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**The end of aesthetic social state:
The field of cultural production between the past and the future**

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Despite some events that acquired historical proportions – the independence of Slovenia and the subsequent wars in the territories of former Yugoslavia – if we observe past social struggles, we see that they involved a little politics and a lot of culture. Cultural struggles, however, have been structured around two very different oppositions: the first, and certainly the more popular one, is the opposition between ethical culture and the offensive foreign culture that became manifest during the Yugoslav school reform *skupna jedra* (“common contents”) and during the process against the four¹, which turned into a fight for Slovenian language (even though the military court allegedly provided translators as soon as the first objections appeared). The second opposition was the elite European-style, modern, opposition between the traditional national culture and the new independent culture. The latter was an emphatically art-centric kind of culture, structured around formalist questions of aesthetic; it considered the political as something that develops from art – the modernization of art would automatically transform its public and society at large. Leading figures of visual art appeared in *Slovenske Atene* (Slovenian Athens), an exhibition that was staged at the *Moderna galerija* (The Museum of Modern Art) in the early nineties. The title befitted the time of national uprising, and the message was immodestly clear: if the new Slovenia is to be compared with the “heroic democracy of Athens” then the comparison needs to be grounded in art. In line with

¹ The author is referring to the so-called “JBTZ Affair” (an acronym of the initials of the defendants’ surnames, also known as The Trial of The Four) – a trial before a military court against three journalists of Mladina weekly (Janez Janša – who is the current prime minister, David Tasić, Franci Zavrl, and Ivan Borštner). The affair began on 31 May 1988, when Janša and ex-army officer Borštner were arrested. Tasić and Zavrl, the then editor of Mladina, were arrested four days later. They were apprehended after Borštner passed a classified military document, an order to raise the combat readiness of the Yugoslav People’s Army (JLA) in Slovenia, to Mladina, where it was subsequently published. The trial sparked mass protests and prompted the founding of a committee for the protection of the rights of arrested, which later grew into the Human Rights Committee. The committee organized mass protests in front of the court building, protesting against two facts: that civilians were judged by a military court and that the trial was held in Serbian, the official language in Yugoslav army. The trial had wider political implications, inspiring the establishment of new political organizations in Slovenia. (Editor’s note)

the title, the exhibited works by contemporary artists reworked the national motif of the sower, whose body language is reminiscent of the Greek discus thrower and who represents the originator of a new life cycle and the cultivator of wild nature *par excellence*. The reworked versions of the myth that were put on display at the exhibition exuded a level of rejection, scorn, and irony that undercut the intended effect of the title. However, the contradictory juxtaposition of the pathetic nature of the state-forming processes and the scorn for the instruments of this politics did not result from artistic treatment of ideological material; rather, they were the effect of the artists' political position: they supported the idea of the state as long as they could, as its organic intellectuals, mock its pragmatic politics. They painted an image, worthy of Genet, of the relationship between master and servant, in which the latter expresses his loyalty to the former through a mischievous shoving and a desperate desire to be just like the master.

Even more illustrative in this sense is the poster made for the Youth Day in 1987, in which the group *New Collectivism* refashioned Richard Klein's Nazi poster to celebrate a socialist holiday. The poster did not undermine the icon of the state; the scorn was aimed at the pragmatic political instruments, which are allegedly more or less the same in national-socialist, real-socialist, and social-democratic regimes. The state, however, was still artistic in its grandiosity; it was still something that made your feet itch, something that transcended humans – as if there existed, next to all other people, a special person who was the king/queen of all people, that is, the state. But even if we look at an utterly apolitical group of painters – their name was *Painter, Do You Know Your Debt* (Veš slikar svoj dolg or VSSD, for short) – they, too, sought the addressee of the artist's phantasmagorical debt.

In the end, this had to come back like a boomerang. If the society then wanted to be democratised, it needed faith in public politics and the public sphere. Cultural production, however, moved in the exact opposite direction: it worshipped the state in an abstract sense, while mocking its pragmatic politics – as if “the state” could be divorced from its actions.

Performing arts were similarly apolitical, for (and here I need to get more autobiographical) we believed then that art practices alone could bring about social reflection. Even more, in our minds and spirits we were firmly with Feuerbach's eleventh thesis, earnestly believing that society could and ought to be changed only through art, through the questions of aesthetics and art processes. We were some

kind of belated “68ers” who thought that the theatre was central to sociality – the key force of progress or revolution – and that we, therefore, had to conquer it. We believed that the theatre was always the first to lift the curtain that veils the future, and this was one of our *mottoes*.²

As the faithful community of thus understood “autonomy of art”, we fought the cultural war between national and independent culture, and we hung on to it with all the seriousness of political activism. To us, national cultural institutions symbolised political repression with their – as we would say today – “Fordist division of labour”, national ideology, conservative art practices, and political opportunism. At the other end of the spectrum, there was “independent culture” with its non-dramatic theatre, contemporary dance and urban culture, post-Fordist division of labour, flexibility, and resourcefulness. Indeed, independent culture received breadcrumbs from the table of the state budget,³ but it also received smaller amounts of financial support from Western European and American foundations, which had greater symbolic power. Even today, people working in the field of culture fight these cultural wars; they live within the conflict between national, independent, and alternative culture, and they share, just as passionately, the “special skepticism” in art (that is to say, the skepticism towards other artists, who think they are “bluffing”), even though the wars have, in the meantime, moved into the theatre of shadows and been displaced by other real processes.

We will try to show what these processes are about by looking at some regional examples. In 1998, Austria passed the act on the organisation of state theatres, which changed the status of the Viennese theatres *Burgtheater*, *Wiener Staatsoper* and *Volksoper Wien*; they became *Theaterholding GmbH* (a limited liability company) – a step that should give the green light to the “market-oriented ideology”, as Veronika Ratzenböck reports.⁴ Given the €133.6 million of annual state subvention, this theatre will not suffer, and the *Graz Theaterholding GmbH* with its €21.3 million annually will be fine too; however, these are only precedent examples of the

² The author is referring also to the first issue of reformed journal *Maska* in 1991 (she was the editor). *Maska*'s subtitle then was “A Journal for Theater, Opera, and Dance,” which reflected its involvement with interdisciplinary scenic practices. (Editor's note)

³ More specifically, in 1993, those Members of the Parliament who were favourably disposed towards the *Association of Independent Producers and Artists* lodged an amendment to secure three percent of the state cultural budget for independent culture.

⁴ Council of Europe/ERICarts, Austria, the *Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe* collection, 8th edition, Veronika Ratzenböck, the reporter for Austria, 2007, <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/austria.php>.

restructuring of cultural institutions. The process entails, first of all, the expropriation of citizens (through a gradual transfer of ownership from people to the state and from the state to private owners) as well as the mechanisms of denationalisation. The theatres in Austria were followed by the museums; the state transformed the *Artothek*, which manages 28,000 works of art acquired with public funding, into a private institution that manages these art works. Another special act passed in 1998 set the state museums onto the path of “autonomy”: they became research institutions of public law, expected to secure a part of their funding for themselves. As a result, some smaller museums, such as the Ethnological Museum and the Austrian Theatre Museum, had to merge with the larger Art History Museum. In 2001, the state sold the biggest national publishing house, *Österreichischer Bundesverlag*, to a German publishing house, which had to uphold publishing plans involving school textbooks and Austrian authors until 2007.

In Italy, the privatization of culture began with the centre-left Minister Walter Veltroni and Decree No. 367 in 1996.⁵ The decree envisaged the transformation of public opera and ballet institutions, such as the *Scala* in Milan and the *Fenice* in Venice, into private foundations. Since only the *Scala* was restructured, a new decree (No. 134) in 1998 set the deadline of ten days after the issue of the decree. The decree also determined that the institutions were eligible for state funding if they acquired more than 12% of funding from private sources. The *Teatro Verdi* in Trieste, for instance, which used to be a *comunale*, thus became a *fondazione* (founded by the state, the region, the city, the associations and private parties from the lists of royal families, university vice-chancellors, financial moguls and profit-making corporations, such as the insurance company *Assicurazioni Generali* and the energetics corporation *Acegas*). Also transformed into private institutions were various festivals, schools, and research institutions: the Venice Biennale, the film school *Centro Sperimentale di Cinema*, the Syracusan *Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico*, *Triennale di Milan*, which is concerned with industrial design, and even the *Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte di Palazzo Venezia*. Encouraged, through a bizarre dialectics of “improving cultural production” and “minimizing the costs”, was

⁵ Council of Europe/ERICarts, *Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe*, 8th edition, 2007, Carla and Simona Bodo, the reporters for Italy, <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/italy.php>.

the transformation of museums in private institutions.⁶ Act 4/1993 already provided that private parties could perform some museum services (coffee shops, book stores, restaurants, shops ...), and Decree 368/1998 transferred the management of museums and archaeological sites (such as Pompeii, the national museum networks of Rome, Florence, Venice and Naples, the Egyptian Museum in Turin) to private foundations. In 2002 and 2004, decrees gave the Ministry full authority for the privatization of “public services” to increase their “accessibility”.

Thus far in Slovenia, we cannot name such a long list of examples, although we could start documenting the first drafts of law, cultural strategies and the reorganization of various institutions. Among these, there is an interesting section in the first version of the new National Cultural Programme and in the final edited version that nevertheless preserves the same spirit. In this section, the authors engage in a polemic against “the concept of culture that belongs to the era of the spring of nations”, on the one hand, and against anti-globalism (“the superficial polemic about the economic effects of cultural production”, as they put it in the first version), on the other hand.⁷ *Nationalism*, allegedly, represents the greatest peril for national identity; it “results from the fact that globalisation itself is a contradictory process that, on the one hand, accelerates social progress while fostering regression on the other, all the way back to desocialization and dehumanization.” Identity is said to have disintegrated in this case, replaced by an insipid identification, whose relationship to other cultures is limited to distorted differences. The comparison that emerges through this psychological analysis of the nationalist actually involves the media representation of terrorists, by means of which we ought to draw a comparison between the nineteenth-century nationalists and contemporary anti-globalists. Yet, the document defines national identity, the key concept of Slovenian cultural policy, as follows: “Identity is formed by means of projection as the synthesis of aims and objectives, in which the key role is played by the mutual interaction of economic and cultural factors”, for only “a productive linkage of culture and economy” can

⁶ Cf. Salvatore Settis, *Italia S.p.A.*, Milan, Einaudi, 2007 [2002], chap. “Le mosse della svendita: escalation del Privato”, pp. 103–14.

⁷ *National Cultural Programme 2008–2011 (Nacionalni program za kulturo 2008-2011)*, p. 4, chapter “Slovenian Culture, European-ness and Globalisation”. As a result of the objections sent by the “civil society” via email to the Slovenian Ministry of Culture, the final version contains some minor changes. For instance, they have erased the sentence about “the superficial polemic about the economic effects of cultural production”; the spirit of the document, however, remains more or less the same.

supposedly offer “a stable future and lasting progress”.⁸ Therefore, if we resist the linking of culture and economy, that is, if we resist cultural or entertainment industries, we act against national identity. If we find ourselves at the same level of national identity as in the era of the “spring of nations”, we are common idiots; if, however, we engage in “the superficial polemic about the economic effects of cultural production”, like the anti-globalists, then we are the enemies of national interest. Ljubljana’s cultural strategy represents an interesting answer to the state of affairs in the field of culture. The strategy is responding to the “crisis” in the field of culture by exerting pressure on cultural production to increase the output of cultural products and services. The authorities obviously assume that the reason for the crisis must lie in the inefficiency of production; hence, they are putting pressure on cultural producers to increase production despite lesser funds and they are recklessly experimenting with new organizational forms. Yet, the insatiable demand for greater productivity and, especially, for prestigious and representative projects could have the exact opposite effect from the desired one: instead of resolving the crisis, it would foment it and speed up the *circulus vitiosus* of cultural institutions that are suffocating in the dialectics of commercialization and art.

If we analyse the field of cultural production in general, we can note that a key shift has occurred since Bourdieu analysed cultural production as the tension between the heteronomous (especially economic) and autonomous (authentically artistic) interests.⁹ The struggle between contemporary cultural institutions no longer unfolds predominantly at the level of autonomous artistic ideologies and practices but rather at the level of their ability to channel these ideologies and practices through “market relationships”: through marketing strategies, the support of sponsors and patrons, the goodwill of politicians and public servants, the economic effects of their projects, and the like. The differences between cultural producers are thus becoming less important as internal differences in artistic positions, as differences between their artistic ideologies and practices, because cultural producers are, first of all, forced to get their positions and counter-positions through the “art market”. In this process, their positions grow weaker and weaker until they become insipid and conformist, their products are increasingly homogeneous and they remain distinct only to the

⁸ The last sentence is also different in the new version. It has been replaced by the following: “however, future significance of investing in the cultural sector, as regards the priorities of social development, has yet to be determined”.

⁹ Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993.

degree required by the art market, which remains hungry for novelty and scandal. The contemporary field of cultural production has abolished the classic conflict between economic capital and autonomous actors in the field of culture because, with quite a bit of support from the state, the logic of economy has penetrated the field of cultural production. A multinational publishing house and a non-governmental organization alike must look for survival strategies in the same *milieu* of entrepreneurial practices, regardless of the artistic programme, target group, or mission. Every artist must justify their art by the number of visitors, financial reports, press clippings, and awards ... These are the material conditions of cultural production, therefore ... *hic Rhodus, hic salta!* Culture has shed a great deal of its mimicry, which still inspired Bourdieu when he analysed the field of cultural production; now, cultural producers carry out their selfish, self-interested attempts to gain social recognition and economic success through disinterested artistic creation. Cultural production today is no longer the economic logic turned upside down that the rejection of and the contempt for economic profit turns precisely into that which it should deter, as the negation of negation; rather, cultural production today is becoming an integral part of global enterprise.

The goal of contemporary reforms is to force all institutions – the national, the local, the independent, as well as the commercial ones – into conforming to the same management model, according to which cultural institutions need to be *chic* and entrepreneurial. The differences between state institutions and private ones are growing pale, along with the social potential of cultural struggles. The advantage of state institutions, compared to the independent ones, is still considerable, especially in that they have the monopoly over certain goods (historical buildings, archaeological sites ...); the conditions of production, however, are becoming increasingly similar for both. With their management reforms, the authorities foster institutional and cultural decay, which manifests itself in the selling out of the heritage, commercialization, and the discontinuation of programmes and knowledge transfers across all institutions. This approach also introduces automatic selection, which concerns all institutions and which relieves political elites of their responsibility for artistic development and the social dimensions of cultural policy.

While cultural production has always possessed artistic freedom, as the freedom to critique pragmatic politics, our examples have shown that it has also divorced the idea of the state as such from state politics. Despite the loyalty that the artists have

shown to the state, the state has double-crossed them. The selfishness and the ambition to acquire the status of state artist or state institution have come back to haunt them as a "Fall of Man" of sorts. Yet, there still exists a chance that cultural struggle could be replaced by political struggle in the field of theory and artistic production for the public sphere and public politics – whose integral part is cultural production – for we can no longer pretend that the state can tolerate art as an appendage.

Translated by Polona Petek.