

From Soros Realism to Creative Class

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Cultural foundations had a strong impact on cultural production in the region of the Balkans during the past decade. Analyzing their particular missions and international agendas for cultural policies, it turns out that their vocabulary reminds of critical political practices and discourses of the 1960s and 70s in Western societies. In this essay, I will trace back the history of *identity politics* and *participation* and critically comment, why and how these ideas are implemented in the recent conceptions of European cultural policies. I will present examples of cultural production from Belgrade and Hamburg as examples of how cultural identity and participation are interpreted and put into practice. I will argue that the culturalization of politics is not solving the problems of inequality in neoliberal capitalism and that the discourse about the ambiguity of cultural identity practically supports the continuation of chauvinistic identity politics.

Cultural foundations and their missions in Eastern Europe

Soros Realism is a term used by Miško Šuvaković for to hint at the part of investor Soros' initiatives in the process of globalization through culture and media.¹ During the 1990s "Soros Centers for Contemporary Art" (SCCA) dominated the cultural scene in whole Eastern Europe. Nowadays, Soros' Open Society Institute in Eastern Europe concentrates mainly on programs concerning education, youth and children, minorities and human rights. Since around 2002 their funding of culture and arts in Eastern Europe decreased significantly and was replaced by the European Cultural Foundation (partly in cooperation with the Open Society Institute), by national foundations such as Kulturstiftung des Bundes, Pro Helvetia, Kulturkontakt and others. There emerged even an important corporate foundation, the Erste Bank Group with its program called "Kontakt" and its „tranzit“ initiatives in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.

What are the goals and visions of the programs offered by these European foundations? For the Swiss Pro Helvetia "cultural identity and cultural self-consciousness" have become crucial in the age of globalization as it is stated in the vision of the "Swiss Cultural Programme South East

¹ www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma2/suvakovicang.htm

Europe and Ukraine”. Culture, and thus its producer, is “contributing to the social and economic transition process” and is characterized with terms like “change”, “openness”, “innovative”, “active”, “engaged”, “strengthening of civil society”, “social challenges”, “partnership”, “shared experiences”, “debate” etc. The producer – subject focused on is according to this description young, culturally self-conscious, innovative, creative, openminded, socially engaged, willing to participate, collaborate, to acquire and to share new knowledge. Two ideas are stressed: cultural identity and participation.

The “Kontakt” program of the Erste Bank Group serves, as it read on their webpage (2008), “as a platform for the social and cultural commitment of Erste Bank Group in the Central and Eastern European region.” Erste Bank sees itself as an actor, who is looking for partners to “work on proposals for solutions” and “to develop strategies on how to tackle the economic, cultural and socio-political issues in Central and Eastern Europe in the near future”. Erste Bank describes itself as “open, eager to learn and ready to try new approaches”. This is what is expected to be the partner, too, of course. Keywords used characterizing possible partners are more or less the same as the ones that uses Pro Helvetia, but there are some new elements coming in: Erste Bank stresses aspects such as cooperation, networking, self-organization, the aim “to work independently in the production of art” and to “enable independent creative strategies”.

In the following I concentrate on three characteristics of the subject (the cultural producer or potential partner) as described in the given examples: cultural identity, participation and selforganization (other expressions might be autonomy, independence, self-determination). I will shortly outline the development of the discourses and practices connected to these ideas from the new social movements of the 20th century to the cultural turn in the 1990s, which is accompanied by the emergence of the creative industries, the promotion of multiculturalism and cultural difference, and the discussions about precarious working conditions of the so-called creative class.

Fight for cultural identity

The statement that identity is not determined biologically was very important for the feminist critique starting in the 70s in Europe and USA. Feminist theory points at the difference between

“sex”, a biological category, and “gender”, a social and cultural role or identity formed in a historical process. With this assumption it became possible to criticize the cultural and social conditions that led and lead to the social inequality between women and men. For some feminist theoreticians the most important question is the question of agency, the capacity to act. For them the power of women and the womens' movement lies inside of strengthening of the female subjectivity.²

Another example for the emancipative potential of cultural identity are the national liberation movements. Writing about the Black Power movement in USA, Africa and Europe, the postcolonial theoretician Stuart Hall states the necessity of the concept of identity as a political strategy within the struggle against colonial suppression. According to him, the term “Black” in the slogan “Black Power” is “a historical, a political, a cultural category”, not a biological fact.³ In this respect I want to mention also the “international solidarity” between the armed anti-imperialist movements in Germany, Italy and France and the national liberation movements in Europe, Africa and America during the 70s and 80s. This (imagined) common fight of the fighters in the centers of imperialism and the ones on the periphery was more a cultural construction than a consequence of a common experience of suppression. This might be one of the (many) reasons why it failed.

Both examples have in common that they revive the modern idea about an autonomous subject with the aim to give hold to the positioning of the individual in an active role and thus to be able to overthrow the ruling system and the discourses of the powerful. Cultural identity serves as a common unifier of a group of individuals to empower them to go against its suppressor.

In the last 25 years, in Western societies the concept of cultural identity shifted from a political mobilizer to an anti-political tranquilizer. Promoted along the keywords of cultural difference and multiculturalism, it is now the theoretical basis for cultural policies in Europe and USA.

Referring to the representation of black culture in contemporary arts and the media, Kobena Mercer notes that “cultural difference appears more visibly integrated into mainstream markets

² Peter V. Zima, 2000, “Theorie des Subjekts”, p. 281, referring to Françoise Gaspard, Sabina

³ Hall, 1994, “Alte und neue Identitäten, alte und neue Ethnizitäten”, p. 66-88, nach Linda Supik, 2005, “Dezentrierte Positionierung, Stuart Halls Konzept der Identitätspolitik”, p.76.

than ever before, but it is accompanied by a privatised ethos in which it is no longer an 'issue' for public debate. [...] 'Hyperblackness' in the media and entertainment industries serves no longer to critique social injustice, but to cover over and conceal increasingly sharp inequalities that are most polarised *within* black society itself, namely between a so-called urban underclass and an expanded middle class that benefited from affirmative action.”⁴ However, in other places of the world, for example in Kosovo and Serbia, national or religious identity are a highly political issue.

The alternative society: collective self-determination

Let us have a closer look at the two qualities, potential donation-receivers should have: participation and self-organization/self-government. Participation and self-government have been central claims of many social movements of the 20th century. Especially the youth and students' movements in the Western metropolises in the end of the 1960s expressed the desire for an alternative way of life and developed dissident practices based on self-organization and grassroots democracy. In the beginning of the 70s young people squatted houses and lived together in communities. Decisions were taken at the plenum according to the principle of consensus. Kindergartens, printing-shops, bars were organized as collectives. The idea of an alternative living comprised the abandoning of regular work in the sense of permanent employment. Work and life fell into one: the fight for personal freedom, for a self determined life, for the revolution, against the establishment, against imperialism.

What happened during the last 30 years is a normalization of these formerly dissident practices. Today's working conditions demand a maximum of flexibility and self-organization. Guaranteed employment many people can only dream of, especially in the so called countries in transition. The rule is unsure, not guaranteed, flexible exploitation: illegal, seasonal, temporary employment, homework, freelancing or self-employment.⁵

⁴ Kobena Mercer, 1999, Third Text issue 49, "Ethnicity and Internationality, New British Art and Diaspora-based Blackness", published again in "Contemporary Art and Nationalism", Pristina 2007, publishers: Minna Henriksson and Sezgin Boynik, pp. 117-118.

⁵ "However, it is precisely these alternative living and working conditions that have become increasingly more economically utilizable in recent years because they favor the flexibility that the labor market demands. Thus, practices and discourses of social movements in the past thirty, forty years were not only dissident and directed against normalization, but also at the same time, a part of the transformation toward a neoliberal form of governmentality." Isabell Lorey in "Governmentality and Self-Precarization, On the normalization of cultural producers", published in: Simon Sheikh (Ed.). CAPITAL (It Fails Us Now). Berlin: b_books 2006, pp. 117-139.

Squatted houses in Berlin or Amsterdam are a good example to see how the scene looks like 25 years later. Over the time, self-organized spaces transformed themselves into professional culture producers like artist-run galleries, cultural centers, tourist attractions, media labs, design studios, pseudo-critical debate clubs etc. while leftover groups of political activists are driven out of the gentrified areas and exposed to state repression.

Culture: the fourth pillar of development

Recent international papers and documents as “Agenda 21 for culture”⁶ claim that culture becomes the “fourth pillar of development” together with economy, social inclusion and environment, as stated in the “Guide to Citizen Participation in Local Cultural Policy Development for European Cities”⁷ issued by the European Cultural Foundation. In many strategic papers (for example the Schroeder/Blair paper from 1998) artists' working conditions and methods are quoted as a role model of an entrepreneurial self.⁸ There are two aspects, why culture is such an interesting field in terms of global politics: its economic potential and its participative character.

According to UNESCO, “Cultural industries [...] are knowledge- and labor-intensive, create employment and wealth, nurture creativity [...] and foster innovation in production and commercialisation processes. At the same time, cultural industries are central in promoting and maintaining cultural diversity and in ensuring democratic access to culture. [...] Their international dimension gives them a determining role for the future in terms of freedom of expression, cultural diversity and economic development”.⁹ Because of the inequality of representation of the world's cultures within cultural industries, UNESCO advocates for counteracting “by strengthening local capacities and facilitating access to global markets at national level.” The problem of inequality is here translated into a lack of representation within

⁶ www.agenda21culture.net

⁷ European Cultural Foundation, 2007, “Guide to Citizen Participation in Local Cultural Policy Development for European Cities”, by Jordi Pascual i Ruiz and Sanjin Dragojevic, published by Interarts Foundation (Barcelona), ECUMEST Association (Bucharest) and the European Cultural Foundation, <http://www.eurocult.org/uploads/docs/577.pdf>

⁸ Isabell Lorey in “Governmentality and Self-Precarization”

⁹ UNESCO Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization at http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=35024&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

the market, which leads us to the question, if the market is the only stage, where cultural expression and visibility can be performed. In any case, in times of visual hyperproduction and unlimited digital circulation, the image and representation as such have lost their power. This is why political issues in the field of representation (the media) can only reach its public if backed up by a successful marketing strategy. Politics “is ceasing to be about conflict over dominant ideas and much more becomes the 'opportunity to participate in cultural production and conflicts and tensions over identity’”, as Martin Albrow puts it,¹⁰ and transforms into something, which is described by Paul Piccone as “postmodern populism.”¹¹

Here we come to the other aspect of culture stressed in various policy papers: its participative character. In the introduction to the abovementioned guide it reads: “What makes an individual a citizen (or not) of a particular town or place is largely determined by cultural aspects.” It is amazing to see the notion of being a citizen being reduced to his/her access to cultural participation. But it becomes understandable if we recall the concepts of “cultural identity” and “cultural diversity” that stand behind this idea. In this conception of participation the state has the responsibility to enable every individual to choose her/his specific cultural identity and to offer a frame where this identity can be expressed. The question is by which forces this frame is really shaped in the end. Not only in science and education, but also in culture economical profit and corporate interests are gaining influence in the shape and content of projects and programs. For sure it is a nice idea to include citizens in the development of cultural programs of their city, but the question comes up, about what kind of culture we are talking. Isn't every day life, school, working conditions, what kind of products we have in our stores and for which price, etc. as well part of our culture? What, if a “cultural identity” doesn't want or is not able to participate? Can every conflict be translated into a cultural dissent? The advocates of the politics of identity understand culture and belonging to a culture as something negotiable, as a process. This is true, but it should not be forgotten that there exist nonnegotiable social inequalities and that we are living in a world of national and private immovable territories. What about the ones that can not take part in a special kind of culture because they just cannot afford to buy the ticket, the book, the right style of dressing, internet... If we talk about “cultural policies based on human rights and

¹⁰ Barrie Axford, Richard Huggins, 1997, “Anti-politics or the Triumph of Postmodern Populism in Promotional Cultures?”, *The public*, Vol.4 , 3 5, <http://www.javnost-thepublic.org/article/1997/3/1/>

¹¹ Piccone, Paul. 1995. *Postmodern Populism*. *Telos* 2, 45-87.

cultural diversity,”¹² then “cultural rights” can not have a price! This would mean a true revolution of the cultural sector! Unfortunately the “advocating for culture” doesn't go that far but matches just too well with the need to mobilize all creative resources with the aim to create a “vibrant cultural life” in cities that want to attract investors, young people, tourists etc.

National identity and contemporary art: Prishtina and Belgrade

The exhibition about contemporary art from Prishtina “Exception”, which took place in 2008 in Novi Sad and Belgrade, focused in one part on artistic works dealing with national identities.¹³ It was funded by the European Cultural Foundation and Pro Helvetia. Realized in the very moment when Kosovo's declaration of Independency was expected every day, it was foreseeable that the exhibition would cause heavy controversy. In Belgrade, one art work was destroyed by militant nationalists who entered the gallery, while several hundred of them were demonstrating against the exhibition outside. It was closed by the police during the opening, attacks on the building followed during the night. Due to the lack of state support the exhibition had to be cancelled completely. The depiction of an Albanian national hero from Kosovo had provoked Serbian nationalists, no matter that it was placed in the general context of pop iconography. It was not the first time, that a work dealing with national identity causes this kind of “scandal” that covers over all other presented works and makes room rather for nationalist propaganda and political manipulation than for the much quoted intercultural dialogue. The question is, in how far the vision of a participative and negotiable cultural identity is performable in a context, where cultural identity has the notion of national, religious or ethnic identity and might be linked to traumatic experiences. These are less negotiable categories, as it is not so easy to change one's history, passport, name or color of skin. In fact, the preoccupation with national identity avoids the solution of immense social-economic problems within the societies of Serbia and Kosovo, which are neglected by politicians and public authorities to an inexcusable extend. The true victims of the fight between “national identities” are the ones “without defined identity”, refugees without papers or without the right kind of papers, living in barracks, camps, favelas or in the woods, displaced from their homes, expelled from the European Union, deprived of their right to exist.

¹² European Cultural Foundation, 2007

¹³ http://www.kontekstgalerija.org/pdf_08/odstupanje.pdf

Local cultural development and participation: Belgrade and Hamburg

In September 2006, the issue of self-organization was discussed on an international conference within the 40th BITEF theater festival in Belgrade. Although initiated within a highly institutional framework and backed up by a row of local academics,¹⁴ the idea of self-organization spread in Belgrade's non institutional cultural scene and two months later the “flexible platform of the Belgrade independent scene”, “The Other Scene” was founded by a large number of local initiatives, more and less established ones.¹⁵ When the city council of culture issued an open call for a new cultural venue to be founded, all members of “The Other Scene” applied under the condition that every member of the network should have access to the venue and be able to contribute their program. Only a very few initiatives from the network were selected. After the opening, the space turned out to be under the administration of the Belgrade Cultural Center of the City Council, which is now presenting the productions of the groups. In business terminology this kind of strategy would be described as outsourcing. Neither the administration of the projects, nor the wages of the producers nor the productions themselves are on the budget of the institution, in return it gets a “vivid and contemporary” program, which is financed, if at all, by diverse cultural foundations.

In 2007, some cultural producers from Belgrade's “Other Scene” took part in the European Art Festival “Wir sind woanders #2” [We are elsewhere #2] in Hamburg. In the introduction to the festival guide, the Senator for culture resumes that “in the meantime everybody has learned that it is the positions beyond mainstream from where surprising visions of the future can be developed”.¹⁶ The event was sponsored by a private donator from Hamburg, who prefers to stay anonymous. For the cultural producers themselves, the shift from the margin towards the center seems to be irritating. The discussions held on a theoretical platform underline a critical reflection of the development. There are around three fractions one could figure out in Hamburg's “independent art and cultural scene”, all based on the precarious working conditions of culture producers. One claims the responsibility of the state to fund them at a larger scale, arguing with the new importance of their productivity. Others see a great chance to jump into the emerging

¹⁴ TKH, 2006, TKH 11, Self-organisation Issue, http://www.tkh-generator.net/IMG/pdf/TkH_11.pdf

¹⁵ Re-Reader, 2007, Biro za kulturu i komunikacije Beograd, pp. 66/67, <http://birobeograd.info/re-reader.pdf>

¹⁶ http://www.wirsindwoanders.de/files_2007/uploads/WSW2_programmheft.pdf

economic field of urban marketing and cultural tourism. A third group explicitly insists the artistically motivated, critical, social or political position of their work.

Conclusion

The key issues of the social emancipative movements, self-determination and participation, have entered corporate and governmental politics. Obviously it is not the concepts' critical power but their economical potential that makes them attractive today. Self-responsibility, flexibility, creativity, high motivation, these are the qualities the creative subject must be equipped with to fulfill the requirements of a society regulated by the norms of neoliberal capitalism. Bestseller author Richard Florida¹⁷ believes in a rising "creative class" consisting of scientists, tech people, artists, managers, lawyers, financial people, as the driving force for economical growth. According to his empirical studies in the US, the "young creatives" are attracted by cities offering the right kind of "active, participatory recreation facilities." As he writes: "They prefer indigenous street-level culture---a teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros, where it is hard to draw the line between performers and spectators. They crave stimulation, not escape. They want to pack their time full of dense, high-quality, multidimensional experiences. Seldom has one of my subjects expressed a desire to get away from it all. They want to get into it all, and do it with eyes wide open. [...] Creative class people value active outdoor recreation very highly and are into a variety of active sports, from traditional ones like bicycling, jogging, and kayaking to newer, more extreme ones, like trail running and snowboarding." To measure the capabilities a city or area has for a synergy of different kinds of creativity, Florida gives three indexes: "The Creativity Index (how many people work in the creative field), the High-Tec Index (how many patents are issued per capita) and the Gay Index (which shows how open an area is to different kinds of people and ideas)."¹⁸ Due to Florida's very simple and affirmative approach, many politicians, city developers and cultural producers adopted his argumentation to claim the importance of investing into culture. One can guess, what

¹⁷ Richard Florida, 2002: "The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life"

¹⁸ Richard Florida, 2002, "The Rise of the Creative Class. Why cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race" article published in <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0205.florida.html>.

kind of culture we are talking about, if its main aim is to stir economic growth: fast consumable, target group oriented, expensive, suitable for urban marketing.

The cultural self-exploitation of the creative subject on the one side and the creation of cultural identities that consume cultural products on the other side seem like two entities of a perpetuum mobile of economic profit. This is an illusion raised up in a blinded world of participative consumer happiness that ignores the fact that its wealth is produced by disenfranchised workers in other parts of the world, of the country, or even of the city. In that other world, cultural diversity might mean something else than the freedom to choose between a Vietnamese, Turkish or Chinese restaurant. In that other world enjoyment in a floating cultural identity doesn't exist, but there exist unambiguous identities confined by their social status. The concept of participation and cultural identity diffuses a potential critical mass into billions of egos fitted with the right to express themselves. It conceals the increasing social inequalities in our societies hit by neoliberal politics and globalized markets downsizing them to cultural or ethno phenomena that could even pay out if only promoted on the market in the right way.

The text was first published in "Psychogeographical Research", The Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, Novi Sad, 2009 and was written in 2008 at the occasion of the exhibition "Exception- Contemporary art scene of Prishtina" in Belgrade.