements she presented the improved version to the editor-in-chief. He was actually quite happy with the result. *Eau de toilette* as disinfectant, golf-club as weapon, TV-team as saviours, everything was perfect except: “But what should one do with gold and pearls on a desert island?” This was of course only one more challenge for the writer.

This time there were two castaways saved on the island: Robinson and the employee of a famous western bank. By the way, it was precisely the bank that had recently supported the media corporation with a large credit in its attempt to speculate with shares on the international real estate market. He swam ashore with a laptop (of course, also from the list of brands) and immediately

opened a branch of his bank on the island. Robinson was now not only able to sell the gold and pearls but also to invest his money. Literally in the last moment before the battery ran out he bought lots of shares on the expanding financial market and as a cherry on the cake a large villa in California with a pool and a sea view.

But the editor-in-chief was now openly disappointed: “This is all too naïve, a cheap promise of happiness. Even an agitprop-amateur would never have written this. What is your real idea of capitalism? One makes a small effort and soon is able to spend the rest of his life on a sunbed at the pool, with a sea view of course. The times of utopia are over, dear colleague. Look at our post-communist reality—crime, corruption, poverty, wars. But this is only foreplay for what awaits us in true capitalism. There will be no mercy, no society to take care of us, only the struggle for survival. Like in nature. This is why we have chosen Robinson. He is the best role model for our people if they want to have any future. For that reason, please, no illusions. Communists tried to spread them and what happened? Communism collapsed. We must finally face hard reality, capitalism as it really is. No gold and pearls will fall from heaven, as you are dreaming of. Even I learned it long ago in the Party school: There is no capitalism without crisis. This was Marx, right?” Despite his criticism, the editor-in-chief encouraged the writer to one last improvement of the story. She went home with only one concept in mind: the crisis.

So one day the waves swam a newspaper ashore. Robinson was jubilant. Finally, some news from civilization. But the whole of the front page was dedicated to only one event, the big stock-market crash. To make it short: he lost everything. The shares of banks and insurance companies he had bought earlier were now worthless. Also the villa in California was lost. With a golf club in his hand, he ran to the bank employee on the other side of island. However, the guy had already disappeared, of course with all the gold and pearls. This is what life looks like in nature she wrote, and added: *homo homini lupus*.

“And what now?” asked the editor-in-chief, “We cannot end our story in that way. It is too pessimistic. We shouldn’t discourage the people. One shouldn’t leave them without hope.

Otherwise they will become communists again. We need another ending.”

But the writer was now in despair. She had no more ideas. However, the editor-in-chief had one indeed: “I think we need working masses.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked, “What does it mean, ‘working masses’?”

“Ah, the youth today. It knows nothing about our communist past, as though life on earth started with the first democratic election. In America, too, they haven’t taught you that at university. Sure, individualism, egoism, every man for himself, alone. But the productive force of collective labour, social solidarity, they have never heard about them, right? I am becoming really nostalgic.”

But the writer seemed to get a clue: “If I understand properly, you actually mean the masses of taxpayers, right? They should help us get out of the crisis, I mean, to rescue Robinson, am I right?”

“If you like so. I must admit, my old communist language is of no use today. It is too ideological, far from reality. We don’t need it any more. So please go ahead with these taxpayers.”

Encouraged by his self-criticism she explained self-confidently: “You know, we call it ‘bail-out’ today. This is like a sort of truly capitalist social contract. I am sure, you have heard about it, Hobbes, etc. Each individual gives up a small part of his or her individual freedom and passes it to the sovereign so that all can live in peace and order. Otherwise they would exterminate each other. Here the taxpayers give up a small piece of their tax payments in order to save capitalism. Otherwise they would go down with it. And this is no option, true?”

“Of course, this is no option. So let us bail out our Robinson. We will make a peninsula out of the island and let the masses of taxpayers in.”

The young writer was exalted. She was so thrilled by the peninsula idea that she even believed she came upon it herself. The problem was solved. Moreover, now on the peninsula one can get rid of that bloody state of nature. One can even get a sovereign who would bring order and justice. And who can take this role in the times of democracy? People of course, who else? Thus, free elections, parliamentarianism, rule of law, independent media, a strong civil society, etc. Finally the story made some sense. Not only Robinson, but the future was rescued.

But the editor-in-chief was not so euphoric. He himself found the story actually stupid, a piece of trash for the so-called target audience (he hated the word). But it was his job and he has been doing it for years as a matter of routine, without any enthusiasm. To be truly enthusiastic, as he believed, is only possible if one is doing something socially meaningful, and this was for sure not the case with this Robinson-story and with the imbecilic men's magazine. Actually, his retirement was already due, and he was dreaming about playing with his grandchildren, not about rescuing capitalism. Unfortunately, shortly after he had been promoted to editor-in-chief and after he had seen his pay-slip, he took out a huge loan from the bank, bought a luxurious apartment, a new car (leased, of course) and started to invest intensively in a private pension fund that was making big gains speculating with shares on the financial market and therefore promised extraordinarily high pensions in the future. Additionally, he was paying for a quite expensive private college in Great Britain for one of his daughters. So there was no other option than to go on that way. In fact, he himself was in a squeeze.

After the writer had gone, he confided his anxieties to his colleague, whom he knew from the times of the socialist youth magazine: "You know," he said, depressed, "I am asking myself who is going to bail *me* out if things go wrong?"

She recalled immediately that famous sentence with which Ilf and Petrov concluded *The Golden Calf*: "Don't worry, like Ostap Bender you'll have to retrain as a caretaker." And then she added, laughing: "Or better yet, as a communist." But he became immediately serious: "This is not funny any more."



Chapter I:

The Condition Called Post-Communism

The post-communist condition is often associated with post-politics: general consensus upon the only remaining path of history agreed beyond any ideological differences. It implies one essential feature, an all-encompassing notion of culture, or more precisely, the ability of culture to translate all conflicts into its own language. Having in mind our general inability to translate in reverse, all efforts to retrace the conflicts that have been shattering post-communism to their social causes were doomed to failure from the very beginning. They have been perceived and dealt with as basically rooted in cultural differences. In this way also the old Cold War divide has survived—as a boundary between two identity blocks, the West and the East. Even the very political event that created the condition of post-communism, the toppling down of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989/90, was defined as a “catching-up revolution”, whose goal was to readjust the East to its normative *telos*, embodied in the actually existing West. This, however, degraded all the sublime ideals in whose name people in the East revolted against their oppressors. Freedom, justice and equality have turned into a set of culturally particular “western” values.

A sort of cultural desublimation of the political and generally social causes of historical change is an essential quality of the post-communist condition. It has prevented the utopian surplus that is inherent in any genuine claim to freedom from transgressing cultural boundaries and affecting the actual social relations and political reality, which are imperfect no matter where they exist. At stake is, concretely, a missed opportunity for a change of the world for the better, in the sense which Kant spoke of French revolution. Only if such a change is recognized as a “tendency within the human race as a whole”—and not as a need of a culturally inferior and historically belated part of the world to catch up with its superior and advanced counterpart—a political event will acquire the meaning of revolution. To put it more concretely: nuclear arms have survived the Cold War and continue to threaten “the human race as a whole” not because of the catching-up revolution that has not yet succeeded in the East, but because of the revolution that was missed in the West.

The Revolution of 1989: The Past of Yet Another Illusion

What really happened in 1989? A glorious democratic revolution that has radically changed our lives, freed millions from the totalitarian nightmare, and opened new historical perspectives? Most of us take this simple and convincing story for granted. No wonder, it has become a self-evident element of our historical consciousness, telling us most directly who we are in today's world, where we historically come from, and where we are going. According to this tale, we have once and for all left totalitarianism behind, there is no other thinkable alternative to the way we live now, and the only imaginable future is one that ceaselessly repeats this already realized dream.

Let's say it openly: This story is a very naive one, indeed. Nonetheless, nobody would seriously challenge it. Even though our real experience is at odds with this story, we are unable to tell another. Isn't that then the best reason to doubt it and openly ask: Was the "Revolution of 1989" really a revolution similar to those events, like the French Revolution two hundred years before it, in which humanity experienced the exclusively modern phenomena of a radical change and a totally new beginning?

As a political overthrow from below of one state order and its replacement with another, the events of 1989 qualify as an example of an authentic revolution. The images we remember from that time, like the one of the masses in the streets of Prague who peacefully (in a "velvet" manner) collapsed the ancien régime and installed a new democratic government, confirm this impression. Similar scenes of popular uprising were seen all over Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Even when mass protests turned violent, like in Romania, they always achieved their primary political goal: the replacement of a one-party communist system with capitalism and parliamentary democracy.

One particular scene expresses, in the most profound way, the entire meaning of the Eastern European revolution. No one can forget the masses of people climbing over the Berlin Wall, which for nearly thirty years had separated two parts of the same city, two parts of the same nation, two parts of Europe, two antagonistic ideological systems, and even the so-called first world from the so-called second world. Without question, the fall of the Berlin Wall is the genuine symbol of the Revolution of 1989.

In a peculiar way, this event evokes the very meaning of the Greek word *symbolon* (from *symballein*, literally “to put together”): two parts of a whole once cut in two but now rejoined to form a universally recognizable sign of an original unity. The collapse of the Berlin Wall was an event that, in a way, directly displayed its symbolical meaning, triggering another association: the myth about the origin of love as told by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*. According to this myth, human nature was originally one, and we were a whole. Because of the wickedness of humankind, Zeus decided to cut each human in two. After the division, the two parts searched for their other half, longing to grow into one. This ancient desire for one another, the need to make one from two, which seeks to reunite our original nature, this pursuit of the whole is what Aristophanes called love. He believed that, in returning to our primeval nature, we would be able to perfectly attain “true love,” making humankind happy and blessed.

The fall of the Berlin Wall illustrates the same mythical motive. Its erection and the manner in which it divided Berlin—its squares, streets, and its inhabitants—into two parts seemed an abnormal or unnatural act; its final collapse was experienced not simply as a reunion of the two separated parts of the city and its people, of all of society and its genuine nature, violently suppressed under communism. For this reason, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the failure of the entire communist project it symbolized have never been understood simply as the victory of

one political system over another, of one ideology over another, but as something much deeper and stronger, namely the ultimate victory of human nature over its worst enemies, ideology and politics. Moreover, the overwhelming enthusiasm that the fall of the Wall awakened all over the world is the result of this extra-ideological, extra-political, and extra- historical symbolic surplus. The real source of that enthusiasm, which, according to Kant, not only accompanies every genuine revolution, but more importantly discloses its true meaning, resides in this meeting and melting of two ideologically and politically divided parts—of one city, one nation, Europe, the world—into one another, in this oneness, in this coming of human nature into its own, which is the very expression of that ancient need and desire Plato called love.

Nobody, for sure, is claiming that all those political events that brought down the Eastern European communist system were simply a revolution of love. However, the fact that the Berlin Wall has come to symbolize those events, that the scene of its destruction flared passions and caused such an enthusiastic identification with the Revolution of 1989, lies in the fact that it echoes the old Platonic myth about the origin of love. The Revolution of 1989 undoubtedly reminds us of the immortal promise, to recall the words of Aristophanes, of Eros, the greatest benefactor of humankind who guides us in life back to our own nature and gives us high hopes for the future. This explains the strong emotional appeal of the Revolution of 1989 as well as its deep impact on today's world.

In this context, one cannot help but recall Freud's theory of Eros. In opposition to the death drive, which destroys things and breaks them apart, Freud saw Eros's main purpose as binding individuals together and producing ever-greater unities. The whole process of civilization (in the original German, *Kultur*), according to Freud, is in the service of Eros who combines single individuals, then families, races, peoples, nations, and ultimately all of us into one great unity, the unity of humankind. However, Freud's discovery of the conservative character of instincts is even more important in his theory of love. Freud was actually convinced that all instincts tend towards the restoration of a previous state of affairs.

Although they appear to be forces striving towards change and progress, human instincts instead are seeking an ancient goal, the same goal Eros pursued in Plato's myth about the origin of love.¹

Let us now sum up our argument: The fall of the Berlin Wall echoes the myth of Eros not only in terms of an epochal victory of love that has finally reunited what communist totalitarianism previously separated, but also in terms of the regressive, restorative tendency of the democratic Revolution of 1989, in short, its essentially conservative character.

With this argument, we leave the vague world of mythical associations and step into the world of harsh reality. What happened in the former communist countries after 1989 was actually one single historical process that we can describe only as the restoration of capitalism. No matter what we call it, transition to democracy or belated modernization, one fundamental change occurred everywhere in Eastern Europe—the change in property relations, better known as “privatization”: what under communist rule used to be common, collective, or state property is now in private hands. All those individuals (and there are many pretty serious people among them who were anything but communist dogmatists) who believed that the famous “expropriation of the expropriators,” that is, the collectivization of private property—primarily the means of production—enforced during the Communist revolution, was historically an irreversible act were proven brutally wrong by the new reality. However, they were not the only ones taken by surprise. The actual political subject of this radical change was not, as the victorious liberals had expected, the celebrated free individual of emerging democracy, but rather an old one that suddenly awoke from its historical sleep—the nation, which provided the institutional framework for that change. The political, juridical, executive, and, before all, the ideological apparatus of

1. In his famous essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) (vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud [London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1955], 57–58), Sigmund Freud explicitly quotes Aristophanes's speech from *The Symposium*.

the nation-state is today the ultimate guarantee that what is now private will never again be common. Finally, if there were a simple answer to the question of what actually happened in 1989, it would be: nation and privatization. In this context, democracy was a secondary phenomenon, often nothing more than an excuse for both.

Of course, this becomes clear only in light of an essentially conservative character of the Revolution of 1989. Russia is a perfect example. What appeared there, in the wake of 1989, to be a historical step forward toward capitalism and democracy was actually a step backward—from the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 to the Russian bourgeois revolution in February of the same year. In terms of political subjectification, the events in Russia also exemplified a move backward from a class of workers and peasants with its revolutionary institution of councils (*soviets*) to the nation and its state institutions, from the concept of proletarian internationalism, with its emancipatory universalism, to Russian nationalism and its claims, to the imagined glory of the Russian past and sacred egoism of its future. “Russia! Russia!” is what the masses were shouting at the beginning of the 1990s on the streets of Moscow, as Boris Groys reminds us in his reflections on the so-called post-communist condition.² He stresses the fact that the struggle for national liberation brought about the Russian anticommunist revolution. What those masses really wanted was Russia to step out of the Soviet Union. They were actually struggling for Russian independence from Soviet authority. The civil war fought in the early twentieth century between Reds and Whites was in fact a historical clash between the “Communist International” and nationalist Russia. The Communists won in 1917. After 1989, Russian nationalists took revenge on them, as if this new democratic revolution, this final victory over communist totalitarianism, was nothing but a move backwards to a moment in the past when communist intervention succeeded in stopping history, violently disrupting a “natural” development and dividing the nation, its allegedly original unity destroyed,

2. Boris Groys, “Die Geschichtsschreibung sucht ein neues Subjekt: Die postkommunistische Lage,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, no. 7380, 11 June 2004.

into hostile parts fighting each other—all in the name of some artificial, transnational society, a utopia of social justice, prosperity, and humanism.

Similar regressive and restorative processes have taken place all over post-communist Eastern Europe. The consequence, as Groys points out, has been an omnipresent conviction that communism, which has in the meantime completely disappeared from our historical horizon, was simply a kind of disruption of an otherwise “normal” development of Eastern European countries, a pause or delay that has left behind no traces except for some sort of a “backlog demand.”³

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has stressed this point even more explicitly. He defined the Revolution of 1989 literally as a “catching-up revolution” (*die nachholende Revolution*), describing it also as a “rewinding” (*rückspulende*) revolution, the actual goal of which was to makeup for missed developments in Eastern Europe.⁴ In the events of 1989, he saw a clearly articulated wish by Eastern European nations to catch up, in constitutional terms, with the legacy of European bourgeois revolutions and, in a sociopolitical sense, with the forms of communication and lifestyle of advanced capitalism, especially that of the European Union.

Isn't it strange? We are talking about a genuine revolution, yet this revolution has brought about nothing new. On the contrary, this old-fashioned, well-known, and, as we are supposed to believe, historically tested and sufficiently proven life now seems worth catching up to and repeating. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, we celebrate the final reunion of violently divided and separated parts, a symbolic victory of love that has created one from two and restored a natural primeval unity. And yet, these parts, although reunited, are still not equal, and there is no balance whatsoever between the two sides of this new wholeness, as if the old divisions have survived somehow in the guise of a new asymmetry within one and the same unity.

3. Ibid.

4. Jürgen Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990), 180.

Berlin, Germany, and Europe are divided again in two, one half having existed for ages and the other just beginning, one half occupying its firmly established historical place while the other strives to catch up. This new difference is one between two forms of life or, to use philosophical terminology, between one whose essence has already become identical with its appearance and another, belated and alienated, that has yet to accommodate to this standard and find its own true essence.

The concept of belatedness, the fundamentally conservative character of the Revolution of 1989, necessarily implicates and in fact reproduces the divisions of old and new in today's Europe. These divisions are surely not the same as those that once marked the cold war. What makes them different is the simple fact that we are no more able to experience these divisions on the level of political systems or economic production. This doesn't mean, of course, that political and economic differences have disappeared. What has changed in fact is only how and where we become aware of them. Only the conceptual space of differentiation has changed, becoming now exclusively cultural. Today's differences and divisions can be seen and recognized as such only if they are articulated solely in cultural terms. Culture has completely absorbed everything that used to be our social, political, or historical experience and dominates almost the entire space of our everyday life.

This is the reason why political conflicts that are shaking our world today become visible only as conflicts of competing cultural differences. The former *Realsozialismus* ("actual existing socialism") is the best example of this phenomenon. Its previous political unity, based upon communist ideology that has melted away since 1989, reappears thereafter as a common space of opposing cultural differences. In this perspective, inexplicable eruptions of regressive ethnic nationalisms are perceived to be the cause of post-communist political conflicts, including bloody civil wars. As if particular cultural values are the only source of post-communist political mobilization. The radical change in property relations, with its historically regressive character, as mentioned above, took place at the same time and may also have caused some of the post-communist social tensions and conflicts, or at least had some influence on them.

This has never crossed the political minds of those in victorious capitalist democracies.

Moreover, culture also seems to have become the ultimate horizon of our experience of time, for it is only in the cultural terms of today that we can still differentiate the past from the present and make sense of historical change. This applies to the communist past too, which can only be experienced today in the guise of a different culture. In short, either we remember the communist past as a particular (communist) culture or we don't remember it at all. There is obviously no memory except for cultural memory. And, what is more, there is no cultural memory without its collective subject, which is, in the first place, a nation.

We face here the crucial paradox of European identity, which, as many expect, should simply emerge out of itself as a cultural by-product of political and economic unification. What still divides Europe today, what cuts it in two different parts in spite of the ongoing unification, namely its communist past, cannot be remembered by Europe itself. Every attempt to do so is doomed from the beginning, for a common past must necessarily fall apart into different nation-based cultural memories. The only communist past we remember today is always only a Polish, a Bulgarian, a Russian, or an East German one, but never a common European communist past. This paradox implicates an intrinsic impossibility of remembering communism at all. For there is no politically viable notion of a transnational collective memory, and there is no subject of this memory that would be able to remember communism for what it—despite of all the terror that had accompanied it—essentially was: the concept of a universal emancipation that, from the very beginning of its political history, had been a global phenomenon. What our memory today cannot keep hold of from the past is precisely this exclusively universalistic experience of communist political engagement. To the simplest member of any communist party, it was once perfectly clear, as a trivial fact, that his or her main cause was a better world, over and above the prosperity of his or her local community or the interests of its particular cultural identity—ethnic, religious, or gender. No cultural memory can recall today the worldliness of the communist political experience.

This points to the crucial antinomy of our historical experience today: As a particular culture necessarily structures this experience today, it is not able to recall what once had been thought, felt, and done not only beyond the bounds of any particular culture, but against cultural particularity as such. In a simpler and more concrete way: We know very well that the communist past belongs to both Eastern and Western Europe and, what is even more important, to the world as a whole, and yet we don't have the conceptual means to recall this past as such. This is not because cultural memory is itself blind to the common character of the communist legacy. Far from it! In her *Requiem for Communism*, Charity Scribner has shown very clearly how recent aesthetic and cultural production in Europe (both Eastern and Western) is not only well aware of a common loss created by the collapse of communism, but also able to redeem it by accomplishing some sort of a Freudian "labour of mourning" (*Trauerarbeit*) for the lost experience of collective solidarity, among working men and women typical for industrial labor.⁵ Industrial modernity, i.e. its forms of life and work, has historically exhausted its utopian potential on both sides of the former iron curtain and not simply the Eastern European side, where state socialism collapsed in 1989. Our (collective, European) cultural memory, as Scribner believes, should recall today "and claim its reminders as sites of reflection and resistance."⁶

However, what has been offered here as the solution turns out to be yet another problem. Whose cultural memory is this? To what political collective does it belong, or, what is today nearly the same, from which particular culture does it originate?

5. Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 2–23. In her book, Scribner analyses a number of literary texts, artworks, and other cultural projects (museums, collections, etc.) that in some way deal with the communist past, including the writings of Christa Wolf, John Berger, and Leslie Kaplan; films of Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and Mark Herman; the German museum collection Offenes Depot; *The Detachment*, an installation by the French conceptual artist Sophie Calle; sculpture by Rachel Whiteread, etc.

6. *Ibid.*, 4.

It is not difficult to see what this cultural memory is really about in this context, namely to keep hold of something that has never existed before—communism as a particular culture—and to do it in the name of a European, global collective that politically doesn't exist yet. Cultural memory, therefore, is not about making up for what we have lost in the collapse of communism, but about producing a new cultural need that can be rather easily satisfied by this cultural memory itself. In fact, cultural memory is nothing more than this need, the satisfaction of which it pretends to fulfill.

The belief that we can come to terms with our past only after we have translated it into some sort of cultural difference is more than a mere illusion. It affects our perception of reality, transforming it into a force of an ideological compulsion; that is, it determines primarily the way we become subjects in our world and not simply how we see it. The fact that this world appears to us today mainly as a space of cultural diversity, therefore, has nothing to do with objective reality. On the contrary, it is the moment of our subjectification, of the way we internalize this reality and draw experience from it. And we can rationally internalize today only what we previously have culturally externalized. In other words, we can assert ourselves as the self-conscious subjects of our lives, knowing who we are, where we historically come from, and where we are going, only in relation to some sort of culturally generated otherness, the Other of our past, the Other of all sorts of cultural particularity, the gendered Other, the neglected, marginalized, suppressed, abused, victimized, silenced, "subaltern," or otherwise excluded Other. Of course, only an ideology can provide such perfect transparency. And it does, since ideology too has survived the Revolution of 1989. It, therefore, is no wonder that ideology affects again today's political reality.

The project of European unification perfectly proves this. It too follows an ideological pattern, one that is articulated—and legitimized—precisely through the relation to the Other of Europe, the Other of its communist past, the East,

its cultural, religious, underdeveloped, backward, belated Other.⁷ In this way, the whole process of the so-called enlargement of the EU appears to us as a heroic endeavor to cope with countless differences, in short, as being part of an epochal struggle with the Other—a sort of gigantomachia of our time—that will decide the future of the entire world.⁸

In reality, only difference that has proven precisely not to be so, difference that is basically the same as the subject who supposedly recognizes and includes it, will have the chance of being recognized and included, that is to say, an already parliamentary democratic difference, “properly” privatized, based on free-market economics, backed by the so-called free and independent media, tolerant of minorities, or simply “pro-Western,” whatever that means.⁹ So the right to be different can be claimed only by those who have already become the same or even “more than the same.” This is actually the case of the so-called “new Europe,” which is obviously the name for a capitalism that is even more capitalistic than its Western original, that is, more “flexible,” more reckless, more Darwinian, or simply freer from old social(ist) constraints, from the last remnants of the institutionalized collective solidarity, in short, from the dying social state. “New Europe” denotes a more radical and more fundamental “democratic” politics than classical Western democracy, of course, only in

7. Against this ideological background, we can understand certain unexpected and curious developments on the European art scene, like the sudden interest in so-called Balkan art. Over a period of only one year in Austria and Germany, there were three large and quite ambitious exhibitions of the art from the Balkans: *In Search of Balkania* (October–December 2002), curated by Roger Conover, Eda Cufer, and Peter Weibel at Neue Galerie Graz, Graz, Austria; *Blood and Honey: Future's in the Balkans* (May–September 2003), curated by Harald Szeemann at Sammlung Essl, Klosterneuburg, Austria; and *In the Gorges of the Balkans* (August–November 2003), curated by René Block at Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany.

8. Following Zygmunt Bauman (“The Great War of Recognition,” in *Recognition and Difference: Politics, Identity, Multiculture*, ed. Scott Lash and Mike Featherstone [London: Thousand Oaks, 2002], 137–51), we may call it also “the great war of recognition.”

9. See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, (London: Verso, 2001), 18–30.

terms of a reawakened nationalism and a revitalized, mostly religiously inspired conservatism. Finally, it points to a culture that is both more traditional, more conservative, and, at the same time, more consumption oriented than its Western archetype. One cannot but ask openly: What is post-communist Europe? Is it the "old Europe," still holding on to the last values of its socialist legacy, or the "new Europe," which got rid of them. Which Europe then is the belated one, having to catch up with its alleged standard, and which is the Europe that is already ahead, waiting for the other to catch up? Which is the original Europe and which is its copy? Finally, is there any difference still worth mentioning, let alone recognizing or including. To put the question quite openly: Why the pompous struggle with all this differences? Why all this trouble with the Other?

The notion of cultural difference plays a decisive ideological role in the project of European integration. As a kind of fetish, it provides a perfect ersatz for the trauma of dealing with the crucial political problem of Europe's future, a problem that has been completely foreclosed from its political reality today. The question regards the final fate of European nation-state(s): Will Europe, in its further political unification, follow the logic of sovereignty and become a more-or-less federal nation-state, having a democratically elected government (one citizen, one vote), in which case it would have to abolish definitely the sovereignty of its member-states, or will it completely abandon the logic of sovereignty and build an essentially new type of political community based on some new idea of democracy that will go beyond already known concepts of parliamentary democracy, political parties, citizenship, etc.? The problem with this question is that every possible answer is a radical one. No decision can be made in this matter without risk and conflict or without some sort of a radical (revolutionary!?) change, in short, without dealing with radical political difference, one that cannot be simply recognized and included according to the principle of (cultural) tolerance. This is the reason why this challenge is so traumatic. It hits the European ideological edifice at its very foundation, in the mechanism of its subjectification. What constitutes the political and historical identity of today's Europe, if not dealing with cultural differences, recognizing and including the Other, following the imperative of tolerance? To put it quite simply, Europe is

nothing but a culture of tolerating cultures, which is mistaken for social essence. What appears to be the genuine political cause behind the project of European unification, the one that transcends the logic of capitalist expansion giving it a “higher” legitimation, is in fact a purely ethical attitude. The United Europe of our future is, therefore, primarily a matter of belief, in a religious sense rather than a political one.¹⁰

One is perfectly justified in asking here: What the hell does art have to do with it? Hopefully, nothing! That is probably the only adequate answer to this question. Any art that would adopt the project of European integration as its commitment or justify its social function in the name of it, is likely to betray both its aesthetic reason and its political meaning.¹¹ Europe is all but an innocent cause. If the European politicians are so keen to forget this, artists shouldn’t be.

As Jacques Rancière has reminded us, it is precisely by virtue of art’s distance from what we perceive as politics proper that it becomes truly political.¹² This applies fully to the historical situation in which we live. Art’s very distance with respect to Europe after 1989, that is, to the ideological and political cause of Europe’s integration, to the moralistic promise of its democratic tolerance, and the aggressive narcissism of its self-asserted cultural superiority, to the whole myth of 1989, makes a European art today both aesthetically and politically respectable. For art and Europe have nothing essential in common.

10. Ibid., 23.

11. In a speech at the General Assembly of the European Forum for the Arts and Heritage (EFAH) in Lille, France, in October 2004, Adrienne Goehler, who was then the senator for Science, Research, and Culture in Berlin and since 2002 has served as the curator for the *Hauptstadt Kulturfonds* (cultural capital funds) of Berlin, told an anecdote about artists’ applications for financial support in 2004. The majority of their project proposals began with the sentence: “In the year of the enlargement of the European Union...”

12. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, (London, New York: Continuum, 2004). “Commitment is not a category of art. This does not mean that art is apolitical. It means that aesthetics has its own politics, or its own meta-politics.” Ibid, 60.

In Communism's Shoes: On the Critique of Post-Communist Discourse

What is post-communism? We do not yet know. But if there were such a thing as post-communism, then its crucial, eponymous moment is its relation to its communist past. To understand this relation, to unveil its historic character, and to comprehend its discursive meaning, the first step would be to answer the question: What is post-communism?

There is no better place to approach this stated relation than the Museum of Communism, an institution that constructs and exhibits the post-communist attitude towards the communist past. Let us visit one of these museums that have recently mushroomed in the former East Bloc.

I.

A curious object attracts attention in the Warsaw Museum of Communism: A pair of left shoes.¹ The accompanying text explains that these were a type of bonus that the workers of the 'Warszawa' Steelworks received for their labor.²

1. I thank Stefan Nowotny for his notice of the shoe exhibit at the Warsaw Museum of Communism. The museum, which was still under construction in the fall of 2003, is housed in the Warsaw Palace of Culture and Science. Erected in 1951, this monumental skyscraper (supposedly the fourth largest in Europe) was given to the Polish people as a gift from the Soviet Union, and originally named after Josef Stalin.

2. "A pair of left shoes—a bonus that each worker of the 'Warszawa' Steelworks was given in the mid 50s," says the English caption.

In the context of the museum, the message about these shoes appears absolutely clear: This system was a fair swindle; it fooled people and forced them to live an irrational and absurd life, it made them accept the unbearable and do the impossible, etc.

But even if one really believed that these shoes were an authentic symbol of communist totalitarianism, with all its absurdity and disrespect for human dignity, a certain doubt is unavoidable, probably due to the utterly provocative banality of such symbolism: Do these shoes really tell us the truth about communism, and show us what it really was like? Or, conversely, do they represent a crude simplification of the communist past? What if, instead of testifying to the impossibility of the communist system, they expose the post-communist impossibility of sensibly dealing with the communist past? What if the two left shoes weren't about yesterday's communist world, but rather about our quest for the truth of our (communist) past?

To find a way out of this dilemma, we avail ourselves of a historico-cultural analogy that inevitably evokes the stated pair of Communist Shoes.

As is well known, Frederic Jameson attempted to explain the difference between modernity and post-modernity using examples of two pairs of shoes: The famous farmer's shoes by Van Gogh, and Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*.

Drawing on Martin Heidegger's famous interpretation, Jameson claims³ that Van Gogh's farmer's shoes—a painting that to him constituted a canonical artwork of high modernism—inherently established the possibility of their hermeneutical reading. They ask us to reconstruct the very original situation to which they refer and which they attend to as an artwork. Jameson calls this situation “the raw material” of the piece. In a hermeneutical analysis of Van Gogh's farmer's shoes, they appear as a kind of key to, or symptom of, a much broader reality³ which turns out to be its ultimate reality.

3. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London/New York: Verso, 1996), 6ff.

In the concrete case of Van Gogh's painting, this reality is a past world of an agrarian calamity; a world reduced to the brutal, primitive and marginalized existence of a farmer. But this miserable, drab and dark farmer's world, of which Van Gogh's shoes "bespeak", simultaneously appears in paradoxical contrast to the style of the artist—the bright world of his colors. Jameson sees the utopian dimension of the artwork in this contrast, as if art compensated the calamity of reality with a new utopian realm of senses.

Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* generate a very different situation for reception. They hardly allow the beholder space for reading. It appears—Jameson explicitly stresses this—as if they had nothing to tell us.

The fact is, one cannot understand Warhol's shoes according to a hermeneutical pattern. They do not recover a lost, objective world of which they were once a part. Jameson finds the paradigmatic example for post-modern art and for post-modernism in Warhol's shoes, that reveal three additional differences to modernism: Firstly, a new kind of flatness or superficiality; secondly, the absence of a utopian gesture (on the contrary, instead of compensating a drab reality with the colorful world of paints, the colors of the *Diamond Dust Shoes* appear as if they have been erased, in order to disclose a dead, black-and-white substrate of the photographic negative); and thirdly, the absence of affects. Actually, the expressivity itself vanishes, i.e. its condition, namely the split of a subject into a wordless internal sensation, on the one hand, and an often-cathartic expression intended for the outside world, on the other. The modernistic depth that allowed for metaphysics on the interior and exterior has been flattened out entirely in post-modernism.

It is obviously not difficult to guess how this relates to the shoes in the Warsaw Museum of Communism. They appear to be a strange hybrid of both pairs of shoes analyzed by Jameson. At first sight, the *mise-en-scène* that is presented to us follows a hermeneutical model typical for modernism. The shoes are there in order to convey a truth, namely the truth about the lost communist reality. They are a kind of key to, or symptom of the communist evil, for the cynicism of the rulers and the helplessness of the subjects, for the entire irrationality and absurdity of the communist realm and experience.

These two left shoes demonstrate the impossibilities of communism; in fact, communism is directly demonstrated as an impossibility. But it is because of this immediacy—they are not an artwork either—that these Shoes of Communism seem to escape a hermeneutic interpretative framework typical of modernism. They do not really seem to ask the beholder to reconstruct the world which they “bespeak” in any way. The shoes serve as a key to the communist past; but this past does not seem to be a raw material that requires treatment and processing, finalized into any kind of truth by our historical, existential or moral interpretation. One cannot (and does not have to) delve into the depths of communism that these shoes are supposed to mediate. As if we were dealing with a strong expression which defies producing inner, in itself speechless, content. As if the Shoes of Communism were completely flat, just like the post-modern shoes by Andy Warhol, as if they only had one single, manifest dimension, which does not conceal anything latent.

What we discover in the content of Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, Jameson explicitly emphasizes, is in fact a fetish. And essentially everything about the shoes in the Warsaw Museum of Communism indicates a similar nature of fetish. But what does it mean to see these shoes as fetish?

As is well known, Freud found the roots of fetishism in the perception of sexual difference.⁴ He believed that we, as children, experience the anatomical gender difference as either the existence or non-existence of a penis. According to his theory, the reason for a lack of penis in the woman is ascribed to a castration, consequently developing an intense fear in connection to the loss. The most important thing for the resulting development of a fetish—and for our attempt at understanding the nature of fetish in the “Communist Shoes”—is the ambivalence of the reaction to the fear of castration: The simultaneous acknowledgement and disavowal of the female castration, this ambivalence of the subject, is perpetuated in a simple manner—the two irreconcilable positions continue to exist side by side. The fetish-object—originally devised as a substitute for

4. In his study “Fetishism” conducted in 1927. See Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, [Collected Works] Volume XIV, 310–317.

the missing penis in a woman—is inserted as a means to normalize the fission, a kind of fixation and stabilization of the “friendly” co-existence of otherwise mutually exclusive forces.

Of course, we would rather not claim that the Shoes of Communism are to be understood as a fetish-object of a sexual perversion. What interests us is the sociological and historico-cultural relevance of Freud’s fetishism fable.

And its most prominent advocate precisely extracted this from the debate on colonialism, particularly in post-colonial theory: namely Homi Bhabha. He tried to interpret the ethnic and cultural stereotypes typical for the colonial discourse (say, Asians were double-tongued, black Africans were sexually permissive, etc.) as a form of fetishism.⁵

Why then, does the colonialist stereotype take on fetishistic traits? Because the perception of cultural and ethnic difference in the colonialist discourse is also extremely traumatizing and evokes a strange mixture of fear and fascination; because here, too, the reaction to this trauma creates an ambivalence that is based on the simultaneous recognition and denial of otherness—primarily perceived as cultural and ethnic otherness in this case; and because here, too, the ambivalence of the (colonial) subject is constantly repeated until it is pacified, stabilized and normalized by means of transforming the very traumatic cultural difference into something more established: a fetish-object. In it, the most diverse and mutually preclusive convictions can actually co-exist peacefully in the split subjectivity.

Bhabha believes that the colonialist stereotype operates within this kind of fetishistic scenario. Based *a priori* on a political normativity, stereotypical images are simply dismissed as positive or negative. But this does not merely negotiate a simplified form of insight, or a false representation of reality. The stereo-

5. See „Die Frage des Anderen. Stereotyp, Diskriminierung und der Diskurs des Kolonialismus“ [The Other Question. Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism], in Homi Bhabha, *Die Verortung der Kultur [The Location of Culture]* (Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 2000), 97–125.

type in this context has another, far more important function as a medium of subjectivation. Frantz Fanon already thematized the positioning of the subject in the stereotype discourse of colonialism. For Bhabha, too, this stereotype discourse primarily poses an abridged, simplified form of identification. He ultimately defines the stereotype as “an arrested, fetishistic form of representation within the discursive field of identification.”⁶

We would like to argue that the two left shoes in the Warsaw Museum of Communism are to be understood within a framework of such fetishistic stereotypes. We have already emphasized that they do not directly serve as a key to the reconstruction of a lost communist world in accordance to a hermeneutical interpretative model typical of modernism.

It is necessary to add that their post-modern flatness and the emptiness of their latent content are not exhausted in a post-modern art and culture that has “nothing to say” (as in Jameson’s example of Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*), but they lay bare a new dimension: the discursive field of identification for a post-communist subjectivity.

So if we claim that the Shoes of Communism were a fetishized stereotype to us, then we mean that their image is understood according to a precast perception. We are talking about knowledge that we already had before we entered the Museum of Communism. That is to say, we were already convinced—in terms of an existing political normativity—that communism is actually the name for a failed utopian project which never had a chance of being realized; that the system of ‘actually existing socialism’ was in fact a deceit of the very working class which it was meant to liberate; and that the socialist economy was based on ideological dogmas instead on the natural laws of the free market, which is why it was unnatural, irrational, abnormal, and inevitably condemned to failure; that socialism was a social system alien to human nature, which was the reason why one did not voluntarily accept this system, but was forced to do so by means of totalitarian violence, etc.

6. Ibid., 113.

We had to know all this in advance in order to perceive those two left shoes in the Warsaw Museum of Communism as authentic Shoes of Communism, and to behold in them the reality of our communist past. They have become a key, symptom, or symbol of communism after all, but only after having already been perceived as a stereotypical negative image. Only as a stereotype do they allow us to hermeneutically capture their “reality.”

That is why it is incorrect to say that these shoes, unlike the post-modern ones by Andy Warhol, had nothing to say. They actually tell us a lot, but only insofar as we already knew it in advance.

To us, this ready-made knowledge explains an important post-communist feature: its anti-communist character. It is not at all self-evident to say that post-communism was anti-communist. This kind of argument even sounds contradictory. But we must not take the anti-communism typical of post-communism as a political conviction, which always articulates itself as a historically contingent political position, namely from within the frame of a concrete political struggle. In this case, to be an anti-communist means to be situated in an authentically political—antagonistic—relation to the idea and political practice of communism. What, however, defines post-communism, and gives it its name, is precisely the disappearance of communism from the historical scene and from the settings of real political struggle. This, thus, implies the structural impossibility of confronting communism as a real enemy in the contemporary political arena. In that respect, post-communist anti-communism is not a political phenomenon at all. It already belongs to a post-political world, since it does not refer to a post-communist political reality. But this does not imply that it was irrelevant at all. As a frozen, arrested awareness that could only be reproduced and activated in fetishized stereotypes (such as the Warsaw shoes), this anti-communism regulates the most important processes of post-communist subjectivation. It poses as an authentic conviction, but indeed is a stereotype that—again quoting Bhabha—“mediates knowledge of difference as a form of multiple and contradictory convictions, while simultaneously denying and masking it.”⁷

7. Ibid., 114.

As a matter of fact, nothing discloses the ambivalence of post-communist subjects as much as the anti-communism expressed in the form of the fetishized stereotype. Bhabha describes the stereotype as an “impossible object” because it demands the impossible from us—to derive our identity out of the fantasy of a pure, undifferentiated origin.⁸ Such fantasy leaves no space for communism or the traumatic ambivalence that it has left behind in our historical experience. Therefore, communism absolutely must be declared as impossible within the drama of post-communist subjectivation. And this is the message of the Warsaw Shoes: Communism was something impossible.

But it is a fact that communism was very possible. Communism was sustained for over a hundred years as an ideological and political movement in a historical reality; it won over considerable numbers of modern intellectual elites, it excited broad masses, and mobilized entire peoples for its ideals.

How could this have been possible, when any child today could see that communism is impossible, just as it is impossible to walk in two left shoes, to even make a single straight step in them?

To reiterate once more: A fetish is also a kind of denial. It is both the historical fact—masked by the shoes—of a possibility of communism, as well as the complicity of all those “innocent” masses, whose enthusiasm and/or opportunism made the communist event possible. The truth of our historical experience is highly traumatic and denied: One was very able to walk in the Shoes of Communism; in fact, one was even able to take part in the long marches in them.

The historical truth is not among the goals of knowledge that the two left shoes of the Warsaw Museum of Communism mediate. But it is the function of this knowledge that regulates the mechanism of post-communist subjectivation. It delivers a firm point of identification for a deeply divided post-communist subject, while normalizing its ambivalence and the often painful argument about contradictions of its reality—including the power that does not control it; the resistance that admits failure;

8. Ibid., 120.

and its dependence on sociological authorities and on a “free” capitalist market—that actually constitute the subject. This is knowledge of a difference, simultaneously proclaimed as a phobia and a fetish within the stereotype, that affords identity to a post-communist subject. Bhabha stresses that the stereotype is the main strategy of colonial discourse.⁹ As we see, it structures the post-communist discourse at the crucial point of identity formation, too. This is the reason why we can attribute a similar meaning to our Communist Shoes as in the colonial discourse, where the fetishized stereotype about skin color is the most important signifier for cultural and ethnic difference. Ultimately, the situation of a post-communist child that sees the two left shoes at the Warsaw Museum of Communism is not that different from the reaction of that little white boy in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, who rushes into his mother’s arms: “Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up.”¹⁰ The didactic mission of the two left Shoes of Communism results in a similar, infantile phobia: Mama, the communist (the one in the two left shoes) is going to eat me up. But who is this communist in post-communism, where could he be found and what does he actually look like? We would like to find the answer in another Museum of Communism, which, in contrast to the one in Warsaw, has already been completed.

II.

It is not easy to find the Museum of Communism in Prague. It is located in the center of the city, but in a strange way, it seems hidden. It is housed in a casino, or to be precise, it is a kind of a subletter of the Palais Savarin, that also houses a casino. “We’re above McDonalds, across from Benetton...” These additional coordinates are written across an image of Lenin, printed on an advertising postcard distributed by the organizers, who seem to want to help potential visitors. And to avoid any ideological misunderstandings from the start, it says “Viva la Imperialism!”

9. Ibid., 97.

10. Frantz Fanon, *Schwarze Haut, weiße Masken*, [*Black Skin, White Masks*] (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1980), 74.

It sounds like a joke, and it is a joke. The Museum of Communism in Prague is not a serious cultural institution. It is really a kind of a self-parody of post-communism, and this is precisely why it is so interesting. It is impossible to find out anything about the communist past, but instead, one learns about the post-communist impossibility to deal with this past.

Of course, the authors argue the converse. A leaflet (produced for interested journalists) claims that the museum was an “authoritative historical account” of the communist phenomenon. But really, the visitors are told an authentic tale within 450 square meters. This tale is less about communism itself and more about the unlucky people subjected to the historical misfortune of being assaulted by communist totalitarianism and kept prisoners for a while. But the happy ending of this tale is the ultimate victory of capitalism, and it is from this happy perspective that the story is retrospectively told.

The historical drama of communism is supposed to have taken place in three acts: the dream, the reality and the nightmare. The museum circuit is structured accordingly in three main stations. First, one believed in the Marxist-Leninist utopia, but then was disappointed by socialist reality, which finally ended in a totalitarian nightmare. This simple story of daily life in socialist Czechoslovakia is supposed to be resuscitated and visualized by means of a bunch of tangible artifacts: the Soviet and Czechoslovakian flags, busts of communist ideologists, photographs taken at that time, documentaries, and numerous objects of utility. All objects are organized in groups of themes: industrial work, the educational system, agriculture, the art of social realism, the organization of the people’s militia and army, the secret police and the machine of oppression, the urban devastation of Prague, the cultural opposition, the dissidents, etc.

These thematic arrangements are summarized stereotypes and one can imagine the motto of the museum: “We will show you what you have always known about communism.” The communists, for example, prioritized the development of a heavy industry that ultimately only produced scrap and an ecological disaster. In order to visualize this, a “socialist workshop” was reconstructed in one corner of the museum that displays old

tools, a rusty bicycle, a broken moped, etc. This pile of junk is supposed to materialize the entire calamity of socialist methods of production, and is exhibited next to a MIG-cockpit and a poster of Yuri Gagarin, both of which (particularly the first cosmonaut in world history) are symbols of progress of humankind. It is no wonder that this juxtaposition does not evoke any kind of contradiction in the context of the museum. The discursive space of post-communism does not know any contradictions by principle. According to this, even “the first man in space” further proves that the communist utopia has always been a lie. Just like in Warsaw, the visitors of the museum are expected to have a preconceived knowledge of the past: The Soviet Union did not advance human space flight for scientific objectives but for entirely different motives, for example, for ideological goals (to distract human beings from their miserable reality), or as propaganda (to prove the superiority of a communist system over that of capitalism), or simply, to expand communist power and control across all of humankind. The Soviet space program was never “real”, unlike the American.

The most important exhibit of the Museum of Communism in Prague is a poster, hung outside in the street. It is supposed to invite passers-by for a visit and shows the image of a Russian Matryoshka that is strangely disfigured: She has teeth, but they are shark teeth. The conceptual essence of the museum’s omnipresent post-communist anti-communism culminates in this image. We have already emphasized that anti-communism is irrelevant in terms of *realpolitik*, but it is all the more important within the theater of post-communist subjectivation. It is within this performance that the Russian shark-Matryoshka takes on a role. Her image offers the ideal platform for the formation of post-communist identity: a tangible stereotype, both a fetish and a phobia, and the cultural Other. Communism may have been a project for universal emancipation at one point, but today it is merely a female Russian who threatens to castrate.

The location of communism is acted out in this Museum of Communism, and its entire history with its traumatic historical presence is fixed retroactively as an essentialist cultural identity. What used to be a universal claim for emancipation of the world’s proletariat is now particularized, relativized and projected as the cultural Other.

One cannot recover communism in its own historical identity, because it was never there to begin with. It came to us, uninvited, from the East, and it was deported back to where it came from. Our communist past has become its cultural identity.

In this sense, the concept of the Museum in Prague complies with the general pattern of contemporary liberal-democratic ideology that dismisses the communist project as culturally explicable and as a culturally locatable totalitarianism (e.g. “Asian despotism” or “Byzantinism”, etc.) According to the conception,¹¹ which is based on a separation of communism and modernity in principle, the Bolshevik Revolution would have had an anti-modernist character. It was a culturally conservative reaction to the expansion of western, modernist culture, particularly in terms of human rights and democratic freedom. This conception of communism is hegemonic, and it is visible everywhere in the main strategy of the so-called transition process, forced onto Eastern European countries with the notion of retroactive modernization. In this sense, post-communism is an arena of modernization, a place where modernity needs to make up for something.

The identification of communism with cultural difference does provide an advantage for the political subject of post-communism, for the nation. The history of the origins of communism, including its ideology and political practice, is not the way the museum’s story begins, but, on a meta-level, rather with the birth of a modern Czechoslovak Republic after the first World War, with the story of the success of democracy, with her economic development and her cultural progress. Communism, which supposedly developed out of Karl Marx’s¹² romantic

11. See Luciano Pellicani, “Modernity and Totalitarianism,” in *Telos* 112 (Summer 1998): 3–23.

12. The caption in the museum explains: “Communists justify the practice of revolutionary terror and dictatorship of the proletariat with the alleged irrefutability of the ‘scientific’ theories of Karl Marx, the bohemian and intellectual adventurer, who started his career as a romantic poet with a tendency to apocalyptic idealism. He studied Hegelian philosophy and after that became a sharp-edged journalist with a focus on economical and political affairs. [...] The attempts to realize Marxist theories have sacrificed over 100 million human lives according to some estimates.”

enthusiasm and Lenin's¹³ resentment, only starts later, and it comes from the outside as a kind of intruder, into the idyllic life of a young and successful democratic nation.

But at the end of the story, in the so-called "Velvet Revolution", this nation finds itself again. However, we should not understand the historical circle in the sense of Hegel's circle. To stress once again, post-communism is not a dialectic space, but above all, a platform for identification, which rather operates on Lacan's imaginary order, just as is the case in the museum in Prague. In the museum—just like in a mirror—the nation recognizes itself as a whole. Here, it is able to perceive its identity (that was split by communism), as a whole, with an undifferentiated root.

But this is certainly not a reason to perceive the museum in Prague as a serious institution that represents national culture: It is evident at first sight that this kind of aura is missing. The narrative and exhibition strategy is a lot like the one in a museum of local history. But it does not raise any plausible credibility that it will preserve rescued treasures of the past for future generations. This museum has other plans. It wants to sell itself, or rather, what it exhibits (the history of a nation that has been liberated from communism) as a commodity. The initiator of the museum is not the state with all its cultural institutions, but a private entrepreneur: An American who earned a lot of money with fast food chains after the fall of communism. Today, this entrepreneur makes no secret out of profiting from the Museum of Communism. But the inhabitants of Prague are utterly uninterested in the museum, and in fact its target audience does not include the nation, whose heroic victory over the communist monster is the theme of the museum. The museum was built to cater to Western tourists that literally flood post-communist Prague.

13. The text accompanying Lenin's exhibit reads as follows: "The chief cause of his irreconcilable hatred against the establishment was the death of his older brother, who was executed because of an attempted murder of the Tsar. [...] From the beginning, Lenin tried to enforce the tactics of betrayal and relentlessness that became characteristics of the communist regime."

This is why it is misleading to say the nation itself generated a site for imaginary identification within this museum by means of dealing with the history of communism. The museum offers commodities to the global customer in an “instant-culture-shop” of sorts, which projects an imagined identification of this nation, or more precisely, the stereotype of a national history that was shaped by communism. The relationship of the nation to its own history and to itself ultimately is always about the relationships among the people themselves, and is the secret behind every attempt to cope with memory and the past. But this relationship, in terms of true commodity fetishism, has taken on a fantastical kind of relationship among objects.

Jameson insisted that the fetishism of post-colonial culture should not only be understood in a Freudian sense, but also in a Marxian sense. This is also applicable to the post-colonial stereotype whose fetishistic character articulates itself in the form of commodity. But this brings us to another subject, namely, to the relationship between post-communist culture and global capitalism, and furthermore, to another “Museum of Communism.”

III.

There are shoes in the *Documentation Center of Quotidian Culture in the German Democratic Republic* in Eisenhüttenstadt¹⁴ as well: a pair of red women’s shoes produced by the company “Salamander” in 1984. They are a product of communism, but strangely enough, they do not symbolize the communist mode of production, because they were one of many brand products contracted for by Western companies, produced in GDR-factories, and primarily destined for Western markets. It was possible to purchase these products in so-called “exquisite” stores, but access to these stores was limited to only the privileged customers.

The Documentation Center in Eisenhüttenstadt indeed contains a collection of different quotidian objects from the times of the GDR. What differentiates this institution from the ones in Warsaw and Prague is the absence of any kind of anti-communist motivation. It is not dedicated to retrospectively get even with

14. Formerly Stalinstadt.

communist totalitarianism, and it is not hostile towards the past that it is remembering. In fact, its concept seems to lie beyond any ideological premises. Its explicit intention is to prevent the memory of quotidian culture—of the state that perished with communism—from falling into oblivion.¹⁵ The center legitimizes this project in two respects: On a politically pragmatic level, it is supposed to actively participate in the process of the post-communist transition, particularly in the German reunification. By providing a space for information exchange, it is supposed to help promote a mutual knowledge and understanding of the history, living conditions and societal developments of a German nation that was once divided by communism. In a normative aspect, its concept assumes that a society that desires a better future needs to learn from the lived experience of the past: “The only thing that will explain how we have arrived at the present, in other words, ‘who are we?’, is our gaze that attempts to strive for a future in light of the past.”¹⁶

German history particularly demonstrates how disastrous oblivion can be, how ignorance and taboos can overshadow memory and produce deep fissions between generations and political convictions. The project is all about the future, and the societal objective is “to benchmark both positive and negative aspects to achieve future goals and aspirations of the society.”¹⁷

So the Documentation Center is an institution for a collective memory that has a societal mission in a most authentic way. The quotidian objects from the past of the GDR are gathered by the people themselves: They deliver them voluntarily, and in turn, the museum keeps a record of all their memories and stories that are attached to every single object. In this way, the Documentation Center can develop a cultural memory by means of an open dialog, as opposed to collecting dead objects

15. See museum booklet *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* containing texts by Wolfgang Kaschuba and the director of the museum, Andreas Ludwig (Eisenhüttenstadt: Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, 2001).

16. From Wolfgang Kaschuba’s introduction. *Ibid.*, 4.

17. *Ibid.*, 5.

that are kept in a museum like a gravestone. If the new, collective subject is to face a better (liberal, democratic and capitalist) future, then the knowledge about its own historical background should not be an ideologically alienated knowledge, imposed onto it by an instrument of power and control. On the contrary: the people themselves are empowered to write their own history in an authentic communicative practice. It is not hard to guess which set of ideas are behind this concept. Of course, it is the famous educational ideal of total transparency, towards a democratic future for “us” that works through memory and re-appropriates all the repressed (and thus alienated) moments of history with all its taboos. To evoke an obvious concept of Habermas, a perfectly transparent totality can be reestablished through self-reflection. And that it is also about emancipation goes without saying. The collective memory not only liberates us from ghosts of the past, it protects the existing democratic public from possible blackouts, it creates unity of a split democratic subject and it even helps us resist global threats.¹⁸

At this point, a question seems inevitable: Is all this about remembering a lost (communist) utopia or is it about the utopia of remembering?

It is obvious that a considerable part of the post-communist experience is the vision of a better future, and any kind of remembrance of a communist past serves this vision. The intrinsically cultural character is crucial and it fundamentally determines both this vision of a future and remembrance of the past. Just as the memory we are talking about here is exclusively cultural, the so-called better future can only be envisioned in a cultural completion. That way, the post-communist experience is attached to the ultimate cultural horizon, as long as it articulates itself through the medium of memory. If we say that this experience was utopian, then we mean nothing other than the immanent impossibility of exceeding cultural horizons, and our past remains as nothing but culture.

18. Charity Scribner also bases her *Requiem for Communism* on this assumption: “Yet today, when the forces of globalization are smoothing over Europe’s industrial wastelands, we can still keep hold of the Second World’s cultural memory and claim its remainders as sites of reflection and resistance.” Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge, MA/ London: MIT Press, 2003), 4.

This circumstance is typical for museums that deal with a communist past,¹⁹ including the Documentation Center in Eisenhüttenstadt (as well as the ones in Warsaw, Prague, and others), and it is also typical for the entire post-communist condition. But the reverse is valid, too.

If there is something like post-communism, then our experience of it is based on our articulation of the experience (the post-communist discourse), which is structured according to the model of a museum; and it basically means that the entire space of the historical, political, moral and theoretical experience is exclusively a cultural space. This particularly determines the post-communist relation to the political. Despite the fact that post-communism emerged from a political event—the decline of communism—it is not a name for a political condition, because it does not feature any politics that would be characteristic. It is only political as a phenomenon of changeover—under the worn-out term of the so-called *transition to democracy*—that post-communism is political; however, the language of these politics (and so the entire meaning) does not belong to the state of post-communism itself, but already to the victorious world of liberal democracy. But even here, it foregrounds the anti-communist character of post-communism, just like in the case of the Museums of Communism in Warsaw and Prague. This anti-communism is (as we have already stressed) not an authentic political phenomenon, but it articulates itself through the prism of cultural difference and is nothing but a symptom of an all-encompassing culturalization that post-communism shares with post-modernism. This does not automatically mean that we should be talking about a specifically post-communist culture. Post-communism is not only a culture; it is nothing but culture: Just like a Museum of Communism, it fails to present a culture of remembering a communist past or a culture of mourning a lost utopia. On the contrary: in fact, post-communism itself is a utopia, and that of a cultural memory, in which a culture has become a place for forgetting. It is a culturally constructed place in which the political, the economic and the historical are forgotten.

19. Meanwhile, there are over a dozen museums that represent the history of the GDR.

As mentioned above, the post-communist and the colonial subject relates to the past in a similar way. It evolves by identifying with a fetishized stereotype that paralyzes its historical experience and locates an ambivalence typical of fetishism: a simultaneous acceptance and denial of its communist past and the historical experience of the social and political struggles that were inspired by communist ideas. The Museum of Communism in Prague has already explicitly demonstrated that this ambivalence is a form of cultural location: Within the discursive field of post-communism, a universal emancipatory project like communism is translated into a particulate cultural identity.

A museum is known to be a place that can shape a collective identity. The exhibited objects talk to us only insofar as they are embedded in a larger—primarily collective, national—story. In his “Imagined Communities,” Benedict Anderson points out that the museum as an institution not only serves the formation of a nation, but also a colonization.²⁰ The European colonial powers have used the museum as an institution on many occasions—particularly the ethnographic museum—to artificially construct the collective identities of the people that they were colonizing. The museum (and this is also true for the Museum of Communism) is a place where cultural difference is constructed.²¹ Within spaces for remembering, the post-communist discourse thus necessarily articulates itself as a discourse about cultural difference. But what fundamentally differentiates the post-communist discourse from the post-colonial discourse is an antipodal direction of their cultural location. While post-colonialism—according to Homi Bhabha’s theoretical approach—proposes a normative vision of a so-called “third space” and imagines a transnational culture and the ideal of cultural hybridity, post-communism falls back on the nation to

20. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London/New York: Verso, 1991), particularly chapters 10 (“Census, Map, Museum”) and 11 (“Memory and Forgetting”).

21. See Giovanni Leghissa, “The Museum as a Metaphor of the Anthropological Discourse” [Das Museum als Metapher des anthropologischen Diskurses], in *Boundaries of the Cultural Concept: Meta-Genealogies* [Grenzen des Kulturkonzepts: Meta-Genealogien], ed. Stefan Nowotny and Michael Staudigl (Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2003), 111–133.

which it attaches the idea of an essentialist cultural identity. This difference must not be understood as a simple opposition between the post-colonial universalization and the post-communist particularization.

Both cases are universal concepts; only the universality of the post-colonial situation remains a purely cultural phenomenon (for example, as a process of a cultural translation, to once again use Homi Bhabha's term), while at least the post-communist universalism finds political expression in a national state. But the following is another problem: Even within the universal frame of nation-state politics, every fundamental political change could only be imagined in the cultural, whether it is an advancing political culture, a cultural memory, or an aesthetic subversion, etc. The social substrate of this kind of democratic change is always a so-called civil society, but the only field of a social agent located between a political and economic sphere is in culture. In this way, culture remains the only thinkable horizon for political change in post-communism as well.²²

The culturalization of all societal spheres is typical for post-modernism (and for post-communism, as we have localized), but it offers another quality: The cultural turn has always been a spatial turn. According to Jameson, an essential spatialization of temporal experience, which is characteristic of modernity, takes place in post-modernism.²³ Everything that we have experienced in a temporal dimension must necessarily work through a spatial matrix to find expression at all. This also applies to the communist experience, which was always unthinkable outside of temporality. If this is true, then the question arises:

22. The critique that appropriately reproaches post-colonial theory for totally culturalizing the term 'universalism,' resulting in its de-politicization, forgets this fact, and itself emphatically utilizes the nation-state as the only effective concept for a political universalism. See Peter Halward, *Absolutely Postcolonial. Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), particularly Excursus II: "On the Nation and Its Alternatives", 126–133.

23. See chapter 6 "Utopianism After the End of Utopia," in *ibid.*, 154–181. See also the chapter 4 "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," in Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* (London/New York: Verso, 1998), 50–73.

Can we understand the decline of communism in its temporal dimension at all? Did communism decline with time and not within time, as seen from today's perspective? This explains why this "post" in post-communism needs to be translated spatially in order to be experienced. It needs to have a cultural location and be territorialized. This is why the so-called post-communist studies are always linked to 'area studies'²⁴; and why, in order to attain its identity, a post-communist subject needs to construct a stereotypical world filled with fetish objects, a world which alarmingly resembles a museum (of communism). It is the darkening of the internal time, writes Jameson, which forces us to read our subjectivity from things that are outside of us.²⁵ It is no wonder that we imagine post-communism as a virtual museum of communism, in which our reflection of the communist past assumes the position of a curator who is troubled with an irresolvable problem: How can the cultural remains of a lost communism be exhibited next to a hundred million victims of terror in a way that is tasteful, informative, and, above all, without contradiction? Walter Benjamin warned us in his day that there is no document of culture, which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. We are talking about a historical experience that cannot be represented by a Museum of Communism and that cannot be articulated in a post-communist discourse (which is constructed according to the pattern of a museum). Benjamin explains that cultural history did not live up to the principal state of affairs.²⁶ As long as post-communist reflection is limited to creating the ultimate canon of a culturally perceivable communist past, it will be reproached for the same reason that Benjamin accused of cultural history: "Enlarging the weight of the treasure which accumulates on the back of humanity, but does not provide the strength to shake off this burden in order to be able to take control of it."²⁷

24. Usually it is called: "Post-Communist and East European Studies."

25. Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 52.

26. Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: The Collector and the Historian," in Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [orig. in German] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), 79.

27. Ibid., 80.

Now we can probably understand what those red women's shoes in the Documentation Center want to tell us. To repeat a seemingly unimportant circumstance once more, they were produced by "publicly owned factories," but destined for another market. What is presented to us as an artifact of a cultural memory, as a document of another culture, is actually a document of our present, which reveals a simple, and yet absolutely concealed, fact of everyday occurrence: The way the shoes most of us wear today are actually produced—through simple wage labor, often in a remote part of the world. Is this not strange? We have come to the Museum of Communism to experience the culture of our past, but instead we behold the presence of global capitalism. Instead of cultural difference, we have found the equity of power structures that critically determines the material reproduction of our life, both now and then. Capitalism has always walked in the shoes of communism and people still face its global hegemony with bare feet. This misunderstanding can be productive because it provides an opportunity to critique post-communist discourse. To question it means to explode its mechanism of culturalization. In other words, to sabotage the defining production of cultural difference. It is precisely this production of cultural difference that lets post-communism appear as a historical phenomenon of transition, an effect of major historical change and development. No! The Museum of Communism and the post-communist discourse that was constructed according to its paradigm are not a cultural or reflexive reaction to an epochal event of the so-called great democratic revolution in 1989 and the ensuing fall of communism. On the contrary: The grandeur of '89 is an effect generated by the narrative of the Museum of Communism and is a product of post-communist discourse. This is the reason why a critical reflection of the post-communist condition can only be developed in contradiction to what we have referred to here as post-communist discourse. One shall not confuse the communist past with cultural difference. And one shall not hope to find a better future in the cultural remains of communism either.

When we saw the red women's shoes in Eisenhüttenstadt, we did not see the difference between our communist past and an advancing transitional process, but we recognized the consistency with the past and found ourselves in a void of the ever-recurring sameness.

What happened here? We have arrived at the notion of a present that a historical materialist cannot do without, which is—according to Benjamin—“not a transition, but a notion in which time stands still and has come to a stop.”²⁸ And this present does not regard its past “just the way it actually was” but recognizes its own image in it “as was intended.” At last, this is our post-communist present that recognizes communism in the moment of its historical collapse, in a failed promise of the communist movement that was supposed to radically change power structures in the field of economic production. Communism did not simply decline by itself, nor was it defeated by our present. Rather, it has denied itself a future. The debate about this inner failure of communism and its historical consequences—that haunts our present—exclusively signifies the term ‘post-communism.’

Now we can give our fairy tale with the Communist Shoes a moral. Never ask: Who is this oppressed, helpless, pitiful creature that strayed through history in two left shoes? It’s you! You are the one who is walking in Communism’s Shoes, here and now!

28. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in Benjamin, *Collected Works* [orig. in German], Vol. I.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 702.

Children of Postcommunism

A curious set of metaphors marks the jargon of postcommunist transition: education for democracy, classrooms of democracy, democratic exams, democracy that is growing and maturing, but which might still be in nappies or making its first steps or, of course, suffering from infantile illnesses.¹ This language of postcommunism discloses a paradox that points at what is probably the greatest scandal of recent history: those who proved their political maturity in the so-called “democratic revolutions” of 1989–90 have become thereafter, overnight, children! Only yesterday, they succeeded in toppling totalitarian regimes in whose persistency and steadfastness the whole so-called free and democratic world had firmly believed, until the very last moment, and whose power it had feared as an other-worldly monster. In the struggle against the communist threat, that world had mobilized all its political, ideological and military forces, its greatest statesmen and generals, philosophers and scientists, propagandists and spies, without ever really frightening the totalitarian beast. Yet, despite that, it calls those who chased it away with their bare hands “children”. Only yesterday, those people got world history going again, after it had been lying on its deathbed, and helped it to walk upright again, after so long. Yet today, they themselves must learn their first steps. Only yesterday, they taught the world a lesson in courage, political autonomy and historical maturity, yet today they must

1. I owe the reference to child metaphors to Dejan Jović, “Problems of Anticipatory Transition Theory: From ‘Transition from...’ to ‘Transition to...’”, presented at the conference *The Concept of Transition*, Zagreb, 22–23 April 2000.

assert themselves before their new self-declared masters as their obedient pupils. Only yesterday, they were the saving remedy for fatally ill societies; today, they themselves suffer from children's illnesses, which they must survive in order to become capable of living. What miracle happened overnight? What wizard turned these people into children?

Of course, it was politics. The child that was suddenly recognized in these mature people is defined neither by an early stage of psychological development that was never really abandoned, nor as a result of the psychopathological phenomenon of infantile regression, but as a political being, a *zoon politicon* par excellence.

An ideology called “transitology”

The human being as a political child offers itself as the almost perfect subject of a democratic restart. Untroubled by the past and geared totally to the future, it is full of energy and imagination, compliant and teachable. It emanates freedom as though its pure embodiment, but actually it is not free at all. A child is dependent; it must be guided and patronized by adults. However, this only makes it all the more suitable for serving society, as the perfect ground for a new beginning. It neutralizes all the contradictions that the sudden irruption of freedom lays bare in society, above all between those who rule and the ruled. There is no relation of domination that seems so natural and self-evident as the one between a child and its guardian, no mastery so innocent and justifiable as that over children. One does not take their freedom away, but suspends it temporarily, postpones it, so to speak, for the time being. A patronized child as political being enjoys a sort of delayed freedom. And in case one day the promise of freedom turns out to be a delusion, one can always say that it was just a children's fairy tale. The repressive infantilisation of the societies that have recently liberated themselves from communism is the key feature of the so-called postcommunist condition. It comes to light in the ideology of the postcommunist transition, a peculiar theory that addresses itself to the task of understanding and explaining the postcommunist transition to democracy.

Here, cynicism becomes (political) science. From the perspective of this political science, postcommunism is understood above all as a phase of transition—that is, as a process of transformation of a “really existing socialist” (*realsozialistisch*) society into a capitalist democratic one.² Political science finds no reason to understand this transition in terms of a specific historical epoch. It lacks basic identity features: a specific postcommunist political subject or system, for instance, and a specific postcommunist mode of production, or form of property. In fact, political science does not need the concept of postcommunism at all. It prefers instead the aforementioned concept of “transition to democracy” and it even develops within this framework a special discipline with the task of studying this process: “transitology”. It is based on the cynical idea that people who won freedom through their own struggle must now learn how to enjoy it properly. The meaning of this paradox goes far beyond the historical situation in which the postcommunist societies in Eastern Europe found themselves after 1989.

The concept of transition was introduced by orthodox political scientists in the late 1960s and early 1970s to explain various cases of regime change, principally in South America and Southern Europe. “Transition” originally meant nothing more than “an interval between two different political regimes”, as a minimalistic definition from 1984 put it.³ This transition was always a “transition from”: “from authoritarian rule”, for instance, in the title of the book by O’Donnell, Whitehead and Schmitter. Basically, at that time, political science always reflected on the phenomenon of regime change retrospectively. It tried to draw lessons from historical experience *ex post*. It was not so interested in the future because the outcome of this sort of transition was more or less open. It did not necessarily end in a democracy; an authoritarian regime could be transformed into another form of authoritarian rule. At that time, it was still conceivable that a

2. Here I draw again on Dejan Jović’s lecture. I thank the author for providing me with its full text.

3. Guillermo O’Donnell, Laurence Whitehead and Philippe Schmitter, eds, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, 3.

military dictatorship in South America might be replaced by a Marxist or even a Maoist dictatorship. The Chilean people, for example, democratically decided to embark with Allende on a form of “socialist democracy”, but the military junta turned them in a completely different direction.

In those days, for political science, the world was still quite complex: there were not just two competing ideological–political systems and military blocs, but also a series of anti-colonial movements in the “Third World”, providing for a certain contingency of the political. At that time, it still seemed as though there was a choice, as though history had an open end. By the end of the 1980s something had changed, and transitology began to understand its topic differently. The process of political transformation was now to be determined in advance. Its goal is always already known—incorporation into the global capitalist system of Western liberal democracy. From that point on, the concept of transition has been almost exclusively applied to the so-called postcommunist societies and denotes a transition to democracy that began with the historical turn of 1989–90 and continues, more or less successfully, mostly in Eastern Europe. This condition is familiar to the “children of communism”. They grew up with the logic of historical determinism. The, however, it was the moving force of class struggle that was manoeuvring society into a better, classless future then. To be free meant, at that time, to recognize the iron laws of history and to yield to them. The trail to a better communist future was not only clearly blazed but also unavoidable.

Nowadays, they are told, they must have a similar experience; only this time, it is the General Law of History they have to obey unconditionally. The goal is clearly and distinctively set and its final attainment is guaranteed in advance. According to the new ideology of transition, there are no major obstacles on the way to democracy, so long as one strictly adjusts to the objective, external factors—economic, cultural, institutional, and so on. Sometimes a geographical position will suffice. “Geography is indeed the single reason to hope that East European countries will follow the path to democracy and prosperity”, writes one of the transitologists, who understands politics only as a

struggle for control over external factors: “if we really control economic growth and the institutional setting, it is very likely that democracy will occur.”⁴

Others go a step further. Our way to democracy is determined by nature itself. It is “a natural tendency and therefore not difficult to achieve”.⁵ Even the very idea of politics is based in Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection.⁶ The author of this Darwinist theory of democracy, Tatu Vanhanen, also believes that democracy is universally measurable. So he introduced the so-called Index of Democratization (ID) that shows us on which level of democratization a society is situated. Accordingly, he also constructed a ranking of democratic societies. In this list, created shortly before the collapse of communism, he classified sixty-one countries as democracies, five as so-called semi-democracies and eighty-one as non-democracies. Only countries that earned more than five ID points were classified as truly democratic. Those under that level were authoritarian. The two poles “authoritarian rule” and “really existing freedom” (i.e. liberal democracy), define a clear line of historical development: from authoritarianism to democracy. The transition is now teleologically determined—that is, designed from the perspective of its intended result—and consists of climbing up the scale of democratization to the top, the condition of realized freedom in the system of liberal democracy. One only has to follow the law of nature. Authority on one side and freedom (i.e. autonomy) on the other—these two poles also determine the ideal of an enlightened, modern education: the development of an immature child, still dependent on an authority, into an autonomous, mature citizen of a free society.

4. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, ix.

5. John Mueller, “Democracy, Capitalism, and the End of Transition”, in Michael Mandelbaum, ed., *Postcommunism: Four Perspectives*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996, 117.

6. Tatu Vanhanen, *The Process of Democratization: A Comparative Study of 147 States, 1980–88*, New York: Crane Russak, 1990, vii.

According to Vanhanen, the most important factors that affect his Index of Democratization are competition and participation. His formula is simple: the more democratic the system, the higher the level of participation and competition. The latter stands for the openness of political possibilities, for a pluralism of interests—that is, of political and ideological options. Under “participation” we should understand the voluntary involvement of citizens in political life and in making political decisions. A fully mature democracy requires mature democrats capable of autonomous thinking and acting.

On these conceptual premises, the process of postcommunist transition appears as an educational process following the ideal of education for maturity and responsibility. However, it also reflects all the contradictions of this old Enlightenment concept.

Education for immaturity and irresponsibility

The analogy between the historical development of humanity and the growing up of a child (its consciously controlled education) is, as is well known, an invention of the Enlightenment. Indeed, enlightenment is nothing but a transition from immaturity to maturity, or, as we read in the first sentence of Kant’s famous essay from 1784, “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity”, which he defines as the “inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another”.⁷ In the same sense that the immaturity is “self-imposed”, the maturity too should be achieved as a result of one’s own action. One cannot be simply declared mature—that is, released from tutelage, be it that of nature, God or some master, which is the original meaning of the idea of emancipation as an acquittal, a release from paternal care, being freed from bondage. The Enlightenment idea of a transition to maturity has more of a reflexive sense, a self-emancipation. Of course, this transition

7. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’”, in *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 17.

should never be mistaken for a revolution. Kant's concept of Enlightenment implies an emancipation that does not take place through a revolutionary leap, but rather as a reform in the manner of thinking (*Denkungsart*), as a continuous progression which alone is capable of securing the identity of its subject, as the subject of Enlightenment.⁸

In historical developments after Kant, the Enlightenment ideal of maturity—and with it the perception of emancipation as a long-term process with an open end—was pushed more and more into the background. Another idea of emancipation took its place. Emancipation was understood now as an act of liberation from an unjustly imposed domination. The goal of emancipation is not any more a mature man but rather a society free of domination. With this move “maturity” has lost the emphatic meaning of emancipation.

Curiously, it was not until 1945 that interest in the concept recurred. Of course, this was the time of a historic transition: from fascist dictatorship to democracy. The traumatic historical experience of the masses, who had blindly followed their Führers into the catastrophe, made the idea of autonomous, mature and responsible men and women attractive again. “Maturity” was now recognized as a precondition for democracy.⁹ After a long historical separation, “maturity” and “emancipation” met once again. This also influenced post-war philosophical reflection. Habermas, for instance, attached interest in emancipatory knowledge to an interest in maturity. At the same time, pedagogy discovered the concept of “maturity”; it became the goal of education, the very principle of an emancipatory educational science. The post-fascist transition envisioned the ideal of mature and responsible citizens as the final cause of the construction of a new, democratic society. It is no wonder that the process of postcommunist transition finds itself committed to the same ideal. Finally, the new condition understands itself as post-totalitarian—liberating itself ideologically and historically from both “totalitarianisms”,

8. Manfred Sommer, *Identität im Übergang: Kant*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988, 123.

9. *Ibid.*, 130ff.

fascist and communist: the so-called double occupation—a retroactive equalization of two ideologies and political movements that in historical reality fought each other mercilessly.

The postcommunist ideal of mature and responsible citizenship has been nowhere so clearly employed as in the development of so-called civil society, which, it is believed, is the true subject of democratic life, the social substratum of all democratic values, justice and well-functioning public and human rights. This civil society is supposed to be very weak in the East European societies liberated from communism. It is still “in nappies”, one might say, which is the reason it has to be first educated, trained, developed, got going.¹⁰ Surprisingly, nobody at the time asked the question: who, if not the civil societies of Eastern Europe brought the *ancien régime* to collapse? What was Solidarity in Poland if not the paradigmatic institution of a resisting, struggling and radically world-changing civil society par excellence? How has it suddenly become so weak if yesterday it was able to overthrow communism? Who has put the Polish workers in nappies, all those brave men and women who initiated the democratic revolution, withstood the brutal repression of the counter-revolution, and carried the struggle for democracy on their shoulders until the final victory? Who—and in whose interest—has put them thereafter in children’s shoes, diagnosed their children’s illnesses, sent them to school and set them exams?

These were the cynical ideologues of transition, the masterminds of the postcommunist transformation, as we can call them. However, their cynicism has followed a logic, the logic of domination. If “education for maturity and responsibility” is propagated in the interest of domination and thereby turns into an endless process about whose possible conclusion the educators alone decide, then the call for “maturity and responsibility” no longer serves, as Robert Spaemann writes, “to enlarge the circle of the mature, but rather the circle of those who are for

10. Those democratic activists in Eastern Europe who tried during the 1990s to get financial support from the West for their projects simply could not avoid the phrase “development of civil society” in their applications. It was as though this phrase was a sort of universal key for opening the cash boxes of the “free and democratic world”.

now declared immature”.¹¹ Thus the child metaphors that are so typical of the jargon of postcommunist transition turn out to be a symptom of a new power relationship. They point clearly to a repressive incapacitation or putting under tutelage of the true subject of the “democratic turn” and to its retroactive desubjectivation. We are talking about a constellation for which those words of Adorno, from his radio talk on “Education for Maturity and Responsibility”, still hold true, namely that “in a world as it is today the plea for maturity and responsibility could turn out to be something like a camouflage for an overall keeping-people-immature”.¹²

Again, in whose interest does it happen? Who puts the protagonists of the historical change under tutelage, who robs them of their subject-status? The question is as old as the Enlightenment concept of maturity. Hamann put it directly to Kant: “Who is ... the vexed guardian (*der leidige Vormund*)?”¹³ He saw him in Kant himself, or, more precisely, in the gestalt of the Enlightener. Today, these are the Western onlookers who didn’t take part in the democratic revolutions of 1989–90. Far from meeting the deeds of the protagonists of the East European democratic revolutions with the “wishful participation which borders on enthusiasm”¹⁴ with which Kant’s passive spectators once welcomed the French Revolution, they reacted to the overthrow of communism with a cynical “participation” that revealed the wish for power and domination. In fact, they recognized in that historical event, like Kant’s spectators of the downfall of the feudal absolutism of 1789,

11. Robert Spaemann, “Autonomie, Mündigkeit, Emanzipation. Zur Ideologisierung von Rechtsbegriffen”, *Kontexte* (trans), vol. 7, 1971, 94–102, 96. Quoted in Sommer, *Identität im Übergang*, 133.

12. Theodor W. Adorno, *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit* (trans.), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970, 143; Theodor W. Adorno and Helmut Becker, “Education for Maturity and Responsibility”, *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 12(3), 1999, 21–34.

13. Johan Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel* (trans.), vol. V, ed. V. W. Ziesemer and A. Henkel, Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1955ff., 289–92. See Sommer, *Identität im Übergang*, 125.

14. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* [1798], trans. Mary G. Gregor, New York: Abaris Books, 1979, 153.

a “progress in perfection” in terms of a “tendency within the human race as a whole”, but at the same time regarded this same tendency as having been long ago fulfilled in their own reality and therefore, speaking Hegelian, already historically sublated. “You want a better world, but the better world is us” was the Western spectators’ answer to the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe. In this sense, they are completely different from those who in 1789 so enthusiastically welcomed the news from Paris. While the latter caught sight of their own dream in the revolutionary reality of others, the former recognized in the revolutionary dream of the other nothing but their own reality.

The consequences of this difference could not be more radical. Those who finally crowned their struggle for freedom with victory in Eastern Europe have become, almost overnight, losers. This was not an effect of black magic but rather of hegemony. It is hegemony that made true winners out of the Western spectators, not only winners over communism but at the same time also over the protagonists of the revolution that brought down communism. Let us hear the declaration of victory in the words of this hegemony itself:

The armies of the winners did not, it is true, occupy the territory of the losers. Still, given the nature of the conflict and the way it ended, it was logical for the losers to adopt the institutions and beliefs of the winners. It was logical in particular because the outcome represented a victory of the West’s methods of political and economic organization rather than a triumph of its arms.¹⁵

It is not a coincidence that Michel Mandelbaum, the author of these words, and his colleague, political scientist John Mueller, speak explicitly of imitation as being the best way to democracy.¹⁶

15. Michel Mandelbaum, “Introduction”, in Mandelbaum, ed., *Post-communism*, 3.

16. Mandelbaum: “[W]here intense competition is the rule, [imitation] is the best formula for survival” (Ibid., 30). As a comment on the process of transition in Eastern Europe, Mueller writes: “Imitation and competition are likely to help in all this.” Mueller, “Democracy, Capitalism, and the End of Transition”, 138.

It could not be worse: not only are the protagonists of the democratic revolutions robbed of their victory and turned into losers; at the same time, they have been put under tutelage and doomed blindly to imitate their guardians in the silly belief that this will educate them for autonomy. It is not only the arbitrariness of the new rulers, but above all the logic of their rule, that reveals itself here.

Education for stupidity

The notion of “children of communism” is therefore not a metaphor. Rather it denotes the figure of submission to the new form of “historical necessity” that initiates and controls the process of the postcommunist transition. On these premises, the transition to democracy starts as a radical reconstruction out of nothing. Accordingly, Eastern Europe after 1989 resembles a landscape of historical ruins that is inhabited only by children, immature people unable to organize their lives democratically without guidance from another. They see themselves neither as subjects nor as authors of a democracy that they actually won through struggle and created by themselves. It has been expropriated from them through the idea and practice of the postcommunist transition, only to return now from the outside as a foreign object that they must reappropriate in a long, hard and painful process. In the strange world of postcommunism, democracy appears at once as a goal to be reached and a lost object. Thus for the “children of communism” the prospect of a better future opens up only from a melancholic perspective. No wonder, since their postcommunist present so remarkably resembles their communist past. It does not give them free choice. The “children of communism” remain what they once already were, namely marionettes in a historical process that takes place independently of their will and drags them with it into a better future. So they are very familiar with this strange form of social life we call “transition”. As is well known, so-called actually existing socialism was, according to its ideological premises, nothing but a sort of transition society from capitalism to communism. Thus, one form of transition has replaced another. However, both the absolute certainty and the pre-given necessity of the historical development have remained the constant of the transition.

As a result, the question of the future in postcommunism is considered as already answered, and the question of the past does not make sense. One does not expect the children of communism to have a critically reflected memory of the communist past. It is precisely for this reason that they have been made into children, namely in order not to remember this past. As children, they don't have one. Paradoxically, it is only in postcommunism that one gets a dubious impression that communism actually never existed. Already, in 1991, Jean-Luc Nancy spoke about the anger one is overwhelmed with when hearing all this empty talk about "the end of communism".¹⁷ The belief that history is now finally finished with Marxism and communism, and simply so, he found ridiculous:

As if history, our history, could be so inconsistent, so phantasmic, so flaky [*floconneuse*] to have carried us along for one hundred and fifty years on clouds that dissipate in a moment. As if error, pure, simple, and stupid error could be thus corrected, regulated, mobilized. As if thousands of so-called "intellectuals" were simply fools, and especially as if millions of others were even more stupid as to have been caught in the delirium of the first.¹⁸

It is not so much the suppression of communism as a historical fact, the erasure of the communist past with all its intellectual and political complexity from the historical consciousness of postcommunism, that evokes Nancy's indignation and concern, but rather the immense ignorance with which the postcommunist world refuses to wonder about this past and its afterlife, or to ask: "Why did this all happen?" Nancy sees in this the true, almost epochal stupidity of the postcommunist turn.

Of course, children are not stupid. However, one can make them stupid, or, more precisely, one can educate them for stupidity.

17. Jean-Luc Nancy, "La Comparution/The Compearance: From the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence'", trans. Tracy B. Strong, *Political Theory*, vol. 20(3), 1992, 371–98, 375.

18. *Ibid.*, 376.

In this respect, a hundred years ago, Freud wrote of intellectual inhibitions that culture implants in its pupils through education to make them more obedient and compliant. He differentiated three types of such thought-blockage—the authoritarian, the sexual and the religious—to which correspond three “products of education”, namely the good subjects, the sexually inhibited and religious people. He understood these forms of intellectual atrophy (*Verkümmerung*), as he also called it, as effects of *Denkverbot*, a ban imposed on men and women in their childhood, a ban on thinking about what was most interesting to them. In Freud’s time, it was above all the suppression of sexuality that had become the self-evident task of education. Once the *Denkverbot* was successfully implemented in the realm of sexuality, it was extended to other spheres of life, becoming in this way the most important character trait of the whole personality.

What was at that time sexuality has become in the world of postcommunism politics itself. While the children of communism are virtually encouraged by their educators to liberate themselves sexually and to come out, as loudly as possible, with their hitherto suppressed sexual identities, to embrace unconditionally all secular values, and to become (instead of good subjects of the totalitarian state) self-conscious, free acting members of a democratic civil society, their liberated intellect seems to have no business being in the realm of the political. It is as though there is nothing there it can wonder about. As though all political questions have been correctly answered long ago; as though the only thing left to think about is how properly to implement these answers, how to imitate, as truly as possible, the pre-given role models and how to obediently follow the wise word of the guardian. It seems that the well-known dialectic of enlightenment, now from its political side, has caught up with the world of postcommunism. From being an education for maturity and responsibility that had been implemented to serve the new power, it has become an education for political stupidity. It has turned Kant’s ideal upside down and puts its trust in precisely those people who are not able to use their intellect without guidance from another. Thus, the stupidity that Nancy ascribes to the postcommunist turn is actually an effect of this *Denkverbot* that has been imposed on the political ratio of postcommunism. It is above all in a political sense

that people in postcommunism have been put under tutelage, made into children, and finally made into political fools. This insight does not have to be taken as a reason for indignation but should rather motivate maturity. The “child” as the leading political figure of postcommunism is much more than simply an instrument of the new hegemony. It is of structural importance for the fantasy of a new social beginning that shapes the world of postcommunism so decisively. As a sort of biopolitical abstraction of the transitional society, it takes over the role of a subject that is freed from all the crimes of the communist past, so that it can enter any new social relation (including that of domination) morally clean. Moreover, as a “child” it does not have to take responsibility for the crimes of postcommunism itself: for the criminal privatization in which the wealth of whole nations has become the property of the few, almost overnight; for the new, postcommunist pauperization of the masses with all its social and individual consequences; for historical regressions that in some places have thrown the postcommunist societies, economically, culturally and morally, back below the levels that had already been reached under communism; and, finally, for all the nationalism, racism, fascism, bloody civil wars, and even genocide. All these phenomena appear today as unavoidable childhood illnesses, or, to put it bluntly, as unpleasant but harmless dirt on the nappies of the newborn liberal democratic society.

Do not forget: contradiction and resistance

The “child” in postcommunism is a sort of ground zero of society on which every catastrophe, the one inherited from the past as well as the new, self-created one, can be recompensed. It is an instance of a primal social innocence thanks to which it becomes possible to integrate everything that happens, including “the inadmissible, the intolerable” (Nancy) into a new heroic Robinsonade; and to retell it as a universally comprehensible narrative about an innocent restart. In the ideological figure of the innocent child, liberal democratic capitalist society enters the age of its unconditional ideological reproducibility.

Even the most distant island can become for a time its cradle, no matter what the cost. Finally, infantile innocence has a constitutive effect for the whole horizon of individualistic (juridical) bourgeois ideology in the era of its globalization. It helps to reduce the antagonistic, political truth of human history to a relation that is structured according to the juridical pattern, the relation between perpetrators and innocent victims. One looks into history only with a sort of forensic interest, as into a corpse that can provide useful information for the court proceedings.

Hegel knew that only a stone, as a metaphor of “non-action” (“not even ... a child”) is innocent.¹⁹ In this sense the fantasy of the innocent new beginning of postcommunist society is possible only from the perspective of a historical development that has been brought to a standstill and has frozen in the figure of a child as its political subject. Here, in the moment of historical transition, non-freedom is being replaced by a freedom that needs children, but only to deny itself to them.

It is therefore no wonder that, as Nancy emphasises, one reacts to the cynicism of the time with anger. In the anger that postcommunist triumphalism provokes he saw the political sentiment par excellence, concretely, a reaction to “the inadmissible, the intolerable”.²⁰ It is the expression of a refusal, of a resistance that goes far beyond what is reasonable. The anger Nancy talks about is political because it is enraged over the reduction of the political to an “accommodation and influence peddling” that in postcommunism determines the frame of the historically possible. The anger opens a dimension of the political that unfolds only in breaking out of that frame. It is therefore the true messenger of a maturity to come that alone can put paid to the postcommunist tutelage.

19. “[I]nnocence, therefore, is merely non-action, like the mere being of a stone, not even that of a child”, G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 282. If this warning doesn’t suffice, one should remember Roberto Rossellini’s 1948 *Germany, Year Zero*.

20. Nancy, “La Comparution”, 375.

It is in an “education for protest and for resistance” that, according to Adorno, the “only real concretization of maturity” lies.²¹ He ended his talk on education with a warning—which remained literally his last public words, since he died a few weeks later—a warning that can serve as a postscript to the ideology and practice of the postcommunist transition. It is precisely in the eagerness of our will to change, which we all too easily suppress, Adorno argued, that the attempts to actively change our world are immediately exposed to the overwhelming force of the existent and doomed to powerlessness. Thus “Anyone who wishes to bring about change can probably only do so at all by turning that very impotence, and their own impotence, into an active ingredient in their own thinking and maybe in their own actions too.”²²

The repressively infantilised child in us is nothing but a pure embodiment of our political and historical powerlessness in the ideal world of postcommunism, which, in a seizure of epochal megalomania, mistakes itself for the realization of all dreams about freedom. The only possible exit from this self-inflicted immaturity is to protest against it and to resist.

21. Adorno and Becker, “Education for Maturity and Responsibility”, 30–1; translation amended.

22. *Ibid.*, 32.

The World of Lost Innocence or: Why Isn't Sergey Bratkov Post-Communist?

What does Sergey Bratkov want to show us? The world of post-communism—obviously. Where is that world? Over there, behind the former Iron Curtain, in Eastern Europe, in the former Soviet Union, in Russia—obviously.

But what appears to be self-evident is, in fact, a strategy of suppression. It implies that the world Bratkov shows us is not our world; that our view of that world is, by definition, not only detached, but doubly so, both historically and geographically. The post-communist world is generally regarded as being determined by its past and limited to a specific geopolitical area. Basically, this dual spatio-temporal detachment boils down to just one form of detachment—a cultural one. For it implies that post-communism is the realm of another culture or, rather, the culture of the other. So the gaze that recognizes an image of post-communism in the photographic work of Sergey Bratkov is a culturizing gaze: it focuses on what constitutes it and on what it generates: cultural difference. Thus, the old people in Bratkov's portraits are old in a different way; young people are young in a different way. Even those who are equals are equal in a culturally different way. But this otherness lies in the gaze itself. This otherness constitutes the subject of the post-communist gaze as something that is not in itself post-communist. The reason people gawp with such fascination at post-communism is that they think they do *not* have to recognize themselves in it.

In other words, there is an ideological dimension to photography that cannot be ignored; a dimension that can be, and should be, discussed. It is based on the fundamental possibility of putting the meaning of pictures into words and vice versa. This has nothing to do with the literal translation of words into pictures and pictures into words. It has to do with what Roman Jakobson once described as “intersemiotic transposition”—the possibility of transposing one system of signs into another, such as verbal art into music, dance, film, painting and—why not?—photography. That is why pictures can speak and express themselves in ideological terms. Which is precisely what happens when Sergey Bratkov’s photographs are said to convey an image of post-communism. That assumption sets in motion a whole raft of discursive stereotypes, giving the impression that we know exactly what these photographs show and what they are talking about.

So we know from the start that they show a world in upheaval—the world of post-communist transformation (or ‘transition to democracy,’ to use the current hegemonic language). The objects we see in that world—which, in the case of Bratkov’s portraits, are individuals in their physical and material surroundings—are in movement, or, to put it more precisely, they are on the move. We think we can recognize quite clearly where they come from. The traces of the past, of that lost world of communism, determine these pictures even when they are not visible. We know, after all, that they have to be there. This knowledge, which accompanies the gaze, and simultaneously helps to construct it, serves as a kind of visual supplement. It supplements the invisible, and, in this way, translates chaos into a kind of order, turning the image of historical and existential contingency into the clear and unequivocal image of post-communism.

That is why the gaze also determines the direction in which this world is moving. It supplements the images teleologically. The process of post-communist transformation is, after all, a one-way street to a society organized along the lines of Western liberal capitalist democracy—a world in which the subject of the post-communist gaze is already ensconced. There is no conceivable alternative to, or deviation from, this development, except as some form of historic regression—or so the knowledge encapsulated by the post-communist gaze tells us.

It is no coincidence that contemporary political studies tell us exactly the same thing. They also see post-communism as a temporary phase, a *transition* between two fundamentally different and mutually exclusive socio-historical formations—that of communism and that of liberal capitalist democracy. Post-communism may be an empty movement, but it is a distinctly determinate one. Some of the so-called “transitologists”—transitology being a branch of political studies that “scientifically” analyzes the process of post-communist transformation—even regard this process as being analogous to certain processes in nature. The development towards democracy is seen as a “natural tendency” that follows the Darwinian logic of natural selection.

All of this lends the post-communist gaze the semblance of objectivity. It sees the world as it really is, and, therefore, its image of post-communism is realistic. People who are regarded by this gaze appear to be genuinely torn, in an existential sense, between the “no-longer” of their as yet unresolved communist past and the “not yet” of an uncertain capitalist democratic future. The culturalized and aestheticized post-communist gaze identifies empathetically with this ambiguity. For what is happening in post-communism is an already familiar identity crisis: uncertainty, upheaval, contradiction. Yet even here it is in the gaze itself that the ambiguity lies.

Shortly after the fall of The Berlin Wall, Jürgen Habermas defined the democratic revolution of 1989 as a “catching-up revolution” (*nachholende Revolution*). He summed up the historic situation of Eastern European societies emancipating themselves from communist totalitarianism as a sort of belated modernity. Though the process of post-communist transformation was defined in terms of catching up with missed development, it was still seen as progressing forward. It implied a society heading from a historically outmoded and delayed situation to one that promised a better, more modern life in every prospect. It was as though the people of post-communism had no choice but to follow an ideal that had already long since been achieved in the West and to make up for lost time in their historical development.

Yet from the viewpoint of the subject of this knowledge—simultaneously the subject of the post-communist gaze—that person appears as the latecomer to history, as the underdeveloped and backward other. In this sense the post-communist gaze implies a hierarchy and a power dynamic. This is why such a viewpoint, in identifying with the ambiguity of the post-communist individual, is in itself ambiguous. It cannot recognize these individuals without depriving them of a voice, without devaluing the reality of their world, their historical experience and their existential condition and putting it on par with some previous, long-abandoned infantile stage. In other words, the post-communist gaze does not take its object—that is to say, the world or culture of post-communism—seriously, and indeed, does not do so even in the act of savouring it aesthetically.

This is why it is not enough to acknowledge the purely aesthetic quality of Sergey Bratkov's work and the "art of post-communism" in general. Not because that would be turning a blind eye to the reality in which that art was created, but because it fails to recognize a certain aspect of the aesthetic experience: namely its inherent ideological criticism. And so it is not a question of freighting the aesthetic judgment of "post-communist art" with ideological critique, but rather, and indeed crucially, of recognizing the ideological critique already articulated in the art itself.

Sergey Bratkov's photographs provide us with the perfect opportunity to do just that. Take, for example, his portraits of children. First of all, it is no coincidence that he has chosen children as his subject matter. In the ideological structure of post-communism, the metaphor of the child plays a special role. It stands for the idea of a new beginning, for the intrinsic innocence of "democracy rediscovered," as the 1989 revolutions are often described. Yet at the same time, the children stand for the infantile character of Eastern European societies, freed from totalitarianism, and for the coming-of-age they have yet to reach in history. The post-communist individual may be the child of a democratic revolution on the brink of a great future, but at the same time, and for that very same reason, a child in need of cossetting and guidance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the many

tragicomic metaphors by which political scientists describe this transformation. They talk, quite literally, of democracy having “teething troubles,” or “taking its first steps,” and of the “democratic learning process,” etc. So the notion of a child of democracy necessarily assumes the existence of a more grown-up, mature and capable democracy that is both admiring and controlling.

Sergey Bratkov is fully aware of this ambiguity. His photographs offer the post-communist gaze the image of a child in need of care, guidance and protection, as in his series, *Birds* (1997) in which little orphans, adorably cute in all their innocence, stir up feelings of simple parental love.

In his series, *Glue Sniffers* (2000), in which the distorted faces of the glue-sniffing street children evoke both pity and horror, this same innocence cries out for help. The gaze of the enlightened social improver (Kant’s call for moral and social responsibility springs to mind here) determines that “something has to be done.” Indeed—but what?

In Bratkov’s photograph, *Mickey Mouse* (2001)—a portrait of a juvenile delinquent—the innocence has been lost. This is no longer about protecting a child from society, but about protecting society from what would appear to be an irredeemably profligate child. Here it is already too late for love and solidarity; it is time for order to sweep aside chaos and for the right combination of educational and punitive measures to be applied. But is a society in the throes of chaotic, post-communist upheaval even capable of such a thing? The post-communist gaze has its doubts. The post-communist gaze is fundamentally skeptical about the post-communist world’s ability to solve its own problems. It is a world still too immature for that.

Yet in Bratkov’s portrait of the juvenile delinquent, innocence has not disappeared. It has shifted—from the image to the gaze. The post-communist gaze now identifies, through the image of social deprivation, with the standpoint of immaculate innocence. In doing so, it evokes an absolutely classic racist stereotype: that of the Eastern European criminal disturbing and threatening the

peace of Western European society. The gaze distances itself from the image and calls for protection from it. What it sees is not its own world, but the world and culture of the menacing other.

Finally, Bratkov shows us his *Kids* (2000): portraits of children in carefully staged lascivious poses. This time they are clearly offering themselves as sexual objects—but to whom? Certainly not to an innocent gaze. Here, no trace of innocence remains. The gaze becomes complicit in the moral corruption of both sitter and spectator. The image has set a trap, exposing the nature of perversion and voyeurism: “That’s what you want, isn’t it?” The child has finally learned the language, and in doing so has made itself the subject.

In Bratkov’s portraits, the child makes the journey from a passive, innocent object, invoking pity and calling for protection and salvation, to a responsible subject, capable of criticizing its own world. The image of post-communism has dared to confront the gaze, and, with that, to embark on reflection and self-reflection. What emerges clearly in this is the perverse truth of the post-communist gaze: lust, avarice, abuse and exploitation as the flip-side of the altruistic paternalism of the post-communist world.

Other works by Sergey Bratkov have to be seen in a similar vein, especially his series *Secretaries* (2001), striking pin-up poses; or his *Princesses* (1996), offering themselves up in despairingly sleazy poses like so many post-communist Cinderellas to Western Prince Charmings.

The photographic oeuvre of Sergey Bratkov shows us a world that is neither post-communist nor non-post-communist. It is a world of lost innocence, of a failed fresh start, of real injustice. In short, it is a world we can find on either side of the former Iron Curtain.

Sergey Bratkov’s gaze—the gaze of his camera—confronts that world realistically. Yet his pictures are not realistic in the sense that they capture an objective reality beyond ideology, but in the sense that they put reality itself on display.

In other words, they are not pictures of this world, but pictures of the hegemonic gaze that holds sway in this world. That is precisely what we should see as the ideological critique inherent in artistic production and aesthetic experience. Its primary trait, so clearly evident in Bratkov's photographs, is simple: working with stereotypes without actually producing any.

Just as Sergey Bratkov deconstructs the innocence projected in the post-communist world as a means of ideological self-misconception, so, too, does he subvert the post-communist gaze, and, with that, the notion of post-communism as such. He is not post-communist, nor is the world he shows us.

Hegel once asserted that nothing except a stone was innocent, specifically adding: not even a child. This, then, is the sense in which we have to understand Sergey Bratkov: ideological critique makes you guilty, but it also makes you smart.

Getting Out of Here

Goran Dević's short film *Imported Crows* tells a very simple story about various attempts of the residents of the small town Sisak, Croatia, to get rid of the crows that inhabit its parks. The crows are considered to be "foreign". They were imported in the 1950s to control the insects that infested the forests around the town. They are known as "Veber's crows", after the Communist government official, who allegedly brought them from Russia—or China, or Serbia, or... No one knows today. The birds have since multiplied and flourished, becoming the town "problem" and object of irrational hatred of the town's residents. Obviously, the film is a metaphorical portrayal of a small, troubled society that obsessively—and violently—tries to exterminate its Other.

"The Passion to be reckoned upon"

Imported Crows can be also understood as a perfect allegory for the phenomenon we might call primal, or "old fear". However, if there is an old fear, there must be a new one too, as well as a historical change that has brought about the difference between both forms of fear.

In his *A Grammar of the Multitude*,¹ Paolo Virno named quite precisely this historical change—the emergence of a historical *novum* in what has been traditionally experienced as fear. It is a change that concerns, above all, the way we build communities—how we organize our social life, form collectives or establish social and political institutions, like the state.

1. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Los Angeles, New York: Semiotext(e), 2004). See also: <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm>.

This is of crucial importance in understanding the phenomenon of fear. For fear doesn't have an exclusively psychological meaning, but also, or even primarily—and this is what Virno focuses on—a social and historical meaning. It possesses a community building quality and it is precisely this quality of fear that defines its historical character. In other words, fear becomes a historical phenomenon and undergoes historical changes because of its social character. This logically implies that we can also think about our social and political institutions (like the state, for instance), as being crucially affected by fear; or, to put it bluntly, as being, in a way, an effect of fear.

This is, for instance, the case in the famous concept of social contract, which still informs the hegemonic ideology of social order and state. Thomas Hobbes' theoretical fairy tale of individuals who—living originally in a sort of state of nature, i.e., in a permanent war of one against other (the famous *bellum omnium contra omnes*)—decide to sacrifice a part of their freedom and delegate it to the sovereign for security and peace in return. This narrative has decisively informed the major political form of modern social life, the notion of the people, the concept of people's sovereignty, as well as the predominant political form of this sovereignty: the institution of the modern nation state.

Hobbes recognized long ago that sovereign rule relies on fear, that for effective domination “the Passion to be reckoned upon, is fear”.² Fear for Hobbes binds and ensures social order, and can be therefore understood as a mechanism of domination and a (what is today more appropriate to say) mechanism of social control.

In short, the idea of social order or its particular political form, the notion of the people, is intrinsically tied to the dialectics between fear—or broadly speaking, the experience of danger—and the search for security. In other words, the quality of being a refuge or shelter, of providing protection from some sort of danger, is a binding element of society and thus an essential quality of the very notion of the people. According to Virno, this dialectics between fear and the people as refuge no longer functions.

2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (London: Penguin, 1968), 200.

Neither are we able to experience fear in its traditional forms, nor is the concept of the people capable of providing a refuge, as it earlier could.

To understand the collapse of this dialectics we must go back to the very origins of the modern experience of fear. Its crucial moment is the absence of a consistent and uniform feeling of fear. In other words, the experience of fear dissolves into two different forms.

Anguish

Kant introduced the distinction—and Virno draws on this distinction³—between a particular danger (such as the concrete danger of being killed in a traffic accident or of losing one's job, etc.) and, on the other hand, a sort of absolute danger associated with our very being in this world. To these two different forms of danger also correspond two different forms of risk and fear, or dread.

In fact, this distinction comes from Kant's definition of the Sublime—an experience that is based on a deeply contradictory and ambivalent feeling. Kant describes this feeling very concretely: when a person observes, for instance, a terrifying snow slide, while he or she is him or herself in safety; observing from a place that is safe from this particular danger, he or she is filled with a pleasant sense of security. This feeling of security, however, is in fact mixed with another feeling—with the perception of his or her own helplessness, with a sort of a basic human insecurity. The Sublime is precisely the name for this twofold and ambivalent feeling.

However, this feeling raises the question: how can we protect ourselves from this danger? There is, of course, an empirical answer to this question—a particular empirical danger implies a corresponding protection—in the case of a snow slide one can simply keep away from the mountains in winter, etc.

3. Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 31.

But the question is, how can we protect ourselves, not from any one given danger or another, but rather from the risk inherent in our very being in this world; what is it, that might provide an absolute protection for our existence, where can we find unconditional refuge? For Kant, this is moral. The transcendental moral laws protect us in an absolute way, since morality places its inherent value above empirical, finite existence.

In short, there is a major bifurcation in what we experience as fear: a fear from relative dangers that have a “first and last name” on the one hand, and on the other hand, a fear from an absolute dangerousness with no exact face and content—a fear from existence itself, from our being in the world.

This Kantian distinction between two forms of fear within the dialectics of dread and refuge was developed later in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.⁴ He introduced different names for these two forms of fear: “fear” and “anguish” (*Furcht* and *Angst*). The fear is always a fear from this or that; on the other hand, anguish (*die Angst*) is the basic existential orientation of human beings (“*die Grundbefindlichkeit der menschlichen Existenz*”). What the anguish is afraid of is being-in-the-world itself. It is only through anguish that we can experience the world as world. Again: fear is circumscribed and namable; anguish is ubiquitous and never connected to some distinctive cause.

Virno has translated this distinction into social narrative. He finds it operative in what he calls “substantial communities” that have developed a consolidated ethos—a set of repetitive and therefore comfortable usages and customs. For this reason, such a substantial community is always experienced as a refuge; it gives its members the feeling of security. In this sense, such a community is itself a response to the feeling of fear, meaning the fear from a concrete, given danger that has a name.

This is the fear we experience inside the community—inside its fixed, stable forms of life and communication, or (as we would rather say today) inside its culture. But outside the community this fear loses its concrete, recognizable cause and becomes ubiq-

4. Ibid., 32.

uitous, unforeseeable and constant. In short, outside of the community our fear is always anguish-ridden. Anguish is therefore this fear that has distanced itself from the community it belongs, from the shared habits and well-known 'linguistic games'. Anguish is the fear that has penetrated into the vast world.

You know that you want to get out

The difference between fear and anguish is based on a clear separation between a habitual "inside" and an unknown "outside", between a substantial community, like the people for instance, and the world as its outside.

Only within this context we can understand why Goran Dević's film *Imported Crows* is an allegory to the old fear. It depicts the feeling of fear that is directly bound to the dialectics of "inside" and "outside". Concretely, this is the fear of a particular strange element, an element that comes from the outside and threatens the community, its alleged normality, its customs, its stable, never changing way of life—its (cultural) identity. The crows in the film are not "our crows"; they behave differently, they jeopardize our way of life, they could even attack as those in Hitchcock's *The Birds*, as is said explicitly in the film.

The cause of this fear has a name: foreign infiltration. As such, it activates automatically a protection mechanism, the act of exclusion—concretely an act of extermination. This fear is expressed also in the form of its mobilizing drives—xenophobia, ethnic hatred, racism, etc. In a metaphorical way the film shows how a closed, substantial community protects itself from intruders, how irrationally it identifies them and how cruel—in a blatant contradiction to the moral and religious principles it allegedly relies on—it deals with those who do not belong to the community.

In fact, the film tells a much more horrible story. What we see happening to the crows in the film had happened only few years ago in the same town to the real human beings, to the fellow citizens who were suddenly declared intruders from the outside. The film is a clear allegory for the war in Croatia 1991–1995, and of similar political situations in which a particular fear—of foreigners coming from the outside—is used as a tool for

political mobilization, such as the recent election campaign in Switzerland: the story about the community of good white sheep getting rid of a bad black sheep.

Although this allegory points directly at the current political situation that we experience in everyday life, the political (mis)use of the so-called “immigrant question”, we might still argue that it actually depicts an old form of fear—or more precisely, an old form of society that is already dissolving.

Just think of the usual answer to the issue of the political (mis)use of xenophobia: the hope that we can bring it under rational control through an open and well functioning public capable of generating the so-called “communicative rationality”, etc.

The problem, however, is that this fear and its political effects are not an irrational, pathological expression of an otherwise healthy community, but politically and socially a constitutive element of this community. It is an intrinsic part of the very idea of “the people”, respectively of “people’s sovereignty”. In other words, the problem is this very concept of a substantial community, the idea of the people itself.

In an interesting way, the film explicitly acknowledges this fact. At the end of the film, with the credits, we hear Lou Reed singing his famous “Small Town”. We hear the refrain:

There is only one good thing about small town

You know that you want to get out

As little as the film is about crows, it is all the more about provincialism or the stupidity of a life in small towns. It is about humans and fear as social phenomenon; and it is about the life in closed, substantial communities. Metaphorically, the notion of small town in the lyrics of Lou Reed evokes precisely this: the notion of an identitarian community, of nation, or politically, of people in terms of people’s sovereignty. The film is about the only way to escape the horror (including the fear and its social and political consequences) of this closed community: to leave it forever!

But how?

Out of *ethos*

Virno argues that our feeling of fear has already done it. It has left the community forever. In other words, fear is not at home any more. While finally leaving the substantial community that is its home, and going away from traditional, repetitive forms of life, it has lost its quality of fear too. It has lost its distinctive cause, a particular danger to which it was a response, and therefore it has lost its content and its name. In other words, it has become anguish, or more precisely, what has failed, what has been lost forever is the clear boundary between fear and anguish, between relative dread and absolute dread.⁵

This is however only an effect of a more substantial loss—it is the clear separation between a habitual “inside” and an unknown and hostile “outside”, which has been lost. Finally, Virno is talking about the loss of the community itself.

Outside of the community, again, all fear is anguish-ridden, or, more precisely, there is a complete overlapping of fear and anguish. Even if we experience a well-known danger, which gives rise to a specific kind of fear, like losing job or instance, this experience will be colored from its very beginning, as Virno claims, by an unidentifiable anguish. It is fused together with a more general disorientation in the world, fused with the absolute insecurity, with the general risk of being in this world. This is new about our experience of fear—namely its disconnection from a particular danger and particular community, and its becoming a sort of free floating fundamental experience of the world as world.

Virno argues that all forms of life have today had the experience of “not feeling at home”, of being out of a stable and habitual social environment one has been accustomed to. We have gotten used to sudden change, to the reality, which is constantly innovated, and where we are permanently exposed to unusual and unexpected experiences. In short, in today’s world we are always already out of what Greeks called *ethos*—out of an accustomed place.

5. Ibid., 33ff.

Of course, one could reproach: Quite the contrary, the separation between an “inside” and an “outside” still belongs to the fundamental experiences of our world today. What about, just to take an extremely important example, the new so-called Schengen borders of the European Union? Isn’t it fear of foreigners—a fear similar to the one depicted in Goran Dević’s film—which keeps Europe together today, making out of different nations, cultures and religions a united community?

Virno would probably answer that Europe is in no case a substantial community. It doesn’t claim a common language, a common culture, a common history, or a historical narrative all Europeans would agree upon; Europe is politically not established according to the concept of people’s sovereignty; in short, the Europeans are still not “a people in political terms. And, one could add—neither they are a society.

Again, one could argue that Europe is neither a society nor a people, simply because it is an ongoing project of a new, emerging society, the construction site of a new type of sovereignty, of collectivity, citizenship, culture, democracy, etc. In short, a sort of social and political work-in-progress, as Etienne Balibar suggests.⁶

Let us leave this question open. We know very well that Virno cannot accept this teleology because his concept of multitude—and this is what is at stake in his reflections on the contemporary feeling of fear—has nothing to do whatsoever with the idea of building a new home for the society that would be able to protect it from all sorts of danger.

6. See Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Like a pig on the run

The concept of the multitude has nothing to do with the famous tale about three little pigs that build homes to protect themselves from the big bad wolf. Virno's multitude is not a political synonym for the most clever pig who builds the strongest brick house—a new political subject that is more clever than the people from Hobbes' fairytale about the social contract and the institution of people's sovereignty. Accordingly, Virno's anguish is not an equivalent to the Hobbesian "passion of fear", either—the strongest brick in the people's home able to stop every intruder. His anguish is rather the feeling of not having a home, of a social and political homelessness. Multitude is not a pig that builds its home of straw, or of sticks or bricks, but a "pig without home" that can protect itself only by always being on the run.

However, the actual problem with Virno's anguish is that it cannot be perceived—nor articulated—in terms of social experience. For there is no society to make this experience. Instead, there is a social groundlessness, which is essential for the experience of anguish. It is an expression of what Brian Massumi calls the general condition of being on uncertain ground.⁷

Anguish is not a symptom/cause of a particular community, but a syndrome of a lost community. For Massumi, "syndrome" is "a complex of effects coming from no single, isolatable place, without a linear history, and exhibiting no invariant characteristics".⁸ In short, something like global warming.

This is the reason why there is a trouble with making a clear, easily recognizable picture of the anguish. It is simply difficult or even impossible to present it visually, to offer a picture and to claim—this what we see is the anguish. One can visualize this or that particular danger but how to show the picture of the emptiness itself? In fact we can never face it directly but rather in a sort of discursive mirroring.

7. See Brian Massumi, "Everywhere You Want to Be: Introduction to Fear," in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), http://www.anu.edu.au/HRC/first_and_last/works/feareverywhere.htm.

8. Ibid.

Let me suggest an example of such a mirroring of this new form of fear, of the anguish Virno is talking about—a work of the Russian collective *Chto Delat?* (“What is to be done?”) bearing the title *The Builders*.

It is a sort of a re-staging of a well-known Soviet painting from the 1960s made in the style of socialist realism: Victor Popkov’s *The Builders of Bratsk*, that shows a group of workers who are heroically building the Bratsk Dam in Siberia.

Chto Delat’s “remake”—a video showing the members of the group in the same pose as the workers on Popkov’s painting—concentrates on questions of building, social belonging, social motivation and community, as well as on the question of their own relation to the future.

We hear: “For us, the feeling that we are building something is important. So we try to find out what we are building.”

What the workers in Bratsk were once building is clear: a dam, a society, a new life—in short, a home for the new society and therefore also a refuge from the dangers of life, the dangers of the wild Siberian nature; but also from the dangers of capitalist exploitations. In this context, one can also say that they were driven by a very clear set of fears.

However, the members of Chto Delat cannot identify with a similar task. They don’t know what they are building, what they are up to: “Shit! What the fuck are we doing here?” they openly ask. Still, alone on a cold night they don’t seem to be scared. However, precisely this is the picture of anguish. In contrast: the determined poses and faces of the real builders of Bratsk—heroically dedicated to their common task, and driven by the same fears—is the visual presentation of the old fear. The builders of Bratsk beam with courage, for they must really be brave in order to face all those dangers. Their bravery, which is so obvious in the old painting, is a symptom of this fear too.

However, in Chto Delat’s *The Builders*, we are explicitly confronted with the question of community, that is, with fear as a

community-building quality. It is obvious that the old builders of Bratsk represent a community, a new socialist society of their time; but what the young artists, the members of Chto Delat, represent is not clear: "There are thousands of workers behind the builders of Bratsk, but who is behind us?" They are obviously already beyond any identification with a social role or social task of their artistic practice: "I can derive some aesthetic pleasure from this painting but it doesn't move me socially." Or more directly: "What is community, I don't like the word 'community'." Precisely this is anguish: confronting the empty place of community, or better, confronting community or society as an empty place. This is the social groundlessness that is essential for the experience of anguish. This is what Brian Massumi calls the general condition of being on uncertain ground.

In short: this new fear, or anguish, or, as Virno also suggests, this uncanny feeling, is the syndrome of a historical passage from the promise of a society without classes to the reality of a class without society. This is something we feel when we face the empty place of society. For it is not only socialism that has collapsed. The society as such is gone as well.

If Goran Dević's *Imported Crows* depicts the fear after the collapse of socialism, Chto Delat's *Builders* offer us the picture of the fear—the anguish—after the collapse of society, as such.

Commenting on Victor Popkov's *The Builders of Bratsk*, the artists of Chto Delat state: "It turns out that the place at which they stand and look to the future has been vacated," and they add: "And we have the same right to look to the future and hope."

At this point we can try to reconnect these two experiences of fear we have described here: the one articulated in Goran Dević's *Imported Crows*, and the other that the artists of Chto Delat portray with their *The Builders*. It is the necessity of finding a way out, that is, of a radical break with the community we live in. In fact, in Lou Reed's *Small Town* there is also another refrain, which explicitly addresses the relation of the Chto Delat artists to the former socialist Builders of Bratsk:

My father worked in construction

It's not something for which I'm suited

Oh, what is something for which you are suited?

Getting out of here.

God is Back in Town

One of the most striking effects of the so-called post-communist transition, one that is very often visible to the naked eye, is its impact on the urban space. We can regard these transformations as a sort of visual translation of many of the social and political phenomena of the post-communist condition. They make visible the ideological mutation a society has gone through after the fall of communism and reveal the new hegemonies that have since been established. Moreover, they confront us with the impasses of our traditional understanding of urban space, of its social meanings and its normative dimensions. The implications of these changes are very often so drastic that they put in question the fundamental values of modern society or even the very idea of society as such.

Let us take as an example the phenomenon of religious renaissance that has so clearly marked the process of post-communist transition. It is well known that religious beliefs during the communist period in the societies of Eastern Europe were exposed to the most radical forms of modernist secularization. God was almost completely banned from public space and confined either to spheres of individual and familiar privacy or to the restricted areas of institutionalized worship, to churches and places of pilgrimage. Priests were often persecuted or at least heavily restricted in doing the service, etc. One can simply say that God, too, was a victim of communist totalitarianism, so no wonder the collapse of communism has been warmly welcomed by religious believers and churches of all denominations.

However, the return of the liberated God has become a phenomenon that has disclosed many new and unexpected features of the post-communist condition. One and probably the most visible aspect of this phenomenon is articulated through the language of urban spatiality.

A group of architects from Croatia called *platforma 9.81* has, for years, been analyzing the changes in urban space taking place during the process of the so-called transition to democracy. One particular part of their research, labeled *Crkva d.o.o.* (Church Ltd.), is dedicated to the role the Croatian Catholic Church has played in this new urban development. The architects of *platforma 9.81* focused on the situation in the city of Split on the Croatian Adriatic coast, where the Church and the political representatives of the city, including the city planners, realized the project “The Spiritual Ring of City of Split”.

The starting point of the project and its major motivation is, of course, the event we call the democratic revolution that happened in Croatia in 1990. The Croatian Catholic Church, which helped the nationalistic movement led by Franjo Tudjman to overthrow the communist regime, has presented itself as both the leading force of democratization and retroactively as the main victim of the communist past. As a consequence, it has also claimed both the right to exert influence not only on political life in the country but on all spheres of social life, such as education, public morals, or media, as well as compensation for the losses it suffered under communist rule.

One particular element of this compensation claim was the demand for permission to build new sacral buildings. Naturally, the Church received this permission without any problems and the result was the above mentioned project “The Spiritual Ring of City of Split”, a plan to build 16 new church buildings, mostly in the new suburbs around the centre of the city. The realization of the project began in 1993 and is today almost completed.

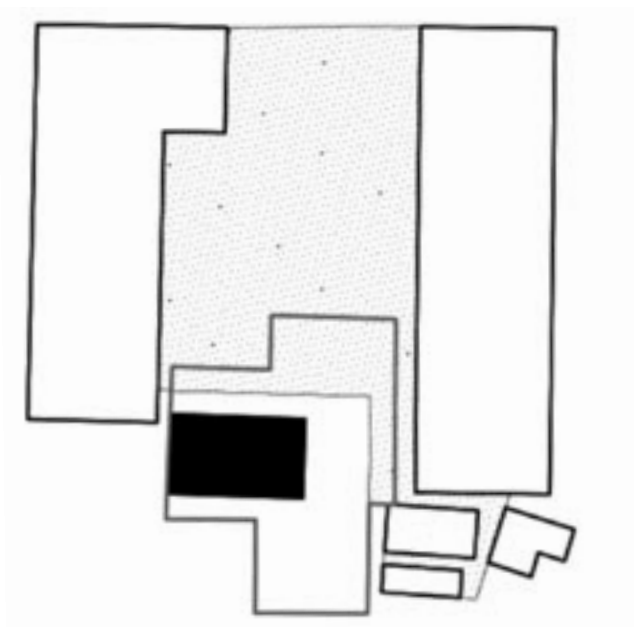
What essentially characterizes this building campaign, according to the critical analysis of *platforma 9.81*, is that the new buildings have not created any sort of new urbanity. Quite the contrary, they parasitize on the already existent public space.

Moreover, they often expand at the expense of this public space. Precisely this occupation of public space, that is to say, its destruction, appears in the analysis of *platforma 9.81* as an expansion of what this group of critical architects understands as private space and labels after one of the major features of the post-communist transition as “privatization”.¹ Their critique suggests that the entire building campaign of the Croatian Catholic Church in Split, which has been publicly presented and legitimized as a remedy for the suppression of religion under communist rule, has in fact regressive effects. It rolls back the former achievements of modern urban development as realized under—or to stay within today’s hegemonic ideology, despite of—communist rule. This necessarily implies that the process of post-communist transition has an ambiguous character and must be reconsidered in terms of its regressive tendencies. It cannot be simply identified with a progressive linear development from totalitarianism to liberal democracy, as is usually the case. This important insight into the very nature of the historical condition we call post-communism is probably the major result of the critical analysis of the architects of *platforma 9.81*. However, the key element of their analysis that has made this insight possible is the distinction between “private” and “public” or rather a specific understanding—historically, politically and theoretically—of this difference. In short, we are not only supposed to take this difference as clearly comprehensible but also to identify with its implicit normativity: “public” is, at least in the case of urban space, better than “private”. Why? One possible answer is: because it is more “social”. In fact, both this “clarity” and the presupposed valuation of the private/public divide is the consequence of the specific architectural perspective of the analysis that cannot but merge social normativity and a living or urban space. The consequence is that social normativity, in this perspective, becomes clearly visible.

Let us take a look at a few diagrams from the analysis.

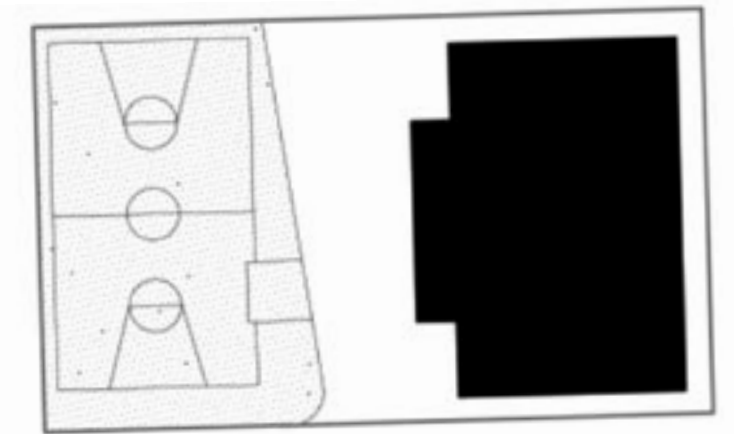
1. An interpolation in the centre of the city, a monastery being reconstructed within an already defined urban space. The building has expanded at the cost of the square.

1. The whole research project by *platforma 9.81* is called “Superprivate”.



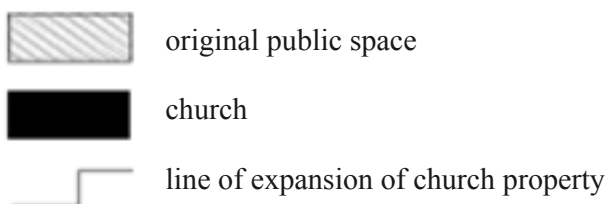
Monastery at Dobri Square

Another example: A new church built directly close to Kaufland shopping mall. In Split people call this church “Our Lady of Kaufland”. The space for parking was taken from the already existent basketball playground.



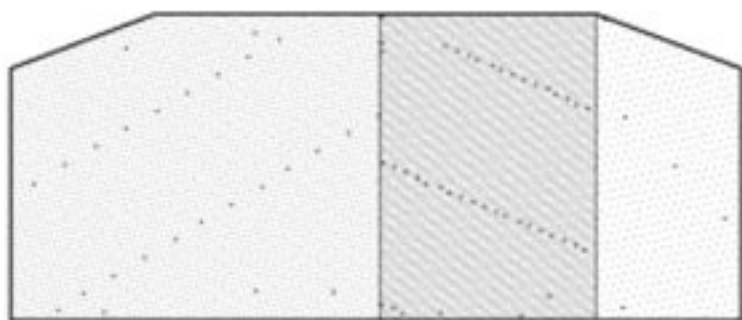
Ravne njive—“Our Lady of Kaufland”—parish church.

The visualization of these urban—respectively socio-political—transformations is based on three elements: two types of space, an original public space and an ecclesiastic space that in the given relation—mutually excluding opposition—actually denotes private space; the third element is the line of expansion of this ecclesiastic/private space.



2. One form of post-communist privatization is the so-called property return. Private property, which was nationalized, that is to say, appropriated by the communist state after 1945, has, after the collapse of communist rule, been returned to original ownership. This has also happened to a part of the Church property. The next diagram shows one example of this phenomenon: The Bishop’s palace in the centre of the city with a large park nearby, before and after property return.

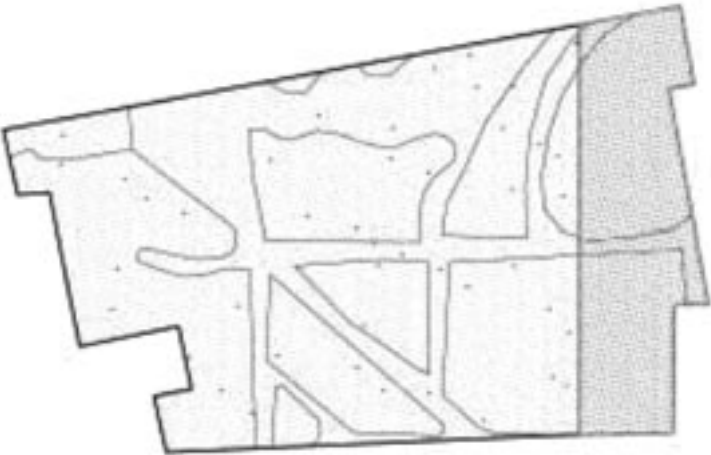
During the socialist period, the building accommodated some faculties of Split University, the City Library and the Art Academy.



After the return, the whole building is occupied by the Church and used for its offices, representative spaces and guest accommodation.



The property return enabled the Church to expand its facilities and to annex a large part of the park that had been used before the collapse of communism by surrounding schools and faculties: the Primary school, the Elementary school, the Naval High School, the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, the Faculty of Chemical Technology—only a relatively small part was used by The Seminary and the Theological Faculty.



After the return, the largest part of the playground—now fenced—belongs exclusively to The Seminary and Theological Faculty and is used at the rate of 40 seminarists per 10,000 square meters.

Here again the visualization describes the difference between two types of spaces:



spaces used by public institutions

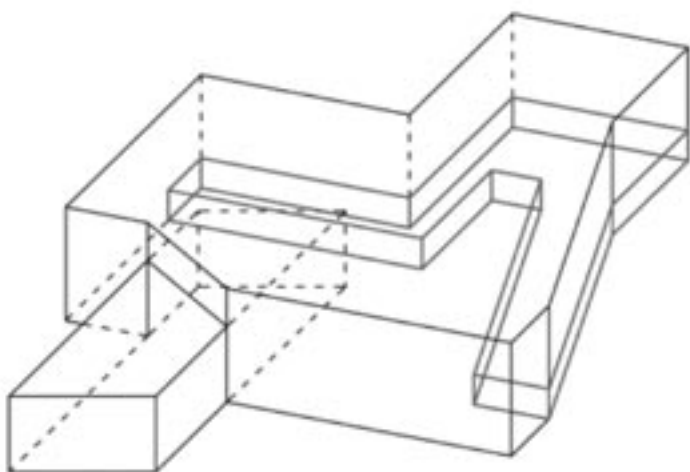


spaces used exclusively by the Church

The first is explicitly defined as public. The other that now exclusively belongs to the Church is implicitly ascribed to the private sphere. Although not mentioned here, the line of expansion of ecclesiastic (private) space is again clearly visible.

3. Another interesting phenomenon of this development is a peculiar mixture of ecclesiastic and secular, commercial facilities or more precisely the merging of the space of religious belief with business space, in short with the market. That is, the Church has incorporated commercial activities on their own property.

One example is the Franciscan monastery of Our Lady of Health and the shopping mall “Monastery”:



Here the visualization of the transformation operates again with two types of spaces, one ecclesiastic, which we are supposed to think of as “private”, and another that comprises retail facilities within the church complex. The relation between these two spaces is different from the cases mentioned above. Here the ecclesiastic space does not expand at the expense of public space. On the contrary, the space of commercial activities that is in the end a space of private business (but as a shopping mall it is also a form of public space) occupies the space of religious belief. The red line here actually represents the line of expansion of private business, in other words, of capitalist economy.

In fact the Croatian Catholic Church, owing to its properties, annual income and investments, has become recently one of the leading entrepreneurs in the country. Already at the end of 2005 it was ranked among the five richest business groups in Croatia. This phenomenon has also become increasingly visible in urban space. The authors of this analysis, the architects of *platforma 9.81*, argue that the basic interface of the Church as an institution with a city life gets a more and more commercial character.

This phenomenon must be seen against the real background of what we call the post-communist religious renaissance. In fact, during the time of nationalistic euphoria in the early nineties the actual number of practicing believers was heavily overestimated. In Croatia only 20% of those who are baptized or who declared themselves Catholics are practicing believers. Actually, the number of believers has changed radically after the fall of communism. According to the census from 1985 there was 80,7% Roman Catholics in Split. The last census shows no more than 87,8% of them in the city. The result is that in the end the new churches were left empty or unfinished.

After having realized this, Church authorities started to build churches that were from the beginning planned and designed to include commercial or business facilities or to be rented for such activities.

This simply means that even the Church itself does not anticipate the existence of an authentic and exclusive space of belief. In short, even the professional believers no longer believe in a pure belief.

This is probably the most important feature of the reawakened religious belief in post-communism—it reappears only in its hybridized form, that is to say, irrevocably merged with other spheres and contents of social life.

Today, however, this very fact makes the classical critique of religion that is based on the claim for secularization very difficult if not impossible. The best example of the crisis of such a critique is this analysis by *platforma 9.81*. It is almost entirely based on a clear differentiation between two spheres of social life, public and ecclesiastic/private. In fact, the public/private distinction is the major tool of this critique of religion.

But the question is: does this distinction still make sense today? Why is the Fine Art Academy public but Church offices and its representative spaces private? Why is the Naval High School or the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics public but the Theological Faculty private? Of course, from an architectural perspective the distinction seems quite simple: a public space is a place where anyone has a right to come without being excluded; streets or parks are typical public spaces. This also includes buildings that are open to the public, that is to say, freely accessible and that are mostly state property, or as was the case in former Yugoslavia, so-called social property. Clearly a fenced space of a seminary or a theological faculty is not open to the public. But the space of schools, universities and even libraries, are they today more open to the public? Education, too, has on all levels become a matter of private business, especially after the neo-liberal turn in the economy and the radical changes of all aspects of social life that this new form of late capitalism has initiated. In fact, an overall privatization, all over the globe, started long ago on its road to success and secured ideological hegemony and decisive support of political power that it enjoys today. Why then not to think of institutionalized religion, or as in our example, of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, as simply trying to catch up with this development? It is already an institution of today's ideological hegemony and enjoys the almost unconditional support of political power. Moreover, it is already publicly approved as “one of the richest business groups in Croatia”, respectively “one of the leading entrepreneurs in the country”. Why then draw this red line within its buildings

that is supposed to differentiate an ecclesiastic space from a commercial space and claim an “unnatural” infiltration of an alien space of private business into a space of allegedly pure belief? A shopping mall is undoubtedly a retail facility built and owned by private business—although, at the same time, it is a sort of public space—but is the space of religious belief something essentially different?

We must obviously stop ascribing an essential quality to religious belief. Consequently, there is no space—neither of private nor of public character—that originally belongs to, emanates from or authentically surrounds religious belief as such. This means that we can also think of this space in terms of its socioeconomic meaning. A church or a monastery could also be perceived as a site of productive labor or more precisely—and more adequately in a world whose material reproduction is increasingly based on the post-Fordist mode of production—as a site of affective or immaterial labor. Pastoral care is nothing more than a “service”, like health care, child care, or, why not, like education, transportation, entertainment, etc. What characterizes these and similar activities is the central role played by knowledge, communication, information and affect.

It is from this angle that we must reconsider the attempt of the architects of *platforma 9.81* to criticize the deterioration of the public sphere of urban space for which they hold the Croatian Catholic Church responsible. They understand this phenomenon in terms of historical regression, concretely as an effect of the fall into a pre-secular age and accordingly repeat the classical secularist critique of religion that entirely relies on the doctrine of “separate spheres” from the nineteenth century. This traditional secularist perspective completely determines the way they have visualized the whole problem. However, it is too late for secularization today. At least due to feminist research, the very assumption of stable boundaries between public and private has become obsolete. It is for this reason that the visual tools of this secularist critique of the post-communist religious renaissance and its social consequences obscure rather than clarify this phenomenon. Typically for the bourgeois critique of religion and its ideological function, they make us blind to its economic meaning—not in terms of an economic sphere

understood as the material base of a religious superstructure but in terms of a historic change in the mode of production that has questioned the very idea of economy as a separate sphere of social reproduction.

If an institution of religious belief is publicly already recognized as a business group, a capitalist entrepreneur, it should also be critically reflected as such. In other words, one should never judge a church by its religious cover. Yet, such a critique still awaits its visual tools.



Chapter II: An Exception that Disproves the Rule: The Case of Former Yugoslavia

If there is a place where the so-called transition to democracy failed before it even started it is former Yugoslavia. The reasons for this failure were usually sought and found, fully in accordance with the logic of the catching-up revolution, in an extraordinary cultural inferiority and historical belatedness of the Yugoslav peoples. In fact, the whole region was seen as more Eastern than the East itself, in short, as the Balkans—the other of Europe and the West, where propensity for violence, ethnic hatred and irrationality are indigenous, which is why Yugoslavia after the collapse of communist rule instead of peacefully setting out on the path to democracy and economic prosperity ended in chaos and war. The logic of cultural exclusion provided more than a “rational” explanation for the failure of the post-communist transition; it has legitimized not only a further delay in the inclusion of the space of former Yugoslavia into Europe, but also the reconceptualization of the transition in terms of an Europeanisation or westernization very much in an old colonial sense. In its final form the logic was very simple: the more European, the less conflicts, violence and war.

In her *Imagining the Balkans* Maria Todorova turned this argument around: it is the process of the final Europeanisation of the Balkans, or more concretely, the consistent implementation of the European concept of nation state that threw the region into chaos and war. Moreover, Giorgio Agamben saw in the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia, and generally in the chaos in which Eastern Europe descended shortly after the collapse of communism, rather a message from the future. At stake was not, as it was commonly believed, a sort of temporary regression into the state of nature, a short moment of disorder, which will soon return to normality, or, in more precise terms, which will be followed by the restoration of the social contract. Rather, these events were, as Agamben wrote in *Homo Sacer*, bloody messengers of the new *nómos* of the earth, set to spread all over the globe. Actually, he was right.

| Saving Private Havel

New graffiti is to be seen these days in bombed Belgrade: “SLOBO KLINTONE” (*Slobo, you Clinton!*). This simple but poignant message reveals the abyss in which a genuinely democratic stance has fallen since the beginning of the NATO military campaign against Yugoslavia. It illustrates not only the political deadlock of the democratic option: the intrinsic impossibility of a choice between the front-lines of two antagonistic sides; or an extremely dangerous *folie a deux*, which has developed its own dynamics of escalation without predictable consequences. The truly witty identification of the two leaders of the belligerent sides also indicated to what extent they are related on a much deeper level.

In an open letter addressed to his friends in Yugoslavia two days after the first bombs fell, the Slovenian sociologist and politician Lev Kreft emphasised the hopeless situation of Serbian democrats “wedged between Sloba and Bill”, by the way he related his vision of Clinton walking the streets of Priština and saying to the Albanians: “As long as I am with you, no one should dare to beat you.” People acquainted with the recent history of the Kosovo crises are familiar with Kreft’s allusion. On April 24, 1987 in Kosovo Polje, a Serbian dominated suburb of Priština, Milošević bellowed this phrase to a crowd of Serbs protesting against Albanian oppression. The police, controlled by Albanian officials used night-sticks to break up the crowd, but Milošević, at that time the head of the Serbian Communist Party, stepped out to protect them. This phrase “enthroned him as a tsar”, according to Miroslav Šolević, one of the leaders of the Kosovo Serbs. Looking back, this phrase changed the course of events that have culminated in the NATO attack on Yugoslavia. But how can we understand what really happened there?

During his famous speech in Kosovo Polje Milošević called the Kosovo Serbs: “You should stay here. This is your land. These are your houses. Your meadows and gardens. Your memories. You shouldn’t abandon your land ...” He appealed neither to some kind of communist ideology nor to national values, but rather invoked universal human rights. The famous switch from communism to nationalism did not occur directly. There was a “humanitarian mediator”. Milošević offered to protect the rights of a minority oppressed by a majority, and under the auspices of the given constitutional framework of Albanian autonomy, the majority had the state on its side. For Milošević the system was too narrow to cope with the problem, and therefore he stepped outside of it. His solution was to be found “either through the existing institutions or not. On the streets or inside, by populist or elite methods.” This was the start of Milošević’s so-called “anti-bureaucratic revolution”: encouraging the solution of a political problem by ignoring the “bureaucratic obstacles” inherent in a given institutional system.

The analogy between the way Milošević and Clinton treat similar political problems is obvious. Was it not the humanitarian argument—instead of a clear political objective—that has been used by NATO to justify its military intervention in Yugoslavia? Have the interventionists not ignored the legal, institutional framework of the UN Security Council, the UN Charter and consequently international law? Both Milošević and Clinton have done the same: they identified some fundamental human right, hegemonized it, bypassed an “obsolete” institutional framework and acted.

In this respect, one could say that Milosevic already has won the war. He lured NATO into playing his dirty game. The breakdown of former Yugoslavia showed us all how dangerous this kind of game can be.

It was Milošević who started to ignore the Yugoslav institutions in 1987, to undermine their authority, and ultimately to demolish them. What are the dangers of a world-wide “anti-bureaucratic revolution” today, set into motion by NATO? This remains to be seen.

Forward into the better past

At this point we should perhaps recall the famous aphorism (attributed to Winston Churchill) about democracy: the worst of all possible systems, but there is no other which would be better. Certainly an attempt to act politically or militarily to protect or promote human rights in a sovereign country where they are being violated by the state itself could be always blocked in the Security Council, due to the “conflict of interests” among its members. In other words, there is always some kind of antagonism which cannot be completely resolved, and this makes the Security Council the worse of all possible security councils. But do we have a better one?

NATO has treated UN institutions in the manner which Bolsheviks treated the democratic institution of parliament—as a bourgeois club where genuine rights have no chance of being recognised and will be blocked by some particular class interest. Therefore, the Bolsheviks eliminated the parliament, and the consequences thereof are today usually summed up under the concept of totalitarianism. They did it in the name of some common good, of course, in the same manner in which NATO is demolishing the institutions of international law today. However, NATO is acting as much in the favour of the so-called common good as the Bolsheviks did, and it represents an instance of universal human rights, just as the Serbian Communist Party leader Milosevic did 12 years ago in Kosovo Polje.

This fact should be obvious to the world public. After all, how can one claim to be a protector of minority rights after having provided extensive military and political support for severe oppression of some other minority, like the Kurds? Even if the use of force has to be recognised as a justified means of achieving democratic goals, how can one bomb Belgrade without bombing Ankara? Why not bomb Moscow because of Chechnya, or Beijing because of Tibet?

“Why can’t we do to our Albanians, what Turks have done to their Kurds?” may seem to be a peculiar justification, but as long as the opponent’s position is untouched by the universality of justice as well, there does not appear to be an appropriate

answer to this cynical question. There is always a particular *political* goal which should be considered beyond all the humanitarian rhetoric.

What is then the political objective of the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia? As far as we know, this ought to be a political autonomy for the Albanians within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: something they already had under the Tito Constitution of 1974 and which was taken away from them by Milošević in 1989. NATO wants to give this institutional framework back to them.

As a political project, this endeavour is a historical scandal: nineteen of the most advanced liberal-democratic states of the world are bombing an ex-communist one to reinstate a communist political status quo ante. NATO is bombing its political way into a better past. How can this desperate political eclecticism be understood? Why has NATO turned communist or “Yugonostalgic”, now that it is really too late? The pre-1990 Yugoslav Federation (which actually was a confederation) in which Serbs accounted for no more the 37 % of the entire population was the *only* realistic institutional and political framework for the political autonomy of Kosovo. Under democratic conditions in *that* Yugoslavia, a politician such as Milošević never would have had a chance to win an election with a Serbian nationalist program.

A dwarf, not a giant

This political nonsense of the NATO military engagement in Yugoslavia reveals its very sense. Bombs are not falling to enforce some political solution. They ARE this political solution. After only a week of bombing president Clinton stated explicitly what the objective of this bombing was: victory. Whatever this means politically.

There is no political strategy behind NATO. Its members have never made a choice between two contradictory principles: state sovereignty or national self-determination, both they have chosen to recognise and violate at the same time. NATO is without a global democratic solution for this dilemma: one that

can claim universal validity, challenge the existing world order, and insist upon its radical reform.

This circumstance explains best why NATO cites “humanitarian causes” as a motive for military intervention and not the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? For the “humanitarian cause” is the highest possible level of universalisation that the USA and its NATO-allies can afford, not merely a rhetorical excuse for the promotion of some dirty power interests, as so many leftists claim today. There is no so-called hidden agenda of the NATO military action in Yugoslavia: an alleged plan to control the Central Asian oil over Kosovo-crossroad or even to seize the gold which, as is rumoured, has recently been found there. The old-fashioned materialistic fantasy about politics as a super-structure of some basic economic interests doesn’t help us to understand the true motive of the NATO intervention. Rather it suppresses its real political meaning in the same way as the humanitarian rhetoric does. For what is hidden behind the both is not an insatiable imperialist giant, but a poor, frustrated and confused political dwarf.

Nothing expresses this fact better than the ever-larger waves of moral scandalising over the tragical fate of the innocent victims of war and genocide. The real scandal today, at the end of 20th century is not the fact that people are being expelled from their homes, raped and killed before the eyes of a helpless democratic audience, (in view of our own historical experience in this century, this is rather trivial) but the truth that this democratic audience and its political representatives still don’t have any political answer to this challenge. The ideological purpose of the humanitarian approach is then to represent war as some kind of natural catastrophe. It naturalises social and political phenomena and in a way that blocks any kind of rational political engagement. It leaves only two actors on the stage of history: an anonymous mass of innocent victims and a couple of pathological monsters. To help the one, means to exterminate the other. Concrete political antagonisms, the whole battlefield of political concepts and their protagonists no longer appear on the scene. This distorted picture of a particular historical situation is completely at odds with reality, but of course not with needs of those who have produced it. As a genuine ideological fantasy it

serves its purpose even if it is extremely contrafactual. That what everybody could perceive as a simple lie—"We bomb Milošević, not Serbian people"—proves to be a very useful lie for both: for those who are bombed as well as for those who bomb. For it makes Serbian people retroactively innocent, i.e. not responsible for all the atrocities either committed by war criminals living undisturbed among them or induced by the politicians freely elected by those same people. On the other hand, it buttresses the illusion that people in a democratic system never make a false choice. And if they make one, it is always due to a "lack of objective information". If Serbs in Belgrade would know what their soldiers and policemen are up to now in Kosovo, i. e. brutal ethnic cleansing, they wouldn't allow this to happen. Unfortunately, the evil dictator has robbed them of free media, and has thus turned them into innocent victims of manipulation. Of course, it is the western democratic audience who gives much more credence to this naive illusion than the Serbs themselves. It helps them to suppress perhaps the severest trauma of democracy—the fact that there is no hundred percent reliable fuse which can completely protect democracy from its regression into some kind of totalitarianism. In the whole ideological edifice "free media" play only the role of the so-called subjective factor. If the system works is thanks to them. If it doesn't, there is their failure to be blamed.

Transparency of evil

Certainly Serbs in Belgrade know enough about ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo, at least, no less than they knew about what happened to Vukovar or later in Sarajevo. In that sense they don't differ from Croats who are well-aware of the fact that 400 000 Serbs were forced to leave Croatia over the last ten years and of their 24 000 burned homes; who know by name their own war criminals with whom they live in peaceful coexistence without ever thinking of prosecuting them.

Croats—with some exceptions, albeit ones without any real significance for the political situation—have never asked their Serb compatriots to return back, nor, for all that matter, would Serbs ask the expelled Albanians.

If there is some lesson to be learned from the Yugoslav disaster, then it is about the full transparency of evil. Nothing has happened in these to date ten years of war what hadn't been "entirely predictable", and what hadn't been even announced in advance. Why then such common outcry over the genocide in Kosovo now after the same practices have been closely followed all over former Yugoslavia for almost a decade? Why hadn't there been an outcry before the war ever has started, when today's President of Croatia Tudjman published his book with the idea that a genocide could have entirely positive consequences because it "leads to an ethnical homogenisation of a given nation and therefore ... to more harmony ..."? A politician endorsing such idea was financially, politically and later militarily backed by the countries now most engaged in the NATO war campaign in Yugoslavia. Both Tudjman and Milošević had outlined the later ethnic cleansing in Bosnia even before the war in Slovenia (1991) have ever got underway, and this, too, is a well-known fact. Those who for instance ask why it is that today's Pol Pot of the Balkans, Slobodan Milošević still yesterday was accepted everywhere as a reliable negotiator, we could reply by asking a more cynical question: What is actually wrong with Pol Pot since it was the United States which protested against the Vietnamese military intervention in the Red Khmer's Kampuchea.

We'll bomb you into stone-innocence

"Only a stone is completely innocent", Hegel once wrote. If this makes any sense, then in politics. Neither the Serbs in Belgrade are innocent, nor is the western democratic audience. The alleged innocence of both is only a retroactive effect of a common depoliticization taking place within a humanitarian framework.

In any case, humanitarianism today is not only a new opium for people which makes them blind to the political meaning of historical events. Its ideological use is of much greater importance. The best example of this is the attempt to find some juristically plausible justification for the military intervention in Yugoslavia, which according to international law is illegal.

Here the notion of “humanitarian intervention” is used to argue that it is a matter of “custom and practice”. To be sure, “customs and practices” are never universal. They vary according to different cultural identities. “Serbian genocide of Albanians” is a crime against humanity only because it doesn’t fit European cultural standards—thus military intervention is called for. By the same token, a “Turkish genocide of Kurds” is a peculiar Turkish custom which depending on our interests we either support or sadly regret.

Not only democracy and justice are particular customs, war is one as well. Instead of understanding its political logic, the West has throughout only seen “people who have been fighting each other for centuries” in the Balkans. War has been a part of their cultural identity and there was no reason to intervene in it. One could recall the words of Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, who in September 1991 wrote on the front page of *Die Zeit*: “It would be crazy to intervene militarily in this Balkan chaos of one’s own free will. It would be pure madness. (...) But if they are determined to vent to their Serbo-Croatian hatred, then one should leave them to it.”

Far from being simply an excuse to further the cause of a military intervention, humanitarianism even hinders it. That is why it always seems that military interventions in former Yugoslavia come too late. They were late because they were following a humanitarian logic, instead of a political one. Thus, they don’t prevent humanitarian catastrophes. They actually produce them by making humanitarian sense of their political nonsense. Kosovo today is the best example of this.

Humanitarianism is the last one conceptual framework of the practical universalism and in that sense, it is only a symptom of the politics which has renounced all its universal claims.

The western democratic world, now represented by NATO, is not capable of coping with the deepest crises of the world political order. It lacks a global vision within which it would be possible to shape the politics of human rights in keeping with its projected universal validity. Thus the bombs on Yugoslavia are merely an ersatz for this ideological and political failure. They are dropped not to

save universal human rights but to protect particular western customs, and what they damage most is the already existing world order, granted rather imperfect one, but the only one we have. It obviously has to be changed, if not revolutionised. However, feeble political NATO-mind is least able to do this.

A collateral gain

If the face of the inevitable victory of democracy in the wake of communism's fall was ever visible, then it was the face of Vaclav Havel. Ten years ago, he stood for all of the universal values of democratic civilisation from Magna Carta to Frank Zappa. At that time he opened up the perspective of a world-wide reinvention of democracy, extending it much further than the simple adaptation of the postcommunist countries to the liberal capitalism of the West.

In his Presidential Address given two years ago in Washington under the title "The Charms of Nato" Havel was enthusiastic about an America which assumes its responsibility for the whole world. It should do it in the way which, as he said, "should embody those premises that have a chance of saving our global civilisations ... values that should be adopted today by all cultures, all nations, as a condition of their survival." And he welcomed of course the decision to include three Eastern European nations in NATO.

These three countries, Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic finally became members of the Western military alliance, shortly before the first bombs fell on Belgrade. As a consequence, the greatest personification of democracy in the recent history was also drafted.

Today when the bombs are falling on Belgrade the brave soldier Havel obsequiously joins in. Do these bombs really represent what he expected "to save our global civilisation"? Should they, as an appropriate means of solving our political problems, really "be adopted today by all cultures, all nations, as a condition of their survival"? Can they really save the hope for democracy, once personified by Vaclav Havel—the last vivid symbol of a moral and political liaison between the western world and the universal idea of democracy?

It seems that democracy has again lost its face. This in itself is not so bad. Moreover, this could be the only “collateral gain” from the damage done to democracy by the NATO military intervention in Yugoslavia.

“Slobo, you Clinton!”, marks not only the radical impossibility of a genuine democratic stance. Democracy’s only chance lies in the fact that it has no more its fixed place within the existing political framework, nor a recognizable personification. Its meaning is freely floating again and can be caught only by our imagination. It is up to us to reinvent its future perspective. And make use of that freedom here and now.

Truth and Reconciliation Are Not What We Really Need

The question seems to be simply rhetorical: now, after the war, is the process of confronting the truth and working toward reconciliation what the peoples of the former Yugoslavia most need? After ten years of violence and destruction, after, as we hope, they have finally gotten tired of hatred and mutual humiliation, what else should they want more? What could be more important to them than to face up to their recent past, to exhume the mass graves and to examine the responsibility not only for the crimes they committed but for those they incited or tacitly agreed to? The process will certainly be long and painful, but do these peoples have any alternative if they really want to live in peace with each other? Only an overall process of reconciliation among individuals and peoples in the region can bring about the stability that is the precondition for necessary democratic reforms and economic achievement, and that alone could enable the societies of the former Yugoslavia to complete the transition from the totalitarian past toward a modern liberal democracy. If we believe that the Yugoslav tragedy can still have a happy outcome, the process of truth and reconciliation seems to be the only comprehensible way to achieve it.

Unfortunately, the real state of affairs looks neither as simple nor as promising. First, the war seems not yet to be over. As we gather here in Delhi in May 2001, there is fighting in Macedonia. The clashes between Macedonian forces and Albanian rebels that suddenly flared up two months ago resumed last week. The international public was astonished; no one expected this—at least no one outside the region. After the successful NATO military intervention in 1999, Macedonia and the whole region around Kosovo was thought to be completely under control, both politically and militarily. But the fighting happened anyway. The war broke out again, despite an excessive military presence, massive political and economical support, and—perhaps worst of all—the more than ten years of experience that the so-called international community has now had with political conflict and war in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia.

We already have the evidence, it seems, to say openly that the West's engagement in the Balkans has suffered a shameful defeat. Of course it is not the West's military, economic, and intelligence powers that have failed; the debacle is in the first place political. What has been defeated is the developed, democratic, Western political mind, which has failed to deal with the political challenge of the Yugoslav crisis from its very beginning until the present moment. So we must ask: what has caused this political fiasco?

Free and Independent Illusion

First let us go back to the recent events in Macedonia. This eruption of violence was no less predictable than the outbreak of war in Slovenia ten years ago, and the beginning of the violent dissolution of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The international community was well aware how dangerous the tensions between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians were, and what incalculable consequences another Balkan war might have. Moreover, it even tried to intervene in the crisis to prevent catastrophe.

If we must choose a practical example that both typifies how the modern democratic West deals with dangerous political conflicts around the world and illustrates the inherent logic of its political failure, let me suggest the following one: shortly after the Kosovo war, *The Financial Times* reported on a joint project that the creators of the famous American television series *Sesame Street* and *The Muppets* had started with Macedonian television. The idea was to produce a forty-show TV series for children telling the story of two families, one Macedonian and one Albanian (a third of the Macedonian population is Albanian), who live in a so-called “mixed neighborhood.” The series was to be geared toward ten-year-olds. The project was organized by an American nongovernmental organization called Search for Common Ground, and its goal was “conflict prevention” and, to quote *The Financial Times*, “to tackle two of the root causes of ethnic conflict in Southeast Europe: segregated education and partisan media.”¹

For many of those who are acquainted to some extent with the political and historical reality of the former Yugoslavia, the statement is strange in itself. Neither of the causes it identifies as the roots of ethnic conflict in the region is correct. The worst cases of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia happened precisely where “segregated education” is unheard of, notably in Bosnia. Bad educational practice is by no means the cause of violent conflicts and ethnic cleansing. Nor are the so-called partisan media: although it is certainly true that many newspapers, magazines, and especially television and radio stations have been directly controlled by the state, there have also been independent media in the region since the very beginning of the 1990s and even earlier, during the last days of communist rule. The media have enough freedom to provide objective information and to generate a relatively independent public space. Even the country recently considered the worst dictatorship in post-1989 Europe, that is, the Serbia of Slobodan Milošević, never suspended the basic freedom of the press. On the contrary!

1. Joe Cook, “Muppet Makers Try to Bridge Ethnic Divide: Creators of the Popular Children’s Show are Pioneering a Television Project to Bring Young People in Macedonia and Albania Together,” *The Financial Times*, August 7, 1999.

According to a report on the independent media in Yugoslavia published shortly before the NATO intervention began, there were in Serbia half a dozen independent dailies, several weeklies, three independent news agencies, over forty independent local newspapers and journals, over fifty independent radio and television stations together reaching about 70 percent of the country's territory, two associations of independent journalists, and an independent international press center.² Many a Western democracy could only envy Serbia its wealth of independent media.

A lack of information has never been the problem in the former Yugoslavia. The public was quite well informed—for instance, about the war crimes committed in its name. Yet this never had the consequences a democratic public usually expects. Let me take an example from Croatia. As early as 1994, an independent weekly published all the relevant facts about a war crime in which a Croatian paramilitary unit in Zagreb had brutally murdered an entire Serbian family, including a twelve-year-old girl. The magazine even published the complete confessions of the perpetrators, down to the smallest detail.³ Yet solely on the basis of a minor error in legal procedure, the murderers were set free and lived happily ever after, neither persecuted by the law nor disturbed by the moral feelings of their countrymen.

Let us agree for the moment: everyone who was really interested in what was happening in the war had the opportunity to know it. The real mystery, though, was not the facts of the war crimes themselves—of who was killing and torturing whom, and how—but rather the political circumstances that made these crimes possible. No one had to wait for the mass graves to be exhumed to know where the 8,000 Muslim men who disappeared from Srebrenica in the summer of 1995 were dumped, and who deserved the blame. Europe's worst war atrocity since World War II happened under the eyes of an international public.

2. Velimir Čurgus Kazimir, "Independent Media in Yugoslavia," *Open Society News: The Newsletter of the Soros Foundations Network* (New York), Spring 1999, TK.

3. Davor Butković, "Suljić je djevojčicu postavio uz rub grabe, uzeo Hekler i pucao joj u glavu" (Suljić put the girl close to the pit, pulled a Heckler and shot her in the head), *Globus* (Zagreb), May 20, 1994.

More: it happened under the protection of United Nations forces. The scene of the crime, the perpetrators and the victims, were completely exposed to the public. What we had been in the dark about, though, was the backstage interplay of political deals and power arrangements made either between the parties to the conflict or between them and the political representatives of the international community. This includes the whole range of actively and passively involved international political agents in the Yugoslav wars, their historical and ideological blindness, and their particular political interests. What was really obscured was the question of the political responsibility for the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and all the crimes that accompanied this political tragedy. It is the political truth of the war that still waits to be disclosed, not the factual record of the crime or its moral and psychological consequences.

One aspect of the international community's blindness toward the Yugoslav political crisis and wars has to do with the extraordinary belief in the power of the so-called free and independent media. The media were thought to play a decisive role in the political reality of the postcommunist countries, especially in cases where democratic development was endangered by nationalistic conflict and revived totalitarian tendencies. It seemed to be expected that free media could correct the mistakes of young democracies and prevent their regression into dictatorship or violence, in short, could protect democracy from its enemies and show it the way to the safe haven of political stability, economic growth, and cultural progress. Yet concrete political realities never confirmed this expectation. As political events ran their course, no "free and independent media," whatever the truth they exposed, could have changed it. Many examples from the former Yugoslavia demonstrate this.

What lies hidden in this problem is an old assumption that when people get accurate information, when they hear "the truth," they will change their opinions and undertake collective action against social evil, aiming to change the existing social and political reality. In the Yugoslav case this would have meant that, having been properly informed of "the truth," they would have opposed nationalist manipulation, overthrown the evil dictatorship, restored democracy, urged their legal institutions to prosecute war criminals, and established a democratic procedure to call to

account all those who had been politically responsible for these terrible crimes. But this idea obstinately overestimates the political effectiveness of the “free and independent media.” The fetishism of information on which it is based typifies both the bourgeois understanding of the political role of the media in modern democracies and the leftist concept of the counterculture, as reflected in numerous alternative media projects and massively applied in the political struggles of new social movements, especially during the period of their formation in the 1970s.⁴ Even then, critics recognized the problem that some information will only be received, people will only perceive it as truth or lie, if they also have the opportunity to actively change the social and political situation it concerns. Otherwise the realism of the media’s reporting won’t matter.⁵ The information will be ignored. The decisive issue, then, is not so much freedom of information as the freedom of articulating—ideologically as well as practically—alternative political options that could challenge existing conditions.

People are not oblivious to the horrible reality around them because they lack information about it. No information, however true, will make politically aware subjects of democratic change out of passive masses. Rather, it is the political subject who generates the truth of necessary political change out of neutral information. We already know enough; the problem is that our knowledge has no political consequences. Why, then, has this concept of the crucial political role of the media, although credibly criticized in theory and never proven in reality, become one of the anchoring elements of the Western strategy in the Yugoslav drama?

4. See Autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe, “Bewegungsle(e/h)re? Anmerkungen zur Entwicklung alternativer und linker Gegenöffentlichkeit,” in Nettime, ed., *Netzkritik. Materialien zur Internet-Debatte* (Berlin: Edition ID-Archiv, 1997).

5. See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, 1972, Eng. trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Kiss of Truth

The first idea that occurs to us is that the real objective of this belief in media is to generate some sort of ideological interpellation. The relentless insistence on the importance of “free and independent media” in a situation of nationalist hatred, ethnic conflict, populist mobilization of the masses, severe violations of human rights, and ultimately war—the case in most parts of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s—actually functions for the West as its call for the healthy forces of democracy. Those who perceive the information delivered by the “free and independent media” as the truth of their social, political, and moral reality, the truth kept hidden by the other, lying (biased, partisan, or state-controlled) media, see themselves as the addressees of the imposed democratic mandate, the historic mission, the struggle for democracy. By opening their eyes to the facts and finally seeing reality as it is, they simultaneously cast themselves as the subjects of democratic change. Beyond any kind of manipulation, they freely and rationally decide to vote for democrats over dictators, to choose peace over war, to abandon the totalitarian idea of dominating ethnic and other minorities, and so forth. Actually what else could they have chosen?

Yet the kiss of the truth-telling media has never awoken the sleeping beauty of democracy into real political life. The masses of the former Yugoslavia have never identified with the call of the democratic West. The interpellation has failed. While the free and independent media were delivering their truths, the ethnic cleansing continued until it had reached its goals, and the *führers* retained their support until they died or lost their last battle. The masses kept protecting their war criminals until the pressure from outside finally became unbearable and threatened to destroy the very basis of their economic and political survival. Even the recent changes of regime in Croatia and Serbia, celebrated in the West as the final victory of democracy in the Balkans, were nothing but continuations of the same old opportunism that had in fact been the most reliable resource of nationalist politics. These changes have brought to power precisely those political forces whose active and passive support made nationalist rule possible, with all its tragic consequences,

and who have always been blind and deaf to the truth delivered by the so-called free and independent media.

One is accordingly justified in asking, what, then, is the ultimate effect of this truth? It has obviously functioned as an agency of interpellation, but this interpellation has failed; it has never produced the political subject of democratic change. If some democratic change in the former Yugoslavia has nevertheless taken place, the truth we are discussing here was surely not among its motivations. Was this truth only an illusion, then? Yes, an illusion, though a necessary one—but the question is for whom. Certainly not for the masses in the former Yugoslavia. For them, this illusion—the truth of the political reality they had been facing in the mirror of their free media—was of no political importance whatsoever. The real effects of this illusion must be found in the democratic West, the proper place of its use. The purpose of this illusion projected on the Balkans, the illusion of the extraordinary political importance of the objective truth, was to support the political reality of the existing Western democracies.

The common belief that truth can liberate people from the chains of political manipulation to which they are supposedly exposed by their nondemocratic rulers, and by the media those rulers control, is a misunderstanding. The fact that this liberation, as we have seen, never took place in the former Yugoslavia does not make this belief dispensable; it still provides a plausible explanation of why people voluntarily support nondemocratic politics, why they vote for populist mass leaders instead of for proven democrats: namely, because they lack the truth. If only they had known the truth, we say, they would never have made the wrong choice. In its final effect, this belief makes out of the people—always imagined in democracies as mature political beings who are responsible for their decisions—a mass of passive, manipulable objects, the innocent victims of political seduction. What has been constructed here is an illusion of primal innocence as the zero level of political community. Every time the democratic system crashes upon some inexplicable internal error, that illusion makes possible a kind of political “restart.”

The fantasy of primal innocence supports the reality of the modern democratic order in its most vital element. It alone enables the democratic system to rebuild its subjective precondition, popular sovereignty, after that sovereignty has been regressively dissolved in some kind of antidemocratic, mostly nationalist politics. There is always some innocent *demos* to be recalled behind the mob, and there is accordingly no democracy that could not restore itself out of its deepest regression. “We the people!,” the famous call to action that constitutes the horizon of democratic politics, still functions today only if it can be instantaneously translated into “We the innocent victims!” For it is only on the ground of the victim’s passivity that the political subject of modern democracy can be reactivated and recast in the role of an agent of democratic change. We are inclined, for instance, to forget that NATO bombed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 in the name not only of the hundreds of thousands of Albanian refugees who were victims of Serbian terror but of the Serbian people whom the international community recognized as innocent victims of Milosevic’s manipulation. They were bombed precisely because of their innocence. It is the cause of the universal victim that makes the ultimate difference between war in a traditional sense and its new form, now called “humanitarian intervention.”

But the fantasy of primal innocence supports our postmodern democratic reality in one more important way: it suggests that all the antagonisms conceivable in a democratic society can ultimately be represented by the relation between victims and perpetrators, which should be imagined as the only still-visible residue of the antagonistic character of the social totality. This decides, in a critical way, how a society constructs the field of politics. For the only social space in which we are now supposed to experience the real effects of social antagonism is the court, not the political arena. The truth of social antagonism no longer emerges out of collective political action but rather through a juridical procedure along the relation between victims and perpetrators. It is a juridical truth, not a political one. It does not disclose the complexity of power relations in the society, pointing at some social injustice and urging a political action to change it. On the contrary, by focusing on what has been acted out between victim and perpetrator, the truth of social antagonism

mystifies social relations and obscures interests of power and domination. It will probably reveal the truth of how hatred has been made in a community, but will never ask how that community has been made out of hatred. And maybe the most important point here is: it presupposes an instance—the court—that remains neutral to the whole issue. This is the instance that makes the truth possible without being itself in any way involved in it. In this way, even the clearest and the most fully verified juridical truth may well turn out to be a dangerous political lie.

Let us take the example of the international tribunal in The Hague that has been given the task of prosecuting the war criminals of the former Yugoslavia. No doubt we can expect the tribunal to disclose the truth of these men's crimes as far as that is possible to do, and to punish, after fair trials, those who committed them or are in the juridical sense responsible for them. The tribunal will also give the victims an opportunity to have their stories heard. The international pressure put on the regimes in the region to arrest and extradite their culprits has already had positive political effects. But what will happen to the question of political responsibility for the Yugoslav wars, which is obviously shared by both the political agents on the ground and the international community that has organized the tribunal in The Hague? What if this tribunal primarily serves the democratic West as an escape from its own political trauma—the fact that it never found proper answers to the political challenge of Yugoslavia's violent disintegration? Will the tribunal enable the West to avoid facing the Yugoslav conflicts as a moment of its *own* political crisis, or give it a chance to maintain the illusion that social antagonisms can always be resolved in the courts? What if the tribunal is not a revolutionary act of global politics but just another means of an overall depoliticization? By treating the Yugoslav wars primarily as a criminal case, we are obviously running the risk of suppressing its political truth.

From Hannah Arendt we have learned that a curious relationship between truth and lie in politics does not have much to do with facts.⁶

6. Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics," in *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics, Civil Disobedience, On Violence, Thoughts on Politics and Revolution* (San Diego and New York: Harvest/Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1972).

Since politics is a matter of a human action whose characteristic is that it can always change existing conditions and begin something new, a deliberate denial of factual truths is an inherent part of political activity. Facts in politics are never compellingly true. This means that the political truth of some historical event can only be grasped if the people involved in it have been recognized as political beings—that is, recognized in their ability to act and to change the existing reality.

Humans are political beings inasmuch as they can imagine that things might as easily be different as be what they actually are—inasmuch as they have the freedom to change the world and to start something new in it.⁷ Otherwise they are passive marionettes of history, whether as its victims or—in the role of perpetrators—as its outlaws.

Children of Transition

If the historical framework of the Yugoslav political tragedy has a name, it is surely the notion of transition. The concept of transition was invented by political scientists in the late 1960s and early 70s to explain various contemporary cases of regime change in South America and Southern Europe.⁸ In its early phase, the theory emphasized uncertainty and unpredictability as the main features of politics, and attached much more importance to the actions of political actors than to various objective factors determining the particular historical situation. It was precisely the so-called subjective side of politics that most interested the early “transitologists.” They considered the outcome of a transitional process completely open. At the time, they saw, transition out of an authoritarian regime could lead equally to the instauration of democracy or to the restoration of a new and possibly more severe form of authoritarian rule. A military junta in South America could undergo a transition not just to a Western

7. See *Ibid.*, 5.

8. Here I draw on Dejan Jović, “Tranzitologija kao ideologija” (Transitology as Ideology), *Hrvatska ljevica* (Zagreb) 11, 1999.

type of democracy but to a socialist type of democracy, like Salvador Allende's Chile. Even a kind of Maoist dictatorship was at the time conceivable as well.

The revolution in Eastern Europe in 1989 radically changed the discourse of transition. The rapid and unexpected collapse of communism so surprised the transitologists that they had to modify their theory: now a set of objective factors made every outcome of the transition not only predictable but completely predetermined. To arrive at democracy was now simply to follow a set of external factors, whether economic, cultural, or institutional. Sometimes it was enough to follow geography, for "geography is indeed the single reason to hope that East European countries will follow the path to democracy and prosperity."⁹ Other transitologists went a step further in their deterministic views: it was ultimately nature itself that decided the necessarily democratic outcome of transition, for democracy was "a natural tendency and therefore not difficult to achieve."¹⁰ One of them even based his theory of democratization on the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection.¹¹ The main characteristic of the concept of transition after 1989 is historical determinism. Post-1989 transition theorists believe in a universal historical trend that inevitably leads societies in a backward phase of authoritarianism on to the developed phase of liberal democracy.

For the so-called children of communism such ideas are not unfamiliar. The system that collapsed in 1989 was strictly speaking not communism but socialism, a type of society in transition from capitalism to the classless society of communism.

9. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Studies in Rationality and Social Change (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 190.

10. John Mueller, "Democracy, Capitalism, and the End of Transition," in Michael Mandelbaum, ed., *Postcommunism: Four Perspectives* (New York: The Council on Foreign Relations, 1996), 117.

11. Tatu Vanhanen, *The Process of Democratization: A Comparative Study of 147 States, 1980–88* (New York: Crane Russak, 1990), 47.

In that sense 1989 brought no essential change in the historical position of the masses; one type of transition was simply replaced by another. Instead of an iron law of historical progress based on the universal notion of class struggle, a law reflecting the necessity of the disintegration of capitalism and the passage to communism, we got after 1989 a universal trend of history leading every postcommunist society necessarily from totalitarianism to democracy.

How this concept of transition really works in a practical situation is shown to us, for instance, by the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe.¹² The international community worked out this pact in 1999, after the Kosovo war, in a final attempt to pacify the whole region and to integrate it into the European Union. If the countries in the region wanted to make any progress toward “European integration,” they had to fulfill a double criterion of democracy and economic achievement established by the declaration of the Stability Pact. First they had to introduce a free-market economy. Such an economy does not work, however, without social and legal stability and appropriate institutional arrangements, which in turn cannot function unless supported by democratic political institutions and activities. Then of course traditional parliamentary politics alone cannot provide the security needed for normal economic development; they must be controlled and moderated by an appropriate public sphere. And there is no genuine public sphere without free media and a strong civil society, which does not function well until a democratic political culture is developed.

Since every country in the region had already introduced a free-market economy, had long ago institutionalized parliamentary democracy, and already had a functioning public sphere generated by free and independent media, the problem of their transition to democracy and integration into the European Union appeared to be ultimately cultural. Accordingly the task of the transitional project is predominantly educational. The peoples of the region must be educated in order to be able to use their

12. I draw here on Rastko Močnik's intervention at the conference on the Declaration of the “Europa South-East” policy forum on the Stability Pact, Ljubljana, July 18–20, 1999.

preexisting democratic institutions and to follow the democratic will of their enlightened political elites. Transition means ultimately nothing but an endless process of education. A number of metaphors used in the transitional discourse only confirm this: education for democracy, exams of democracy, classrooms of democracy, democracy that is growing and maturing, and perhaps that might be in diapers, or making its first steps, or, of course, suffering from children's illnesses.¹³

The children of communism have become the children of transition—the world has changed indeed. But the general dependency of the masses on political powers and processes completely alienated from them has not changed. The moment of their maturity, again and again postponed during the communist period, has finally disappeared altogether in the bad infinity of the transitional process.

Where maturity is understood as the goal of an infinite process, the use of this notion serves to extend not “the circle of the mature, but the circle of those who are for the time being declared to be immature.”¹⁴ In that sense the process of transition does not automatically extend the space of democratic freedom. On the contrary, it extends the power of so-called objective factors that are completely out of the control of the masses and indefinitely defers the moment of their political maturity.

This regression corresponds with the move from the pre-1989 idea of transition as a contingent political process with an open, unpredetermined outcome to the post-1989, determinist idea of transition in which liberal democracy becomes not just the best possible result of the transitional process but the only natural, the only *possible* aim for all existing societies. What has changed here is not just the transitional paradigm but the very status of politics.

We often say that the East European revolutions of 1989 reinvented democracy, but what they actually reinvented was the

13. See Jović, “Tranzitologija kao ideologija.”

14. Robert Spaemann, “Autonomie, Mündigkeit, Emanzipation. Zur Ideologisierung von Rechtsbegriffen,” in *Kontexte* 7 (Stuttgart, Berlin) (1971): 96.

political subject of democracy, the famous “we the people” of the democratic revolutions. In a genuine act of self-determination and self-liberation, the peoples of Eastern Europe reinstalled the autonomy of the political—the idea that politics, despite its historical conditions, is nevertheless ultimately founded upon itself. In the concept of transition after 1989, there is no place for an autonomy of the political. The truth and reality of politics are not *within itself*, in its own activity, but *outside itself*, in its external conditions.¹⁵ This in fact resembles the situation under communist rule, where politics was considered to belong to the so-called superstructure: the general direction of history toward communism was decided not by political forces but by the economic sphere. The current concept of transition similarly does not expect politics to bring us to democracy; geography, nature, or simply the universal trend of history will do that instead. This is also the reason why transition no longer needs a genuine political subject.

It would be wrong, however, to say that this transitional road to democracy is without a social agent. That agent is the concept of civil society, which has today become a universal answer to all crises of existing democracies, thanks to the role it played in the struggles against communist and military dictatorships in many parts of the world.¹⁶ In that sense civil society is a genuine transitional concept, not only historically but also essentially. If there is a subject that can push forward democracy today, it should be civil society; if there is a place where democracy can still expand, this again should be the social space occupied by civil society; and if there is some utopian potential we can still imagine in today’s democracies, its name is again civil society.

This is the idea behind the Macedonian Muppets project: that the solution of political conflict must be found somewhere within civil society—in the distribution of independent information, say, or in the processes of public education and cultural development.

15. See Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, trans. James Swenson (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), x.

16. See Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), chapter 1: “The Contemporary Revival of Civil Society,” 29–83.

The project is actually very successful; the TV series is very popular among both Macedonians and Albanians. Unfortunately this seems in no way to have influenced the political reality in Macedonia. Whereas both Albanians and Macedonians enjoy the TV program that is supposed to reconcile them, the fighting between Albanian rebels and Macedonian government forces threatens to escalate into a full-scale civil war. No doubt the Muppets will improve the cultural life in Macedonia. But as long as this and similar cultural projects are not accompanied by resolute political decisions, they will remain merely a symptom of a political failure of the West in the Balkans.

No More Auschwitz!

Nothing can replace a political solution—not TV programs for children, not free and independent media. From the very beginning of the Yugoslav crisis, at the end of the 1980s, until the present day, the international community has found no appropriate answer to the political challenge of Yugoslavia's disintegration. It has been disgusted by primitive Balkan nationalism while simultaneously recognizing that movement's political achievements: not only the newly established nation-states but almost all of its other, violently reached goals, including ethnic cleansing. The international community has passively accepted the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia as a kind of historical necessity. It counted the process's victims and to some extent took care of them; it started to prosecute war criminals and, with the fall of Milosevic, even to celebrate the final victory of democracy in the Balkans and the rest of Eastern Europe. Commenting on the political turn in Serbia in October 2000, the German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, remarked, "The last piece of the wall has fallen."

The truth is, unfortunately, that democracy has not won at all. Neither Serbian politicians nor the free democratic world have any idea how to solve, in a democratic way, the problem of the political status of Kosovo; there is still no democratic solution for Bosnia either. A military protectorate in an ethnically cleansed Kosovo . . . an all-powerful governor in Bosnia, who can suspend the decisions of a parodic parliament at any moment . . . so-called

sovereign constitutional states (*Rechtsstaaten*) that cannot prosecute their war criminals on their own . . . economies that need ten to fifteen years to reach the level of development they had ten years ago under communism . . . a peace grounded only in a military threat from the outside . . . and now new fighting in Macedonia. There is no reason for celebration.

The political problems that have arisen out of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia are obviously much greater than the problems that allegedly caused that disintegration. The best example is that of Kosovo: for its future status, the international community has suggested the same political autonomy that it used to have within the former Yugoslavia under Tito's constitution of 1974. Not only does this intention show how far from reality the political mind of the democratic West is, it discloses that mind's profoundly nostalgic streak in dealing with the Yugoslav crisis. To be nostalgic for the former Yugoslavia is quite normal for the real victims of the Yugoslav wars. They have good reason to long for a better past. But why should the modern democracies, after their final victory over totalitarianism, still be politically nostalgic?

Let us remember the pictures of those identified during the war as victims. We saw all those children, women, and old men on the streets of Vukovar, expelled from their destroyed homes by the Yugoslav army and by Serbian paramilitaries in 1991; for years we watched them running for shelter under sniper fire in besieged Sarajevo, and met them again in endless columns leaving Croatia in the summer of 1995. These pictures evoked pity from the international public and induced massive humanitarian aid. The victims of political violence, ethnic cleansing, and war were treated like any other victims of some natural catastrophe or tragic accident. The fact that their tragic fate had something to do with politics was noticed for the first time when a British TV station showed pictures of emaciated figures standing behind barbed wire in the Serbian concentration camp in Trnopolje, in northern Bosnia. "No more Auschwitz!" the international public cried out, and this slogan initiated and symbolized the whole political and military engagement of the West in former Yugoslavia, including the NATO intervention in 1999 and the establishment of the tribunal in The Hague.

It was not the truth, however; it was an analogy—as if the whole political meaning of the Yugoslav breakup and war could be reduced to an already known episode of the common past, and the only political other for democracy today were an old, curiously resurrected, and already defeated fascist enemy, and any claim to the political dignity of the war's victims were actually derisory. Historical resentment seems to be the main driving force of this approach. The only history that the political mind of the developed democratic West is still able to recognize is a new version of the eternal repetition of the same. Behind its nostalgic longing for a clear, already known—and politically nonchallenging—historical situation is a deep fear of facing something new and unknown.

This is why the people of the former Yugoslavia do not need to establish truth commissions and launch the processes of organized reconciliation. It is an overall depoliticization that they have most been suffering from, and no truth of the past will help them to get rid of it. What they really need is to repoliticize their tragic experience and to seize the suppressed freedom to radically change their miserable reality. They must invent a new form of political solidarity, one that goes beyond their national, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities, if they really want to build new bridges toward each other over the mass graves and ruins. No reconciliation, however deep and thorough, can do that instead. For every reconciliation is finally a reconciliation with the status quo, with the existing power relations and ideological deadlocks that should be the first to be blamed—rather than a few political knaves and war criminals—for the Yugoslav tragedy. None of the victims need such a reconciliation, for it would be nothing but a reconciliation with the historical senselessness of their depoliticized fate.

What victims need most is not to remain mere victims. They need a political cause to be recognized in their tragic fate. It is not humanitarian aid, of whatever sort, from bread to bombs, that can help them; it is only political solidarity—a clear commitment to the cause of their emancipation—that can liberate them from the misery they have been suffering over the last ten years.

On Critique as Countercultural Translation: The Post-Yugoslavian Condition of Institutional Critique

The question about the post-Yugoslavian condition of institutional critique is obviously the question about this condition itself. Does it have a historical character of its own? Aren't we actually talking here about the so-called post-communist condition or the historical process also known as the post-communist transition? How then to distinguish the specific post-Yugoslavian character of this condition?

But first there is a problem with the post-communist condition itself. As it is well known, one of truisms of the post-modern discourse, actually one of its corner stones is the famous plurality of narratives, that is, the alleged absence of a major historical narrative, of the so-called master narrative. Interestingly, the post-communist discourse seems never to have heard of this. In its hegemonic version it operates, in fact, as a sort of historical master narrative: the well-known story about the collapse of communism in 1989 and the final victory of capitalism and liberal democracy. According to this narrative, after having overthrown totalitarian rule the societies of former Eastern Europe don't enter directly into the world of developed capitalism and Western democracy, but rather must undergo first the process of transition to this final condition, which poses as normality, that is, as the universal norm of historical development in general.

The process of transition is accordingly understood as the process of normalization. So everything that happens during this process automatically gains the teleological meaning intrinsically tied to the transitional narrative. This also includes the logic that before things get better—normal, capitalist, democratic, etc.—they must first get worse in comparison to the former situation, concretely to the state of actual socialism. But the problem is that the transition process can turn into a real disaster. This is precisely what happened in former Yugoslavia: collapse of the state, civil wars with horrible destruction, ethnic cleansing, atrocities, human losses, economic breakdown, political chaos, etc.

Although this case openly contradicts the hegemonic narrative of the final victory of democracy and prosperity, it has never been able to call this general narrative into question. Moreover, it has never cast doubt on it. The ideology of the post-communist transition has managed to symbolically include all its contradictions—even the worst of them, like the siege of Sarajevo or the Srebrenica massacre.

These events have been generally explained as temporary regressions into the state of nature, that is, according to the Hobbesian myth that is still held about the pre-social condition of the so-called *bellum omnium contra omnes*—in short, according to his theory of social contract, or, to put it more clearly for our purposes, according to the logic of sovereignty: the social contract based on communist power, on the communist party as sovereign, had been canceled and social order dissolved. This caused the civil war, which would last until the new social contract is concluded and the new sovereign—nation in terms of its democratically elected representatives—takes on responsibility and restores order and security.

The reasons for the regression into the state of nature have been found either in an alleged cultural backwardness or in the former communist rule that had caused a delay in historical development. Habermas' understanding of the revolution of 1989 as a "catching up revolution", i.e. a revolution whose primal goal is to catch up with the West, is the best examples of this logic.

II.

In both cases we have to deal with new differences: a difference between those who are the embodiment of the historical standard and others who are behind them, that is between developed and underdeveloped societies in historical, political and cultural terms; a difference between the regressive state of nature and a valid social contract, or rather the functioning order of sovereignty; a difference between normal and abnormal, etc.

All these new differences that have replaced the old ideological difference between capitalism and communism and its historical form of the “Cold-War-Divide” are best expressed in terms of the difference between West and East, which has surprisingly survived the fall of the Berlin wall. The persistence of this West/East divide is the major feature of what is today almost unanimously understood as the post-Yugoslavian condition.

Of course, this has a primarily ideological function—it makes it possible for the winner of the Cold War to completely control the inclusion and exclusion of the loser. Thus it was possible for the bloody dissolution of former Yugoslavia to be simultaneously included and excluded without producing any sense of contradiction.

What makes this logic function well is the hegemonic liberal ideology, that is, the core of this ideology, the myth of the social contract, actually the fairy tale about people who cannot live together peacefully and normally, moreover, who cannot build a society without abandoning part of their freedom for the sake of security and order.

This condition, marked decisively by the ideological reproduction of the cultural difference between East and West, determines the core of what is practiced today in former Yugoslavia as critique of the institutions. Roughly speaking: institutional critique proceeds almost exclusively in reference to this difference. The institutions are criticized in terms of their developmental deficit. They are allegedly underdeveloped, not yet fit for the market, corrupt, passive, not self-sustainable, too traditional, patriarchal, ... in short: what is wrong with the institutions in

former Yugoslavia is that they are not yet Western. The criticism thus focuses on one major deficit, the gap between the reality and the norm that is already realized in the West.

The strongest and the most active critic of the institutions under the post-Yugoslavian condition is therefore the European Union itself, or respectively its institutions directly managing the so-called enlargement process. The liberal, enlightened, progressive public on the ground—as far as it becomes the subject of the institutional critique—is basically the local personification of the EU demands, completely identified with the task of catching up the West. In this respect all domestic liberal critique of the institutions is a sort of compradorial critique. This automatically implies the necessity to explicitly identify one major subject/institution of critique, which in this case is the EU itself.

If we recall Althusser's well known claim that ideology always has a material existence and that this material existence of ideology is embodied in institutions, then we might conclude that Europe appears as an ideology precisely in being itself an institution of critique. In this respect the notion of the East is nothing but an effect of Europe as ideology, that is, a product of Europe as the institution of hegemonic critique. The same constellation—the ideological hegemony of Europe, i.e. its role of being the major subject/institution of critique—explains the conservative or right wing critique of institutions under the post-Yugoslavian condition. It is a kind of secondary effect of Europe as an ideology, in short, the reverse side of the liberal compradorial critique: it is an anti-European, anti-Western critique of institutions, even if it is completely ambivalent, for instance when it claims to be more western than the West, which is very often the case, for instance in Croatia, or today in Poland.

III.

The conservative critique of the actually existing institutions in former Yugoslavia is usually labeled by its counterpart, the liberal critique, as nationalistic, anti-modern, originating in the 19th century, in short, as belated. In fact it really stands for the protection of the alleged original cultural identity, for an uncompromised ideal of people's sovereignty, for the old conservative values that are part of the so-called European identity, for its traditional family values, for its Christianity, etc. At the same time it opposes the values of liberal modernization including the so-called culture of tolerance, multiculturalism, individualism, liberalization of gender relations, etc. On the other side, the conservative critique identifies more and more with some elements of the contemporary critique of neoliberal globalization. Its protectionism resembles the pattern of an old anti-colonial struggle, which means that it echoes some elements of the formerly universal emancipatory narrative.

Precisely in merging with the left critique of globalization, that is, in blurring the clear boundary between left and right, the conservative critique of institutions serves perfectly the ideological hegemony of liberalism. It helps the proponents of liberal ideology to appear as equally distant and equally opposed to both left and right critique of existing reality. So both appear now from the liberal angle as an equal threat to democracy, pluralism, human rights, prosperity, modern values, etc. In this context liberalism can offer itself as a third way, more precisely as the only solution to the conflict between left and right, and claim its authentic anti-totalitarian character not only today but retroactively as well – as being a post-totalitarian phenomenon equally innocent of both the communist and fascist past. It is precisely from this liberal angle that both communism and fascism appear as equally guilty for everything what has gone wrong in the past, including the aforementioned historical delay.

This is, generally speaking, how the battlefield of today's institutional critique strategically looks like, not only under the post-Yugoslavian but rather under an overall post-communist condition. However, there are other understandings of the post-

communist condition radically diverging from the hegemonic one. There is, for instance, an important remark that Giorgio Agamben made in his *Homo Sacer* about the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia and generally about the chaotic dissolution of the systems in Eastern Europe following the collapse of Communism. He has openly challenged the hegemonic narrative essentially based on the story of a temporal disruption of the otherwise—in the West for instance—normally functioning social contracts. Agamben argues that we shouldn't understand these events as a sort of temporary regression into the state of nature, which will sooner or later return to normality, which in other words will be followed by the restoration of the social contract—as it is suggested within the concept of transition—but as a sort of bloody messengers of the new nomos of the earth, which is going to spread all over the globe.

The crisis he indicates has a global dimension. Thus, what has been experienced in the last fifteen years in former Yugoslavia could be described as a mere symptom of much deeper historical change—the dissolution of more than three hundred years of international order—the so-called Westphalian order, in short, the fading away of the picture of a world divided into sovereign nation states that can be clearly located in a certain territory and are supposed to politically represent different peoples. With the collapse of this order the whole normative dimension of international politics is disappearing. What is replacing it now is a chaotic pragmatism, whose rationality doesn't claim any universal validity. Nation-states continue to exist, but the meaning and extent of their sovereignty depends strictly on their particular power-position and the role they play in the process of neoliberal globalization. Another symptom of the collapse of the Westphalian order is the proliferation of the state of exception—more and more people end in the clandestine spaces of lawlessness that are excluded from the existing regimes of representation and juridical security. It is not difficult to recognise similar symptoms in the process of the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia and its direct consequences.

IV.

This too must be considered in evaluating the post-Yugoslavian condition of institutional critique. Instead of settling down in a stable regime of sovereignty, as promised by the teleology of transition, the institutions on the ground face the chaos of an uncontrolled globalization they are no longer able to escape. The conditions of their reproduction undergo a similar sort of precarization as the conditions of individual reproduction, of the reproduction of the globalized labour force, of migration, brutal competition on the market, etc.

I am arguing now that we cannot think of the specific post-Yugoslavian condition without taking into account these and similar symptoms that are more or less effects of the neoliberal turn in world's economy and politics. In other words, what we describe as the post-Yugoslavian condition (of institutional critique) must be radically reconsidered in terms of this neoliberal turn.

Slovenian philosopher Rastko Močnik has recently put forward the thesis that the practices of the institutions under the post-Yugoslavian condition have in fact a neoliberal character.¹ Moreover, he argues that classical liberalism is in fact the ideology of this neoliberal practice. This implies of course a critical awareness of the ideological character of political institutions of representative democracy and institutions of civil society that are based almost exclusively on liberal ideas—and one can claim that this is today the case of all these institutions in former Yugoslavia, as long as they have undergone the post-communist transformation. Let us now raise the crucial question of whether there is, under the condition we have described, a possibility of such a critique of institutions, which will go beyond both the compradorial critique from the liberal positions as well as the conservative, protectionist critique. We have already suggested that the notion of the East should be understood as the product of Europe as ideology. As such it also has an ideological use-value. For Rastko Močnik the notion of the

1. In an unpublished paper.

“East” performs a historical amnesia. It “erases the political dimension from the eastern past, and achieves likewise effects in the present.”² In the same context he talks of a new Orientalism that is culturally forged and that this culturalization “accomplishes the work of political amnesia erasing the past political struggles which carried an alternative potential to confront the crises of world capitalism.”³

It is obviously this culturalization of the political, ideologically condensed in the phantom of the East, that blocks the memory of these past struggles and consequently obliterates the very ground from which the new critique (of institutions that would go beyond both the liberal and the conservative one) could be launched. This critique remains groundless, that is, it seems as though it should be induced *ex nihilo*. But the problem is that far from not being able to catch up with the West—as the liberal critique claims—we are actually not able to catch up with our own past, as far as it concerns an experience that has been common to both sides of the West/East divide. We are simply not able to recall the past of the common political struggles Močnik is talking about, as though they have left no traces in our social experience.

How then to recall them? How to reclaim the memory of the past political struggles from cultural oblivion? This is the challenge of a new institutional critique. At first sight the solution to the problem seems to be within easy reach. We should rearticulate our social experience, which must have somehow remembered the past and condensed its political meaning.

But what is offered here as the solution is actually another, even bigger problem: how to grasp our social experience today, how to reflect on it and rearticulate it? Should we try to extract it from what we usually call the public sphere?

2. I am referring again to an unpublished paper with the title “Europe as a Problem”.

3. The best example is the revolution of 1968. Močnik: “Retroactively, the revolution of 1968 now appears as the first world-wide attempt to confront the crisis (of capitalism) that had only been announcing itself at that time.”

In their *Public Sphere and Experience* Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge showed that marginalized groups, excluded minorities, or suppressed political subjects—and precisely this is the human substratum of a possible subject of a new anti-hegemonic critique of institutions—always face a certain blockage of experience, a sort of atomization and fragmentation that obscures, distorts or even erases the social character of their experience.⁴ The problem is that “what is blocked today is not simply the articulation of social experience but the very possibility of this experience itself.”⁵

How can we then recall the past struggles from social experience, if this experience itself is heavily damaged or even erased? The same applies for the subject of a new critique of institutions that would transcend both liberal and conservative critique and focus on their neoliberal practices. This subject too might be lost together with the social experience from which it is supposed to emerge.

The major form of damage done to the social experience is, as mentioned above, culturalization. What appears as a cultural sublimation of the social experience is in fact its distortion or worse, its evaporation. It is not difficult to recognize in today’s obsession with cultural memory a desperate attempt to restore our social experience and revive the original meaning of the past social and political struggles. Regrettably, there is no way to reconstruct the original out of its translation. The only social experience available to us today is the one contained in different forms of its cultural articulation or rather its cultural translations. In other words, there is no original experience of society as society except the one that is made in its cultural translations.

4. *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1972. See the interpretation of this problem in Stefan Nowotny, “Die Bedingung des Öffentlich-Werdens”, in Gerald Raunig (Hg.), *Bildräume und Raumbilder; Repräsentationskritik in Film und Aktivismus*, Wien: Turia und Kant, 2004, 54–65.

5. Nowotny, *ibid.*, 63.

The only thing we can do about it is to keep on translating – critically aware of the trap we have found ourselves in, the trap of culturalization with its primal ideological effect, de-politicization.

However, if there is still a strategy of a critique (of institutions) to be suggested under these conditions—that are by no means only post-Yugoslavian conditions—I would call it the task of countercultural translation. It openly echoes the old notion of counterculture, for it willingly inherits its antagonistic character, its subversive motivation and its intrinsic hostility to the mainstream, yet without cherishing the illusion of automatically having a political impact. Quite the contrary, the countercultural translation opposes the very notion of culture—including the so-called counterculture—as far as it claims direct political meaning. In fact it opposes the culturalization of what once was genuine social life. This is how it wants to become political, namely as a cultural critique of culturalization. Is this an impossible task? Aren't we suggesting a sort of Baron Munchausen's trick: after being stuck in culture like in the mud, we should pull ourselves up out of it by our own pigtail? But instead of answering these rhetorical questions, let me paraphrase one of Althusser's definitions of ideology, replacing it with the notion of culture: culture in itself has no outside, whereas at the same time (for the critique of culturalization) it is nothing but an outside. In short: what once used to be ideology critique can be rearticulated today only as a cultural critique of culturalization. But what this has to do with the institutional practices? Again an Althusserian answer, paraphrased in the same manner by replacing ideology with culture: every practice is possible only through culture and within it.

Behind the Velvet Curtain: Remembering Dušan Makavejev's *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*

Reviewing filmmaker Dušan Makavejev's *W.R.: Mysterije Organizma* (*W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*, 1971) a critic wrote: "A movie that, had he been compelled to see it, would surely have given John Wayne a stroke."¹ Tito, who happened to be a big fan of John Wayne, saw it upon its release—and *W.R.* was banned in Yugoslavia. Britain also censored parts of the film: Channel 4 asked Makavejev to cover some details (mainly male erections) with computer graphics.² In the USA, the film never received a proper theatrical release; its distribution was restricted in some areas to porn cinemas, where it was billed as a "sex film".³ *W.R.*, however, is not a sex film, but a film about sex and freedom, an assemblage of heterogeneous material—fictional, documentary and archival footage—that is held together by one main theme: the life and work of Wilhelm Reich, a psychoanalyst, sexual therapist and communist who invented the notion of the "sexual revolution".

1. See J. Hoberman, "Happy B-day, John Wayne", *The Village Voice*, 12 June 2007. Also available at <http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0725,hoberman,77001,20.html> (last accessed on 18 February 2008).

2. Makevejev chose to do so with goldfish and psychedelic patterns.

3. Raymond Durnat, *W.R. – Mysteries of the Organism*, London: British Film Institute, 1999, 12. See also <http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Wi-Z/W-R-Mysterije-Organizma.html> (last accessed on 18 February 2008).

Both capitalism and communism at their late modernist stage had accepted that sex, to some extent, needs freedom. But Reich's point—and the very idea at the centre of Makavejev's *W.R.*—is exactly the opposite, namely, that freedom needs sex, or, more precisely, that a healthy sexual life of the masses is a precondition for the development of a free society. This is actually what the film is about: the belief, or rather the historical fate of the belief that a liberated sexuality (“free fucking”, to use an expression from the film) can change the world for the better—a belief that also found expression in some of the protest movements of the 1960s.

This was clearly too much for audiences at the time. Critics, however, liked the film from the very beginning, praising it as “one of the most subversive masterpieces of the 1970s”, “the flagship of ‘philosophical cinema’”, “a fabulous libertarian freak-out”, “a pioneer of ‘postmodernism’”, and “a ‘mainstream avant-garde’ movie that merits its place in the pantheon”.⁴ It was hailed at international film festivals, winning the Luis Buñuel Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1971, where, according to *The New York Times*, it received a standing ovation lasting for thirteen minutes.⁵ Even today, *W.R.* can be proud of its recognition among critics and film theorists. However, the same cannot be said about its status as rebellious or shocking. Today no one seems afraid of this once so fearsome liaison between sex and freedom, and *W.R.* has become part of history, or, better, art history. Is that all? A beautiful film... without a cause?

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to answer this question. This is not because the film has been emptied of the allegedly original meaning it had when it was first shown in 1971, but rather because of the historical transformation of our understanding of the emancipatory project that lies at the film's core.

4. See <http://www.bam.org/film/series.aspx?id=151> (last accessed on 18 February 2008). Also R. Durgnat, op. cit., 6.

5. Ibid., 12.

This transformation from a Cold War to a post-communist perspective seems to have fatally obscured our view of this work, as if the stage curtains that opened before the screening in an old-fashioned cinema cannot now be drawn, leaving us no choice but to watch the film through them, through their shadows and distortions.

According to Walter Benjamin, the afterlife of a piece of art can be formulated as its ability to survive. He also called it the “translatability” of an artwork, an essential quality of certain works that enables their renewal or, as Benjamin says, “a new flowering”.⁶ This is what translation is about: it doesn’t copy an original but rather gives it a new birth. In fact, there are no originals without translations: instead of reproducing an already given original, a translation actually produces its own original after having transformed and renewed its meaning. If we apply this idea to the subject of this text, we could say that we will never be able to reconstruct the original meaning of Makavejev’s *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*. What we shall do instead is challenge the current (hegemonic!) translation of the film—which is to say, its dominant interpretation today. This is the true task of critique as translation: to save the original and, in this way, to secure the survival of the artwork by winning the struggle against translations that have betrayed it.

The way we see and understand Makavejev’s *W.R.* today is almost exclusively determined by a post-communist perspective. If this way of looking at the film is a sort of translation, we might call it a hermeneutic one. It either aims to reconstruct an alleged true meaning of the work from the perspective of its historical and cultural context, or tries to reconstruct this very historical and cultural context by (mis)using the film as some kind of clue. From this viewpoint, the film tells us the truth of our past: the past of communist totalitarianism, the past of the Cold War divide, the past of the struggle for sexual liberation, the past of class struggle, the past of social utopia, the past of the idea of revolution, etc. The film becomes a document of its time, reflecting a socialist reality that is long gone.

6. See Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (trans. Harry Zohn), London: Fontana Press, 1973, 71–72.

Since this socialist reality and, in the broader sense, the political and ideological experience of communism is today ascribed to a particular identity labelled “East”, the film becomes a document of another, different culture.

This is how *W.R.* has been canonised, in terms of both temporal and cultural difference—as a film that articulates a historically particular experience of communism, and as a film that is emblematic of Eastern European cinema. The fact that it was banned in Yugoslavia supports this exaltation: a victim of communist totalitarianism, it automatically becomes affiliated with dissension in Eastern Europe.

Thus, what is perceived today as the original meaning of Makavejev’s *W.R.* is in fact a retroactive effect of this later canonisation. This has particular bearing on the idea of freedom, which is at the core of Makavejev’s project. In a post-communist perspective this freedom is articulated through an already fulfilled narrative: what Makavejev and his film dreamt about appears now as realised—that is, the collapse of communism in 1989, and the subsequent establishment of liberal democracy and market capitalism in Eastern Europe. This applies to the whole dissident culture of Eastern European communism: if it ever had some sort of utopian quality, this must have disappeared in 1989. From the same post-communist perspective, dissident culture—actually the most interesting cultural product of Eastern European communism—appears now as a culture without a cause, structured around a problem that is happily solved. The reason why we can say today that Makavejev’s *W.R.* has lost its original cause is that post-communist discourse has robbed the cause itself of historical meaning. Any dreaming of freedom in a world of realised freedom is meaningless.

The post-communist perspective implies a subject who latterly knows the truth of history—a history of which that subject has been the necessary result. This conception is a parody of Hegel’s owl of Minerva, an embodiment of the Absolute Spirit, who comes out only at the falling of the dusk of world history, bearing with it all the knowledge of history’s previous stages. In a similar way, the post-communist gaze reads the cultural production of the past retroactively as anticipation of later developments.

This has been the fate not only of Makavejev's *W.R.* but of many other Yugoslavian films, especially of those belonging to the Black Wave.⁷ They have been vulgarised to the point that they stand as mere symptoms of an allegedly unavoidable collapse of communism, or in the case of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, as early witnesses to a coming catastrophe.

Curiously, and against the dominant reading of Black Wave films in general and *W.R.* in particular, the "original" *W.R.* seems to turn this logic upside down. Instead of anticipating the bloody (Yugoslavian) collapse of communism from the post-communist perspective, I would argue that the original film articulates, quite consciously and openly, the post-communist perspective itself and denounces its intrinsic historical limits. In other words, *W.R.* was post-communist long before the actual collapse of communism, and in a much more (self-)critical way than today's post-communist ideology. We even can say, paradoxically, that Makavejev's film is a radical critique, not of communism, but of post-communism.

In 1933 Reich published *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, in which he presented fascism as a symptom of sexual repression. After the book's publication he was expelled from the German Communist Party and, being forced to flee both fascism and communism, took refuge first in Scandinavia, and in 1939 in the United States. In Rangeley, a small town in Maine, Reich continued his research of human sexuality, focusing on a new form of energy he claimed to have discovered called "orgone". His communist allegiances and the eccentricity of his experiments resulted in an investigation by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), who in 1954 banned the distribution of orgone-therapy equipment and literature.

7. The label "Black Wave" refers to a series of Yugoslavian films made in the late 1960s and early 70s. It was derogatorily labelled as the 'Black Wave' by the official critique because of their overall pessimistic character and their interest in the dark side of the socialist reality. Some of its most prominent representatives are Dušan Makavejev, Živojin Pavlović, Aleksandar Petrović and Želimir Žilnik. The Yugoslavian Black Wave was one of the most politically and aesthetically subversive film movements of that time.

After Reich refused to comply with the order, the FDA ordered the destruction of every book that mentioned the term “orgone energy” and in 1956 arrested Reich. He died in prison one year later.

Reich’s life and work in the US occupies most of the documentary part of Makavejev’s film.⁸ The film also includes a fictional story, a short and tragic love affair between Milena, a young Yugoslavian communist, feminist and follower of Wilhelm Reich, and a Russian ice-skater who is visiting Yugoslavia with his ice-ballet troupe. The ice-skater’s name is Vladimir Ilyich, and his words in the film are often direct quotations of his namesake, Lenin.

In what is perhaps the key scene of this section, Milena’s head lies on the autopsy table, having been cut off by Ilyich with the blade of one of his skates. She opens her eyes and starts to speak at the camera, explaining what happened. She describes her murderer as “a man of high ambition, of immense energy ... romantic, ascetic, a genuine Red Fascist”, and immediately following we hear her last, famous words: “Comrades! Even now I am not ashamed of my communist past.”⁹ This sentence explicitly posits communism as past—and yet as a past one doesn’t have to be ashamed of. How is this possible? How can one be post-communist before the actual collapse of communism, without being at the same time anti-communist? This subversion of post-communist discourse is perhaps the most challenging element within the film. After having shown more than enough reasons for taking an anti-communist stance—the totalitarian character of communism and its intrinsic relation to fascism—it doesn’t take the final step. Neither Milena, killed by a “Red Fascist” called Vladimir Ilyich, nor Dušan Makavejev, whom communists barred from making films, nor the film itself are anti-communist.

8. The documentary footage also shows counterculture poet Tuli Kupferberg performing a satirical song in the streets of New York, and *Screw* editor Jim Buckley having a cast made of his penis, as well as testimonies from Warhol Superstar Jackie Curtis and painter and feminist Betty Dodson.

9. “Red Fascism” is a term coined by Reich in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (trans. Vincent Carfango), New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980.

In the film there are two cases of “honest cheating” by Makavejev. As part of the documentary section he includes footage of a mental hospital accompanied by a soundtrack of Russian songs, allegedly showing examples of Stalin-era torture through the misuse of psychiatric methods like electroshock therapy. These images in fact come from footage shot in Germany during the 1930s, and used within government circles to make the case for the “euthanasia programme”.¹⁰ The second example are the explicit sex scenes shown at the beginning of the film: although presented as a Sexpol film, they were actually filmed at Woodstock in 1969.¹¹ One can easily say that the first cheating suggests an equivalence between the two totalitarianisms. Why then painstakingly insist on a difference between communist and fascist terror if in principle they are the same? An equal distance from both is an essential part of post-communist discourse. Moreover, Makavejev treats the images of both forms of totalitarian terror—as well as those of “joyful fucking”—as mechanically exchangeable not because they have the same ideological or historical roots, but because they are nothing but stereotypes, and he deals with them as such. Again: Makavejev is a critic of post-communism rather than of communism—he is not equally distant from both totalitarianisms, but distant to the very idea of their equation. Within *W.R.*, as within his entire film production, the sentence “I am not ashamed of my *fascist* past” is simply unthinkable. What unites different elements of Makavejev’s narrative—the fate of Wilhelm Reich and his ideas, the communist revolution, sexual liberation, the protest movements of the 1960s, feminism and,

10. The Action T-4, also referred to as the “euthanasia program”, was established by the Chancellery of the Third Reich under the direction of Philipp Bouhler and Dr. Karl Brandt in 1939. By the time it finished in August 1941, between 200,000 to 250,000 adults and children with disabilities and hereditary and mental conditions had been secretly killed by lethal injections or in gas chambers.

11. “Sexpol” is the short name for the German Association for a Proletarian Sexual Policy that was founded in 1931 by Wilhelm Reich. Its publishing project, *Sexpol-Verlag* (*Verlag für Sexualpolitik*), had as its goal the sexual education of young people. See R. Durnat, *W.R.*, op. cit., 10.

last but not least, art-making—is, however controversial and contradictory, a common experience of freedom. This is what Milena is not ashamed of, and this is what cannot be said of our fascist past. In short, this is the very cause of Makavejev's *W.R.*

Does this experience of freedom still make sense today in societies of really existing freedom—be they Eastern or Western? For all of us freedom has become primarily a property—a part of our identity, “our value”—which can be taken away from us. This is why we must do everything to protect and defend it, even at the cost of willingly abandoning it. In short, the only freedom we still experience is actually the fear of losing it. Milena's experience of freedom is the direct opposite of that. She struggled for freedom, lost the struggle and with it her life; yet the experience of freedom she has encountered in this struggle, through her hope, disappointment and even defeat, is something that can never be taken away from her. This is why, even dead, she can talk to us—for the true experience of freedom can be articulated only through its afterlife.

Has the freedom that was fought for in the struggles of the 1960s—of which *W.R.* is probably one of the most explicit artistic portrayals—ever expressed itself through its afterlife? Actually, it was silenced by shame. That freedom appears today as something we have grown out of, like an early stage of our development, a wild and yet somehow innocent adolescence we have abandoned as adults, and often are ashamed of: ashamed of believing in or even practicing sexual revolution; ashamed of the Lenin and Mao posters in our rooms; ashamed of sympathising with the radical left or even with left-wing terrorism; ashamed of being directly involved in riots or attacks on state authorities or the police. Is there any experience of freedom from that time of which we are not ashamed today?

Makavejev's *W.R.* is not an answer to this question. Nevertheless, it provides a perfect opportunity to tackle the problem underneath this question, because it subverts many of the stereotypes of which the post-communist mind is made of. It is a product of communist culture and yet was not financed by the communist state, but by two small film companies—Neoplanta in Yugoslavia and Telepool, a Bavarian TV company, both working in the in-

ternational market. It was born from the world of the Cold War divide, and yet was made on both sides of it: a scholarship from the Ford Foundation made shooting in the US possible, and this was granted to its director because he learnt English in a communist school; the director himself at that time was a member of a Communist Party, and yet the film he made was already post-communist, although not anti-communist.¹² The conditions of its production have actually become almost as interesting as the film itself.

The subversion of post-communist stereotypes becomes even clearer if, instead of relating it to a communist past, we locate Makavejev's film in its artistic context—that is, in the context of the Black Wave of Yugoslavian cinema. Why were these films actually labelled “black”? The usual answer is because they disclosed the darker side of socialist reality. But let us rather take an example—Živojin Pavlović's *When I Am Dead and Gone* (1967), probably the best of all the Black films. This work depicts the reality of socialism as one of mass unemployment, precarious lives (in particular for migrants and casual workers), failed strikes, unlimited power of employers over employees, the emergence of the culture industry, the transformation of unemployed industrial workers into cultural producers, etc. When watching it one cannot help but ask: is this really a picture of the communist past ... or rather of a society that has just undergone the neo-liberal turn?

The Black films in fact are an artistic response to the introduction of a market economy in the former socialist Yugoslavia during the late 1950s and early 60s and the consequent liberation of labour force from state control (its liberalisation).

12. Asked in an interview whether he had finally abandoned communist ideology in *Sweet Movie* (1974), the film which followed *W.R.*, Makavejev said: “Actually I don't know. When Ana Prucnal and Pierre Clementi sing a refrain from ‘*Bandiere rossa*’, “*evviva il comunismo e la libertà*”—you see that all this is in vain and yet there is some tenderness in it.” (Dušan Makavejev, “Veliki povratak ‘unutarnjeg neprijatelja’ Razgovor s Nenadom Polimcem”, *Jutarnji List*, 25 August 2007). If Makavejev had ever been ashamed of his own communist past he probably wouldn't have mentioned such feeling, as the very purpose of shame is to put our feelings under control.

They constitute a reaction to the first symptoms of the collapse of industrial modernism and the emergence of post-industrial modes of production, an early cultural announcement of the coming neo-liberal turn in the global economy and, precisely in this context, an anticipated response to the final defeat of the communist promise in the late 1980s. The “black” in these films refers to the ominous side of this historical development, which has much more to do with our reality today than with what is believed to be a foregone reality of actual existing socialism.

We should look at Pavlović’s *When I Am Dead and Gone* in connection with, for instance, Mark Herman’s *Brassed Off*, made nearly thirty years later in 1996, as an artistic response to the British neo-liberal turn initiated by Margaret Thatcher and continued by John Major. *Brassed Off* is the story of a group of miners who, after losing their jobs, become successful cultural producers: they form a brass band and win the national competition at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Pavlović’s hero, on the other hand, does not succeed. His move from the sphere of casual manual labour into that of cultural production ends tragically: after miserably failing at a young rock talent competition he entered in Belgrade, he goes back to the misery of unemployment and homelessness, only to end up killed by his former boss. Culture doesn’t necessarily provide a compensation for the collapse of the world of industrial welfare state. The market-driven culture industry is a field of merciless competition and brutal exploitation, which many, especially the socially weak, do not survive. The dark, dystopian side shown by Pavlović’s film makes it the logical and historical complement to Herman’s optimistic narrative, although we often overlook such affinities.

As it is well known, the 1989 “Velvet Revolution” in the former Czechoslovakia helped open the Iron Curtain. But interestingly, one type of Cold War divide hasn’t yet entirely disappeared, and persists in the form of a new (cultural) difference. We might call it a new—a velvet—curtain, woven entirely of post-communist stereotypes. Its name is “East”.

The Slovenian philosopher Rastko Močnik has identified in this notion of “East” a new Orientalism with an ideological function.¹³ As he says, the notion of East “erases the political dimension from the Eastern past”, and therefore “accomplishes the work of political amnesia”. It makes us forget the past political struggles, which carried in them the potential to confront the crises of world capitalism. Seen from this perspective, Makavejev’s *W.R.* operates as a critique of ideology. It recalls the common cause beyond the East/West divide and so subverts the ideological production of cultural differences that makes us blind to the crisis we currently live in—in short, it makes us see the reality behind the new velvet curtain.

13. Rastko Močnik, “East as a Problem”, 2006, unpublished essay.

Shoot It Black!

An Introduction to Želimir Žilnik

It's not easy facing up when your whole world is black.

The Rolling Stones, "Paint It Black", 1966

It is usually said that Želimir Žilnik is one of the most prominent directors of Black Wave, a tendency in Yugoslav film that emerged in the wake of the political and economic liberalisation of the country in the 1960s and 70s, and presents the best that Yugoslavia had produced culturally in its short-lived history.¹ But what does it actually mean to be a protagonist in this cultural story from the Communist past? To what does 'black' concretely refer in the famous phrase the "Black Wave"? Let us start with this simple question.

The newspaper article from 1969 in which the notion of the "Black Wave" was first introduced opens from a curious perspective.²

1. Inspired by Italian Neorealism and various new waves in European cinema, the authors of Black Wave rejected the norms and ideals of an optimistic, self-congratulatory official culture, and openly exposed the dark side of socialist society – above all its ideologically hidden capitalist truth that emerged with the implementation of market economy and its devastating social consequences like unemployment, massive migrations of workers both within the country and abroad, poverty, crime, etc. The most prominent directors along with Žilnik were: Živojin Pavlović, Bata Čengić, Dušan Makavejev and Aleksandar Petrović.

2. Vladimir Jovičić, "‘Crni val’ u našem filmu", in *Borba*, 3 August 1969, 17–24. All translations the author's.

The author looks at the reality of Yugoslavia from the future of several decades on—thus from today’s present—and argues that this future will not be able to find “our true picture”. That is, the authentic picture of Yugoslav society of that time is not in the “yellowed yearbooks of the contemporary daily press”, for “this informative level stored in the archives and computer brains will fade into oblivion”, but instead in the art made at the time. The future, as he states, will not believe those who had directly witnessed the actual reality but rather the “condensed and suggestive artistic story and picture that this reality produced”.³ In his view, this is why the future will have a black picture of Yugoslav society of the 1960s and 70s—because Yugoslav art, and above all Yugoslav film, painted this society black.

Isn’t it interesting? In a society ruled by Communists one would expect the voice of the Party to be at the same time the voice of the history itself—which *Borba*, the newspaper where this article appeared, undoubtedly was⁴—and not to tremble before this history helplessly expecting its final judgement. “What will the future think of us?” This is not the question of those who are supposed to know the course of history and legitimise their rule precisely from this very future. Moreover, no law of historical materialism, no Marxist concept, however undogmatic and creatively enlightened, would endow art, that superstructural phenomenon, with the power to give the only “true picture” of society and even to be the last word of history itself. And yet this is the logic on which the argument against the Black Wave filmmakers relies. *Borba*’s critic accuses them of betrayal. But betrayal of what? Not, primarily, of reality: they are not so much blamed for having unfaithfully represented reality in their films—for painting it more black than it really is—but rather their real “crime” consists in misrepresenting the society they belong to. So when the critic uses the notion of a “true picture of our society”, it is not so much the “truth” that is at stake here—that is, a realistic representation of social life—

3. Ibid., 17.

4. For this reason I do not mention the name of the author of this particular article explicitly in this text. His personality is of secondary importance since his personal and public opinion at that time was immediately identified as the opinion of the Party itself.

but “the picture of the society” that he is actually concerned about. He complains that society, in the Black Wave films, “dresses in drag before taking pictures of itself”. But by that he obviously doesn’t mean that it should take off its clothes and expose itself in full nakedness, as it really is.

This apparently slight shift in accentuation from “truth” to “picture” has far-reaching consequences. The real conflict between the critic and the “traitors” doesn’t take place where we usually project it from our post-communist perspective: between Communist ideology on one side and the autonomy of art on the other. The case of Yugoslav “Black Wave” is definitely not that of ideologically stubborn communist apparatchiks who try to impose the dogma of (socialist) realism on freedom-loving artists. Moreover, it is not even the socialist cause that the critic insists upon: the well-known discourse on the social function of art, of its programmatic role in building a new society, of its educational duties, for instance, in boosting optimism. A classical discourse of socialist realism is totally absent from this polemical text.⁵ Rather, he argues that the problem with the pessimism of which he, and through his voice the Party itself, accuses the Black Wave filmmakers is not that it spreads defeatism and so disarms the progressive forces of society, but rather that it spreads an unflattering picture of Yugoslav society. This is what the whole drama is about: how the society represents itself to the Other, both the Other abroad and the Other of posterity. Specifically, the authors of “black films” are blamed for “clownishly presenting the nation and the society for the sake of a cheap and ephemeral mundane fame”. In the eyes of the critic they are guilty of submission to the fashionable taste of the international market.

5. Indeed, the author explicitly distances himself from any concept of an “educational” function of art. For him it is “didactically old-fashioned to ascribe any functional attribute to art”. The idea that a work of art should deliver some sort of message he also puts aside as “Zhdanovism”, or the party doctrine on Soviet arts and culture developed by the Central Committee Secretary Andrei Zhdanov in 1946. Moreover, he openly writes that he would have some understanding for the “blackness” of Yugoslav films only if it would stay within the “art for art’s sake” concept of art. *Ibid.*, 19.

In support of his criticism he naturally calls on authorities. However, these are not Marx, Engels or Lenin, nor any of the Yugoslav Marxists or leading Party intellectuals. It is Bosley Crowther instead, legendary film critic for *The New York Times* and at that time art director of Columbia Pictures, who is quoted from an interview he gave at that time to a Yugoslav magazine: “You Yugoslavs [...] you are so vital [...] you know how to look at women, you can laugh from the heart, you are open, there is an original joy of life in you. Why then are your films so bitter, so dark? What is the truth? You as I have seen you, or you as you present yourselves in the films? [...] Or is this all in your film a temporary fashion of pessimism which, with a certain delay, comes to your authors from abroad?”⁶ Thus we have the official position of the Party on cultural issues at the time drawing its arguments from an identification with a Western-Orientalist gaze that imagined Yugoslavia as an exotic realm of authentic enjoyment of life and natural vitality.

But the question of representation becomes even more dramatic from the perspective of the future, or in relation to posterity. Again, at stake is the picture of the society that will survive it in works of art, or as *Borba*’s critic writes, “a picture of us that is going to be bequeathed” to the future. He insists that we shouldn’t be indifferent to this “sort of recognition”, for if the art is now painting this picture black, the future too will have a black picture of us.

Writing from a contemporary perspective, this all is to suggest that we must necessarily abandon our post-communist perspective if we really want to understand what that “blackness” ascribed to a great deal of Yugoslav film production at the end of the 1960s really was about. Not only because of all those unbearable clichés about the communist past (whose real ideological effect is not so much in blackening the utopia of the past but rather in brightening the actual one about liberal democracy and capitalism as the only exit solution of world history), but there remains one more, even better reason: the notion of the “Black Wave” was coined from this post-communist perspective itself.

6. Ibid., 20.

“Black Wave” is obviously a concept forged in struggle, and implicates a certain instrumentalisation of art in that struggle. But what struggle? Not the one for a better—for instance, a just, classless, in short, communist—society. Here we are definitely not dealing with a story about art being (unjustly) caught in a social struggle. From the point of view of the critic who introduced the slogan “Black Wave”, the social struggle was already over, or more precisely, the social cause of the struggle had become obsolete. However, the struggle went on, but in another form, on another battlefield and for another cause. Now it was the struggle for recognition that was fought exclusively on the field of culture. What was at stake in this struggle was now *identity*.

It sounds paradoxical, but the position from which the voice of the Party announced its *j'accuse* against the Black Wave filmmakers was the position of an already dead society—a society that had exhausted all its utopian potential and had reached the limits of its further expansion in terms of social justice and an overall social prosperity. It was a society that was facing its historical end, a society with no future whatsoever. It literally didn't see itself in the future, or better, it saw only an alienated picture of itself there, a picture that had been already appropriated by art, by the Black Wave films. This is why our understanding of the Black Wave cannot be reduced to a post-communist cliché about art struggling with society for its freedom. On the contrary, it is about a society struggling with art for the “true” picture of itself, a society in the final struggle for its cultural survival. In launching this struggle in 1969, the communist critics of the Black Wave precisely proved to be post-communists long before all those democrats who would replace them later. They knew very well that they were no longer in command of history, but were still able to anticipate its development. Moreover, by occupying themselves exclusively with the question of cultural representations they had already accomplished that notorious cultural turn which would be later ascribed to postmodernism as one of its main features. Yugoslav communists of that time already looked at the society they were in charge of from the point of view of its cultural afterlife.

Of course, politically the Party was still identified with its historical mission—to radically change the society for the better—and still saw itself as being able to achieve this goal. But this, to use Lacanian terms, existed only on the imaginary level of their identification. In short, this was how Yugoslav communists identified with the ideal picture of themselves, with their ideal-ego. However, at the same time, but on a symbolical level, they identified with the gaze of the history itself—i.e. with their ego-ideal—in which they saw the society they had built surviving only in a cultural translation that fully escapes their control. They ruled society, but only in an imaginary realm. Symbolically they had already lost it, they had surrendered society to culture. For them, in 1969, the challenge was no longer to build a new, better society, but rather to properly represent the dead one. Thus, a true picture of social reality still seemed to be possible, but only in an anticipated cultural retrospective. This also marks a move within realism itself: from its socially prospective dimension (the concept of socialist realism deployed in the service of society as a utopian project) to a culturally retrospective realism. The latter is no less ideologically dogmatic than the former. The name of the dogma now is cultural memory—the only form in which social experience is still available to us today, in retrospect of course. The Party knew this in 1969.

Now we could probably answer the introductory question: to what does “black” refer in the notion of the “Black Wave” of Yugoslav cinema? It refers primarily to the end of society, to the experience of the abyss that opens up at this end, to that bottomless contingency one encounters after a social experiment—or, better, after the human experimentation with the social has been historically exhausted. It is the blackness that has absorbed all the utopian light that had hitherto clearly illuminated society’s path to the future. In its subjective dimension it is the darkness of the fear we are filled with when we face, existentially, the terminality of society—that is, when we become aware of the possibility of its total absence, in short, a social fear in its ontological dimension.⁷

7. In terms of Heideggerian *Angst* that makes a subject experience society’s being-toward-death.

This is best expressed in words of one of the most famous actors of the Yugoslav Black Wave, Bekim Fehmiu, who acted in European and Hollywood productions as well. In *Borba*'s article Fehmiu is quoted saying: "We have never lived better and yet, everything is black before our eyes."⁸

However, to calm this fear and to pacify this ambivalence, a fetish was introduced: the fetish of cultural identity that also implied, within the political concept of sovereignty, national identity. At that time—the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 70s in the former Yugoslavia—there was a major shift in the way Communists legitimised their rule. The narrative of class struggle was essentially abandoned. The Party stopped conceiving of itself as the vanguard of a universal history that would lead it to its classless end, communism. Instead it began to legitimate its rule within the history of a particular nation by identifying itself as its political elite, which, after having finally accomplished the goal of national liberation and achieved full national sovereignty, was leading the (nationally framed) society into progress under the given historical conditions of a socialist regulated market economy and open participation in international *Realpolitik* and global capitalism. In short: the communist leaders of this era did not aim to adapt society to the communist utopia. Rather they adapted the communist utopia to a society that had fully identified itself with its nation. Of course, this fundamentally changes the situation on the so-called cultural front. The communists were no longer fighting in the trenches against the traditional bourgeois culture that was devoted to creating essentialist identities of the Yugoslav nations, Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Macedonians, Montenegrinians, Albanians, etc. Rather they made a non-aggression pact with it—"you leave politics to us, we leave national culture to you" (with a few clearly defined exceptions)—and so even strengthened their identitarian, that is, national legitimization.

8. Ibid., 20.

To stay in the saddle they had to remount a fresh horse of identity politics, and were now riding it blindly into the catastrophe of the 1990s.⁹

To sum it up: identity or, in a slightly broader sense, cultural identification, was what from then on was able to offer a perspective of a life after the end of society. No wonder almost all grasped for it. But not all indeed. Some preferred not to.

The most prominent among those who entered the darkness at the end of society with their eyes—and the lens of their cameras—wide open was and still is Želimir Žilnik, whose entire filmic opus, extending over almost half a century, represents the most radical and consistent expression of its “blackness”.

Moreover, Žilnik is the only one of the Black Wave film-makers who explicitly responded to the official accusation:

“You are blaming me for making black films. So be it, then.” In 1971 he shot a documentary, which he titled literally *Black Film*.¹⁰ Žilnik picked up six homeless people from the street and brought them to his home, not only to share the warmth of a middle-class apartment (it was January), but also to actively participate in making a film about their problem.

9. With the new constitution of 1974 multiculturalism has become the official ideology of Yugoslav state. The discourse on social justice didn't simply disappear from Yugoslav politics. It was translated into the new language of identity politics, which dominated political public—not, however, as an intra-social cause but rather as an inter-national one. The question of an (un)just redistribution is now posed not in relation of one class of society to another, but rather in relation of one republic—one nation—of Yugoslav (con)federation to another. This is clearly a post-socialist turn as it was defined by Nancy Fraser in her *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, 2: it demonstrates a shift away “from a socialist political imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is redistribution, to a ‘postsocialist’ political imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is recognition”.

10. “Black Film” was recently featured in the film program of Documenta 12, curated by Alexander Horwath.

(This would become typical of Žilnik's documentary drama: allowing his amateur actors, whom the film story is about, to consciously participate in its making, or, in other words, to play themselves.)¹¹ The next day on the streets of Novi Sad he used his camera to enquire about how to solve the problem of homeless people in the city. Neither the passers-by nor the officials have an answer to this question. The filmmaker himself doesn't have it either, for "these stinky people", as he calls them in the film, cannot stay in his flat forever. So, finally, after telling them that no solution to this problem has been found and that he is running out of tape, Žilnik asks those people to leave his home.

Again: what is black in this "Black Film"? The reality it depicts? The failure of communists to solve social problems? The notorious gap between a utopian promise and reality? No! It is the film itself, the very idea of art, especially film art, claiming power to change social reality—this is what is really black in *Black Film*. In fact it begins with the author saying to the camera: "I used to make these films two years ago, but such people [the homeless –B.B.] are still here." The film is a radically honest self-reflexive critique of the idea and practice of so-called socially engaged cinema. Žilnik openly considers *Black Film* being his own tomb. In a manifesto published on the occasion of the 1971 film festival where the film premiered, he calls the whole festival a "graveyard".¹²

11. "I do not hide from the people I am shooting the fact that I am making a film. On the contrary. I help them to recognise their own situation and to express their position to it as efficiently as they can, and they help me to create a film about them in the best possible way." Želimir Žilnik in an interview in *Dnevnik*, Novi Sad, 14 April 1968. Quoted in Dominika Prejdová, "Socially Engaged Cinema According to Želimir Žilnik", in: Branislav Dimitrijević et al., *For an Idea – Against the Status Quo*, Novi Sad: Playground Produkcija, 2009, 164.

12. Želimir Žilnik, "This Festival Is a Graveyard. Manifesto to the 18th Yugoslav Festival of Short Film, Belgrade, 1971", in: Will Wehling (ed.), *XVII. Westdeutsche Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, Oberhausen: Westdeutsche Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, 1971, 24-25.

“Black” here refers to the “misery of an abstract humanism”¹³ and of the “socially engaged film that has become a ruling fashion in our bourgeois cinematography”¹⁴; it refers to its false avant-gardism, social demagoguery and left-wing phraseology; to its abuse of a socially declassed people for the purposes of film; to the filmmakers’ exploitation of social misery, etc.¹⁵ But, what is even more important, “black” doesn’t refer at all to a “lack of freedom”, which is usually presented from today’s post-communist perspective as the worst “blackness” of the communist past. Already 1971 Žilnik explicitly states: “They left us our freedom, we were liberated, but ineffective.”¹⁶ “Black” refers to a chasm that no freedom can bridge, a chasm that will survive the fall of communism.

For Žilnik a film, and in a broader sense culture, however liberated from totalitarian oppression, will never provide a remedy for social misery. For him the emancipatory promise of culture is a bluff. In his mocking the authors of the socially engaged films from 1971 who search “for the most picturesque wretch that is prepared to convincingly suffer”¹⁷, he already makes fun of the liberal inclusivism that twenty years later will impose its normative dogmatism on the cultural producers of the new (and old) democracies. We know that picture very well: one discovers somewhere on the fringes of society the victims of exclusion, those poor subaltern creatures with no face and no voice. But luckily there is an artist around to help them show their faces and make their voices heard.

13. Želimir Žilnik, quoted from: Heinz Klunker, “Soziale Experimente”, in: Wehling, *ibid.*, 23.

14. Želimir Žilnik, “This Festival Is a Graveyard”, *ibid.* 24.

15. Cf. Želimir Žilnik, in: Heinz Klunker, *ibid.*, 23.

16. *Ibid.* Reporting from the festival in Belgrade the same German critic, Heinz Klunker, criticises Žilnik for seeing the situation “too darkly” and for underestimating the freedom that filmmakers in Yugoslavia have been granted, a freedom that Žilnik, as Klunker writes, “equates with pure complacency”. From H. Klunke, “Leute, Filme und Politik in Belgrad”, *Deutsches Allgemeine Sonntagsblatt*, 28 March 1971.

17. Želimir Žilnik, “This Festival Is a Graveyard”, *ibid.* 24.

How nice: what a bad society has excluded, a good art can include again. For, as one believes, what has been socially marginalised can always be made culturally central, that is, brought to light—to the transparency of the public sphere—from the dark fringes of society. The rest is a democratic routine: a benevolent civil society, sympathetic to the suffering of the poor and excluded, makes a political case of the social darkness; and as soon the party politics is involved, a political solution searched for and finally found, a law is changed, a democracy is reborn, now more inclusive than ever before.

Not with me, answers Želimir Žilnik, already in 1971. He, who has been working his entire life with different kinds of so-called marginalised people—from street children, unemployed, homeless people to transvestites, illegal migrants, Roma, etc.—knows well what their “blackness” is about. It is about where the society as society is absent and about what politics, however democratic, cannot represent: a “blackness”, which is rapidly swallowing that light we have historically gathered around.

No Fear...? An Artwork...? Smell Like Violence...? Šejla Kamerić's *Bosnian Girl*

One does not have to take literally Joseph Beuys' claim that everyone is an artist to understand that *Bosnian Girl* represents two artistic interventions. The first is a self-portrait of Šejla Kamerić articulated as a critical reaction to the second: a piece of graffiti by an unknown Dutch soldier, which reads, "No teeth...? A moustache...? Smel [sic] like shit...? Bosnian Girl!"—words found on the wall of an old battery factory in Potočari that was used during the Bosnian War as a barracks for the Dutch Battalion of the United Nations Protection Force deployed to provide safekeeping for the Muslim enclave in Srebrenica. The meaning of the whole piece becomes clear only if we read this in reference to art and cultural history, and understand it accordingly as a critical statement on a particular cultural location—Bosnia, or to put it more precisely, the Balkans. It is Kamerić's hostile confrontation with this statement that makes her *Bosnian Girl* both an artistic masterpiece and a political statement.

The key methodological assumption of Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* is the author's separation of the image of the Balkans from Edward Said's notion of Orientalism. There is certainly something we might call Balkanism but it is not, as some argued, a subspecies of Orientalism. Among the features that clearly differentiate the two Todorova brings up sexuality.¹ She reminds us that the notion of the Orient, especially in literature and visual arts, is attached to an unhidden interest in sensuality and sexuality. The imagined Orient is a metaphor for the forbidden and exotic. Alongside eastern cruelty, Orientalist discourses involve lust and erotic themes. Naked female bodies in baths, harems and at slave markets are, for instance, popular motives in Orientalist painting. But above and before all, there is an explicit relationship between the Orient and the feminine. The Orient is female and as such constitutive of the Western male, sexist gaze. None of this applies, however, to the Balkans. It is neither forbidden nor sexual or feminine. Rather, the Balkans is a metaphor for male, primitive, cruel, crude and dishevelled.

The graffiti on that wall in Potočari is a direct reaction to its author's traumatic encounter with this difference. He went to an imagined Orient but found himself in the Balkans. This is why his comment on the wall, however personal, has the heuristic character of a general value: the discovery, and at the same time an articulation, of Balkanism. In fact, the words of an unknown Dutch soldier express, in their unreflected immediacy, a sort of frustrated Orientalism. To understand this we must first distinguish two different levels in the abstract phantasy of Bosnian girl that is addressed in his graffiti. One clearly relates to an object of sexual desire framed within a generally orientalist projection. But there is a parallel phantasy that rather belongs to the classical colonial imaginary, the one of a helpless native woman who seeks protection from violent local males. Only taken together, they explain the desire behind the graffiti. It is clearly a desire for sensual enjoyment, but one that can be satisfied only through the simultaneous recognition of cultural superiority and male dominance.

1. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 10ff.

The graffiti is proof that none of this was found in the Bosnian reality. Even worse, at the place of the sensually desired Bosnian girl, in a sort of Freudian “return of the repressed”, emerges a stinky, toothless creature with a moustache—obviously that primitive and ugly Balkan male himself, from whom the UN soldier was supposed to protect her. His Orientalism is replaced by Balkanism, his fantasmatic expectation of recognition and sensual satisfaction turn into disgust and disappointment. The graffiti is but an expression of this frustration.

In Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* We find a well-known motive—“white men saving brown women from brown men.”² Concretely, it relates to colonial India, in which the British, who saw the natives as primitive and barbaric, intervened to “save”, as Spivak once wrote commenting on her own text, “Indian women from their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons.”³ But the famous quote also generally applies to contemporary neo-colonial conditions, in which the West legitimizes its violent interventions around the world by evoking the image of a native, freedom-loving civil society oppressed by a backward, pre-modern culture, traditional patriarchal relations and religious—mostly Islamic—fundamentalism. It is best epitomized in the figure of a helpless Third World woman who passively waits to be rescued and freed by men from the civilized West. However, this is, as Spivak explicitly points out, not about saving women, but rather about a superpower further consolidating its power.

As is well known, the Dutch Battalion and with it the United Nations Protection Force in Bosnia, together with the so-called international community (in fact select Western powers) that politically backed the mission, failed to protect the Muslim enclave of Srebrenica from General Mladić’s butchers.

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London: Macmillan, 1988, 293.

3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s Quotes, <http://www.shmoop.com/spivak/quotes.html>.

But they didn't fail entirely. The Dutch soldiers and the West, for which they stood ideologically, did manage to accomplish their mission in Srebrenica in at least one respect. In a sort of macabre parody they succeeded in saving Bosnian women from their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons—thanks to the help of precisely those toothless, stinky Balkan men who did the dirty job instead, executing almost 8,000 other toothless, stinky Balkan men. One cannot but ask: was there anything to protect in Srebrenica except those male Balkan creatures of no cultural value whatsoever? The problem is, however, that what today is of no cultural value has no human value either.

By putting her self-portrait under the insulting words of a Dutch soldier Kamerić does not act as a representative of an offended cultural identity that strives for recognition by opposing a false, ideologically (in terms of Balkanism) distorted picture of “Bosnian girl” with an accurate one—without a moustache but probably with teeth and a pleasant smell. Kamerić is not a pretty Bosnian girl who has removed an ugly one from the spotlight so as to please the Orientalist gaze. There is something more in her artwork, an essential quality that takes its political meaning beyond the scope of the so-called struggle for recognition that has become the paradigm of post-modern politics; a politics in which various cultural identities feature as both the main agencies and stakes of political mobilization, while cultural differences provide the fault lines along which today's major political conflicts unfold.

In a carefully staged and clearly perceptible act of defiance, *Bosnian girl* evokes and provokes that structurally disavowed element of the post-modern politics of recognition on which its whole ideological edifice is erected—violence: a post-communist violence that has decisively shaped the reality with which Kamerić's art deals; a colonial, post-colonial, or neo-colonial violence, which accompanies western humanitarian interventions (and non-interventions), wars on terror as well as the so-called terrorism itself; a gendered violence which is, on various levels and in different forms, a pervasive feature not only of today's armed conflicts but of the so-called normality as well; and finally, a violence that is intrinsic to the capitalist world in the times of its crisis and beyond.

Those familiar with the work of Kamberić know she is an expert in “basics”. If a situation of extreme violence such as war makes us aware of the basics of human existence—bread, water and light—it reminds us of the basics of politics as well: the relation of antagonism between friend and enemy that also implies violence in various forms of expression. This is what *Bosnian girl* addresses—violence as the basics of politics. It addresses the violence inflicted on the victims by the perpetrators. But it also addresses, or better, evokes a “violence to come”, a violence that shall transcend its humanitarian reduction to a simple non-political relation between perpetrators and victims and instead, become constitutive of an emancipatory agency. As an artwork, *Bosnian girl* is not about recovering a violated dignity of women as the ultimate victims of war. Rather, it is about disclosing the conditions of the very possibility of human dignity as such, a condition that obviously implies an engagement with violence.

The eyes of the artist that look at us from behind the bars of those humiliating words were disillusioned long ago. They don’t look to excite compassion. Even less do they ask for help; and they emphatically don’t address an abstract humanitarian consciousness, for they know the truth of this help. It is perfectly epitomized in the graffiti of the Dutch soldier, the truth of a very particular, very Western, enlightened, multiculturalist, post-feminist, liberal democratic help, the truth that is so clear to all its miserable beneficiaries all over the world, from Libya, Palestine and Syria to Iraq and Afghanistan, from 1990s Bosnia to the Ukraine of today. These eyes demand solidarity, a concrete political solidarity. If they don’t get it, they won’t go breaking out in tears—they will aim a gun at us instead.



Chapter III:

Art and Communism

Out of History

Isn't it curious how contemporary art after 1989 opportunistically followed the logic of area studies that has been haunting the western humanities since the end of the WWII? A case in point: only within twelve months, from October 2001 until November 2003, there were three large and quite ambitious exhibitions of art from the Balkans in Austria and Germany: *In Search of Balkania* at Neue Galerie Graz; *Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans*, at Sammlung Essl in Klosterneuburg near Vienna and finally *In the Gorges of the Balkans* at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel. Needless to say, the notion of an "East European art" was at that time already massively in use. A "Balkan art" was a short but intensely lived subspecies of it. One of most striking effects of the general reconceptualization of actual art production and art history in terms of area representation was an overall intensification of the so-called struggle for recognition. To be included in or excluded from the powerful western art system, its canons and its financial resources has become for the artists and art institutions of the post-communist East a matter of their survival. In paraphrasing the famous slogan of Mladen Stilinović on the hegemony of the English language in the art field one could say that in Eastern Europe after 1989 "an artist who does not represent an area is not artist."

Another closely connected and no less striking effect of the introduction of area logic into the field of art and cultural production and in more general terms into the entire sphere of socio-political relations was the interesting fact that post-communism as a historical condition has never generated its own art, say a “post-communist art”. Every art produced, collected or canonized under this historical condition has been immediately recast into an “eastern art”. Only through its absence was communism still able to enclose an area and provide a specific (cultural) identity. Yet, it was already unable to tell its own history or at least to be seen within one. In post-communism it is already too late to follow that famous advice given by Fredric Jameson at the beginning of the 1980s: “Always historicize!”

Recycling the R-waste: (*R* is for Revolution)

It is odd how simple and transparent the world looks today: one single concept of (post)history, a single economic system, a single political model, a single art-system. Either you are already in or you strive to get in. The picture clearly resembles an ideological delusion. But it is not. Rather it is a cultural one: the belief that the major difference that divides people nowadays is no longer ideological, political or economic but cultural. At least it was Huntington who would have us subscribe to this notion. He also dated this post-ideological turn to the end of the Cold War. Thus, ideology is supposed to have died with communism, but only to make place for culture that has taken over its function in structuring our reality, both the current and the past one. For it is cultural difference that nowadays governs over both space and time, defining and controlling the boundary between here and there, between now and then.

Where Communism was, there is now East

The best example of such a culturalization of historical reality is the process of transformation known as “post-communist transition” (to democracy, where else?). Curiously, this eminently historical process is usually imagined as a sort of time-space, concretely, as a space of cultural belatedness, mostly in terms of a belated modernity. Its name is “East” and it designates much more than the geographical realm of Eastern Europe. In the post-communist discourse “East” refers primarily to the cultural other of the West. This is how the Cold War divide has survived the collapse of communism—as cultural divide between the West and the East. And this is how the entire historical experience of communism has disappeared from the West—disposed of into the cultural otherness of the East. Now communism not only appears as intrinsically non-western—the West for its part is cleared of all the trauma of the communist past that is still accessible only in the cultural retrospective of the East.

On the ideological level the Western exclusion of the communist past is carried out through the signifier of totalitarianism. It retroactively totalizes a politically, ideologically and culturally heterogeneous experience of historical communism, unifies the space of the East, renders it transparent and finally essentializes its cultural identity.

Now the East, after having been defeated politically and appropriated economically, can be also conquered epistemically and colonized culturally. The first task is assumed by the Western academy, particularly disciplines like the so-called area studies. Not only does the academy produce the knowledge on the East, it also establishes the West as the exclusive subject of this knowledge. In this way the West acquires the ultimate epistemic competence over a historic experience it has allegedly never shared. At the same time, the cultural difference between the West and the East becomes a chasm between theory and praxis in terms of both space and time: theoretical knowledge is here and now (in the West) while the historical praxis is there and then (in the East). Needless to say, the Western theoretical knowledge is always already universal; the eastern historical praxis, however, is merely particular.

As regards cultural colonization, this unfolds in the form of an accelerated modernization of the East—perceived in the East as the process of catching up with a cultural development it missed. Values, norms and standards of the Western cultural industry are introduced in the East. The same applies for modern and contemporary art. The global (Western) art system with its institutions—large exhibitions, museums, galleries, biennials, curators, art magazines, etc—penetrates the space of the former communist East. However, there are also some authentic cultural and artistic values to be discovered in the East and introduced in the West. A sort of cultural exchange takes place, but not one between equal partners. The East has much less to offer. It is poor, weak and backward. This is why it suffers a lack of recognition. And this is why the relation in which the East stands to the West can best be described as a struggle for recognition—entirely in accordance with the so-called identity politics that dominates political life today.

The best example of this struggle is the phenomenon of “self-easternization” that marked some artistic projects between the 1980s and the 1990s in former Yugoslavia (Slovenia in particular) and former Soviet Union (Russia).¹ At stake artistically was a critical reflexion on the so-called historic avant-gardes. But in terms of its ideological meaning the concept of “East Art” actually accepted the rules of identitarian game and claimed an essential otherness in relation to Western art. Let us put aside the question whether the reason for this claim was an attempt to challenge or subvert the Western-dominated art system or rather “simply” a marketing trick—concretely, the opening of a new market niche made possible by the globalization of the art system and the expansion of the capitalist market toward the East during the 1980s and 1990s.²

1. See Igor Zabel, „Intimität und Gesellschaft: Die slowenische Kunst und der Osten“, in: B. Groys, A. von der Heiden und P. Weibel, *Zurück aus der Zukunft: Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005, 472–508. Zabel uses the term “Veröstlichung” (easternization).

2. The latter option is suggested by Miklavž Komelj in his lecture “The Function of the Signifier ‘Totalitarianism’ in the Constitution of the Field of ‘East Art’” given at the *Workers’-Punks’ University* (Ljubljana) on May 15, 2008. (Manuscript)

The fact that “East Art” is more than a Western ideological projection is important, for it has a real self-proclaimed referent in the East, an art that is not only truly identified with its “eastern-ness” but also with its referentiality to the West.³

It is thus no wonder that the Western art system has taken this “Eastern challenge” seriously, especially on the part of its enlightened, inclusivist wing eager to discover hidden aesthetic values out there in the East. If the cultural exchange between the West and the East has, from the perspective of the latter, the form of a struggle for recognition, seen from the West it becomes a sort of simple cultural translation. It sees its task in bridging the cultural difference, embracing the (Eastern) Other and filtering out what is useful and can enrich the (Western) art system—concretely, refurbish the existing canons and so eventually foster the renewal of the whole system.

But not everything is translatable. What the Western cultural translators address in the East is its cultural heritage, in particular its art history, yet in fact nothing more than a pile of cultural data inscribed into the signs of a foreign culture, respectively the “native informants” charged with delivering this data. By participating in this model of (an always already unequal) inter-cultural translation the “easterners”, even if they believe in struggling for recognition, necessarily accept a radical divergence of cultural history and historical praxis with the latter being irrevocably lost in translation. Or, to put it more precisely, it is heterogeneity, contingency and opacity of the historical praxis that is in this mode of inter-cultural translation rendered untranslatable. In order to be culturally recognized, the East must leave the truth of its historical praxis to oblivion.

3. Komelj gives the example of an “Eastern” exhibition featured in Ljubljana’s Moderna galerija in 2004 under the title “Seven Sins—Ljubljana—Moscow”: “The visitor was confronted with a billboard installed in front of the gallery which submitted a definition of ‘the Easterners’ as clowns who entertain the West (mind the obvious self-irony which is ideally included in this definition). Typically, among the seven constitutive characters of ‘the Easterners’, beside ‘laziness’ (we should, of course, read this notion in light of the texts by Kazimir Malevič and Mladen Stilinović) and similar ‘sins’, one would also read: ‘Love of the West’. Thus, an artist is defined as ‘Easterner’ through his/her love for the West.” Ibid.

This is the price it pays for having a unique cultural identity—identity that necessarily implies the transparency of a common historical experience, a homogeneous cultural space, a shared ideological totality, one is even tempted to say, a common destiny.

If the rules of this game are generally accepted, we get a sort of hermeneutic narrative—a relatively coherent (hi)story of art related out of a transparent historical context, concretely the history of East Art in the context of communist totalitarianism.

Capitalism: An East Side Story

The case of the former Yugoslavia is of particular interest here, for it usually serves as a perfect exception that proves the rule: socialism but with a more or less human face, a closed society but with open borders, a communist rule but not within the Eastern bloc, a one-party system but without a command economy, a Marxist ideology but a respectable cultural production thoroughly comparable to the Western one; and yet, nothing but a communist totalitarian system that collapsed in 1989/90.

Let us try to avoid this hermeneutical trap of providing a specific (Yugoslav) historical context for a general narrative of “Art in the Communist East” and so helping the West to culturally translate the East. The first step in this direction is to shake the entire conceptual horizon that is structured by binary divisions like West/East, capitalism/communism, democracy/totalitarianism, autonomy of art/its ideological subjection and propagandistic misuse, etc.

What follows are a few simple facts of Yugoslav political and cultural history that necessarily get lost in the current Western translations of the Eastern communist past.

In a speech from 1950, Boris Kidrič, a member of the Yugoslav Politburo in charge of the Yugoslav economy, opens the problem of monopolisation in a socialist economy, ascribing it to

the “Soviet praxis” or more precisely to “the monopoly capitalism that was brought to perfection by Soviet bureaucratic centralism.”⁴ Elsewhere he writes that “the economic and social role of the Soviet bureaucratic caste totally resembles the role of the capitalist class if it is not, because of its almightiness, even worse.” In his *Theses on the economy of transitional period*, Kidrič takes the USSR as an example of how “state socialism” cannot be separated “from the strengthening and privileging bureaucracy as social parasite ... from the suffocating of socialist democracy and general degeneration of the system” so that it comes to “a peculiar sort of restoration ... a vulgar monopolism of a state-capitalist character.”

Isn't it interesting: the crucial part of what is today retroactively perceived as historical communism and identified with “East” was labelled—*within* this very historical communism and by the communists themselves— (monopoly) capitalism that is even worse than (Western) capitalism itself. Having said this, I don't insist on a singularity of Yugoslav position within the communist experience, but rather on an intrinsic heterogeneity of this experience that cannot be subsumed under one single feature, be it totalitarianism, one-party rule, Marxism-Leninism, command economy or simply the culture of the East. To emphasize again: we can think of “East” as a place where capitalism was worse than in the West.

However, one might rightly object that the place from which the communism is seen as a form of capitalism that is worse than capitalism itself is just another self-proclaimed “true” communism. Indeed, this was precisely the case with Yugoslav “associational socialism”,⁵ based on the so-called self-management system, and a peculiar mixture of social welfare state and market economy.

4. This and following quotations are taken from Darko Suvin's essay on bureaucracy in the post-revolutionary Yugoslavia 1945–75. (“Diskurs o birokraciji i državnoj vlasti u po-revolucionarnoj Jugoslaviji 1945–75”, unpublished manuscript). Translations are mine.

5. This is how, in the 50s, one very prominent Yugoslav economist (Branko Horvat) coined—by the way, in a dissertation written in Great Britain—the Yugoslav type of historical communism.

But let us take a look at how this “true” communism identified its own political stakes and inner contradictions.

After the split with Stalin 1948, and contrary to the Soviet model of state-capitalism, Yugoslav Communist Party introduced “market socialism”: all central plan directives to the enterprises were abandoned, the labour market was liberalized, a sort of financial market with the strong role of the banks was introduced, etc. This resulted in rapid industrialization and an economic growth rate that averaged 13% annually (1950–60s). This, however, also had negative consequences like massive unemployment⁶, a deepening of the divide between the north and the south, inflation, growing foreign debt and more.

Yet these changes also radically transformed the conditions of cultural production, making possible the emergence of a powerful cultural industry. To offer but one example, the famous Yugoslav film industry was capable, already during the 1960s, of producing some 150 short and 30 feature films a year. The backbone of this industry consisted in a number of relatively independent companies, the enterprises that were also the owners of their final products, the films. They provided the expertise and technology, studios, film-processing laboratories, professional support, etc. On the other side the authors (writers and directors) of the films were not employed by the state. Rather they were organized in free associations of the film workers comprised of screenwriters, directors, actors, composers, cameramen, set designers and more. They were given the status of freelance professionals, freed from direct employment in technical and production enterprises and were granted the right to negotiate contractual arrangements with the film studios in order to realize various scenarios and film projects. Productions were not financed by the state budget but rather through fundraising from banks, companies, TV and media centres, communal or republic cultural funds, cooperation with foreign film and TV companies and similar.

6. This explains one of the best-known differences between Yugoslavia and the Eastern Block communist countries—Yugoslavia’s open borders. The borders were opened not out of respect to so-called freedom of movement, but rather in order to cope with the growing masses of unemployed. They were allowed abroad to find jobs on the international labour market, mostly in Western Europe, in Austria, Germany, France, Scandinavia, etc.

This doesn't sound like a typically socialist approach to film-making, does it? Moreover, this example applies to the broader cultural production in former Yugoslavia, including publishing, theatre, literary and art production.

Altogether, market socialism provided a reasonably friendly environment for the flourishing of all sorts of modernist cultural expression, including contemporary art. It also allowed for a constant and problem-free contact with the international cultural scene and market.

However, there is no market economy—say, capitalism—without crisis. In Yugoslavia such crisis emerged, with all of its political consequences, in the late 1960's.

At the Party Congress of 1971, the elite managed to clearly define the economic core of the crises: "The surplus value that had been taken from the state hasn't returned to the production, to the organizations of self-management labour in the factories, but has flowed over to the banks, insurance and large trading companies, especially those in the export branch." In other words, the Party, as well as society as a whole, loses control over a growing financial sector. One of the leading Party ideologues of the time, Vladimir Bakarić, points to the central problem: "the capital that is accumulated in the banks has become autonomous, is out of any control and restores capitalist relations and conditions wherever it occurs—and it occurs everywhere." He also sees the new subject of power emerging, the so-called techno-managers monopoly. At stake is a new political grouping originating mostly in the banks and other loan-granting and credit institutions "that use or misuse the state in order to push forward the privatization of social income." Bakarić also warns that this new political force is well connected with the positions of power in the Party—he even explicitly complains about himself belonging to a minority within the Party that tries to resist this development—and starts to align itself with the nationalist political opposition in order to take over the state.

Hence, there is one fundamental antagonism that, already in the 1970s, dictates the political life in former Yugoslavia, that between

the ideal of a social(ist) welfare state, defended by the “dogmatic” faction in the Party, and the capital concentrated in the financial institutions that strives for overall privatization and in order to seize political power makes a pact with conservative—in this particular case, nationalist and even fascist—ideology and political movements.

Here one should remember just how completely blind Western politicians and media showed themselves to be during the 1990s, when they personified the main cause of the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia and the greatest obstacle to achieving peace and democracy in the Balkans in Slobodan Milošević, “that dogmatic communist apparatchik”. Certainly he was guilty, on both counts, not as a communist apparatchik but rather as a bank director (having also worked in New York) and economic liberal who seized power precisely by aligning himself with the Serbian nationalist movement.

It is in this context that we must rethink the very meaning of the so-called totalitarian repression against art and culture in communist Yugoslavia, especially the wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s, that targeted, among others, the left-wing student movement of 1968, the films and authors of the so-called Black Wave of Yugoslav cinema, the Marxist and humanist intelligentsia, like philosophers such as the Praxis group and more. However, it is highly significant that this unfolded at the precise moment the warm current of the old revolutionary elite was replaced by the cold current of the new technocratic apparatchiks, who personified the growing dominance of the market, a return to bourgeois consumerism, and the rise of free-floating capital with the banks and similar powerful institutions.

Finally there is a well-known image that, in a way, well serves to symbolize the historical failure of communism—a photograph, essentially black and white, of people desperately queuing for basic goods. If this photography had really been taken in former Yugoslavia it would have depicted the reality of the 1980s; more precisely, the social consequences of the so-called austerity measures implemented by IMF and other international financial institutions.

After having entered the international market, Yugoslav economy was also exposed to both new crises and complex power relations. In the 1970s these took the form of the energy/oil crises with oil prices increasing fourfold in 1973–74, the global recession of 1974–75, the crisis of classical Fordism, the implementation of neoliberal economic policies and their intimate association with conservative and right-wing politics. By 1980 Yugoslav foreign debt had mushroomed from \$2 in 1970 to \$20 billion. From the early 1980s on, communist Yugoslavia was completely dependent on global capitalism and the political will of its most powerful players. While the Party was enforcing shock therapy on the society at home, as was prescribed by the centres of global financial and political power, the social(ist) welfare state was gradually collapsing. The country's standard of living fell by 40% during the 1980s. Not surprisingly, the full integration of the former communist Yugoslavia into the global capitalist scheme, implying of course a fire sale of its entire economy, was finally accomplished by its violent disintegration in the wars of the 1990s. The rest is tragedy.

I am afraid, it doesn't make any sense

What does this last act of Yugoslav history bring to mind—a communist past that has disappeared from our historical horizon with the so-called democratic revolutions of 1989/90? Or the incalculable social and political consequences of the current crisis of capitalism; concretely, of Greek society for instance, that was recently brought to the brink of total collapse by the debt crises and the imposed austerity measures? Finally, of what are we talking here, of communism or of capitalism, of the past or of the present?

What appears in this story as unresolvable confusion that resists any clear historical and ideological determination of the communist past, preventing even a simple differentiation between this past and our present, or retroactively between two antagonistic systems that shaped the global politics—of communism and capitalism—of the 20th century, is only the effect of a genuine historical contingency of Yugoslav communism, a contingency that was once induced by a radical revolutionary intervention into the given state of affairs and established power relations.

At stake is the Yugoslav socialist revolution 1941–45, the only successful revolution of its kind in Europe after 1917. It liberated an enormous amount of emancipatory energy that subsequently forged entirely unexpected and “impossible” dimensions and developments, like Tito’s split with Stalin in 1948, the introduction of market economy and worker self-management, the taking of a leading role in the non-aligned movement, etc. That same energy also fostered cultural production that flourished under the communist rule. It enjoyed freedom, not as a space spared from state intervention but rather as a stake in a struggle. However, the signifier of totalitarianism makes it impossible to entertain an idea of freedom that goes far beyond the meaning of a socio-political or historical condition in which art and culture were produced—a freedom that was seized by art and culture in order to create this very socio-political and historical condition; in short, a freedom that did not serve to provide a context of art and cultural production, but rather was its very text. What made this freedom possible? What made this possible was clearly the revolution. In his seminal work on partisan art Miklavž Komelj⁷ argues that the partisan “contemporary art” was able to co-create its time, and not, on the contrary, simply adapt to it. What this art at that time actually did was rather to challenge its own impossibility and in that way, symbolically articulate the turn of impossibility into possibility. This is precisely what we call revolution.

To end with a question: does it make any sense for a contemporary knowledge on art to rummage through the dustbin of history in search of some recyclable artistic R-waste (“R” is for revolution)? From a position that historically legitimizes itself precisely in its having thrown its own revolutionary experience into this same dustbin; and is now able to enthusiastically embrace the idea of revolution only if it is being actualized somewhere else—in another remote and belated culture or one forensically recovered from the scrap heap it calls the cultural heritage of the East?

7. “Kako misliti partizansko umetnost” (*How To Think Partisan Art*), Ljubljana: Založba / *cf, 2010.

Art In, Gypsies Out: On Several Contradictions in Post-Communism

No city in the world has been as marked by the conflict between the democratic West and the communist East as Berlin has. The Berlin Wall became the concentrated metaphor of this conflict, just as its fall became the symbol of the fall of all communism, as if communism had gone under in Berlin of all places, and as if 150 years of recent world history had ended in this city.

The symbolism of this event does indeed carry with it an obligation. Not because it gives the city of Berlin a specific identity that could be staged on the cultural scene—say, along the lines of the motto “Berlin: The city in which communism died.” Making a local attraction out of a memorable historical event is at best of interest to the tourism industry. Rather than tinkering with the death mask of communism so as to sell it quickly on the growing market for nostalgia, art and its accompanying process of reflection have more important things to do. They could ask, for example, whether there is anything about the fall of communism that still remains to be said or evoked. It may well be that today this event reminds us of nothing more than the incredible arrogance of a time that rode roughshod over the whole of human history, then announced its own end and decided just to while away its days.

In 1990 Jean-Luc Nancy spoke of the anger that takes hold when hearing all the chatter about the “end of communism.”¹ He found ridiculous the conviction that Marxism and communism had now finally been done away with, as simple as that. It could not be true, he protested, that our history, which 150 years had been so fatefully shaped by the communist idea and the communist movements, was just a deception that had veiled our eyes and then suddenly dissolved into nothingness. “As if error, pure, simple, and stupid error could be thus corrected, regulated, mobilized. As if thousands of so-called “intellectuals” were simply fools, and especially as if millions of others were even more stupid as to have been caught in the delirium of the first.”²

For Nancy, genuine indignation and concern were evoked less by the fact that communism could have existed—with all its facets, both intellectual and Realpolitik—than by the immense ignorance with which our age declined to think about this fact, to ask why all this happened. This self-imposed prohibition on thinking is the real stupidity—a truly epochal stupidity—that followed the fall of communism historically and ought to be the real reason for our rage and anger today.

Nancy also sees anger as the political sentiment par excellence.³ Anger, he believes, is the response to something inadmissible and intolerable, an expression of resistance that reaches far beyond what our common sense considers achievable. Consequently, the resistance that is produced by such anger is necessarily “unreasonable”, since it questions the accepted limits of the “reasonable”, which have always been determined hegemonically. It is precisely in this sense that such resistance becomes political, by exploding the framework of “reasonable politics” or of so-called Realpolitik.

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, “*La Comparution/The Compearance: From the Existence of ‘Communism’ to the Community of ‘Existence’*,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (August 1992), 375 (French original, “*La comparution: De l’existence du ‘communisme’ à la communauté de l’‘existence’*,” in Jean-Christophe Bailly and Jean-Luc Nancy, *La comparution: Politique à venir*, Paris 1991).

2. *Ibid.*, 376.

3. *Ibid.*, 375.

With the fall of communism, Nancy believes, this anger disappeared from politics “into a huge democratic’ no-man’s-land”.⁴ The anger continues to exist, just as there continue to be sufficient reasons for it in today’s world, but now it no longer finds political articulation. The anger and rage that we have felt since the “end of communism” have thus become mute in the ubiquitous language of democratic politics that has become obligatory everywhere. This does not mean, however, that we can no longer hear them. They are loud enough, but they are spoken in a different language.

This is the language of art. Everywhere where art confronts its social reality, is outraged over existing social injustices, joins local protests or helps to shape resistance to globalism, for example, we hear the echo of the anger that has been banned from politics. This should not be confused with a form of choleric actionism for its own sake or explained away by reference to Utopian desires that are supposedly innate in art. This is not a matter of art itself—of what art is or should be—but rather of the constantly changing historical space in which it articulates itself. Today, this space has become the space of anger, the space from which politics withdrew with the fall of communism and which art now seems to occupy. In this sense, art too has become post-communist. This does not refer to a feature it has acquired as a result of recent historical changes but to the mode of its historical existence, to the way it announces its social significance to us today, takes over a political role or becomes historical in a general sense.

This affects above all the relation of art to the “reasonable”, that which, so the general belief today, is realized in democratic Realpolitik. The place once occupied by a politics that could taken by anger at the inadmissible and intolerable, and that knew how to elevate its claims above the “reasonable”, is occupied by art today. Like politics before it, art dares to look the “reasonable” in the eye from the outside. But that does not make art itself political. The legendary slogan “Be realistic, demand the impossible”, which at the time of the student protests of the 1960s was still recognizably political, has lost its political significance in our day.

4. Ibid.

Today, it can at most be understood as a kind of artistic intervention in a reality that is resistant to every form of change. What is still political about it is nothing other than the fact that it depicts, in the purest form, the intrinsic impossibility of any essential political change. In today's hegemonic system of liberal democracy, we have reduced politics to the art of the possible. Hence it is no wonder that art demonstrates to us the impossibility of politics.

This circumstance is yet another phenomenon of post-communism. It cannot, however, be localized geographically. Otherwise, the relationship of art and politics described above would apply only to the eastern part of Berlin, say. But Berlin has become indivisible, and that applies to the post-communist character of the city as well. It is post-communist, just as the whole world is post-communist. Nevertheless, the rival argument—that the entire complex of meanings of the thing we call post-communism applies only to those societies where a so-called communist power existed prior to 1989—is not simply false. It is, above all, the expression of a power relationship, since anyone who asserts that only the ex-communist countries are post-communist presumes a world in which one part has radically changed while the other has remained the same and is waiting for the changed part to find its way back to it. As if communism had been merely a kind of wrong turn, from which today millions of people who were lost on it since 1917 or 1945 are now turning back towards the only true path of world history. This supposed return to historical “normality” is encoded in today's political discourse as the transition to democracy. The process is primarily understood as the introduction of multi-party democracy, of an economy based on free markets, of rule of law or of an effective civil society. Its dark sides—namely, privatization in the hands of criminals, massive pauperization, the outbreak of extreme social and ethnic conflicts and even civil wars and ethnic cleansing—are, as a rule, blamed on the failures of communism. Communism is also to blame for post-communist nationalism, for two reasons: not only because in its day it brutally suppressed the free expression of nationalist feeling but also because it disappeared suddenly and thereby allowed it to break out in an uncontrolled fashion.

The crucial aspect here, however, is the way in which the process of post-communist transition (of East European societies) is

perceived in the West. For the “real existing system” of Western democracy, this process mainly plays out as the inclusion of an alienated cultural identity. This perspective totally determines the hegemonic discourse in which the post-communist transitional process is contemplated. We are, of course, speaking of a highly contradictory mechanism—every inclusion is simultaneously caught up in the dynamics of an exclusion. The best example today is the almost universally held liberal-democratic explanation of communist totalitarianism.⁵ According to this model of thought, the system of liberal-democratic capitalism is the purest embodiment of modernity. And this is said to be true not only on the level of civilization—that is, as unlimited development of the forces of production and scientific and technological mastery of nature—but also on the level of culture, whose most essential features are free elections, constitutionality, universal civil rights, institutionalization of change, cultural secularization, autonomy of subsystems and efficiency.⁶ Broadly speaking, the modern culture typical of liberal democracy means above all a “culture of rights and freedoms”.⁷ Communism, by contrast, especially in its Bolshevik, Soviet version—is nothing other than a radical negation of all the above-mentioned essential features of modern, liberal-democratic culture, in short: “The Bolshevik Revolution was a titanic effort to stop the invasion of Western culture.”⁸

It is not difficult to guess from this what such a line of thought implies for an explanation of post-communism or the post-communist transitional process. Post-communism—understood here as a historical condition that is limited to the ex-communist countries—is above all a cultural phenomenon; more precisely, it is the label for a cultural identity that has to open itself up to a radical process of transformation in order to be recognized and included by the universally valid, modernist culture of the

5. See Luciano Pellicani, “Modernity and Totalitarianism”, *Telos* 112 (Summer 1998), 3–23.

6. See *ibid.*, 10.

7. *Ibid.*, 14.

8. *Ibid.*, 15.

liberal-democratic West. Consequently, the post-communist transition is ultimately understood as a process of cultural modernization.⁹

Nor is it difficult, in this context, to detect an enormous ideological gain that the West can register by thus adding the culture of the post-communist East to its own symbolic capital: a total exclusion of communism from its own cultural and historical identity, a virtually perfect ideological purification from its own identity of the entire mess of communist totalitarianism, of all the gulags, show trials, forced collectivization and so on. Even so, it is not just the notorious “black book of communism” that is removed from its own house in this way. All the 150 years of world history that were marked by communism, with their incomparable intellectual and cultural achievements, are projected, by means of this one change of perspective, onto a foreign culture—sometimes described as “Byzantine”, sometimes “Asian”, but in any case anti-modern, non-Western.

To this is added the identification of the liberal-democratic West with its own role in the inclusion process we have described. It is not just that in its apparently altruistic inclusivism and generous tolerance it turns itself into an object of narcissistic enjoyment. The significance of this act goes much further. Only through the inclusion of a post-communist world that had strayed into another culture is the universalistic claim of Western culture shown to full advantage. Its universalism is ultimately just an effect of its act of inclusion. For that reason, we can also speak of the hegemonic character of the relationship that the West adopts vis-à-vis the post-communist East. Post-communism is also the name for a power relationship.

9. This is best confirmed by the concrete programmes for the transition that the West imposed on the post-communist countries—for example, the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe and TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States). On the latter, see Sergei Prozorov, “EU Tacis as an Instrument of Postcommunist Transformation: Technical Assistance and Practices of Governmentality”, *Rubikon* (October 2002), venus.ci.uw.edu.pl/~rubikon/forum/tacis.htm.

The circumstance described here holds equally true for the current process of “eastern expansion” of the European Union. This is not just because the eastern part of Europe coincides almost exactly with post-communist space. It is also because the ideological mechanism of expansion follows entirely the logic of inclusion that determines the Western attempt to come to terms with post-communism. Just as, in the post-communist perspective of the West, communism is turned into an alien cultural identity, so that its historical truth can be excluded at the same time the reality it left behind is hegemonically included, the East European societies must also be transformed into alien cultural identities in order to be included—in a contradictory process—by the West.

Let us consider the example of a paradigmatic case of eastern expansion that takes place on a seemingly apolitical field. A strange wave of fashion recently swept through the European art scene—more precisely, the Austrian-German scene. Within a brief period three fairly substantial and ambitious exhibitions of “Balkan art” were organized.¹⁰ Why did this kind of Balkan hype emerge so suddenly at this time? The immanent dynamics of the art scene or the art market alone cannot explain this phenomenon. It is neither the case that anything like a specific Balkan art has evolved of its own accord in South-Eastern Europe recently nor even that these exhibitions recognized and presented it as if it had. On the contrary! This allegedly Balkan art is not exhibited for its own sake but for the sake of a specific cultural experience that can be summed up in the concept of the Balkans, with its heavy symbolic burden. What is actually exhibited is, strictly speaking, an identity and not an art. The art merely provides the frame within which this identity can be put on view. It is not, of course, just any old alien

10. *In Search of Balkania*, Neue Galerie Graz (5 October–1 December 2002), curated by Roger Conover, Eda Čufer and Peter Weibel; *Blut & Honig: Zukunft ist am Balkan* (Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans), Sammlung Essl, Klosterneuburg (16 May–28 September 2003), curated by Harald Szeemann; *In den Schluchten des Balkan: Eine Reportage* (In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report), Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel (30 August–23 November 2003), curated by René Block. The title of the exhibition *In den Schluchten des Balkan* is an allusion to the novel of the same name by the German author Karl May.

identity, but rather precisely the one that is on the agenda for the European inclusion programme and that is, indeed, only constituted by means of the inclusion process. Even Balkan art is a product of the inclusion. It never existed in the Balkans previously. This is best confirmed by the fact that the organizers of the exhibition *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report* declared Kassel, the German city in which it was held, to be the “centre of East European art”. In fact, they are absolutely right, since the Western art market is indeed the place where Balkan art is not only consumed but also produced as such in the first place. Thus it is clear that the true role of art in this whole story is literally of secondary significance. It is exhausted in the staging of a kind of identity peep show, in which the Balkan identity is stripped of its usual clothing and presented naked to the West. The obscene (self-)satisfaction that Western Orientalisms find in this process is covered by a nearly perfect alibi. It is called eastern expansion and can thus even be fun.

In truth, the Balkan exhibitions described here do not accomplish any radical transformation of the Western image of the Balkans, as some people would argue. They simply follow the pattern that was already established in the 1990s through the engagement of several European—and also American—intellectuals during the war in Yugoslavia. One need only think of Alain Finkielkraut, who found in Croatian culture the authentic European soul that had supposedly been long since dead in decadent Western Europe.¹¹ Peter Handke, by contrast, took the Serbian side. The reason was also a cultural difference. Handke discovered in Serbia a nature preserve for authentic life, a kind of reality park beyond the media—in short, a world that may have been backward in comparison to Europe today but was vastly superior culturally.¹²

11. Alain Finkielkraut, preliminary remarks for a lecture at the University of Zagreb, December 1991. Paraphrased in Boris Buden, “Philosophie und Krieg: Finkielkraut in Zagreb”, *Literatur und Kritik*, no. 261–2, *Verzweiggt, verbrieft, vergessen: Flaschenpost aus Österreich* (February 1992), 33.

12. Peter Handke, *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia* (New York 1997), 12–26 and 39–42 (German original, *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina; oder, Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*, Frankfurt am Main 1996).

These views were also met halfway by several films by Emir Kusturica, who is now probably the most famous film-maker from the former Yugoslavia, particularly by the 1995 film *Underground*, in which the war that was still ongoing at the time was depicted as a consequence of the belligerent and self-destructive characteristics of the peoples of the former Yugoslavia. As if war were innate to their cultural identity.¹³

The logic of cultural difference that completely dominates the way the concept of the Balkans is treated today does not represent an obstacle for the European integration of the Balkans; on the contrary, it is a necessary prerequisite. Only the inclusion of the cultural Other will confirm the universalistic monopoly of European culture and legitimize the claim to power of the liberal-capitalistic system embodied in the project of the European Union as democratic tolerance. That the other, the Balkan side, is by all means ready to cooperate with the project of inclusion is demonstrated by Kusturica's example.

One of his most famous films, *Time of the Gypsies* of 1988, tells of the exodus of young Roma from the former Yugoslavia to Europe—more precisely, to Italy—where they try to build a better future through organized begging and petty crime. As if it were a kind of continuation and reply to Kusturica's Roma film from 1988, Želimir Žilnik's most recent film, *Kenedi Comes Back Home* from 2003,¹⁴ shows the result of a Yugoslavian Rom's attempts to emigrate. Kenedi – which is his real name – is a young Rom who emigrated from Kosovo to Germany during the 1990s and in the wake of the war. In autumn 2002 he is deported from Germany, along with many other Roma from the former Yugoslavia, because the war is over in

13. The film also settles accounts with communism. Kusturica attacks the myth of the partisans and depicts the Yugoslav communists as depraved, corrupted, greedy rogues who do not even hesitate to instigate a war in order to increase their personal fortunes. In the film, communism becomes just another form of Balkanism. *Underground* won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival. And in 2003 Kusturica was represented by the film in the exhibition *Blut & Honig: Zukunft ist am Balkan* in the Sammlung Essl, Klosterneuburg.

14. In the programme of the 3rd Berlin biennial for contemporary art.

their homeland. But for Kenedi and many others there is no home in today's Serbia. In Kosovo, where he lived previously, he cannot even visit his parents' ruined home, because it is in the Albanian part of Kosovska Mitrovica, from which the Roma were brutally expelled. A similar fate befalls many of the others who 'returned home'. Either their children, who attended school in Germany, cannot speak Serbian at all, or they themselves lost their jobs there, so they are now left standing on the street, unemployed, in an impoverished land that has been destroyed by war.

What distinguishes Žilnik's film from Kusturica's *Time of the Gypsies* so clearly is not only that the Roma depicted in the two films move in opposite directions but also that it has freed itself from any kind of discourse of identity. Žilnik's Roma do not come from an idyllic, magical world of an exotic culture in order to immortalize themselves in their cultural identity, after a hard, poor and brutal but nonetheless beautiful earthly existence. Rather, a political decision throws them into the reality of a hard struggle for survival, without the slightest chance of winning it. They are turned into gypsies—not in the sense of a cultural phenomenon but of a social fate.

Both films can be described as post-communist, but in completely different senses. The world that Kusturica's films depict can certainly be grasped politically. That is to say, it is articulated in a language that can very well be understood by today's hegemonic liberal-democratic politics—the politics of the realistically possible. This is the language of (cultural) identities or of the dynamic of inclusion that has developed under the alibi of democratic tolerance. Roma, the Balkans, communism and so on: everything becomes a foreign culture that will sooner or later be recognized and included. Even current (real)political projects like the eastern expansion of the European Union are held at the ready for such objectives. For that reason, Kusturica's world, however imaginative or magical it might be, never leaves the framework of the "real" and "reasonable". In this respect, too, his art becomes political. It is precisely the art of the politically possible, which also explains its post-communist character. It speaks of a post-communism whose entire meaning is captured in the gaze of the victorious, liberal-democratic West. It characterizes a universal

historical experience that is repressed in the form of a cultural Outside in order to be occupied again as such, hegemonically and unquestioningly.

Žilnik's *Kenedi Comes Back Home* is post-communist in a completely different sense. It is an artistic reply to what is inadmissible and intolerable in politics. It is the expression of a resistance that is produced by the anger that Jean-Luc Nancy says disappeared from politics with the fall of communism. And it challenges the "reasonable" aspect of politics today by demonstrating the impossibility of politics. And it does so literally: whereas the film *Kenedi Comes Back Home* can come to Europe as art without a problem, the real man Kenedi, the deported gypsy, can no longer cross the Schengen border. And no "reasonable", "realist", "democratically achievable" or "even more tolerant" politics can help. The film shows precisely the dividing line where the human and today's hegemonically hypostatized "reasonable" diverge once and for all. Consequently, the political aspect of the film's art cannot be translated into any existing form of democratic politics. One can say, paradoxically, that this film is completely apolitical, even that it is "pure art", a kind of present-day *l'art pour l'art*. Its true political meaning—in name of which the film was made, of course—can only be (re)produced in one way: by finally making our world post-democratic. But that cannot be the task of art.

What to Do with the Question: “What Will the Balkans Look like In 2020?”

The question I am confronted with and expected to answer is very simple: “What will the Balkans look like in 2020?”. Unfortunately, I cannot answer this. In fact, nobody can answer such a question. We still cannot predict the future. It is, nevertheless, a good question because it addresses an almost forgotten dimension of time—the future. So, regardless of how we answer the question, it is a sign of something new. It already belongs to the future it seems to ask about. Just to remind you: Philosopher and art critic Boris Groys once defined post-communism as a historical condition that is essentially shaped by the move “back from the future,”¹ meaning that with the fall of communism the dimension of the future has lost its historical importance and its power to transform reality, not only in former communist countries but worldwide. To put it more concretely, post-communism is a condition in which our perception of reality is no longer influenced by the future.

1. See B. Groys, A. v. d. Heiden, P. Weibel (ed.), *Zurück aus der Zukunft. Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2005.

This obviously doesn't apply any more. We are now asked again to look at the world from a futural perspective and to include a sort of prospective imagination in our perception of the actual reality: "What this reality would look like in the future?" Questions like this are clearly a symptom of historical change. Something new is expected to emerge. But, on the other hand, what is it that has come to an end? The historical condition we have hitherto called post-communism?

Hopefully we haven't yet forgotten that, not so long ago, the end of communism was also defined as the end of utopia. Accordingly, the post-communist world was perceived at the same time as post-utopian, that is, as a world in which the socially formative power of utopia had been exhausted. But now the future is back. Does this mean that utopia has returned too? Or rather, had it ever disappeared? And finally, what do the Balkans have to do with all of this?

It is at this point that I would like to remind you of an event that happened near Vienna seven years ago. The late Harald Szeemann, legendary curator of Documenta V in 1972, and famous inventor of the so-called *Grossausstellung*, the great exhibition, in which art works are put together around some central concept. In this case here, the Balkans was the central concept of an exhibition at *Sammlung Essl* in Klosterneuburg with the title *Blood and Honey*². The subtitle was even more curious: *Future's in the Balkans*.

I hope that you have already noticed a "slight" difference in meaning. What was at stake in this exhibition was not the future of the Balkans, as addressed in our initial question, but rather the Balkans as future. Whose future, you might ask – well, the future of all of us, of the world in which we live, the future as such.

Harald Szeemann suggested conceiving the Balkans as having some exemplary quality for the rest of the world. The message his exhibition appeared to deliver is clear: look at the Balkans as a place that you can catch a glimpse of your future and even

2. May–September 2003.

learn how to shape it. However, one cannot but question whether he really meant that the West too should learn from the Balkans and regard them as an example for its future? He did indeed. He pointed to the Balkans as the future of the West and certainly not in a cynical sense. In other words, Szeemann recognized in—or better yet, projected onto—the Balkans some sort of utopian potentiality. We can even go a step further and argue that his art project, the above mentioned exhibition in Klosterneuburg, was an attempt to revive the very idea of Utopia—by situating it nowhere else but in the Balkans.

Let's put aside all the possible reasons for such a rediscovery of Utopia precisely in this part of the world, and consider its blatant contradiction to the proposal formulated in our opening questions, namely to imagine the future of the Balkans. It looks like we are dealing with two mutually exclusive perspectives on one and the same region here. The one is forged by artistic imagination and is seemingly totally detached from the reality on the ground—usually perceived in terms of an overall backwardness—where the Balkans appear as the future of the West. The other perspective is one that motivates us to contemplate the future of the Balkans and seems to implicate precisely the opposite: that the West is the future of the Balkans. In the second perspective, we are expected to project the region's future development from the standpoint of the West, which functions as its role model. From here, it looks like we are standing with both feet firmly on the ground, facing reality as it really is. Indeed, this perspective can be easily verified by this reality. It has been even institutionalized.

Explaining its policy regarding “Balkan Region,” the U.S. Department of State explicitly emphasizes the task to help the states of the region “cement peace and build stability and prosperity [...] by their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO and the EU.” It also welcomes the “tremendous progress” the Balkan region has made in “implementing democratic, economic and defense-related reforms on the path to a Euro-Atlantic future.”³

3. <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rt/balkans/>.

Here, there is no doubt about the future of the Balkans. We already see the Balkan Mountains bathing in the Atlantic Ocean. What is even more curious is that we may even consider this vision a realistic one.

But let's first clarify what we actually mean when we talk about the Balkan region. Instead of answering this question directly I share an anecdote.

More than ten years ago I took part in a public discussion in Amsterdam, along with Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić and Maria Todorova, a Bulgarian (and also American) historian and the author of *Imagining the Balkans*, which is probably the best book about this topic published so far.⁴ The topic of our discussion was—what else could it be—the Balkans. At one point the moderator, a Dutch anthropologist, asked each of us to take a pointer to show the borders of the Balkans on a large map of Europe that was hanging behind us. We all started to laugh spontaneously and openly refused to do this. Why? The Balkans are not simply a geographical region of Europe that one can clearly demarcate on a map. Instead, they are a figure of exclusion, a highly abstract cultural and ideological concept that, precisely because it is ideological, has real effects indeed.

According to Todorova notions such as “Balkanism” or “Balkanization” are *Schimpfwörter*—as she writes in the German original—disparagements used to designate, I quote, “a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian.”⁵ They are in fact newly constructed concepts that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century during the Balkan Wars 1912-13, at a time when Europe was outraged by their atrocities and were simultaneously deeply convinced of its own cultural superiority. Todorova quotes Mary Edith Durham, a British anthropologist and traveller from that time, who commented on the Balkan Wars: “War is so obscene,

4. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

5. *Ibid.*, 3.

so degrading, so devoid of one redeeming spark, that it is quite impossible there can ever be a war in West Europe.”⁶ These words were written only a year before the outbreak of World War I.

To put it in short: in Western imagination the Balkans are “the other of Europe,” a region inhabited by people who, as Todorova writes, “do not care to confirm to the standards of behaviour devised as normative by and for the civilized world.”⁷

What are the Balkans then? A *Schimpfwort* for backwardness or a new Utopia? A provincial periphery of the West whose only dream is a metropolitan Western future? Or a utopian place where the West can finally recover from its decadence?

Let us try to resolve this contradiction by introducing another concept of exclusion that is not only broader than the notion of the Balkans, but has also a more political meaning—the concept of East, which has also been constructed as an excluded opposite of the West. However, I am here not using the concept of East in Orientalist terms as an exotic and imaginary realm of the West—Todorova clearly distinguish Balkanism from Orientalism⁸—but rather in terms of its post-communist context and the way it has been used since 1989. Here, the East primarily refers to the post-communist East, a part of the World that, because of its communist totalitarian past, had diverted from the “normal” historical path to democracy, economic prosperity and cultural excellence, the path of the West.

Here, I would like to remind you that already in 1990 Jürgen Habermas, probably the most prominent German philosopher living today, defined the so-called democratic revolution in Eastern Europe that brought an end to historical communism as the “catching up revolution” (also a “rewinding revolution”).⁹

6. Ibid., 6.

7. Ibid., 3.

8. Ibid., 10–12.

9. “*Die nachholende*” or die “*rückspullende Revolution*.” See Jürgen Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990, 203.

He is referring here to a revolution that clears the way for catching up with the lag in development in comparison to the West. Concretely, what had been lagging in the East was modernist development. Now after 1989, that is, after the removal of the Communists, as Habermas believes, the Eastward expansion of modernity can be resumed, and the East—conceived as a space of “belated modernism”—can finally catch up with the West.

Now we see that the concept of the East is a way the former Cold War divide has survived after the year 1989. “Eastern” means “still eastern,” that is, that eastern modernism is belated, which in relation to the West, is made particular, specific and localised. However, on the other side, Western modernism is not only always already in its proper place, it is also always on time. In other words, as Slovenian philosopher Rastko Močnik points out, it is “timeless, canonic, general, it is a non-space, since it is a norm, a measure against which the peripheral, the provincial is to be measured.”¹⁰ According to Močnik the East-West divide is an ideological phenomenon. Its ideological function is to rob both sides of their history: the West appears as emancipated from its own history, in fact, from any history, which is why it can be imposed as general and canonic. For Močnik, the West takes on the form of a real existing utopia. Contrary to this, the notion of the East functions as form of amnesia, for its *telos*, that is, the goal to be reached in the future, is to get rid of history, to become an a-historical non-space like the West. Its own history is what makes the East peripheral, provincial, in short, the East. As Močnik writes, the East “has a history that would be better forgotten.” The result is that within the West-East divide, which has survived the fall of Communism in the form of “belated modernism” of the East, the East robs both sides of their common history and prevents them both from having a common history in the future. To quote Močnik: “It freezes them into an eternal unequal couple, one part of which is forever doomed to struggle to get rid of its phantom past, while the other is bound to an everlasting

10. See Rastko Močnik, “Will the East’s past be the West’s future?”, in Caroline David, (ed.), *Frontières invisibles*, Oostkamp: Stichting Kunstboek, 2009.

autistic celebration of its idiocy.” The East is thus doomed to struggle for recognition, and the form of this struggle is called identity. Again, Močnik writes: “An identity is the ambiguous privilege of those doomed to remain local, particular, peripheral: it is a euphemism for the incapacity to attain the serene firmament of universality.”

So both the Balkans and the East have an identity. Both are determined by their cultural particularity, which only makes sense in relation to the West, which is supposed to be universal.

This is what we should have in mind when confronted with the question of the future of the Balkans. It is a normative question and, in this sense, is also merely a rhetorical question, which we are supposed to answer by complying with typically Western, democratic, inclusivist norms. We are expected to know precisely what the Balkans should look like in ten years: it should look like Europe, like the West. This is also what already limits our imagination in advance. What we are dealing with here is a future that can only be imagined in distinctly teleological terms, that is, in terms of its pre-given goal. The Balkans and the East should become Europe and/or the West.

Thus, the only question that is to be answered and, as such, still leaves some room for our imagination is—how? How are the Balkans going to become the West?

The first strategy to achieve this can be called cloning. The Balkans are included in the West as its clone or, if you like, as its carbon copy. The best example of this way of becoming the West is demonstrated in the case of a Serbian boy that briefly appeared the news. In an article with the title “Blogging Belgrade boy takes on Serb nationalists,”¹¹ BBC presented a video clip showing 12 year-old Rastko Pocesta introduce himself in perfect English in a room decorated with the flags of the United States and European Union in front of a row of books (he wrote himself) about the American Presidents (*The Hall of Presidents*), Barack Obama, etc. The voice tells us: “I live in Belgrade and I am a human rights activist fighting for justice and equality in

11. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8640434.stm>.

Serbia and the World. I support the independence of Kosovo, I support the EU and NATO and Serbian membership in these organizations, [...] EU means economic stability and prosperity while NATO means security [...]” What we have heard and seen is a perfectly—one could even say, professionally—summarized dream of an ideal Serbia, which is however a Western dream. It seems as though the Western policy for the “Balkan Region,” as presented in the U.S. Department of State’s statement quoted above, has been spoken by an original voice from below. The fact that it is the voice of a child only discloses the patronizing character of that dream—the dream of a fresh new start from scratch. What is at stake here is the phenomenon we might call repressive infantilization, which is typical for the societies that have recently liberated themselves from communism.¹²

So, in this case, we have seen how the Balkans have directly become the West. However, this is a utopia in a completely vulgar sense, that is, a utopia of absolute inclusion, conceived of as a repetition that produces no difference whatsoever. The Other of the West becomes the West without leaving any traces of its particularity behind. It has simply melted down. The voice of the Balkans directly becomes the voice of the West,

12. “The human being as a political child offers itself as the almost perfect subject of a democratic restart. Untroubled by the past and geared totally to the future, it is full of energy and imagination, compliant and teachable. It emanates freedom as though its pure embodiment, but actually it is not free at all. A child is dependent; it must be guided and patronized by adults. However, this only makes it all the more suitable for serving society, as the perfect ground for a new beginning. It neutralizes all the contradictions that the sudden irruption of freedom lays bare in society, above all between those who rule and the ruled. There is no relation of domination that seems so natural and self-evident as the one between a child and its guardian, no mastery so innocent and justifiable as that over children. One does not take their freedom away, but suspends it temporarily, postpones it, so to speak, for the time being. A patronized child as political being enjoys a sort of delayed freedom. And in case one day the promise of freedom turns out to be a delusion, one can always say that it was just a children’s fairy tale.” Boris Buden, “Children of Postcommunism”, *Radical Philosophy*, January/February 2010, http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2369&editorial_id=28990. For German version see: Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009, 35.

that is, its master's voice. This is why we cannot even call it submission, for submission would imply a sort of relation. There is no relation whatsoever here. Instead, it is a cloning: the future of the Balkans becomes a Western clone.

However, since we haven't reached this supra-natural level of simple cloning yet, there are other strategies that are more within the realm of human possibility.

The most well-known one is the so-called struggle for recognition. It employs an old Hegelian concept originally used to explain the relation between the slave and his master. A slave who cannot liberate himself by directly defeating the master engages in a long struggle for recognition that finally ends with the abolition of the master-slave relation and with the establishment of their equality within the common concept of "universally human." Nowadays, so-called identity politics has adopted the idea of being a struggle for recognition, which is understood in terms of struggles of excluded, suppressed identities for their final inclusion in what is conceived as universal—for instance, the struggle of women for full equality with men, or the struggle of people of colour for equality with whites, to be included in the concept of the "universally human."

A perfect example of this struggle is provided in the above-mentioned book *Imagining the Balkans* by Maria Todorova. To offer a brief recap, the author explains the Balkans as a cultural concept of exclusion and suppression. She also reveals the complicity of imperial politics in forging this concept and with it the introduction of a frontier dividing the civilized parts from the barbarian parts of Europe. She writes, "the Balkans serves as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the 'European' and 'the West' has been constructed."¹³

Nonetheless, Todorova concludes her book with a sort of plea: "If Europe has produced not only racism but also antiracism, not only misogyny but also feminism, not only anti-Semitism, but also its repudiation, than what can be termed Balkanism

13. Todorova, op. cit., 188.

has not yet been coupled with its complementing and ennobling antiparticle.”¹⁴ In fact it is a plea for a sort of cultural translation in the sense that American feminist philosopher Judith Butler uses it, namely as a model for cultural universality. To put it simply: people of colour had been excluded from the idea of the “universally human” and, consequently, they were also excluded from the public political life in the West. So, by putting pressure on this concept of universality—in a political struggle—they succeeded, gained acceptance and, at least constitutionally, the same rights as white people, which ultimately altered the very idea of what is universally human. Similar processes took place for other minorities, such as Jews, to women, who even in some most developed countries of the West only few decades ago had not had equal rights with men. In a similar way Todorova expects that the Balkans, as a figure of cultural exclusion, will undergo this same process of inclusion of an excluded outside (of the West) and, in that way, push the existing concept of universality forward, in terms of its inclusivity, equality, justice—in short, in terms of democracy.

To put it clearly: I am not talking about the traditional concept of translation that is based on the primacy of an original context, that is, obsessed with the idea of the original while conceiving the translation as its secondary product. Instead, the notion of translation I am thinking of here provides a model for forging a certain type of cultural generality or universality. Concretely, this means that as the figure of a previously excluded cultural identity, precisely by way of cultural translation, the Balkans successfully become part of—and thereby ultimately change—the concept of cultural universality. The Balkans don’t simply become the West, as in the case of cloning, instead they influence and transform the West. In short, including the Balkans also means that the West, or more precisely its concept of universality, is changed too. Translation is a repetition that produces differences both in the translation as well as in the so-called original.

But was that ever a problem?

14. Ibid., 189.

In fact, Todorova's plea for European recognition of the Balkans was soon fulfilled, literally a few years later (the book was published 1997), at least within the European art scene. In only one year, there were three large and quite ambitious exhibitions of art from the Balkans in Austria and Germany: *In Search of Balkania* (October–December 2002), curated by Roger Conover, Eda Čufer, and Peter Weibel at Neue Galerie Graz, Graz, Austria; the already mentioned exhibition by Harald Szeemann in Klosterneuburg; and finally *In the Gorges of the Balkans* (August–November 2003), curated by René Block at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany.

So the Balkans, as a label for a certain style of art-making—let us call it here pejoratively “Balkan art”—has been already included. It has already succeeded in entering the Western art system as a Western art commodity. The problem with this strategy is that it doesn't even conceive of the Balkans as a problem—for, it is the market and its own dynamics that finally appear as a solution to all problems—and this is clearly another utopian moment too.

In conclusion, the Balkans are in fact not a problem, and more concretely, the inclusion of the Balkans into what is called Europe or the West today, is already underway.¹⁵ So the future of the Balkans seems to be obvious as well. Why then are we asked about this future, if we already know the answer; if another answer than the expected cannot be imagined at all?

Good old Althusser, a French Marxist and ideology theorist called it interpellation: by feeling addressed by this question and identifying with an attempt to answer it, we automatically become subjects of an ideologically already structured historical process.

15. In fact, Todorova emphasizes that the Balkans have always already been Europe, moreover, that precisely what we call Balkanization is in fact only a symptom of an Europeanization: “From this point of view the Balkans were becoming European by (...) assuming and emulating the homogeneous European nation-states as the normative form of social organization.” Ibid., 13. Todorova also explains the last Yugoslav wars in the 1990s that have been widely ascribed to some Balkan essence—tribalism, primitivism, Balkan violence, nationalism, etc.—as the ultimate Europeanization of the Balkans.

Concretely, we start to think of ourselves as those who actively make this process—in our case, the process of Westernization of the Balkans—happen. In terms of a social structure, this means that we automatically identify with Balkan elites, who are believed to be the ones that are naturally called to accomplish the task of becoming Western.

On a more intellectual level—let's call it the level of knowledge production—by attempting to answer the question about the future of the Balkans we assume the role of the so-called native informant, whose task is to represent the Balkans and inform the European audience about some specific Balkan experience. The figure of the native informant, as is well known, comes from anthropological fieldwork. The task of the native informant was to supply “indigenous knowledge” to colonial subjects, and thus to facilitate exchange between the metropolis and the nation or country of origin.

The figure of the native informant, or more precisely, of the “foreclosed native informant” is featured in Gayatri Spivak's *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.¹⁶ She argues, in short, that the planetary humanism that emerges with the Enlightenment and founds its theoretical foundation in the European ethical philosophical tradition of Kant, Hegel and Marx, foreclosed native informant as the condition of its possibility. For Spivak, a native informant is a necessary complicity in the humanist knowledge production. It is a character that stands in for an imaginary or absent figure—in our case this would be “a true Balkan identity.” In other words, there is no innocent knowledge production. We must therefore become aware of its complicity with imperialist or neo-imperialist projects, or to quote Spivak, “to acknowledge a responsibility toward the trace of the other, not to mention toward other struggles.”¹⁷

I hope it has become clear now what we have to do when confronted with the question “What will the Balkans look like in 2020?”. We shouldn't even try to answer it.

16. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge MA, London, E: Harvard University Press, 1999.

17. Ibid., 198.

One Region, Two Regions, or: How to Forget Them All

There is a certain problem with talking about the Balkans in Istanbul. This is not only due to the fact that Istanbul is the place where the Balkans—seen, of course, from the hegemonic European perspective—actually ends. The problem is much deeper. It seems that in Istanbul the whole discourse on culturally constructed regional identities becomes somehow absurd. The reason is obvious. Istanbul is situated—as a kind of historic center—in a space that not only comprises more than one region, but it is in its very essence a negation of what we call a “region” today. It is a space that cannot be subsumed under only one culturally unified regional identity. That is why when talking about the role Istanbul plays in its cultural context, we are forced to use the logic of simple addition. So we talk about the region of the Balkans AND the Middle East or South-East Europe AND the South-East Mediterranean.¹ The region we are talking about is, therefore, nothing but a descriptive composition of two differences without its own name, without a clear and simply comprehensible notion of its own, specific cultural identity. So there is no region for which Istanbul might be perceived as the cultural center.

1. This is precisely what has been done in the invitation to the conference “In the Gorges of the Balkans”, organized by *Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center* in Istanbul.

What we have instead is the recollection of a historic past, actually, the imperial legacy of the Ottoman Empire that is still present here in Istanbul. The form of this presence is cultural, which means that the common political past of the region is only culturally visible today. This is probably also the reason why the vision of a common future of this no-name-region, which is composed of both the Balkans and the Middle East, focuses exclusively “upon rethinking the artistic production, cultural geography and possible future collaborations in the region”. Istanbul and its artistic and cultural capacities are offered here as “a site of discussion, and negotiation between these geographies.”² According to that, we are supposed, by means of our intellectual, artistic and cultural efforts, to revive the old unity and commonality between the regions of the Balkans and the Middle East again, along with their peoples, cultures and political orders.

Let us first stress the importance of this vision. It discloses a deep—and we might also say a new—need for a more universal perspective that goes far beyond the identitarian logic, and, what is even more important, which implicitly expresses how uncomfortable we are with the present political divisions and historical deadlock.

However, the crucial question here is, of course: can we, can art and culture, put together again what has been divided by history and political reality? And in what terms and forms can we imagine the supposed unity of this no-name-region?

First of all, both regions—the Balkans and the Middle East—are involved in two parallel political projects today, which threaten to deepen and petrify the divisions between them much more than strengthening their commonalities and their unity. These political processes are the well-known “enlargement of European unity” along with something we might call “the new democratic revolution” today, launched recently by the United States as part of—or maybe as an ideological and historical framework of—the so-called “war on terrorism”.

2. Both quotations from the “Invitation”.

The enlargement of the European Union is an ongoing process with an open end. The concept of Europe as a new political unity still doesn't have its final shape—we still don't know how deep the development of its inner political structure will go and how far the extension of its outer borders will reach. Although it has already become clear that most of the Balkans will be integrated into the European Union, the question, whether Turkey should be involved in the process or not, hasn't yet been decided. What we do know, however, is that an answer to this question can be given only as result of political contest and struggle. The role culture should play in making this political decision is obviously very ambiguous, as it is much more part of the question rather than the answer. Since today's Turkey is a modern, democratic and capitalist state, the problem of political and economic compatibility with other European countries doesn't actually exist in principal. The only imaginable obstacle for membership in the EU could, therefore, be cultural. As we have already stressed, the final decision will be a political one, but its content will be cultural. The inclusion of Turkey into the EU cannot be but a positive answer to the question: does Turkey culturally belong to Europe?

However, this question is not our question. We have just pointed out—taking it as the starting point of our discussions—that Turkey culturally and historically offers a perspective that goes far beyond the European one. The problem is that this perspective has in reality been overshadowed by another political project—the already mentioned US-led democratic revolution that is currently taking place in the Middle East. Let us sketch out this project from an interesting point of view—one taken by the German historian, Dan Diner.³

He sees the American engagement in Iraq as part of a long-term project. It has originated from the experience of September 11th. According to Diner, this event opened a new temporal horizon that goes far beyond the biologically determined life-time dimension, typical for today's pragmatic democratic *Realpolitik*. This kind of politics has proved to be helpless against the Islamic extremists who think and handle in sacral temporal categories.

3. In Dan Diner, "Mit östlichem Blick", "Die Zeit" Nr. 46, (6. Nov. 2003).

This is the reason why the American response to this terrorist and political challenge also goes beyond the scope of *Realpolitik* and opens a new long-term-dimension: it aims at a revolution; it will, by military means, revolutionize the whole region of the Middle East, in the sense of democracy and pluralism, of course.

The toppling of Saddam Hussein and the occupation of Iraq should be understood as a political move of no return. There is no way back to the *status quo ante*—not for Americans, not for Iraqis and not for the whole international community, including all those who opposed the war. This also applies to the next American administration, be it republican or democratic. In order to accomplish this task, the Americans, as Diner suggests, should also change their perspective on the whole Middle East. They should take again, as he believes, the old imperialist angle of the British Empire. For only under the British rule was the region seen as a unity. It had been before 1948, the year the State of Israel was established. What we have been witnessing thereafter is a segmentation of the region into nation-states.

According to Diner, the still present cohesive elements in the region can only become visible today if we recall its former imperial past. A logical connection between the Mediterranean port of Haifa and the ports in Iraqi Basra and Iranian Abadan, all built by the British, as well as the two airports in the north-west of Iraq called H2 and H3 and their connection to the Tel Aviv airport, originally a runway built by the British in the central Palestinian Lydda, becomes comprehensible as former posts on the British communication line to India. H2 and H3 actually stays for Haifa, both posts were originally built by the British as pump-stations on the pipeline from Mosul and Kirkuk to Haifa. These cohesive elements, the fossils of the colonial past as Diner calls them, are the only witnesses of the former unity of the region today.

Diner points at the fact that British imperial rule, in its history, was subjected to several radical changes. One of the most important reforms took place after the famous “Indian Mutiny”—the uprising against the empire troops in 1857 that severely shook the British rule of the Indian subcontinent. This experience led to a radical change in British colonial politics.

Henceforth, they tried to appease the Muslim part of the British-Indian population. The British perspective, as Diner puts it, had been “easternized”.⁴ The greatest colonial power started to respect Islam and at that time the last Islamic universal power—the Ottoman Empire. This “eastern perspective” was also kept alive after the First World War when Great Britain and France divided the Arabic parts of the collapsed Ottoman Empire amongst themselves. However, the contradiction between the Western perspective of the Foreign Office in London and an “eastern” perspective of the Colonial Office in New Delhi had also marked the British rule in the Middle East, in Iraq and in Palestine.

Dan Diner believes that Americans should learn from the British colonial experience in their political and military engagement in the Middle East today. They too should “easternize” their view of the Middle East, Islamic and Arabic world, as the British once did. Only through this new “eastern” perspective—which includes a respect for Islamic and Arabic culture—could they succeed in their attempt to pluralize, democratize and modernize Iraq. This also applies to the crucial role the United States plays in all the efforts to solve the conflict in the Middle East, the still open Palestinian question.

Diner believes that the Israelis and Palestinians are not able to solve their problem alone—just as the Iraqis were not in a position to overthrow the Saddam dictatorship alone. The search for a solution for both problems should, therefore, start from a perspective that goes beyond the existing—at least in a normative shape—system of sovereign nation-states. Diner suggests, as argued above, that this perspective can only be found from a more universalistic standpoint that was historically represented by the old colonial powers such as Great Britain. A certain revival of this colonial past, an identification with its universalistic power politics, seems necessary for Dan Diner today if we want to tackle the most severe problems of our historic reality. It doesn’t mean that a new colonial high commissar should reside in Jerusalem again, as he once did during the British mandate in Palestine before 1947.

4. In the German original “... der britische Blick ‘veröstlichte sich’”. Ibid.

However, a new American supervisor of the peace process can and should be installed there as some kind of a modern proconsul. For, without a third party equipped with enough effective means to impose pressure on all sides involved in the conflict, there won't be any positive developments in the region.

Let us summarize the most important points implicated by Dan Diner's vision:

This is, in the first place, a new necessity for a more universalistic approach to the political and historical reality of the region. This means, first of all, a perspective that discloses its previous colonial unity that has been destroyed and suppressed by the system of nation-states. Here we must keep in mind that this system has been developed out of an anti-colonial struggle for national liberation. This struggle was also part of the modernization of the whole region, a modernization that has obviously been deadlocked by the same system of nation-states and turned into its opposite—into a growing religious fundamentalism that threatens to erase almost all historical achievements of the modernization, on the one side, and into the forms of secular dictatorships incapable of any kind of democratic development—the best example is exactly Saddam Hussein—on the other side.

Secondly, this is a peculiar, nostalgic longing for an old fashioned power politics—precisely in a time when theory focuses almost exclusively on a completely different notion of power conceptualized by Foucault and summarized in the concept of governmentality, where power is seen as an endless plurality of power practices which cannot assume the shape of a unified, essential subject. What we are witnessing in Diner's vision is a clearly articulated need for a new universal power instance which can intervene in a given political reality from its alleged outside and take the role of a threatening moderator. This new power instance is not a subject of a new order. On the contrary, it identifies itself explicitly—in the words of President Bush—with a subject of revolution. Does it mean that the old subject of revolution is finally back in the historical scene?

Thirdly, the solutions of the actual political problems and conflicts can no longer be found within the principle of sovereignty.

This means that sovereignty—as the sovereignty of a nation, respectively a nation-state—has, in the meantime, become a historical value that is not to be defended anymore but abandoned instead. Let us stress it again: Diner argues that both Israel as a realized nation-state and Palestine as a nation struggling for its own state can respectively only reach their sovereignty if they turn it down. This is not a paradox. It simply tells us that sovereignty today is more or less useless if you are weak and poor. It is a toy for the rich and powerful. Only they can still afford and enjoy it. However, Diner's argument also implicates a new, strong sense of historical responsibility—and that is precisely what he expects of Americans. The problem indeed is who will pay the costs of this failure?

It is not difficult to see that Diner's vision of the political reality and an imaginable future of the Middle East almost completely applies to the other region we are trying to deal with—that of the Balkans.

Don't we have the same old unity of the region here, emerging out of its colonial past, once realized either by the Ottoman or Austrian-Hungarian Empires? And all those violent conflicts and wars that shook the region in the nineties, haven't they only been calmed down or resolved by the intervention of a powerful instance from the outside, in the shape of the so-called "international community" represented by NATO, the EU, UN or USA? And the principle of the national sovereignty that has so radically disintegrated and fragmented the whole region, the political idea the peoples of the Balkans so resolutely fought for, hasn't it been openly violated by the same powerful instance that still has everything in the region under its control? And finally, isn't the only comprehensible goal of almost all political actors in the region actually the membership of their nation-states in the EU, a political project that necessarily implies the sacrifice of their sovereignty?

The conclusion emerging from these rhetorical questions is very simple and points to a possible unity of both regions, a unity that is a normative motivation for our discussions in Istanbul: both the Balkans and the Middle East or South-East Europe and the South-East Mediterranean are involved in a

deeply contradictory process of global political reconstruction of the existing world (dis)order in a similar way. This is what finally unifies these regions—and what simultaneously makes any claim of both regions to have each a unique, essential identity simply unconvincing. Let us repeat it again: the still existing traces of a former unity in both regions lays hidden in their colonial past. The only way out of the disorder and chaos from which they are now suffering can be provided by a powerful instance situated outside the regions. The price they have to pay for this “service” is the sacrifice of the sovereignty of their nation-states into which they have been disintegrated and fragmented.

This is the destiny that is also shared by the so-called cultural sector in both regions. Culture and the arts cannot escape this kismet. However, what they can still do is reflect it in their own way.

This is, of course, not the whole story about an imagined unity of both regions and a universalistic perspective that makes this imagination possible. There is also something missing in the vision of Dan Diner, a kind of Lacanian lack that structures the whole scene of his reflection: The only universalistic perspective he mentions is the one represented by the rulers and oppressors, be it in the form of an old colonial or imperial power that once guaranteed some sort of universal order or be it in the form of a new, post-colonial and even posthistoric subject of democratic revolution who now promises to create a brave new world of democracy and prosperity by force, even against the will of the people who should be the only beneficiaries of this democracy and prosperity.

This dramatic appeal to the universalistic tradition of the old imperial rulers has an additional effect in this context—it has silenced another universalistic tradition: the one of the oppressed and wretched, the tradition of a universalism emerging from the bottom up, the universalism of popular uprisings, of the deprived who fought for their social rights and class liberation, in short, the universalism that was once represented by the communist movement and that seems to have completely disappeared from our historical horizon today. There is no way to look ahead by staying blind to this remaining part of our universalistic tradition. For if another, better world is possible, it cannot be given, for sure, as the current from of another better big brother.

Beyond Eastern Art: An Excursus on Strategies of Identity Formation in Post- Communist Europe

Is eastern Europe a cultural area in its own right? An exhibition that opened in the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana in December 2004 seems to have given a positive response to this question. In a rather conservative, essentialist way—not without (self-)irony, of course; after all, this is the field of art we are talking about here—it defined this cultural area with reference to seven constitutive traits or, to be more precise, seven “sins.” The title of this exhibition was, namely, *The Seven Sins: Ljubljana – Moscow*. These seven sins are collectivism, utopianism, masochism, cynicism, laziness, amateurism, and love of the West.¹

We should not be impressed by the substance of these concepts. They are not merely arbitrary, but banal as well, following as they do the platitudes of the post-communist discourse. For example, they suggest that the now vanished communism was marked by collectivism, not just as the main characteristic of the prevailing ownership structures in the eastern parts of Europe, but also as the dominant form of everyday life there—in contradistinction to Western individualism, of course.

1. “7 SINS: Ljubljana – Moscow,” <http://www.mg-lj.si/node/696>.

This implicitly assumes that this was what actually caused communism to fail. From the post-communist point of view, collectivism is not a value—like Western individualism, which has apparently been legitimated by so-called world history—but a “sin”: something that should be jettisoned as quickly as possible in the post-communist transitional period on the path toward (Western) normality. The same thing goes for the other characteristics such as utopianism, laziness, cynicism and amateurism, which are also constructed as counterpoints to Western values: that is, to the concept of a society that is based on the performance principle and the trustworthiness of its justice system—like the famous “fairness” described in John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, for example. In this way, the culture of the European East rises from the ruins of communism as a reflection of the West, but with one reservation: art reserves the right to transform the sins into virtues in a subversive reversal typical only of itself—and to which only it is entitled!

For instance, the idea of collectivism should be reassessed, as collectivism had a particularly positive effect on the field of artistic and intellectual production under real socialism. The experiences gathered in collective work, collective authorship or artists’ groups, which all contrast with the marked individualism of artistic work in western Europe and the USA, should not only be carried over into the new era, but revived. Each of the seven “sins” has a healthy core that allows the Eastern cultural and artistic experience to compare favorably with that of the West. Amateurism, for example, can be seen as an element of authentic artistic production that guarantees joy, improvisation, and creativity, as well as freedom from the dictates of the market.

By and large, all seven “sins” are actually the authentic values underpinning eastern European culture, and thus define its identity. That is what the above-mentioned exhibition was about: the identity of eastern Europe in relation to the West. The organizers were completely aware of this problem. From the Western point of view, the societies of eastern Europe seem pre-modern. If eastern Europe is a cultural area, it is an area of delayed modernity. It is also clear what was responsible for

this time lag—communism, which allegedly prevented the social and cultural development of eastern European societies from progressing normally, thus creating the gap that still exists between West and East. The logical consequence of this theory is that the missed development needs to be made up for in the post-communist transformation process. The cultural area of eastern Europe thus becomes a period of time; and that also applies to the art produced in this area, which seems to lag qualitatively behind Western art—“art per se”—and to need to make up for lost time.

The exhibition challenged this constellation. It was an act of resistance against the cultural hegemony of the West—against the canon of its art history, against the production conditions imposed by the art market, against the normative and discursive sovereignty of Western mechanisms of evaluation, against the far superior institutional infrastructure—in short, against the global art system, which is Western-dominated irrespective of the concrete geographic location where it operates and is articulated: in Basel, Kassel, London, and Miami, just as in Moscow, Kiev, Istanbul, Guangzhou, and Ljubljana. The Seven Sins exhibition was the scene of a fight and at the same time an institution in this fight. The fight even has a precise historical name—it is the struggle for recognition in which Hegel’s servant once rose up against his master in the name of equality. The same thing is being attempted today in the world of post-modern multiculturalism by the countless identities, from gender and ethnic groups to minorities of every sort—and also, as in this case, by the post-communist European East as opposed to the hegemonic West.

Although the legitimating discourse of the exhibition set out from a universal critique of cultural history—it aimed to expose contradictions in the conceptual foundations of modernity—it remained committed to the struggle for recognition particularly in its strategic orientation, thus embracing the epochal paradigm of identity politics. The European East, represented by its art, laid claim to identity in this exhibition. Basically, this is a normative claim. Just as the West identifies—and simultaneously glorifies—itsself by means of its values, the East characterizes itself by its countervalues cloaked as sins.

In a cultural and in an artistic sense, the global perspective falls into large, normative blocks of identity that are, however, organized hierarchically, with the West as the normative yardstick for all other areas with particularized cultural values. These thus have to uphold their identity in relation to the Western values. This makes the East nothing but a culturally backward area of values.

The “Eastern art” presented in the exhibition is indeed a special case in the ideological construction of the eastern European cultural area. It has its own history going back to the time before the Wall came down, when the cultural strategies used today in the struggle for recognition were developed in resistance to what to this very day, without reflection, is called communist totalitarianism.² The axis Ljubljana-Moscow is of major importance here: “Eastern art,” which was first articulated in the nineties, had its roots both in the artistic practices of the so-called Brezhnev Stagnation and the perestroika era in the Soviet Union—Sots Art and Moscow conceptualism—and in Yugoslavia after the death of Tito, above all in Slovenia—the Neue slowenische Kunst (NSK) [New Slovenian Art]. In both cases, these partly involved an engagement with the legacy of the artistic avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Not only were the totalitarian tendencies allegedly intrinsic to the art of the avant-garde exposed, but the whole artistic avant-garde as such was equated with totalitarianism—and this to such an extent that Boris Groys even claimed, in *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*, that the Stalinist system of terror was nothing but a logical real-socialist realization of the project of the artistic avant-garde.³ This is typical of the post- and retro-avantgarde groups of the eighties: they engaged with the heritage of the avant-garde under the paradigm of totalitarianism.

2. This is thoroughly elaborated in Igor Zabel, “Intimität und Gesellschaft. Die slowenische Kunst und der Osten,” in: Boris Groys, Anne von der Heiden, Peter Weibel (eds.), *Zurück aus der Zukunft. Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter 472-508. des Postkommunismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005.

3. See Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*, translated from Russian by Gabriele Leupold, Munich: Carl Hanser, 1988.

This was expressed most clearly in the 1982 manifesto “Art and Totalitarianism” of the Slovenian artist/musician group Laibach.⁴ Its main hypothesis, which became the principle of an entire resistance strategy, was: all forms of art are the object of political manipulation, except those that speak the language of this manipulation themselves. This also produced a clear strategy of artistic resistance, which even then was already summed up in the concept of “over-identification”—or “subversive affirmation.”

When Laibach gave its first performances in Slovenia in the early eighties wearing uniforms that bore a dangerous resemblance to those worn by the Hitler Youth, public opinion was shocked even far beyond Slovenia itself—triggering heated debate about whether the members of the group really were fascists. One faction was sure that what you see is what you get: in other words, that they were true fascists. A rather liberal faction saw the open imitation of fascist symbols and gestures as an ironic and therefore harmless mimicry of totalitarian rituals. And then there was a third faction consisting of Lacanians led by Slavoj Žižek that maintained that the artistic practice of the group actually represented a successful subversion of totalitarianism. It argued that this practice aimed to frustrate the system and the prevailing ideology because it was not an ironic imitation of totalitarianism, but instead displayed an over-identification with it. According to this account, Laibach used precisely this over-identification to bring to light the system’s obscene, super-ego underside. The group reproduced fascism in all its totalitarian rhetoric and ritual as a strategy of radical confrontation with this ideology, and had laid bare the hidden, true nature of fascism, which always remained invisible and unmentioned in order to be able to successfully retain control over people.

4. Here I rely on the excellent analysis of the use and misuse of the notion of totalitarianism in the genesis of the concept of “East Art” put forward by Miklavž Komelj in his seminal essay “The Function of the Signifier ‘Totalitarianism’ in the Constitution of the Field of ‘East Art’,” in: Daniel Šuber, Slobodan Karamanić (eds.), *Retracing Images: Visual Culture After Yugoslavia*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, 55–81.

This strategy was recast during the already post-totalitarian nineties, when democratic hopes had been swallowed up in the reality of the catastrophe. Both countries, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, were shattered by wars. The identity turn that devastated the political and social landscape of eastern Europe also affected cultural and artistic production. The strategy of over-identification left the once heroically defended front line against totalitarianism and found a new application in the struggle for recognition. People no longer identified with the symbolic world of totalitarian power to subvert it, but with the original identity of the post-communist East in order to fight against the Western cultural hegemony—while at the same time securing recognition by this hegemony, both in the esthetic, normative sense and with regard to the market economy.

One of the best examples of this is the project of another Slovenian artists' collective: the "East-Art Map" by Irwin. The curious thing about this project is that it tries to reconstruct almost fifty years of eastern European art history without any reference to the history of Western art—which has always been seen as universal—and in this way to build up an archive parallel to "Western art." It is an act of (self-)Easternization of art that, after the disappearance of the East-West schism generated by the Cold War, takes this division culturally ad absurdum. Despite its enormous forensic value—it rescues a huge amount of culturally and artistically important data and content from oblivion—and despite its subversive remapping of hegemonic art history, which forces us to adopt alternative esthetic and cultural perspectives, the project unwittingly remains caught up in the vortex of capitalist globalization. It is an act of desperate cultural reterritorialization that divides the world up into manageable geocultural macro-regions similar to the old, premodern empires in order to subjugate them even more efficiently to the power of global capital.

But there is also another way to engage with the cultural East-West division, one that tries to break apart the ideological framework of the cultural difference. This alternative interpretation also aims to narrate alternative histories. For instance, in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Susan Buck-Morss claims that the downfall of eastern European communism also brought

about the end of the modernist landscape molded by the East-West conflict.⁵ She even asserts that the disintegration of this geopolitical map actually marks the end of modernity: of a particular form of modernity that, as she writes, was monopolized by the West. This gives us a chance, she believes, to visualize modernity in a different way—to be more precise, to look for the origins of modernity in an area that is not formed by the West-East division and not Eurocentric like this division itself. What is involved here is something Buck-Morss sees as a genealogical mapping of the origins of globalization, and of the movements that offer resistance to this globalization in its present-day form. She espouses a critical archeology of globalization that deconstructs the current, triumphalistic historiography founded on the history of the East-West division, which leads to the affirmation of the existing global power structure; and she refocuses our interest on forms of resistance that have developed on the margins or within a nationally undefined space. In fact, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* is a deconstruction of the entire narrative of the Cold War and the East-West division. This deconstruction is based on the repressed, forgotten or marginalized truths of a never-told history of similarities, commonalities and shared experiences between what was known as the free world of the West on the one hand, and its ideological opponent, the so-called communist East, on the other.

Buck Morss uses an example to show how such a deconstruction takes place. To begin with, she presents two facts. First, US engineers made a major contribution to building the factories for Stalin's first Five-Year-Plan. Secondly, there are masterpieces of European art in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. Although she found these facts in different places, Buck-Morss joined them to form a coherent history. Stalin, who needed a hard currency to pay the American engineers, acquired it by having the Soviet Union secretly sell some of the most valuable masterpieces of European art from the collection of the Hermitage Museum.

5. See Susan Buck Morss, "Interview: Susan Buck-Morss, Laura Mulvey and Marq Smith," in: Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*, London, New York: Verso, 2003, 113–135. See also Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2000.

Some of them were purchased by the US Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew Mellon, who later, to escape prosecution for tax evasion, left more than twenty masterpieces—including paintings by Raphael, Titian and Jan van Eyck—to the then newly founded National Gallery. In this way, the Soviets procured the American know-how to realize the Magnitogorsk project—the world's largest iron and steel works—which was based on the model of American steel works in Gary and Pittsburgh. In return, the Americans received the state-owned art from the Bolsheviks. The strange thing about this story is that Susan Buck-Morss found the first part in the literature of an extremely right-wing American think tank, while the second part comes from art-history books. No one before her had combined the two.

So there is more than one way to deal with the persistence of the East-West division. The one we choose depends on a fortunately equally persistent critique of ideology.



Chapter IV: After History

As far as post-communism articulates itself as a discourse it also has its own rhetoric. The question is, however, which one? Aristotle understood rhetoric in its relation to temporality. He differentiated three main areas of rhetoric, or three types or genres of oratory and related them to the three dimensions of time. Deliberative or political oratory is concerned with the future. Its purpose is to motivate action. Epideictic or ceremonial rhetoric addresses the present with an aim to praise or blame someone or something, for instance, to praise a virtue or to blame a vice. Finally there is also a forensic or judicial oratory, which is focused on the past. Its proper place is within the court of law where it questions guilt or innocence. Justice and injustice in relation to past events are its main concern.

The language of post-communism speaks to us in a form of forensic rhetoric addressing the past not as a mere dimension of time but rather as the teleological horizon of its historical legitimation. Therefore the post-communist condition is post-historical in the sense that it owes its very existence to the past alone. If in 1989 Francis Fukuyama saw the world in the museum of human history, the subject that was at the same time evoked by the post-communist rhetoric finds its world in a sort of courtroom in which the entire previous history appears reduced to one single relation, that between perpetrators and victims.

The voice it raises there does not simply speak in the name of innocent victims pointing condemning fingers at the guilt of perpetrators, it speaks rather as the innocence itself that exposes the entire history as one single crime scene. This is why post-communism is so obsessed with “body count”, statistically comparing the evil of the two totalitarianisms. It invests huge amounts of its utopian energy in memory, yet not to commemorate the tragic past and heal its traumas but rather to distance itself from history in which, as it is well known, the killings continue.

| When History Was Gone

It Was All about Democracy

Neoliberalism in the eighties? That was not an issue at the time. ‘Democracy’ was the word on everybody’s lips. One was either living it out or craving it more than anything else. Indeed, there was no alternative in the eighties—no alternative to democracy. Even then, already collapsing communism saw its future—its survival, an afterlife—in its democratic transformation. In the eighties, it seemed that nothing could stand in the way of democracy except the brute force of those who were left behind by history. Even neoliberalism, back then, looked like democracy. Hardly anyone was aware that it already had its own agenda.

A historical periodization that measures time, like here, merely by calendar—a ‘decade’—only makes sense within a broader historical framework. In the eighties, this framework was clearly defined by democracy, not by neoliberalism. In fact, the eighties were the last decade of history. At the end of that period, in the summer of 1989—the year that also stands for the fall of East European communism—Frances Fukuyama announced the end of history exactly by declaring democracy, or more precisely a Western-style democracy, as its final stage. In fact, he meant an ideological end of history: democracy as the ultimate form of human government and the finally reached *telos* of all ideological development. At the moment of the post-historical turn neoliberalism, again, is not an issue.

It turned to post-history in the shadow of democracy as a final form of humanity's economic development. While it was loudly proclaimed that no political regime or system would ever again claim ideological superiority to liberal democracy, it was tacitly asserting that no alternative economic model would ever challenge neoliberal economics. This is what, at the end of the eighties, created our post-historical horizon and still determines the contours of the global order in which we live—a seemingly self-evident assumption that one cannot have democracy without its alter ego, neoliberalism, and that both are the final outcome of human history.

Of course, another narrative is also possible. It is, for instance, provided by David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.¹ The breaking point that defines the broader historical framework within which we can situate the eighties as a period took place at the turn of the decade, not the end. This was the time when the first government with a clearly neoliberal agenda was installed—with Margaret Thatcher elected as Prime Minister of Great Britain in May 1979. Paul Volcker, who became the Chairman of the Federal Reserve in the summer of the same year, started the implementation of neoliberal monetary politics in the United States. The major objective was to abandon the old principles of the New Deal, actually a Keynesian fiscal and monetary policy aiming at full employment and in favour of quelling inflation regardless of social consequences.² A year later, when Ronald Reagan entered the White House, neoliberal economic policy won full support from mainstream federal politics. Yet the turn to neoliberalism didn't take place only within the most advanced Western democracies. The first neoliberal inspired economic policy was introduced in Latin America under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet who, in a 1973 military putsch, overthrew the democratically elected President of Chile Salvador Allende. After the labour market was violently 'freed' from regulatory or institutional constraints such as, for instance, trade union power, the infamous

1. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2. Ibid., 23-25.

‘Chicago boys’—a group of economists trained in the neoliberal theories of Milton Freedman at the University of Chicago—were called in to reverse the nationalizations and privatize public assets, open up natural resources to private exploitation, privatize social security, facilitate foreign investment and cooperate with the International Monetary Fund, for instance: take new loans, et cetera.³ At that time a neoliberal turn also took place in one of the most closed totalitarian states of the world. With Deng Xiaoping taking power in 1979, the economic liberalization of communist China began. The famous ‘four modernizations’—in agriculture, industry, education, and science and defense—which brought market forces into the Chinese economy, opened up the country to foreign trade and foreign investment, in short, enabled China’s entry into the world market, which coincided with the neoliberal transformation of international trade in the eighties.⁴

According to David Harvey, the emergence of neoliberalism at the beginning of the eighties represents a revolutionary turning point in the world’s social and economic history.⁵ In this sense, it radically reframes the historical meaning of the eighties. Now they are not the last decade of history, which will end with the global—and eternal—rule of liberal democracy, but the first decade of the global rule of neoliberalism, whose claim to eternity is no less intrusive.

These two historical narratives are incompatible. While democracy fully subsumes neoliberalism, letting it appear as its legitimate corollary, neoliberalism itself doesn’t have to pledge allegiance to the rules of democratic politics. On the contrary, it feels comfortable and sometimes thrives best where autocracy and dictatorship exert full power over individuals and where human rights are ignored or openly trampled upon. The eighties were the time when the disproportional relationship between

3. Ibid., 8.

4. ‘The spectacular emergence of China as a global economic power after 1980 was in part an unintended consequence of the neoliberal turn in the advanced capitalist world.’ Ibid., 121.

5. Ibid., 1.

democracy and neoliberalism was established: since then we have accepted as normal the fact that democracy is often the first to facilitate the implementation of neoliberal policies but the last to come to people's defence when these policies result in destroying their lives. The incompatibility of the two historical narratives—the one in which democracy concludes the entire development of human history and another, which makes the neoliberal turn central to our historical experience—renders any attempt to clearly grasp the historical meaning of the eighties impossible. This is not only due to the ideological disparity of these narratives: while the first, which celebrates the happy, democratic end of history, apologetically affirms the actual historical reality, the latter, which sees neoliberalism as a cause/symptom of a historical crisis, by contrast, calls for its radical critique. In fact, the absence of a common historical ground on which these two narratives might reconcile is not what makes us unable to define the eighties. Rather, the opposite is the case: it is our inability to articulate these two narratives in a radical political opposition to each other, or more precisely, our inability or shall we say fear—to create, politically, a historical ground on which democracy and neoliberalism appear in their irreducible antagonism; a ground on which they clash with one another as open adversaries. At stake is an inability at the level of historical experience. It is an inability of socio-political subjects to totalize historical experience in terms of a mutually exclusive, binary opposition between democracy and neoliberalism.

The problem is that a historical experience, which would allow for such a radical antagonism, cannot take democracy as its ultimate horizon. In other words, for the struggle between democracy and neoliberalism to make historical sense, neither of the adversaries can take the position of history itself—not even democracy. If anything were historical about such a struggle then this would be its open outcome, one that will decide history, not the one that is decided by this history in advance. Or, to put it more clearly, a democratic struggle against neoliberalism becomes truly historical only if and when it faces the possibility that there might be no democratic exit from neoliberalism. To democratically challenge neoliberalism one must allow for the possibility that there might never be a democratic solution to its drawbacks.

More Than a Theft of History

Now we might understand why it is so difficult to grasp the true historical meaning of the eighties. In terms of history this temporal designation is a sort of borderline case. It marks the moment at which the unity of historical time began to dissolve, making any attempt of social subjects to orient themselves within the emerging time-space dynamic of global contemporaneity illusory. In this sense we might say that there is an element of truth in defining the eighties as the last decade of history. The democratic revolutionaries of 1989 were the first to bitterly experience this in the beginning of the nineties. At the moment they toppled communist regimes in Eastern Europe, they saw themselves—and were at the same time seen by the world—as the very protagonists of history. One might say, history itself cast them into the role of history makers. This means that they were not only able to radically cut into an allegedly linear flow of historical time, dividing it into the old destined to be destroyed and the new they represented—a fundamentally modernist operation—but also to create a new historical temporality, which was, in fact, the very essence of a modern revolution. They were, at least for a moment, the embodiment of history itself.

This illusion, however, didn't last long. Soon they found themselves in a time different from the one they just created. Contrary to a naïve, common sense understanding of recent history, the democratic revolutions of 1989/90 in Eastern Europe haven't immediately delivered what they promised—a democratic society. They didn't result, as expected, in democracy, but rather in the so-called transition to democracy, an ambiguous process of social transformation whose temporal extension was not only indefinitely open to a vague end point, but, moreover, completely out of the control of those who brought about historical change. What followed after the collapse of historical communism was not democracy proper but 'post-communism', a condition for which was claimed, from the very beginning, that it hasn't brought anything new and which was, precisely in terms of historical temporality, declared 'belated'⁶—of course,

6. See for instance Jürgen Habermas, 'Nachholende Revolution und linker Revisionsbedarf. Was heißt Sozialismus heute?', in: same author, *Die nachholende Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 179–203.

in relation to the West as the time-space of actually existing democracy. So, instead of fully consuming the hard-fought democratic freedoms, societies of the post-communist East had first to embark on an endless process of catch-up with the West. The old Cold-War divide, once pathetically epitomized in the picture of the Berlin Wall, has been replaced by a new wall composed solely of an alienated historical time.⁷ The West was now more than historically ahead of the post-communist East; it was the place where history had reached its closure and where the flow of historical time had come to a standstill. The concept through which the post-historical condition found its ideological expression was 'identity'. With the collapse of its Cold War counterpart at the end of the eighties, the West emerged as a compact identity block that claimed normative supremacy over the rest of the world. It didn't simply dislodge itself from history. Rather, it has become the very measure of historical temporality. The same applies, by and large, to democracy. Now it was no longer a historically contingent social condition, a matter or cause of political struggle that forces within society could win or lose, but rather a 'property' of an identity—the identity of the West. In the normative guise of 'Western values' democracy has ascended from the social space of history to the sphere of its angelic sublimity, thoroughly purified from the dirt of real history, emphatically universal, despite its cultural (Western) particularity, and above all, timeless. It is from the higher ground of its abstract normativity that Western democracy could judge historical reality, which was now always somewhere else, not only in another non-Western place but also in another time. From the standpoint of actually existing Western

7. The turn of the eighties saw a historical revival of the temporal difference, once an effective instrument of colonial oppression deployed to project the colonized peoples in a time different from the one of the colonial powers, concretely in a non-historical time. Now, in the form of a fluid temporal border, it is used by the forces of neoliberal globalization to regulate and control the movements of capital and labour force across the world. (See Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), especially Chapter 5: 'In the Space of Temporal Border'). Today, as much as in the time of classical colonialism, it serves the interests of domination. This also applies to the nowadays much discussed idea of a 'multi-speed Europe'.

democracy, real history is still taking place, yet only in the past as the temporal modus of its non-Western contemporaries. For the West, any non-Western democracy is necessarily a 'belated' one, which is why it cannot share one and the same time with it.

What the West has accomplished at the turn of the nineties was more than the theft of global history. We can describe it as a form of primitive accumulation of historical temporality, totally in parallel with the new—neoliberal—wave of primitive accumulation of capital launched after 1989 in the former communist countries. As we know, it was made possible by a radical transformation of property relations that involved the mostly criminal privatization of the state or socially owned means of production and other assets. But something similar happened in the sphere of ideology. Those who were separated from their land and factories also lost what they just created—history. The very means of their historical reproduction, a self-created historical temporality by which they alone were able to cast themselves as the subjects of history, was taken away from them. The euphoria of the democratic revolutions of 1989/90 was short-lived and so was the historical role of their heroes. Just as they, as economically liberated individuals, were immediately surrendered to the whims of the globalized markets, so too they found themselves, as members of their transitional societies and as political subjects, running after history in a desperate attempt to catch up with its actual time. But they were always running late. History was already in foreign hands.

What we usually call post-history has nothing to do with a world in which history, having done its job, has abandoned, evaporating into another temporality that eludes historical meaning. Rather, it is a divided world, a world in which history has been expropriated—by means of an identitarian (Western) enclosure—from those who created it. What is now imposed on them as a post-historical temporality is in fact their own alienated history.⁸ In the hands of its new owners, the sole

8. We could understand this transformation in terms of an identity fetishism: a relation between men and women, of which history is but temporal expression, has taken shape of a relation between identity values irreducibly separated by an objectively given temporal difference.

rulers of the global world, it has turned into an instrument of domination and a perfect protective mechanism for the existing order. The temporal logic of post-history gives the regime of the actually existing Western democracy a kind of strategic depth, a temporal buffer zone in which none of its crises can ever acquire historical meaning. However destructive or irresolvable, it will never be perceived as the terminal crisis of the system itself. Post-history is an ideological arrangement in which democracy always gets a second chance.

The Triple Turn of the Eighties: History to Memory; Future to Past; Society to Culture

In the years that followed the historical changes of 1989, history gradually abandoned the hearts and minds of the masses, which it had occupied for almost two centuries. But these hearts and minds, much like the factories of industrial modernity, from which living labour had just disappeared, were not, in fact, empty. History had left at least one of its temporal dimensions: the past.

French historian Pierre Nora argues that we live in an age of commemoration.⁹ Nora has diagnosed the extraordinary rise, already in the 70s, in interest for the past. In France and elsewhere in the West, it coincided with the first serious economic crises after World War II, triggered by the huge rise in oil prices in 1974, a crisis that shattered the hitherto stable belief in progress: industrialization, urbanization and a constant growth in welfare. Secondly, the political atmosphere radically shifted following the death of General de Gaulle in 1970. The French began questioning official history, disclosing the dark side of the heroic narrative of anti-fascist resistance, the collaboration

History can happen only when human beings who enter into relationship with each other share one and the same time. This is not necessary for the relation between identities.

9. See Pierre Nora, 'Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory,' in *Eurozine*, April 19, 2002, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-04-19-nora-en.html>. (Last accessed on March 13, 2017).

of Vichy France. But they also turned their attention to a more distant and deeper past, the history of pre-revolutionary France. 'The French Revolution is over', wrote François Furet at the end of the seventies.¹⁰ The idea of historical time symbolically condensed around the experience of revolutionary rupture lost the prestige it had enjoyed for almost two centuries. It ceded its place to the concept of tradition. The seventies ended with what Nora describes as a 'meteoric rise of the cult of national heritage'.¹¹ At the same time, the French Communist party, at that point still a significant political force, started to lose its influence on both national politics and French intellectuals. The intellectual collapse of traditional Marxism was underway.

It was the historical decline of the idea of revolution that brought about radical change in the perception of history. The unity of historical time fell apart. It was kept together by the concept—a reflected historical experience as well as a prospective expectation—of a radical revolutionary rupture, which not only regulated the economy of historical loss and gain, clearly differentiating the old—consigning it to the dustbin of history—from the new that was yet to be created, but which also directed an entire historical timeline toward the future. The great beneficiary of this transformation was the past. It was, as Nora explicitly states, liberated by the disappearance of historical time oriented by the concept of revolution. In the eighties, the world was turning back to the past. Not only in France. Nora speaks of an 'ardent, embattled, almost fetishistic 'memorialism' that spread all over the world, especially after the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and military dictatorships in Latin America. The key feature of this 'tidal wave of memorial concerns that has broken over the world' was the close ties between a new adoration for the past and an idea that was rapidly taking hold in intellectual and political circles: identity.

The eighties was a time when memory began to replace history both in terms of the knowledge of the past and in terms of a

10. In *Penser la Révolution française (Interpreting the French Revolution)* from 1978.

11. In 1980, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, at that time the President of the Republic, proposed to dedicate himself to the national heritage.

particular sense of temporality. It has chosen culture and not history's preference, society, as the medium of its articulation. In fact, culture established itself as the only sphere in which something like the totalization of historical experience¹² still made sense, for instance under the name of postmodernity—a cultural epoch that was first diagnosed and conceptualized at the beginning of the eighties. Then, culturally experienced time was seen as closely connected to the condition of contemporary capitalism, already affected by neoliberal policies: in 1984 *The New Left Review* published Fredric Jameson's 'Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'. Only a few years earlier, 1981, the same author called for us to 'always historicize!'.¹³ But there was no serious answer to his call in the eighties and later it would be forgotten. It has seemed impossible to historicize in the post-historical world of neoliberal capitalism. But isn't this a reason to remember the eighties, when the trouble with history began; and a good reason to try again?

12. On the problem of cultural totalization of historical time, see Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time. Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London, New York: Verso, 1995).

13. The famous first sentence of Fredric Jameson's, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Social Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981).

The Public Intellectual after History: Remembering Said's "Speaking Truth to Power"

There are no given truths on which an intellectual can rely when speaking out publicly. Yet this claim, although it might sound like a truism, had for Edward Said a very particular historical meaning. It was grounded in the critique of history as the objective knowledge of the past. After having asked in one of his lectures on representations of the intellectual, what "truth and principles one should defend, uphold, represent?" Said argues that the objectivity of our knowledge, and accuracy of the facts on which it is supposed to be based, no longer provide the stable ground upon which the intellectual can stand today.¹ As paradigmatic for his argument he takes the example of historiography, concretely a book of an American historian, Peter Novick,² in which the author showed how the ideal of objectivity, which led historians in grounding their investigations on facts, has finally ended in a chaos of competing claims and counterclaims that were lacking any objective validity. Not only were the objective truths of historiographical research politically misused, but they were then adapted to the ideological narratives of the opposing sides of the Cold War, splitting apart into American versus communist truths. The production of historical knowledge also followed the pattern of identity politics, which resulted in each identitarian community—from women and African Americans, to gays and other cultural minorities—claiming its own historical truth.

1. Edward W. Said, "Speaking Truth to Power", in: *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, London: Vintage Books, 1994, 66.

2. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Finally, the historical knowledge was shaped according to different schools of thinking like Marxist or deconstructionist or cultural. This all led Novick to the conclusion that the discipline of history, seen as a broad community of discourse and of scholars united by common aims, standards, and purposes, had ceased to exist.

It is not by chance that Said chose precisely the crisis of historiography as the best example to illustrate the impossibility of intellectuals' reliance on professional knowledge when raising their voices in public. He already assumed that the fate of public intellectuals was to be decided in their relation to the past—no longer in relation to what we vaguely call society, meaning some sort of social reality; politics, state, nation, etc. It is precisely in relation to the past that our knowledge has failed to attain objective validity to provide us with reliable orientation in the world. This is why the general condition of the intellectuals' public involvement today, implies, in a paradigmatic way, a total disorientation in what once was historical time—a disorientation of the subjects who are supposed to understand the past, the historians—or, as Novick writes, “professors of history,” not those who are supposed to act, i.e. to make history.³

The difference is crucial if we want to understand what this transformation is actually about. First, we shouldn't confuse it with those disorientations in historical time, which the enlightened spirits experienced in the age of revolutions, and is best described in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville in his seminal work on *Democracy in America*: “As the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity.” (Le passé n'éclairant plus l'avenir, l'esprit marche dans le ténèbres.)⁴ Reinhart Koselleck explains this condition as the consequence of a change in our understanding of history that was brought about by modern revolutions.⁵

3. Said, 67.

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/ch4_08.htm [accessed May 5, 2014].

5. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt Main: Suhrkamp, 1979, 46ff.

It was the French Revolution that disconnected the past and the future and disrupted the pre-modern continuity of historical time. The obscurity about which Tocqueville talks is the result of a history that has become the generator of its own time and space in its own particular experience. Moreover, history has become a subject in itself. In other words, historical events themselves started to tell their own stories, making those who were telling the stories about the historical events obsolete. This is the reason why historians, as Koselleck explicitly emphasizes, have abandoned story-telling and let the facts write history—a constellation that, as Said quoting Novick warns, has come into crisis at the end of twentieth century. And this is the reason too, why Said's public intellectuals wander again in obscurity. However, it is an obscurity that is essentially different from Tocqueville's who meant by it the general openness of historical time toward the future, i.e. the contingency of historical reality that was intrinsic to the creative power of history itself, a history that has become the subject of action and transformation, able to create the new. This is why Tocqueville's "mind of the man" (l'esprit) had to wander in darkness. What it knew from the past was old and obsolete. About the new, on the contrary, it knew nothing since it was yet to be created in the future. So the past no longer was throwing its light upon the future.

Let us at this place leave the imagination of the reader to sketch out the role of a public intellectual in the age of revolution and history, which at the same time was also the age of history as knowledge of the past based on objective facts. This history, as Said and Novick argue, ceased to exist. But what about history as subject. Has it also ceased to act?

Only one year after Novick's book on the end of history as objective knowledge, in the summer of 1989, the American magazine *The National Interest* published Francis Fukuyama's essay "The End of History?"—with a question mark, though.⁶ Three years later the title of his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, no longer expresses a question.⁷ Rather it

6. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *The National Interest*, No 16 (Summer 1989), 3–18.

7. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992.

declared authoritatively that we have reached the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and that the Western liberal democracy is the universal and, therefore, the final form of human government. This is what Fukuyama meant by the end of history. It is, in his own words, a sad time in which there will be no more ideological struggles like those of the past that have shaped modern history and mobilized the power of the masses, their social and political imagination and their willingness to fight, to die, and kill for abstract ideals. It is a time in which not all societies will necessarily become successful liberal democracies, but whatever the regime or system, it will no longer claim any ideological superiority over the Western-type liberal democracy. What then follows after history are, as Fukuyama writes, the centuries of boredom marked by rather banal economic calculation, the endless solving of technical and environmental problems, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.⁸

Since then, Fukuyama's diagnosis has been refuted many times. Already, in 1990, Misha Glenny published a book on the so-called democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe under the title: *The Rebirth of History*.⁹ Under the same title, there appeared, in 2012, Alain Badiou's book—as its subtitle reads—*On Times of Riots and Uprisings*, referring concretely to the events of the “Arab spring.”¹⁰ Or, published in the same year, the book of *Guardian* columnist Seumas Milne, *The Revenge of History*, which challenged Fukuyama's claim in a similar way.¹¹

In fact one doesn't need philosophers, historians, critics, or those clever and competent opinion-makers (once called public intellectuals) to tell us that even after the proclaimed end of history something is still happening in the world. But is what is happening around us, what looks so significant that one even

8. Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, 18.

9. Misha Glenny, *The Rebirth of History: Eastern Europe in the Age of Democracy*, London: Penguin Books, 1990.

10. Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, London: Verso Books, 2012.

11. Seumas Milne, *The Revenge of History*, London: Verso Books, 2012.

openly talks these days—it is the Spring 2014—of a new Cold War emerging on the eastern fringes of Europe, really that history, which Fukuyama at the end of his article put explicitly in the museum, imposing on us an obligation to take care of it in a way one cares for a piece of properly stored and well protected cultural heritage?

Or would we be better advised to take Fukuyama's claim on the end of history seriously? Indeed, his vision of the history in the museum and of us as its caretakers doesn't seem, at least in one sense, entirely wrong. What structures our relation to the past now according to French historian Pierre Nora, is memory, not history.¹² This turn from history to memory he dates back to the so-called collapse of communism, the historic event that happened in the same year that Fukuyama's "The End of History?" was published. Since then, he argues, we have been witnessing "a world-wide upsurge in memory." What for Fukuyama is seen as the post-historical period and the general condition in which we live today, for Nora is the "age of commemoration," in a similar post-historical sense. It is a time of memory, a time in which memory has dethroned history from its sole rule over the past. According to Nora, the meaning of memory has broadened so much that, nowadays, it is used simply as a substitute for history. The study of history, he argues, is now at the service of memory. If once there was *collective history* and *individual memories*, now it is memory that has acquired collective meaning.

But there is one more change brought about by the turn from history to memory. The production of our knowledge of the past, as Nora clearly points out, has been significantly democratized, i.e., it has escaped the control of qualified historians and become a concern of various non-professionals. In the creation of memory everyone is now invited to participate. This is obviously one of the consequences of the crisis of history-as-discipline diagnosed by Novick in the late 1980s. But it also, remarkably, coincides with Edward Said's praise of amateurism, intrinsic to his model of the public intellectual.

12. Pierre Nora, "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory", *Eurozine* (April 19, 2002), <http://eurozine.com/articles/2002-04-19-nora-en.html> [accessed May 5, 2014].

He believes that having the attitude of an amateur instead of a professional, for an intellectual, is a better way of maintaining independence.¹³ Amateurism is a choice. By intervening as an intellectual in the public space one chooses the risks and uncertain results over the insider space controlled by experts and professionals. Precisely as an amateur, Said's public intellectual is also an outsider. Both figures are indispensable in preserving critical distance from the institutions of power. And both make sense only against the background of a historically particular social imaginary. An amateur is amateur only in relation to the position of a professional that is generated, reproduced, and protected by certain types of social institutions. And, however estranged and excluded, one becomes and stays an outsider only within a given society. In other words, amateurism and outsiderhood are forms of intrasocial dislocations that can be perceived and conceived of only within the image of society as a coherent unity, which automatically implies control and totality.

This, however, is nothing new. But what Edward Said has originally contributed to our understanding of public intellectuals and what we, reflecting critically upon its role shouldn't ignore today, is its relation to the past.

Said's *Culture and Imperialism* begins with his saying that appeals to the past are among the commonest strategies in our interpretations of the present. He quotes T.S. Eliot's words that "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."¹⁴ The idea is that the past cannot be, as Said writes, "quarantined" from the present and that both inform each other; that each implies and co-exists with the other. Concretely, for Eliot, a writer must be conscious of his or her place in time, of his or her contemporaneity. But this is possible only if the whole literary past, not only the national, for the writer, is in the form of its timelessness, simultaneously present. This is crucial for Said too: our representations of the past shape decisively our understanding and views of the present.

13. Ibid., 64.

14. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage Books, 1994, 1ff.

And, we might add, our relation to the past, quite generally, shapes our relation to reality in all of its manifestations, social, political, cultural and, of course, intellectual. This, again, sounds like a truism but today it implies a significant dislocation. The past we are talking about so much here has abandoned the place it occupied for so long on the time line of history. Not only are we helplessly confused trying to find its proper location again, but the change went deeper than that, and the past has ceased to exist altogether as a dimension of the historical temporality. When we refer to it today, we no longer refer to history but directly to the whole spectrum of our existence, before all, to our social being. If some 100 years ago Maurice Halbwachs discovering the social meaning of memory put our mental relation to the past, considered before as purely individual, into a social frame¹⁵—precisely at the time when social imagination almost completely turned to the “opposite” direction of time, to the future—now, in the age of post-history and commemoration, we should reverse the move and put society in the frame of memory. Precisely by framing our relation to the past, memory also frames our social being. This reversal necessarily implies a different perception of the past. It becomes now a temporal dimension of the post-historical sociality.

What then, in this context, does the phrase of the social role of the public intellectual mean? The public intellectual is a social figure, and there is no doubt about it, but its social character can be understood only from a post-historical retrospective. A *retrospective*, I repeat, not a perspective. Our entire social imaginary today is haunted by an overall retrospectivity. The past is not simply a dimension of time, especially not in a historical sense. Rather it is the general modus of our understanding of the world and taking our stand in it as social beings, political animals, or cultural identities. It is not possible for us today to enter a social conflict, to fight a political struggle, or to occupy a cultural location without stepping into the past as a platform of social activity, as a political battleground, as a stage of cultural articulation, as a screen of utopian imagination and, last but not least, as a museum in which we take care of history.

15. Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952.

The same, of course, applies to the critical practice of public intellectuals. Its social topology today presupposes its temporal localization in a post-historical world. An outsider to whose past, an amateur to whose memory? Those who still dare to speak truth to power cannot avoid these questions. So the good news is that the public intellectual is not a social figure of the past. Rather it is the figure of a past sociality, a role whose social meaning can be articulated only retrospectively, in our relation to the past, or better, to the society that speaks its truths to us only from its own past.

Red Velvet

Do you remember Vaclav Havel? Not only the most innocent among all the anti-communist dissidents, but he was the leader of the most innocent of all the so-called democratic revolutions of 1989–1990, the one called “Velvet”. Velvet, of course, is the name for a closely woven tufted fabric of silk, cotton, wool or any other natural or synthetic fibers. It is known for its softness and smoothness, which is why it is so popular as a metaphor. In the case of the revolution in former Czechoslovakia, “velvet” seems to stand for its peaceful and nonviolent character.¹

It is believed that the art of velvet weaving originates in the Far East. The fabric was well-liked by nobles. History tells us that when Harun al-Rashid, the Fifth Caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, then the ruler of Baghdad, died at the beginning of the ninth century, 500 pieces of velvet were found among the treasure he left behind. Known as the fabric of the royals, it was allegedly introduced to Baghdad by Kashmiri merchants.

1. The Slovaks, however, prefer to call the revolution “gentle”.

The rule of Harun al-Rashid is also known as the peak of the so-called Islamic Golden Age, when Baghdad flourished as a center of knowledge, culture and trade. The fact that the Caliph Harun al-Rashid appears as a figure in some of the *Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *The Arabian Nights*, gives the symbolic meaning of velvet a certain orientalist touch. A decade or so before his death, Harun al-Rashid moved his court and government from Baghdad to Ar-Raqqah, a city on the north bank of the Euphrates River in Syria. Today, curiously, the city is located again in a caliphate. It was established in June 2014 and is ruled by Caliph Ibrahim, most commonly known by the nom de guerre Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of a terrorist organization, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), considered by the international public to be worse than al-Qaeda. His rule, in contrast to the one of his predecessor Caliph Harun al-Rashid more than one thousand years ago, will surely not be remembered as a golden age, a time of peace and stability in which knowledge and culture flourished along with overall economic prosperity. In Ar-Raqqah, now the headquarters of the jihadist movement, all educational institutions are closed, the city is cleansed of religious and other minorities, the cultural and social achievements of modern civilization annulled. It is a time of animal cruelty, mindless destruction, sheer stubborn regression—a condition for which the enlightened European mind, trading freedom for security, once coined the notion of a “state of nature”.

The question remains, what does all this have to do with Vaclav Havel?

Rock the Casbah

At the end of January 2003 Vaclav Havel was among the leaders of eight European states² who issued a joint declaration of support for U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq.³ In the statement they hail the so-called transatlantic bond as “a guarantee of our freedom.” At stake is, of course, the bond between the United States and Europe, which as the authors want us to believe, consists of shared values: democracy, individual freedom, human rights and the Rule of Law; values that once, as they wrote, “crossed the Atlantic with those who sailed from Europe to help create the USA.” Their adversaries, the terrorists whom they vow to fight in Iraq, are defined as simply the enemies of these values. The September 11th, 2001 World Trade Center attacks showed how far they are prepared to go. Yet there is no reason to worry: the signatories of the Declaration assure us that the governments and people of the United States and Europe stand firm in defense of their common values. All that remains is to “rid the world of the danger posed by Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction.”

Ideologically the statement is grounded in the common platitude of Europe being liberated from the two totalitarianisms, Nazism and Communism. As such it is far from being politically unbiased. Rather, it aligns its subscribers with European conservatives’ implicit evocation of the historical narrative of the *Historikerstreit* (historians’ quarrel) in the late 1980s in West Germany, and Ernst Nolte’s interpretation of Nazism as an excessive reaction to the threat of Communist totalitarianism, which was ultimately to blame for all the Nazi atrocities. It is therefore not by coincidence that Silvio Berlusconi was among the signatories of the Declaration.

2. The other seven were: José María Aznar, Spain; José Manuel Durão Barroso, Portugal; Silvio Berlusconi, Italy; Tony Blair, United Kingdom; Péter Medgyessy, Hungary; Leszek Miller, Poland; Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Denmark.

3. See “Leaders’ statement on Iraq: Full text,” *BBC News, World Edition*, 30 January 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2708877.stm>. (Kind thanks to Přemysl Houđa for reminding me of this text.)

In September of the same year, 2003, he would provoke a public outcry by claiming that Benito Mussolini had never killed anyone but had just sent people on holiday to confine them. Berlusconi, however, has never been a person whom one would expect to deal with the world in a soft, gentle, if not to say a “velvety” manner. Is that in contrast to Havel?

A few years earlier, in October 1997, Havel was in Washington to give an address after receiving the Fulbright Prize. The title of his speech was somewhat curious: “The Charms of NATO”. He namely used the occasion to welcome the decision to include three Eastern European nations (Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic) in the Western military alliance. He enthusiastically called for America to assume its responsibility for the whole world. For Havel, only the United States can save our global civilization by acting on the premises imbued with its values that should be adopted by all cultures, all nations, as a condition of their survival.⁴

A year and a half later NATO, which now included its new Eastern European members,⁵ militarily intervened in a sovereign European country—to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, as it was said in the language of “humanitarian interventionism” or, in its generally ignored political translation, to support the secession of an oppressed ethnic minority. It was in Serbia in 1999 and the minority at stake was Albanians in the then-still-Serbian province of Kosovo. Like the previous military intervention in Bosnia, this one, too, succeeded in pacifying armed conflict on the ground, yet failed to solve any political problem. It only reinforced new divisions along the ethno-confessional fault lines, tolerating even the cases of open segregation and leaving the entire region in a sort of permanent state of exception—a condition that has become the pattern for

4. Vaclav Havel, “The Charms of NATO,” *The New York Review of Books* LXV (15 January 1998).

5. Who according to Donald Rumsfeld represent a “New Europe”, which in contrast to the “old” hesitant one, was unconditionally willing to send armed forces to Iraq.

the results of western military interventions around the world; a condition in whose creation Vaclav Havel was so enthusiastically involved.⁶

In this case again, language is cleverer than the ideological kitsch called “Velvet Revolution”. It coined an idiom that better suits the reality: an “iron fist in a velvet glove.”

The story about “velvet”, a fabric so rich with symbolic meaning, does not end here. Only a year before NATO warplanes dropped their first bombs on Belgrade, Serbia, Vaclav Havel was guest of President Clinton in the White House. In fact, he came to the official dinner along with a special guest of his own, the legendary front man of The Velvet Underground, Lou Reed, who even played that evening in the famous East Room. In the early 1990s Havel welcomed Reed in his residency in the Prague Castle. Some believe that the Velvet Revolution actually owes its name to the famous American rock band.

Coming back to the already-mentioned orientalist touch obviously inherent in the notion of “velvet”, we might remember that the name of the band was actually taken from a book with the same title written by Michael Leigh, a contemporary paperback reporting on sexual subculture of the early 1960s in the USA. From New York, where he was at the time, Havel brought home The Velvet Underground’s *Banana* LP. It was the year 1968, the year of the Prague Spring and the subsequent Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. It was also the year of the worldwide student revolts against conservative and authoritarian establishments, as well as the year of mass protests against the war in Vietnam; the year that still stands symbolically for the flourishing of all sorts of subcultures especially sexual ones. (Are we not following another symbolic trajectory of that fascinating fabric called “velvet”, the one that connects the Velvet Revolution with the Sexual one, and both with the anti-war protests?)

6. See Boris Buden, “The Official *Bastard* Statement on the war in Yugoslavia: Saving Private Havel,” Special edition *Bastard*, *Arkzin* (1999).

It might be reasonably assumed that so-called western values include the achievements of sexual emancipation, which have significantly contributed to the liberation of women and various sexual minorities in addition to playing a role in the moral and political legacy of anarchism, pacifism and left-wing anti-militarism. This means that these values must also—as Havel, smitten with the irresistible charms of NATO suggests—be adopted by all cultures, all nations, not simply to increase their overall well-being or to improve the form of government but to secure nothing less than their ultimate survival. For Havel this was clearly the reason to support military intervention in Iraq. What then has happened to all these values out there between the Tigris and the Euphrates? Have they been swallowed in the no-more-velvet Arab nights or stolen by Caliph Ibrahim and his forty thousand terrorists?



The Thermidor's Bloody Velvet

Igor Girkin, a.k.a. “Strelkov”, is the self-proclaimed leader of the so-called pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. Like Caliph Ibrahim, a mysterious person: messianic, militaristic, ultranationalist and reactionary.⁷ It seems, moreover, that he also shares similar values, best presented by his ideological advisor Igor Druz, a strong supporter of Orthodox Christian morality and the virtues of family. Needless to say, he equally strongly opposes homosexuality and would most probably agree with Caliph Ibrahim’s views on women. In short, he is disgusted by the above-mentioned achievements of the sexual revolution and woman’s liberation, things he perceives as Western decadence. Anti-militarism, too, is presumably for him nothing more than a “faggot’s ideology”. Yet what connects these two obscure figures of today’s crumbling international order even more is their deep, utopian-like wish to restore a previous condition, an allegedly better past. While Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi dreams of repeating and even surpassing by far the might and glory of the Caliphate from the early Middle Ages, for instance by raising the black banner of the Islamic State over St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, his Russian brother-in-arms Strelkov fights to revive Russia’s historic destiny and to re-establish a Czarist-Stalinist empire.

Most striking about both, however, is what they share with Václav Havel: the perspective of a world divided into normative identity blocks or “civilizations”, each defined by its own values and each occupying its own space in which these values are supposed to be at their proper, original location. While the former two still see some limits to the expansion of their delusional retro-projects, Havel wants western values to be adopted by the whole world, if necessary by military force of the USA and Europe. For him there is no alternative. Those who reject western values are doomed to perish.

7. See Noah Sneider, “Shadowy Rebel Wields Iron Fist in Ukraine Fight,” *New York Times*, 10 July 2014, accessed 20 September 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/11/world/europe/russian-seizes-authority-over-ukraine-rebels.html?_r=0.

The picture clearly resembles Carl Schmitt's vision of the world after the collapse of the old Westphalian order of sovereign nation states, or more precisely, the most pessimistic version of what he called the "Nomos of the Earth": one of the parties has identified its particular position, grounded in no less particular values, with the position of humanity as a whole. At stake is a Universalist stance, which makes it only more dangerous because it perceives all those who oppose it as absolute enemies. Their destruction becomes a pre-condition for humanity's survival. In this perspective the enemies of the West are the enemies of humanity, and as such don't deserve to be treated as humans. The notion of a "terrorist" today not only perfectly denotes Schmitt's concept of the absolute enemy but also personifies a political waste product of the post-totalitarian ideology in which the West has absolved itself of the terror of the so-called two totalitarianisms. Moreover, it has washed itself of the violence in which the very values it claims today are grounded in, and were born, of the "terror" of the French Revolution.

"'Terrorism' and 'terrorists' are words that originated with Thermidor," writes Sophie Wahnich when defending the "terror" of the Great Revolution.⁸ At that time, the notion was applied to those who fought for a new world grounded in a political and symbolical egalitarianism, concretely to Robespierre, Saint-Just, the Jacobins and all who fought for "liberty or death". It was also applied by those who defeated them, by the forces of the continuity with the old world of inherited inequalities, stable hierarchies and political passivity of citizens.⁹ It was the Thermidorians who invented the neologism "terrorist".

8. Sophie Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution*, trans. David Fernbach (London, New York: Verso, 2012), 99.

9. That is, by the forces who sought "the establishment of property-based suffrage and the abolition of the right of resistance to an oppression which refused [the people] any active citizenship." Ibid

They, as Wahnich argues, “not only anthropologized a violence that was also seen as popular, but they actively obscured what had given this terror a situational legitimacy: a juridico-political process of collective responsibility.”¹⁰ As a consequence, “terror” has become the name for an abstract evil that has lost any causal relation to the historical praxis. It has become an *otherness without history*.

More importantly, the notion of “terror”, according to Wahnich, presupposes a process of active forgetting. It is a forgetting that is affected after the time of revolutionary foundation when the forces of counter-revolution restore the post-revolutionary “normality” in which they seek to reclaim their privileges and assure their rule. It erases from memory the traumatic truth of an irreducible contingency of historical praxis as well as its prospective openness. What the re-established normality wants people to forget is what they have learned in the revolution—that collective will can change the existing reality.

At stake is, as Sophie Wahnich underlines, an *active* forgetting. It doesn’t simply erode the experience of the creative power of negation, acquired in the revolution, but reemploys it in the interest of the new order by turning it in the opposite direction. Instead of a better future one now creates a better past. This is how what was an uncertain outcome of revolutionary struggle, a contingent fact of victory or defeat, suddenly becomes a substantial value of the community’s identity that is deeply rooted in its unique genealogy and not only able to connect generations divided by centuries but unite them beyond any historical time.

A perfect example of such active forgetting offers the notion of “velvet” in the Czechoslovakian “Velvet Revolution”. Far from referring to the peaceful outcome of a thoroughly contingent revolutionary transformation, the attribute “velvet” suddenly turns, as if by miracle, into an essential quality of the new post-totalitarian order. Moreover, it seems to have articulated itself in the revolution only because it had always already been there as an identitarian value. “Velvet” is now a

10. Ibid., 100.

value of an originally non-totalitarian and non-violent Czechoslovakian community, which was only temporarily suppressed by a foreign force of Communist totalitarianism and militarism, in addition to being a value that ties the community to a larger identity block, to a “civilization” called the West. Instead of metaphorically describing a contingent quality of a historical event, or if one insists, a uniquely and grandiosely bloodless character of a revolutionary act, the notion of “velvet” has become a mode of cultural belonging—a shared value that connects individuals and peoples not only beyond their actual differences but beyond history itself. This symbolic transformation, the translation of an attribute of practical deeds into a value, has, of course, far-reaching ideological effects.

First, it enabled Havel and the community he represented at that time to immediately swap one military block for another, without (even for a moment) claiming liberation from military blocks altogether and ultimately from the very logic of militarization of the political. Becoming an identitarian value, “velvet” helped the sovereignty of popular will that was forged in the act of revolution to avoid a traumatic encounter with the very openness of the historical praxis and to take the responsibility for the new it had just called into being. It has prevented, too, even more traumatic encounters with the powers of the status quo, which saw in the revolutions of 1989 and 1990 nothing but a desperate attempt of the historically-belated nations of Eastern Europe to catch up with the West.¹¹

It was only after the “velvet” of the Prague revolution became the “velvet” of the West, a genuine value of its identity, that the veil of oblivion was woven out of that fabric; a veil that covered the whole of “The Democratic Revolutions of 1989–1990”.

11. See especially Jürgen Habermas’s concepts of “die nachholende Revolution” (The Catching Up Revolution) and “die rückspulende Revolution” (The Rewinding Revolution). In Jürgen Habermas, “Nachholende Revolution und linker Revisionsbedarf. Was heißt Sozialismus heute?”, in J. Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 179–203.

Similar to the Thermidorian concept of “terror”, it was generated in the process of active forgetting, both retrospectively and prospectively. Not only did the notion of “velvet” rid itself of its pacifist and anti-militarist meaning from the 1960s, the memory of the colonial terror in America and the eradication of indigenous people as well as the trans-Atlantic slave trade had also miraculously evaporated from Havel’s phantasy of western values, having once sailed from Europe to America.¹² The iron fist of NATO had put on its velvet glove. What else could better hide its bloody and often-criminal history? Now, only the charms of this most powerful military association in today’s world could be seen, and not a trace whatsoever of its ugly dirt. So “velvet” became a magic means of whitewashing, able to restore the primal innocence of its wearer under all possible circumstances and within all dimensions of time. Even that responsibility for which Havel called the United States to take for the whole world could have turned into its opposite, a total irresponsibility for one’s own decisions and deeds. “Velvet” is today a general attribute for the double standards of the political and military engagement of the West around the world, and stands for its infinite impunity in the face of international criminal law.¹³

Now when we haven’t yet finished counting the victims of the Western world’s intervention in Iraq, of which Havel was a full-hearted supporter—so far at least 500,000 deaths, 4 million refugees, mass torture, ethnic cleansing and irreparable damage to the state of Iraq, as well as the unstoppable sliding into chaos

12. There is, of course, a radically different perspective on the issue of “travelling values” between Europe and America; an anti-colonial one: “Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 313.

13. Of which the greatest beneficiaries today are political leaders and military commanders of Israel. See Richard Falk, “Massacre in Gaza: Can International Law Provide Justice for Palestinians?” *Al Jazeera*, 22 July 2014, accessed 23 October 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/in-depth/opinion/2014/07/massacre-gaza-20147228354824989.html>.

and war of the whole region, with no political solution whatsoever in sight—the time has come to finally lift the velvet veil of oblivion. Not to disclose the moral shortcomings of the hero of the Velvet Revolution, but to lay bare the fatally-missed opportunity of radical change; to look fearlessly into the abyss of historical contingency and to recognize the tragic defeat in what has been celebrated as victory ever since the so-called fall of Communism. Even if the time to try anew hasn't yet come, it is still not too late to reclaim the “velvet” from the forces of the new Thermidor.



Under the Terror of Values

When the website for *The Guardian* dubbed their new news region “The New East Network,” covering “fifteen countries that rose from the ashes of the USSR,” the Lithuanian ambassador to the UK protested. Asta Skaigirytė Liauškienė found it unbearable that the map of the former USSR included Lithuania. Although it is factually true that Lithuania was a part of the Soviet Union in the past, the ambassador was incensed to see *The Guardian* present former Soviet space as a somewhat homogeneous region today. This was misleading and unfair to the Lithuanian state, she argued: “Lithuania is a vibrant civic society, which is strongly committed to Western values.” That these values also include the magic fabric of velvet is beyond doubt. When in the mid 1990s in downtown Vilnius, the statue of Frank Zappa was erected to replace the torn-down one of Lenin, it was the Czech President Havel who was invited to unveil the new monument that marked the Lithuanian transition from the former communist East to the civic future of the West.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the velvet veil of oblivion was also deployed to facilitate this transition. It enabled Lithuanians to swap the homogeneity of the former Soviet space for a new one of so-called Western values, and to reinvent the community’s identity in terms of belonging to another identity block.

What is the most astonishing about this rather embarrassing public intervention is not the blatant counter-factuality of the diplomat’s retroactive spatialization of Lithuanian identity, but her arbitrary creation of another history in order to assure an absolutely consistent genealogy of a new belonging. It didn’t suffice to draw a radical boundary between the civilizations in real space. The same boundary had to be drawn, however falsely, throughout historical space.

In fact, there is no essential difference between what the Lithuanian diplomat has done to the factual history of her nation and what Caliph Ibrahim is doing to the legacy of the old Caliphate. Both have cut out of the past every trace of historical heterogeneity

14. See Kate Connolly, “They tore down Lenin’s statue—and raised one to Frank Zappa,” *The Guardian*, 29 January 2000, accessed 23 October 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2000/jan/29/lithuania>.

(the latter literally using knives) that could have interrupted the trans-historical continuity and spatial unity of their respective values. A community grounded in values presupposes an absolutely homogeneous time-space, which it can create only through active forgetting.

We have been witnessing something similar these days in Ukraine, where people die and kill along a completely new boundary between two fabricated pasts, both claiming territory: one of a Czarist-Stalinist imperium in the East and another of the so-called Western values in the West. Although constructed from a historical perspective, both spaces are in fact ahistorical, which is why their values can be essentialized, canonized and petrified beyond any form of historical transformation, and why anything that contradicts these values must necessarily fall victim to oblivion. However, the more it is whitewashed from their values the more it returns as the dirt of political propaganda. This is the case of the legacy of the two totalitarianisms, which has in a monstrous way been revived today in Ukraine as a cultural other of the respective identities, as something non-European, non-Western, non-Russian or, by the same token, non-Islamic; an element with no place within their historical genealogies. Both fascism and communism appear in historical retrospect as sort of temporary intruders from abroad (or in the Russian case, from the other world), who invaded Europe and victimized its innocent nations, only to be subsequently repelled by the strength and superiority of their values.

The real danger of the ideology of the two totalitarianisms, however, lies in its implicit premise that their horrors definitely belong to the past, and that the experience of these horrors is retrievable only in a form of cultural memory. This is the case in Ukraine today, where the public frenetically searches for, or morbidly produces, fascists among the combatants in the East, recognizing them (on both belligerent sides) primarily by their cultural appearance, that is, only insofar they surface in historical costumes, with swastika-tattoos or Nazi salutes as though they had just escaped an ethnological museum.

Those who remember the past only culturally are doomed to repeat it politically. In Ukraine today it is the fascism of the actual reality that has been forgotten, not the one of the past—

a fascism that is constitutive of the political conflict itself and of the ideological legitimations and self-representations of both sides, entrenched in their normative identity blocks, each killing and dying for their genuine values. It is a fascism that is inherent to a rather self-pitying resentment (which makes it no less dangerous) of the once-world power and its belated, parochial retro-imperialism. Nonetheless it is fascism, too, that feeds the spiral of militarization of the West and generates the diabolical logic of its self-justification: we are supposed to believe that the violence has broken out despite, not because of Western intervention, that it is escalating because NATO hasn't yet sufficiently protected its East European allies rather than because of its expansion into the area, and that it won't stop soon because there are too few, and not too many guns on the ground.



It is in the repressive homogenization of what is historically heterogeneous and contingent, all in the name of the most “velvet” of values. Furthermore, it is in the violent territorialization of these values, which monstrously evokes and decadently repeats the horrors of colonial imposition of Western values, where we should recognize the symptoms of a fascism of tomorrow, not the traces of the one of yesteryear.¹⁵ It is, finally, this terror of values that should be called fascism today.

Let’s Swap Havel for Lenin and Space for Time

What could prevent the emergence of a new fascism, as well as stop the bloodshed, not only in Ukraine but in the Middle East? Might a proper politics of memory offer a solution—one that would save the truth of historical heterogeneity from repressive oblivion, and remind Ukrainians from the east and the west of the country of their common values and shared history, however controversial and tragic; one that would make the supporters of Caliph Ibrahim aware of the tolerant, multi-confessional and multicultural reality of the old Caliphate? Do we not need a more accurate knowledge of what truly happened a hundred or a thousand years ago? Concretely, should we not remind western Ukrainians or Lithuanians who topple down Lenin statues, as well as those in the East who protect them that they both are wrong? The former, because it was precisely Lenin and the Bolsheviks who actively fostered, in a violent opposition to Czarist imperialism and Russian nationalism, the national liberation of Ukrainians, and their territorial, cultural and linguistic self-determination; and the latter, because they symbolically protect precisely what they destroy in reality. Could an accurate historical knowledge of who Lenin truly was and what the Bolsheviks really did end this tragedy of errors—especially regarding the legacy of their opposition to the very logic of capitalist militarization and imperialist wars?

15. See Jon Solomon, “After Iraq: Trends Underlying the Initiation of Generalized, Global War,” *Journal of Futures Studies* 8, no. 1 (August 2003): 115–122, accessed 20 September 2014, http://www.academia.edu/1225139/After_Iraq_Trends_Underlying_the_Initiation_of_Generalized_Global_War.

Cultural memory, which has long ago taken the position of historiography in our dealing with the past, is itself part of the problem, not a solution. It has emerged out of the destruction of what was once historical experience—a destruction arranged and executed by the powers of the new Thermidor. However accurate and emancipation-minded, it will never liberate the past from its identitarian confinement in which the genuine heterogeneity and contingency of historical praxis are necessarily lost to oblivion. This is precisely what happened to the legacy of Lenin. Preserved only in the form of cultural memory and reduced to a piece of cultural heritage, Lenin finally became Russian, even worse, a Russian nationalist: a commemorative embodiment of Czarist imperialism, which in the reality of historical praxis he mercilessly fought.

There is no way to retrieve the truth of the past without frontally challenging the forces of its identitarian confinement in the reality of their political institutions and ideological apparatuses. The past is not a battlefield for a better future. Rather it is the actual historical praxis in which one has to take responsibility, not simply for what we do now but also for what all those whose footsteps we walk in have done. The ground of this responsibility is historical experience, not cultural memory; its dimension is prospective creation, not a retrospective preservation; its medium is a resurrected revolutionary praxis, not a *Realpolitik*.

A new, radical politics of peace, which is urgently needed today, doesn't necessarily imply taking responsibility for a more democratic state that would properly commemorate the past and so eliminate the *casus belli* fabricated out of imagined histories. It is already too late for that. The current wars do not destroy an existing order; they are waged out of its decay. This is why a responsibility to peace today can no longer rely on its principles and institutions, both national and international. Rather, it emerges from an open confrontation with the forms of their degeneration and abuse—concretely, with the wreck of what was once a sovereign nation state, and its corrupt, either compradorial or imperialistic, elites and its repressive and often criminal role in the neoliberal destruction of the very order for which it had for so long been both an agent and a beneficiary.

Those who want peace today must radically oppose the current division of the world into normative identity blocks, and never allow themselves to be squeezed into one of the new global containers of values that threaten to plunge us in an endless war.

What cultural memory cannot remember but what a true historical experience already knows is that this destructive development does not rely on historical necessity. One can remember the creative power of negation only by activating it in one's own historical praxis. This is what responsibility today is about. It must be taken in the midst of historical contingency as an act of radical negation beyond any sort of moralistic innocence. Moreover, it must be able to resist the Thermidorian black mail imposed on a whole epoch with its (seemingly opposed) shock concepts of "terror" and "velvet". Yet to restore the historical experience and reactivate the emancipatory potential stored within, one also must dare to say that "yes, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were right to take arms against capitalist exploitation; yes, they were right to liberate the nations (including Lithuanians and Ukrainians) oppressed by Czarist imperialism; yes, they were right to foster the emancipation of women, right to decriminalize abortions and homosexuality; yes, they were also right to look at traditional bourgeois art and culture with disgust; and finally they were right, too, to pull Russia out of an imperialist war," and in the same breath: "No, the execution of the Romanovs in Ekaterinburg in 1918 was not a terror." Rather it was a revolutionary terror, just as the decapitation of Louis XVI of France and Marie Antoinette was a century earlier. "Revolutionary terror is not terrorism," writes Sophie Wahnich.¹⁶ Indeed, there is not and there will never be an equivalence between the sending to guillotine of the Louis XVI by the National Convention in 1793, and the recent beheading of the American journalist by Caliph Ibrahim's butchers. No, a decapitation is not always decapitation; a crime is not always crime; terror is not always terror, although sometimes it is "velvet", like the red velvet of 1917.

Only after saying this openly will we be able to behold those historical heterogeneities and continuities that the current terror

16. Ibid., 102.

of values has blinded us to. We will see the East that once was, and that can still be again, more western than the West itself; we will see Lenin marching in the steps of the fifth Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid when the East also was ahead of the West; and, following both, those anti-colonial fighters who became more western than the West precisely by waging war on it. We will see, too, the monuments to Lou Reed and Frank Zappa erected not in the place of, but beside that of Lenin. We will see a deep historical affinity between the October Revolution and the sexual one in the 1960s,¹⁷ as well as the radical anti-militarism of both. In short, we will see a legacy to claim where the Thermidorians have dumped the trash of history that they expect us to be ashamed of. Only then we will also be able to actively and responsibly oppose the ongoing war, which is not ours—in a reactivated memory of what Lenin did in March 1918 in Brest-Litovsk. As it is well known, he traded, as he explicitly said, “space for time.” We must do the same today—forget the space and choose the time—for only then it will come over to our side.

17. See Bini Adamczak, “Gender and The New Man: Emancipation and the Russian Revolution?”, *Platypus Review* 62 (December–January 2013), accessed 20 September 2014, <http://platypus1917.org/2013/12/01/gender-and-the-new-man>.

In Memory of Utopia or In the Utopia of Memory: On the Films of Deimantas Narkevičius

The worst thing that can happen to a piece of art—even worse than being ignored—are superficial reflections that usually accompany its public appearance, explaining to the audience, briefly and simply, what the piece is about. Never intellectually strong enough to survive independently, these comments stick to the artwork like parasites to their hosts and so live, grow and even multiply. While it's true that they rarely kill their host, they nonetheless harm it. By and by they become inseparable from the artwork forming a sort of symbiotic unity with it. One can call these empty phrases—in reality stereotypes whose only purpose is to attract (or divert) attention—simply the “ideology” of a work of art. However, ideology means much more than a false consciousness of reality. Rather, ideology is a constituent part of this very reality, and it is that which makes it appear as reality to us. This is why the critique of ideology is such a challenging task. It is not enough to disclose it as an illusion and thereby hope to get rid of it. This is very relevant for the clichés that surround the films of Deimantas Narkevičius, telling us what his work is actually about: about the post Soviet condition, about the crisis of (cultural) identity, about the collapse of ideology, about questions of heritage, memory, utopia, the authenticity of commemoration, the relationship between personal and collective memory, between individuals and history, etc.

As a matter of fact, his films are really about all these things but in an entirely ideological sense. As with all ideological statements, there is a significant amount of truth in these clichés, yet they are themselves necessarily blind to this truth. This is why we cannot ignore them yet neither can we let them alone to speak of the artwork they supposedly represent. In other words, a reflexive approach to a piece of art work is still in need of some sort of critique of ideology. Let us tackle in that way one of the “truths” that accompany Narkevičius’ films, the “truth” of their post-utopian character.

In a talk with Hans Ulrich Olbrist, Narkevičius gives us a very interesting definition of Utopia. If we want to understand it, he argues, we should focus on the limits of creativity, a particular moment when creativity reaches a point where it is not fulfilling. At this same point, according to Narkevičius, we can also experience Utopia. For Utopia is about “understanding what being creative is” and—this is now crucial—about understanding “the failure of that” too. In short, the truth of Utopia lies in the limits of creativity: “Being creative with a definite target is Utopia.”

Like all authentic thoughts this one is also both clear and obscure. It is clear in what it says and obscure in what it implicates. However, there is good reason to throw some light on its obscurity, for it seems to disguise more than the mysteries of creativity or utopianism.

Let us ask therefore, what does it mean actually “to reach the limit of creativity”? Does it mean to come up to the point at which it has exhausted its ability to produce new things? This would then be its immanent limit. But we can think of the same limit as being imposed on the creativity from the outside, not only in the name of the old that opposes the new, but also in the name of something new claiming to be newer than the previous—now old—new thing. Curiously, in this last case the limit of creativity is also in a way an immanent one, a result of different creativities competing over the representation of the ultimate newness. What thus defines the limit of creativity is... another creativity. It prevails by establishing an arbitrary difference between old and new.

This tells us a very simple although often neglected truth about creativity: its agonistic quality. Creativity is not about creating the new *ex nihilo*, adding it to the existing reality and so enriching the world. It is about negation too. Precisely in creating the new it produces at the same time the old, rendering it obsolete, removing and destructing it. Creativity antagonizes. This is why we can say that true creativity can never be innocent. The old it attacks is not without value or significance. It is not bad in itself; it is bad “only” for the creativity claiming to articulate the new.

However, one can immediately reproach this explanation of creativity for relying on a dialectics of new and old typical of the general logic of modernity, and especially of its understanding of art, which is today itself obsolete and dispensable. Yes, indeed, it really evokes the experience of modernity, but this is precisely the reason, why we are tackling it here. For the artistic work of Deimantas Narkevičius is in fact an encounter with the trouble we call modernity. It is the modernity’s temporality that he deals with in his films. The stories he tells us in these films are made of a temporality, both thematically and structurally. Modernity is often the explicit content of the memory these films articulate, moreover, it is the name of the past they attempt to commemorate. Modernity is what Narkevičius wants us to feel, to smell, to touch in his films, their very visuality. This is why in the presentation of his works of art he insists on using outdated film formats and antiquated technical equipments, cameras, projectors etc., typical of the modernist film and media industry. We know, of course, that their purpose is not to produce cheap nostalgic effects; they are not visual reminders of the past deployed to make memory more colorful and authentic. Rather they are reminders of the past modernist visuality, which essentially structures the way we memorize, that is, the general form in which we establish our relation to the past regardless of how we define it, communism or childhood. Narkevičius simply reminds us that our memories cannot be separated from their particular cultural form, and that this cultural form itself cannot be rearticulated independently of its historicity, which necessarily includes the historicity of the means of its production. Not only things and persons we remember have grown old. Memory’s gaze has also undergone change over time.

This explains what actually Narkevičius wants us to be aware of: not the past as it really was, but rather the past as it is getting older together with the very visuality that desperately tries to keep it in memory. For the visuality itself is transient as well. In fact, there is no such thing as visuality for it always appears in a culturally, historically and technically specific form. The intrinsic contingency of visuality is what puts a limit to memory too. Does this limit coincide with the limit of creativity, and both with the truth of Utopia? They do indeed.

Seen from this perspective one understands how naïve—or rather ideologically—it is to say that Narkevičius films are about the memory of the communist past. They are not about the memory of a past Utopia but about the Utopia of memory instead.

In the first sequence of his film *The Head* (2007), a film of found footage that tells the story of the construction of a monument from a past socialist time (the head of Karl Marx created by Soviet sculptor Lew Kerbel and erected in Chemnitz, former Karl-Marx-Stadt, in the German Democratic Republic in 1971), we see the faces of kids answering a question we haven't actually heard but can still reconstruct out of their answers, a question about the role model to whom they turn for guidance. They mention names of the Soviet heroes, like famous cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, family members like their mother or brother, or professions like pilot, chauffeur or explorer, etc.

The footage emanates a special warmth that only strengthens the certain nostalgic impact of the whole film. Where does this warmth come from? The answer seems obvious: from our identification with these children, with the sincerity of their wishes and innocent purity of their dreams. In fact, we see in these children our own childhood full of hope and promise. This seems to explain the nostalgia we clearly feel in the film: the memory of lost childhood.

But what is actually its role in the film? Why does Narkevičius begin his story about the fate of a Communist monument with this old footage of childhood dreams? Does he want us to approach the historical past from its more personal, intimate

side and so render our historical experience more subjective, colorful, human, etc? For there was not only Communism that happened in the past; there was our childhood too.

Things, however, seem to be more complicated. First of all, we don't simply identify with the children in the footage but instead, and above all, we identify with the view of these children, which is constructed via the footage. We may even say that the whole footage is the construction of such a view. It consists of nothing but children's heads talking into the camera in such a way that we see them from the perspective of the subject to whom they talk, to whom they utter their wishes. This is what we identify with: the gaze of a subject supposed to fulfill their wishes. It is therefore completely wrong to say that we identify with an ideal world of childhood dreams. Rather we identify with the subject supposed to be powerful enough to make these dreams come true. This is where the true place of Utopia is: not in a dreamworld of our childhood but in a vision of an almighty subject able to safeguard the future of these children.

Who could have played the role of this subject? There is only one rationally and historically possible answer: the (socialist) welfare state. This is the gaze we have identified with, the gaze of a collectivity that assumes complete responsibility for its members, takes care of them and fulfills their dearest wishes. This is also the source of the warmth that we feel through this identification. It is not a warmth that emanates from the kitschy view of cute kids innocently telling their infantile wishes. Rather it is the warmth of collective security and protection, in short the social warmth that we desperately lack today in our neoliberal reality and that we are certainly nostalgic about. For both personal childhood and the modernist welfare state are lost forever.

What makes Narkevičius' films unique is that he has succeeded in putting both perspectives together. Individual histories in their singularity and history seen as an objective process that seemingly takes place independently of individuals that in his films appear intrinsically tied to each other. This is crucial for the experience of Utopia too.

Today's dominant perspective on Utopia casts it as something completely alien to personal experience; an objective, totalitarian system imposed by force on individuals who dream only about waking up from the nightmare and facing reality as it actually is. It appears as something both unnatural and inhumane, an ideological distortion of otherwise authentically non-utopian or even anti-utopian human existence. This currently hegemonic, or as we could also say, "post-utopian" perspective on Utopia is in fact the perspective of its victims. As such it necessarily implies its counterpart, the idea of Utopia as the ultimate executioner. As though Utopia itself, and not Stalin or Lenin, Marxism or Communism, the Bolsheviks or the Khmers Rouge, committed all the crimes of Communist regimes.

Yet this perspective is completely absent in Narkevičius' films. The way they deal with the past is light years away from any sort of "victim-perpetrator" logic. This is why in his films Utopia is allowed to reappear as an authentic part of human—both historical and personal—experience. This is why we are so impressed by its reappearance. In what one can compare only to a sort of critique of ideology, and something typical in Narkevičius' artistic procedure, his films give us back what today's (not past!) ideologies and hegemonies have taken away from us: the utopian experience, i.e., the right to share it not only with other members of our societies but also with those who lived in the past. For it is only in the Utopia of memory that we are able to recreate the experience of those who are no longer alive. This is precisely the topic of *His-story* (1989), the story of his parents reconstructed out of memories. In this film-installation Narkevičius uses old technical equipments, film and projectors that seem as if they've been taken from an archive of the seventies. The films were even processed in a lab using the original techniques. Why? Again, the reason is not to produce an effect of authenticity but rather to disclose the limits of memory, the fact that there is no memory beyond its historically and culturally specific frame. Memories are not only there to preserve history; they themselves can become history. This is the ultimate limit of what memory can (re)create, the limit of its creativity, the moment at which it reaches a point where it is not fulfilling and, that is to say, the moment at which it exposes its utopian character.

His-story clearly evokes the notion of history but not in terms of an individual perspective that complements an objective historical experience. It rather lays bare its intrinsic incompleteness. This is the moment in which Narkevičius goes against the grain of his time. He refuses to participate in the post-totalitarian resurrection of the free and self-conscious individual, now the subject of liberal democracy, of its rights and freedoms (“the Western values”), of the free market economy, etc. He refuses to identify with the allegedly post-utopian character of our time. In the aforementioned interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist he gives us, from the perspective of his personal experience, a quite different picture of what we today call Communist Utopia. In the period Narkevičius grew up “nobody really believed in it.” It was rather a time when people had other Utopias, like liberal ones “about the freedom to do what you do.” However, these kinds of Utopia also proved to be an illusion. So from the perspective of his personal historical experience we may say that even post-communism itself is structured in a utopian way.

In short there are enough reasons not to consider Deimantas Narkevičius’ art as an artistic supplement to the grand narrative of the fall of Communism. His films simply don’t fit into this ideological frame. They don’t support its crucial idea about a radical difference between the (communist) past and the (democratic) present. They ignore or rather deconstruct this difference, insisting on alarming continuities and similarities. Moreover they directly oppose some of the most vulgar clichés of today’s dominant post-communist discourse, like the one about the end of Utopia, or another that defines the whole space of post-communism in terms of a major historical deficit—often presented in pictures of cultural backwardness, economic downfall, urban devastation, social misery, alcoholism, corruption, prostitution, all culminating in ethnic conflicts, nationalistic hatred and civil wars. Theory has summed up this condition in terms of a “belated modernity”, a lack of the essential elements of the modernist experience like human rights, constitutionalism, free and independent media, tolerance, independent civil society, the autonomy of the cultural sphere, etc.

Where there is a regressive backwardness there must clearly be a genuine need for progressive development. This too is how the post-communist East is defined, namely, as a space in need of catching up with the advanced modernity of the West.

Deimantas Narkevičius' artistic work escapes completely this interpretational frame. The last thing we can accuse it of is lacking modernist experience, or dealing in its social and historical context with the lack of such an experience. Quite the contrary, brimming with confidence in his authentic modernist experience, what Narkevičius actually does, we insist, is to dismantle the very cornerstone of post-communist discourse. This is none other than the temporal-historical difference between radically separated past and present, and its spacial-cultural translation. It is the difference between the properly modern West and an insufficiently modern post-communist East. The form of this dis-mantling, again, resembles a genuine critique of ideology.

Let us take once more the example of the footage of the children from Narkevičius' *The Head*. As previously stated, in identifying with the gaze at kids dreaming about future we actually identify with an omnipotent subject able to bring about this future. But the same gaze necessarily produces another effect, a vision of all individuals being essentially children unable to care for themselves and therefore in constant need of assistance and guidance, i.e., in need of a powerful state to protect them, political parties and politicians to make decisions for them, elites to teach and feed them, ideology to make them willingly accept the reality as it is, and last but not least, culturally produced and mediated role models to be followed and copied, like the canons of "great men" of literature, science and politics, idols of popular culture, monuments on every corner, etc. This same gaze thus infantilizes people, deprives them of their maturity, of the capability of self-determination.

This is, of course, what totalitarianism was about. But this is also how the ideology of the so-called (post-communist) transition treats the masses that have liberated themselves from the totalitarian rule—as children to be taught how to live a proper modern life. The jargon of transitology tells it best:

“democracy in nappies”, “the first steps of freedom”, “the school of democratic parliamentarianism”, etc.

That which a naïve understanding of Narkevičius’ artwork recognizes as a memory of a totalitarian past, can be also seen as an articulation of the ideologically foreclosed continuity with this past, concretely, the continuity of dominance. This is the moment of a genuine ideology critique. “Genuine” means here the critique of a living—not of an already dead—ideology. Narkevičius’ treatment of the totalitarian past is more than a critique of this past. It is a critique of current totalitarianism, however soft—or simply remote—its manifestations are.

One cannot, of course, vulgarize Deimantas Narkevičius’ artistic opus as a politically motivated critique of ideology. But if his art is really, as stated above, an encounter with the trouble called modernity, than the question of ideology is unavoidable. At the very heart of his artistic interest, and in the very core of his stories, is a classical relationship between the individual and history—the most traumatic of all the relations of modernity. It is the historically particular framework in which he artistically articulates what is “eternally human” and what gives his works of art their specific warmth. Ideology is, so to say, a cold side of this relation, the one that forces us to think of his art and not only to feel it. In modernism thus ideology informs the very character of the relationship between individuals and history; specifically, it makes subjects of history out of individuals. This is best expressed in the famous formula of Luis Althusser, which says that “ideology interpellates individuals as Subjects”.

No one has visualized this formula better than Sergei Eisenstein in his only completed film about the contemporary subject of modern, progressive collectivity. It is known as *The Old and The New* (USSR, 1929) and it depicts the mechanization and collectivization of an old Russian rural village. The original title was *The General Line* implicating both the general line of the history—progressive development, industrialization, collectivization, etc.—and at the same time, the general line of

the Party politics at that time, in short, its strategy that had to be followed and not deviate from. With the film Eisenstein finally made the move from the subject-as-collective to the subject-as-individual. The role of collective was now concentrated in a single individual, a rural heroin, who appears as an embodiment of the General line, i.e., that of modern history. This is the moment of full ideological closure, precisely in terms of Althusser's formula.

Narkevičius seems to have reversed this logic of ideological interpellation. One gets the impression his films interpellate retroactively the subject of modernity as individuals. This is what we are witnessing in *Energy Lithuania* (2000), the story of a town created in the 60s to serve an electric power plant; a film that explicitly evokes the memory of the Modernist era. The story is told by a former worker who recalls, proudly and nostalgically, the life and work of the labourers who once, full of belief in the future, built the plant and the city. He talks to the camera, but it doesn't seem that he talks to us. There is another subject of the gaze the footage has constructed—the modernist past itself to whom the former worker of *Energy Lithuania* appeals in his memories. Like Althusser's policeman who hails a passer-by saying "Hey you!" and the latter, by answering, accepts his ascribed status, the former worker of *Energy Lithuania* hails the modernity of which he once was the subject: "Hey You!". Narkevičius' film is an answer to this call; a moment in which modernity re-emerges as a subject in the "small narrative" of an individual memory. Once it was the ideology of modernity that made individuals see themselves as authors of their own destiny. Now these are individuals who, in their memory, reconstitute modernity as the subject of a necessarily alienated historical destiny. In other words, we can recall it only in the experience of its ultimate failure. This is the point at which individual experience coincides with the historical one, the point at which both necessarily fail to reach the limit of their creativity, in short, the experience of Utopia.

One of the questions Hans Ulrich Obrist asked in his interview with Narkevičius was about the possibility that our revisiting of Utopia today could result in "defining a social contract not in a totalitarian way but very much on a more human scale."

Narkevičius is sceptical about it: “What kind of utopias can be created on a human scale? That is the question and I don’t have an answer.”

Well, his art is this answer, for it thinks that which current hegemonies have made unthinkable. Wasn’t it Deleuze who once compared filmmakers to thinkers and philosophers? This applies perfectly to Deimantas Narkevičius.

Conditions of Possibility: Translating Wróblewski

What are we up to? Is it a rescue attempt, to save a personified artistic value from oblivion? Are we rewriting a history of art? If yes, whose history is it? Or is our task of a broader scope, cultural, historical, political...? In short, why remember Wróblewski?

Regardless of how we answer these questions, the object of our inquiry, the artist Andrzej Wróblewski and his artworks, appear for us in time and space: in our past and in a particular location. But already, at the very beginning, we face the first problem. Both time and space—those a priori notions that for Immanuel Kant make possible and structure our experience—are today culturally determined. Moreover, it is precisely in their cultural meaning that the very difference between time and space tends to disappear.

Take for instance the phenomenon of cultural heritage with which our time is so obsessed. The title of a classical work on the topic, David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country*,¹ is in fact the famous first line of L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* from 1953: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." Thus, the past is not simply a dimension of time. Rather it is a space, or more precisely, a foreign space. In other words, we perceive it in terms of cultural difference. Not only is it culturally foreign to us, similarly we all become foreigners when we enter this cultural time-space called the past. I repeat: we all. Certainly, there are some

1. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1985.

of us who have visited this foreign country more often and who can be even considered its true connoisseurs, having already learned much of its mother tongue, mapped its sights accurately and reported widely of its treasures, curiosities and secrets. And even more of us, armed with a Lonely Planet guide to the past written by those same connoisseurs, travel there to collect our own, vivid impressions. But not a single one of us has ever become a native of that remote cultural landscape. When it comes to the past, we all remain ultimate foreigners in that country, whose citizenship one doesn't acquire by birth but rather by death.

Concretely: Even the most competent specialist in Polish post-war art history, having studied the artistic work of Andrzej Wróblewski profoundly in its authentic historical context will never be able to reach beyond the foreignness of the past, which always addresses us in its own language. Put in a different way, a translation is necessary for all of us, both for the legally resident aliens and the temporary visitors of that foreign country.

I have chosen two foreign words to start with: history and existence. Both belong to the language of the past, which keeps their meaning hidden and prevents us from giving sense to these words in the living languages we speak.

The word history is a good example. According to the French historian Pierre Nora, what had been called "history" in the past, has meanwhile been replaced by "memory", the meaning of which has broadened so far that it can be used today simply as a substitute for "history".² At stake is a long process of transformation in which the historical consciousness that had once been an intrinsic part of the modernist experience has slowly vanished from the horizon of the present. This, however, hasn't diminished the interest for the past. Quite the contrary. Our present is virtually obsessed with it. Yet it is no longer history, but rather memory that has now taken charge of the past.

2. Pierre Nora, "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory", *Tr@nsit online* 2002, no. 22, http://archiv.iwm.at/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=285&Itemid=463 [online: 22 III 2013].

Nora even calls our time the age of commemoration, which is characterised, as he writes, by a passionate, almost fetishistic memorialism. People feel an obligation to stockpile in every possible manner all sorts of memorabilia and preserve them in archives, museums, collections, data-banks or similar institutions, the importance of which has been constantly growing. This has also brought about a change in the issue of competence. Professional historians and the study of history more generally are no longer exclusively responsible for the production of and control over the knowledge of the past. Almost everyone now feels called to create and recreate the past—by means of memory, of course.

To put it succinctly: what in the language of the past was called history translates today as memory, which, however, has far-reaching consequences not only for our general relation to the past, but to every particular domain of it, including the history of art.

When it comes to remembering Wróblewski, the following question arises: if now it is memory, and no longer history, that arranges our experience of the past, how then can we remember the history itself? It seems to always get lost in our translations of the language of the past.

What is meant here by history is constitutive of the artworks of Andrzej Wróblewski, not a mere context in which he created these artworks. Art historians are sufficiently sensitive to this difference. History is not only an omnipresent topic of their narratives on Wróblewski's art, but structures these narratives internally and constitutes their unity. The perception of Wróblewski's artistic development, of the transformations and transitions he went through in his artistic creation, is determined by the sequences of a linear historical time and the relentless rhythm of concrete historical events: the Second World War, post-war Poland, the Stalinist period, the so-called "Thaw" after 1956, the Cold War reality, etc. But understanding Wróblewski's own relation to history is also crucial to any attempt to understand his art. One art historian quotes from the artist's article on Mexican graphic art: "In the eras that make history,

life is grand enough to be beautiful as it is.”³ Is there a more clear and precise way to express the inextricable connection between historical and aesthetic experience? Moreover, the very essence of realism arises out of history’s close links with the aesthetic: a life is “beautiful as it is”, however, only through history making.

Curiously, by differentiating within linear historical time an “era that makes history”, Wróblewski automatically implied another era that is obviously unable to make history and is emptied of historical experience. If in the former, life is grand and beautiful in its simple presence, does it mean that in a historically fruitless era, life becomes trivial and ugly? Or is it a time that simply doesn’t connect life, beauty and history, a time that even cannot think of itself as being more or less authentic in whatever existential, aesthetical or historical sense? Did the artist actually mean our time, and anticipate our confused gaze at his art and his “era of history”, or more precisely, at the interconnectedness of both, which seemed so obvious to him?

Although itself a translation of what once was history, today’s cultural memory seems to be unable to remember the history itself. What it remembers instead are the cultural effects of the past, its art for instance, which it preserves in the form of cultural heritage. But why this huge effort to remember and preserve? Not so much because of the cultural values themselves. In its obsessive dealing with the past, cultural memory fulfils other tasks. One of them is, as Nora states, to foster the sense of belonging and collective consciousness, in short to create and assure identities.⁴

This is why every attempt to remember Wróblewski and his art cannot ignore the question of whose identity is supposed to carry out this task. But the time when the answer to such a question would have been easy is gone. Today it doesn’t suffice

3. Andrzej Kostołowski, “From Studies on the Oeuvre of Andrzej Wróblewski. The Period before 1949”, in: Magdalena Ziółkowska (ed.), *Andrzej Wróblewski. To the Margin and Back*, Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2010, 58.

4. Nora, *ibid.*

to point at a national culture or a national history of art as the self-evident subjects-objects of cultural memory. Not only is this text written in English, a language that has nothing to do with Wróblewski and his art; the very idea of remembering him today addresses a culture and a history of art that largely transcend the scope and the meaning of a “Polish identity”. To remember Wróblewski today means to abandon enclosed identitarian spaces and move across fixed cultural and disciplinary boundaries. But more than anything else, it means to challenge the curse of cultural particularity as well as the power relations that operate in the contested field of cultural universalisation.

Having understood this, we might try to accurately relocate the cultural position of Wróblewski’s art. We already know that it has left its “home”, a location that is almost automatically imagined as its cultural “birthplace”: a particular narratively unified history, an established, right down to the last detail canonized culture and history of art, but also a clearly mapped geographical area with a particular population speaking a single standardised language, a society with its institutions, including the most important one, the nation state—all that subsumed under the notion of “Poland”. But we also know that Wróblewski and his art haven’t yet arrived at the destination: a phantasmatic sphere of cultural universality, the cannon of all particular canons comprised not so much of real cultural values, but rather of the abstract norms of what a cultural value truly is, a space without a proper location that is itself timeless because it is the measure of time according to which all the particular times, all the particular histories, are determined and located. It would, however, be wrong to believe that such a symbolic sphere has no real determinations. It is well-anchored in today’s real world, in the forms of political and economic life we euphemistically call “inter- or transnational” or in the renowned cultural and art institutions situated in very real locations, from “Oxbridge” to *L’Académie française* or from the Venice Biennale and MOMA to Documenta in Kassel or Art Basel. And yet, however particular in their concrete cultural location, all these institutions have something in common, a curious ability to detach themselves from every particularity and emanate together a sublime realm of universal cultural values. One wouldn’t be wrong in calling this realm “Western”, but this quality, however particular it

sounds, doesn't make it less universal. So, where now is Wróblewski? The answer cannot be but: in the limbo between his particular cultural origin and his universal translation. Does this answer finally clarify our task?—To help Wróblewski and his art to bridge the gap and arrive at their destination; to enter as an internationally recognised artist into the canon of modern art history and make a line (or a chapter) in its narrative; to enrich the general idea of what modern art is; to disseminate a locally generated cultural value globally...? None of the above should be our task. Translation is not about facilitating communication and movements of all sorts; not about bridging differences or transporting contents over linguistic and cultural gaps. Rather, it is about activating the obscured, neglected and disavowed sameness; about dissolving allegedly homogenous spaces of this or that language or culture; about dismantling the presumed unity and transparency of the original. Finally, translation is, to follow Walter Benjamin, a form of transformation of the original, a renewal of something living. It is, as he writes, the afterlife of an artwork.⁵

Isn't this precisely what we are up to?—To give a life—an *afterlife*—to the artwork of Andrzej Wróblewski. So there is no way around translation and the iron logic of its necessary losses. One of the heaviest of them is the already mentioned loss of history.

Translating an artist and his artworks from their embeddedness in the Polish past and culture into a transnational cultural and artistic contemporaneity implies today an unavoidable misrecognition. What we see departing is not what the destination sees arriving. We can say that we have properly prepared Wróblewski and his art for their journey, selected his most representative paintings, packed them together with a pile of authentic documents, his own writings as well as the reflections of art historians on the value and meaning of his art. The package is clearly "Polish", yet everything inside—the paintings from this or that phase of his work, the notions of art, modernism,

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in: *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol. 1 1913–1926, M. Bullock, M.W. Jennings (eds.), Harvard University Press: Harvard 2002, p. 253–263.

history, socialism, socialist realism ... even the notion of Polish culture—claims universal meaning expected to be recognised as such at the destination it has been sent to, a destination that has its own very particular but at the same time ambiguously universal address: the West. However, on their arrival the package and its content are recognised as coming from a different sender address, namely, from the East. In other words, they will be recognised neither in their cultural, “Polish”, particularity, nor in their claimed universality, but misrecognised as belonging to the addressee’s ideological concept of the Other. Thanks to this misrecognition, they will be not only rejected in their claims to universality, but also robbed of their own history.

In cultural terms the “East” today means primarily the post-communist East and is defined in its relation to the West as belated, that is, as in need of catching up with the missed—modernist!—development; concretely with the West as the location at which no development has ever been missed and where everything has always arrived on time. Since the East is a space in which all forms of life are delayed, economic and cultural production as well as politics (including of course modern art), its real history is of no value whatsoever. It is not even worth remembering since it is nothing but the history of delays, aberrations and wrongdoings, a time hardly worth living. It is therefore no wonder that the East, on its way to catch up with the West, what is the essence of the so-called post-communist transition, is supposed to get rid of its worthless past. This is the reason why today any return to the Eastern past ends either in a moralist discourse on totalitarian terror in which all the social relations that once shaped and were shaped by the history of the Communist East are reduced to a single completely ahistorical and apolitical relation between the evil perpetrators and their innocent victims; or on the other side, in a nostalgic kitsch that trivialises and depoliticises this same history. In both cases, there is no way to recall the history Wróblewski had in mind when he was relating it to his own artistic creation and to the very idea of aesthetic beauty, the history he was confronting and struggling with as an artist and a social being, the history that structured both his life and his art. This is the history that gets lost in any attempt to culturally translate the Eastern past into the Western contemporaneity, or, as in our case, to translate

the value and meaning of Wróblewski's artworks into the "universal" language of contemporary art. As though this history were a mere obstacle to his own artistic development, without which this development and the art it resulted in would have been "normal", "always-already-Western", that is, directly readable and comprehensible without any need for translation.

However, Wróblewski's confrontation with history cannot be understood without considering the existential motifs in his work. History for him is not out there in the so-called events that take place independently of personal lives. So a historical crisis for the artist is always already an existential crisis, a confrontation with the finitude of Being, with death. As has been pointed out by art historians, Wróblewski's *Confessions of a Discredited 'Former Communist'*, his personal response to the crises of the Communist movement, had its visual pendant, the gouache *Funeral* from 1956 that is also known as *Funeral of a Communist*.⁶ The artist depicted a male corpse—believed to be his self-portrait—in a transparent coffin with his hands crossed over his chest clutching a star and a sickle. Again, the art historian suggests that this art work depicts the artist's statement about a very concrete historical situation in 1950s Poland, the so-called "Thaw", the break with Stalinist "deviations" and in consequence the relaxing of the totalitarian grip on all forms of social and cultural life, which he didn't experience as a liberation but rather as the terminal stadium of the idea of radical social change and of the decisive role of art in it. However, his disappointment with history is not personal, one that in disgust looks away from the ugly and corrupt historical reality. He doesn't turn his back on history, but rather dies with it, concretely with the very idea of making history, both as a social being and as an artist. Strictly speaking the modus of this experience is existential. History for him is not a dimension of time, but a dimension of ontological depth. Here, one cannot but recall Martin Heidegger's concept of "Being-toward-death" (*Sein zum Tode*): a genuine experience of death, or better of dread (*Angst*) that we feel coming face to face with the finitude of our existence, the experience that opens our

6. Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowska, "Body and Melancholy. The Late Works of Andrzej Wróblewski", in *Andrzej Wróblewski. To the Margin and Back*, op. cit., 107.

Self to truth and to the authenticity of human life (*Dasein*) and makes possible the access to the very meaning of Being. But at the same time it is also the experience of the temporality and a true historicity of human life.

To stress it again: Wróblewski experiences history existentially. This is why he also believed in its social and artistic potentiality. And he did believe in it, uncompromisingly. This is why for him a historical failure is always already an existential failure, the loss of authenticity as the loss of the very meaning of Being, a form of death, or to use the words of the art historian describing the artist's situation during the Thaw: "becoming one of the living dead".⁷

Actually the motif of death is omnipresent in Wróblewski's ideas and artworks. Take for instance the series of his works from the late 1940s, *Executions*, or his idea for an exhibition in 1956 for which he takes a motto from Louis Aragon's poem: "I Hear the Voices of the Dead". Thus, history and existence are constitutive elements of Wróblewski's artistic work. The question is, how does it translate into the ideologically universalised—that is, Western—contemporaneity?

A naïve translator would probably ask—Did Wróblewski read Heidegger?—and start busily searching through the documents, recorded memories and data that has already been collected and critically analysed in "Existentialist Philosophy Beyond the Iron Curtain: The Case of Poland," or "Reading Heidegger in the Communist East". This is how cultural memory is produced. It always starts with collecting data and narratives so as to reconstruct faithfully the so-called original context. But this is not how a good translation works. It is not interested in an authentic memory of what once were history and existence, so as to properly reconstruct their meaning in another context. It is, to repeat again, about giving life to an artwork that has been left behind in the cultural otherness of the past. This is why the question whether Wróblewski read about the authenticity of history and existence is simply the wrong question. It doesn't matter whether he actually read Heidegger or not. He lived this

7. Ibid.

very authenticity of his time, both historically and existentially. This is why he was unable to make compromises. If your art is made through your Being-toward-death and if it has become a question of life and death to you, how can you compromise about it? And how can we translate this stance into our contemporaneity, which is so stubbornly disinterested in history, existence and especially in the question of authenticity? Would it really be enough to collect the data properly, to furnish the verified documents and suitable references, to provide these with the appropriate scholarly discursive support and deliver that bundle to the addressee's doorstep; and wait patiently, bearing in mind that patience is the strongest weapon of the weak?

Two hundred years ago the German romantic Friedrich Schleiermacher, a classical theorist of translation, urged us not to misunderstand translation as an attempt to move the author of the original artwork toward the audience of another language and culture. It is the other way round, he argued. The task of translator is to move the audience, those addressees of the artwork toward the author.

To conclude: We are not postmen delivering packages around. So let us leave Wróblewski and his art where they are and what they are and pull the addressee toward them. There is no reason to further insist on adjusting the artist's legacy to our contemporaneity, on updating its cultural and artistic delays, on appeasing its moral and artistic intransigence so as to fit today's post-ideological and post-political frivolity. The task is rather to challenge with Wróblewski this contemporaneity itself. It is its own fore-closed belatedness that desperately needs to be updated; its pompous universality that waits to be localised, particularised and relativised; its metropolitan arrogance that is long due to be provincialised; its self-delusional superiority over the East and its wilful ignorance of the past, both of which contemporaneity has to get rid of if it wants to survive and reach its afterlife. In short, it is contemporaneity itself, not Wróblewski and his art, that is in need of translation, precisely in the sense Benjamin talked about: a renewal of something living.

Is it too difficult a task to undertake? Not for those willing to re-enact the honesty of which Wróblewski's life and art were made.

It is Too Late for Memory: Yael Bartana's *Two Minutes of Standstill*

I.

Can art commemorate differently? However plausible it sounds, this is a wrong question. It takes for granted that memory culture is art's natural concern—a premise that automatically dehistoricizes the conditions of artistic practice. In fact, the very concept of memory culture is a post-historical phenomenon. Memory today is believed to have replaced what once had been called history. At stake is more than a shift in how the present deals with the past. One of our present's main features, a feature that decisively characterizes the epoch of late modernity, is the turn to the past. It also implies what Boris Groys described as a move “back from the future.”¹ What he meant is generally the so-called post-communist condition in which the exhausted utopian energy has abandoned the promise of a better future that had regulated the life of individuals and societies throughout modernity and even beyond the ideological divide between the capitalist democratic west and the communist east. One often refers to this condition as also being post-utopian, as though utopia itself had vanished altogether from the world that had turned its eyes from the future. Yet already before the famous “end of history” was proclaimed, Zygmunt Bauman had envisioned its afterlife—precisely in the guise of memory in which “history re-incarnates as a Utopia which guides, and is guided by, the struggles of the present.”² Hence, utopia has survived. Only it no longer looks into the future. It is the past now that seems to provide a more fertile ground for its imagination.

1. See Groys, Heiden, Weibel, eds., *Zurück aus der Zukunft. Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005).

2. Zygmunt Bauman, *Memories of Class: The pre-history and after-life of class* (London, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 1.

And, what is even more important, utopia no longer rhapsodizes about a better, a more just, and a happier society. Rather it has found in culture a new medium of its articulation and the battleground for its struggles. An art that is engaged with memory culture and looks back to the past is therefore no less utopian than an art that had once found its purpose in building a new society in the future.

It is utopian in both its emancipatory claims and its illusions about the real effects of its practice. And it is utopian too in its belief that the past is that chosen realm where the present is to be transformed and the fate of the future decided. But what has induced that promise has also produced its limits.

Turning the past into the realm of transformative praxis was also facilitated by the failure of historians to guarantee the accuracy of their knowledge. After they lost the cognitive monopoly on the past, everybody felt entitled to enter this realm and claim its own truth within. From a history witness, judge, or forensic expert to the proponents of various identity politics, those from the civil society below as well as those from the official institutions above, everyone rushed into the now chaotic terrain of what once was history. Some to find its ultimate truth or to challenge the one imposed on them by power, others to reinvent or recreate their own past, often hoping to refight and finally win the battles they lost long ago. However different in their interests and hopes, however morally corrupt or honest in their intentions, they all agree in perceiving the past not simply as a dimension of time but rather as a culture, or more precisely, as a different culture. In other words, it is not a difference in time but a cultural difference that demarcates the realm of the past. Without much exaggeration one can even say that the notion of cultural memory is in itself a tautology. Beyond the difference between its individual and its collective character, memory is a cultural phenomenon per se. So the struggles it fights—and it fights many of them everywhere today—are always cultural struggles, even if their stakes are openly political and situated in the present day. It is for this reason that what Nietzsche once wrote for history also applies to memory, namely that it can be used and misused for life. And that too much of it can make us sick.

So today art and memory are not an unusual couple. But they are not a happy couple either. What has brought them together is but an extraordinary obsession with the past in our time, an obsession that has in the meantime created a sort of culture of its own, a culture of memory that in recent decades has exerted its immense influence all over the world of the so-called post-history.

But before we return to our initial question, let us make something clear. The famous turn to the past doesn't occur as a simple move of our attention from one dimension of time to another, from a prospective view into the future to a retrospective one into the past. Rather it presupposes a translation of social into cultural concerns. If a society that was primarily concerned with its (utopian) future had its history, a culture today has its memory instead and it is concerned, in a no less utopian way, primarily with its past. This is a past that is no longer a dimension of time but a product of memory culture. It is an uncertain and contested past, a past that is exposed to constant change. In the world we live in today another past is always possible.

II.

Instead of asking whether art can commemorate differently, one should dare a more radical question. Why commemorate at all? This question, however, makes sense only if we consciously subvert the cultural logic of commemoration. As a matter of fact all commemoration is a cultural practice and there is no culture without the practice of commemoration, yet doesn't it give us an explanation of what a society actually wants when it culturally commemorates the past? Or, to put it in a concrete historical and political context: what does, for instance, German society want when it commemorates the Holocaust? Does it want to live in the truth of its past? Does it want to ground itself in a certain value created by the experience of this past? Does it want to do justice to the victims of the past crimes? Does it want to learn from this past and so prevent it from ever happening again? It wants all of that, sure enough, but it also wants something else—to establish itself through this cultural praxis. It is society itself that is at stake in every act of commemoration, not some of its qualities like justice or sincerity, or some of its political concerns like the one of how to build a better future.

Commemoration is a socially formative praxis. It doesn't simply take place within an already given society. Rather in every act of commemoration the existence of society is tentatively suspended for it has yet to be created, or better, recreated through this act itself. And consequently, in every act of commemoration the past, which is always the past of a society, is also created anew. For, not only is the society always open to its past. The past itself is open to all sorts of re-articulation. Moreover, the practice of commemoration can re-articulate the regulative ideas that transcend the values of every particular society, and can have moral consequences for humanity as a whole, but it can do so only by bridging a normative abyss in which there is no clear differentiation between good and evil.

The commemoration of the Holocaust in Germany appears today as an integral part of society's normative identity. It plays an important role in the production of the past, concretely in giving shape to what is perceived today as German history. The cultural practice of commemoration doesn't take place within a given history but rather creates this history. Precisely as such it also has its own history. The commemoration of the Holocaust in post-war Germany has undergone significant transformations in terms of its emotional quality, moral accentuation, and political use. The student revolts of 1968 had not only disclosed the scandalous fact of the nation's suppression of its traumatic past, it charged the memory of the Holocaust with an emancipatory energy. At the end of the seventies the American TV series "Holocaust" emotionalized the German public, stimulating an intimate, empathic identification with the victims of the Nazi persecutions of Jews.³ The so-called historians' dispute (*Historikerstreit*) in the late eighties re-actualized the political meaning of history writing and memory culture. It has made clear that the memory of the Holocaust is a politically contested territory claimed by both camps of German politics, the right and the left. Later in the nineties the *Wehrmacht* exhibition re-opened the question of guilt for the "capital crime" of German recent history, undermining the myth of an innocent majority of German soldiers who fought in WWII.

3. See Ute Frevert, "Geschichtsvergessenheit und Geschichtsversessenheit revisited: Der jüngste Erinnerungsboom in der Kritik," supplement of *Das Parlament*, September 29, 2003.

In the meantime the public has discovered another focus of its memory concerns, the suffering of the innocent victims of the Allied bombing campaign during the Second World War and the mass expulsion of Germans at its end, which, as seen by the critics, brings the danger of relativizing or overshadowing the sufferings of the Holocaust. Overall there have been still more developments in German memory culture concerned with the Holocaust, but they all, regardless of how radically or controversially they deal with the past, have so far remained within one and the same narrative based on the twofold evidence: the Holocaust did really happen and it was an evil deed. This narrative provides the general normative frame of all the commemoration of the Holocaust in Germany. It also makes an impression of a homogeneous and stable society having rational control over its traumatic past, from which it is able to draw positive lessons for the future. It is the impression of a society that is capable of orienting itself in what still looks like historical time, a society that is fully in command of its history, in short, a society in its historicity and a history in its sociality.

It is within this social and historical frame that one can commemorate differently, concretely, that art can commemorate the Holocaust better than before and better than others, for instance by bringing into the commemoration yet another emancipatory twist, providing yet another challenge for the existing moral consciousness, discovering yet another so far suppressed truth of the past, dealing yet another blow to the strategy of forgetting and neglecting the evil. However, a world that can be made better by art must have already been quite good.

But what if this world has already changed for worse? How then to commemorate the Holocaust in a society in which a supporter of a parliamentary political party, a party that has recently sent three representatives to the newly elected European parliament, openly says: "Who cares if six million Jews were exterminated? ... I don't care if they were turned into soap."⁴

4. Helena Smith, "SS Songs and Antisemitism: the Week Golden Dawn Turned Openly Nazi," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/07/greece-golden-dawn-fascism-threat-to-democracy>.

III.

One does not commemorate soapmaking, unless one is an artist. This is to say that true art should be able to commemorate beyond any given culture of memory and its concrete historical and social frames. In other words, it must be able to make sense of remembering even if memory has lost its social basis, the general consensus on the normative values has collapsed, the boundaries of a particular cultural identity have blurred, the political forces one can rely on have been defeated, and one is even completely lost in what used to be the historical time, now mistaking the past for the future and dissolving both in a never ending post-historical present. Concretely at stake is the challenge to commemorate the Holocaust when fascism threatens to come from the future, disguised as democracy of course, and when the perpetrators from tomorrow have already put on the masks of the victims from yesterday. And to do so surrounded by the majority that cares for the Holocaust no more than for soap making. It is the challenge to remember when it is already too late for memory and when it is rather the future that has been forgotten, not the past. Only an art that dares to take memory over the abyss of total contingency is able to commemorate the Holocaust today. And it will make sense of this memory only if it finds the audience daring enough to look into the same abyss.

Yael Bartana's performance project *Two Minutes of Standstill* seems at first to be perfectly settled in its historical context and appropriately adjusted to the cultural and political conditions in which it has taken place. We as audience and critics also seem to have immediately understood what the artist actually wants and how she is supposed to achieve it. In a social and political environment that is generally critical of its past and willing to properly remember the crimes committed in its name as well as to commemorate the suffering of millions of innocent victims of these crimes, Yael Bartana wants the people to feel their past deeper, to compassionately recall its injustice, relearn its moral lessons and think of its meaning for their present life. This she will achieve by reconnecting, in a rather uncomfortable way, the traumatic memory of the past with the banality of everyday life and publicly creating an artificial time-space for commem-

oration and contemplation and its temporary social subject. Concretely, Bartana called for the citizens of Cologne to interrupt their daily routine for two minutes on June 28, 2013, at 11:00 a.m. and, in a sort of collective performance, to stop city traffic, pause lessons in the schools and universities, halt assembly lines in the factories, provoking the citizens to feel the burden of their past and give their thoughts to it.

But what did they actually think? Were their thoughts on the past this day really deeper than usually? Did they feel more empathy for the victims of the Holocaust, and did this empathy improve their understanding of the past? Finally, were they really able to connect the past with their present, to translate their empathy with the victims of the Holocaust into the solidarity, both emotional and political, with those who are in their present, in the very same world, victims of persecution, expulsion, and extermination? Did these two minutes of standstill really suffice to move the hearts and minds of German citizens today—not to more properly and authentically remember the traumatic past but to change the bad and ugly present?

One cannot answer these questions. Moreover, one is not even supposed to ask them either. Art seems to have already fulfilled its tasks regardless of whether we ask or how we answer these questions. Unless one dares to think beyond the limits it has already gone over in its own practice.

IV.

Isn't it a bit naïve to all too quickly associate a standstill with more intensive feelings and deeper contemplation that make it possible for memory to concentrate on its objects? While the speed of today's everyday life is automatically made responsible for shallow emotions, forgetting, and superficial thinking, a condition in which memory has no chance to develop. Why see both at all, the standstill and the speed, as contradictions that exclude each other?

It is true—the time of late modernity has experienced an unprecedented push in acceleration of all forms of life, something

Hartmut Rosa calls “social acceleration.”⁵ Everything in our everyday life, from communication, material and immaterial production to our social relations, has become faster and is in a constant flux. Even history, proclaimed dead a quarter century ago, seems to have recently experienced an immense acceleration of events on a global scale that are rapidly changing the world before our eyes. One cannot but remember Fredric Jameson’s famous phrase of the time that has become today “a function of speed, and evidently perceptible only in terms of its rate or velocity as such.”⁶

But this push in social acceleration is at the same time counter-balanced with what Rosa calls the “crystallisation” of the cultural and structural formations of our age, their idleness and immobility.⁷ Time now appears, as he writes, as a sort of box, as hard as steel, in which nothing can be changed and nothing new appears. In short, it seems that in our age all movements have come to a standstill, all the utopian energies expired, all the ideas and options of our mind having been already tried. It is a condition that culminates in Fukuyama’s thesis on the end of history but is also implied in all sorts of “postisms” that define our time in terms of an “after, post, or end-epoch.”

What differentiates these diagnoses from the earlier ones of historical “turns” is, according to Rosa, their asymmetry, or as he also calls it, their “half-way character.” At stake is the perception of an epochal change without a corresponding vision of a new cultural start, without a meaningful connection between the past, the present and the future.” Rosa, however, understands this contradiction as only apparent. This is why he coins the notion of “frenetic standstill” (*rasender stillstand*) merging both into one single condition.⁸

5. See Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2012).

6. Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983/1998* (London/New York: Verso, 2009), 50.

7. Rosa, *Beschleunigung*, 40–41.

8. Ibid.

This lets Bartana's public performance appear in a different light. Far from creating the condition for an acceleration and deepening of our thinking and feeling, a condition in which memory will flourish healing the traumas of the past and reviving what is morally and politically the best in the society and its members, *Two Minutes of Standstill* demonstrates precisely the opposite: a total stalemate of our thinking in which the contemporary mind stares into the past as the ultimate horizon of its critical reflection and utopian imagination. Anxious to forget anything it doesn't dare to move anywhere, not even into its alleged deepness. Curious but true, in the standstill there is even no place for memory either. It is rather out there in everyday life where everything is remembered with breathtaking speed, where the so-called memory culture flourishes as never before, where individuals and societies are obsessed with their heritage and devoted to frenetic stockpiling of all sorts of memorabilia. In an ever-growing network of institutions and cultural practices, from museums, archives, and schools to films, art exhibitions, and public events, no past is allowed to get lost. In a present that accumulates the past much faster than it is heading towards the future, everything can be commemorated everyday, in a totally indiscriminate way, soap making no less than the Holocaust.

One shouldn't mistake *Two Minutes of Standstill* for an artistic attempt to make a society better. Yael Bartana hasn't performatively created a sort of healthy kernel of memory and contemplation around which the society can renovate itself in the truth of its past, the justice of its present, and the emancipatory promise of its future. Rather she opened before our eyes the cavern in which what once was society is falling apart, a cavern, which after being completely saturated by the past is now rapidly swallowing our future, a cavern of egoism, ignorance, and phlegm in which there is no longer any difference between memory and oblivion. The Holocaust is all but a unique German story, a piece of horrible past a particular society can deal with. What is worse, it is not history either. To commemorate it makes sense only for those who feel its danger coming from the future.

Holding the Gaze on One's Own Time: An Artwork by Maja Bajević

There are no definite interpretations of an artwork. Not only can it be seen from different aesthetic, cultural, social, or political perspectives, but these perspectives, of whatever sort, also themselves undergo a transformation in time. It is on these transformations too or, more generally, on their historical contingency that the survival of an artwork depends. So, no intrinsic feature of a work of art, for instance a supreme aesthetic value, will guarantee in advance its persistence, except probably one—its translatability. In translations, as Walter Benjamin wrote almost one hundred years ago, artworks find their afterlife. Yet not all of them, he warned, but only those that are translatable, that is, the artworks whose essential quality is their translatability. They alone will survive. For Benjamin, translation was not about bearing resemblance to the original but about, as he wrote, “a transformation and a renewal of something living.”¹

Thus, interpretation of an artwork can be understood as a form of translation. And this translation, for its part, is a form in which an artwork exists in time, a form of its historicity. This is of particular importance for the works of Maja Bajević. Some among the most significant of them revolve around one motif that appears precisely as the opposite of what translation is about: the very impossibility of survival, or the general transience of human creations.

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” [1923] in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 73.

A perfect example of this motif is provided by her installation *To Be Continued/Steam Machines*. The artist constructs a mechanism that resembles an old-fashioned steam engine. On the steam constantly emitted by this machine a series of slogans are projected, which, after having become visible for a moment, disappear together with the dissolving “steam screen.” The slogans represent one hundred years of modern history, from 1911 to 2011. For instance: “Workers of the World Unite!” “Big Brother is Watching You!” “Art is Dead!” “We Want Bread, and Roses Too!” etc. Additionally, an archive of short texts provides general information about these slogans taken from various fields of historical life such as politics, culture, and economy. The work has been presented in different settings, including performances and audio installations.

Putting this particular piece in the context of Bajević’s other works, the interpretation has created a sort of personal historical deepness in which the individual history of the artist conjoins the collective history of her “original” community. Concretely, *To Be Continued* can be seen conceptually as a continuation of an earlier work called *Women at Work—Washing Up*, from 2001. Here Bajević and three Bosnian women refugees wash fabric—on which they have previously embroidered slogans of the late Marshal Tito—over and over again until it falls to pieces. The meaning is obvious: even the strongest ideas and convictions that once united people around a stable and promising social collective—epitomized in slogans like “A country that has youth like ours should not worry for its future”—cannot survive the eroding force of time. The ideas get washed off or evaporate like steam in the air along with the social and political forms of life they once represented. While *To Be Continued* symbolizes a general transience “of all that is solid” within universal human history, in *Women at Work—Washing Up* it is Bajević’s own country, the former Yugoslavia, that has vanished in history.

With this in mind, one would expect the artist to focus on the motif of personal loss, for instance, the loss of her own identity “in the swirl of history.” Indeed, some other works of Bajević that revolve around the topics of home, displacement, or return, such as two other editions of *Women at*

Work (subtitled *Under Construction* and *The Observers*) prompt such an interpretation. Yet even in these works one can easily notice a total absence of traumatic pathos. However irrecoverable is the loss, however impossible the return or irreparable the damage inflicted by history, the artist Maja Bajević will never look at it from the perspective of a victim of history. Neither will this history ever feature in her works as an evil perpetrator. What Bajević addresses in her works is something rather more sublime and, at the same time, more specific than the irrational vision of history as a monstrous, supernatural force that destroys everything in its path. It is history's temporal form that interests her most or, more precisely, the temporality of history that is itself historically specific and exposed to all sorts of social and political transformations. In her artistic practice Bajević doesn't address history as such but rather the destructive power of its reified and alienated temporality.

This might sound quite antiquated today. A critique of the temporal dimension of human alienation became the topic of existential philosophy in the twenties of the last century. One need only think of one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century philosophy, Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Various critiques of historicism shouldn't be forgotten either. The idea that historical temporality is determined by objective processes, independent of human will and that history, accordingly, is but a realm of necessity, was not only a target of the liberal critique of dogmatic Marxism; Marxists themselves contrasted it with different concepts of historical contingency, promoting the idea of history as a generally open, not determined process. The best representatives of such a critique are Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, and recently also Ernesto Laclau.

But the critique of historicism is not simply old, let alone obsolete. Rather it is a part of our critical legacy that obliges us not to judge what appears outdated in the art of Maja Bajević by the same historicist logic. Yes indeed, she is at odds with her time, but does it make her art, precisely in the context of what is today called contemporary art, less valuable, and what is even more important, does it make her art less contemporary?

In fact, in the way she deals with history, Bajević is not only at odds with her time, but with a great deal of today's contemporary art. One of its major trends Dieter Roelstraete calls, remarkably, "new historicism."² He means by that the obsession with archiving, forgetfulness, memoirs and memorials, nostalgia, oblivion, reenactment, remembrance, reminiscence, retrospection, in short the obsession with the past, that, as he believes, drives much of the work done by some of the most important artists active today.³ According to Roelstraete, they seek to define art first and foremost "in the thickness of its relation to history," by which he actually means the past, arguing that art today increasingly looks back, both at its own past and at the past in general, which, he critically adds, "has also become a big business."

If this is truly the major trend of today's contemporary art, then Bajević is not part of it. In her artworks we may search in vain for any sort of obsession with the past and the forms of its articulation, such as memory, nostalgia, traumas of oblivion, etc. Bajević doesn't look back at the past but confronts face to face history itself, that is, the historically specific form of its own temporality. This is what distinguishes Bajević not only as an artist from other artists of her time, but also from the way her historical time generally deals with history. Take the example of what French historian Pierre Nora calls "new memorialism," meaning a profound change in our relation to the past that has taken place during the first quarter of the twenty-first century.⁴

2. See Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art", *e-flux* 4 (March 2009), online at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/> and "After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings," *e-flux* 6 (May 2009), online at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/after-the-historiographic-turn-current-findings/> (both accessed November 30, 2016).

3. To mention some of them, Gerard Byrne, Tacita Dean, Chto Delat, Aneta Grzeszykowska, Laura Horelli, Joachim Koester, Susanne Kriemann, Marysia Lewandowska & Neil Cummings, Goshka Macuga, David Maljković, Deimantas Narkevičius, Paulina Ołowska, Anri Sala, Nedko Solakov, Sophie Nys, etc.

4. See Pierre Nora, "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory," *Transit* 22 (2002), online at <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-04-19-nora-en.htm> (accessed November 30, 2016).

Confirming on a much broader historical level Roelstraete's diagnosis of today's contemporary art, Nora similarly speaks of a fetishistic obsession with the past even calling our time "the age of commemoration." Today it is memory, he argues, that has taken on a meaning so broad and all-inclusive that it simply can replace what once was called history. But this, again, doesn't apply for Bajević's art. Not only is she not obsessed with some traumatic past and searching for remedy in memory and commemoration; rather, in her artworks she translates our relation to the past into a traumatic encounter with historical time itself, or more concretely, with its current alienated form.

If the artist Maja Bajević is so obviously at odds with both her historical time and the major trends of contemporary art, then we might openly ask whether she is a contemporary artist at all?

But today this question implies almost necessarily a more general one: "What does it mean to be contemporary?" As is well known, Giorgio Agamben, motivated by Friedrich Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, answered this question by pointing at a certain anachronism as intrinsic to what he calls contemporariness.⁵ Only those who neither perfectly coincide with their time, nor adjust themselves to its demands are truly contemporary. Contemporariness is this relationship with one's own time, both adhering to it and, at the same time, keeping a distance from it. It is precisely this condition of being in a way disconnected from our time that makes us capable of perceiving and grasping it.

Isn't this the right answer to the question of whether Maja Bajević is a contemporary artist? Yes she is, but only insofar as this contemporary art is capable, as she undoubtedly is, to hold its gaze on its time.

5. See "What Is the Contemporary?" in Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 40–41.

Srebrenica after Commemoration: Towards a Politics of Revenge

After you have entered the former concentration camp Buchenwald, which is now a memorial complex near Weimar, Germany, on the left from the main gate, you will find a relatively modest memorial plaque set in the ground and often surrounded with wreaths. It has a text on it in German: “*Ägypter, Albaner, Algerier, Amerikaner, Andorraner, [...]*,” which, translated in English, says, “Egyptians, Albanians, Algerians, Americans, Andorrans,” and so forth in alphabetic order until “[...] Portuguese, Roma, Rumanians, Russians, Swedes, stateless and other unknown inmates.” So, not a single human being was killed in Buchenwald —only nameless bearers of different national identities, stripped of any other human quality and any other social relation except of their belonging to a particular identitarian community. All the rest cannot be commemorated and are necessarily left to oblivion.

This is, however, not a problem of this particular memory site but one of any so-called culture of commemoration. To put it short, it remembers the past only as a mirror-image of its present. And it remembers it only as a culture, that is, as a culture that remembers as well as a culture that is remembered. So in Buchenwald it remembers and commemorates Egyptians along with British, both abstractly equated not only as victims of Nazi-fascism but also as representatives of two equal cultures, entirely in agreement with the famous slogan of multiculturalism: all different, all equal. However, the historical truth is that precisely in the same time when the Nazi concentration camp Buchenwald was active, the Egyptians were in a profoundly unequal social relation to the British, concretely they were subjected to their colonial rule.

This simple historical truth, or more precisely, the truth of a historical and with that a politically contingent social relation is what generally eludes every culture of commemoration. It is always culturally retrospective, never historically and politically prospective. This is why it necessarily implies a sort of post-historical closure. It looks back at history from a point beyond history. In other words, it administers the effects of historical events from a point that is no longer affected by historical events. For any politics of memory, however inclusive, emancipatorily motivated and democratically generated, politics will always stay merely a matter of memory, that is, of the past.

In this sense, Srebrenica and the culture of commemoration by which it is surrounded is not an exception. Only Bosnian Muslims were killed in Srebrenica and only Serbs killed them. Not a single human being was killed and not a single human being perpetrated a crime. In commemoration the event appears retrospectively as a single issue between two identities, Serbs and Muslims, which perfectly translates into the actual political reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina, divided into ethnically clearly demarcated political entities. If, on the one side, the current culture of commemoration has reduced the highly complex political conflict, emergent out of the collapse of historical communism and the Yugoslav federal state, to a totally abstract and non-political relation between perpetrators and victims, it has, on the other side, completely recognized the general political outcome of this conflict. The culture of commemoration articulates itself totally in accordance with the political paradigm that was established as the result of war and crime.

Finally, if the goal of commemoration was to build at the scene of the crime and on the ruins of war a culture that will never forget what happened, the goal of a politics after the commemoration is rather to ruin what the crime and war have achieved. Only a new political movement that will radically—and if needed violently—challenge the existing political reality in Bosnia and Herzegovina will remember what culture of commemoration have already forgotten—those human beings we no longer see in Buchenwald and Srebrenica.



Chapter V:

In the Nowhere of Democracy

There is one word that undoubtedly occupies the very centre of the post-communist discourse: democracy. It provides a sort of ideological hub for all the spheres of social life connecting them into one whole. Here an egoist interest, there a noble cultural value, or political will, religious belief, social need, moral claim and even a conflict or war—all must go through the hub of this miraculous word in order to become legitimate components of the actual historical reality. The problem is, however, that the hub itself is empty. “Democracy” in post-communism decides on the meaning of everything, yet, it alone has no meaning whatsoever. The word seems to have run empty of all its positive content, which is why it can be attached to anything. This does not apply only to the post-communist East.

Democracy in the West is “hollowed out”, states Peter Mair in his *Ruling the Void*. What is meant by that is the widening gap between citizens and their democratically elected representatives. While parties and political elites have withdrawn from wider society and moved towards the realm of government and state institutions, the citizenry on their part have increasingly disengaged from conventional party politics. What was once the common world of democracy has now fallen apart into two separate worlds: a world of citizens and a world of political elites with less and less interaction between the two.

Political struggle in this hollow space of democracy might still be intense and hard-fought, but, as Mair argues, it resembles the kind of competition within sports: “sharp, exciting, and even pleasing the spectators, but ultimately lacking in substantive meaning.” Mair comes to the explicit conclusion that the age of party democracy is passed.

Everything seems to suggest that the so-called democratic revolutions of 1989/90, instead of breathing new life into the system of actually existing democracy as it was then genuinely believed, have quickly used up all emancipatory meaning. In the world of post-communism as a global historical condition, democracy is an empty word that, as it seems nowadays, can only enthuse populist minds. Can “democracy” be saved? Or is it already too late and we need something else?

Democracy: A Look into Its Guts: With the Eyes of Rimini Protokoll's "Experts of the Everyday"

As is well known, the fall of communism in 1989 left a single player on the political scene of modern history: Western-style liberal democracy. For some, this became so self-evident that they even declared the end of history itself. People, for sure, will continue to fight both politically and militarily, bringing about significant changes in the world, but no political system or regime they create will ever claim ideological superiority over liberal democracy. The political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who came up with this thesis at the same time saw in liberal democracy the final form of human government.

Largely unnoticed, however, one side effect of the euphoric proclamation of the end of history has remained within the very idea of democracy. Leaving behind all of the dirt of historical praxis, democracy has undergone the process of radical sublimation. Not only the idea of democracy has been retroactively purified from the historical contingency in which it was originally born, but it has also been thoroughly whitewashed. Democracy emerged from a now-vanishing history without a single drop of blood on its hands, as though it never had anything to do with the violence, lies, and injustices of which, as generally understood, history is full. Democracy has taken a sort of angelic turn, becoming a transhistorical instance of absolute innocence. As for those once authorized by democracy to act in its name, they have been granted automatic impunity. They may have destroyed whole societies, thrown millions into poverty, or brought the world to the brink of nuclear disaster and climate catastrophe, yet democracy will always exculpate them. It never does anything wrong.

In its ahistoricity, democracy has become a sort of divine value—although not everyone is blessed equally by its grace. The more angelic it becomes, the more it turns culturally particular. The only true democracy is Western democracy, universal when imposed on the weak and poor, but particular when it defends the privileges of the rich and the powerful. This, however, does not make it any less sublime. On the contrary, the notion of democracy evoked today in the West has reached a level of such angelic sublimity that legitimately we might ask whether there is anything human in it. Is it mortal as humans are? If it was ever “born,” does it mean that it might also one day “die”? Does anyone know when this day might come? Does anyone know whether this day has already come, without anyone noticing it yet?

Political science gives us no answer to such questions. It never asks them either. Understandably so, since historical thinking in general, or more concretely, the ideas of an epochal closure, of a total openness of the future, or an irreducible contingency of historical events, are no longer its business. It is hard to ignore a certain cognitive logic behind the thesis on the end of history. It implies, necessarily, a clear idea of what is and what is not worth thinking about, which knowledge makes sense and is of some use to us, and which is useless and dispensable. Once the final end of history is proclaimed, no end of whatever sort can be of any essential interest for us. Even the question of a possible periodization within the post-historical time becomes negligible. What remains, is to properly arrange things within a finally determined order. To do so, however, a certain strain of knowledge is needed—not just anyone’s, but the knowledge of those whose thinking is more refined, whose view on reality is more focused and conceptual tools better calibrated. In short, we need people who not only possess a superior knowledge but are also trained to properly use it. We call these people experts. Without their help we are dumb. Or, the other way round, relying on their knowledge makes us “clever”.

At least this is the thesis of Anthony Giddens. In the time of what he calls “reflexive modernity,” individuals have to engage

with the wider, globalised world if they want to act in, understand and even survive in it. They will be able to do it only if they routinely interpret and act on the information produced by experts. This is how knowledge becomes constitutive of social life, shapes our identities and makes our planet into “the world of clever people,” as Giddens explicitly calls it.

Needles to say, this also applies to the existing order of liberal democracy. It will survive, that is, become immortal, as predicted by Fukuyama, only if “clever people”—lay individuals whom the expert knowledge has made “clever”—will be able to constantly reproduce it. Indeed, if we only listen to the experts, democracy might truly become immortal. There are, however, other experts around, for instance, “the experts of the everyday”—lay individuals who in the documentary performances of Rimini Protokoll play a crucial role, both as performers and subjects of certain knowledge. As actors on stage they play themselves in a role they have created in collaboration with the members of the theatre group. It is a narrative composition consisting of selected elements of their true biographies, a subjective mixture of personal fate, professional experience and self-reflection. Here is a mayoral candidate, there a hobby presenter of mourning speeches at funerals, an Indian call center worker, or a former president of the BND, the German secret service. After having been processed and shaped into a role, this narrative material, however random and subjective, acquires on stage the character of an objective, reflected and socially relevant experience that can be appropriated by the audience in the form of knowledge, or more precisely, as an “expert knowledge,” not least because it is named and staged as such. The question is, however, whether it also makes us “clever”?

Rimini Protokoll’s “experts of the everyday” cannot be more different from those “clever making” experts of Anthony Giddens. On the global stage of his reflexive modernity the latter play a role of mediators whose activity might best be described as a sort of translational coaching. They make the knowledge that has been accumulated in the institutions of traditional knowledge production, universities and research centers, acces-

sible to a wider public. In a way they translate the esoteric language of their narrow field of expertise into the language of lay people. What is at stake, however, is much more than a simple popularization. Translation is, even when it comes to relation between languages, never only about making people understandable to each other. Rather, it is always a socially formative praxis, which is to say that it creates and shapes, in its own way, social relations. That is the case here: translating their abstract knowledge into a “common” language, Giddens’s experts open up a range of new spaces between the realms of lay and expert knowledge. It is in rearticulating their lives in these spaces, that finally makes people “clever” and the historical condition in which they live “reflexive”.

But, like in the case of a “purely linguistic translation,” the social relations that result from this praxis are far from ideal. The progressive teleology of Anthony Giddens’ concept of reflexive modernity relies on a tacit presupposition that the final answer to the question of the political order in which people shall live has been already given. This again is Western-type capitalism and liberal democracy. Just as the “there-is-no-alternative” logic necessarily neglects its cultural particularity and historical limitations, so too is the vision of an ever growing reflexivity that slowly but inexorably turns the globe into a world of clever people blind to its own ideological load and its apologia for the existing order. Becoming worldly in reflexive modernity, expert knowledge not only reshapes social life in terms of progressive globalization, it also reaffirms local and global hierarchies and so perpetuates the existing relations of inequality and domination. The sublime ideal of a knowledge that informs a better world of a global future, an ideal that undoubtedly builds on the legacy of Enlightenment, hides all the dirt of its dialectical counterpart, the brutal reality of neoliberal globalization, its failed democracies and broken economies, a chaotic dissolution of the geopolitical order and a ruined nature. Have the experts forgotten to include this dirt in their curricula? Or is becoming clever in this world possible only by unlearning it?

In the performances of Rimini Protokoll the “experts of the everyday” don’t hide the dirt of their knowledge of the world. For the source of this knowledge is too close to their bodies, to

the contingency of their own, particular and unique life-world. Moreover, it has been generated in a collective process of researching and staging that can no longer be separated from its product. It is a knowledge that in fact does not exist outside of the artistic, theatrical practice within which it is staged and performed; a knowledge that is too short-lived to hide its origin. Something like a spirit that cannot survive the body in which it came into life.

Compared to the experts of Giddens' reflexive modernity, Rimini's "experts of the everyday" are not translators who move information from one too esoteric code to another, simpler, more popular one, leaving sociologists to reflect upon the social meaning of their practice. The "experts of the everyday" are rather the human embodiments of the very process of translation, its hybridizing effects, its frictional losses as much as its unexpected, heuristic gains.

To better understand the difference between these two types of experts, let's remind ourselves of the typical figure of an expert in mass media. It is a TV talking head that is usually invited to the studio on the occasion of some political event. In answering the questions of the journalist such an expert typically provides more in-deep information about the event, its historical background, the persons involved in it, or its future prospects. These experts are almost indispensable when it comes to the events of global politics, be it the war in Syria, the presidential elections in France, or the crisis in Venezuela. They are hired by broadcasters to help their audiences to understand the events, orientate themselves in the boundless space of global geopolitics and eventually make relevant decisions when it comes to these topics in their local political context ... all completely in line with the task Giddens gave to his experts—to make people clever, that is, fit for life in a globalized world. And when it comes to the source of the knowledge they provide, in the case of geopolitics, for instance, it has been mostly acquired in the heterogeneous field of the so-called area studies.

But what about the “expert of the everyday,” the already mentioned former president of the German secret service (BND) whose voice can be heard in Rimini’s *Top Secret International (Staat 1)*, a piece that deals with the social role and meaning of the „secret“. Reflecting on his experience as the head of BND he tells us at one point that „there is no clean intelligence agency; they all lie, betray, deceive and corrupt.” If this is the knowledge that an “expert of the everyday” provides, than it is by no means an innocent knowledge. For it has not been cleaned from the dirt, in which it had been acquired.

At this point we should remember that the emergence of the special field of research and scholarship called “area studies” after World War II was closely connected to the Cold War agendas of the US administrations and its intelligence and secret services. This dirt only recently surfaced on the otherwise clean and innocent normative *telos* of the area studies expert knowledge.

The knowledge of the “experts of the everyday” is not only of a different origin. It also follows a different *telos*. One might even dare to call it an “emancipatory desublimation”—a cut that slices open the guts of both the expert knowledge supposed to make us clever and the highest ideals of the liberal democratic order within which this expert knowledge has found its ultimate normative horizon.

Sublimation, as we learned from Freud, is a result of repression. And, when there has been repression, there will be, sooner or later, on this or that occasion, in whatever form, also a return of the repressed – unexpected, powerful, embarrassing, treacherous, painful, unavoidable, but human – probably all too human.

When this happens, suddenly, we are confronted with the lowest in us, the uncontrollable outbursts of our basic instincts, with the dirt and the stench of our guts. Speaking of sexuality, Freud reminded us of its deep roots in our animal past by quoting Saint Augustine: “Inter faeces et urinam nascimur,” or in English, “We are born between shit and piss.”

Why should we believe that democracy was born of a more noble origin? Why have we so effortlessly forgotten all the blood of the battlefields where people slaughtered each other in the name of democracy as well as against it, all the dirt from the prisons that incarcerated both its heroes and its enemies, the stench of the decapitated corpses around its scaffolding, and the rage of animal instincts from both those who attacked democracy as well as those who defended it?

In fact, we never forgot, we just repressed it for a while. For remember that, however strong, every repression is doomed to fail, eventually.

Nowadays what Western democracies are experiencing is but a powerful return of the repressed. This repression, which is now coming to light in such an irrational and uncontrollable way, is the historical truth of the modern concept of democracy; or, more precisely, the never-reconciled contradictions of its dialectical development, in Hegel's parlance, its *Werdegang*. This is seen primarily in the perverse abuse by today's predatory capitalism of the most important democratic institutions and principles. The now undeniable consequences are seen in total class disintegration of once democratically united national societies, an ever-expanding afterlife of colonial exploitation, growing remilitarization that today is seen in open war-mongering, and, finally, the most dangerous: the realistic prospect of fascism as a generally welcome solution to the ensuing capitalist crises.

In short: today history is returning from its ideological repression. It has ripped off the well-protected and well-tended white skin of Western democracy to expose the dirty and stinky workings of its guts. However, there is nothing inhuman about the return of the repressed. On the contrary, to be historical is but to be human, to be of a mortal and transient nature. As far as it is historical and, therefore, also human, democracy to be sure was not born far away from the piss and shit of humankind's birth. However, like humans, it still has the choice to die not in the same spot. History, we should never forget, is the only dimension in which the most sublime ideals of human freedom might become real.

If we now reflect on the last quarter of a century, during which democracy enjoyed the angelic heights of its historical existence—a short epoch that is now ending before our very eyes—we see that history itself was democracy’s most well-hidden or, to say the same in another way, its most suppressed truth. Now disclosed, it might retroactively explain why liberal democratic developmentalism—the belief that after the fall of communism, democracy can only develop progressively in terms of becoming ever more inclusive, righteous, and transparent—must have failed. The case of Edward Snowden is a perfect symptom of this failure. It clearly shows that a noble, almost angelic fidelity to the most sublime values of democracy might imply a filthy practical betrayal of its actual reality. This is precisely what history is all about – the move beyond innocence. Only a stone is innocent, Hegel once wrote; thus no human is innocent, as long as we are historical beings.

References

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Democracy In Eastern Europe: Old, Ugly and Alone

What Hegel once said about truth could be as well ascribed today to democracy in Eastern Europe, namely, that it has turned stale. In fact, Hegel had in mind a simple subjective truth, the one grounded in the certainty of our senses, which is why it could be apprehended without altering anything in it and even without comprehending it. However, after it is subjected to a complex process of mediation, this simple truth loses its immediate certainty, becomes outdated in a way, or in Hegel's original phrase, "stale." This is precisely what has happened to democracy less than thirty years after the fall of communism: it has lost that sensuous certainty, which it had enjoyed at the moment of the so-called democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe, when it seemed that its values and principles were instantly accepted by the broadest masses and directly applied in their social reality. It was a time when almost everyone could experience democracy as an authentic quality of one's own real life and consume it without ifs or buts, a time when people truly felt that their voice is heard and their will respected, and when even the last and least members of society believed they have rights equal to everyone else's. What we usually call the democratic ideal, meaning a certain normative quality that guides our will in the "dirt" of everyday politics but can never be fully realized in the actuality of historical praxis, was perceived back then as a bare fact. To put it short, at the moment of the historical turn of 1989, democracy entered the ruin of Eastern European communism in the form of its simple immediacy. This, however, couldn't last for long. Once it started its real life, democracy was inevitably exposed to a series of ideological mediations in which it was gradually stripped of all its angelic purity.

The first was a deeply problematic relation to its ideological counterpart, the so-called totalitarianism. When democracy arrived on the scene in 1989–90, it was not only bringing its freedoms and rights as something new in Eastern Europe, it was also replacing the collapsing *ancien régime*, whose historical character was subsumed under the notion of totalitarian rule. It was this stark contrast between both, democracy and totalitarianism, a totally simplified black-and-white distinction with no gray nuances in between that essentially determined this particular historical moment and introduced a radical discontinuity with the past. As a result, the whole space of the former communist East suddenly appeared as miraculously unified under a single common experience, the experience of totalitarianism. Yet, besides various cliché-ridden stories of national victimization, mostly presented in some sort of cultural memory and misused for cheap political gains, there was not much historical content inside. It was an experience emptied of all the flesh and blood of history, of all the dramatic inner contradictions of historical communism, of the severest ideological and political clashes among its many fractions, of a huge diversity of its theoretical concepts and sociopolitical practices, including essential differences in the form of property relations, the role of state, the status of culture and arts, or in geopolitical principles. But, before all, this experience was emptied of what is truly essential about history, namely, of its intrinsic contingency, that is, of that often tragic awareness that the course of events could have been different than it really was. Instead, history was reduced to a bare past witnessing of nothing else but a senseless failure that is not worth remembering at all.

So why has democracy, upon entering the post-communist East, so quickly abandoned its own historical consciousness? The answer is both simple and scary: because it was not able to get rid of its own traumatic past, specifically, the legacy of European colonialism that has been haunting it ever since the ideas of freedom and equality emerged as a political force at the end of eighteenth century. It is because of this colonial legacy, which democracy has never properly reflected and politically recognized, that it to this day perceives its Other as having no history of its own.

This is what made it possible for democracy to arrive in the East in 1989 as a newcomer in a space of ahistorical otherness, where it could fulfill its mission of implementing its rights and freedoms in the hearts and minds of the natives who were blessed in a complete ignorance of their own history. It is therefore no wonder that this space so quickly turned into a breeding ground for new, now democratically legitimized, forms of oppression. But this leads us to the second stage of mediation to which democracy has been exposed upon its arrival into the post-communist East.

The problem is that democracy in its idealized form has, in fact, never entered Eastern Europe. A *Western* democracy did instead. Despite all of its universal claims, it appeared in the East as culturally particularized, that is, as having its origin and its proper shape in the West. Consequently, the supposed democratization has become a mere moment in a broader historical process of Westernization, or in more general terms, of an expansion of Western modernity into the East. Getting a supporting role in this much broader cultural—or should we say, civilizational—mission, the process of democratization of the East has been additionally tasked with the trauma of dealing with cultural difference, which curiously, also implied a peculiar temporal delay. The East was now more than a simple cultural Other. At the same time, it was perceived as “not-yet-West,” and accordingly, it was expected to catch up with the world’s most powerful normative block. More precisely, it was supposed to catch up with the modernist development it has “missed” due to communism, which was presented as an anti-modernist historical force or at least as a major obstacle to a “normal” modernist development that had succeeded so brilliantly in the West. This, however, had a further implication. Within the same cultural paradigm, the East was redefined in terms of its belatedness, as a space of belated modernity. This meant that even after 1989, the West and the East haven’t shared one and the same historical temporality. While the former was always on time and, in that sense, presumed as timeless (i.e., post-historical), the latter, now measuring its historical time only according to the West, was chronically late. As a consequence, democracy found itself caught in a sort of temporal gap, stretched between two different temporalities.

This is why we might say that it has never really arrived in the East. Rather, it is still in the process of arriving there, a process whose scopes and limits are purely arbitrary. Political scientists, or in this case whom we might instead call “the ideologues of Westernization,” have found a proper name for this condition: transition to democracy. Not only has “transition” further degraded the original project of the democratization of the post-communist East into a mere means to an end, which is the cultural, economic, and geopolitical realignment of the whole area into the sphere of Western interests, it tacitly implies a weird idea of an “Eastern democracy,” which is a sort of would-be democracy desperately striving to become a proper Western one. This idea perfectly corresponds to an already coined, no less weird notion of a “former East.” Like a tiger that cannot change its stripes, the East cannot get rid of its past, existing now in the form of its never-ending “afterlife.” Is this really what democracy in Eastern Europe is all about—an afterlife of communism? True, this is nonsense, but unfortunately it accurately describes the reality on the ground.

And finally, democracy didn’t come to the post-communist East alone. It was accompanied by a fellow, whom back then nobody seems to have noticed and of whom hardly a word was said. It was capitalism. In 1989, both capitalism and democracy arrived in the East side by side as a perfect couple. But while democracy was parading in the limelight of the great historical event, the other half of the couple did its job backstage: the privatization—mostly criminal—of former socialist property, which generated a new, powerful stage of post-communist primitive accumulation with disastrous social and moral consequences. And while democracy was desperately struggling to gain a foothold in the institutions and civil societies of the East, capitalism, in its most predatory neoliberal form, has not only quickly dismantled the leftovers of the former socialist welfare state but destroyed society as such. Finally, while democracy has continued to work hard on the catching-up of the East with the West, capitalism has long been celebrating the full integration of the former socialist economies into global capitalism, which paved the way for a no-holds-barred extraction of all the human and natural resources of the post-communist East.

This third mediation to which democracy has been exposed upon its arrival to Eastern Europe, its dirty liaison with contemporary neoliberal capitalism, seems to have been not only its most fateful but also the one almost totally fore-closed, which is why we are not able to ask even the simplest question: If democracy and capitalism are such an unequal couple, why is there still so much trust that they will ultimately stay together? Why is it so hard to imagine that one of them—the stronger, more successful one, but also the one more brutal and egoistic—sooner or later won't go down its own path? In fact, this is already happening, and not only in post-communist Eastern Europe.

The One Too Many: On How Democracy Ends in Sophistry

Until the last grain

How many migrants can a nation accept and still remain a nation? This question, around which the heaviest political battles in Europe are fought today—battles that might decide the fate of democracy in Europe as well as the very meaning and historical role of what is in geopolitical terms called the West—actually assumes the structure of an ancient sophistic paradox in the manner of “The Heap” (which grain of wheat will make the random pile a heap?), or “The Bald Head” (which hair falling out will render the head definitively bald). As is well known, these paradoxes were rhetorically presented in the form of a series of questions which, taking the case of a nation admitting immigrants as example, would read like this: Is a nation that has taken a single immigrant still a nation? Obviously, the answer is yes—it is. But will the addition of a second transform it into a shapeless hybrid community that will no longer be recognizable as a distinct nation? Most certainly it will not. Would a third make the crucial difference? No. What about a fourth; a fifth; a sixth...? Obviously, there will always be an external element that can be added to a nation without transforming it into something else. However, if the addition of such alien elements continues, the nation will cease to exist. The problem is that we cannot definitively locate the point at which this will happen.

Critical analysis of such paradoxes points to two crucial moments. The first is the vagueness of the pivotal concept; in short, its incoherent character. While, as in our case, there are an infinite number of descriptive features that clearly differentiate nations from other forms of human communities, it is impossible to identify a precise cut-off point between them—the point at which a nation will suddenly transform into an amorphous heap of individuals without any common identity whatsoever. The vagueness at issue here also affects the second problem of such paradoxes: they all are borderline cases, which is to say that the borders of such concepts as heap, baldness, or as in our case, of nation, are never clearly distinguishable lines, but rather blurred bands that are intrinsically imprecise and indefinite.

It is of crucial importance to keep the vagueness of such borderlines in mind when we consider the paradox of today's global migration processes: the horrible pictures of countless corpses floating inanimate in the Mediterranean, the fact that so many boats overcrowded with migrants capsize before ever reaching the shores of Europe finds its metaphoric counterpart at their very destination, the nightmare of that single immigrant, "the one too many" who will cause some celebrated European nation state to finally tip over.

The question, "how many migrants will it take to make the boat full?" has become the "to be or not to be question" of European politics today—not because it miraculously translates all the concerns of Europeans into a single, universal cause, but rather because of its essentially sophistic character. This is the true reason European politicians and their frustrated electorates have been asking it over and over again and won't stop asking it—not until the proper answer is given, but because there is no such answer.

With no ontological effect whatsoever

This sophistic erosion, so obvious in the heated debates on migration that so dominate in European publics and parliaments today, points to two possible conclusions: firstly, that these debates are no longer able to fulfil their teleological function of regenerating democracy from within. At stake is more than their inability to produce a rational choice based on common interests; that is, to find a democratic solution to the problem of migration, which, however imperfect, will still bring the will of the people in line with the values proclaimed by its democratic institutions. The problem of migration rather challenges the existing liberal democratic state at its very core, challenges the democratic legitimacy of its system of political representation. Whatever the outcome of the public debates on migrants and whatever the final decision on this question ultimately agreed among the political parties, it will not be able to reproduce that simple yet essential public consensus that lend these debates functional sense; and that those responsible for translating their results into policy, the elected representatives of the popular will—in short, the political parties—are an indispensable component in the life of their constituencies.

As long as it is grounded in the principle of people's sovereignty and as such implemented in the modern nation state, the concept of parliamentary democracy relies on the mechanism of its own self-empowerment. Like a sort of perpetuum mobile, it must be able to regenerate the power of its authority on its own, something it achieves by constantly redrawing the clear-cut distinction between its interior and its exterior. The challenge of migration, as it has come to impose itself on the Western liberal democratic states, seems to evade this logic. It seems as if it can never be fully internalized as a democracy's own heterogeneity with which it will sooner or later successfully deal; that is, find a rational solution to that problem in accordance with the interest of its citizens. This is why we can claim that today's debates on migration no longer take place within the framework of democracy but rather on its increasingly frayed edges. In fact, these debates discursively inform these edges by allowing us to concretely experience its conceptually vague and historically contingent limits.

And they make us realize that democracy, in its present shape and form, won't be able to take migrants on board without it tipping over.

Secondly—and closely connected with the first conclusion—migration challenges the very social substratum of the democratic order; or simply and concretely, society itself. It is obvious that the question of how many immigrants a society can accept cannot be answered without also asking what this society actually is and of whom precisely it is, or should be, comprised. At stake is more than a mere reference to an already existing social whole. Rather, this social whole is expected to be the first to emerge from the debates on precisely who constitutes society. It is believed to be a performative effect of the decision on this question. Yet such a decision cannot be made arbitrarily. It is intended to be the result of a political struggle in which different interests collide and the competing political forces representing these interests are involved. The final decision on whom to include and whom to exclude from society, a decision that rearticulates social totality and performatively brings society as such into existence, is intended to be effected through a hegemonic operation, which, however contingent and temporary, still provides the social substance of the democratic order. Thus, providing an answer to the question how many immigrants a society can take on board without causing it to sink under their social weight goes far beyond the pragmatic process of striking a rational balance between available resources and increasing social needs.¹ It decides an existential question, the “to be or not to be” of society as such—at least in theory.²

1. This is the point at which the discussion on how many migrants a particular welfare system (or what is left of it after decades of the neo-liberal dismantling of the social welfare state, moreover, of society as such) can take care of, almost unavoidably acquires a “national-socialist” character.

2. I have in mind here a very particular theory, the one of a post-foundational concept of the social as it has been articulated in many works by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, like *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, New York: Verso, 1985); Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London, New York: Verso, 1996); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, New York: Verso, 2005); Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London, New York: Verso, 2014), etc.

Practically speaking, however, the political debates on migration as they are held in Western, and especially European settings today, seem to fall short of their social teleology. It appears as though they've lost their performative power and thus the ability to rearticulate social totality. In other words, hegemonic operations performed in the process of political struggles over the problem of migration fail to produce ontological effects. They are no longer able to regenerate the social substance of the democratic order. Instead, they only prove the social impotence of the political forces involved in these struggles, before all of the traditional political parties as well as vast swaths of civil society, from spontaneously emerging protest configurations to newly engaged intellectuals. Their dominant rhetoric, which time and again spins around the once socially productive logic of inclusion-exclusion, becomes increasingly emptied of its social meaning. For the most part, it now creates but a public noise full of racist escapades, moralist kitsch and ideological perplexity. And when it explicitly tackles the growing problem of migrants and refugees it usually ends in populist sophisms. This sophistic aberration of democratic discourse is a clear symptom of its performative failure. When political debates in a democratic society degenerate into sophistry this means they are no longer able to reproduce either democracy or society.

Left dreams and right realities

Yet despite its purely sophistic character the question of how many, if any, migrants or refugees shall be accepted might still serve as a clear indicator of the position of the political actors who answer it. It is reasonable to expect that those who are prepared to welcome more migrants occupy the left side of the political spectrum, while the others, who are likely to reject as many of them as possible, settle themselves rather on the right. However, such calibration of a scale from left to right really makes sense only if its end-points, that is its extremities, are clearly defined—which, when it comes to the question of accepting immigrants implies the logic of a zero-sum game. For it is clear that there are those for whom even a single immigrant or refugee is too many.

This is obviously a position we might ascribe to the extreme right. However, to clearly locate on the same scale its direct opposite, the position of the extreme Left, isn't quite so easy. The Left generally stands for a generous acceptance of migrants and often openly demonstrates its practical solidarity, assisting them in crossing borders or supporting various forms of their integration. It also accepts cultural differences without much difficulty. Some of the Left's initiatives even explicitly claim the principle of universal inclusion, like the activist network "No one is illegal". But it is almost impossible to hear from the European Left that, for instance, all migrants, without reservation, should be immediately accepted. It appears that a Leftist counterpart to the extreme Right Wing's stance on migration simply doesn't exist.

At stake here is an asymmetry of far larger dimensions. It is well known that today whole states, led by their democratically elected governments, have adopted an extremist right-wing stance on migration. Such is the case with some Central-European countries. Slovakia, for instance, filed a lawsuit against the European Union's initiative to forcibly impose the so-called refugee quota on its member states, the obligation to house and feed a proportional number of refugees fleeing wars and other humanitarian crises. In its protest against Brussels, Slovakia is accompanied and backed by Poland and Hungary, two countries with which it shares a zero-migrants policy. Their governments openly pledge not to accept a single one. Although some other countries in the European Union show far more understanding and are willing to take a significant number of migrants—with Angela Merkel's Germany leading the way—it is in fact impossible to imagine an EU member state that would open its borders entirely for all incoming migrants and make available to them all of the social services as well as capacities and instruments necessary for their full economic and cultural integration. This looks like a left-wing utopia totally at odds with reality. On the other side, the actually existing, democratically legitimized, right wing extremist stance, and its zero-policy on migration, has already been completely integrated into the existing democratic order. In so doing, Europe has not only smoothly domesticated and normalized even the worst racist policies but also, equally

smoothly, included right-wing extremism into the realm of *Realpolitik*. The dreams of the Left are just that—dreams and nothing else. Yet its nightmare, a full-fledged political institutionalization of the most extreme right-wing dreams, has become a reality. The Right, on the contrary, no longer dreams. Instead, it makes policies.

Precisely as a matter of right-wing *Realpolitik*, migration—which is essentially a global phenomenon—enters a much broader political context, the realm of geopolitics: the global arena of political struggles and, increasingly, military conflicts over ever scarcer resources; the space of global capitalism, constantly reshaped by economic competition; the world stage on which the so-called global players make crucial decisions on global issues like biopolitics and climate change. And, if there is still such a thing as world history, it is politically written, determined in the realm of geopolitics. But this is also where the processes of migration were economically and politically generated, where they took their shape and direction even before they reached their destinations—the borders of largely Western nation states, at which point they trigger the big drama of inclusion and exclusion. And yet this same realm of geopolitics, which essentially determines the entire phenomenon of migration and where the future of the entire world might even be decided, is eerily emptied of the Left. True, Leftist voices are today increasingly heard all over the global public dominion. When it comes to the most important issues related to global development—pollution, poverty, human rights, global justice—Leftist critique and the demands of the Left civil society grow louder and louder. And Leftist critical theory isn't far behind. It provides the most plausible explanation or description of the actual condition of the world; its diagnoses of possible terminal illnesses that might bring about human extinction are no less relevant nor precise; its critique of global capitalism, especially in its currently most destructive and dangerous, neoliberal form, is sharper than ever; it has reclaimed the emancipatory potential of a near-entirely degenerated historical consciousness; and it even dares, again, to sketch out some utopian prospects. And yet, the world seems to care not at all—as though it no longer takes the Left seriously.

Angels forever?

Is this because the Left no longer exerts any significant influence on geopolitical agencies and processes; or has actually abandoned geopolitics altogether? When it comes to the recent attempts to resurrect the idea of radical Left political subjectivity and militancy this might well be true. Such attempts, as Alberto Toscano argues, fail to properly address the problems that arise when a transformative, revolutionary or emancipatory political action is situated in an actual geopolitical context and must confront its many constraints.³ He reminds us of the legacy of the old Cold War Left, which was able to combine intense commitment and uncompromising enmity with instrumental geopolitical calculation. At stake was a “battle-hardened realism”, typical of the most radically transformative of political movements of the time—a time when “The ‘angelic’ position (turning away from the moment of *Realpolitik* for the sake of an uncertain purism) was regarded by most revolutionaries, and many reformers, as an unacceptable capitulation.”⁴

However, the story of how the radical revolutionary Left has turned away from practical political realism and evacuated the sphere of geopolitics is long and controversial. It might begin with the split between the Old and the New Left, which in fact took place around what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “the world revolutions of 1968”.⁵ Not only did they radically transform the post-WWII geopolitical order that had, until then, been based on the Yalta agreement, but also, as Wallerstein argues, denounced The Old Left, the traditional anti-systemic movements that were comprised of three components—Communist and Social-Democratic parties as well as national liberation movements.

3. Alberto Toscano, “Carl Schmitt in Beijing: Partisanship, Geopolitics and the Demolition of the Eurocentric World,” *Postcolonial Studies* 4 (2008): 417. Here Toscano has in mind, above all, Alain Badiou and his *Logics of the World* (London: Continuum, 2009).

4. *Ibid.*, 418.

5. Immanuel Wallerstein, “Precipitate Decline: The Advent of Multipolarity,” *Harvard International Review* 1 (2007): 56.

They all followed a two-step strategy: first conquer state power, then change the world. Both steps were supposed to be achieved within the parameters of *Realpolitik*.

While the ultimate goal of the first was an actually existing welfare state, either in its social-democratic form within the centre of the developed capitalist West or in its Eastern socialist form on the periphery, the second step, made according to the then dominant rules of geopolitics, was pursuing the teleology of developmentalism: “[T]he thesis that all states could ‘develop’ and have a high standard of living, if only the appropriate state actions were instituted to permit the process of development to take off.”⁶

In contrast to the Old Left, the revolutionaries of 1968 concentrated primarily on the second—changing the world—although not in terms of geopolitical *Realpolitik*. The New Left—which is what they were called then—generally rejected the world designed after the developmentalist narrative and opposed the Old Left that was actively participating in its reproduction. Yet, however “angelic”, the New Left still managed to realistically address the first symptoms of the next great transformation—the historical decline of industrial modernity. The entire world, which was based on its mode of production, together with the forms and ways of life it had created and had been sustaining it, was now falling apart. Naturally, the processes of its disintegration also affected the historically particular forms of migration that had come with industrial modernity, forms best embodied in the figure of a migrant worker moving across a network of sovereign nation states, primarily from the poorer south to the richer north.

Millions of these migrant workers, also known by their German nickname “guest workers” (*Gastarbeiter*), were largely working industriously away in Fordist factories while simultaneously, and equally diligently, struggling for and toward social integration.⁷

6. Ibid.

7. That there would soon also ensue a struggle for a cultural one, and that this struggle would become even more dramatic, they still didn’t know at the time. Identity politics was then taking its first, early steps.

Although expected to return home sooner or later, most of them stayed in their host countries, creating with their families new sorts of national minorities that still haven't been properly integrated. But then, the world around them changed.

In 1975, John Berger, together with photographer Jean Mohr, published a classical work on migrant workers in Europe, which described this change—a change that turned migration into an essentially global phenomenon. In the preface to a new edition published thirty-five years later he writes:

“The world political structure has been transformed as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the global economic order, known as neoliberalism—or, more accurately, economic fascism. The power of trade unions and the power of national governments have both been diminished. Factories now are becoming as migratory as workers. It has become as simple to build a factory where labour is cheap as to import cheap labour. The poor have become poorer. The present concentration of global economic power is unprecedented. Its agents are the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation.”⁸

None of these bodies was mentioned in the first edition of the book. Yet today, together with other powerful subjects of international politics, they run the world. The fact that they are almost entirely beyond any democratic control is widely known and discussed. And the fact that the global Right effectively rules over this global network of institutions is simply taken for granted. But the idea that the contemporary Left, Old, New or whatever, might have any influence on them, let alone gain or assume power over some of them, is beyond imagination.

8. John Berger, Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man. A Book of Images and Words about the Experience of Migrant Workers in Europe* (London, New York: Verso, 2010), 7.

With its bare hands

What then can the Left do about a global problem like migration? It has no say in the economic, political and military institutions that generate, control and exploit the global movement of migrants. Nor do its representatives count themselves among the CEOs of the most powerful international banks and corporations. Moreover, the Left has in fact almost completely abandoned the entire infrastructure of the global power relations. Today, it no longer governs any globally significant nation state, nor does it command any army.⁹ Old or New, modest or extreme, global or local, the Left doesn't hold any instruments of *Realpolitik* in its hands with which it could effectively intervene in genuinely global processes of migration, either peacefully or violently. The Left today can no longer pull the trigger of a single revolver. Even the times when it had its own violent extremists are also gone. The last members of the former Left-wing terrorist organizations, if they haven't yet become political servants of the neoliberal order, are today drug dealers, religious zealots or right-wing activists. The situation is no better on the Left's pacifist flank, either. Quite the contrary: during the most heated periods of the Cold War it was still able to mobilize a strong, worldwide peace movement, and within the frameworks of geopolitical *Realpolitik* articulate a politics of non-alignment; today, when serious experts on international politics talk of a Cold War II that might prove more dangerous than the previous one—that is, when the possibility of a nuclear catastrophe has become even more realistic than before—a similar mass pacifist movement or a geopolitical peace project seem entirely inconceivable.

Taking decisions on such important matters like (nuclear) war and peace, or the ecological survival of the planet, decisions that might seal the fate of all of humanity, is altogether left to the right-wing *Realpolitik*, in both its moderate and its most extreme forms.

9. A few exceptions to this rule, almost exclusively in South America, were rather short-lived.

Moreover, the Right has entirely taken over the old, already crumbling Westphalian order; however, not to maintain or improve it, but to systematically dismantle and abuse its entire instrumentarium for its own purposes. It has stripped its basic institution, the nation state, of all its normative legitimation; but before all, of the principle of sovereignty; and, at the same time, emptied it of most of its social content. After decades of neo-liberal “reforms” the Right has almost totally destroyed society from within, and refilled the empty shell of a state with all sorts of identitarian rubbish, from fetishized cultural heritage to racist paramilitary gangs. In the hands of the neo-liberal Right the nation state, long believed to have been tossed by globalization into the dustbin of history, has been resurrected as an instrument of destruction of the very order of that for which it once served as the backbone. Now the old order is supposed to be replaced by a new one, based on the principle of multipolarity and designed after Carl Schmitt’s vision of the “New Nomos of the Earth”, a new system of international relations in which sovereignty will be a privilege of its few centres, or in Schmitt’s words, “great spaces” (*Grossräume*) that can still afford it. It is within this new geopolitical order, with its powerful instruments, that the Right today manages migration, or more precisely, controls and filters its flows in the interest of domination and exploitation. The Left, on the contrary, has no influence on this same order, and can make no use of any of its instruments. Can it then influence the problem of global migration in any way? It can indeed, but only if it reinvents a *Realpolitik* beyond the already collapsing order, one able to recompose the dismembered social bodies of the Westphalian nation states and finally leave their temporal and spatial arrangements behind, the “all-too-human” narratives of national histories as well as the very idea of territorialized democracy. But even for many on the Left this sounds like too extremist a vision.

Is there such thing as a moderate Left?

All that has been said here about the Left seems to refer only to its extremist, radically anti-systemic, militant wing. But isn't there also a non-extremist, or shall we say, a moderate Left, the one that slowly but steadily works within the given system and makes, within all the constraints of a democratic *Realpolitik*, the best of things in the interest of society as a whole and in accordance with traditional Left values. This is a Left that in the parliaments and publics of democratic states bravely struggles to keep the borders as open as possible for migrants and refugees, a Left that welcomes cultural difference, facilitates integration and publicly resists racist propaganda. It is largely composed of social democratic, green, and even more radically Left parties and the attendant broader range of their supporters. Although it is rare today that it finds itself in the position to rule alone, this moderate Left constructively and productively participates in coalition governments and shares general responsibility for their policies. If it is not able to radically change the world, or concretely solve some of its central problems like migration, it certainly renders such problems more bearable. What then could be wrong with such a non-extremist, moderate Left?

The trouble with the moderate parliamentary Left is that it is increasingly difficult to differentiate it from other political alternatives, not only from classical centrist parties but also from those that are considered far-Right. This becomes especially apparent in the debates on the so-called refugee crisis. Examples show that in such cases even the very difference between a Left and a Right stance on migration begins to blur. The German public was recently confronted with a dispute that was conducted in the form of a parallel interview, between the leaders of two German parliamentary parties—one considered to be on the far left and another, a newcomer in German party politics, on the right.¹⁰

10. See: "Streitgespräch zwischen Sahra Wagenknecht und Frauke Petry" (A Dispute between Sahra Wagenknecht and Frauke Petry), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, October 2, 2016, accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www.sahrawagenknecht.de/de/article/2432.streitgesprach-zwischen-sahrawagenknecht-und-frauke-petry.html>.

Sahra Wagenknecht is the deputy chair of the Left Party (*Die Linke*) and Frauke Petry the chair of the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*).

What was most striking about this confrontation, which, not surprisingly, focused largely on the question of migration, were the desperate attempts by the representative of the Left to minimize and justify the obvious overlaps by both parties on major issues dominating German politics today: that the migrants who abuse their “right to hospitality” should immediately lose said privilege, that migrants and refugees should stay and be helped outside Germany’s borders, where they come from or in neighbouring regions; that the influx of migrants threatens the most vulnerable social strata, drives the lowest wages down still further, raises the cost of the cheapest housing, and generally fuels competition among the weakest and poorest, etc. They even agree on such strategic questions as Germany’s relation to the European Union. Both want the German state to reclaim the competencies it ceded to the non-transparent bureaucracy in Brussels. In other words, the party representing the extreme left of German party politics and the most extreme right wing party both demand a return to the nation state as the historically ultimate institutional framework for democracy, social justice and economic prosperity. And both also agree that, as one explicitly stated, “the insanely expensive Euro-experiment” has definitively failed as both a project of transnational democracy and economically as a monetary union.

But where then do they actually disagree? When it comes to the problem of migrants and refugees we return to the question of how many—or, in this concrete case, of who precisely might be accepted. While the right-wing politician would rather accept those that are highly skilled, the criterion of her left-wing counterpart is somewhat more flexible in terms of general humanitarian values. The Left’s party program even contains a universal call for “borders open to all”. However, as its chairwoman explains, this is only a vision for the future, which, of course, cannot be applied in actual reality.

The question now is where does this humanistic surplus, which expands somewhat on the number of immigrants the German state can accept, actually come from? The answer is to be found in the interview itself—more precisely, in a single word mentioned but once the entire time—and astonishingly, by the chairwoman of the right-wing party: “solidarity”.

Solidarity: towards an afterlife

Such an obvious silence around this word shouldn't come as a surprise. Solidarity is a key concept of the Left, a sort of fundamental ideological paradigm from which historical Left projects, revolutionary or reformist, communist, socialist, anarchist, or in some other way Leftist, have drawn their political strength and socially formative power. It was a weapon in the class struggle, a shield against predatory capitalist exploitation, a means of survival in times of scarcity. It even wrote codes of law and fought for justice in courts and tribunals. But above all, solidarity as a modern political force represented that very special addition that would give various forms of human togetherness a historically specific character of the social. What in the age of industrial modernity was called society would not have been possible without solidarity.

How much of that solidarity has survived in today's democracies after decades of neoliberal transformations? Not much, but just enough to make this small difference between "left" and "right", or better, to keep the memory of this difference alive. Yet this miserable leftover of what once was solidarity, barely sufficient to maintain even a modest amount of humanitarian empathy, is most certainly not enough to confront the problem of migration on any political level. Without being able to breathe new life into its longstanding ideal of solidarity the Left is doomed merely to opportunistically following the liberal democratic mainstream as it reduces the challenge of migration to a matter of empty sophistry; how many, whom precisely, and for how long?

If we can still imagine a genuine politics of solidarity, can it really be, when confronting a challenge as formidable as migration, anything but extremist? Not because it must assume that the instruments of a liberal democratic state may not be able to cope with this challenge, but rather because these same instruments—borders, detention facilities, deportation mechanisms, capacities of economic, social and cultural integration, etc.—actively shape the object with which they are supposed to cope.

They—or more precisely, those who make democratically legitimized use of these instruments—make the human fact of migration appear like a sort of “bare life moving”, a form of human life that, beyond its juridical inclusion/exclusion, is also stripped of its entire existential meaning as well as deprived of its political subjectivity. If the existential experience of one’s own finitude, one that borders on the ontological dimension of a “being-towards-death”, has ever had any social and political meaning, then this meaning is epitomized in the experience of migration and taking refuge. Migrants and refugees have not simply escaped fatal poverty or violent death from war, they carry this experience of human finitude and bring with them to all of their destinations. It is this experience that the solidarity at these destinations must be able to socially encounter and politically address in order to become genuinely political. Instead of emphatically mobilizing hospitality, which only further victimizes migrants, it must be able to politically activate the social truth of their existential experience, which is more fundamental than the bundle of cultural differences the migrants might have brought along with them. This is also the only way to generate the political subjectivity of migrants. It won’t emerge as a successful outcome of their own struggle for recognition from an already given political subject—the publics and political parties of the “democratic world”—but through an active sharing of a common political cause that fundamentally transforms the very perception of political reality and the existing relation between the real and the possible. At this point, a truly political solidarity cannot but become extremist. For what it identifies with when it encounters the migrant’s experience of existential finitude is the experience of its own impossibility within the given order; that is, the finitude of that same society for which it once constituted the very core.¹¹

11. This might go some way in explaining why the cultural differences of the migrants instill so much fear among the citizens of the Western democracies. They function as a sort of fetish, whose original role in the psychic economy of a person is to suppress and make bearable another more fundamental fear and the contradictions it creates—the fear of castration. The exaggerated fear of the cultural incompatibility of immigrants has a similar fetishistic function, to calm a more fundamental trauma, the one of the terminal loss of society.

Is there anything solidarity can do about it? It might try to do what people usually do when faced with a threat to their existence. They escape the conditions in which they cannot survive, which is what these days makes them into migrants. And so shall solidarity do, escape the socially emptied shells of the existing democracies, abandon that sinking boat—not because it is too full of foreigners, but because it is too empty of social meaning. If the struggle for survival is called extremism, so be it.

But what is actually the alternative? Obviously, there is nothing else to be done than to go on with the struggle for hegemony within the existing framework of a democratic nation state by making use of all the sophistry available, in the hopes of winning and finally, ruling. And ruling what? A void.

Ruling beyond society

Ruling the Void is the title of Peter Mair's book on the terminal crisis of what he suggests is a "hollowed out" Western democracy. It begins with the words: "The age of party democracy is passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form."¹²

What Mair actually has in mind with this clear and univocal diagnosis is the widening gap between citizens and their democratically elected representatives—more precisely, the ruling elites recruited from and installed into power by the political parties. The gap in fact opened up with the mutual withdrawal of both sides. The parties and the political elites have withdrawn from civil society, and more generally from their democratic accountability, and moved towards the realm of government and the state. At the same time a parallel disengagement of the citizenry also developed, for they, too, withdrew from the realm of parties and conventional politics. What was once the common world of democracy, in which political parties represented the voice of the popular will while

12. Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London, New York: Verso, 2013), 1.

the people (demos) was their genuine point of origin in which they were deeply socially embedded, has now fallen apart. Now Mair speaks of two separate worlds: a world of citizens and a world of politicians and parties, and claims that interaction between these two worlds is steadily diminishing.

Of course this development has further consequences. The farther the parties have moved away from their voters, the closer they have moved to each other. The result is not only the emergence of a new governing class, in which politicians of different parties easily gather and unite around their common interests, but the parties themselves increasingly tend to echo each other and blur clear policy choices. Although there still exists a sharply defined choice between competing leaders, there is less and less choice in terms of policy. Competition in these circumstances can be intense and hard-fought; but, as Mair argues, it closely resembles the kind of competition in sports, like we find in football matches or horse races: “sharp, exciting, and even pleasing the spectators, but ultimately lacking in substantive meaning.”¹³ The general elimination of any real opposition in contemporary democracies, while hardly new, finds even more validity and relevance today. Mair and Richard Katz call it a “government by cartel”, the situation that emerges and prevails when “no meaningful differences divide the party protagonists, however vigorously they may at times compete with one another.”¹⁴ The example of the leaders of two German parties occupying the opposite spectrums of German party politics herein is a prime illustration of this condition. Mair describes it as a hollowing out of democratic party government or, in more general terms, the hollowing out of mass democracy itself. For him, this is a consequence of two general trends: individualization and globalization. In the first case at stake is an emptying out of the social content of party democracies; and concretely, an erosion of its socially cohesive infrastructure, that which originally constituted the social basis for mass democracy, like trade unions, churches, clubs, farming groups and other, similar networks of social cohesion. In fact, it is an erosion of all traditional forms of social solidarity.

13. Ibid., 68.

14. Ibid.

In political terms, individualization is for Mair a secular disintegration of the modern demos. But the process of this transformation goes far deeper. It affects the very essence of what society is. After decades of what is known as the neoliberal dismantling of the social welfare state it might well be true that Margaret Thatcher, who was the main political strategist and the personification of such a neoliberal policy, was ultimately right when she said there is no such thing as society.¹⁵ With this in mind, we can finally understand what is actually meant by the “void” over which, as Mair suggests, politicians rule today. Certainly it is a genuine political space, but of such a character that all of the performative power that is deployed within by the rhetorical virtuosity of the democratic political elites, however agonistic or radical, just suffices to reproduce their dominion over this space, but is not enough to recreate its social content. In short, it no longer means ruling over a society but, literally, ruling beyond society.

This is closely connected to the second general trend that has effected the void of the social—globalization—which implies the ever-declining ability of today’s rulers of democratic nation states to create their own autonomous policies, both on general social and specific economic issues. As a result, the crucial political decisions are no longer made by the party elites, but rather by the so-called non-majoritarian elite institutions; like, on the national level, central banks and various regulatory agencies; and internationally, the global financial institutions and transnational political constructions like the European Union.

The nation state, once the very seat of popular democracy, has lost both its political voice and its economic power. The political elites that once held sway within and beyond the borders of

15. Although it has been quoted many times it is still worth remembering time and again: After complaining about people who, as she states, expect government to solve their problems, like finding a job or home, Margaret Thatcher concludes: “... and so they are casting their problems on society—and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first.” Margaret Thatcher, Interview for *Woman’s Own*, September 23, 1987, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>.

their nation states and were at the same time accountable to their national electorates now find themselves in an increasingly difficult predicament: either they follow the social interests of their voters and, as a consequence, trigger a flight of capital that undermines the economic integrity of the nation; or they attract the capital that further undermines social welfare and destroys whatever is left of society. In such a conundrum, an empty sophistry is all that is left to appease both the people that elected them and the global capital to which they are bound.

Sophism as border

One of the most precise indicators by which to measure today's intellectual and political regression of the modest, liberal Left is its moralistic outrage over the global proliferation of new walls ("worse than the Berlin one"). While it still makes some sense to remind ourselves how empty the promises of a better world after the collapse of Communism and the closing of the Cold War divide were, and how violent and unjust so-called democratic normality is, it also serves to blind us entirely to the real meaning and extraordinary political and economic importance of contemporary borders. Needless to say, today's processes of global migration cannot be properly addressed, neither theoretically nor as a political issue, without being critically reflected through the prism of borders.

A border is all but a clear-cut line separating distinct territories and preventing the free movement of people, objects and capital. Rather it is a device that articulates and regulates these movements. As such, borders create and give shape to the heterogeneous time and space of today's global and postcolonial capitalism. This is the central thesis of Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's *Border as Method*.¹⁶ It reveals the key role borders play in establishing different migration regimes across the world, and the way these regimes partake in the production of labour—and the power of it—as a commodity.

16. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2013), ix.

If globalization is inconceivable without an enormous increase in the forms and scope of mobility, than this mobility is unthinkable without borders as the main instrument of its regulation as well as of its economic and political utilization. But in order to understand this, one must first abandon the still prevalent notion of border as a mere geopolitical phenomenon, and concretely, as a linear boundary that is situated along the margins separating geopolitical unities from one another. Border, on the contrary, is everywhere within, and has an extraordinary depth in both the spatial and temporal sense. In fact, it is essentially heterogeneous, which means that it might have many faces and layers: symbolic, linguistic, cultural, etc. And it might be endlessly multiplied.

Understood this way the concept of border offers us an indication of the true teleological ratio of all the debates on migrants and refugees that are being so vehemently held in the publics and parliaments of the Western nation states. At stake is not a democratic deliberation on the collective interests that will sooner or later result in a rational decision on a proper migrant policy, concretely, around a “rational” level of border porosity (or impermeability). These debates don’t discuss borders, they are the very borders themselves; or more precisely, they are but the very practice of bordering. The fact that they usually end in sophistry has nothing to do with the failure of their protagonists to make a rational choice on the matter of migration. On the contrary, this sophistry is perfectly in line with the very teleology of these debates. As outlined at the beginning, sophistic paradoxes emerge or arise out of the vagueness of their pivotal concepts. In other words, these concepts are borderline cases, blurred bands that can’t at any point be definitively distinguished from other concepts. And the borders of today are just such bands: vague, blurred, imprecise, unstable; and in any case, far from the idea of a sharp and definitive cut-off line. This is why there can be no rational answer to the question of how many migrants might enter the community through its border, precisely who of them might do so (in terms of marketable skills, cultural adaptability, or in view of security and humanitarian reasons), and for how long they might be permitted to remain within?

But the political elites, democratically granted the right to answer these questions, keep on promising what they can't deliver. This, however, doesn't make them superfluous. They still serve a purpose, but a purpose in a system in which they are instrumental far beyond the scope of their democratic legitimacy. This is because the borders they constantly redraw and that regulate the processes of migration are themselves in the service of contemporary global capitalism. The logic of its economic functioning, as well as of its political reproduction, can no longer be reduced to the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion nor presented in terms of a clear-cut division between inside and outside—a logic that, however at odds with reality today, still lies at the ideological core of the liberal democratic nation state, assures its economic justification, and generates dominant forms of political subjectivation within its borders. The claim to equal rights, the principle of the rule of law, the paradigm of a national economy (with or without distributive justice within) and finally, the political model of parliamentary democracy, personified as a whole in the figure of worker/citizen in which a historically particular mode of production has found its corresponding, equally historically particular form of political subjectivity—all of that has been considered possible only within the borders of a modern nation state capable of including all that helps it survive and grow, and excluding what could in any way undermine its very existence. The problem is, however, that contemporary processes of migration challenge the model of nation state on all these levels because they, like the globalization of which they are the cause and effect, necessarily evade the logic of inclusion/exclusion, together with all of the ideologico-political baggage that goes with it.

One example particularly proves this: the practice of detention institutionally embodied in the form of the detention camp. Such a camp is largely understood as a site of sovereign exception that has its origins in the juridico-political concept of “state of exception”. Confining migrants and refugees in such a detention facility renders them legally included, precisely by virtue of simultaneously excluding them from the same legal order.¹⁷

17. Here I rely on Mezzadra and Neilson's critical analyses of Giorgio Agamben's concept of detention camp as elaborated in his *Homo Sacer*. Ibid., 142.

Yet this legally and existentially paradoxical space acquires an essentially different meaning when put in the context of the way global capitalism today manages labour markets. Here it becomes an instrument of migration control that serves to regulate the time and speed of the migrant's transition into the labour market. Mezzadra and Neilson even call such detention camps "decompression chambers".¹⁸ They argue that these and similar institutions of administrative detention are being increasingly deployed beyond the boundaries of nation states as a form of benching, a practice of the so-called body shopping system: workers are being temporarily withdrawn from labour markets and held in reserve, which pushes the price of their labour up and increases demand. Used this way, as a device employed by the bordering regime—literally as a temporal border—the detention camp serves the production and reproduction of labour power as commodity far more than it does the exercising of sovereign power on bare life.¹⁹

This, however, radically changes the mainstream Left's liberal perception of migrants. Instead of being seen exclusively as innocent victims of exclusion by a sovereign power, they also turn out to be commodified objects of differential inclusion in the interest of capital. This shift in focus quickly reveals the limits of juridical ideology that has so far dominated the liberal Left's discourse on migrants resulting, by and large, in their victimization. This has had two major effects on the general debate on migration: the first is the depoliticization of the migrants themselves. Precisely in the figure of excluded citizens, a figure imposed on them by the juridical ideology, they are deprived of their political subjectification and surrendered to the political will of an already established sovereign power. At the same time they are surrendered—literally—to its mercy. This is the second effect of their victimization—a turn to humanitarianism. In both cases political debates on migration end in sophistry: how much empathy can a sovereign power exercise without losing its legitimacy vis-à-vis the moral conscience of its citizens (or that of the entire world), the so-called values

18. *Ibid.*, 149.

19. *Ibid.*, 150.

of its (Western) civilization, God himself; or simply vis-à-vis the profit interests of its entrepreneurial class? On the level of concrete political decision-making this sophistry is instrumentalized in the practical differentiation between so-called economic migrants on the one hand, and refugees and asylum seekers on the other. But its true origin lays in the ever-widening gap between two major figures of global capitalism and its political order today—"worker" and "citizen". The sophistry we are talking about here is in fact the result of a desperate attempt of the ruling political elites to close this gap into which their democratic legitimacy is collapsing. This same sophistry reveals the last, decadent phase of the so-called struggle for recognition, the paradigm that has for decades determined the language of political demands and thus the stakes of contemporary political struggles. The sophistic character of its political claims marks the historical moment in which the struggle for recognition has come to exhaust its emancipatory potentials. What has finally failed is a deeply culturalized liberal inclusivism grounded in the belief that the realm of freedom and justice has been, and will further be, expanded exponentially with every new inclusion of its formerly excluded outside—that is, with the subsequent inclusion of women, people of colour, ethnic and sexual minorities, etc.²⁰ Migration as a global phenomenon succeeds to evade the teleology of this emancipatory developmentalism.

20. This is clearly a subtle reference to Judith Butler's concept of universality, which in the form of cultural translation, can be articulated only as a response to its excluded outside. See especially Judith Butler, "Universality in culture," in *For love of country: Debating the limits of patriotism* (Martha C. Nussbaum with respondents), ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 45–52.

Don't wait, walk!

No story of migrants as the most paradigmatic socio-political embodiment of global mobility is complete without taking into consideration its negative counterpart—the figure of an absolute immobility rhetorically epitomized in the metaphor of those “left behind”. It is a picture of a failed historical movement, a sort of social stasis. And it is no less politically charged than the picture of the mass movement of migrants and refugees. Moreover, it immediately triggers the association of millions of former industrial workers in the heart of the so-called Western world who have lost their jobs and their way of life due to globalization; lost concretely through the deindustrialization that is the result of outsourcing industrial production overseas to sources of cheap labour; or, on the contrary, through the influx of this same cheap—migrant—labour. As is well known, these masses of jobless industrial workers with no material ground on which to stand and no future to look forward to provide the most powerful social source of right-wing political mobilization. Yet this social condition is paralleled by another more sublime condition, a sort of spiritual stasis condensed in the image of a spirit that has also been left behind.

Now, speaking of spirits, we all know there is no spirit like the German spirit. It is, without a doubt, the most prominent among all the spirits that have ever animated the world: the most ambitious, most profound in its self-reflection, the most dialectical and even the longest-lived. But there is another feature that distinguishes the German spirit, and that is its most intimate relation to language, one established more than 200 years ago, in the time of the German Romantics. Yet what is less well known is that the German spirit had already shown an extraordinary openness to what it called the foreign (*das Fremde*). Its genuine medium, the German language, saw the only chance for its development (*Bildung* in all the richness of its cultural and social meanings) in welcoming influences from foreign languages; or, as one theorist of translation put it, in the effort “to fertilize what is one’s Own through the mediation of what is Foreign”.²¹

21. Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 4.

This is an extraordinary ideological legacy of the German spirit, one that is today, at least in the eyes of its most faithful inheritors, probably the main reason this spirit (or what still remains of it) doesn't seem so endangered by the foreign that the migrants bring with them.²² Yet its main enemy, the one that threatens it with certain death, is also a product of globalization; in fact, it is its *lingua franca*, the English language.

Jürgen Trabant, probably the most prominent expert on German romantic philosophy of language, sees the German language today being left, quite literally, behind on the platform. He uses the explicit metaphor of the taillights of a departing luxury train, in which global English is seated, slowly pulling away into the distance. For Trabant, however, the struggle of and for the German language—and the German spirit in it—is already over. It is lost, and any further debate on the matter is superfluous.²³ Nevertheless, he still makes the effort to tell us the story of the historical “re-vernacularization” of German and other European languages.²⁴ At stake is a new socio-linguistic and cultural condition that resembles the Europe of the Middle Ages, when Latin was used across all of the higher strata of social, political and intellectual life, while the lower classes continued speaking old vernaculars. Today it is English that has taken the place and role of Latin. It is spoken in all of the higher and more important discourses in today's Europe, while the national languages, including the two strongest among them—German and French—have increasingly retreated into the background of everyday life and less important discourses.

Trabant understands this transformation as a “cultural revolution” that divides society into two linguistically differentiated classes: above, an elite, for which English is the language of

22. The fear of *Überfremdung* (being overrun with foreigners) that is typical of German right-wing populist propaganda definitively does not belong to the great inheritance of German romanticism.

23. Jürgen Trabant, “Über abgefahrne Züge, das Deutsche und andere Sprachen der Wissenschaft“, *Denkströme. Journal der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 6 (2011).

24. See Jürgen Trabant, *Globalesisch oder was? Ein Plädoyer für Europas Sprachen* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2014).

knowledge, prestige, power and success; and below, another for the rest, a national language for the practicalities of everyday life. He sees this as a process of social regression and cultural decline—and one that also reflects global injustice.²⁵ While everybody else has to speak English, the “Anglo-world” no longer learns other languages, which makes it provincial, too: “The Masters of the Universe are increasingly provincial monolinguals”.²⁶

This is the condition—global and local, linguistic and spiritual—in which migrants move towards their destinations today. What they find upon arrival is a Western democratic nation state; but this state is not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, full of humanity’s most precious, universal values, which they might be allowed to appropriate and enjoy only if they are properly integrated. The local national language, which they are expected to adopt once there, is no longer what it once was. It has been defeated on its own territory, into which it now, after being ousted from its most important sites, goes into hiding from the mighty conqueror. Similarly, the spirit that brought this language into the world, that cared for, nurtured and watched it grow and develop, preserved the memory of its glory and promised it the brightest of futures, has in the meantime evaporated. Hegel’s vision of a national spirit (*Volksgeist*) as a dialectical moment in the development and articulation of the world spirit (*Weltgeist*), a vision in which the historical process of universalization implied a genuine continuity between what we call today the local and the global, and in which the world spirit was deployed as a superstructural complement to the economies and geopolitics of the world order, of the notorious Westphalian

25. Trabandt’s thesis on the re-vernacularization of European national languages is above all a call for resistance against “the program of re-education into ‘global English’ (*Globalesisch*)”, in short, it is a call for resistance against what he sees as the disastrous social and cultural effects of globalization. For him, such a resistance implies a restriction on multilingualism “that should be tamed and controlled”, as well as the promotion and funding of translations from national languages into English. It also directly addresses a political agent expected to organize and conduct this resistance—a protectionist nation-state. Trabandt, “Über abgefahrene Züge,” *ibid.*, 18.

26. *Ibid.*

cluster of sovereign nation states, has been broken, together with the continuity it once promised. The new vernaculars are no longer able to enclose and define a territory and consequently impose their hegemony on it. Nor can they guarantee any spiritual—cultural, in today’s parlance—continuity between the local and the global, either. Moreover, a new vernacular isn’t able, via a narrative, to create a history and to map and enclose, within a common historical temporality, a defined area. Such was one of the main tasks of the old national languages that once thrived and rose from the Middle Age vernaculars. Thus the speakers of these languages were provided with the ability to connect their own social present not only with a distant—both temporally and culturally—past, but also with the histories of those speaking other languages, and further, to envision a common, universal history—one that Reinhart Koselleck describes in terms of a “collective singular”.

Today, however, one who speaks a new vernacular is literally out of both space and time. One literally becomes a socio-politically groundless and at the same time ahistorical creature. This is what is actually meant by the metaphor referring to those “left behind”—left behind in a decadent national monolinguality in which they can only reproduce their global subalternity. Still, they might have their own national culture, a national history, a national art, etc., but this culture, this history or this art have all become a sort of non-translatable autistic trash, something that can no longer be integrated into the narratives of global modernity. These new vernaculars are now the desolate leftovers of what once was a nation, a national language, a national spirit or culture, a national history or whatever. Which is why the imperative of integration imposed on migrants today by the democratic publics and political elites of the Western nation states is utter nonsense—or better, mere sophistry.

But does it make more sense then to allow those vernacularized masses waiting on the platform for the next right-wing demagogue to lead them—lead us—into a common fascist future?

At this point we should remember what happened in the summer of 2015 at Budapest's main train station, where masses of migrants and refugees finally decided, after being trapped there for days, to break out and start their walk to freedom. Since they were blocked there by that same ideology and that same political power that has now left the local losers of globalization behind on the same historical platform, they might consider taking their fellow proletarians along with them next time. This would be an act of solidarity, one that has no territory nor historical time of its own. Indeed, both have to be yet invented.

[Instead of an Epilogue] With the Blow of a Paint- brush: Contemporary Fascism and the Limits of Historical Analogy

Is there such thing as contemporary fascism? Our major difficulty in trying to answer this question is that we rely almost exclusively on historical analogy. We are like dogmatic philosophical descriptivists who believe that the meaning of the word “fascism” was defined long ago by a certain set of descriptive features, and we now meticulously explore reality in search of similar ones. While these days reality, for its part, offers ever more socioeconomic, political, and cultural points of resemblance to historical fascism, they never fully converge. As a result we must constantly abstain from naming the condition under which we live “fascist.”

Take the right-wing regimes flourishing in Eastern and South-eastern Europe, in countries like Poland, Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia. These regimes legitimate their rule with the most extreme nationalist rhetoric, purge their countries of minorities, wage racism-fueled wars with their neighbors, follow the logic of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) in their cultural policies, actively erase the memory of anti-fascist struggles, rename their streets and squares after notorious fascists and Nazi collaborators from the Second World War, rewrite their school textbooks from a pro-fascist angle... and yet, all this somehow fails to justify calling these societies fascist. The people living in these countries enjoy many liberal freedoms and democratic rights.

They get their information from various independent media sources, vote in democratic elections, and freely choose their parliamentary representatives and governments. These nations are even admitted into the European Union. So our talk of “fascism” in these places remains limited to a vague historical analogy. In light of this, is there any reason to still use the word “fascism” today?

In fact, this kind of comparison can productively enhance our understanding of social reality, but only if we refuse to be led astray by naive optimism, in both the historical and conceptual senses.

When it comes to history, this naive optimism consists in the belief that the worst is behind us. But there is a distinct possibility that what happened less than a century ago in Europe was no more than a fascist proof-of-concept, and that a much worse form of that evil could lie ahead. This rarely occurs to us, which tremendously restricts the value of the analogy. We understand fascism only retrospectively, making us blind to the fascism to come.

The analogy also has a conceptual shortcoming. There is a danger in thinking that an accurate, objective *analysis* of the fascist tendencies in a given society will make us aware of their threat to the very survival of people and society as such. What we have learned from historical fascism is that those who studied it—who understood fascist ideology and the political and psychological mechanisms of its realization—were not only weak when it came to confronting its challenges. They also failed to recognize its danger in time, even though the fascists never hid their true intentions. The best example was provided by Mussolini in 1922, in his newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*: “The democrats of *Il Mondo* want to know our program?” he snarled in response to an inquiry from *Il Mondo*, a liberal newspaper. “It is to break the bones of the democrats of *Il Mondo*.” People were openly told what would happen to them, but, for whatever reason, they were still unable to prevent it from happening to them. This is to say that when we think about contemporary fascism as analogous to historical fascism, we should focus on the conditions of its subjective misrecognition.

In short: it is not a question of what in our social reality resembles fascism from the past, but rather what deceives us into failing to recognize its coming from the future.

This contradiction is clear whenever we are told to take fascism seriously. Quite the contrary: fascism is a phenomenon most likely to be misrecognized by taking it too seriously. One cannot account for it, that is, without accounting for fascism's intrinsic ridiculousness. This is what any serious analysis of its contemporary forms should consider. Unfortunately, the social sciences are poorly equipped to reflect on social life from the perspective of comedy. Not the arts, however. Think of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*. Or of Hannah Arendt when she took as the motto for *Eichmann in Jerusalem* a few verses from Bertolt Brecht's famous 1933 poem "O Germany, Pale Mother," of which one reads: "O Germany—Hearing the speeches that ring from your house, one laughs."

There is no reason not to laugh while analyzing fascist tendencies in our contemporary societies. Even when it comes to one of the most important topics of such analysis—the class composition and sociopolitical dynamics that give rise to and foster these tendencies—we need not abstain from laughing. Contemporary parallels to the historical burlesques of Hitler and Mussolini make us laugh while simultaneously confirming the looming fascist threat.

I.

Let us imagine a Don Quixote of our time who is a painter, a male painter of course, and a quite famous one, at least locally. He has already been added to his nation's art historical canon, admitted to its Academy of Art and Sciences, declared emeritus of the local Faculty of Fine Arts. His oil paintings feature prominently in the permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Modern Art. His drawings decorate the Parliament building and the living rooms of the local elite. He also enjoys a comfortable life in a villa in the wealthy district of the capital, as well as many forms of cultural and social recognition, from national awards to honorary positions. Local media regularly ask for his opinion on issues other than fine art, so he is also considered a

sort of political person. And yet this otherwise successful and prominent person is in fact deeply unhappy. All his glory and even his very identity as an artist miraculously evaporate beyond the boundaries of his national culture. Abroad, in what he calls the “misty bubble” of the global art scene, he is simply a nobody.

However, he does not quietly accept this. He regularly vents his hatred for the international art world, calling it decadent, corrupt, and aesthetically irrelevant, and he accuses his fellow artists, who enjoy a measure of international recognition, of not only having sold their souls to the global art market and its fashionable trends, but also of having betrayed their national cultures. Although he would normally speak with disgust of any sort of artistic performance or activist art, he went so far as to stage a sort of performance of his own. He attended the opening of an international exhibition in the capital wearing a T-shirt with the slogan: “An artist who cannot speak English is still an artist.” He verbally harassed the female curator. The audience didn’t take him seriously and even laughed at him, which is why he is now considering more radical acts like destroying artworks by his internationally recognized colleagues. But his old friend, a local poet—himself deeply disappointed by the marginalization of his national language and its poetry within the globalized culture of a younger generation—strongly advises him against it. Tilting at windmills, says the poet, would make him even more ridiculous.

Our painter, however, is not Don Quixote until he finds his Sancho Panza, that little angry man who lost his job after the factory he worked for moved to another side of the world, and who now, watching his country being flooded by cheap migrant labor, cannot hope for a new one. It is true that he has never been rich and famous like the painter, but now he is even poorer and more irrelevant than ever. This is why, despite all their differences, these men have something strong in common: memories of a better past and the will to restore it. It is a past of which they were the heroes, one as a painter and the other as a worker, two historical figures of a local industrial modernity who perfectly epitomized its social order: above, the cultural elite responsible for the ideological reproduction of society, and below, the working class, providing its economic reproduction.

Both were unified within the political frame of a then more or less welfare nation-state. This was the perfect world of their youth—transparent, manageable, stable, and safe. Not only did they both know their proper place in society and the world as a whole; they were also able to clearly discern the three main dimensions of linear time as one and the same history: yesterday was a bad past, today is a good present, and tomorrow will be a better future. Their life in this world was undoubtedly unique, but it was at the same time universal—in other words, absolutely translatable and commensurable. They lived in their own society, their own nation-state and culture; they spoke their own language, painted their own history of art, and worked in their own Fordist factories. As did, ostensibly, everyone else in the world. And so they shared something crucial, both among themselves and with the whole world: a deep feeling of national belonging—that is, of belonging to an imagined community bound by a common narrative full of great rulers, tragic heroes, glorious events, and priceless cultural achievements. While the painter truly believed in this story, the worker believed that the painter knew best what to believe in.

But one day they realized that this world had gone and that they were both—each in his own particular sphere—left behind. Now they watch helplessly as their language crumbles into a premodern vernacular, their culture gets trashed by their own kids, their jobs are taken away, and their future becomes worse than their past. Yet they haven't given up. They have stayed put, each in his sphere, angry but self-confident because they have survived their attempted deconstruction by the most advanced anti-essentialist theories and by the neoliberal experiments of their “glocal” elites; they have survived precarization, globalization, gentrification, flexibilization, the banks, terrorism, multiculturalism, the European Union, and even the final victory of liberal democracy.

Cervantes's *Don Quixote* had a lunatic obsession with chivalric romances, and this makes for a nice parallel with our painter's desire for authenticity and his identification with the great heroes of his national culture. Even the former industrial worker playing Sancho Panza might recover some functional identity again, at least culturally. And it seems that they can stay there, each in his particular sphere, forever. Unless someone brings them together.

For this we will need a third figure: a politician promising a better future, if only in the form of a restoration of a better past. In this case, the adventures of our painter and worker won't be any less funny. But they will evoke a certain sense of real danger. This danger still won't be the danger of fascism, however. For this, a fourth figure is needed, one that will back the politician's promises with the material power—that is, with capital.

In his *The Economy and Class Structure of German Fascism*, Alfred Sohn-Rethel clearly demonstrated how the monopoly forces of a crisis-ridden German capitalism backed the Nazi Party in order to establish a new regime of accumulation that would allow them to transfer their losses to society by means of the state—a bailout, in today's parlance. This is what essentially paved the way for fascist dictatorship. It offered a solution to the economically generated crisis of the system. Thus, what first brought fascism onto the stage of modern history was its ability to manage the weaknesses of its political partners.

If that is so, there is no reason why fascism shouldn't be able to do it again, helping those two pitiful creatures left on the sideline of history by bringing them together and giving them each a role in its own story. Don Quixote will be given the chance to tilt at windmills again, but no longer as the hero of a burlesque. This time the painter will crush the rotten windmills of our democracy... with a single blow of his paintbrush.

II.

Although this historical analogy might successfully laugh us into a proper recognition of the fascist tendencies in our contemporary era, it alone cannot prepare us for fascism's real threat. Something more is needed, a certain purely subjective predisposition.

This is a problem with which George Orwell dealt long ago. In March 1940, he published a review of the English translation of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in *New English Weekly*.¹

1. George Orwell, "Review of *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler," available in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Agnus, vol. 2 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968).

It was the second British edition of the book. The first, which had been published only a year earlier, was edited, as Orwell states, “from a pro-Hitler angle.” Thus in 1939—the year when WWII officially started—Adolf Hitler was still a respectable German politician in Great Britain. Orwell points out that the intention of the translator’s preface to the first edition was “to tone down the book’s ferocity and present Hitler in as kindly a light as possible.” “The property-owning classes,” as he writes, “were willing to forgive him almost anything.” For the Right—and also for many on the Left—National Socialism was at that time merely a version of Conservatism.

What is even more frightening about this story is that the radical change Hitler’s public image would undergo (from a conservative politician to a dangerous fascist) had nothing to do with any change in his ideas. On the contrary! Orwell stresses that by 1939, Hitler’s opinions and political aims had hardly changed for more than fifteen years: “a thing that strikes one is the rigidity of his mind, the way in which his world-view doesn’t develop.” But for Orwell in March 1939 it is already perfectly clear that the Russo-German pact represents no more than an alteration of a timetable. The plan that Hitler laid down in *Mein Kampf* was to smash Russia first, and England afterwards: “But Russia’s turn will come [...] that, no doubt, is how Hitler sees it.” All that is necessary for Orwell to recognize the fascism coming from the future is to read the words of a fascist intent on making this future. There is no need to invest in a rhetoric of the “sober-analysis-of-contemporary-*realpolitik*” variety. Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* is for Orwell “the fixed vision of a monomaniac and not likely to be much affected by temporary manoeuvres of power politics.”

When it comes to the logic of fascist *realpolitik*, the so-called realist approach is worse than ill-advised, it is complicit. After the war, in spring 1946, Orwell wrote an article about the American philosopher and political theorist James Burnham, who had published multiple books and numerous articles during the course of WWII.² In the article, Orwell highlighted Burnham’s many failures to predict the real historical unfolding of the war.

2. George Orwell, “Second Thoughts on James Burnham,” in *ibid.*, vol. 4.

In his book *The Managerial Revolution*—written partly during the second half of 1940, when the Germans had overrun Western Europe and were bombing Britain—Burnham prophesied a German victory, a postponement of the Russo-German war until after Britain was defeated, and the subsequent defeat of Russia. Then in a note written for the British edition of the book at the end of 1941—when the Germans were in the suburbs of Moscow—Burnham declared that Russia’s defeat was inevitable. In a short article written for the *Partisan Review* in 1944—soon after the signing of a new Russo-Japanese treaty—Burnham predicted that the Soviets would join forces with the Japanese against the United States. Then in the winter of 1944—when the Red Army was advancing rapidly in Eastern Europe while the Western Allies were still held up in Italy and northern France—Burnham published another *Partisan Review* article predicting that the Russians would conquer the whole world... and so on. “At each point,” writes Orwell, “Burnham is predicting a continuation of the thing that is currently happening.” This, for Orwell, represents “a major mental disease,” the roots of which lie “partly in cowardice and partly in the worship of power.” In each case Burnham was obeying the same instinct: to bow down before the conqueror of the moment and to accept the existing trend as irreversible. Such an attitude toward historical and political events—which, according to Orwell, prevailed among intellectuals at the time—is at the very core of the historically catastrophic misperception of the fascist threat. It shows, for Orwell, the damage done to any sense of reality by the cultivation of what is called “realism,” which is but an effect of a total submission of one’s own common sense, not so much to the logic of objective reality, but rather to the existing power relations of which this so-called objective reality is a reified expression.

But not all thinking people succumb to such “realism.” In contrast to Burnham, Orwell identifies Jack London as an intellectual who was sensitive to the dangers of fascism. Reviewing his 1909 book, *The Iron Heel*, in the spring of 1940, Orwell argues against the opinion, common at the time, that London’s novel forecasted the coming of Hitler.³ For Orwell, it was merely a tale of capitalist oppression. London had accepted the main ideas of Marxism,

3. George Orwell, “Prophecies of Fascism,” in *ibid.*, vol. 2.

but only intellectually. Orwell emphasized that, temperamentally, London was very different from the majority of Marxists. "With his love of violence and physical strength, his belief in 'natural aristocracy,' his animal-worship and exaltation of the primitive," Orwell reasoned, London, "had in him what some might fairly call a Fascist strain." Yet far from making London susceptible to fascism, "this probably helped him to understand just how the possessing class would behave when once they were seriously menaced." The writer of this science-fiction novel succeeds exactly where, for Orwell, the majority of Marxists, or as he calls them "Marxian Socialists," have fallen short. They "failed to see any danger in Fascism until they themselves were at the gate of the concentration camp." But Jack London, Orwell is convinced, would not have made the same mistake: "His instincts would have warned him that Hitler was dangerous."

Returning now to the question of what subjective predispositions are required for a proper recognition of the fascist threat, we might draw a provisional conclusion, one that is sobering and deeply disturbing:

A person who has some sort of affinity toward fascists or shares with them certain character traits will be more likely to properly perceive the danger of fascism than someone who is clearly different from them. Being civilized, tolerant, and reasonable won't help us much in recognizing the fascist threat. Quite the contrary: a "wild" person will more quickly react to such a threat than a civilized one. Someone with an aggressive, radical character, a sort of extremist, will better deal with fascism than someone who is peaceful, tolerant, and conciliatory.

When it comes to fascism, our intellectual abilities confront their own limits. A purely intellectual attitude toward fascism is a handicap. A rational insight into the "real state of things" is useful only insofar as it prepares the will to openly confront it, even if this will is completely irrational. The same applies to so-called objective political analysis, whether it follows some verified socio-scientific paradigm or is based on critically examined historical experience. Here, knowledge or wisdom are less reliable than instinct or childish naïveté.

We also shouldn't forget about ordinary cowardice or the opportunistic worship of power. Both are mostly to blame for our blindness toward fascism, if only because they are so common.

And finally, there is the widespread fascination with fascist ideas and visions, even though they are often thoroughly ridiculous. Together with Orwell, one can only laugh at Adolf Hitler's vision of "a state of 250 million Germans with plenty of 'living room' (stretching to Afghanistan or thereabouts), a horrible brainless empire in which, essentially, nothing ever happens except the training of young men for war and the endless breeding of fresh cannon-fodder."⁴

Although Orwell showed no interest in Hitler's visions, he was deeply impressed by his image, by the picture of an acutely suffering man, a martyr, Christ crucified, the self-sacrificing hero fighting against impossible odds. "One feels [...] that he is fighting against destiny, that he *can't* win, and yet that he somehow deserves to," writes Orwell, openly admitting that he has never been able to dislike Hitler. Yet he immediately adds: "I have reflected that I would certainly kill him if I could get within reach of him."⁵ In fact, Bertolt Brecht said the same; directly after the verses quoted above, Brecht wrote: "But whoever sees you, reaches for his knife."

Drawing analogies between contemporary fascism and historical fascism is far from our worst analytic tool for confronting the dangers of today's crisis-ridden global capitalism. So we might as well make productive use of it, but only insofar as we have another tool at hand—a knife.

4. Orwell, "Review of *Mein Kampf*," in *ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

Sources / Acknowledgements

[Instead of a Prologue]

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Chapter I

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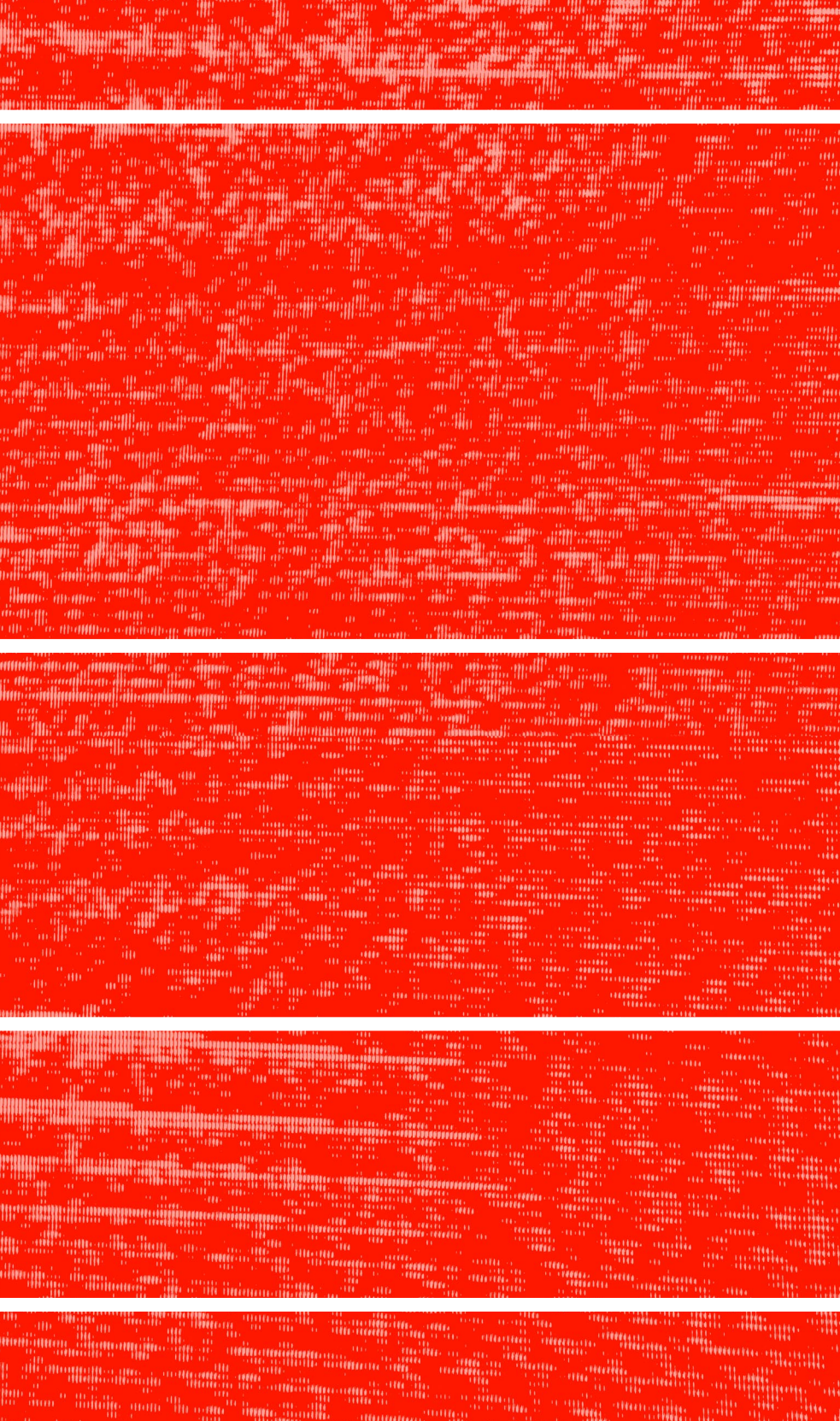
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PERSPECTIVES

Boris Buden is a writer, cultural theorist and translator. Born in former Yugoslavia he studied philosophy in Zagreb and cultural theory at Humboldt University in Berlin. Since the beginning of the 1980s Buden publishes essays and books on critical and cultural theory, psychoanalysis, politics and contemporary art in Croatian, German and English. He teaches at universities in Europe and lectures worldwide. Buden currently lives in Berlin.

Today, after Post-Communism has ended in chaos and confusion, we are entitled to ask: was it a condition, or a transition, a rise or a decline, progression, regression or simply a time-lag? Has it ever shaped its own form of social being, a unique mode of economic production, a politics of its own, a culture? Or was it just another interregnum of history, full of morbid symptoms we cannot get rid of?

Most of the essays in this book search for answers to these questions in works of art. Not because art possesses a superior knowledge on history, but because the knowledge on history we possess has failed in providing those answers. This is a new experience made possible by both art and history, which, in simultaneously facing their end, have come closer to one another than ever before. It is an experience we might possibly learn from.



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