Editors’ Note

As the editors of the Red Thread e-journal we are faced with certain heterogeneity. This heterogeneity is, on the one hand, requested by the project, since it is expected to involve people from certain geographies (i.e. what is known as South East and Eastern Europe or, more precisely, the Balkans, the South Caucasian region, the Middle East and North Africa, while Turkey seems to be the provisional center of this geography). On the other hand, it is precisely this heterogeneity that could prove to be productive in terms of "broadening the picture" and establishing connections between our respective regional networks of collaborators. By this we don't mean the usual "networked" networks almost exclusively created for fundraising, but precisely a set of encounters, friendships and, finally, collective endeavors meant to jointly deal with various issues that these geographies have in common, thereby rendering this seemingly incomparable heterogeneity quite easily surmountable.

This heterogeneity can become productive precisely through an exchange that exposes the common ground - that the local constellations are embedded in the context of the neo-liberal globalized capitalism. Now, speaking of what do we all share in this given geography immediately calls to mind the often violent conflictuality present in our respective regions and the lack of "a political will to resolve conflicts in a civilized manner." It is precisely this locus communis of the "Western gaze" that this e-journal strives to problematize. The image of the geographies in question constitutive of the Western political imaginary consists of ethno-nationalism, religious fundamentalism and so-called oriental despotism which gets perpetuated illicitly underneath the auspices of the official ideology of multiculturalism. Dealing with various political (re)articulations of intellectual and artistic, i.e. cultural, production, the journal challenges the separation and the specific (re)unification of "identities" within contemporary neo-liberal politics of culture.

The questions that this first issue specifically tackles could be put as: How does contemporary art as subject (both as a topic and as a manifestation of different artists, curators, art critics and theorists) get positioned within the broader field of cultural and socio-political contexts (between global neo-liberal multicultural policies and local national cultures)? Do we, as the actors in the field of contemporary art, intellectual production and culture in general get stuck between those two positions, unable to escape being attached to either one of them? Furthermore, how could practices of resistance and/or intervention in culture be imagined and realized? How do we relate to "reality" that is under constant re-construction by the technologies of neo-liberal capitalism? How do we re-appropriate the damaged concepts of "left" politics? In other words, how could artistic and cultural productions be political within the current crisis of representation both in art and politics?

The problematic of similarities and differences runs through the issue - besides some geographical specificities, there are other thought-provoking similarities in each context. "Resistance in the Asian Way" may not be that "Asian" as may seem from its title; although it points to the problems of "different culturalization" examined many times before in pre- and post-colonial approaches towards what is perceived as "the different mindset" or the "the otherness" or "Easternness" of the culture of the societies in the region, the text by Oksana Shalatova provides a firm set of clues to understand the "sameness" of the actual disposition of power. However much we try to "understand in a different way," what happens when one is trying to perceive the world through "intuition rather then logic" or to express it through the fundamentally despised and thoroughly rejected means of the "metaphor" is that some eerily similar "things" appear. The "problem with institutions" (which seems to remain "the problem" even when it seems like there is a lack of institutions to criticize), the longing for the 1990's, when "things used to happen" (not only the perception of East Europe, we would say), the increasing difficulties in maintaining the momentum of "collective," and increased speed of the different transformations of the public space - all that would sound very familiar to most of the possible readers of this text. Perhaps the most interesting one among these similarities is the figure of the yurodivy, "the holy fool," the one who eventually finds a position to speak in public with a critical voice, only to find itself subject to deliberate self-marginalization in the process of articulating that position. The process may appear to be different in its form and to be very dependant on the specific "language," but the artistic/activist subject is always determined by its
function in this process; in this specific case, first you need to proclaim yourself as "irrelevant to life," be it "being mad" or "being an artist," in order to be allowed to speak.

The discoveries of "similarities" are also waiting in Armenia, as we explore "New Political Subjects in Armenia and March 1 Events" by Vartan Jaloyan. The well-known "transition scenario" in which the idea of "public space" is first instrumentalized in order to bring "democratic changes" and then thoroughly suppressed and appropriated by the newly-established authoritarian regimes, as it "served its function" and now becomes "the problem," is very familiar to whoever lives east of Berlin. And so are the controversies within capitalism itself, and the clashes between its "nationalist" and "liberal" poles; also, there is the confirmation that the abstract notion of the "nation" is actually a tool for "paralyzing" and hijacking the idea of the political from the society at large, and that the space for political action would either open up on a more immediate, "urban" level, or - we may add - a much wider but less abstract space than that of the "nation": the international one. As pretty much elsewhere, there is a certain idea, not yet understood in its entirety, that technology may be the tool to be used for some substantial changes to emerge; indeed, even ten years ago it would not be possible to predict that we are going to discuss the Armenian "DVD revolution" on the pages of our e-journal. But, this "power" of contemporary networking and technological "means of expression" should be examined carefully, and its consequences should be evaluated in terms of the "effectiveness" of the purely "technological approach" in political action. Whatever belief we hold in the power of self-organized networks emerging all over during the previous decade, still there is a sentence in Jaloyan's text which "signs," regardless of whichever society we come from or whatever its perceived "level of development" may be: "The capitalist reconstruction of Yerevan also signifies the restoration of the ruling electoral 'caste' which is currently solely composed of big business 'oligarchs' and representatives of the state nomenclature who concentrated in their hands enormous economical power..."

To continue with similarities, it seems that we have a whole chapter emerging around the topic of violent exhibition openings (or closings); there are three texts which examine in details "the case" surrounding the forced non-opening of the exhibition "Exception: Young Kosovo Artists" in Belgrade (by Jelena Vesic, Dušan Grlja and Vladimir Jerić), and a text exploring the background of the unrests and damaging of the works at the opening of the exhibition "Incidents of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary" in Istanbul (by Balca Ergener). There are certain apparent differences regarding the two events; in Belgrade, it is the institution of "the autonomy of art" which was perceived to be under the attack, while in Istanbul, as the exhibition was a documentary one, it was "the right to public speech" which was proclaimed as threatened. Also, the exhibition in Belgrade was never opened and was soon removed both from the gallery and from the public sphere, while in Istanbul the exhibition eventually was displayed, and it seems that it had a certain public discussion surrounding its "case." But what appears as important in both cases, are, again, similarities surrounding the events in question; in both cases the repressive apparatuses, the police, denied to the exhibitions the status of "socially protected" art events, and to the artifacts displayed the status of "being under police protection." As we go through the texts and examine the reasons for such a denial of function, we do learn that the concept of "deep state" which is somehow always connected with Turkey is not that unique. Encompassed within the universe of "the politics of identity," all the different elements of what we understand as "modern nation building" were thoroughly instrumentalized in order to serve to the new/old instances of power, which are always connected with the control of actual means and resources of reproduction of a certain "convenient" discourse. There are histories, and then there is the History; it is the latter that presents both the means and an end of the battle for shaping and controlling the world-as-we-know-it. Obviously, the exhibitions examined here, never mind if they were proclaimed as "artistic/actual" or "documentary/historical," were perceived as attempts to intervene in "the History," a no-go zone for those who challenge the existing constellation of power. Besides the non-function of the police, there are other identical mechanisms involved in both cases; easy instrumentalization of carefully maintained fascist mobs which serve the role of the "unofficial" repressive apparatus of the state, using the power of "media machines" to control and direct the public sphere and public opinion, and conducting the
reaction to support the exhibitions by using the personal names of those subjects who are in defense of these events, rather then their institutional affiliations (albeit with somewhat different results, which is the case remain to be examined).

The commonalities that are shared not only all across the before mentioned regions that comprise the geography of this e-journal, but also across today's globalized capitalist world are evident in Şükrü Argın's text entitled "Shrinking Public, Politics Melting into Air and Possibilities of a Way-Out." The encroachment of private capital on both public space and public sphere, depoliticization of politics through media imagery, and the twilight of the principle of representation as the core of parliamentary democracy, are quite known and represent constantly reoccurring topics for some decades now. Those are the main traits of what Şükrü Argın calls "politics melting into air," and it is not by chance that this idiom was coined in the Communist Manifesto, since it is precisely one of the tendencies that capitalism brings to the fore. The loss of foothold for politics, according to the author, is also evident in the so-called representation and legitimacy crises: "[...] the main concern for anti-establishment parties and organizations is to deepen the 'legitimacy crisis' and thus to make it 'unmanageable' for establishment parties and organizations; and on the other hand, to urgently do whatever is possible to overcome the 'identity crisis,' to find ways of overcoming it before it is too late."

Today's structure of politics tends to be dual and hierarchized. On the one hand we have haute politque, represented by super-national entities, that is beyond the reach of ordinary people, while on the other there is "low politics" that deals with localized and particular problems which are supposedly delegated precisely to ordinary people, but which proves to be incapable of resolving anything since the root-causes of problems are on the side of "high politics." Being only a little more than ordinary people in this neo-liberal (re)structuration of politics, the so-called cultural operators are faced with a longstanding dilemma of "What is to be done?" for which Şükrü Argın finds answers in three examples of concrete actions. The first one, the Campaign Against All Parties by the Moscow Actionists strove to produce a political effect by undermining the election process through placing invalid votes, thereby deepening and exposing the representation crisis. The anti-militarist initiative, the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, proposes an alternative which can be called "motherhood based politics." The third example is from Turkey, representing the group of people who publicly condemned the assassination of Hrant Dink, journalist of Armenian origin who was the editor-in-chief of Agos newspaper. All those examples for Şükrü Argın stand for "way-outs" from the pseudo-representational and identity politics that keep us trapped within false choices fed by the contemporary structure of politics.

Zeynep Gambetti's text "The Opposition of Power / The Power of the Opposition" starts from her experience of participating in conferences that gather speakers of different cultures and standpoints aiming to establish an "unfettered communication" and dialogical resolutions. However, the results often happen to be the contrary. Each speaker pursues 'his' own agenda by refusing to relate to others, and mostly feeling justified to do so by a certain position of victimhood. Criticizing the traditional idealist separation between speech and act, and emphasizing that every discourse is always a "speech act," she analyses the implications of power and opposition in the all-too-known schisms on the left. In the recent case of Turkish left, the divisions ran along the lines of being pro or contra the Ergenekon operations, representing thus the separation on "true" and "liberal" left. In this division she finds that there is something like the power of opposition, which is the reverse image of the same power. Introducing Hannah Arendt's metaphor of the 'table' that both connects and separates the people in conversation, Gambetti reflects on the possibilities of action that is geared towards freedom. She gives examples from the Zapatistas to discuss modes of action and subjectivity, in order to envisage opposition to power.
Like Gambetti, Tanıl Bora deals with the deep split that has divided the Left in Turkey in his article "The Left, Liberalism and Cynicism", and problematizes the positions of the two sides of the debate. Bora argues that an attitude that remains limited to strategies of exposing the faults of its counterpart and reduces political reason into a binary identity opposition does not produce political action, but rather sheer cynicism. He calls for a reconsideration of the problematic relationship between socialism and liberalism. Besides the obvious disagreements on notions such as equality, the public and the social state, there might be some matching regarding rights and liberties. The definitions left abstract by the liberal discourse can be brought into concrete terms through socialism’s emphasis on conditions of material-objective realisation. Bora acknowledges the potentiality of radical resistance in Wallerstein’s call for appropriation and fulfillment of liberal promises for equal rights, liberties and status of equal citizenship, that are proved to be inoperative within the capitalist system. He underlines the need for elaborating a language that can voice separate demands side by side, and asserts that socialism can employ its tension with and separation from liberalism to enhance its political efficiency.

"Nationalism is becoming a concept which exists everywhere yet is tangible nowhere; which is infused with meaning according to the situation at hand, its contents later being emptied out and then replaced once again. And with its ever-changing contents, nationalism is becoming a concept which at once explains everything, and for this very reason, ultimately fails to explain anything at all... So much so that, although nationalism continues to exist as the founding ideology of nation-states, as times change, it begins to conceal within itself a multitude of very different realities." This quote from the Introduction to the book The Indivisible Unity of the Nation: Nationalism That Tears Us Apart in the Democratization Process by Meltem Ahıska, Ferhat Kentel and Fırat Genç suggests to think about nationalism not in the terms of the monolithic ideology which reaches some supra-identity levels, but to examine how it operates in everyday life, and which desires and dissatisfactions of different individuals or communities it represents as the (only) cohesive force offered in the era of capitalist globalization. Siren İdemen, in her interview with the authors which is published in this journal under the title "On Nationalism," tries to give a more concrete name/shape/face to this "tumult beneath the surface" or, "concealment of different realities" as the authors will put it. Stating that "talking about nationalism from the comfort of an armchair is one thing, but discussing nationalism after having traversed Anatolia and conducted face-to-face interviews is quite another," she introduces the main issue of this conversation, which is how and why class differences, social injustice, humiliation, exclusion, insecurities and fear - all of which are comfortably settled under the shield of nationalism - cannot be expressed directly. Siren İdemen's interview with Meltem Ahıska, Ferhat Kentel and Fırat Genç examines the specificities of the contemporary Turkish society and it's inner clashes of tradition and modernisation, but it also points to the cluster of similarities and differences compared with the other peripheral societies, like, for example, Serbia or Latin American countries.

In the text "Ecstasy, Fear & Number: From the 'Man of the Crowd' to the Myths of the Self-Organizing Multitude" Brian Holmes departs from the concrete "exhibition report," analyzing the strategies of contemporary art in comparison to broader social and political strategies. The exhibition No More Reality [Crowd and Performance], curated by Claire Staebler and Jelena Vesić and presented in DEPO, Istanbul, observed and examined the global transformation of cultural and political space during the 1990’s in which different mechanisms of control of public space have been invented under the propaganda of "guarantee and security." Reports of mass conflicts, wars, demonstrations and strikes are turned into aestheticized images, which feed the imagination of the people and become objects of consumption, in the same manner as "action" or "natural disaster" movies. Their role is to tell us that the horror is somewhere else, and that we can freely surrender to the consumerist pleasure and the feeling of security. If the exhibition No More Reality put into its focus the subversive potentials of crowds in the streets subjugated to the permanent state of exception, Brian Holmes gave to this focus both a historical and an actual perspective. He offers three XX and XXI century figures which are "continuing to hunt the anxiety and ecstasy of political life in the present": "First there is the relation of the nineteenth-century individual to the crowd, structured by the principle of general equivalence, offering its positive
face in the willful metamorphoses of the flâneur and its negative double in the sudden swirl of the mob, which sweeps the onlooker into a violent and unpredictable explosion of panic. The second possibility is that of the twentieth-century mass, ruled by the quasi-hypnotic absorption of biological drives into the larger-than-life body of a disciplinary leader. The third figure is the contemporary multitude, governed by a principle of self-organization that appears in the positive guise of emergent collective intelligence in the writings by Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri.

What could the potential of art be for intervening and altering the present configurations of power? Erden Kosova gives a critical reading of art practices in Turkey starting from 1980s. The relation between the artworld and politics has been uneasy and ridden by conflicts. By pointing to some significant political events and conditions, such as the major violent rupture of the 1980 coup d'état, the war against the Kurdish in the South-east of Turkey, and more recently the assassination of Hrant Dink - a Turkish Armenian journalist - he discusses how the political climate has influenced the production of art and the position of the artists. Furthermore, Turkey being stuck in between the notions of the simultaneously desired and the despised West, Kosova points to the political implications of how some works of art have been regarded as "imported" as opposed to "local." The contemporary art scene is much more heterogeneous and localized, and more overtly "political." There are many alternative art collectives that immediately react to current political issues by producing art in different froms. However, the same art scene is not independent of tendencies of professionalization and individualization, and its hurting conflicts. By this critical trajectory, Kosova emphasizes the need to think about the political economy of art more deeply for being able to insist on the engagement with alternative art spaces and collectivities.

Rastko Močnik's text *Extravagantia II: Koliko fašizma?* [Extravagantia II: How much fascism?] was one of the most important and influential contributions to the theoretical debates accompanying the disintegration process of Yugoslavia. Močnik asserted that the possibility of presenting a radical alternative capable of shaping the world history through the emancipatory discourse that had been perceptibly shaped in opposition to the official politics of Yugoslavian single-party administration was terribly missed, and the inherent critical energy was displaced by the political conformism of the emerging framework of nation-states, as initially exemplified in the institutional process of the Republic of Slovenia. As Močnik argued, the wasting of the possibility of radical differentiation in political terms was also conditioned by the theoretical positions coming from the Western hemisphere that had declared "the end of utopian thought." He related the ongoing conflicts surfacing in Yugoslavia and similar geographies, including the problem of the rise of fascistic forces, to the structural consequences of the re-construction of peripheral capitalism. The dynamics, which were outlined in Močnik's text, seems to have an effect on the political panorama at the present that has been narrowed down to the imposed binarism between democratic forces propagating integration into Western liberalism and chauvinist reaction of different strands of nationalist forces. Dušan Grlja's text "Antinomies of Post-Socialist Autonomy" traces the impacts of this polarisation on cultural production. Grlja tackles the concept of "autonomy" to show how it has been usurped by the dominant post-socialist "reason" that invites people to join in the "free market economy" and embrace "their right to self-determination as members of a certain cultural (national, ethnic or confessional) group", and as "solipsistic entrepreneurial subjects." The dominating call for autonomy paradoxically creates new, though subtler, dependencies by reaffirming the main ideological tools of neo-liberalism, particularly anti-communism. Thus, "autonomy" becomes an imperative that defines a whole range of cultural activities and promotes the culture industry, especially within the context of the EU generated and funded projects that claim to be "progressive." Art and culture are supposed to play the role of reconciling the former warring sides and enhance an "intercultural dialogue." But, how to make a political break, a rupture in this situation? Are there any possibilities of being really autonomous within this constellation? Dusan Grlja argues that autonomy could not be an individual project but entails a collective material practice. And it cannot simply mean to stay outside and against the operations within the current cultural field. He succinctly discusses what is at stake in the notion of intervention. Autonomy or "a constant process of autonomization” in the author’s words, “can be achieved through a process of
(con)test the limits of a given ‘rationality’.” One cannot aim a single break, but rather make several breaks at several fronts. Interventions should be invented and re-invented within this precarious battle, otherwise, they can easily slip into opposite directions.
Shrinking Public

Since the late 1970s, we have been living under neo-liberal hegemony. The most obvious aspect of this globally influential hegemony is, inarguably, the constant and violent attack of the “private” on the “public.” Moreover, by exploiting the existing overlap between the terms “public” and “state,” or in other words, by activating available associations between the two terms, neo-liberal ideology is able to present its attacks on the “public” as if they target “state” and “state intervention.” By doing so, it manages to present itself as a sincere and loyal pursuer of the deep-rooted libertarian tradition of classical liberalism and, therefore, to conceal its special tie to the state, and at the same time corners its opponents right from the beginning, into a position of allegedly defending the “state” and “state intervention.”

All the adversities and afflictions caused by the “welfare state” in the West, “state socialism” in the East and the “anti-democratic state structures” in the Third World were employed as a pretext for destroying the “public” and turning its ruins into a game reserve for private enterprise. First, the “spiritual – “cultural,” “political” – presence of the “public” was targeted, then its “physical” – “social” – spaces were bombarded one by one.

In the course of the establishment and institutionalisation of neo-liberal hegemony, not only all kinds of – whether republican or socialist – positive (defined inclusively) notions of public space based on the idea of common good, that is the notion of a “public space declared to be the common property of everyone,” but also all kinds of negative notions (defined exclusively) of public space based on the idea that everyone is free to choose and live according to “their own good,” that is the notion of a “public space declared to be no man’s land”, have come to be labelled obsolete, conservative, and even “reactionary”, and have been degraded as a result.

Neo-liberal hegemony could bear the adjective “collective” only when it denoted a corporate form; it would not and did not allow any space – especially one which “belongs to everyone or belongs to no one” – to stay out of its own gunshot range. Accordingly, “public space” not only fell from grace as an idea, but was also attacked physically. Avenues, streets and squares in cities ceased to be the public spaces of the citizen community and became glittering commercial showcases of the consumer community in a very short time. From then on, the pulse of the city started to beat not in “agoras,” or squares, but in agora-phobic shopping centres.

Streets used to remind those who live private lives in private homes, and work in offices built as fortresses of private property, of the “public” in every step they took. The very same streets which bear deep traces of a tormenting “common” history that made those private lives and the building of those fortresses possible eventually lost their public identities and became the private labyrinths of the “world of commodities.”

There are many significant consequences of the constant and violent attacks, or rather invasions of the “private” on “public space.” However, I maintain that the most important of these is what we can call “the melting of politics into air.” Here “melting into air” refers to two different but related conditions. The first is very clear: the shrinkage of “public space” naturally gives way to the distressful state where politics and political subjects are uprooted.

For one thing, as we mentioned before, city squares are ceasing to be the property of the “residents of the city.” This claim has one very material implication: we no longer have “squares,” or “agoras” as physical spaces where we can come together; or to say the least, they are decreasing in number. Spaces where citizens can gather, meet and encounter each other are rapidly melting into air.

We are well aware of the fact that this “melting into air” is actually a product of the all-encompassing “commodification” process. Therefore, speaking of a blatant “invasion” might be more appropriate. Squares are no longer the “empty” spaces for citizens to meet because now
they have owners. Now, there are many places you cannot stroll as a citizen. You would be admitted only if disguised, only with the identity of a consumer.

Without doubt, the physical structuring, or more precisely re-structuring processes in cities also tend to increasingly restrict public spaces. The residents of cities surrounded by intricate webs of highways and roads are no longer the pedestrians. They can become a part of the city only by means of and to the extent allowed by their cars.

This constitutes a grave problem, especially for opponent radical movements. In such kinds of privatized spaces, you can only organize a “pirate” demonstration with your citizen identity, which eventually is another indicator that citizens cannot go about in their own countries unless they are disguised. There is a growing tendency to sanction political demonstrations solely in “allocated” places, “reserved for this purpose”, and most often located somewhere “far” away from the city centre. These signal that politics has been banished from the “polis,” the real arena of politics, and exiled to the peripheries of cities.

Accordingly, demonstrations are becoming strangely invisible. You are going to have a demonstration, but in an “isolated” space; so, to whom are you going to demonstrate? Isn’t it the aforementioned process that turns political demonstrations into dull rituals, silent “shows” like football matches played in stadiums without spectators?

Inarguably, at this very moment it is possible to say that squares, streets and the like which have been invaded by the “private” were the traditional spaces of politics, but contemporary “public spaces” have taken on a novel and utterly different form, so now, especially today, it is more correct to speak of the expansion rather than shrinkage of “public space.” The argument is valid; as a matter of fact, the second condition implied by “melting into air” is related to this phenomenon.

We already know that nature dislikes absence! Naturally, the absence of city squares was rapidly replaced by something else. I think we can say that the media has claimed the former political function of “squares.” Of course, this not a simple replacement; it has dire political consequences. For one thing we can say without hesitation that even the presence of a political movement in real squares has come to depend on its visibility in the media in one way or another. I had read that the IRA used to postpone any bomb attacks, if they were not going to make the BBC primetime evening news. Is the conclusion that today this irony has become our daily reality, too far-fetched?

Some writers claim that “media-dominated” republics are transforming into “media democracies” and we have to reflect on this. I presume what it implies is that the media is becoming one of the main institutions of democratization for a significant part of present day societies. Parliments and political parties – almost everywhere – have been subjected to a rapid and constant process whereby they have lost the confidence of their citizens. This, together with the above mentioned factors like the shrinkage and melting into air of “public spaces,” have radically transformed the main function of the media as a medium of communication between political institutions and citizens. Today, the media is no longer a medium of political communication; it has gradually become the main location where this communication takes place. In other words, today the media is not only the location where politics makes its presence, its debut; but it is also where politics takes place, and maybe to put it correctly, where politics is structured. Without doubt, the media is still where real public spaces are seen. However, in the absence or shortage of other means of visibility, and hence their ineffectiveness, the initiative of determining how and how much these spaces are going to be visible ceases to be an initiative and becomes de facto power. We can say that this power makes it possible for the media to become the unique “square” through which all squares can be seen, and this must be what is referred to by the phrase “media democracy.”

This, undoubtedly, has extremely complicated and significant consequences. It is impossible to touch upon all of them here. However, we can point to two issues related to the concept of
“structuring/organisation” noted above. First, like we said before, today politics has to reshape itself in relation to the gaze of the media. Real politics or professional politics put aside, even “amateur” political demonstrations are increasingly employing “temptation” strategies which will attract the media. The ‘cunningness’ of football spectators who carry the logo of the TV channel broadcasting the match to make sure that they will appear on TV is reflected in the behaviours and attitudes of political activists. Accordingly, political demonstrations are transformed into “shows;” and perhaps more dangerously, this is so because the media “formats” these demonstrations despite the intentions of the activists. And this is the second issue I would like to raise: media reshaping politics.

The issue concerning the “images” of real squares in the media is self-evident. Nevertheless, this second result, that the media reshapes politics, is much graver. Without doubt this is about the media becoming the only real square for politics. The transformation of politics into a commercial strategy; the reduction of political propaganda to a marketing strategy; and consequently the transformation of politics into a non-political business, a kind of “performance,” a kind of “showbiz”, I believe, are the trademarks of the reinvention of politics by media. Or let’s put it this way: this is the inevitable end of politics which plays ot not in the “squares” but to the “media” as a last resort...

### Politics melting into air

In order to find the key to politics playing out strictly on screens, we have to look away from the screens to the real world... For instance, Zygmund Bauman emphasizes: “The real powers that shape the conditions under which we all act these days flow in global space, while our institutions of political action remain by and large tied to the ground; they are, as before, local.”

In other words, here Bauman points to the paradox articulated by Manuel Castell: “increasingly local politics in a world structured by increasingly global processes.”

This is a serious paradox indeed. Bauman writes: “Because they stay mainly local, political agencies operating in urban space tend to be fatally afflicted with an insufficiency of the power to act, and particularly to act effectively and in a sovereign manner, on the stage where the drama of politics is played.” That is, according to Bauman our political organizations have remained outside “politics.” Yet, we may ask: outside which “politics”? The answer we can gather from what we have read so far will be, no doubt, outside the main “stage where the drama of politics is played.” However, Bauman continues: “Another result, though, is that the stage itself has been restructured; so to say, the thing called “politics” has been gradually depoliticized. I think this the reason why Bauman talks about “real powers” and “playground of power.” Now, we are face to face not with political powers in the classical sense, but with “naked” powers and forces, and this is the core issue. That is, politics has actually been transformed into a “show”; it is a screen business now not a square business.

In fact, at first sight, it seems like politics has been unleashed in the streets, but only like a bull unleashed in the streets of Madrid for show purposes... Bauman goes on: “Evicted from and barred access to cyberspace, politics fall back and rebounds on affairs that are ‘within reach’, on local matters and neighborhood relations. For most of us and for most of the time, these seem to be the only issues we can ‘do something about’, influence, repair, improve, redirect. Only in local matters can our action or inaction ‘make a difference’, whereas for other admittedly ‘superlocal’ affairs there is (or so we are repeatedly told by our political leaders and all other ‘people in the know’) ‘no alternative’.”

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2. Ibid., p. 101.
3. Ibid., p. 100.
4. Ibid.
“global” as “natural” and because of this, again in Bauman’s words, “Even matters with undoubtedly global, far away and recondite sources and causes enter the realm of political concerns solely through their local offshoots and repercussions. The global pollution of air and water supplies turns into a political matter when a dumping ground for toxic waste is allocated next door, in ‘our own backyard’, in frighteningly close, but also encouragingly ‘within reach proximity’ to our homeground.” The sources and causes of all these matters are – undoubtedly! – natural and therefore outside the reach of politics. Undoubtedly, what we can conclude from this is rather obvious: since politics is assigned to find local solutions to global matters, it is only authorized to manage the insoluble. This is the role cut out for the politics in the restructured “political stage.”

It is apparent that this situation will lead politics to a serious legitimacy crisis: what would then be the function of political institutions and organisations which are “afflicted with an insufficiency of the power to act, and particularly to act effectively and in a sovereign manner, on the stage where the drama of politics is played”? And in whose name are they going to take over this function? When problems are naturalised and dragged out of the sphere of politics and therefore, insolubility is acknowledged, what will be the function of politics? Furthermore, as the notion of the “public” has been destroyed both spiritually and physically, who and what will give politics the legitimacy and the right to take over the responsibility of solving, or better, “managing” problems? These questions, undoubtedly, take us right to the core of the problem referred to as “crisis of representation.”

The prevalence of the attitude so-called “political cynism” is evident almost everywhere in the world – whether “developed” or “underdeveloped,” “West” or “East,” “neo-liberal” or “post-communist.” A regime which reduced politics to a form of “management” both for those who govern and for those who are governed, and placed the notion of “citizenship,” and more importantly, its own presence and own promises inside quotation marks; elections turned into hollow rituals; decreasing voting rates; bizarre parties which do not have “partisans” or supporters and therefore try to win the floating votes in every election period; and a system that does not have a “left or right”... All these can be considered to be the manifestations of the phenomenon called “crisis of representation.”

Among the representatives, the “crisis of representation” leads to a condition where they “lose their foothold.” Thinking about the difference between classical parties that represent the interests of the “people”, or to make a narrower and more realistic definition, the interests of “classes,” and parties that have no concerns whatsoever other than seeking the “favour of the voters”, may help us to understand this “condition.”

“Interests” are relatively stable references of representation; on the other hand, “favors” are similar to speculative reference points which are too instable to make the “representation” relation possible; they may be said to be “metaphysical” in character. In such a system, parties do not represent the will behind the votes they receive, but they own it. The key to understanding the obviously cynical attitude of present day “voters” is maybe right here. Why would you take a system seriously if your only vote is no longer yours at the moment you cast it?

Then the following can be claimed: the manifestation of the “crisis of representation” within the context of those represented is a state of “groundlessness.” We could also say this is the the need of “belonging” not being fulfilled. Citizenship ceases to be a stable right and is reduced to a duty, an extremely instable “favour” you demonstrate in recurring elections. Thus, naturally you cannot feel “at home” within any party or organization, or even in the whole political system since you are excluded from the system in which you have to live in.

To sum up: “crisis of representation” is the name for the lost contact between parties, organizations and even systems without any foothold, and groundless citizens, or to put it correctly, people at large. And without doubt, this is a rather general crisis. That is, it is an all-

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1 ibid., pp. 100-101.
encompassing crisis impacting not only establishment parties and organizations but also and especially anti-establishment ones. For, within the present system, “having no foothold” is not an outrage but a blessing for establishment parties. It has an “extenuating” effect for them since when they lose their foothold they can ascend in the system. On the other hand, the opposite is true for anti-establishment parties and organizations. They experience the same thing as an increasing burden; when they lose their foothold they hit the rock bottom because they cannot reach the summit and are pushed to the margins of the system. Thus, I think we can make the following conclusion: the “crisis of representation” comes down to a matter of “management” for establishment parties and organizations; yet, it is an “existential” matter for anti-establishment parties and organizations.

We have mentioned before that the “crisis of representation” manifests itself as “legitimacy crisis” among the representatives whereas its manifests itself as an “identity crisis” among those represented. I presume now we can add the following: no doubt, the two crises are interrelated, and they mutually trigger each other, but, it is the legitimacy crisis for establishment parties and organisations and the identity crisis for anti-establishment parties and organizations that have more importance. In other words, it seems like for establishment parties and organisations the issue is to overcome, or defer the legitimacy crisis and for the others it is to overcome the identity crisis. I think we can even say provisionally that, the main concern for anti-establishment parties and organisations is to deepen the “legitimacy crisis” and thus to make it “unmanageable” for establishment parties and organizations; and on the other hand, to urgently do whatever is possible to overcome the “identity crisis,” to find ways of overcoming it before it is too late.

To explain the issue more clearly and to point to possibilities of a way out I would like to give three concrete examples: two of these are from Russia, and the third one is from Turkey. I believe these examples coincide with instances when the shrinking public took a breath and politics melting into air got a foothold even if momentarily. Accordingly, I maintain that we have to reflect on these examples at length and urgently imagine and implement similar ones... I will start with possibilities of a way out that emerged in Russia and finally I will finish by pointing to a possibility that momentarily appeared and disappeared in Turkey.

Possibilities of a way out

Recently I have read a quite interesting article by Irina Aristarkhova that examines the manifestations of the crisis of representation in post-soviet Russia in 1990s. Aristarkhova points to the anti-representative attitude that is commonly observed among oppositional movements in post-soviet Russia. She quotes the following from an influential article published in 1998 by Anatoly Osmolovsky, who coined the name and was a forerunner of the political-artistic movement called Moscow Actionism: “The absence of a real world knowledge, the destruction of homogenous social structures and sub-cultures, and the impossibility of developing a reasonable behaviour make it inevitable that we deny one of the political principles of social government, namely the principle of representation.”

Aristarkhova claims that this anti-representative attitude or persistent avoidance from “speaking in the name of others,” which is commonly observed in especially the left-wing opposition, can be considered a product of an implicit reaction against the superficially “politically correct” behaviour of the West. However, without doubt, this attitude has many dimensions and goals that cannot be reduced to such a reaction. Anyway, Aristarkhova, makes this very clear when giving examples of political manoeuvres developed to overcome the crisis of representation.

Aristarkhova emphasises two examples. The first of these is the ironic election campaign, which was devised and implemented by the above-mentioned group, Moscow Actionism: a Campaign Against All Parties. The second is, the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia, an organisation which resembles the Saturday Mothers who organized an influential protest campaign in Turkey.
Aristarkhova writes that the *Campaign against all Parties*, had an ironic contribution to the election process. The campaign let itself be heard mainly through street demonstrations, publications and exhibitions. In addition to these, it planned and managed to be a participant in the elections as a “side against all sides.” Hence, Russian voters had the option to vote “Against All Parties, Groups and Candidates” along with the existing options. The participation of this group in the elections had an ironic character because it had a serious aim quite distinct from the “cynical” attitude of not participating in elections, which is very common in Russia and in many other places. For one thing, according to the current election law in Russia, if other parties or candidates get fewer votes than the “Against All” party or if the party itself gets more than fifty percent of the total votes, elections are cancelled and all other parties and candidates lose their right to take part in the following election. Consequently, the preference to be “Against All” had literally positive outcomes as opposed to not voting or casting an invalid vote; this is the possibility of stating your preference actively by erasing all the other alternatives instead of stepping aside and staying silent.

Aristarkhova states that this campaign was not very successful in the early 1990s, but became increasingly influential during the years to come. Besides it success, it is clear that the campaign was able to generate the effect we previously mentioned, that is, it exacerbated the legitimacy crisis while assuaging the identity crisis. This presents a possibility for a form of organisation where people who feel they don’t belong anywhere experience a feeling of belonging – even if only temporarily – and therefore the horizons opened by this form of action deserves to be examined thoroughly.

The second example Aristarkhova gives, as we have already stated, is the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia (CSM). Established in 1989, the Union works in domains related to military-political institutions and struggles to reshape them. It tries to supply the families of soldiers who died during their mandatory military service with financial and legal support; publishes data and information about death incidents in the military; conducts lobbying activities for amnesty legislation and military reforms in the Parliament; etc. CSM was one of the organizations in Russia which opposed the war on Chechnya actively, and was awarded the Dean McBride Peace Award in 1995 for their efforts.

All these set aside, what Aristarkhova writes about the political significance of this organization is extremely interesting and important. She maintains that the CSM manifested a rather authentic and interesting way of overcoming the identity crisis, which is worth commenting on. According to Aristarkhova, in an era where common goals and principles evaporate, differences of opinion become more and more visible, in a world where the “representation” claims of representatives are seriously challenged, when it is becoming all the more impossible for people to commit themselves to a cause, to a party, that is to devote all their energies to a common struggle in the name of the same ideals with their “comrade” party members, the CSM constitutes a concrete example for overcoming all these problems.

Aristarkhova thinks that belonging is a natural need directly related to the notion of “friendship,” to feelings of loyalty and friendship which divide the world into two camps: “friends” and “enemies.” Thus, she acknowledges that the lack of a clearly defined enemy can mean the absence of a base or support in terms of political struggle, and in order to confirm this once more, she quotes the words of Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship*, where he critically analyzes the famous, classical “friend-enemy” formulation of Carl Schmitt: “The loss of an enemy results in the loss of political ‘Self’.”

In an era, where “the enemy,” better to say, “the real enemy” is rather ambiguous, hence an addressee cannot be determined, this lack of an opponent/addressee would – naturally – lead to an inevitable state of “lack of direction” in the political sphere – and again would naturally erode the political subject itself in the first place: If I do not have an enemy, who is my friend, and more importantly, who am I?
The political alternative Derrida offers to this dazzling state is the construction of a new political understanding based on the reformulation of the notions of “friendship” and “fraternity” beyond the “friend-enemy” distinction. Aristarkhova, moving on from the CSM example, proposes a different alternative which can be called “motherhood based politics.” According to her, this political alternative goes beyond the dualistic logic of the “us-them” distinction. Consequently, as can be seen clearly in the CSM example, the absence of an “enemy” does not hinder the political activity based on the notion of motherhood because the CSM does not designate anybody as other. For one thing, people who can be designated as “enemies” also have mothers and CSM addresses not the “enemies,” but their mothers. Therefore, motherhood takes sides not through “exclusion” but through “inclusion.” Secondly, a mother’s interests and convictions do not need a Code or a Law. On the contrary, they are self-legitimating and do not need to be legitimated by another source.

And finally, the CSM experience suspends the very idea of “representation,” so it is worth quoting Aristarkhova verbatim as her words are directly related to the issue we are addressing here: “When someone represents another person, he/she places himself/herself on the same level with the other person. Representation is founded on ‘sameness’ and the experience of difference usually deteriorates a politics based on representation. People think that as the resemblance between them and those they represent increases (in terms of class, sexual preference, gender, ethnic background, disability etc.), their right to representing them grows respectively. In the case of the Soldiers’ Mothers the issue is totally different. They do not represent other mothers who love their children; rather they represent people who are radically different from them. They represent every actual or potential soldier who connects them to each other via the symbol of motherhood.”

Aristarkhova still speaks of “representing,” but I presume we have to use the verb in quotation marks here since it seems that, if there is a “representation” in this case, it is not the representation of an entity, say of people, but the representation of a “value,” a human value called “motherhood.” After all, Aristarkhova, too, with a reference to Levinas, stresses the altruism embodied in the notion of motherhood, which is an “existence not for itself, but for the other.” This makes it clear that we have entered a radically different domain of politics than politics based on representation.

Finally, the third example is from Turkey. I propose to take a closer look at the “social will” embodied in the crowd gathered on Halaskargazi Street on 19 January 2007, in the hours following the assassination of Hrant Dink, a journalist of Armenian origin and the editor-in-chief of Agos newspaper, who was shot behind the head in front of the offices of the newspaper on this street. What was the nature of the “social will,” the “social conscience” which appeared and disappeared there like a ghost?

First of all, it was defying darkness. It showed how an inconsolable and irreparable grief can bring people together. Of course, at the same time it showed how streets can regain their “public” character.

Secondly, it seems to me that, it was able to gather everybody together with one of the most radical slogans throughout the history of Turkey which explained the situation in a nutshell: “We are all Armenians!” No doubt, this slogan is loaded with infinite meanings which cannot be consumed through interpretation. Thus, we can list only a few of them here.

To begin with, this slogan was the expression of a political cry that had no “enemies.” The slogan itself is sure to have enemies, and it actually did. It even aroused an angry outcry. However, the slogan itself was not directed at any enemies, and as a result, it caused the enmity directed at it to inevitably miss its target and fall into void. For, in this slogan the phrase “we are all” was not a totalizing or “totalitarian” quantifier, like the word “every” in the slogan “Every Turk is born a soldier.” Namely, this “we” was not a comprehensive “we” meaning “we are speaking in the name of the others,” but a participatory “we” meaning “we all who endorse this slogan.” Therefore, when someone made an objection saying, “I am not an Armenian, I am essentially a
Turk!” it only meant “I don’t agree with you,” and this person naturally ceased to be the addressee of this “we.”

Thirdly, most of the people who gathered there did not represent anyone or anything but was present there personally. I say most, not all, because certainly there were some people who came dressed in attire disclosing their ethnic background or carrying banners revealing their political identity. However, the majority, if I may say, came there bare-naked because the incident was too harrowing to become a pretext of something else. Therefore, what is called “politics” was mostly absent as a name, but the political character and attribute of everything was out in the open.

Jacques Ranciére once said that the slogan “We are all Algerians!” voiced by French radicals in 1961 in Paris as a protest against the oppression of Algerian immigrants “by the French police in the name of the people of France” had nothing to do with a wish to identify themselves with Algerians. It could not even be interpreted as an attempt to empathize with them because this would not be possible in the first place. According to him, rather than forming a prospective identification, this slogan was intended to break apart an existing one. Those who cried out the slogan, at that very moment, did not wish to be Algerians but rather wanted to express that they were ashamed of being French, more precisely, they were ashamed of the things done in their name. In other words, they did not want to take on another identity, and consequently have the right to speak for Algerians. On the contrary, they wanted to tear apart and get rid of their existing identity, and in Rancière’s words, hoped to have the possibility to express themselves quietly in the “crack” or “fissure” between “two identities neither of which they could identify with.”

This was what people did after Hrant Dink’s assassination, and that “will,” or “conscience” that seemed to appear momentarily illustrated that a participatory solidarity which is not based on representation but, on the contrary, threatens the legitimacy of “representation” was still possible. We know that this “state of solidarity” was ephemeral; still, it was encouraging. After all, even in the form of a rebellion against an identity, it created a possibility to satisfy the human need of belonging.

Translated from Turkish by Nalan Ösoy

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Ecstasy, Fear & Number
From the “Man of the Crowd” to the Myths of the Self-Organizing Multitude
Brian Holmes

All demands for justice and all theories of equality ultimately derive their energy from the actual experience of equality familiar to anyone who has been part of a crowd.

Elias Canetti, Crowds and Power

“Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet... The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else, as he sees fit. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes. For him alone everything is vacant; and if certain places seem closed to him, it is only because in his eyes they are not worth visiting.... What people call love is quite small, quite limited, and quite feeble, compared with this holy prostitution of the soul which gives itself over entirely, poetry and charity, to the unexpected that appears, to the unknown that passes.”

These were the words of Charles Baudelaire in a prose poem entitled “The Man of the Crowd,” published in 1869. They express an historically specific, yet still widely practiced version of the artist’s relation to the urban environment. As a poet on the loose in the industrial city, with its freedom of commerce, its claims to democracy and its gaping class divides, Baudelaire adopted the liminal position of the strolling flâneur, with the leisure to feast his gaze on the endless displays of commodities and to furtively penetrate the anonymous lives of other wanderers on the streets. Conceiving himself as a dandy and a quintessentially singular individual, Baudelaire was fascinated with the mobile and fleeting multiplicity of urban life, or what he referred to as the element of “number.” This fascination was an artistic technique: the capacity to let oneself dissolve, to be swept away in a perceptual and imaginary flux, then to recover and concentrate oneself again in the moment of writing. “On the vaporization and the centralization of the self. That’s everything,” he wrote in his Intimate Journals.

The crowd, as Elias Canetti observes, is a primordial experience of equality: a chance to abandon the strictly policed limits of the self and to merge into the flesh of the other. But a cultural critic might also read this free exchange of self for other as a subjective reflection of the economic relation dominating life in the metropolis: the relation of general equivalence, whereby every thing and every warm body can be exchanged for any other thing or body, via the intermediary of cool hard cash. Walter Benjamin developed that kind of reading, interpreting the poet’s claim to become everyone he desired as a subjective translation of the commodity’s power to attract everyone with money to spend. However, Benjamin’s philological research also showed how Baudelaire fed on the raw energy, linguistic inventions and obstinate popular resistance of the lumpen proletariat on the outskirts of Paris. The flâneur drawn into the nocturnal crevices of the sprawling city was able to unearth new vocabularies and rhythms for poetic language. Thus the German writer defined the potential of art under capitalism by its openness to normalizing seductions. Yet Benjamin also criticized Baudelaire for engaging in what he called “the overtaxing of the productive person in the name of a principle, the principle of ‘creativity.’” Echoing Marx, he saw the exaltation of creativity as a self-administered trap for the bohemian artist: “This overtaxing is all the more dangerous because as it flatters the self-esteem of the productive person, it effectively guards the interests of a social order that is hostile to him.”

The social blindness fostered by a self-centered creativity remains part of our common experience—precisely to the extent that the gentrified city is still a world of the flâneur. But if Baudelaire critiqued his own practice, it was not for self-centeredness but rather for an excess of dispersal, of vaporization: the terrifying loss of the centered self in the element of number.

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“Inspiration always comes when a man wants it, but doesn’t always leave when he wants it,” he wrote in his *Intimate Journals*. He was fascinated by prostitution, by the figure of the author as prostitute, because his own embrace of the anonymous other left ineradicable traces in his memory and in his sense of identity. In an early poem conflating the figures of poet and streetwalker (“Je n’ai pas pour maîtresse une lionne illustre”), he writes these verses about his venal mistress:

In the cruelty of night her big restless eyes  
See the alleyways glitter with two other eyes,  
For having opened her heart to all her hosts  
She’s afraid of the dark and believes in ghosts.

Which means she keeps more candles alight  
Than a scholar in bed with his books day and night,  
And she worries less about hunger’s shudders  
Than about the return of her defunct lovers.

What kinds of traces have been left on our personal and political lives by the long history of ecstasy and fear, of anxiety and desire, that structures the relation between the democratic individual and the urban multitude? What kind of traps and dead-ends have been built into the very fabric of the city, and indeed into human skins and psyches, in order to stanch this fear and quell this anxiety? And what possibilities do we still have to open up a politicized public space in the metropolis – at the risk of ecstatic self-dissolution in the element of number, or even self-destruction in the violent clashes of the streets? To go further with these questions I will examine a series of artistic and political proposals gathered together in a remarkable exhibition of contemporary art entitled *No More Reality [Crowd and Performance]*, curated by Jelena Vesić and Claire Staebler and recently shown at DEPO in Istanbul.² What these artworks reveal is that our experience of the city as an urban theater of subversive gesture, political speech and direct action continues to be informed by a matrix of three major figures, or three open possibilities of fear and ecstatic desire for the incarnations of equality.

Let’s review the three figures in advance, before turning to the artworks. First there is the relation of the nineteenth-century individual to the crowd, structured by the principle of general equivalence, offering its positive face in the willful metamorphoses of the flâneur and its negative double in the sudden swirl of the mob, which sweeps the onlooker into a violent and unpredictable explosion of panic. The second possibility is that of the twentieth-century mass, ruled by the quasi-hypnotic absorption of biological drives into the larger-than-life body of a disciplinary leader, whether in the image of constructive promise that we recall from the agit-prop posters of the Soviet Constructivists, or in the overwhelming threat of total abnegation and submission now irremediably associated with the historical memory of Hitler and the cinema of Leni Riefenstahl. Finally, the third figure is the contemporary multitude, governed by a principle of self-organization that appears either in the positive guise of emergent collective intelligence that writers like Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri have celebrated in recent years, or in the vacuous, aimless construct of a hyperindividualized consuming population organized into infinite differences through the ever-present ramifications of the urban spectacle – which, as Jean Baudrillard insisted, are nothing less than myths made to order, and indeed, increasingly made by ourselves, through processes of manipulated participation at a micro-individual scale. So we have the crowd, the mass and the multitude: three figures which form a matrix of possibilities, all alive and active, all continuing to haunt the anxiety and the ecstasy of political life in the present.

**Paradox of the Choreographer**

It is a sunny afternoon on an animated city street in the Croatian capital of Zagreb. A dancer in a yellow shirt gestures to the sky, turns gracefully around on his heels – then falls suddenly and violently to the ground. He gets up, twirls gracefully again, weaves sinuously through the traffic – then lashes out, kicking savagely, attacking the air while consternated passers-by make an effort not to see him. Like the Baudelairean poet, this is a man who knows how to be alone in a bustling crowd; and even more, he knows how to populate his own solitude. His gestures are those of a fight, if not a riot. But where are his opponents or victims? And what can it possibly mean, to struggle with no one in the bright light of day?

The great actor is a “cool and tranquil spectator,” writes the eighteenth-century philosophe Diderot, in a text entitled *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1773). To succeed on stage the actor must have “penetration and no sensibility,” he must be incisive and aloof, so that he can take on “all kinds of character and roles.” What’s called for is not passionate involvement or hysterical mimesis but distanced precision and self-mastery: the artist’s consummate ability to be anyone at any time, expressing any emotion in any style, like an instrument from which a virtuoso musician can call forth an astonishing variety of tones, timbres and hues.3 The dancers on the streets of Zagreb perform this coolness, this imperturbable poise amid outbursts of violence. The artist Igor Grubić has underscored their self-control by placing a series of stills next to the video that records their gestures. It’s almost uncanny to see them in this way, like statues frozen in a moment of extreme mobility. But what makes their reserve so unnerving is the source from which the artist-choreographer has excerpted their gestures. For the figures whose passion he has asked his dancers to mimic within their bubbles of strange, distanced solitude are those of neo-fascist hecklers attacking and beating the marchers at Gay Pride demonstrations in Belgrade and in Zagreb itself, where the violent acts were restaged.

What resounds in the indifferent atmosphere of normative liberal tolerance are cries from another era: homophobic attacks carried out in the name of masculine identities whose claims to moral right are based on service to the nation in the recent wars. Fists fly, shots echo in the air, blood flows from the faces of the marchers whom the police rush to protect, but always too late, after the assailants have discharged their irrepressible collective rage. The videos are shown together, forming a diptych of extreme tension.

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3 Also see the commentary on this text by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Diderot: Paradox and Mimesis,” in *Typography: mimesis, philosophy, politics* (Stanford University Press, 1998).
The piece, entitled *East Side Story*, is a protest against the continuing right-wing violence of Balkan society, but also a question addressed to the West (which begins in Croatia, with its pending candidacy for entry into the EU). The question Grubić asks, through an overidentification with the cool spectatorship of the classical Enlightenment actor, concerns the capacity of liberal society to master the aggressive and self-defensive passions that are periodically unleashed by the infinite exchangeability of persons and places under the reign of the general equivalent. What does the modern flâneur forget while parading every day past the shops of gentrified cities such as Zagreb and Belgrade? What violence lurks in the smooth flow of traffic and the reflected image of oneself among the designer goods in a storefront window? What ghosts haunt our streets, and even our own gestures, under the noonday sun?

**Mass and Mythos**

The French psychologist Gustave Le Bon wrote about the hypnotic suggestibility of the crowd, where the individual “is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will.” Le Bon exemplifies the anxiety and premonitory fear that gripped European intellectuals in the face of early manifestations of the mass, conceived as the antithesis but also the apotheosis of the atomized individual: “An isolated individual knows well enough that alone he cannot set fire to a palace or loot a shop, and should he be tempted to do so, he will easily resist the temptation. Making part of a crowd, he is conscious of the power given him by number, and it is sufficient to suggest to him ideas of murder or pillage for him to yield immediately to temptation. An unexpected obstacle will be destroyed with frenzied rage.”

Freud quotes Le Bon at length in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, and disagrees only with the vague notion of “suggestibility” used by turn-of-the-century psychologists to explain the absorption of individual consciousness into the mesmerizing personality of the leader. In its place he installs the myth of Eros and the unifying power of libido as it appears in the

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clinical phenomenon of hypnosis:

From being in love to hypnosis is evidently only a short step. The respects in which the two agree are obvious. There is the same humble subjection, the same compliance, the same absence of criticism, towards the hypnotist as towards the loved object. There is the same sapping of the subject’s own initiative; no one can doubt that the hypnotist has stepped into the place of the ego ideal.... The hypnotic relation is the unlimited devotion of someone in love, but with sexual satisfaction excluded.5

Interestingly, Baudelaire’s relation to the crowd has been almost perfectly inversed in Freud’s portrayal of mass psychology. Instead of the poet’s vaporization into the element of number, there is a centralization of the dispersed crowd in the mythic figure of the leader, conceived as a force of attraction and a love-object. The leader now haunts the crowd, organizing and unifying the sea of faces. Apart from the neofascist demonstrators of Igor Grubić’s piece, there are no direct representations of this kind of aggressive totalitarian mass in the exhibition No More Reality. What you do see, however, are the waving arms and pleasure-seeking female faces of the silent video 50,000,000 Can’t Be Wrong by the German artist Susanne Bürner, who combed the archives of 1950s fandom to splice together liberal democracy’s answer to the terrible scenes of Nuremberg filmed by Leni Riefenstahl. These are the Fordist masses whose ecstasy Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had already witnessed in Hollywood in the 1940s: the pure emotional plasticity of consuming subjects, whom the artist shows only in themselves, without ever revealing the identity of their desired object. It is as though the invisible leader were now only a cipher, a meaningless simulacrum or a force of capitalist nature.

in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive.” They attributed this self-destruction of society not to the singularity of the leader but to the relation of general equivalence between commodities: “The identity of everything with everything else is paid for in that nothing may at the same time be identical with itself.” Through its relentless quest to emancipate itself from nature through production, they believed, mankind ultimately recreated itself – its body, its culture, its political relations – as a de-individualized image of the machine: “The regression of the masses today is their inability to hear the unheard of with their own ears, to touch the unapprehended with their own hands... Through the mediation of the total society which embraces all relations and emotions, men are once again made to be that against which the evolutionary law of society, the principle of self, had turned: mere species beings, exactly like one another through isolation in the forcibly united collectivity.”

The irony is that Adorno and Horkheimer’s protest against industrialized culture in all its forms – or against what Lewis Mumford would later call “the myth of the machine” – was destined to become the very norm of neoliberal society from the 1980s onward. This norm was already implicit in the conduct of world wars to make the world safe for liberal democracy; and it was reinforced by the critique of the “authoritarian personality” which the Frankfurt School carried out in the early 1950s. But the mass culture of the 1950s and the very standardization of the Hollywood dream factory remained as a kind of collective ambiguity within the fold of liberal individualism, all the way to the great rebellious rock concerts of the 1960s and early 1970s. The industrial machine was the structural principle of postwar Fordist society. Only when flexible accumulation – and with it, Japanese micromedia – had finally triumphed in the 1980s, could the Frankfurt School’s rejection of mass culture become the unquestioned norm and dogma of middlebrow cultural formations, and particularly of contemporary art. For the planetary petty bourgeoisie that emerged from the postwar industrial boom and then began hoping to make some small profit off its own human capital, the rejection of anything that smacks of the mass is de rigueur.

I am not sure that the relation to collectivity in pieces like Johanna Billing’s Project for Revolution or Fia Backström’s Herd Instinct 360° can be described with such strong words as “fear” or even “anxiety.” Rather they appear as the recital of an obligatory lesson whose contexts and teachers have been forgotten. The former work is a restaging of a celebrated scene from the opening of Antonioni’s Zabriskie Point, which shows a meeting in a college classroom rising to a fever pitch of revolution. But in the art video, nothing happens amid the strained uncertainty of a typically self-conscious and alienated postmodern social encounter, and at the end of the short piece, the photocopier does not churn out incendiary tracts but blank sheets of paper. Fia Backström’s far more elaborate work takes the form of a lecture complete with PowerPoint slideshow, delivered, she explains, as a kind of sermon at communal gatherings that she organized in New York, and projected in the exhibition space between two red flags, just to make sure that you understand which collective politics she wishes to ridicule. Referring to yet another of the turn-of-the-century psychologists – the Englishman Wilfred Trotter – Herd Instinct takes you through 360 degrees of abject community, culminating with Nazism before ending in an account of adultery and murder out in some banal Swedish suburb. All this is apparently supposed to convince us that Freud was right, and that behind the drama of Le Bon’s authoritarian crowd there is really only a sordid story of regressive sexual fascination: the zero degree of collectivity in pointless death. It’s at this point – the low point of post-Fordist nihilism – that the title of the exhibition seems to take on its full meaning.

In fact, the title evokes a video work done by the French artist Philippe Parreno in 1991. The piece shows a miniature crowd of children marching under a forest of signs that proclaim “No

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More Reality.” The implications of regression, infantilization and disempowerment in the image-society are clear. But Parreno’s piece does not appear in the exhibition. Instead, the title marks the site of a cultural and political challenge, like a line drawn in the sand, defining the entry to our own period. It is here that the really interesting things begin.

Herd Instinct 360°, Fia Backström, 2005-2006

Postmodern Crystals

If there’s no more reality, then what is there? After 1989, the gnawing anxiety that filled Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern theories – the suspicion that the spectacle of life unfolding before our eyes might be no more than a precession of simulacra – began to spill out from the saturated consumer paradises of capitalist Europe to the former East. A decade before, Baudrillard had evoked the Borgesian fable of a map coextensive with the imperial territory it depicts, and he pointed beyond this excess of representation to a new, generative role of the model in computerized processes of simulation:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself.8

Millions of citizens of the formerly communist societies gratefully followed the Anglo-American map to democracy, only to discover that their entry into consumer capitalism had been calculated and organized in advance, forestalling any genuine exercise of political self-

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determination. Thus a powerful doubt hangs over the photographs of popular protest shot by Olga Kisseleva in the cities of Paris, New York and Kiev, under the title (In)visible. Always in black and white, with the banners and placards blurred or erased, these images ask for our enthusiasm, our democratic love of the people in the street; but they also make us wonder what invisible social forces may lie behind the exuberance of the image. The case of Kiev, in particular, raises questions: because it is now well known that as in the other “color revolutions” in former Soviet republics, the Ukrainian elections that brought Viktor Yushchenko to power in 2005 were anything but spontaneous, grassroots events. As Ian Traynor writes in the Guardian, “while the gains of the orange-bedecked ‘chestnut revolution’ are Ukraine’s, the campaign is an American creation, a sophisticated and brilliantly conceived exercise in Western branding and mass marketing that, in four countries in four years, has been used to try to salvage rigged elections and topple unsavory regimes.”

Behind the images of grassroots social movements are a panoply of American civil and governmental organizations: the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the Albert Einstein Institute, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflicts, etc. With their slogans, stickers, color codes and posters of a raised fist borrowed from the Serbian resistance movement Otpor, it is as though these organizations were seeding the crowd for democracy, the way the Air Force seeds the clouds in the sky with tiny crystals to provoke rain. At stake here is the introduction of an idealized model with powerfully generative capacities.

Very few serious studies have yet been done on this capacity to “wage peace” through the strategic application of finely hewn behavioral cues and patterns. In a fascinating speech at the US State Department’s Open Forum on June 29, 2004, Peter Ackerman, chair of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflicts, said this among other things:

We've hired a firm, called Breakaway Games, that has done civilization games, and has also worked for the Department of Defense on conflict issues.... And we have been working with them now for a year on simulations of nonviolent resistance movements. So you'll be able to take your own country and basically recreate it in this game. It's demography, it's geography, it's key institutions, the predilections of every member in that society you can identify. You can lay all that out, and then you could actually sort of choose up sides, and one side would play the regime and one side would play those who were in the resistance, and continuously work through a variety of tactics and to see what the impact is on... hundreds of variables.... Now, the importance of that is not just to transfer knowledge about what might work or what might not work, but also to create cohesion and to create a sense of possibilities amongst people who basically have difficulty seeing the next steps. This game will be generally distributed throughout the world. It will be in open architecture form. It will be usable on paper or on computer. And we think it will be incredibly important for those who are working to free themselves from oppression.

The democracy game is an educational/propaganda tool designed to naturalize an entire way of thinking, an operational logic, a set of reflexes. It would be hard to find a more literal illustration of Michel Foucault’s dictum that liberal strategies of control operate “on the rules of the game rather than on the players.” But what if you are the one who has been handed freedom's
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joystick? A new, fully cybernetic version of the Great Game for the control of the Eurasian Continent is the very pragmatic context in which the R.E.P. group began their work, in the fall of 2004 during the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine. And so they rushed into the public space with signs, slogans, loudspeakers – demanding attention for a famous New York artist.

What should we make of this activist group and their bizarre black-and-white costumed performance, where they invite the protesting Ukrainians to become Andy Warhol? Should we condemn them as manipulated subjects, “swarming adolescents” engaged in “rebellious hysteria,” as the reporter Jonathan Mowat puts in a trenchant article on the strategies of what he calls the “postmodern coup”?12 Are these Ukrainian Warholians really no more than remote-controlled insurgents of the American dream? Or is this merely a ploy to enter the international art market, one more classic case of what Walter Benjamin called the “overtaxing” of the “principle of creativity” – which, as he noted, “is all the more dangerous because as it flatters the self-esteem of the productive person, it effectively guards the interests of a social order that is hostile to him”?13

The ambiguities of democracy and public space under postmodern conditions are endless. Yet two can play at changing the rules of society’s game. In other words, the meta level of conflict-production strategy can itself become a theater of conflict, open to grassroots experimentation. This is what the R.E.P. group came together to do, since the name means Revolutionary Experimental Space. What can be glimpsed here, in the gestures and actions of this tightly knit artistic group, is a contemporary form of what Canetti called a crowd crystal:

The clarity, isolation and constancy of the crystal form an uncanny contrast with the excited flux of the surrounding crowd. The process of rapid, uncontrollable growth, and the threat of disintegration, which together give the crowd its particular restlessness, do not operate within the crystal. Even in the midst of the greatest excitement the crystal stands out against it. Whatever the nature of the crowd it gives birth to, and however much it may appear to merge with it, it never completely loses the sense of its own identity and always recombines again after the disintegration of the crowd.13

The urge to form such a crystal – similarly evident in the performance Coagulum – a momentary clot in the heart of commerce, by the Inventory group in London in the year 2000 – stems from a root desire for the embodied experience of equality, through a problematic or interruptive presence amid the ordinary flows of public space. But the troubling question raised and left unanswered by the R.E.P. performance is how to operate within the postmodern image-worlds, with their generative models and all-pervasive simulacra of democracy. When popular play has been incorporated as a technique of power, can the subversive strategies of the 1960s have any more effect on the managed transformations of the status quo? Or must we all accept to simply play the roles of freedom and democracy?

Gaming the System

Over the last twenty years, the Italian Autonomia philosophers have provided a language to conceive of grassroots strategies of intervention in the control society. Their work has culminated in the widespread diffusion of the figure of the multitude, which arises, in their view, when the directly productive activity of the former working class becomes permeated with “immaterial” or intellectual labor. To legitimate this notion of “intellectual labor,” so totally heretical in the Marxist tradition, Paolo Virno calls upon the notion of “General Intellect” used by Marx in the Grundrisse to designate the accumulated scientific and technical knowledge which increasingly makes physical labor power obsolete. Yet as Virno explains:

Marx conceives general intellect as “a scientific capacity” objectified within the system of machines, and thus as fixed capital. He thereby reduces the external or public quality of intellect to the technological application of natural sciences to the process of production. The crucial step consists rather in highlighting to the full the way in which general intellect comes to present itself as a direct attribute of living labor, as a repertoire of a diffuse intelligentsia, as a “score” that creates a common bond among the members of a multitude.14

The key thing, then – the action that brings the multitude into existence as such – is the capacity of a dispersed but communicating network to coordinate or orchestrate its own behavior. Yet this capacity is always threatened by a particularly insidious form of alienation, which demands that the members of the multitude use their coordinating capacities in a predatory way, in order to actually create the simulated environments of postmodern consumption and control. As Virno explains: “The excess cooperation of intellect, however, rather than eliminating the coercions of capitalist production, figures as capital’s most eminent resource. Its heterogeneity has neither voice nor visibility....” His conclusion is exactly the one that has led so many politically engaged artists to shift their terrain from the fictional sphere of suspended disbelief that defines the space of artistic production in the liberal societies, to the directly conflictual space of the street. Virno writes this: “Civil disobedience’ is today the sine qua non of political action. Through myths that may be its single manifestations, the radical Disobedience that interests me here must bring into question the State’s very faculty of command.”15

You can see exactly this transition toward disobedience in the activity of an artist like John Jordan, one of the coordinating figures of London Reclaim the Streets in the late 1990s. He is interviewed by Marcelo Expósito in a video called Carnivals of Resistance, which forms part of Expósito’s larger cycle of films devoted to the unwritten history of the new organizational forms and grassroots practices of political struggle.16 At a key point in this long and detailed interview, Jordan focuses on the potential ambiguities of the carnivalesque demonstration:

Of course, it was a political action: we were reclaiming space from motor cars, we were creating different forms of social relationships between people, there was no money in exchange, we were reclaiming that public space, and so on. But to some extent, a lot of people simply saw it as a party. So we really thought, by placing this carnival in the least carnivalesque of places – in the City of London, one of the key nodes of global capital, of the financial system – it would really push the message that we are anti-capitalists, we’re not just against cars and we’re not just party people.

The speaker’s face, filmed in extreme close-up, periodically gives way to a montage perception of the event. Knitting together sequences from many different cameras wandering loose on the streets of the City of London on June 18, 1999, the video offers composite four-image views of the performative interventions (some would say the wild and uncontrollable riot) that helped catalyze a networked social movement, relayed in November 1999 by five days of urban insurrection at the WTO summit in Seattle. By shifting from a single, retrospective narrative to a multiplicity of simultaneous and divergent perspectives, Expósito translates the complex interactive mesh of the counter-globalization protests, where carefully elaborated plans must be reshaped or abandoned in an instant. Only the willingness to combine highly reflected strategies with spur-of-the-moment tactics allowed the protesters to move fluidly through the grid of control, realizing embodied collective gestures that could resonate through proliferating media

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15 Ibid., pp. 194, 196.
16 For a more thorough treatment of this work see my text “Marcelo Expósito’s Entre Sueños: Towards the New Body,” in Open 17, Summer 2009; available at http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/01/19/marcelo-exposito-entre-suenos.
channels to inspire a new generation of activists. And the images spun off in this way were as powerful as the events themselves: they became the myths and multi-faceted mirrors of the cycle of global protest that exploded from 1997 to 2003. At the urban sites where global decisions are taken – and expropriated from any democratic process – acts and images of radical disobedience helped to bring the “personally political” dimensions of everyday life into antagonistic contact with the formal and institutional spheres of politics.

**Tomorrow in the City**

The strength of this exhibition is to privilege neither the proactive interventions of the multitude, nor the analysis of simulation and simulacra in the control society, but instead to play both against each other under the historical shadows of the earlier figures of the self-dissolving *flâneur* and the amalgamated urban mass. The contrasting choices of the present only take on their full meaning in their opposition to each other and in a shared relation to the past from which both spring. As the current economic crisis unfolds, one can expect new combinations to arise from this historical matrix, or maybe even a new figure of existential fear and egalitarian desire.

As for the show itself – its walls decorated with the strange imagistic codes of the R.E.P. group’s hieroglyphic visual language – it seems to reach its conclusion with the highly problematic *Radioballet* of the Ligna group, who sought to “haunt” a privatized Leipzig train station with the banished gestures of common modes of existence (sitting, sleeping, loitering, begging, saying goodbye). A performance script broadcast by pirate radio allowed a crowd of interventionists to coordinate subversive movements in a situation of extreme dispersal, flush with the disjointed everyday realities of atomized populations moving through the neutralized hygienic space. In this way Ligna claims to realize the Brechtian promise of radio, whose two-way potential is not manifest here as sending/receiving, but instead as centralized broadcast/dispersed performance. The gestures are ghostly, graceful, strained and at times quite hilarious.

*Patriotism, R.E.P. Group, 2007-2009*
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This staged protest – visibly carried out with the permission of the authorities – appears at first glance to add a new layer of perversity to the postmodern spectacle of self-administered control. Yet it simultaneously appears as a fresh and unusual act of experimentation.17 Do these strangely docile-looking dissidents really succeed in haunting the slick and cool spaces of the station with the everyday behaviors repressed by the patrols of a typical neoliberal security firm? Or are they themselves more deeply haunted by the fascist order-speech of radio propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s? What kind of forgotten loves and unutterable drives could return to the polished floors and sterile corridors of circulation and commerce, where the consumer’s lack is reflected in the overfullness of the contemporary void?

Cast back into the default role of the flâneur in the post-social spaces of the contemporary city, we will all have plenty of time to ponder this enigma on our daily rounds through the urban environment. Until the pressure of crisis finally breaks through the omnipresent spell of the commodity, and we find out which collective experiments – which fears and desires – we ourselves are ready to welcome into flesh.

17 It should be noted that an earlier performance in Hamburg was done without permission. To form your own idea of this unusual and fascinating performance, see the video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qI3pFa5ONZI and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpT-wb3TPXk.
Antinomies of Post-Socialist Autonomy
Dušan Grlja

The following essay aims to elucidate the meanings and functions of autonomy within the post-socialist framework of peripheral neo-liberal political economy of “cultural production” in the former Yugoslavia region or, as the contemporary geopolitical agenda terms it, the Western Balkans. It will also present efforts to address the possibilities and practical strategies concerning the struggle for autonomy in the field of “independent cultural activism.”

The transition from “really existing” socialism to liberal democracy and the free-market economy (i.e. capitalism) is often seen as a transition from the state of heteronomy, of being determined by the “Other” (by the State and the Party), to autonomy or self-determination. This view follows, in a certain way, what Kant referred to in his essay “What is Enlightenment?” as the transition from self-inflicted immaturity to full maturity, in the sense of taking responsibility for one’s own beliefs and actions. The dominant neo-liberalism presents itself precisely as a wake-up call, a reminder to everyone that it is time to “grow up,” “get serious” and take responsibility for one’s own self. This means to market one’s self, to become the so-called “prosumer,” being at the same time one’s own labor-force and employer, as well as financial, marketing and PR manager, not “finding,” but “creating” jobs, “self-organizing” one’s health security and pension – in short, waging an everyday and never-ending fight for one’s ever-precarious place on the “open market.” Socialism is therefore seen as a tucked-in and safe time when at least everyone’s basic material needs were both looked after and taken care of. It seems like it is precisely this maternal care – and the paternalism, too – from the State, for sustaining its subjects through administrative networks of collective employment, social security systems, so-called social health care and pension funds etc, which allegedly provided the leisure time for developing childish ideas about the possibilities of radical change – revolution.

From this perspective of peripheral neo-liberalism, the advent of capitalism in former Yugoslavia (through the destruction of the socialist federal state and through both civil and “humanitarian” wars) seems precisely like the transition from the heteronomy imposed by the socialist system – being completely dependent on the decisions and whims of State and Party – to the autonomy enjoyed by “finally” aligning with the “free world.” This dominant post-socialist “reasoning” is not only inviting – or rather, ordering – people to exit their immaturity, their childish dependence on the “Other” and to become solipsistic entrepreneurial subjects within the “social free-market economy,” but also to become aware of their own rights to self-determination as members of a certain cultural (national, ethnic or confessional) group. This kind of autonomy is perceived in the former Yugoslavia region as the final achievement of a “thousand year dream” of national – in fact, ethno-nationalist – self-determination for the newly-formed states, thus retroactively making socialist Yugoslavia a “prison-house of nations.” The dominant post-socialist perception of autonomy therefore serves the purpose of rendering socialist Yugoslavia, the communist movement and Marxism into something that has been definitively surpassed, belonging to the past’s long gone times of repression, and reaffirms the anti-communist “consensus” as the main ideological support of contemporary neo-liberalism. It is precisely this zealous anti-communism that unifies the apparently opposed political options of “democratic” pro-Europeanism and “patriotic” nationalism, religious chauvinism and the struggle for human rights, a re-traditionalized culture of “our fore-fathers” and a democratic culture of civil society, the identity politics of nation-state building and multi- or inter-culturalism.

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1 The ideas presented in this essay were developed within the Frontbildung project as a part of Hamburg’s festival Wir Sind Wonders #2 that took place in October 2006 (http://www.wirindswoanders.de/files_2007/index_allE.php?seite=38&folge=00).
2 This new geopolitical area encompasses the newly formed ex-Yugoslav states, minus Slovenia (now a fully-fledged EU member-state) plus Albania, thus representing “ascending” countries which still need “cultivating” in order to achieve full EU membership.
4 Cf., for instance, http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/kant.html
Obviously, “culture” represents an important stake in this constellation of nation-state building — aiming to purge “nations” from their communist past and “modernizing” them for their re-unification with the “international community.” It is precisely this project of isolating and separating “nations” and, subsequently, re-assembling them within the EU that facilitates the seemingly paradoxical partnership of advocates of both pan-European and ethno-national cultures. Although local elites and their nation-building ideologues declare fidelity to the EU project the actual political and cultural policies remain self-enclosed and hostile to most forms of regional exchange. On one hand, official local cultural policies still favour programmes and projects which aim to create a strong and exclusive national identity. On the other, the ruling elites have recognized the need for a more intensive regional collaboration as a necessity for joining the EU, but whenever regional cooperation is mentioned they claim that no one wants to be part of anything resembling the old “repressive” communist ideology of Brotherhood and Unity.

For the more “progressive” EU policies and institutions, culture is also an indispensable vehicle of a new, “innovative” geo-political agenda. The basic infrastructure for capitalist “development” was set up in the peripheral states of Eastern Europe after the post-1989 “rectifying revolutions” and a transitional period of establishing constitutional, parliamentary democracies and the free market economy during the 1990s, thus leaving unfinished the task of supplying capitalist development with a necessary superstructure. Since the old liberal ideology of personal achievement through “free trade” lost its grip almost a century ago, it had to be supplemented with something that would respond to the situation of a vanished bipolar world, globalization and the “end of ideologies.” Enter multiculturalism as an injection that would simultaneously inoculate people of the periphery with the “eternal values of democratic culture” and reinvigorate capitalism itself with a post-colonial twist. Multiculturalism actually facilitates a seemingly paradoxical unification through differentiation, since it operates on two registers. The first asserts its “democratic” character by making each and every “culture” equal in value, but also having an equal right to express and preserve itself. Therefore, it is perceived as compassionate, humane and non-discriminatory, but also as exclusivist, chauvinist and discriminatory, since this expressing and preserving of a culture is often seen as a right to “defend” it against other cultures that “threaten” its existence. However, the second register imposes a political division precisely between those two perceptions by differentiating “essentialists” (those who believe in a consistent and unchangeable underlying substance of their cultural identity whose invariable and fixed properties separate them from all the “others”) from those who are aware of the so-called multicultural “normality,” that requires “democratic” negotiation of one’s own, as well as others’, multiple cultural identities. Multiculturalism, as well as its official successor — interculturalism, is therefore little less than colonial racism cloaked in the form of an “empty universality.”

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5 It is enough to recall the process of creating and implementing the official languages of the newly formed ex-Yugoslav states, whereby the same common language of the majority of Yugoslav peoples – which was called either Serbo-Croatian or Croat-Serbian, containing multiple dialects – exploded into apparently distinct and incomparable, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and even Montenegrin.

6 For the overwhelming majority of politicians, joining the EU now stands for almost a millenarist belief in the return of a mythical Golden Age and access to “the land of milk and honey,” but actually covers up their incapability of improving the living standards of the people. While liberals use the banner of “European integration” to present cuts in public funding, privatization, and deregulation as necessities, the right-wing uses it to apotheosize their roots in an “ancient,” white, Christian – even Aryan – Europe.

7 “This rectifying revolution, in so far as it is meant to make possible a return to constitutional democracy and a connection with developed capitalism, is guided by models that orthodox interpretations consider the revolution of 1917 to have made redundant.” (Jurgen Habermas, “What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left,” New Left Review 183, September-October 1990, p. 5)

8 Capitalism always preys on and constantly generates differences, since it is precisely those differences, unevenness and disproportions that facilitate the extraction of surplus value.

9 “[M]ulticulturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a ‘racism with a distance’ – it ‘respects’ the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-encoded ‘authentic’ community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position. Multiculturalism is a racism which emplaces its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn’t oppose to the Other the particular values of his own culture), but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged empty point of universality from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures—the multiculturalist respect for the Other’s specificity is the
In the post-conflictual region of former-Yugoslavia, art and culture are supposed to play the role of reconciling former warring “sides,” thus enabling the “peaceful coexistence of differences” (religious, ethical, cultural). This is especially evident in the EU agenda for culture – by declaring the year 2008 a year of intercultural dialogue – and in some US foundations’ programs, which, under the banner of “celebrating cultural diversity,” promote a clear political agenda: resolving and preventing violent conflicts, insuring post-conflict stability and peace, creating conflict management capacities and thus enforcing the rule of law through “democratization of culture.” In short, art and culture are supposed to enforce tolerance for the “Other” and full respect of its basic human rights, while the pressing problems of poverty, the dismantling of all social welfare nets, shameless gang-style privatizations and the “unavoidable” wasting of natural resources, as well as tycoon control over governments remain hidden behind this multi-multiplication.

It is most especially art that is considered fit for this job of “cultivating” the peoples of capitalist periphery, since it is “autonomous” in its action (as it is always supposed to be the expression of an individual genius). Dominant neo-liberal art history claims that in the case(s) of East European art, it was precisely denied its “autonomy,” meaning that it was exclusively put in service of the Party- and/or-State politics. Therefore, East European art has to be freed from that burden of a shameful social realist heritage, and once-and-for-all disentangled from this kind of politicization. The “struggle” for this kind of arts autonomy confirms the traditional place reserved for it in capitalism – as something quite distinct and evidently different from immediate social reality. The aim is precisely to neutralize art’s potential to impact “life” in social and political terms. Nevertheless, neo-liberal policies seek not to completely depoliticize art, but to give it a certain “progressive” political direction. One of the earliest cases of such a policy was the Soros Foundation and its network of Contemporary Art Centers that spread throughout Eastern Europe in the 1990s. Based on Karl Popper’s notion of “open society,” it primarily promoted art whose political tendency could be subsumed under the term “anti-totalitarianism.” Within its revision of history, the only artists that defied Party-State coercion are the currently-celebrated “brave dissidents” who spit in the face of a totalitarian regime. Therefore, the defense of art’s autonomy is aimed at deterring artists from venturing into such devastating projects as socialist realism or Nazi art, thus reviving the dissidence

very form of asserting one’s own superiority.” (Slavoj Žižek, “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” New Left Review 225, September-October 1997, p. 44)
10 “For the purposes of the consultation process for the ‘White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue’, the following preliminary formulation may serve as a reference: ‘Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads up to a deeper understanding of the other’s global perception.’ In this definition, ‘open and respectful’ means ‘based on the equal value of the partners’; ‘exchange of views’ stands for every type of interaction that reveals cultural characteristics; ‘groups’ stands for every type of collective that can act through its representatives (family, community, associations, peoples); ‘culture’ includes everything relating to ways of life, customs, beliefs and other things that have been passed on to us for generations, as well as the various forms of artistic creation; ‘world perception’ stands for values and ways of thinking. […] In a general sense, the objective of intercultural dialogue is to learn to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging. Intercultural dialogue can also be a tool for the prevention and resolution of conflicts by enhancing the respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.” (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/concept_EN.asp?P30_3374)
11 See, for instance, the page of the United States Institute for Peace: http://www.usip.org/programs.
13 [T]he SCCAs dealt mainly with the emancipation of art and culture from the ideological, political and economic control of the state. On the aesthetic level this transition was manifested in the attempt to break with the doctrine of Socialist Realism, with its aesthetic and ideological principles; artists were encouraged to work with new media whereas art historians were to write new art histories, which would evolve around the narrative of the formerly suppressed non-conformism. Economically the SCCAs provided expertise for developing local networks of Western-styled private and corporate art institutions capable of accommodating to the logic of the free market. After escaping the ideological and material control of the state, the centres were to help local artists adjust to a new order, devoting a good part of their efforts to cultural management and fund raising.” (Octavian Eșanu “The Transition of the Soros Centers to Contemporary Art: The Managed Avant-Garde,” http://www.think-tank.nl/ccclyEșanu_ManagedAvant-garde.pdf, p. 7)
ideology articulated in the 1970s. The reheated Cold-war anti-totalitarian ideological device thus serves the purpose of installing the image of socialism as an inherently authoritarian and totalitarian system that crushed any attempt at “autonomous action,” in the sense of the “basic human right” to “freely” – and, of course, “creatively” – express one’s own individuality.

It is those “progressive” institutions and foundations – in a seemingly paradoxical convergence with local forces – that, by supporting “socially responsive art,” are actually creating the environment that corresponds to the needs of the neo-liberal political economy of “cultural production,” making us “cultural workers/producers” or even the so-called “content makers” for the expanding “cultural industries.” Although we criticize, resist and oppose this kind of positioning, as well as the whole constellation that produces it, the objective, material practices that we will-nilly engage in are driving our activities in the direction of neo-liberal cultural entrepreneurship. Keeping this situation in mind, one has to ask how it is possible to critically operate within it and enable autonomous, independent and self-determinative action. In other words, taking a self-critical view of the activities of Prelom kolektiv, the question is: How does an initiative of young critically-minded theorists from the fields of visual arts, cinema, philosophy and political theory in favor of making a break, an rupture – prelom is translation of the Althussian term coupure – with the dominant neo-liberal ideology, steer clear of being, at the end of the day, functional for the cultural industries and contemporary political economy of “cultural production”?

The answer is all too familiar for anyone who had ever tried to act in the sphere of “independent cultural activism” anywhere in today’s globalized world. No matter how critical, subversive or, even, revolutionary the idea one might have, it has to be produced – in the both meanings of the Latin word producere: to build or craft something, and to make something visible. Since the means of production are either owned or controlled by capital, it has to be somehow wrench out of it. The usual way is to formulate a “project” and apply for support of either local national or those international “progressive” cultural institutions and foundations. Further, this involvement in creating

14 “This [...] is what Robert Lihart quite rightly calls ‘Western dissidence ideology’ – a novel ideological formation that ends up making 'dissidence' the slogan for major political disengagement by the intellectuals, in favour of a 'revolt' (‘resistance’ or ‘rebellion’) that is nothing more than the name for a refusal: a refusal to participate in the mass struggles that could yield a revolutionary outcome to the crisis we are living through.” (Dominique Lecourt, Mediocrity: French Philosophy since 1968, Verso, London, 2001, p 150)

15 “The logos of international liberal NGO’s stamped on brochures, publications, invitations and posters [...] add a tinge to progressive political practices that leave one with a sense of ambivalence and uneasiness. Being inevitably material, cultural practices find themselves operating within limited fields of possibilities encircled by the material conditions of international institutions, by the limits of ‘legitimate’ discourses eligible for funding, by what counts as recognizable and intelligible forms of injustice and suffering. One realizes that international NGO’s have in fact successfully conditioned the field of political visibility according to its own logic and its own terms. As a result, social and cultural activists critical of these institutional conditions find themselves in the grip of a double-bind: they face the choice of voicing a powerful message at the risk of advancing global neo-liberal projects. The opposite is also true: labeled as uncritical pro-western propaganda, these conditions have provided the right-wing’s most powerful argument to delegitimate any attempts on the part of the left to challenge practices of exclusion and discourses of hate. They have also enabled old nationalisms to reinvent themselves anew against the presence of international liberal agents.” (Zhivka Valavicharska, “Culture, Neo-liberal Development, and the Future of Progressive Politics in Southeastern Europe,” in Jonathan Harris [ed.] Globalization and Contemporary Art, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, [forthcoming].)

16 “Recent decades have [...] witnessed an obvious neo-liberal effort to subdue ‘culture’ to the mechanisms of the free-market economy in the sense of the culturalization of the economy or, conversely, the economization of culture. The principles of free-market competitiveness and entrepreneurship have been introduced to the once privileged sphere of artistic and intellectual production. This means not only simply bringing market relations into the ‘sphere of culture’, but is more about establishing the practices of entrepreneurship at the individual level – at the level of the subject. [...] What is actually happening is that individuals educated or self-educated in the fields of art, theory and culture in general have a certain privileged access to so-called ‘cultural capital’ – a set of symbols, images, notions, ideas, representations of historical events and persons, art-works, etc. The cultural worker today has to be a cultural entrepreneur at the same time: one who ‘creatively’ – meaning profitably – uses the ‘cultural capital’ which is at hand. In another words, the cultural producer is supposed to be a ‘funky businessman’ in contemporary ‘karaoke capitalism’, transforming this raw material of ‘culture’ into little more than temporary entertainment.” (Dušan Grija and Jelena Vesić, op. cit.)

and executing such “projects” means that one must attain a recognizable legal status, either as individual artist or theorist, or as a collective subject, which usually takes the form of an NGO. It is only on the basis of this legal subjectivity that one may open a bank account in order to get financial support. This also means subjecting oneself to “managing” and paying the administration and accounting needed for applying and using funds, as well as being subjected to financial regulations, tax obligations and monetary constraints, thus adopting the practices of a capitalist enterprise (although a “non-profitable” one). 18

So, are there any possibilities for being autonomous within this constellation, since it is quite impossible to be independent in the strong sense? Well, this “sacrifice” of being not completely independent enables one to step into the very battlefield where this neo-liberal political economy of “cultural production” is being (re)created, and to use this opportunity for making interventions within it. The strategy of intervention 19 means to consciously – with a grasp of the present conjuncture – act with, as much as possible, a clear aim to get involved in order to produce a certain effect, an effect that can give insight, reveal the “truth” of the dominant logic of “cultural production.” It stands for an effort to produce breaks or ruptures with it, in order to add to a possible process of condensation, of making a ruptural unity of contradictions 20 that we all witness. Thus, achieving autonomy, in the sense of making an independent action, is not just a simple matter of “stepping outside,” making a break and completely separating oneself from the culture industry and the dominant art system. It is rather an effort to make breaks within them. This also means that autonomy cannot be a definite state one may finally achieve, but a constant process of autonomization, of waging an ever precarious battle by constantly (re)inventing interventions.

This constant (re)invention – which entails self-critical insight – is crucial, since the effects of an intervention can easily slip into opposite directions. 21 On the one hand, an intervention could become a part of the neo-liberal production of critical discourse. The last couple of decades witnessed an effort – which becomes almost an obligatory request – to produce criticism within the “sphere of culture,” especially in artistic and intellectual production. This is particularly evident in the practice of various discursive events, publications and web-projects regularly produced on the margins of various

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18 One could disagree that the involvement in this kind of economy is necessary since there are “alternative economies” based on unconstrained barter of goods and services, and solidarity in exchange. But, as long as the production (of culture) requires some possession of the general equivalent (money), this “free exchange” will always be subsumed under the capitalist mode of production. Moreover, those “alternative economies” – since they can never be completely exempted from the capitalist commodity-monetary relations – can actually prove to be functional for contemporary neo-liberal economy by their virtue of actually lowering the market value of one’s labor. In other words, the (cultural) products are much cheaper to make this way than within the professional framework of the existing (cultural) institutions – not to mention that “alternative economies” with their enthusiast and DIY practices foster the expansion of the so-called “creativity” as the fundamental asset for neo-liberal economy.

19 We perceive intervention – following Louis Althusser – as something like jumping into the moving train. To use a metaphor, intervention is like a signal-gun shot over the battlefield that lights the trenches in the darkness of the dominant ideology. Intervention means producing an effect that enables the present positions and divisions to become evident. Therefore, it is a production – making something appear that was not visible before the intervention. It enables some different divisions to be drawn, divisions that do not follow hegemonic binary or “organized” differences. They are new divisions that strive to change the very ground upon which the old ones are based.


21 “It is therefore necessary to fight, if not everywhere at the same time, at least on several fronts, taking account both of the principal tendency and of the secondary tendencies, both of the principal stake and of the secondary stakes, while all the time ‘working’ to occupy correct positions. All this will obviously not come about through the miracle of a consciousness capable of dealing with all problems with perfect clarity. There is no miracle. A Marxist philosopher able to intervene in the theoretical class struggle must start out from positions already recognized and established in the theoretical battles of the history of the Labour Movement – but he can only understand the existing state of the theoretical and ideological ‘terrain’ if he comes to know it both theoretically and practically: in and through struggle. It may be that in the course of his endeavours, even when he starts out from already established positions in order to attack open or disguised enemies, he will take up positions which in the course of struggle are shown to be deviant positions, out of step with the correct line which he is aiming for. There is nothing astonishing in that. The essential thing is that he should then recognize his deviation and rectify his positions in order to make them more correct.” (Louis Althusser, Essays in Self-Criticism, NLB, London, 1976, pp. 143-144)
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art shows, whereby theory is dwindled to a status of a “decorative authority.” 22 Those instances supposedly have the task of providing a space for reflection and criticism, but they actually serve to present an opportunity to neutralize, domesticate and eventually appropriate any critical opposition through the manifold mechanism of culturalization 23 – by making every given political content and tendency cultural, and to “culturalize” the “actors” in the sense of respecting civic conventions of cultural conduct and tolerance for the Other. This is precisely where the critical and oppositional stance gets twisted and ultimately co-opted by the exigencies of the contemporary political economy of “culture production,” presenting us as nothing more than functional “discontent providers.” On the other hand, projects that we are involved in, like the “Political Practices of (Post)Yugoslav Art,” 24 can be locally interpreted as Yugo-nostalgia, 25 which is always an opportunity to inspire “national sentiments” of the extreme-right Lumpenproletariat and their ideologues, their being little more than an unavowed forefront of the official national culture.

So, at the end, what does it mean to be autonomous, to be able to effectuate self-determinative action? Self-determination can be a misleading term since it refers to an individual process traditionally conceived by Hegel as the Idea’s dialectical movement of passage from “by-itself” to “for-itself” through externalization, alienation and de-alienation. This is a classical model for a single consciousness arriving to self-consciousness through an almost mystical enlightenment. In reality, there is no self-determination stricto sensu, since some kind of “externality” is always needed for the formation of self-consciousness or subjectivity. In other words, there is a dialectical movement in the very Bildung (meaning both self-formation and education) of a subjectivity which is always an outcome of the struggle for identification and differentiation from that external instance. But, this is by no means a “spiritual” move, since it is always happens in respect to material circumstances and concrete events. Consequently, autonomy cannot be achieved as an individual accomplishment, since it entails a collective material practice and a social dimension – changing dominant social institutions. Since institutions are less particular buildings populated with administration (and upheld by a hierarchy of positions with a top-down structure of decisions) than they are institutionalized – power-structured and socially sanctioned – behavior or conduct, self-determining activity must commence with the practical countering of established structures that shape social interaction. In the case of the organizational form of the NGO, this means establishing a different type of social bond than the dominant capitalist “NGO economy” that relies heavily on a US-style internship system to perform the necessary but routine gofer roles that hold it all together. This is effectively a scheme of

22 “[W]e see a kind of overproduction of theory, as well as the staging of this theory as a decorative ‘appendix’ to artistic and activist events (i.e., theoretical conferences as discursive platforms for all manner of biennials, major exhibitions, social forums, etc.). We can observe numerous instances of the overproduction, commercialization, and ‘decorativeness’ of theory – for example, quite scholarly but secondary texts chockabloke with citations of the most ‘fashionable’ names and texts, or all those thick but incomprehensible catalogues and ‘theoretical documents’ published in connection with art projects. […] All this is crowned by a system of intellectual ‘superstars’, who, even when they take quite radical, critical stances, are unable to resist their quite decorative function as thinkers and ‘keynote speakers’ at an endless series of seminars and conferences.” (Alexey Penzin / Dmitry Vilensky, “What’s the Use? Art, Philosophy, and Subject Formation. A Chto Delat dialogue,” Chto Delat?, 01-25, March 2009, p 2, also on: http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=204&Itemid=282&lang=en)

23 “The logic of the contemporary usage of ‘culture’ is evident in the neo-liberal strategy of the culturalization of political relations – as Boris Buden has called it. What it indicates is less an almost total breakdown of the “political sphere” in its modern sense, but more its significant transformation. The articulation of political struggles and social antagonisms have moved from the ‘classical’ domain of the state apparatuses such as political parties, the parliamentary system and the procedures of the Rule of Law to the dispersed field of competing ‘cultural options’. Yet culturalization exceeds the simple translation of political issues to cultural ones. Culturalization is also a ‘school of culture’: the education, cultivation, and breeding of subjects for the dominant culture. [It also] culturalize[s] us in order to renounce the ‘non-civic’ or, simply, ‘uncivilized’ ways of solving conflicts by adopting the ‘non-violent’, symbolic mechanisms that the ‘cultural field’ supposedly offers. […] Therefore, culturalization has an important function within today’s neo-liberal capitalist system – the function of pacification and neutralization of contemporary social antagonisms.” (Dušan Grijč and Jelena Vesić, op. cit.)


25 Cf. editorial to the chapter “Against Post-Socialist Reason” in: Prelom 8, op. cit.
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bourgeois apprenticeships or – putting it more bluntly – a minute and up-dated system of capitalist exploitation that needs to be fought from the very outset.  

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Autonomy is hence coterminous with the process of subject formation. It does not entail the passive production of the individuals necessary for a given social system, but a self-determinative process of making a reflective and deliberative collective subject. This process is grounded in making an ethical choice. Subjectivity proper always stems out of the collective material practice of making an ethical choice in a given situation by breaking with dominant “rationality.” Autonomy, i.e. the Bildung of an subjectivity, can thus be achieved through a process of (con)testing the limits of a given “rationality.” It always emerges from an autonomizing act – which is precisely an event – and the fidelity to it. Therefore, one must endure in her/his critique and remain faithful to the event of publicly stating what are the motives, insights and experiences that brought one to – at least – speak it out.  

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Cf. Dušan Grlja and Jelena Vesić, op. cit.  

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“Courage [...] is the virtue which manifests itself through endurance in the impossible. This is not simply a matter of a momentary encounter with the impossible: that would be heroism, not courage. Heroism has always been represented not as a virtue but as a posture: as the moment when one turns to meet the impossible face to face. The virtue of courage constructs itself through endurance within the impossible; time is its raw material.” (Alain Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” New Left Review 49, January-February 2008, p. 41.)
New Political Subjects in Armenia and March 1 Events

Vartan Jaloyan

The political and social developments in contemporary Armenia share common features with developments in other “third world” countries. However, there are differences in addition to these similarities. The Soviet industrialization in Armenia was accompanied by tendencies of concentration in demography, economy, politics and culture; 30 percent of the nation’s population was concentrated in the capital. The post-Soviet de-industrialization further enforced these concentration tendencies. Interregional disparities grew along with increasing social injustice.

In the late Soviet era Yerevan was a bipolar city composed of an urban village and industrial suburbs. The basic principles of the master plan developed by architect Alexander Tamanyan in the 1920s were preserved in the downtown area: a garden-town for laborers with wide streets, mid-rise buildings and accessible parks, where the basic unit was a “yard” – the basic unit where special local communities took shelter. On the opposite side were suburbs, “stone jungles,” filled with industrial plants and unattractive standardized blocks. It is no coincidence that the nickname given by the citizens to one of these suburbs – the “Southwestern District” – was “Bangladesh.”

One difference that can be interpreted to be political was the difference between the “national” and “the Soviet.” But this was not a regular colonial difference based on racial and economical factors.

In the Soviet Union there was no significant economic inequality; social layers were determined by status. The social status of individuals was based on their possession of “prestigious” commodities divided into categories. Prestigious commodities were endowed with symbolic capital, which explained the high status of intelligentsia in the Soviet Union. Among these prestigious commodities were items of Western origin, like jeans, US movies, tape-recorders, pornography and “avant-garde” art, represented in the late Soviet Armenia by abstract and pop art. The latter found representation in the civil landscape in architectural constructions of “communist-capitalist convergence”, like the “Youth Palace,” the “Russia” movie theater, the “Dvin” hotel and so on.

This explicitly pointed out to another political difference: the “local” and the “foreign.”

Yet, the most significant examples of this “convergence” were the cafes. In the 80s Soviet Yerevan there were many cafes scattered in the public parks of the city. The people gathering in these public facilities were mainly members of the intelligentsia like artists, writers, etc. They discussed and shaped the ideas and formulas that later in the “Glasnost” period evolved into slogans for political action. These formulas were based on the aforementioned differences: “the national” and “the liberal.” One was focused on Nagorno-Karabakh’s right to self-determination, whereas the other aimed at developing a market economy and private property.

One of the forms of the manifestation of the second formula was contemporary art that emerged from the underground and became one of the bearers of a Western mindset in post-Soviet Armenia. What bears significance was not that the art presented by those artists had emerged in the West, evolved with Western support and used Western concepts to describe local experiences. More significant is the role of the West as a locus of power without which it was impossible to imagine the reconstruction of the art scene that enabled the emergence of these means and forms of expression. If the “Soviet modernism” of the 60’s was seeking its legitimacy in the national as a locus of power, then the “Armenian avant-garde,” which was opposed to it, stemmed from the Western mindset/power without which the production of those paintings, installations and art videos would be impossible. On the other hand, the problem of re-distribution of property was vital to the development of the Armenian art scene, including the contemporary art scene. Specifically, the case of the “Hay-Art” Cultural Center building is a case in point: It was initially “donated” to “avant-garde artists” by the liberal regime of Levon Ter-Petrosian, and later reclaimed by the “nationalist” regime of Robert Kocharyan.
Armenian contemporary art was and is affiliated with the local electorate that advocates “democracy,” “human rights,” “market economy” and “economic liberalism” and is presently acting as a pipeline for spreading international capital.

It is noteworthy that class stratification and the formation of the capitalist class were completed during and owing to the Kocharyan regime. The development process of capitalism in Armenia is typical of many other “third world” countries. “Insider” (internal, not formal) privileges shaped “special interest groups”, and a system that was quite different from the European model was created.

Jean-Francois Chevries writes: “The dominance of the European model weakens when a certain norm of capitalist development diverges from socio-political regulative principles. Marx was familiar with capitalism and nation states, but not with the ‘entrepreneurial state’ (État entrepreneur). Today we are familiar with this new type of state that is sustained with the consent of populations and frequently employs antidemocratic or pre-democratic systems of control.”

What spurred the formation of the Armenian entrepreneurial state was that international financial institutions demanded that the government strictly adhere to the “Washington consensus” principles.

Under such conditions, the economy may grow, and life standards may slowly improve; however, these developments will eventually lead to the growth of a revolutionary mood.

What can be seen as the symbolic accomplishment of capitalist reconstruction of Yerevan is the destruction of the historical center of Yerevan, the forced expulsion of its residents and the construction of the “Northern Avenue” in its location. To quote Mike Davis: “Polarized patterns of land use and population density recapitulate older logics of imperial control and racial dominance. Throughout the Third World, post-colonial elites have inherited and greedily reproduced the physical footprints of segregated colonial cities. Despite the rhetoric of national liberation and social justice, they have aggressively adapted the racial zoning of the colonial period to defend their own class privileges and spatial exclusivity.”

A significant turning point was in 2001, when municipal land was put up for auction. In the past, the municipality was only allowed to lease the land. Another important motivation was the urge to make Yerevan an attractive place for foreign tourists, which meant creating a zone of luxury.

The construction of the Northern Avenue was in fact the certification of the capitalist reconstruction of Yerevan. It is also worth mentioning the construction of numerous highway tunnels; in particular, the case of the Getar River that used to flow through downtown Yerevan, was asphalted and turned into an underground canal. The symbolic implication of the latter is obvious: an act of violence by the authorities. Like in the 1860’s Paris under Baron Haussmann’s fanatic ruling, the reconstruction of Yerevan in the 2000’s also appears to lead to the maximization of private benefit and the intensification of social control. However, in contrast to the case of Paris, Kocharyan’s reconstruction of Yerevan was focused on the downtown in order to move the upper class (that once used to prefer suburbs for their villas) closer to political institutions.

Consequently, the Armenian bourgeois, like in all other developing countries, “cease to be citizens of their own country and become nomads belonging to, and owing allegiance to, a super terrestrial...”

topography of money; they become patriots of wealth, nationalists of an elusive and golden nowhere.”

The Northern Avenue needs to be viewed as a *creatio ex nihilo* – something created out of nothing. The artificial nature of the street is further underlined by the absence of green areas; only small bushes in tubs. Apparently, the street is to be a witness to the grandeur of the Armenian dictator Kocharyan, a proof of his demiurgic ability to turn nothing into something.

According to Kocharyan, the Northern Avenue was supposed to “embellish” Yerevan in order to attract more tourists and thus become a symbol of globalization.

The capitalist reconstruction of Yerevan also signified the restoration of the ruling electoral “caste” which is currently solely composed of big business “oligarchs” and representatives of the state nomenclature who concentrated in their hands enormous economical power.

The cultural field was also reconstructed. While a decade ago Armenia was a country that imported show business products from Russia, the former center of the empire, and from the Armenian Diaspora, today not only have local products replaced imported ones, but are also “exported.” Show business is politically subordinated to the power system and serves as an ideological platform. It has become the official art of the regime as a capitalist version of totalitarian “socialist realism.”

In terms of the exploitation of urban space, the transformation of the show business into an official tool of propaganda widened the scope of the public events, festivities, outdoor concerts, performances, etc. organized by the authorities.

Images of local celebrities appeared on many street banners and advertising billboards, taking control over manifestations of urban life. The capitalist reconstruction of culture led to the formation of a “society of spectacle,” which, in fact, differs from its counterpart in the West in terms of the commodities offered. Instead of commodities like “freedom” and “democracy” offered by the Western spectacle system, among the spectacular commodities offered by the Armenian power system are “prosperity,” “state,” “nation,” and “genocide.” These reconstructions significantly weakened the position of the “old” political opposition which was heavily defeated in the 2007 parliamentary elections. I believe the reason was that both the authorities and the opposition used the same spectacular commodities per se, turning authoritarianism into a perpetuating complementary factor.

The Impeachment Bloc, mainly composed of young people, came along criticizing the “old” opposition. Their activities had a carnival-like character and were influenced by art-activism. Their main political slogan was “No to robotization (an allusion to former president Robert Kocharyan), no to Sergeanting (an allusion to former prime minister and current president Serzh Sargsyan), no to Dumbing (an allusion to the criminally notorious oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the Prosperous Armenia party and nicknamed as ‘dumb’).” Their campaign banners featured portrait photographs of these three politicians with a “Stop” sign stamped over their faces.

The Impeachment Bloc brought a new principle as a first in Armenian politics: everyone should enjoy the political process. Unlike the elitist organizational principles of the “old” opposition, the slogan of this new political movement was “1+1+1+...” A well-known local political essayist Hrant Ter-Abrahamyan described this new phenomenon in the following way: “Real politics returns to streets

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and squares. Finally, there is some real talk in the kingdom of authoritarian opposition." Special attention needs to be paid to the spatial descriptions in the quote. Saskia Sassen writes:

The space of the city is a far more concrete space for politics than that of the nation. Here, non-formal political actors who are rendered invisible in national politics, have better access to the political scene. And, perhaps more importantly, they can constitute themselves as political actors. The fact itself that the new advanced urban economy generates a vastly expanded luxury zone that displaces other firms and homes becomes a fact feeding politics. Urban space is no longer civic, as old local ruling elites aspired to: today it is political. Much of urban politics is concrete, enacted by people rather than dependent on massive media technologies. Street level politics makes possible the formation of new types of political subjectivity, which are not dependent on the formal political system, as is the case with electoral systems.5

In the beginning of the same year youth activist initiative Sksela (It Has Begun) was launched. Their actions organized in public spaces also had a carnival-like character. This initiative is an example of a new political subject. Arsen Kharatyan, a member of the initiative said, “As soon as this movement becomes formalized, it will immediately limit its own potential and will turn into an artificial NGO, like the many others we have. For us the situation of organized chaos, i.e. talking about concepts we believe in, has extreme importance.”6

In fall 2007 the first president Levon Ter-Petrosian returned to the political arena to participate in the presidential elections on February 19, 2008. He mainly tried to rely on this kind of new political subjects. This was an important stimulus for the new generation activist initiatives that were organizing various kinds of activities in different key locations of the city. Among these activist groups it is essential to mention Hima (Now)7 and Hatuk Gund (Special Regiment)8 youth initiatives, Ver Katz (Get Up)9 political movement, Mi Khump Usanoghner (A Group of Students) youth movement, Yeritasard Pahpanoghakanner (Young Conservatives) NGO, and Art Laboratoria (Art lab) cultural organization.

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1 Haykakan Jamanak (Armenian Times), no. 92.
3 “Sksela initiative will surprise the parliamentarians.” Aravot, 23 April 2008. Available online: www.aravot.am
4 http://abhima.blogspot.com/
5 http://hatukgund.do.am/
6 http://verkats.com/
One of the significant distinguishing characteristics of this oppositional movement was its rejection of state-controlled mass media. The wide application of new digital technologies as an alternative to the state-censored media led to the labeling of the political upheavals of 2008 in Armenia as a “DVD revolution.”

Over one million DVDs, most of which were art videos, were produced and distributed during those months. Another important organizational tool was the internet. Many of the aforementioned youth initiatives like the activist movement Ver Kats were formed in virtual space. This fact was interpreted by some critics as the end of post-modernism in Armenia.

The conclusion of the first phase of the movement was the bloody tragedy on March 1 where authorities used weapons against peaceful protesters and ten people were killed. In the aftermath, limitations were imposed on freedoms and rights concerning speech, public demonstrations, rallies, etc. Hundreds of activists were put in jail. After the official termination of the state of emergency the authorities still did not sanction meetings, demonstrations and rallies. Activist groups intensified their

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[10] The expression “DVD revolution” was pronounced for the first time by the opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosyan (which as he said he had heard from the talks among the protesters) during the 2008 presidential election demonstrations in Yerevan. Activist groups produced and distributed DVDs which contained information about demonstrations, meetings, activist actions and speeches delivered by their leaders as well as video documentaries of the clash with the police and special forces on March 1. Using a DVD format made it possible to widely circulate this material, whereas they could not be aired on TV because of strict censorship and if they were published on the web the scope of the circulation would be limited because the internet was not widely accessible. [Here](#) you can find a link to the manifesto DVD REVOLUTION written around the same time by six artists (Tigran Khachatryan, Yuri Manvelyan, Arman Grigoryan, Karen Alekyan, Karen Barseghyan, Arman Martirosyan) reflecting on the revolutionary process in Armenia and proposing an alternative artistic “revolutionary program.”
activities despite the full range of violence unleashed by the police. They also experienced difficulties caused by government-sponsored pro-fascist groups like MIAK, Hayastani Yeritasardakan Kusaktzutyun (Armenian Youth Party), Mek Azg (One Nation), Hameraşkhutyun (Harmony), Miasin (Together), Baze (Hawk) and so on.

Hatuk Gund - Bubbles in front of the Prosecutor General’s Office - 2008

HIIMA - "Newspaper reading," one of the first flash mobs after the March 1 events when all public demonstrations were prohibited in the republic

The Northern Avenue became the main arena for activism. Regular action on the Northern Avenue called “Political Walks” evolved in various flash mobs and spontaneous rallies during the state of emergency and involved different opposition groups walking along the avenue and transforming pedestrian traffic into political action. This, of course, led to counteraction by the police, and the discontentment of various corporate security services.

The capitalist reconstruction of Yerevan signifies the fragmentation of urban space. The struggle of the new political subjects is foremost a struggle for public space.

Translated from Armenian by Diran Lokmagozyan
The romantic word “resistance” is being widely and eagerly circulated in the field of contemporary art, as it encloses in its essence one of the key symbols of faith in contemporary art — its claim and volition of resisting the “natural order” of capitalism.

To be more precise, the word “resistance” usually designates a credo of neo-avant-garde art-activism — political gestures in the aesthetic field such as the creation of autonomous enclaves on the map of global neo-liberalism, and the criticism of institutions and systems of power. The Situationists in the 60-70s, or contemporary interventionists may serve as examples of such a "resistance."

If we attempt to apply this term to art in Central Asia, or more specifically in the Republic of Kazakhstan, we might discover that our art doesn’t “resist” actively enough. In any case this is a euphemism. We have no such “political” art practice. Or, it would be better to say that the most interesting and representative examples of our art just do not belong in this category.

Let’s start, for instance, with a “collateral evidence” that in Kazakhstan, all significant art collectives broke up into atoms, whereas a collective of like-minded persons is a typical form of self-organization for art-activists who unite as protest groups or fighting brigades. In Kazakhstan, the art collectives of the past were rather supporting groups — groups that were supporting the development and rooting of local art and art institutions —, i.e., they were united, not against, but for something. Despite all their differences, art collectives formed in Kazakhstan during or right after the disintegration of the USSR (Kokser, Red Tractor, Green Triangle, etc.) were powered by the shared pathos of pioneerism, the pathos of “new, free and fashionable art,” the pathos of populism and even a prophetic pathos. This was especially true for the Kokser group with their radical, bloodthirsty animal killing actions that were rather conventional illustrations of the issue of the “Other” in an international context. It was the time of manifestos, a time of enthusiasm and inspiration — energies that can be transiently unifying.

It is no surprise that the pathos of pioneerism ran out gradually. All art groups formed in the 90s practically fell apart. A time of collective manifestos was turned into a period of personal research and expression, a period of post-avant-garde recording, documenting, and producing metaphors. That visualized the hardly explainable “Pan-Asian” mythologies, images of the “third world,” or metaphors of “empire debris.” The production of such visual images (the perception of which requires sensitivity to poetry and irony, creativity and even intuition rather than logic) is in fact the general line and specialization of Central Asian, and in particular Kazakh art. A wide range of examples is available here. We can recall a photo-series Said Atabekov has been working on for two years titled Daroga v Rim (The way to Rome): lone figures in the steppe — wanderers, animals, cars, technical constructions — all seem to be crossing the frame from the left to the right, imitating movement yet at the same time posing motionless. And the sculptures in Erbol Meldibekov’s photographs that are part of the series titled Hallisyunatsiya (Hallucinations) which replicate the shapes and textures of works by Swiss modernist Alberto Giacometti, yet are made of organic material — dead flesh and meat. Pik Pabedi (Victory Peak) is a series of objects made by the same artist — mountain reliefs on the bottoms of American foil plates and Soviet enamel pots. In his video Çyorniy Kvadrat (The Black Square), the “trade mark” of modernism is transformed into a random figure formed by a mass of wiggling worms. In numerous videos by Almagul Menlibayeva Asian women appear in the steppe like constant elements of Asian identity. We can turn around and recall junk-objects by Georgy Triakin-Bukharov, assembled from the recyclable waste of horses, pigs and camels and abundantly charged with irony. And so on, and so forth… Metaphors may be subtle and witty, precise, exact, and unexpected; in any case, this is the opposite pole of political art-activism which usually operates with clear and logical constructs.
In Central Asia Western neo-liberalism has led to intentions of solidarity rather than criticism until now, because it has been perceived as an unreachable utopia. In our region there is no established art system and there is no contemporary art market – its creation being the desired dream of artists. Our art is a zone of loyalty and solidarity rather than of resistance – of course, I do not mean solidarity with state authority structures, but with institutions in the international art-system which are legitimate components of the global capitalist system. That is why verbal fetishes of contemporary art like “institutional critique” are disseminating quite slowly in the Central Asian context. Institutions are not being criticized precisely because there is nothing to criticize.

With regard to artistic reactions to local political developments, the situation is much more complicated. There is a lack of any clear critical message in practice – just a compilation of more or less witty metaphors.

Let us recall that after the collapse of the USSR the map of Eurasia witnessed the emergence of strange geopolitical structures – Eastern despotic states with cosmetic puppet-democratic institutions. Kazakhstan is a presidential, and after the so-called “democratic reform” in 2007, a “presidential-parliamentary” republic. However, as a matter of fact, it is essentially an authoritarian state where political processes are stipulated by competing clans, their leaders being either members of the president’s family, or persons from his inner circle (almost a medieval struggle for throne between relatives). As foreign press calls it, the opposition here is “tamed and in the pocket,” launched by the president himself to create an illusion of pluralism, and citizens feel completely removed from the management of the state. Consequently, the society in Kazakhstan became increasingly apolitical, distrusting democratic institutions in general, and regarding state authority structures as things-in-themselves. However, apolitical attitude and indifference are sometimes transformed into a love of the power system as a sort of God-sent substance that obeys the principle “there are no bad seasons in nature” (love here obviously stems from a mixture of fear and caution). The safest way for persons who are hypnotized by the official propaganda is to follow it in a humble way. During the “pre-crisis” period, the constant element in the rhetoric of the government was the mantra of “stability” (the regime became stronger due to the increase in hydrocarbon prices); today, it is “restoration of stability.” Citizens are loyal to government. According to foreign media, 1990 elections in Kazakhstan were forged; yet in 2007, people unanimously voted for the presidential party Nur Otan that became the only party that passed the 7 percent electoral barrier and flooded the whole parliment.

The state is perceived by its citizens as closed, autistic, and inaccessible, like a mystical Kafkaesque Castle. And talking about the situation in post-Soviet Asia is possible only through using a figurative language resembling the language of myths.

Or – following a rational approach – it is possible to record and document the situation without having any ambitions to influence it; and this, as a matter of fact, is what is reflected in art.

* * *

If you are still going to search for sparks of resistance in Kazakhstan art, then you must forget about the correlation with the logic and purposefulness of art-activism and attach to this word existential, metaphysical, and even irrational meanings.

Of course, this approach allows the definition to be extended infinitely; every work of art could be defined as “resistant” to something (even to magnetic storms).
However, I would like to choose a definition which could symbolically indicate a specific “resistance in the Asian way.” As it is in art, the most adequate means to employ to for describing an irrational reality here would be a poetic figure, a metaphor.

In this case I consider as a quite witty metaphor a performance by the video artist Natalia Dyu from Kazakhstan, who compared the caterpillar costume she wore in her work titled *Gusenitsa* (Caterpillar) to the fetters of a “yurodivy” (a Holy Fool). In Almaty, where Natalia was shooting her video performance, summer conditions are extremely hot even for a lightly dressed person, and this heavy costume turned an ordinary street stroll into a serious agony (during the performance Natalia lost 5 kilos).

Now then, the figure of “yurodivy.” This figure emerges from time to time in post-Soviet art, especially in so-called radical art. For instance, the *Siniye Nosi* (Blue Noses) group presented new *yurodivys* in a series of photographs titled ”New Yurodivys,” where the members of the group posed with Moscow churches in the background. In contrast to Natalia, they were freezing as they were wearing only briefs in the winter. And yet, even though it may not be original, I would like to revive this image once again.

As we know, a *yurodivy* is a person who deliberately imitates madness and flouts everyday life ethics. This Slavic word originates from the word “urod” (i.e., “mad” or “fool,” but it could also mean a “deformed” or an “ugly” person) and contemporary artists in general are perceived by their fellow citizens as morally deformed persons (or rather immoral persons).

By their very lifestyle *yurodivys* exposed the imperfection of the mundane life – abasing themselves “for Christ,” sneering at themselves and others, thus reminding society that everything in this life is transient and empty. *Yurodivys* used to have an ascetic life style, deliberately experiencing deprivation and pain; they used to wear fetters and token clothes, or even used no clothes at all (just like the Blue Noses in winter), slept in the company of stray dogs, loudly rebuked tsars in city squares, and so on. Contemporary artists also happily justify their strange and sometimes provocative behaviour; however, theirs is not an ordinary hooligan act, but a hooligan act with a sublime goal, a message addressed to society, which can be a declaration or critique of injustice, an appeal for mercy towards the fallen ones, and so forth. It is as if these noble motives give them the right to all sorts of disgusting and scandalous behaviour.

Another important resemblance is that *yurodivys* – the “holy fools” – are public figures like contemporary artists. In contrast to hermits, they always tend to be the center of attention, provoking the reaction of the crowd; like artists, they try to convey their message by attracting attention through their scandalous gestures.

Finally and most significantly, *yurodivys* are accusers acting alone. This kind of “resistance” was typical in the Middle Ages and in conservative societies in general (that is why Tsar Peter I, a proponent of Westernization, had good reason to fight against *yurodiviyism* as a phenomenon).

*Yurodivys* did not try to change the existing order of things. They only emphasized the imperfection of the world through their own disagreement with it.

There was an absolute constant for them, a constant personified by Christ and his Kingdom – to this they compared mundane life, and this comparison was certainly not in favour of the latter.

We can only make assumptions about what this constant is for a contemporary artist, a representative of “resistance the Asian way” – it might be a Kantian moral law or something similar. In any case, the artist can see the imperfection of the world but, alas, would not repeat after an
activist, “another world is possible.” The artist does not believe in any changes. Therefore, the figure of the artist who "resists the Asian way," and is stuck in autistic, imperfect reality, is more tragic than the figure of a yurodivy for whom the mundane world was only a threshold to the world of the good and the eternal.

This is the kind of passive resistance we can find in our art when the addressee of a protest seems to elude definition. This is like a protest in the ontological sense, a protest against the deaf, autistic reality.

Artworks by Natalia Dyu are quite representative in this respect. The artist always acts as the hero in her videos. And her recent works are, in fact, a practice of public yurodivyism.

In December 2007 she made a performance titled Na Zemle (On the Ground) in the South Indian city of Mumbai. In Moscow only several yurodivys slept on the ground in the winter, but pavements in tropical Mumbai are used by wide strata of society in the winter. Natalia, wearing a white suit, lied down by the paupers and tried to get some sleep, or at least some rest while reading a newspaper. She made the performance in about ten different locations in the city, such as the "European" shopping area, the slums, and the bazaar. While a domestic pavement sleeper did not attract any attention, the “Other” who tried to join in the local context elucidated a wide spectrum of emotions. Crowds of city dwellers laughing, yelling, and condemning invariably gathered continually around lying Natalia (in one instance, she had to interrupt the performance and escape as the populace started to throw stones and bottles at her). The message of the yurodivy was certainly heard, but as usual, it did not affect the status quo. However, yurodivys never aim at attaining such a goal – it was only a temporary boiling point that appeared and disappeared on the smooth indifferent surface.

Natalia constantly practices this kind of spiritual training. She spent a couple of days in extremely hot weather in July 2008 wearing a “caterpillar” costume almost made for the winter and shared the ordinary leisure time of Almaty residents in the amusement park. In April 2009 Natalia, dressed in a heavy “snail” costume, crawled slowly along Almaty pavements – and not on the friendly soil but on the rough asphalt.

That is how “resistance the Asian way” is being realized – just taking place, no impact intended. Nevertheless, some changes in the environment do accompany the appearance of yurodivys; and these changes are being expressed as well as limited by the personalities of yurodivys themselves.

This is probably even more than what could be expected.

Translated from Russian by Anaida Ghazaryan
I. Introduction: Anti-fascism ‘95

In issue no. 15. of the periodical IZI [Izbjeglice za izbjeglice – Refugees for Refugees], published in Ljubljana in June 1995, a reporter working for the Ljubljana daily Delo contributed an article the main point of which can be summarised by the following quote: “All European states, with the exception of Great Britain, succumbed to the German onslaught without much visible resistance, capitulated and soon enough established collaborationist regimes… All these states that are members of the European Union today, with the exception of Churchill’s England, and all their neighbouring states were fascist states in the 1940’s… Europe was liberated from these fascist regimes by the English and the Americans… That is why the only thing Europeans can celebrate on May 9th can be liberation from fascism, but not victory over it.”

As far as states are concerned, one can perhaps really say something like that. But one cannot say anything of the kind concerning Europeans. When the Second World War began, the anti-fascist Europe and the international anti-fascist movement had already been defeated in their struggle against fascism – I am referring to their defeat in the Spanish Civil War. Long before European governments capitulated, prisons in Italy and concentration camps in Germany had already been populated with opponents of fascism, those who would not accept it, those who thought with their own minds and those who were pronounced different. It would be difficult to find an area in Europe where there was no resistance to fascism: be it armed or unarmed resistance, on home ground or abroad, in exile, on battlefields in Europe and outside Europe. In the year 1939, Europeans had been fighting fascism for two decades already, and would go on doing so for the next six years.

When European states capitulated before fascism, people of Slovenia established Osvobodilna fronta [the Liberation Front] less than two weeks after the capitulation of “their own” state. The capitulating attitude of European states and the collaboration of parts of their ruling classes were among the reasons why the peoples living in the area of the former Yugoslavia fought not only against fascism but also for a different kind of state, which is why they managed to pull off a revolution.

At the time, the peoples of Yugoslavia had already had a long experience with fascism, with a state that collaborated with fascism and with a fascist state. They already had a tradition of fighting against fascism – Italian fascism, European fascism in Spain, and fascism at home. They were among the first victims: while fascist squadras went wild in Italy, they set the Slovenian cultural centre in Trieste on fire even before they came to power. But they were also among the first ones to organise resistance: between 1927 and 1929, TIGR enabled Slovenian and Croatian patriots to join forces and establish what was probably the first international organisation formed for the purpose of fighting fascism.

The above-mentioned issue of the IZI periodical provides data on how many refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina there were in various states; at the moment, there are 22,667 refugees in Slovenia. Three years before there had been approximately 75,000. It is worth remembering how the Slovenian state said at the time that there were one hundred and twenty thousand refugees, and we shall never forget the statements given by its officials or the media harangue before, in August 1993, the state decided to close its borders for those exiled from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In a poll conducted after the closing of the borders, more than half of the respondents spoke in favour of admitting the exiles. Then, too, the people spoke differently from the state; then, too, the people fought fascism.

The conduct of states when faced with fascism is worth pondering, and the decisions made by the people are worth remembering. It is on account of those decisions, the battles fought and the
sacrifices made by ordinary individuals that today we may say, in 1945, the people of Europe defeated fascism. Will they defeat it in 1995?

There is a definite connection between oblivion and the powerlessness of today. States organise oblivion, conclude pacts with fascism, may fall prey. People remember, resist and persist. Today, there is no anti-fascist front, there are individuals who refuse to resign to the existence of fascism, who know that there may be more to life than hatred, anxiety and war, and who have the strength to demand from the state to behave differently from the way states and powers-that-be behaved half a century ago. I have written these analyses in order to make those demands successful, so that people should know how to formulate them and so be able to bring the nightmare of this century to a close.

And I have also done this so that the world we shall leave behind should not be worse than the one we were born in.

II. Utopia and self-deception of the spirit

Today, every utopia is discredited. At the very mention of this word, a disciplined user of the dominant ideology must think of the guillotine or of Gulag. On the other hand, the rare statements in favour of reviving utopianism, which one could still come across in the 1980’s, today sound utopian themselves.

Still, it makes one suspicious to see how voraciously political classes have taken over the more popular variants of the former philosophical fanfares about “the end of the utopian thought.” It is truly irritating when vulgarised dregs of the intellectual doxa of our youth become the agitprop slogans of the ideological avant-garde of the new ruling class. History warns us all of intellectual responsibility only too gladly by bashing us on the head; we have made mistakes, but only get to perceive them as such afterwards. Notwithstanding the sirens beckoning into darkness, we are obviously still not committed enough to enlightenment; we do not sufficiently deal with prejudices. And when these prejudices gain material existence in the apparatuses of oppression and exploitation, then what would once have amounted merely to cleaning the edges of the sphere of theory assumes the false value of analysis.

Today, intellectual engagement spins in a vicious circle within which it always misses theory. It is either dedicated to shedding light on the given topic, meaning dealing with the ideological effects on the edges of the problem areas, thus losing time and power by opening fields that it never manages to process. Or, it neglects these marginal activities, as a result of which intellectual weed grows and gains momentum, gaining “material existence” in ideological and who knows what other apparatuses, grabbing thought by the scuff of its neck and forcing it into self-defence. Amidst cleaning and fire-fighting duties, there is no time or strength for authentic theoretical production.

Anyhow, it is worth pointing out that this is a new situation. It may be connected with the ebbing of the utopian impulse. If this is not enough of a consolation, we could perhaps draw some much needed confidence from a conclusion that, if the truth must be told, it is the bleakest one yet. The detritus from which they put together new cages for us and make new blindfolds for our eyes once constituted elements of legitimate constructions of theoretical production.

1. The end of grand narratives?

If we ponder the phrase, “the end of grand narratives has arrived”, we will see that a certain strategy is of decisive influence here. First of all, this “end” applies only to possible alternative narratives. The dominant ones need not even be narrated, the established structure squeezes them out of its own accord. If we renounce all other significance, what remains is only that which
The degree of magnitude is, of course, a relative quantity: in view of the fact that it is not possible to think, even “on a small scale,” without a broader framework, and that local thought requires global consciousness all the more, the rejection of grand narratives is suspiciously close to rejecting thought as such. The ban also pertains to alternative narratives and actually prohibits thought itself; it is not just that it is forbidden to think in the long term, in great strokes, possibly peering through the nearby fence. What it is all about is that the absence of the “grand” scale releases the small-scale illusions of all kinds of surveillance, criticism and denial, illusions that the greatest existing system feeds on.

2. Recuperation by means of inversion

The critique of “grand narratives” has a pedigree worthy of respect. The “narrative” was once attacked on account of the fact that narration produces totalisation. The narrative selects “events,” links them into a “whole,” the whole having a “point” – and all of the above, functioning as an ideological mechanism, it regulates the self-understanding of its victims, establishes the image of the world for them, interprets the present and the past, determines the promises of the future, imposes beliefs and provides reasons. The “grand narratives” criticised by this theory are the big ideologies of Western imperialism – from the time when it still worked on establishing the preconditions for its system, from the time when it still did not function as a “natural” product. The “initial establishment of preconditions,” of course, could not unfold without wars and conquests, was not possible without administration and oppression – nor was it possible without ideological foundations. The grand narratives of ideological foundations did not only hold together the army of conquistadors, clerks, gatherers, engineers and builders – they especially programmed the spirits and the bodies of those whose intended role was to be coolies and labourers, porters and policemen, lower-ranking officers and local intelligentsia, the administrators and executors of their new slavery.

Now, however, when the system has been established, when it functions of its own accord, unless something interferes with its functioning, it if is not opposed too much, the new narrative about the end of “grand narratives” is the new opium for the colonised peoples of Eastern Europe. Just as the misery of the proletariat is a precondition for the establishment of capitalism and its most dependable staple product, even though this no longer refers to the proletariat from the era of industrial revolution and Marxist utopian constructions, but to the new global proletariat on the margins and in the white spots of the system; so intellectual misery is a precondition for conquering new colonies from the Adriatic to Siberia, almost a prerequisite for the “proletarisation” of new recruits to the world system. And, of course, a prelude to establishing new local class rules – which tell us the fairy tale about “the end of grand narratives.”

It would appear that the ideology of world governance uses one of the mechanisms of mythological thought. From the same elements, from the same matrix, it derives the opposite
point by means of some kind of inversion. In keeping with the general paucity of “white mythology,” this inversion is mechanical in character; it consists in returning the same piece of information to the sender, but in such a manner as to direct him/her to the assumptions that the statement itself rests upon. The information about “grand narratives,” their repressive character and their “end,” directed against “the system,” as a promise of its defeat, only brings the system back — “de te fabula narratur” — by merely turning that same statement (“the end of grand narratives,” etc.) against the assumptions of the critique, pointing it in the direction of its declarative situation. Did not the critique of world imperialism assume the anticolonial revolution, the struggle of the oppressed and the downtrodden for liberty, for independence, to be its tacit but explicit basis, a point of reference and orientation, the possibility of its declaration? Did it not flirt with the ideology of the Third World, of the damned of this world, of those bewitched by slavery, did it not flirt with their rebellion, with their grand narrative?

Serves you right — says the story about the end of grand narratives now — for not having listened to Che and produced “two or three Vietnams,” for opting to warm your bottoms sitting in the debate salons of the academia! It is too late now, the grand narratives have come to an end. The system has appropriated the subversive ideology, what has occurred, as we used to say in the 1960’s, is recuperation. Recuperation could work because the declarative position of academic critique was “false” right from the start, for it was always already a part of the system itself.

But still, this propaganda reaches further than its salon-type critics. In the meantime, while they sat in academic salons toying with their postmodernisms and deconstructions, a revolution did occur. Instead of “two or three Vietnams” in the American sphere, Afghanistan happened — and it was in the entire sphere of the Soviet whip. As for us here, we did our bit — and since old Europe neither jumped nor danced, the “Hic Rhodus, hic salta” moment passed, and the only thing left after the failed reconciliation were the thorns of the present.

3. The ideology of “the end of narratives” and the institutionalisation of national masquerade

And how does that ideological make-up compare with the other side of contemporaneity — that contemporaneity which got so overzealously, so recklessly, rigidly, barbarously, wildly engaged when it came to the institutionalisation of the ur-model of all “grand narratives,” that is to say, the institutionalisation of the national epic? We probably have to rely on a distinction that imposed itself upon us in the course of our former analyses of the one-party rule. The ideology of the rulers should be distinguished from the ruling ideology. The ruling ideology is the one that exists, in material terms, within the institutional network, and the current glue of the institutional network is the ethnic state. On the other hand, the ideology of the rulers, the ether of self-understanding of the ruling class, or at least the greater part of its factions, is the ideology of pacts concluded between the political class and other power groups (in the economy, administration, the machinery for producing public opinion, and only partially in “culture”). It is also, which is of particular importance — a tool for establishing short-term “civic” consensuses on the horizon of the nationalist grand narrative.

This structural opposition was established in the course of the diachronic development of “post-communist” societies. First, a bunch of lunatics dressed in national costumes burst onto the scene, introducing, through a repressive organisation of political public opinion, the revolutionary act of institutionalisation into the masquerade of “primary-school nationalism.” When the pathos of the initial ideological accumulation was spent in the course of establishing the state-legal framework of the ethnic state, the command positions were taken over by sober pragmatists, who initiated the procedure of normalisation into the prose of everyday capitalism. They announced the end of “grand narratives” only when the vampire national epic was securely established and a “narrative” of any kind could only come from the other side of the barricade.

Anti-utopianism is thus simultaneously the structure of the ideology of the rulers and the ideological formulation of its attitude towards the ruling ideology. As the ideology of the ruling
elite, anti-utopianism is everyday wisdom, a specific *phronesis* that enables the new political classes to manoeuvre among the “indigenous” trends of capitalist economy. These trends are inaccessible to the political classes in nation states anyway, for they unfold on an essentially higher level. And that ideology reformulates that which is *structurally given* into that which is *politically desirable*. By “protecting,” on the level of *statement*, the self-realising effects of the capitalist system, and by protecting, on the level of *making a statement*, that is, in reality itself against those very effects, it maintains its ruling position despite the changes occurring in capitalist trends. The anti-utopian “pragmatism” is merely an admission of eternal defeat made in advance, a perpetual alibi for accommodating to situations that the subscribers to this ideology cannot keep under control. And admitting defeat in the world system is a guarantee of “victory” in the microcosm of the nation state; it is an ideology through which the new local class rule is reproduced.

If the new political class maintains its world-historical position by ideologically reformulating that which is *structurally necessary* into that which it *wants in political terms*, and if it reproduces its position of power within the society by ideologically formulating its attitude towards that which is not *necessary in structural terms* (that is, towards the ethnic state) as a *non-attitude*, something “non-necessary” – the ethnic state, viewed from this perspective, begins to appear as something that is *beyond the political will*, in view of the fact that it is not possible to formulate either “will” or “non-will.” If the anti-utopian ideology assumes the attitude of denial, *Verleugnung*, towards the world system, when it comes to the system of the national-ethnic state, its attitude is one of negation, denegation, that is, *Verneinung*. “Suppression” (the contradictions of capitalism, class struggle, exploitation on the world and the national level, etc.) is the “positive content” of anti-utopianism. “Negation” is the attitude that the ideology of the rulers establishes towards the ruling (ethno-nationalist) ideology.

If anti-utopianism possesses two elements, “the content-related” and the “relational”, and if, consequently, anti-utopianism is an albeit deformed but still *reflected* political position, which comprises both the self-determining mechanism (denial) and the mechanism of the attitude towards one’s own other (denegation) – what about the element whose negation is established through anti-utopianism? What is the situation of utopianism?

### 4. Utopia as an image and an act

Anti-utopianism has its own image of utopia. To put it more precisely, through its negation it establishes utopianism in a special interpretation, as a “grand narrative.” According to this interpretation, utopia is a more or less defined notion of what “society” should be like; therefore, it is a *request* that, as this interpretation would have it, utopianism would be prepared to realise by fire and sword. Hence, the connection with the guillotine and – somewhat rashly – with the Gulag. (The rashness concerning the Gulag is due to the fact that, first of all, the Gulag systems were actually anti-utopian reactionary systems; secondly, it is due to this rashness that we neglect the real problem, namely, how utopian ideology may function legitimately and in a conservationist manner, be it in Gulag-like or neoliberal systems.)

If we try to find an ideology that would correspond to that notion of utopia, contemporary fascism is an evident candidate. To put it more precisely, it is those ethnic policies the most consistent variant of which today is implemented through war, crime and military crime, which we refer to as contemporary fascism for want of a better name. A characteristic of such ideologies is that they are convinced that they have a notion of society; as far as we can judge on the basis of its realisations so far, this conviction is “utopian,” for these comprise various peripheral capitalsims, “neo-colonial” societies that can survive relying on less authoritarian regimes, and are certainly possible without “fascism.” “The ethnic utopia,” as a matter of fact, actually typically occurs precisely in such peripheral “neo-colonial” environments, but it is not necessary at all for such environments to really organise themselves in such a utopian fashion. All this means that “utopia,” which is negated by the contemporary anti-utopianism, is utopian self-
imposed blindness. This self-imposed blindness, somewhere and sometimes, manages to be imposed, through authoritarian policies, upon those very same (peripheral) societies that the anti-utopian ideology aspires to rule. This means that anti-utopianism *in this dimension* expresses – *from the position of one of the parties involved* – the ideological conflict within the ruling political class of peripheral societies.

Now we see the specific economy of the anti-utopian ideology. It is capable of *simultaneously* negating the reactive romantic tensions of the ethnic institutional system *and* blocking those motivations that might bring into question *the entire construction of peripheral capitalism*, from the structure of the state to the economic premises and legitimation mechanisms of political rule. It is, therefore, through negation that anti-utopianism intervenes in the *non-antagonistic contradiction* within the framework of the political class and its broader surroundings of social power – thereby blocking (at least ideologically) the possibility of *establishment, articulation of an antagonistic contradiction* between the new social (economic, political, administrative, cultural, communication, military) power and the oppressed, the exploited, those who are excluded from the new system. That is why anti-utopianism has every chance of becoming a new hegemony on the periphery of capital. Of course, that is precisely why such anti-utopianism *misses* the utopian potential of “contemporary spirit,” and that may be precisely the reason why it will not be able to perform its blockade much longer.

It is enough to take a look at the latest rise of utopianism, the 1980’s, the alternative, social upheavals, to get a picture with the help of which we can at least begin an analysis. Those times and those upheavals were certainly not “utopian” in a vulgar anti-utopian sense; they did not have a model of the future society in their pocket, they did not even use the term “the future society.” And yet, they did “aspire to reach beyond the boundaries of the era,” even though this was not expressed in the shape of a globalistic “demand,” but presented itself of its own accord, through resistance to the current order. The dialectics of those relations, responses, collisions and conflicts was complex: it was partly immediately analysed by theory, and partly it still awaits processing. Here, we can only summarise those dimensions that are of importance for our purpose.

The utopianism of the 1980’s somehow corresponded to Mannheim’s definition: the realisation of his aspirations demanded a real abolition of the current relations. However, it only corresponded to that concept “somehow”; that is to say, with some important additional definitions. The most important specific characteristic was that the utopianism of the time *did not understand itself in this way*, and this was due to the fact that its demands were not globalistic-frontal, and they are not such because they did not originate from a “programme,” from a “vision,” but from various *practices* that various individuals and groups effectively carried out. The demands arose from *productions*, which, in turn, originated from the actual postulates of the *products, styles and outcomes* of those practices and productions. To the extent that those “demands” were shaped – as a response to blockades, attacks, persecution, “guilt,” *restrictions* – they were diffuse and disparate. They relied in particular on *the already existing horizons* within the framework of “historical reality.” The revindicative, programmatic, political moment crystallised and coagulated at the *points of contact between the rigid horizon of the establishment, the “system” and alternative practices, productions, styles and outcomes*. Even in these articulations there was nothing “utopian” in the vulgar sense of the term. Their horizon, their “reality,” their “sociability,” “historical activity” already existed, were already there – precisely within the framework of the alternative. Alternative self-understanding therefore felt all too obligated to “the real state of affairs” to feel any kind of need for additional construction of “utopias.”

*But, paradoxically, this is precisely where the true utopian moment within the alternative was to be found.* And from that very moment originated the only characteristic that, in the historical fate of the alternative, somehow corresponds to the vulgar notion of “utopia”; namely, that its “realisation,” its historical effect, denied the expectations, aspirations and “demands”; that, from the point of view of its cause, the outcome was even catastrophic.
We can define the utopian moment as blindness, self-blinding or “fateful illusion” – *hamartia* in self-understanding. The alternative actually had a “concept” of its responsibility towards the historical situation, but the “content” of that concept was an illusion. The place, the *locus* of that blindness can even be precisely determined: at the “points of contact” with the system, where the alternative had to shape its “demands” in order to make credible the *preconditions for the possibility* of its practices, productions, and styles (which were happening anyway); the formulation of “demands” *unfolded following the dictates of the system*.

The above self-blinding can be conceptualised in a number of ways. We could say that the alternative insufficiently made use of the mechanisms of overdetermination, even though, ironically, it was precisely its own theory that introduced this concept of preconditioning, which had a central role in the political reaches of this theory. But this kind of postulate is not sufficient, a rigorous conceptualisation must also comprise the *logic* of self-blinding. And that means the *mechanisms of subjectivation*, connected with the discursive articulation, the discursive establishment of “historical positions.” And the alternative as a cultural undertaking, was nothing else but a “discursive articulation, in the broadest and the most dramatic sense.” That only means that the “utopian” moment of self-blinding was its *inner* moment, necessary and inevitable, even constitutive.

We can also, in a stenographic manner and using the Hegelian jargon, place the utopian moment in the difference between what “the historical position” or, *sit venia verbo*, “the level of spirit” is “for itself,” and what it is “in itself.” The drama of appropriating the “in itself” is the basic formula of the *phenomenology of spirit*, which can also be formulated “materialistically” as a process in which the “in itself” pounces upon, surprises, prevents the illusions of “being-for-itself,” even though these illusions are – and precisely because they are – constitutive for “being-in-itself.” If we deprive this jargon of its teleological charge, while preserving the positive moment of “abolition,” *Aufhebung*, which resides in *alienation* –, we are still left with the conclusion that the utopian element is constitutive, if not for some possible “upheaval of the spirit,” then all the more so for *any spiritual upheaval*. That is why insistence on the utopian moment today constitutes *self-deception of the spirit*.

5. Is it still permissible to think?

We easily reconcile ourselves to the fact that we shall never be able to think everything through, and that even the little that has been given to us to think we shall not be able to think through in its entirety. Today, this modesty, which is not much of a virtue because it is our fate anyway, confronts us with a dramatic ethical problem: are we still allowed to think at all? If that which is “unthought” is within the framework of the alternative – even if indirect and contingent – and yet undeniably connected to the horrors of today, which leave us speechless, and if, on the other hand, we know that the “unthought” is constitutive of every thought: do we still dare, do we still have the temerity to think, can we still afford to be so arrogant as to make thoughts public?

Hopefully, it may be just a sophism that we can reject by means of an opposite sophism, the Aristotelian argument that even that very dilemma is the fruit of thinking. In order to ask ourselves whether we are allowed to think, we already had to think in order to arrive at that question at all. This means, the dilemma in question presupposes something the possibility of which it finds doubtful, thus responding to itself, for it “pragmatically” denies itself.

We could also say that what makes horrors horrible to us, the observers, is precisely the fact that we are left speechless, our thought petrified, when confronted with them. That thought and speech, therefore, the speech of thought, constitute the first gesture of refusal, opposition, and resistance. Or, to put it less pathetically and less self-admiringly, if the horrors of today are the work of the masses that are, no matter how abhorrent we may find it to admit this, still a kind of
human community, then it is only possible to stop them “jointly,” that is to say, through speech, reciprocity, and one day, possibly, through solidarity.

If then, beyond the ethical dilemma and actually with it, we are forced and obligated into practical thinking, and if utopianism is a constitutive element of such thinking, then anti-utopianism constitutes abdication of the spirit and is an accomplice that allows the horrors of today. Conversely, utopianism is no mere self-defence of the spirit; the defence of the spirit is but the first step against today and beyond it. This sounds sufficiently “utopian” to hope that it is also reflective – and thereby practical.

III. How much fascism - again

In the current debate about fascism, it is probably of importance that it has been initiated by the media and not, say, by some voice of public, or social critique. It wasn’t even initiated by the alternative, still less by the established politics. Actually, the political establishment was not to be expected to do this, for the general reason that ever since the beginning of the period of the multiparty democracy, it has not initiated any intellectual discussion – on the contrary, it has stifled quite a few. It is also due to the particular reason that the political establishment manifests a leaning towards, perhaps even a predilection, for the right, including the extreme right. This is proven, for example, by the fact that even prominent members of both parties, which do plead for “tolerance,” occasionally resort to the racist kind of jargon. Another indication of this is the government’s coarse arrogance in the course of negotiating with the trade unions, especially when compared to its mellifluous servility when it fraternises with the Catholic Church establishment.

The alternative and critically intoned science have tried to place this debate on the agenda a number of times, but until now they have not been particularly successful at it. Within the space of a year that has elapsed since last such attempts (in 1995, editor’s note), a lot has obviously changed, leading the media, which have so far been almost exclusively fascinated by the multiparty rule, towards issues that they have not been able to deal with within such narrowly defined borders. The most important change is probably that “fascistoid symptoms” have coalesced within the framework of parliamentary politics, that extreme and populist parties have realised themselves within the political establishment, so that it is no longer necessary to leave the intellectually undemanding rut of the parliamentary establishment for “fascism” to present itself as an issue worthy of being considered.

This is the first paradox of discussions about fascism: under some circumstances, probably under some of the current ones, what public debates about fascism prove is precisely the power of fascism. It would appear that these debates are an achievement of fascism itself, which has earned itself the right to qualify for the subject of a public debate. Perhaps that is why one tends to feel awkward at the very use of the term “fascism”: on the one hand, we have a feeling that we are “painting the devil,” and on the other, it seems that it is fascism itself that guides our hand in the process.

In the sphere of “new democracies,” the first one to really initiate a debate was probably Milan Popović in the daily Borba. In the spring of 1992, he warned that the Nazi technology used for the purpose of legitimating the powers-that-be was still not sufficient to pronounce, for example, the regimes in Serbia or Croatia fascist in the true sense of the term: “…these regimes cannot become fascist ones… first of all because of their (semi-)peripheral, extremely dependent status on the hierarchical world system, that is, on the world economy.” In the course of the election campaign in early 1993, the same writer dealt with this issue again, on the pages of the same daily paper, under the telling title of “Fascism, after all.” This time around, he interpreted the positioning of “post-communist” societies on the (semi-)periphery of the world system relying on Chomsky’s theory of fascism (Deterring Democracy, 1991), within the framework of which “marginality” (as being paradigmatic in Italy following the First World War and, with some
modifications, also in Germany, as well as in South America in the second half of the 20th century, and today in numerous “Third World” countries) is precisely one of the preconditions for the development of fascistogeneous dynamics. This dynamics typically unfolds in three phases: 1. the phase during which reactionary powers in the world centre offer indirect support or even directly install fascist apparatuses on the periphery; 2. the phase during which there is an increase of tension between the (democratic) centre and the former (fascist) client; 3. the phase in which direct confrontation occurs. Popović provides other arguments as well, referring to Wallerstein, and it has to be admitted that his analysis has been confirmed to a large extent in the meantime precisely within the framework of those regimes that are of greatest interest to him: the Milošević regime oscillates between the first and the second phase, having, for the most part, entered phase two; the Tudman regime also oscillates between the first and the second phase, remaining mainly within the boundaries of the first one for the time being. Does this theory apply to our local (Slovenian, editor’s note) relations? One can at least note that the protagonists of the local fascistization very much strive to enter “the first phase”; it is obvious that “theories” of a “communist conspiracy,” warnings that democracy has not been secured yet and that, therefore, the nationalist revolution should be shifted to “phase two,” the hypotheses about the “UDBO [Security Service]-Mafia,” even some characteristics of international liaising, belong to the logic of the first phase of fascist dynamics. Judging by this, at least in political terms, if not in broader social terms as well, there is a possibility that fascistogeneous dynamics might be initiated with us, too.

But let us remain sceptical. There are other reservations that one may have concerning the use of the term “fascism.” The first one is purely methodological: there is reason to fear that we are pondering contemporary phenomena relying on categories from the past, thus missing precisely that which is most important about them, namely, their topical character. The other reservation is ethical: the label of fascism indisputably produces stigmatisation; let us not forget how this designation was abused, for example, when they tried to criminalise punk, and how we spoke out against the use of such methods in political conflicts. Finally, indiscriminate use of such an extreme expression is also politically problematical: whoever gets tagged with this label loses political legitimacy. Consequently, in the final analysis, such a person gets a push towards “fascistoid” acts and tendencies.

These problems are not new. Almost all their elements have been manifested, for example, in the course of German attempts to do away with the country’s Nazi past. And our position today seems to be more complex than that of Germany. In that country, the main issue was “memory” and “construction of the past,” which referred to only one, though gigantic problem. As for us, we have been affected by two historical issues at the same time, namely, the issue of domestic fascism before 1945 and the issue of the one-party rule after World War Two. There are two more problems today: the establishment of a state in the spirit of nationalism, accompanied by a pronounced “Blut und Boden” rhetoric of the Demos party, spiced up with the local equivalent of racism, namely “Balkanism”; and the emergence of radically right-wing and populist politics. The circumstances under which we are faced with these issues are significantly worse than they were in the former Federal Republic of Germany. “Adenauer’s” Germany, whatever objections might be and have been levelled at it by critically-minded individuals and movements, did manage to establish a firm constitutional framework of parliamentary democracy, supplemented by an “independent public sphere” of intellectual power and prestige that we would have approached only if the 1980’s had lasted some ten years longer. With us, the constitutional framework is still relatively weak, and also lacks adequate foundations, both in terms of the legal system and particularly in terms of, to use Habermas’s expression, an “ethical citizens’ consensus.” There is no independent public sphere at all; worse still, all the established political forces have been engaged in destroying it in one way or another.

If we think of the great contribution that the 1960’s movements in Germany and their rich heritage made to that country’s attempts to deal with its past and its struggle against neo-Nazism and the fascistoid excesses of right-wing politics, we can perceive a significant parallel in our local history, a parallel which warns us anew of the falling standards in the realm of political culture
and general social relations, which occurred with the introduction of parliamentary democracy. In the era of “extraparliamentary opposition” and new social movements in Western Europe, in our country, too, there appeared social movements that, driven by numerous cultural, subcultural and countercultural motives, especially in cooperation with the then flowering theoretical production, created the seeds of an independent and free public sphere outside the ruling and established, then one-party politics. This structural social transformation is probably the fundamental reason for the transformation, at long last, in the technology of state-political decision-making, that is to say, for the introduction of parliamentary multiparty democracy.

One observation that imposes itself even when one gives the recent past a cursory examination is that, in the historical dimension, on the level of social events in a broader sense (economic, political, ideological), we were already continuously involved in “European” events. Lest the task of proving this should prove too easy, we can even disregard the 1960’s, because that particular decade provided a rather favourable set of circumstances the world over, even though it is worth noting that the first major manifestations of the 1960’s occurred almost simultaneously in Berkeley and in Ljubljana, and that in the mythical year of ‘68, students in Belgrade kept the university under control longer than anywhere else. We can also disregard the significance of the Yugoslav brand of self-management socialism for the progressive world debate, and the theoretical, political and ideological importance that the Yugoslav “third path to socialism” undoubtedly had. Likewise, we can temporarily disregard the non-alignment movement, the first, and at least for a while, successful way of organising “the despised of this world,” within the framework of which Yugoslavia had a leading role. Also, we shall not speak of the rise of social and political thought in our country, which, on the one hand, drew a lot from that “participation in world history,” and on the other, fortified it, pushed it forward and at the same time criticised it.

Let us restrict ourselves to the era of “extraparliamentary oppositions” in the West and later social movements. In parliamentary democracies, these new political forms stepped outside the established political apparatuses and established a new political life, new forms and new “styles” of organisation, and produced alternative publics. But in our case, we were outside the establishment in advance because of the nature of the political system, but we also had to develop new forms, models and styles, and especially, of course, a “new” public, which means a real public as an alternative to the “inner public” of the establishment and the “false public” that was only the ideological apparatus of the one-party state. The way extraparliamentary movements in parliamentary democracies had to fight for penetrating the mechanisms of decision-making, we had to find ways of penetrating “the system.” In parliamentary democracies, this was not possible without the critique of progressive and leftist system organisations; with us, it also required a critique of the only party there was, the monopolist Communist Party. Just like extraparliamentarianism and the new social movements in the West led to transformations inside the political establishment (“Eurocommunism,” “the coming of socialist democracies to power), so the alternative managed to transform the political establishment with us, that is, to end the one-party system and introduce parliamentary democracy.

At first, the introduction of parliamentary democracy was nothing but adjustment of the state-political sphere to the deeper changes in society. For a number of different reasons, to which we partly pointed in the course of the actual development, and which will partly have to be additionally analysed in the future, what came to pass was that, to a large degree, the consequence liquidated its causes. This process, too, was closely connected with “European,” even world events: the rise of neoliberalism, first of all in the metropolises and subsequently worldwide; the slowing down of reformed communisms; the electoral defeats of social democracy. Due to the specific character of development in the democratic system, now we participate anew in European and world history, although not at its progressive but at its regressive end: our development here is now part of the general developments in “Eastern Europe.” The proof that this “participation” in many ways assumes less drastic forms is the fact that from its very beginning it wasn’t necessary at all. In the analyses conducted so far, we have dealt with, for reasons to do with practical polemics, the politics of the right, Demos, reactionary
groupings and the former communists, which produced this regressive turnabout. What remains, however, is the more important part of the task: to analyse the policies that enabled a counter-strike. What is certainly worth thinking about is how the alternative was either lost or, during the short period between 1989 and 1990, the hegemony it had been creating for ten or fifteen years. Also, it is worth analysing how the social effects of the alternative hegemony, which appeared to be so deep, increasingly gave way to conservative, even reactionary “restoration.” These analyses we have yet to conduct: for now, suffice it to say that the local new populism, new “fascism,” new right-wing extremism, are the ways in which we participate in European, or even world history. This does not mean, of course, that these phenomena are in any way “necessary”; perhaps we shall be the first to remove them convincingly. It only means that they are real, that the historical “logic” is realised through them, broader than the local one, which still runs deeper than everyday political complications.

The dimensions of the “restoration” shock are gigantic: the presentation of peripheral capitalism as “renewal,” that is, a violent introduction, in one way or another, of rather backward capitalist relations; the establishment of a state based on nationalist ideology; the abolition of the independent public sphere and the monopolisation of the political process in the hands of party, ownership or even ideological “elites.”

It would appear that these disturbing outcomes of the “shift,” which to a great extent destroyed the achievements of the social transformations of the last decade, have created a situation to which a part of society and a part of the political elite respond with fascistoid reactions. The real question is not whether this or that political group actually resorts to fascistoid methods, still less whether this or that politician manifests behaviour that might qualify him or her for a “leader,” and the will to apply such talents. The real questions are whether there do exist circumstances in which extreme political attitudes stand a chance and authoritarian persons might succeed, and what the causes of those circumstances are.

The thesis that liberal democracy automatically produces fascistoid effects and that in a system of parliamentary rule the removal of such “reflexes” is a permanent task is seductive, albeit somewhat old-fashioned. In its more pessimistic variants, this thesis maintains that fascism is one of the possible responses to the internal contradictions of parliamentarianism, and that therefore classical liberal policies are not successful when fighting fascism. But even if we accept this, we may say, somewhat simplified view, we can note that, nevertheless, additional reasons are needed, special circumstances in which the “fascistoid by-products” of liberal democracy become truly significant. One of such special reasons may be if a sense of insecurity spreads among broad segments of the population. In the current circumstances of intensified social stratification, economic transformation and peripheral inclusion in the capitalist system, this precondition is certainly fulfilled.

We can also define this reason differently: fascism may be a way of resolving a real crisis in the existing relations between the economy and exploitation. Even though a while ago it did appear that the crisis of the one-party rule and the corresponding system of exploitation was already resolved, the introduction of the peripheral Eastern European capitalism brought about a deeper crisis, maybe precisely because, in view of the already achieved historical level of Slovenian society, that system is anachronistic and produces critical outcomes due to its backwardness.

The next reason may be a social-psychological one: the importance of mass-scale ressentiment in broad segments of the population that have a feeling that they are “victims of injustice.” At a moment when a new class rule is being established, and in a society in which, as sociological research has shown, egalitarianism is a deeply anchored ideology of the masses, that precondition is fulfilled as well, particularly if, among increasingly broad layers of the population, there is a deepening awareness that they have been separated from the processes of political decision-making and a rising sense of powerlessness. What also tends to happen is that some political groups particularly cultivate and incite such psychological processes; on the other hand, until now no political group has proved able to establish a convincing alternative to either liberal
Peripheral capitalism or the increasingly dangerous monopolisation of economic, political and
general social power in the hands of the “new” class.

Finally, in contemporary parliamentary democracies it is more or less clear that the system
cannot survive if it is not supported by a free public sphere that is independent of the political
establishment in the narrower sense of the term. Multiparty democracy can only survive in a
“political” environment that is much broader than multiparty parliamentarianism. That particular
precondition has not been fulfilled in our case, and even worse, today we are further from
something like that than we were in the final years of the one-party rule. We can assume that a
more or less clear sense of this dramatic shortcoming is the reason that eventually led
the ideological apparatuses of the multiparty system to initiate a debate on fascism. Perhaps we can
hope that this debate will at least contribute to the establishment of a public sphere and the
broadening of the political space beyond the framework of the party establishment.

The most challenging part of the current episode involving fascism and anti-fascism is not
political fascism, which has long been with us, but cultural fascism, which does appear anew. A
somewhat stereotypical explanation of the current radicalisation of a significant part of cultural
establishment means that the “intellectual elite,” having done a heroic job when it came to
introducing democracy, now feels rejected at the moment of “normalisation,” which is why it
resorts to more forceful registers. Contrary to this view, we put forward the thesis that the
“intellectual elite” continues its heroic job, that its task, now as before, is directed against the
 beginnings of an independent public sphere, and aims to prevent the establishment of that
intellectual position that a developed democracy makes possible.

Their role model, actually, is the classical moralist writing, a type of engagement that historically
belongs to the first half of the 19th century in Europe, that is to say, a position in which the only
public was of the bourgeois-literary kind, and when there was no real political public. Contrary to
this, the contemporary intellectual position only developed towards the end of the 19th century,
that is to say, in the era of developed parliamentarianism, mass press and a developed public
sphere, which extended beyond the framework of parliamentary politics. This position, of course,
was created by the labour movement and the development of socialism, as well as the spread of
general literacy. At the root of this process lies the intellectual response to the crisis of European
civilisation. If we wish to position this break in anecdotal terms, we can date it by referring to the
Dreyfus affair. It was then that the role of the intellectual was established, of one who applies his
expert knowledge outside his immediate field, that is to say, in the political public sphere.

The role of the intellectual in the one-party system was reminiscent of the intellectual role in
Heine’s time, precisely because at that time, just like in the era of the one-party system, there
was no political public sphere to speak of. Still, that social position was finished off by the student
movements of the 1960’s. Later, the new theoretical intelligentsia, in cooperation with the
cultural self-organisation movements of masses of the young and subsequently with the new
social movements, initiated the establishment of an independent sphere of political public,
outside the one-party state apparatus. In the course of this historical turnabout, which ended
successfully sometime around the middle of the 1980’s, the classical “dissident” position had no
role whatsoever; precisely the opposite, it was then already an ideological ingredient of the
cultural establishment and, therefore, on the other side of the barricade.

The current fascization of the mandarin establishment attempts to apply that specimen of
bourgeois “literary” and limited “public,” and through its radicalism it proves the historical crisis
and probably the end of the historical potential of such archaic “intellectualism.” In its own way,
this maybe proves that with the mechanisms of parliamentary democracy in place, an
independent and broader sphere of political public has begun to gain in strength after all; it is a
guarantee of a successful functioning of parliamentarianism, and at the same time an area in
which it is possible to develop a modern European intellectual position. That is why, in spite of all
the darkness being spread by the new fascism of old intelligentsia, we can still be optimistic.

Naturally, on the condition that we successfully develop those initial elements that are the
historical cause of this radicalisation. If we help the development of that sphere, the mandarin phantoms will evaporate of their own accord, even if they are only vampires from the dumpster of history.

IV. After the purloined revolution

I wrote the texts contained in this booklet in 1995, at the time of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of political instability, when in the functioning of this state [Slovenia] one could discern a malignant mixture of rigidity, incompetence, authoritarianism and panic. By means of these writings, I tried to respond to the intellectual urgency of the moment, which was all the more dramatic because it appeared then that those who “perform the social function of intellectuals” – to use Gramsci’s expression – decided to mobilise extremist right-wing ideologies and to engage, through their great social power, supported by the influence of elite associations and the school canon, the “intellectual establishment,” that is, a great part of the ideological apparatus of the state, pointing it in the direction that, in my view, led into fascism.

The main correction that I would now propose is that what, three years ago, appeared to me to be some kind of aberration is actually the normal state of affairs of the epoch, which will probably last a while longer. That is why, in something of a hurry, perhaps even in a state of panic, I tried in those writings to sketch the historical processes that had led to a specific set of circumstances favourable to fascistoid trends. These are limited primarily to intellectual and ideological dimensions, but do encompass the “material existence of ideology” in the school apparatus, touch upon political constructions in their materiality and in the discursiveness of their reproduction. All the same, they neglect excessively the fundamental long-term processes in society, and especially in its “economic basis,” if I may use this jargon, so zealously discredited today. That is why in this preface I shall provide an outline of what should be written in some future treatises in order to supplement these writings – and what, perhaps, could be preserved for the future from them.

The basic postulate, it would appear to me, still remains; namely, the question is not “Fascism – yes or no?” but “How much fascism?” That means that what we stenographically call “fascism” is a structural element of the installation, and also, it would appear to me, in the reproduction of the local “semi-peripheral” capitalism. This hypothesis disproves the myth, common to the ideology of liberalism and to most Marxisms, that the capitalist way of production, and allegedly the capitalist social formation, are capable of reproducing themselves without extraeconomic pressure. The persistence of this myth is all the more noteworthy because the thinker whom liberalism considers to be its originator and Marxism thinks of as the main object of their criticism, actually thought otherwise. In fact, Adam Smith warned that the immanent logic of the “free market,” which, on account of the interests of “those living on profits” spontaneously tends towards monopolisation, can only be stopped by resorting to the state measures imposed by the ruler. Thus, the very first classical formulation already diagnosed “the free market” to be inherently suicidal, so that the only thing that could keep it alive is state pressure. Neoliberalism confirmed this classical thesis in practice – from Reagan’s antimonopolist legislation to the brutal suppression of British trade unions under the rule of Margaret Thatcher. The world’s hegemonic power of today also ensures the “freedom” of the world market through financial terror, political extortion and military “policing” – sometimes going solo, other times through its military extensions, mostly through “world” organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank or the World Trade Organisation.

Contemporary “extraeconomic” practices that keep alive the current system of the world economy also point to the fact that the reproduction of the system does not depend so much on market relations but on relations in the sphere of production. In this way, they confirm that the theoretical shift from market analysis towards analysing production methods performed by Karl Marx was justified. The transformations in production relations are, of course, the central dimension in “transition” processes as well: new relations are established by means of state
regulation, legal measures of state coercion. The juridical-economic formula “privatisation and denationalisation” now itself belongs to the *normalisation discourse* through which the ruling ideology managed to *neutralise* the dramatic dimension of that historical process. If we try to condense these developments into another formula, we can say that the process of divesting the state of its authority as the political-administrative representative of *solidarity*, arising from work, has just been brought to its close; what has been established in its place is the new *civil society* form of rule based on private ownership of capital. In this new context, the policing function when it comes to the regulation of *conflicts arising from the exploitative nature of new production relations* belongs to the state. The state now mostly channels and regulates conflicts arising from the insurmountable contradictions of the new system, arbitrates, and occasionally performs a repressive function in the course of buffering those conflicts which cannot be channelled into parliamentary democracy procedures or into some extraparliamentary negotiating (temporary) solution. Sociability is no longer based on solidarity but on conflicts. Hence the necessity of permanent *operative presence* of the state and the necessity of this liberal *etatism*, which is in total opposition to the declared political ideology of the liberal state. That is why it is all the more brutal in its dry pragmatism, and its legitimization discourses are that much more cynical.

The “extraeconomic” violence of the state is, therefore, an integral element of “normal” reproduction of social relations based on private ownership. It is, then, all the more to be expected in “transition”-related circumstances when the state, as the main factor of thorough transformation, must at least temporarily rule as a *state in a state of emergency*. This particular formula is one of the possible explanations of the fascization with the state, particularly developed by Nikos Poulantzas. The real theoretical problem, therefore, is why in some states undergoing “transition” this fascization has never occurred. Among the many reasons for this, the political-ideological dimension was probably important: 1. “the discourse, passions and illusions” of democratic revolution kept the peoples of Eastern Europe fascinated for some time after the revolution had already been “stolen”; 2. the social reaction of the deprived masses stripped of power was initiated relatively late, and was relatively skillfully manipulated by the reformist communist parties with social-democratic programmes.

Neither of the above has happened here. The pathos of the revolution of human rights spread through the “broader society” through the filter of nationalist ideologies, maybe because, paradoxically, the Yugoslav democratic revolution was never sufficiently “pathetic.” It was entirely *avant la lettre* “politically correct” and politely enlightening. The communist leadership rejected all too lightly the solidarity responsibility imposed by the former ideology, merrily embracing the transition jargon, and switched, without any particular upheavals, from the communist “new class” to a liberal “new class.” Even though the reformed communist parties inspired surprising confidence in the civic electorate, they made a succession of bad estimates and political mistakes, allowing a right-wing radicalisation of deprived social layers, thus significantly helping to articulate “fascisization from above” by means of “fascisization from below.”

Concerning our local relations, then, we must explain the *surplus of violence* against the “transitional” regulation of “rule of law” and the *surplus of ideological extremism* against the “democratic” methods of fabricating public opinion. For the moment, it is only possible to offer the initial elements for interpretation; at this stage, the answers are necessarily theoretically eclectic, disconnected, and perhaps even mutually contradictory. They are therefore theoretically one-sided, and simplify too much; they cannot achieve a synthesis on the level of analysis, instead, they try to derive it by means of the alibi of the coherence of their subject, which they look for in the phantom of “national society.” This designation of the subject is doubly wrong: First, on the one hand, the effect of the “imagined community,” whose construction was allegedly analytically dealt with by these contributions, is tacitly accepted as their self-evident horizon; and second, on the other hand, they neglect the decisive dimension in the production of their subject, namely, the specific “transitional” inclusion of some special social-economic space, defined by the non-orthodox variant of state socialism, in the world capitalist system. Let us outline briefly how we
could explain, from a point of view that would eliminate the shortcomings of these contributions, what we, perhaps somewhat cynically, refer to as the surplus of violence and the surplus of extremism in local relations.

One of the problems when trying to explain these radicalisations lies in the fact that we cannot avoid the attractive stereotype of regressive “resurrection” of old tensions and frustrated political programmes. In these essays I tried to offer a structural analysis that encompassed, for the most part, only one of the ideological levels, namely, the level of “high” or the ruling culture. This approach should be deepened. If we opt for the initial formula only, the strategic position of “outdated” or “anachronistic” structures, which have established themselves so quickly and all-encompassingly in the local societies, could be designated in the following manner: The “anachronistic” structures that the resistance to inclusion in the system of world capitalism relies on (meaning resistance to the intrusion of contemporary relations of inequality and exploitation in areas that, until now, have at least to some degree “resisted” the world system) are at the same time the structures taken over by this inclusion, “invested into” by precisely those relations of inequality and exploitation in the world capitalist system. The nation state, with its “civil society” supplement, the nation, is perhaps the pre-eminent one among those “anachronistic” constructions. In today’s relations, the “sovereignty” of the nation state boils down, at best, to the right of jurisdiction within a limited area of the world system. (And in “transitional” states this right is very conditional and is mainly realised as the obligation of fulfilling the “expert” ultimatums of hegemonistic world or “international” organisations and the political pressures of the so-called “international community.”) Nevertheless, in its real limitation, the “sovereignty” of nation states can be an operative element in the functioning of the world system, wherein it can create the conditions of “unequal international exchange” and investment niches, lower the value of labour by means of state regulation, lower ecological standards through the absence of state regulation, and create and regulate new markets of goods, production factors and labour through local policies, etc. It is through their archaic character that nation states bring “pseudo-natural” diversification into the landscape of the world economy, creating local landscapes through which world capital moves with its products and exchanges, thus successfully compensating for the existing tendencies of falling profit rates and “falling profits.” On the other hand, various forms of local resistance to these processes view the nation state as a shield and a defence weapon. Thus, a great, if not the major, part of political battles within the nation state unfold within the coordinates of the false dilemma between “cosmopolitanism” and “localism.” What characterises both elements of this opposition is fascination with the power of the state and temptation in the face of monopoly on physical violence.

But this still cannot explain fascisization. This is the position of all “transitional” states, of many states from the centre, and even of some states from the first division. We must search for further origins: for example, the ideological horizon and the models of understanding the classes, coalitions and groups that those nation states, as they brag about themselves, “created” and appropriated. These ruling coalitions understood themselves as colonial powers even before they managed to qualify “their” states as “colonies.” The ur-model of such conduct was provided by the Slovenian communists when they broke up the last Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, whereupon they took the first plane to return to “their” state. It did not occur to them that after a negative gesture it was possible to do something positive; they did not see the democratic fermentation throughout Yugoslavia, they failed to see that the entire Yugoslavia expected democratic action of them, they did not want to know that they were in a position of being able to respond to the question posed by the historical moment. Neither they nor the later political classes thought of looking over the national fence. Some of those political Mafias actually wanted to expand their borders and violently export their limitations – “forcibly,” by means of ethnic cleansing, mass killing. “A people that oppresses other peoples is not free itself!” Naturally, but what should also be taken into consideration is the fact that a people that has fallen into the trap of nationalism is not free either.

So much about the “specific” local characteristics, but even they will not be enough for providing an explanation. What should also be explained is how these intellectually thin political classes
with an antiquated ideology and schematic programmes managed to crush the democratic revolution of human rights, destroy the public, devastate the rich and diverse social space by introducing the plundering “Eastern capitalism.”

Translated from Croatian by Novica Petrović
On Nationalism
With Ferhat Kentel, Meltem Ahıska and Fırat Genç
Interview by Siren Idemen

The Tumult Beneath the Surface

Talking about nationalism from the comfort of an armchair is one thing, but discussing nationalism after having traversed Anatolia and conducted face-to-face interviews is quite another. Let’s turn our attention to Ferhat Kentel, Fırat Genç, and Meltem Ahıska, who have conducted a seminal study titled “The Indivisible Unity of the Nation: Nationalisms That Tear Us Apart in the Democratization Process.”

What were the intellectual premises of your study on nationalism?

Ferhat Kentel: This research was the last of a series of research projects conducted under the auspices of TESEV. Probably the common aim of these projects was to unearth answers to questions beginning with “how” rather than “what.” TESEV’s “Democratization Program” provided the overarching framework for these studies focusing on various fields such as the state, family, laicism, and nationalism in relation to the democratization process in Turkey. Etyen Mahçupyan was the coordinator of the project and our research was his brainchild. The departure point for our foray into nationalism was the simple observation, or claim, that, “In recent years, nationalism has been on the rise.” We searched for answers to such questions as “is this really the case?” and “how so?” There was also an hypothesis that went something like: of course the era we live in has certain peculiar characteristics, but there were waves of nationalism on September 6-7, 1955, and there were fresh bouts during the Cyprus crisis. Moreover, ever since the rise of the Kurdish issue, people have been talking increasingly about turbulent waves of nationalism in Turkey. We set out with the questions regarding how this so-called rising nationalism was adopted and embraced, and what kind of language is was being used to talk about it.

Meltem Ahıska: In the TESEV research series, mentality structures were emphasized. Yet “mentality structures” is not a very explanatory concept, as it can be twisted in any number of ways. Generally in Turkey, nationalism is understood as something like a kind of latently existing mentality or way of thinking that goes through fluctuations of prominence. With this research we sought to shake up this assumption. Rather than searching for something at the level of culture, in structures of mentality, we asked the question, “How is nationalism produced and consumed in a particular historical and social context?” Rather than producing a static picture of society, we tried to understand what existing perceptions and structures of mentality are influenced by, how they are mobilized, and what they contain. Expressions like “obstructions to Turkey’s development and modernization” and “elements resisting democratization” are commonly thrown around. A plethora of labels such as “backward,” “resistant,” “conservative” and “traditional” are applied to groups of people. Based on the assumption that perceptions and structures of mentality are not particular to certain cultures, locales, and groups of people, but are products of certain strategies on the macro level, we looked at how these strategies are reproduced simultaneously as they are being consumed as a part of the social process. Therefore, the project was oriented towards historicizing these perceptions and mentality structures without pigeonholing them in fixed categories.

1 This text was translated from the original published in Express no. 75 August 25-September 25, 2007. We would like to thank Siren Idemen and Express for giving us the permission to publish it again.
3 The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, an NGO founded in 1994 in Istanbul. TESEV is a think tank that promotes, among other things, research and discussion on culpable governance, foreign policy, transparency and democracy.
Kentel: Actually, the key concept is problematisation. There are certain “lifestyles” which the modernization politics of the Republic perceives as problematic and tries to overcome by a process of “othering.” But these “others” are actually “non-existent others.” In other words, no such thing exists – the politics of modernization renders them as “other,” that’s it. You render them a problem, and this becomes the basis of your own constructed identity. This supra-discourse, these mental structures, become the air we breathe and live in. What we tried to do is problematise this. Generally, studies on nationalism and laicism become slaves to the discourse itself, and in thus end up reproducing the its tenets. Maybe we wanted to claim that this discourse is not real, and to take a look at things upwards from below, and thus reverse the process. Within reality, defined and stabilized, lies what is actually a much more complex world with different human, psychological, sociological, and cultural facets, lifestyles and habitus. This complexity needs to be illustrated, and it needs to be talked about. And this will lead to us to very political conclusions.

You mentioned that you are indebted to Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and especially Michel de Certeau for the theoretical framework of this study. What is the theoretical and conceptual framework within which the study is situated?

Kentel: The common ground these thinkers share is the concept of “everyday life,” the complexity and creativity of everyday life. Everyday life is continually under the threat of becoming enslaved by certain discourses. Power structures enslave everyday life; so, for example, fascism can become firmly established by becoming normalized and commonplace. When such is the case, it is necessary to re-think everyday life as a sphere of resistance to discourses which seek to enslave it. This is the common point between the thinkers just cited. For example, there is the concept of “strategy” utilized by Michel de Certeau. According to him, strategy is not something appropriated by a group and continually presented and produced as an ideology. For strategy to exist, it must be interpreted and entered into personally by the people below; strategy is the space in which people move. Theoretically, de Certeau and Foucault are kin. When we live in everyday life, we are simultaneously moving around inside strategy and thereby reproducing it. But what we reproduce is not the same thing as what the Ministry of Education, the Sun Language Theory, the Turkish History Thesis or the Republican People’s Party (CHP) instituted. Laicism, nationalism, Atatürk, law, family – all become different things through our interpretation as we reflect on them via our traditions. As soon as we say this, we move from a realm in which people move around like strategy, to a world of tactics carried out by individuals, social actors, and groups. While strategy defines space – the geography of Turkey, the borders of the national pact, Ankara – tactics are more time-based: my needs today, my feelings today, the news I watched today. I interpret Turkey and nationalism through my tactics. There can be some cunning involved as well. After all, I’m just trying to make life under this strategy liveable. And as I do this, the strategy is torn apart, altered and demolished, but at the same time reproduced.

Ahska: Historically, nationalism is an ideology founded on a supposition that obliterates differences in experience and temporality. In the words of Benedict Anderson, nationalism is an ideology which imagines that people living in a particular timeless locale all have the same identical experiences at the same identical moment. When we take this alone to be the reality, we take nationalism perhaps too seriously and begin thinking in its terms. Yet the important question here is “how?” What people invest in, or to use de Certeau’s terms, how people use certain strategies, and how they move around within those strategies, are important. The thinkers mentioned have tried to find the nexus between subjectivity and objectivity. They explain how subjectivity is produced and how it becomes differentiated in this process, and claim that it can carry potential for resistance. What we have tried to do is to understand different temporalities and different experiences, both in their relationship to dominant representations and on another level.

How did this theoretical framework work out in the field?
Kentel: The concept of experience played an important role in the book even if it was not as frequently referred to as the concept of everyday life. As social subjects, we are experienced about social constructions. Experience also includes macro situations such as globalization. But there is always a gap; for instance, we never appropriate word for word the nationalist discourse which we believe the state has produced. There is always a difference of interpretation. In our research we formulated this as reproduction in the act of consumption. Everyday life is fundamentally crucial for our theoretical framework precisely because of this gapped structure and because it functions as a surface which allows for occasional shifts. In our fieldwork, rather than confirming the answers we sought, we tried to extract answers from people’s narratives.

Ahıska: Just as nationalist strategies restrict certain experiences and different ways of thinking and living, certain academic assumptions or theories also have the power to restrict. You try to situate what you find in whatever model you have in mind. Our findings related to the subject of everyday life and the gaps that Fırat mentioned also problematise these models themselves, so that what we have is a self-critical method which seeks to hear that which lies beyond representations. Here, methodology and theory converge.

Kentel: In the end, we too are people who exist within the field of the strategy, and who are nourished by the strategy of science, but underneath, there are different modes of knowledge production, and it is via that knowledge that people are able to make life liveable. It was our intention to remove any hierarchical differences between their knowledge and our knowledge. Of course such a task cannot be carried out in absolute terms. Because we are intellectuals, what we say is nourished by the books and research we read and new conclusions we reach. Perhaps there is no utopian solution that could remove this discrepancy altogether, but the intention to do so is nevertheless important. When I talk to people, I take what they say seriously. When they explain to me their understanding of nationalism, I have no right to say that theirs is “a warped way of thinking.” While someone from Kars explains nationalism in one way, someone from İzmir may say something very different; the things they say and the things I say, are all on the same level. In this study, we tried at the very least to overcome this dichotomy, or not to fall into that trap.

Ahıska: The aim of overcoming this dichotomy is not to point at pluralism or relativism or to simply say something like “everybody thinks differently, there are a multitude of voices.” On the contrary, our goal is to reveal how different strategies, representations, and models, which are actually very small in number, are used in various social relationships. The issue is not just pluralism and relativism. The goal was to show how – depending on many factors like class, region, gender, being Kurdish, being Turkish, being Muslim or not being Muslim – people relate to these representations, how these representations are reproduced and how they are “performed.”

Within this complexity what were some of the points in common you observed?

Kentel: There are a lot of things and I think they’re all interrelated in some way. Actually, there is no such thing as nationalism! There is a set of representations which people call nationalism and which imprison people. Even though people use this strategy, and move within it, what they’re actually trying to explain is something else entirely.

In the introduction to your book you state: “Nationalism is becoming a concept which exists everywhere yet is tangible nowhere; which is infused with meaning according to the situation at hand, its contents later being emptied out and then replaced once again. And with its ever-changing contents, nationalism is becoming a concept which at once explains everything, and for this very reason, ultimately fails to explain anything at all. So much so that, although nationalism continues to exist as the founding ideology of nation-states, as times change, it begins to conceal within itself a multitude of very different realities.” Could you expand this a little? What are those concealed realities?
Kentel: It conceals class differences, social injustice, humiliation, exclusion, insecurities, and fears, rendering them invisible. In this way, actually, it conceals “opposition.” No matter how much people talk in nationalist terms, and even use racism on occasion, there are very different things they would like to express.

How does this concealment work? Why can’t people express their problems directly?

Kentel: They can’t – this is the strength of the strategy, as if the language of the strategy constitutes the only means of expression.

Because the strategy creates a totalitarian discourse?

Kentel: Despite tendencies towards totalitarianism, it never becomes totalitarian. Just think of the most intense manifestations of totalitarianism in the figures of Hitler and Mussolini, or in the concept of the German race. But in Turkey, the strategy contains nothing like that; some people talk about the “Turkish race,” some about “Turks from Central Asia,” some start with 1923, others speak of a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis,” still others say “Turkish nationalism doesn’t murder, it is a positive force.” Some say, “I don’t acknowledge the ‘other.’” There is no potential in these stories to become totalitarian.

Ahıska: We shouldn’t think of the language of nationalism solely as a veil. That language, that structure of mentality and action ultimately produces certain practices. And those practices push people into a certain channel. We mustn’t fall into the duplicity of, “There is a veil, now let’s just pull it back and we’ll surely find pure, genuine, beautiful things underneath.” We are talking about fractured experiences, most of which cannot be expressed; but when they are, they speak and act from within the language of nationalism, sometimes even erupting into aggressiveness and violence. We are not concerned with trying to justify such acts. People use this language differently according to their own particular context. While some use it rather brazenly, some find it more difficult, and those furthest on the periphery are more or less unable to use it. When we say, “There is no nationalism,” we mean nationalism as a monolithic ideology does not exist. However, the language of nationalism, nationalistic representations, and the language of otherization, is used in different ways by different people.

Kentel: They are used differently at every level. And that being the case, nationalism ceases to be an overarching ideology, that is, an ideology at the supra-identity level, capable of pulling everyone in. One of the most conspicuous examples of this was a person we spoke to in Çorum, who said, “I am a Çorum nationalist.” Another spoke of being “a Hatay nationalist.” Sometimes the term nationalism is used when what is really meant is devotion or dedication to the hometown or region, not necessarily “the nation” per se.

You write, “The ideology of nationalism, so prominent in the last two centuries and so instrumental in the founding of nation-states, is undergoing important changes in the face of globalization and its impacts.” How does globalization influence nationalism?

Kentel: Globalization is a process with both economic and cultural dimensions. In order to understand globalization, you first have to look at capitalism. As capital is no longer confined to the boundaries of the nation, cultural processes are also globalised. The ability of the time-revered “national home” to exercise control has also been shattered. The most neutral way to explain globalization is the disappearance of economic, capitalist, cultural etc. boundaries. However, when we look at the positive and negative aspects of this process, we see two phenomena, which we can call “hard globalization” and “soft globalization.” When this process creates negative results for certain people, we can call this hard globalization. In a world

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4 The year that the Republic of Turkey was founded.
dominated by wealth, capital, and power, certain people are deprived of the protective mechanisms of the welfare state. The globalization process harms individuals, institutions and the nation-state.

Nation-states may weaken and fall into retreat in some respects during the process of globalization, but at the same time, don’t they also become more powerful especially due to security issues?

Ahıskal: Rather than the disappearance of nation-states, we can talk about the transformation of their functions. Once, the ideology of the nation-state or nationalism, which was also reflected in art and culture, was constructed with images of a romantic home and belonging. Now, as the nation-state becomes more and more of a police state and the issue of national culture is in a crisis, we witness the failure of the ideology trying to interiorize anti-capitalist opposition and to re-build a sense of belonging. What is produced today is violence and aggression; not much is left of that old romanticism. This is true in many places, but especially in Turkey, the search for a “home,” the search for belonging, has emerged as a merciless arena of conflict. The language of nationalism has perhaps become more intensely and widely used than before, but when we look at what lies beneath it, we see an astounding amount of conflict and disintegration.

Kentel: Actually, I think the entire “package” has ruptured. The industrial revolution, industrial society, modern society, citizenship, secularism – the state secured a feeling of unity on the national level for all of these... These are all in a complementary harmony with one another. As a whole, they constitute a single package. With globalization, this package has ruptured. Now, it is more difficult to talk about a national economy, a national bourgeoisie...

Ahıskal: They all become legends, their supposed foundations undermined. For example, parts of OYAK are sold to foreigners. The national culture, national economy etc. are now myths. But still, the language of nationalism is in use. One interesting example of the change in the function of the nation-state is the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. We didn’t perceive this as a political process; rather, it was regarded as another step towards Turkey’s economic development. In order for the pipeline to pass through Turkey, the Turkish government legally relinquished control over the land surrounding the pipeline. Therefore, it is now primarily BP, together with the other private companies working on the project, and not the Turkish government, who are the legal authorities there. Ultimately, it is a process which shatters and punctures the legal, cultural and social limits of state power. All of these are part of the process called globalization. In the same process, the mobilization expected of the Turkish state to provide security in that region, and the focus on its role as a military and policing power, continue, while at the same time its role in terms of juridical, economic, cultural, and social politics is partially diminished.

Kentel: From the point of view of classic orthodox Marxism or neo-Marxism, if we think about the debate over whether the state belongs to the bourgeoisie or whether it has relative autonomy, perhaps that thing called relative autonomy is becoming definitively independent. In all this commotion, it is becoming an obvious separate and powerful element. What we have now is a state with its memory shaped by all of the functions historically ascribed to it, but without the capacity to carry out those functions. This state, as an element of a modern strategy, comes into conflict with the strategy of globalization. Take as an example a businessman from Trabzon, who believes he is the bedrock of the Turkish state – a nationalist through and through. But this man’s thoughts and economic life are completely global. “Ankara is just the tip of the iceberg,” he says, “I want to build bridges between the Turkish world and Russia.” He no longer thinks inside “these boundaries.” If we go back to the distinction between hard and soft globalization, this is an example of “soft globalization.” The former is perceived as a threat, and the latter as a possibility, an opportunity for expansion. Many people experience both processes at the same time, and this of course generates entirely different combinations. An interesting example from Adapazari

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1 OYAK is the Armed Forces Pension Fund.
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Interview by Siren İdemen

comes to mind. At the time when Öcalan was detained in Italy, Italian goods were boycotted – refrigerators were burned, shirts were torn up... A local follower of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) who was the owner of the Benetton store in Adapazarı, found himself on the horns of a dilemma. Naturally, he couldn’t close the store. The ways the language of nationalism is consumed and utilized can vary depending on differences in class, opinion and geography. A businessman or an unemployed person can both use this language, but they do not talk about the same thing. While one uses nationalism to rebel against oppression, the other uses it as a means to adapt to a new era. They speak from class positions and talk about different things. One is rebelling, while the other wants to garner power by using certain words that belong to the nation state strategy. In our conversations, the issue of class does not come up frequently, but for instance being from the city of Çorum does. Somebody says: “They built an airport in Amasya, but the state hasn’t lifted a finger here.” Here, above and beyond a class position, what is at stake is a sub-identity peculiar to a city and a community.

Genç: The man in Çorum realizes that in a global economy, cities have taken on a new function. He realizes that historically, Çorum has been looked down upon and excluded by the state authorities. He says, “Ankara hasn’t done a thing for us, so from now on out just keep out of our business; but, we need an airport – we’re going to do business.”

Was the man you spoke to a businessman?

Genç: No, not at all.

Perhaps he will never use that airport...

Genç: Definitely. But a macro-economic perception informs the construction of his identity as a person from Çorum. Actually, there is a class aspect that perseveres within all such urban narratives.

Kentel: Yes, sometimes class manifests itself overtly, and sometimes it is interwoven with other things and expressed culturally. Two examples of nationalism concerning the east-west and traditional-modern dichotomies in Turkey come to mind. Let’s think of two men, one from Çanakkale who defines himself as Muslim but at the same time as modern, and one man from Kars who emphasizes Islam. One positions himself against fanatical interpretations of Islam and religious superstition, saying, “I drink alcohol when I have to.” At the same time he shares other discourses, such as, “Missionaries are trying to divide Turkey.” His position on wearing headscarves at school is very clear: “The school is a state territory, don’t wear headscarves there, the issue of headscarves is part of a foreign conspiracy, anyway.” A tire-seller from Erzurum, for example, nationalist to the core, said: “We children of Anatolia shed our blood for this nation, and if we have to, we’ll do it again.” He then went on to complain, “They don’t let my daughter into school because of her headscarf, and the state doesn’t show me any respect.” These narratives are not derived from class positions, but they articulate class differences because there is a certain perception about “Turkey’s west”. When he says “west”, he is expressing his objection to the structure and groups that make all the decisions, consume all resources and position themselves as secular. In doing so, he employs a set of religious references.

How do you interpret the recently very visible nationalism of educated upper-middle classes living in metropolises? When these groups unfurl flags and get fired up during Republican People’s Party (CHP) rallies, what are the concerns and desires they express?

Kentel: It is most likely the issue of lifestyle that leads them to action. They were included in that secular “package” of the Republic and therefore benefited from the advantages of the social state. Those who rose as a class based on their education among other things until the neo-
liberalism of the 1980’s experience today the crisis of the package. As new social classes with new cultural values are on the rise through new social movements, the former are afraid of losing their lifestyle. An “enemy culture” has emerged. The “enemy culture” does not only threaten their culture, but also social status and class position. In Turkey we have always experienced class struggle culturally. We have always discussed class in terms of culture. With the arrival of a different culture, people’s unconscious conception of class is shaken. It is expressed completely in terms of culture: “provincial,” “puritan” etc. Because their class position has been threatened, they turn to the most commonly shared nationalist symbols like Atatürk and the flag to protect their style of life.

Is it predominantly a fear of Islamists and Islamic religious law that is troubling these groups? Among them, there is an increasing number of people opposed to the European Union, and even Europe in general. What does the E.U. mean for them? Having traditionally considered themselves European and prided themselves on this, have they come to find out, during the process of E.U. accession, that they are not actually European after all? What motivates this reaction both towards Europe and almost everything Islamic? Is there a connection between these two things?

Ahıska: When we say globalization, we are talking about a process involving intense conflicts, impoverishment, and polarization. We see the insufficiency and weakness of unifying symbols and discourses in the face of these conflicts. While the upper-middle classes try to distinguish themselves spatially and culturally from others, they feel the threat of those they have distanced breathing down their necks. Nationalism imagines a unity that ignores the polarization created by capitalism. Nationalism is redefined as a means to maintain and secure their existing identity, lifestyle and culture. As for those positioned further down, living in increasingly impoverished conditions, nationalism can bear hope for achievement and improvement. Perhaps now, as never before, nationalism is being used as a common language. However, below the surface, there are hundreds of conflicts, hundreds of different needs and different motives. In the 1970’s socialism was able to generate a different language in Turkey. Since socialism lacks such a language today, nationalism is viewed as though it is the only valid language people could employ to defend their rights and sustain their lives. For the upper-middle class, this means constructing a common imagination, redefining the boundaries that belong to “us,” and defending their position from within those boundaries. And so this language is propagated via constant provocation and rendering of new enemies. As for opposition to the E.U., it is embedded in resentment. By instigating xenophobia, they try to formulate their own sense of belonging, an identity performed by being both Western and anti-Western. It is inflected by feelings of inferiority and resentment. And by positioning anti-Western Western-ness as a form of “authenticity” it tries to transform this inferiority into superiority and foil those who threaten it. I call this “Occidentalism.”

Kentel: That thing I call the “package” – the modern nation created in reference to the West and in opposition to a religious, traditional world – in a way means “approaching the West.” But at the same time, we could refer to this as approaching or imitating an enemy you have failed to conquer. There is a middle class created by Turkish modernization. They were the ones who most thoroughly adopted and internalized the representations and ideals of modernization because it was mostly they who were educated at schools. At school they learned what is “right,” “good,” “modern,” and “contemporary.” They more than anyone else were indoctrinated with these representations. Thus, when this package ruptures, they are possibly the most likely to experience a crisis. And as the middle class is in a crisis, there are a number of social groups eyeing their position. The most important tools of cultural struggle these aspirant groups have are religion, Islam and Islamism. On the other hand, this same middle class is also negatively impacted by globalization, perhaps more than any other group. The others, with their particular cultures and traditions, create a number of hybrid conditions, but the hybridity of the bourgeoisie now in crisis has been emptied of content. Having struggled so vigorously with their own pasts, and, ashamed of anything deemed embarrassing to the Republic, they have rigorously repressed...
all of this. It is almost as though they are struggling against an internal other. Today the E.U. says, “There will no longer be any sheltered realms of the modern middle class.” And along with all of capitalism’s projections, globalization too is saying the same thing. This feeling of pressure, of being stuck, also explains one aspect of the reinforcement or reappearance of the language of nationalism in Turkey. They use a “pure” Turkish (Öz Türkçe) word “ulusalci” to refer to themselves as nationalists and therefore mark 1923 as the starting point of their historical narrative, rather than using the word “milliyetçi” which would be a reference to the Ottoman period and imply a continuity.

Ahiska: I see things a little differently. The new upper and middle classes that came into being after 1980 should also be taken into consideration. Nationalism is also the way that this group operates under these conditions. The classes generated by the post-1980 liberalized economy are not the same as the upper class elites who tried to create a Kemalist nation and a national culture in the 1930s. This group jauntily refers to itself as “white Turks,” demonstrates stronger racist tendencies and can be far more aggressive. Rather than taking into consideration the society as a whole and developing a political agenda encompassing all strata of society, they opt to operate beyond and outside of the state. The nationalist (ulusalci) demonstrations that you referred to are a way in which these classes, and especially the women of these classes, exert themselves politically.

Kentel: We can also describe it as a step towards public sphere. Nothing is guaranteed. By taking to the streets, they are trying to do something to protect themselves.

Ahiska: And it is more and more intertwined with racism. Perhaps this is the modernization process in Turkey; democratization did not take place in Turkey, but modernization did. Isn’t this the modernization process that Western thinkers have described: becoming homeless, losing the ground you stand on, the loss of villagers’ land, proletariatisation, the crumbling of job security, increases in cultural mediation and uncertainty, and the shifting of conflict onto a similar symbolic plane? Thinking in terms of history of capitalism, we see that modernization takes on the meaning of a loss of home. It seems like modernization is finally happening in Turkey after giving us such a hard time and creating many dead-ends. Since our concept of modernity has been charged in a different way, it may be hard to perceive this. It is not democratization, but modernization that is taking place in Turkey...

The nationalist language that is supposed to be a means of unifying the nation is being used as a “weapon” by all groups. Why is nationalism essentially functioning to divide and fragment society internally, rather than being directed towards the “outside”?

Kentel: A strategy is a line that cuts from the very top to the very bottom, and is in fact a method of proceeding along this route. The strategy has fundamental watchtowers, fundamental rules of grammar (describing strategy as grammar is a metaphor that Michel de Certeau uses a lot). We violate the rules of this grammar on occasion, using the same language to swear, to tell our love. But this language has a set of taboos which define as transgression things that should never be said and things that should be said. And the primary watchtower of nationalism is probably the definition of borders: the nation… This country belongs to the Turks; others, Bulgarians, Greeks and so on, are outside of its borders. If you use this language in the most critical moments of everyday life, in order to overcome your insecurities and to express your revolt; and you learn its rules – what it considers a transgression or a good deed, what are its absolutes and sacred concepts –; then you have taken it to the very depths of life. If Turkey has enemies at the most macro level, scale it down: Nişantaşı also has enemies, and so do the Sunnis and Alevis. In every aspect of their lives people reproduce the language based on the same rules and under the control of those watchtowers. And that’s how “nationalisms tear us apart.”

And is it this disintegration that creates the need for communities (cemaat)?
Ahıksa: Again I will refer to the post-1980 era, when political language became so impoverished. In the 1970s the political language spoken was much richer. Nationalism was constructed as a language and propagated by the media, primarily television, and the culture industry. Ultimately, it has become a model, a structure. This structure is presented almost as a commodity, as something you can adopt and use in any way you wish. But actually it is extremely hollow and baseless. For instance, take the flag: it is hung everywhere, manufactured in record-breaking sizes, but it has been pulled in so many directions that its power to unite has disintegrated and it has weakened as a symbol. A bitter struggle ensues: “I’ll manufacture an even bigger flag,” or “I’ll fly even more flags.” They have come to be used as weapons to destroy one’s enemies and their symbols: in other words, a means to keep one’s footing. I think that in this way nationalism – as a system of belief overtaking religion – as well as the ideology which renders it sacred, have gone bankrupt. In Turkey nationalism does not constitute a hegemonic language which will attract people; on the contrary, it is produced just like any other commodity, like a weapon, marketed through provocation and made available for consumption.

Nearly all of the quotes in the book, from the diehard nationalist from Trabzon to the neo-nationalist (ulusalcı) from Nişantaşı, share a common point, they include negative descriptions of Turkishness: “We are lazy, inept, filthy, we flare up quickly.” If there is anything at all for Turks to be proud of, it is buried deep in the past. There is no mention of the positive qualities of Turks today...

Ahıksa: This is a serious crisis, isn’t it?

Kentel: We can probably explain this by referring to the home metaphor again. Even if people are told, “Look, we have made you a wonderful home, go on, move in,” they don’t really feel comfortable inside.

Ahıksa: This is exactly what I mean when I say modernization. Those old homes have been torn down, existing bonds disintegrate rapidly. There are new types of bonds that can replace them, but nationalism is presented as the new counterpart. However, nationalism is not surrounded by an imagination about how people living together can become a community. The utterly impoverished language of nationalism is insufficient to express conflicts, contradictions, needs, and desires.

That brings to mind Marx’s well-known maxim on religion: “Religion is...the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation.” It seems as though nationalism is a candidate to take up this role.

Ahıksa: Yes it does seem that way, but it can’t. Nationalism presents itself as a candidate, tries to provoke the aforementioned role, yet at the same time it fails to provide the necessary basis.

So it cannot be the opium or the remedy...

Ahıksa: Right, it can’t kill the pain; on the contrary, it exacerbates the pain, rubs salt into the wound.

Kentel: But religion can still do this, at least to a certain degree, and that’s one reason why nationalism is becoming more and more inflicted with conservative religious terms. Nationalism tried to supplant religious experience, but couldn’t entirely eradicate it. That’s why most people infuse their readings of nationalism with religion. The strategy is also becoming religious and infused with the sacred holies, the kabaas and the temples.

Ahıksa: But religion too is becoming something other than itself.
Among the upper-middle classes, Atatürk has almost become a religion. What was the impression your fieldwork yielded in this regard? Is there an emphasis on Atatürk among the lower classes as well?

Ahiska: Everybody has a different Atatürk.

Genç: Well, even if not expressed as Atatürk, nationalism displays its religious character in the rituals and ceremonies. The image of Atatürk, as a symbol, is not as explicitly expressed amongst the lower classes as it is amongst the upper classes, I’d say.

Kentel: Education plays an important role here. It is clear why the slogan “education is essential” appears everywhere. Among the upper classes, symbolic narratives of Atatürk and the Republic are more concise and a little better reinforced.

You’ve dedicated the book to the memory of Hrant Dink. In the foreword you write, “If Hrant Dink were alive, it would have been possible to write and read this book in a different way.” An analysis of Hrant Dink’s assassination could greatly help us understand many different issues: the population currently residing in those parts of the country previously inhabited by the Greeks, the cult of weapons, unemployed and desperate youth, the Armenian question, the effects of the media’s provocative language concerning the Armenian question, and the relationship between the state, nationalisms and nationalists. How do you situate Hrant Dink’s murder in the framework of your study in regards to these various elements?

Kentel: Hrant Dink’s murder was probably one of the most difficult things this study attempted to comprehend. It was actually an a posteriori effort. Hrant Dink was murdered a few months after we had completed our interviews. But in the interviews we conducted, the Armenian question and hatred towards the Armenians had surfaced. In the case of Hrant Dink’s murder, roughly speaking, there are three overlapping levels. The first is masculinity and its founding myth, heroism: “We weathered war, we died, we were murdered, we resisted, we fought bravely.” Thus, there is a heroic essence attributed to Turkishness. Masculinity is probably the most concrete way that this is experienced. The reinterpretation of the belligerent militarism of a patriarchal culture by the modern nationalist culture, symbols of masculinity… A large part of society, or in fact, perhaps all of society thrives on this discourse of masculinity. Men are just as much, maybe even more so, the victims of this masculine discourse as women, just as masculinity is something imposed upon women by men. The strategy reproduces this type of “masculinity” through various terms like martyrdom and heroism. At the second level, there is ennui, social passivity, and even a sense of uselessness and desperation. In classical terminology, we would call this situation a social problem. Between this social problem and the consumption of masculinity is the field of popular culture. There is a cultural production which, by filling the gap between dissatisfaction and discourse, facilitates the adoption of this discourse and gains popularity. The most symbolic example of this is the TV series “Valley of the Wolves” (Kurtlar Vadisi) which produces symbols and representations about how those good-for-nothing people can become useful and valuable. Heroes like the protagonist Polat Alemdar, who act outside of the law, commit murder and wear black trench coats, inspire awe. This popular culture is neither national nor local; rather, it is a completely American narrative. And then added on to these three components is O.S.’s situation.7 He is from Trabzon’s Pelitli district. Trabzon is a place where guns are as commonplace and easy to get hold of as bread and butter. And so there we have the fusion of two things: a “masculine” man, a consumer of popular culture and a killing tool sold and used with the same ease as bread and butter which can make him a hero. However, there are many people who share the same frustrations, who just watch television and go to soccer games, but who wouldn’t do what O.S. did. For example, we spoke with two young men, big fans of guns, who work in a pharmacy; there’s no way they would ever have anything to do with death or murder. So popular culture alone is not enough, masculinity alone is not enough,

7 Ogün Samast, Hrant Dink’s murderer.
frustration alone is not enough to explain that murder. There was a kid from Çorum, exceptionally bored, with absolutely nothing to do. It was unbelievable, you wanted to just hug him; he was so innocent and well behaved. Surely murder will never cross his mind. One of the interviews we conducted in Trabzon was very instructive on this point. Trabzonspor⁸ was slated to play the Greek Cypriot team Apoel in the European Cup. On Fenerbahçe’s web site, incendiary comments had been posted to the effect that people from Trabzon are actually Greek: “You are going to play your brothers.” A young man from Trabzon told us, “This is maybe one of our biggest problems – an older buddy of mine told me the same thing. Maybe the reason we’ve become so nationalist is in order to cut ourselves off from our Greek heritage.” Perhaps what is known as Trabzon culture has paved the path to nationalism, via guns and masculinity. In order not to be “Greek momma’s boys,” you construct yourself as a handgun-toting, real man. This is just speculation of course. In the end, just having a gun isn’t sufficient motive for murdering Hrant Dink. And that’s exactly why the whole matter is so complex. To answer the question, “Why did he murder Hrant Dink?” by saying “Because he was a nationalist,” just doesn’t cut it. This kid is a multitude of things all at once. He’s immersed in all kinds of things; there are all kinds of aspects that make him who he is. The same is true of tactics; tactics take on all kinds of appearances. We mustn’t think of tactics merely as positive means of resisting a strategy. Tactics utilized to give meaning to life also carry great potential to generate results that are by no means positive.

Ahska: Hrant Dink’s assassination was a turning point. It brought to the surface a number of associated issues going way back in time. No longer would it be easy to deal with these issues within the framework of the official ideology. For example, from the beginning, defining Turkishness in opposition to the non-Muslim community was a building block of identity construction. Throughout history “Turkishness” continually merged with the concept of being Muslim. During the period of transformation between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, non-Muslims were viewed by Turkish Muslims as part of the West, even as pawns of the West, and occasionally conflicts flared up, some more blatantly obvious than others. Hrant Dink’s murder disclosed how the state was directly involved in this and therefore how invalid the term “deep state” actually was, and how it had been organized by much more familiar networks. Secondly, a hundred thousand protestors marching under the slogan “We are all Armenian” marked a historical moment and constituted a serious threat. These people were embracing history in an entirely different way, and that was a cause of concern.

But at the same time, after the murder, a crowd of fans at a soccer game unfurled banners proclaiming, “We are all Ogün Samast” and shouted slogans to that effect. The whole mass of them very blatantly and proudly claimed the murder and the murderer, to be one of their own.

Ahska: I was heading to that point. This is an insurmountable history, an impassable tumult. If we recall Foucault’s account of discourse, it defines the limits of what can be said. At this point, there is a bankruptcy of the official ideology which can no longer define those limits. Meanwhile, the established limits of what has been denied in history can no longer be maintained, due in part to the development of globalization and capitalism. Extreme violence ensues when discourses can no longer conceal or deny conflicts. In one way, this is an utter breakdown of discourses, the onset of muteness. The limits of what can be said can no longer be delineated, because conflict can no longer be concealed. Nationalism is, after all, a rejection of social processes; it is a family construct, a construct of “us” – but this cannot take place, because of the serious conflicts within society. This is a very strange moment.

Kentel: This is not specific to Turkey alone; it too is a kind of Americanization. The U.S. is a symbol of power, and no matter how dressed up in a rhetoric of peace and democracy, everything it does, it does with brute force and violence. They go and occupy Iraq. Even when the nation-state resists, it imitates the United States in its resistance. It is imitating all the

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⁸ Trabzon’s soccer team.
manifestations of hard globalization. And so Polat Alemdar in “Valley of the Wolves: Iraq” and whatnot, is essentially imitating Rambo. Despite their claims of the national and the local, they are actually behaving like American soldiers.

Isn’t the military, which is the primary institution neo-nationalists rely on, the most Americanized of institutions?

Kentel: The American military is the model for everything. From the commandoes who paint their faces and wear bandanas to the uniforms they wear, everything is American. The 1990s was a turning point in this sense.

Genç: In the 1990s several different moments converged: the left retreated, globalization picked up speed, and the Kurdish conflict was at its peak.

Kentel: Liberalism levels the playing field, and from that point onward, a bitter power struggle ensues. Liberalism is based on the belief that everyone must compete as individuals and that the strongest will win. Thus, you have to struggle to be strong. But everyone is in a position to speak. So that’s the first moment. That’s what 1980 made possible: the strong social movement was eradicated, at least the language of the left was, and the right was rendered invisible. This leaves you face to face with the remaining voices, the most important of which was Islam. In the 1990s, the Kurds and then the Armenians began to speak. If we think of the expression “civil society” so prominent in those years, we can say that civil society, or social movements, began speaking up. When social movements speak up, what is revealed is the potential of different forms of modernization, which are beyond the scope of the modernization project the state has tried to accomplish and control through a kind of social engineering. Other possibilities begin to emerge, possibilities which exist outside of the system that the state tries to control by means of official history, civics, and socialization processes. We have seen the precautions taken by the state in the face of such possibilities. After The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power and clear steps were taken on the issue of accession to the European Union, the state’s conservative politics became even more radical. Becoming an E.U. member would denote the disintegration of the package, the order, all existing structures. And so to protect those structures, an operation was undertaken within the state. These are the politics of a government bent on protecting itself. The attack on the council of state, for example, made many facts blatantly clear. Who was the man who made the attack? A pawn. Clearly this wasn’t an Islamist reaction. This is obviously the work of criminal organizations. It was a reaction directed entirely towards social change.

While all of these changes were taking place, if there could have been improvements in the everyday life of the populace, and if there had been a feeling that these efforts were undertaken for the good of the people, then maybe the General Staff’s psychological operations and strategic manoeuvring would not have been able to arouse such a response.

Genç: Or if an alternative political vision had been laid out, it may not have turned out as it did. While debating the results of our study, Mesut Yeğen made an excellent point: Globalization is happening everywhere, mobilizing similar dynamics across the world. While there is a similar situation in Turkey and Serbia, why is the situation in Latin America so different? Why is it that there, people express themselves inside leftist movements rather than with fascistic reactions? Certainly there are a number of structural differences cutting across multiple planes between Latin American countries and Turkey, and my point here is not to make an oversimplified comparison like, “why is it like that there, but not here,” but rather to suggest a way to trace the differences between the two paths. I think if we had been able to envision an alternate politics the situation here would have been very different. And I think we can still do this; this state of disintegration or dissolution in fact lays the foundation for the development of an alternate political vision.
Far before us, Latin America underwent a shift to neo-liberalism accompanied by massive political upheaval. Moreover, they lived under much longer and graver military juntas. I wonder if the most notable difference between Turkey and Latin America is that in Latin America there is no opposition between religion and socialism.

Ahıska: In Latin America, the state has a much more unifying character. Laclau makes the following analysis: In Latin America, the principle of citizenship has validity because the state is unifying and inclusive, able to contain differences; while in countries like Turkey and Hungary, a politics of inclusion based on citizenship does not exist, and thus nationalism based on ethnicity and exclusion prevails.

Kentel: In Latin America there is the Bolivar phenomenon, which renders viable the idea of a Latin American Union. A real nationalism doesn’t develop in Latin America because you’ve got the same thing on the other side of a nation’s borders: a mix of natives and descendants of European immigrants. As Turkey adopted its model of modernization from France, it also got a system where laicism is opposed to religion. In Latin America, there was no such model opposing religion.

Going back to the economic aspect of the issue, we find that there is increasing impoverishment, unemployment and desperation; at the same time, crucial resources are being sold to foreign capital. This is also a process which probably fosters nationalism. Since the left has withdrawn from the political sphere, would it have been possible for neo-liberalism not to lead to fascism, or reactionary, hard-line nationalism, and xenophobia?

Genç: As long as alternate politics – which, in my opinion, should be termed the left – does not exist, globalization cannot be properly described, and it will be impossible to develop a feasible opposition to globalization, which has not been properly described and therefore cannot be properly understood. And so in short, at the end of the day, what we’re likely to end up with is xenophobia if not fascism.

Ahıska: I think hostility towards foreigners and society. When we view and address things using more intimate terms associated with family, or masculinity, etc., rather than viewing them in relation to society and the social, the reactions that emerge also relate to those terms.

Kentel: We said that in the 1990s society began to speak, but the language used was cultural. Postmodernism is capitalism’s cultural sales pitch. It is the only way in which people are able to express themselves. Global capitalism and neo-liberalism have made it possible for people to express themselves on a cultural level. But in the meantime, we have forgotten the languages of economics and class. And this state of affairs is an amazing boon for liberalism. From the point of view of the powers that be, those who might otherwise rise up as a class and rebel are instead just “hung up on stuff like culture.” And so when cultural identities express themselves and make cultural demands, this does not just give rise to a kind of liberation; at the same time, it creates insular, even totalitarian communities. And while cultural identity signifies freedom, nationalism cannot. So what then? Maybe you will plunge into fascism and hit rock bottom. When your nose hits the wall, you’ll likely find yourself in a predicament saying, “Alas! I need to find something else, this language cannot save me.” Therefore, an alternate language should be the number one priority of the left. We need a language in which the issue of class can be readressed, though not at the expense of cultural identity, but rather together with it, because no matter how much capitalism has benefited from the sphere of cultural identity, ultimately the latter has been a quest for freedom as well. Perhaps what we need to do is to build a new home, a new community, one that’s warm and welcoming and will give shelter to all our stories; this could be the alternative to what we’re being offered now. And that’s probably the only way to resist. Then we can reinterpret the concept of “community” and imagine it in a whole new way. Richard Sennet comes to mind; for example, the idea that we can re-conceive the city as a model of living together. This city, which both renders me anonymous and saves me from my traditional
community, at the same time, in all that confusion, gives me a new identity. If the words “city” and “community,” which combined seem paradoxical, can be thought of together, then new political visions for the future may also become possible. What modernity taught us is that through urbanization we would be saved from community. We can be saved from that community, but we can also think together with the newly and differently imagined community that we create in the city.

You wrote, “With the collapse of those masculine representations and symbols equated with the imagined nation-state, society becomes visible from below. And this is no longer a society under the hegemony of secular nationalism’s envisaged ‘rational’ and ‘masculine’ symbols. (...) When the varnish on the surface cracks, society emerges in all of its femininity. And society, which until that day had been inculcated with masculine symbols and which had envisaged itself as male, realizes its femininity.” Could you expand a bit on what you mean by this feminization?

Kentel: If the nation-state is an ideology which reproduces itself by means of masculine symbols, then every blow dealt to that ideology threatens masculinity as well. For example, just a moment ago we talked about a widespread complaint: “We Turks always do things poorly.” This signifies a loss of confidence; whereas a man is he who has self-confidence. Nationalism loses its ability to provide confidence, and the disorder of life becomes more visible. Now, everyone is embroiled in complexity. From the male ideological perspective, the nationalist thus comes to correspond to “femininity”. Nation becomes feminized. Unlike a society identified with “masculinity”, this “feminine” society breaks down and cries, loves passionately, speaks from the heart, is sometimes silent and obedient, sometimes rebels with screams, pleads, and is self-contradictory. Just as nationalism insisted that I forget about my religion, my traditions, and my ethnicity, so too did it insist that I forget all about my femininity. The Kemalist woman, who raises robust children for the future of the homeland, is a “manly” woman. But today, in all of this confusion, everyone is over-sensitive and everyone behaves like a woman. On the one hand, this is a good thing: men are experiencing femininity. But on the other hand, I find myself having to deal with this thing inside of me that I don’t want to be there. As society becomes feminized, nationalism becomes more and more masculine, and society plunges into a state of internal struggle.

Between the time that you started the research for this project and the time the book was actually published, did you experience any changes, in terms of your perspective, or your mentality or approach?

Ahıska: I came to realize how important representations are. This doesn’t mean that class struggle or economic structures are insignificant, but by the end of the research, I realized the importance of language, imagination and existing structures. There is a relationship between the production of visions and intellectuals, and I think that we have faltered badly when it comes to the creation of a dissident social vision which opposes power. This is also true both for academic research and the press. I don’t much care for the term “alternative.” I think it was in a letter to Ruge where Marx said, “We cannot teach the world what it ought to do.” In the end, we have to make a criticism from inside historical struggles and find different ways to expose the meanings they embody. We cannot say to social groups, “Stop your struggle, here, this is the truth, now kneel down before it,” we cannot create new modes of thought from nothing. For me, this was an important aspect of our research: being able to see the quests underlying various expressions, and from there to begin imagining a “different” language.

Genç: Though Meltem and I may put things a little differently, I think we stand close to each other. I think that an alternate vision will emerge from experience. Perhaps, in order to emphasize the importance of social experience in this regard, it would be more correct to speak of it as “an oppositional vision.” When we began the research, as a student of social sciences I briskly used such expressions as “appropriating experience,” without fully grasping their meaning. Looking back, I see that now. At the beginning, I thought that our country was very nationalist, and I found this trend of sweeping nationalism discomforting. During the course of
the research, however, I understood that nationalism was not as powerful and pervasive as it seemed. Thanks to this lack of pervasiveness, I believe that we will be able to arrive at an alternate vision. As Leonard Cohen put it so well: “There is a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in.”

Kentel: Seeing just how convoluted nationalism is led me to this political conclusion: despite all we saw and the thoughts that they invoked in us, or perhaps even because of them, I have more hope now. This may sound populist, but I felt a certain pity and compassion for this society, of which I too am a part. To be honest, I didn’t think that I would come across such a truly pathetic society. I was expecting to come across groups of hard, calloused people; however, beneath that hardness there is an unbelievable amount of downheartedness and desperation. Only a left which can rethink itself is capable of addressing this condition. There is an extraordinary potential here. People want to talk, and the left should hear those voices. When the sharp divisions and clear colours melt away, seeing the interpenetrations beneath the surface made me think that a new language of the left would be possible, a language which would be able to see these and speak to the tumult in society. I think that by taking in a new set of elements, the left has considerable potential to be reborn. And this gives me hope. It is from this society that I derive the strength to sustain my hope for resistance.

Translated from Turkish by Mark Wyers and Amy Spangler
This section deals with ‘the case’ of the exhibition *Exception – Contemporary art scene of Prishtina* and its violent (non)opening in Belgrade, happened during February of 2008. This event, overshadowed by the massive political turmoil before and after the local political leadership of Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia around the same time, in the circles of what could be described as ‘critical art and activist scene’ of Belgrade gained somewhat mythical connotations. The aim of the following three texts is to examine the conditions and constellations which were contributing to the emergence of such an event, to try to understand what it was exactly about, and to analyze its consequences. It is our opinion that [this video clip](#), viewed quarter of the million of times right after it was posted, tells a lot about the condition of contemporary societies in the region known as former Yugoslavia (you can find it re-posted [here](#), with somewhat apologetic description of the author translated in English – click on ‘more info’ to read it). The scarce conversation is in Serbian, but we do believe that the pictures are sufficient enough to portray the social tensions and desperate position of the ‘small individual’ caught in the unsolvable puzzle of ‘the society in transition’ and the vicissitudes of ‘politics of identity’ as the tool to ‘normalize’ what is perceived as the ‘periphery’ of today’s global capitalism.

Below you can find a chronology of the events surrounding the exhibition, and some links we managed to gather where some additional information could be found, together with discussions and reactions following ‘the case of Exception’.

Jelena Vesić, Dušan Grlija and Vladimir Jerić Vlidi

- “Politics of Display and Troubles with National Representation in contemporary Art”
  by Jelena Vesić

- “Four Acts and a Pair of Socks”
  by Vladimir Jerić Vlidi

- “The Exception and State of Exception”
  by Dušan Grlija
Exception – The case of the exhibition of Young Kosovo Artists in Serbia
Jelena Vesić, Dušan Grlija, Vladimir Jerić Vlidi

Chronology of Events by Marko Miletić

January the 22nd 2008

The opening of the exhibition Exception: The Contemporary Art Scene of Prishtina in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, organized by NGOs Kontekst from Belgrade and Napon from Novi Sad.

January the 25th 2008

The municipal committees of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) as well as the Association of Evicted and Displaced Serbs form Kosovo demand the official Municipal authorities to close down the exhibition or they will do it themselves, as it was stated by them in the media. On the same day Dren Maliqi’s artwork Face to Face becomes the object of various media manipulations.

February the 3rd 2008

The second round of presidential elections was held. Boris Tadić, the candidate of Democratic Party (DS), was elected.

February the 6th 2008

The exhibition Exception was moved to the Kontekst gallery in Belgrade. The call for gathering of all patriots in order to stop the opening of this exhibition was published at the web-site of the extreme right Patriotic Movement Honor [Otečestveni pokret Obraz] and in various daily newspapers.

February the 7th 2008

3 pm: The police notifies the organizers that several extremist groups announced that they will come and stop the opening of the exhibition.
6 pm: A couple of dozens of policemen in civilian clothes is in the gallery and in surrounding streets.
6.15 pm: Police cordons were set up in the surrounding streets preventing the extremists to approach and enter the gallery.
6.40 pm: Unidentified person succeeds to enter the gallery and tear down a part of Dren Maliqi’s artwork depicting Adem Jashari. His accomplice finished the deed by destroying it completely.
6.50 pm: The organizers decide to proceed with the opening, leaving the dismembered artwork as a part of the exhibition.
7.05 pm: The introductory speeches have begun. After few sentences by the curators, one of the present “patriots”, a painter and a member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, wielding a stone in his hand, interrupts the speech insulting the organizers. Couple more people joins in, among which a woman who brought her two kids to spit on the “terrorist Shiptar art”.
7.15 pm: The organizers demand police’s action to enable the opening to be continued. Police officer in charge responded that they cannot deprive people of their freedom of speech.
7.20 pm: The police order the organizers to stop the opening, since they cannot guarantee the security of the event any more.
Afterward until 11 pm: The organizers and a part of the attendants, inspired by this incident gathered at the Center for Cultural decontamination and decide to publicly fight for the (re)opening of exhibition by forming a group Workers in Culture [RUK].

February the 8th 2008

6 pm: The glass door of the Kontekst gallery was smashed, as well as the gallery sign. The police advised the organizers, because of security reasons, to remove the artworks from the gallery during the night.
February the 11th 2008

3 pm: The students of the University of Belgrade organize a protest entitled *Europe has No Alternative*. They demand the resignation of Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica if the government does not ratify the agreement with the EU.

February the 13th 2008

12 am: The press conference of RUK was held in the Belgrade’s Media Center about the violent incidents that prevented the opening of the *Exception* exhibition.

February the 17th 2008

12 am: The Declaration of Independence was declared at special session of the Parliament of Kosovo.
7 pm: Hooligan groups made havoc in Belgrade, demolishing the embassies of the US, Slovenia, and the offices of the Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP), as well as the *McDonalds* restaurants. The press correspondents were attacked and several of them beaten up. Over 30 people were injured. The police reacted belatedly.

February the 20th 2008

The panel entitled *Europe has No Alternative* was held at the Media Center in Belgrade. The proponents of clero-fascist organizations verbally assaulted the speakers which were mostly the professors of the Belgrade University.

February the 21st 2008

The demonstrations entitled *Kosovo is Serbia* were held in Belgrade. During the course and after the demonstrations extreme right and hooligan groups set the US embassy and one of the *McDonalds* restaurants on fire, demolished Croatian, Turkish and German embassies, as well as some of the offices of foreign banks. Several news reporters were beaten up and some shops were looted. Over 200 people were injured. One casualty confirmed. The police reacted belatedly.

February the 28th 2008

Police bans the meeting entitled *A Window to Europe* of the student’s movement *Europe has No Alternative*. After this ban, some members of this movement together with the Slovenian ambassador, replaced together the smashed window on the embassy of Slovenia.

March the 7th 2008

Police bans the action *In Search of Prime Minister* organized by the student’s movement *Europe has No Alternative*.

March the 8th 2008

Police bans the public celebration of the International Women’s Day in the organization of the *Women in Black* NGO.
4 pm: Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica on a government press conference announces that there is no more agreement within the coalition in power on the question of Kosovo and European integrations, and that the premature elections for the government will be held on May the 5th 2008.

Translated from the 7th of February newspaper, p 9,
(http://radniciukulturi.net/files/7februar_Glasilo%20Radnika%20u%20kulturi.pdf)
Exception – The case of the exhibition of Young Kosovo Artists in Serbia
Jelena Vesić, Dušan Grlja, Vladimir Jerić Vldi

Links:

1. The catalogue of the exhibition "Exception - Contemporary art scene of Prishtina":
2. RUKI statement:
   http://radničikulturi.net/ruk
3. RUKI newspaper:
   http://radničikulturi.net/files/7februar_Glasilo%20Radnika%20kulturi.pdf
4. Reactions to the closing of the exhibition in Reartikulacija journal:
   http://www.reartikulacija.org/RE3/ENG/stateofexception3_ENG_excep.html
5. Rekapitulacija
6. Kontekst arhiva 06/07/08
   http://www.kontekstgalerija.org/pdf_08/KontekstArhiva.pdf
7. The interruption of the exhibition ‘Exception: Contemporary Art Scene of Prishtina’ –
   Two eyewitnesses’ account – blog post by Jelena and Vlidi.
   http://www.labforculture.org/en/members/jelena-vesic/blog/the-interruption-of-the-
   exhibition-%27exception-contemporary-art-scene-from-prishtina%27-two-eyewitness-
   account-part-i
8. The discussion in the Alkatraz Gallery:
   http://www.kudmreza.org/alkatraz/razstave/2008_04a_eng_kontekst.html
   http:// victims.labforculture.org/site/texts/force-of-trauma
10. About the 12 meters tall image of Adem Jashari in Prishtina:

Reviews:

1. http://www.cunterview.net/index.php/Artists-Reviews/Belgrade-Exhibition-EXCEPTION-
   forced-to-close-before-opening.html
   &pop=1&page=75&Itemid=39
   contemporary-art-scene-from-prishtina/
Politics of Display and Troubles With National Representation in Contemporary Art

Jelena Vesić

The idea of the exhibition Exception – Young Artists from Pristina, the network of collaborations surrounding it, and the relation between the curatorial idea and the artworks, is not a straightforwardly simple matter as it may seem from what is so far being said about it. Here I refer especially to the ‘case’ of its violent closing. One of the main motives for this exhibition to happen maybe lies in the local interest of Belgrade’s contemporary art circles in the young and vibrant Kosovo art scene, which “officially” emerged after the year 2000. Another interesting aspect is that this sudden ‘flourishing’ of local contemporary art scenes in “Western Balkans” was and still is, in most of the cases, connected to the significant influx of money from the various foreign foundations.

This was precisely the case in the second part of the 1990s with the Soros Fund for an Open Society, when the Center for Contemporary Art in Belgrade was established. Although there was, approximately at the same time, a pretty developed contemporary art scene in Kosovo, the appearance on the international scene of the youngest generation of Kosovo artists had to wait until the year 2000 and owed its international visibility, almost exclusively, to the programs of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes and, especially, the Missing Identity project. Certainly, this happens always in relation to a wider geo-political agenda, which is in this case the official assignment of culture to become a part of the processes of “democratization” and “normalization” in the so-called post-conflictual societies. However, such geo-political constraints did not mean that the situation could not be used for other more progressive and emancipatory goals (as both the cases of the Belgrade and Pristina scenes clearly show in a number of ways).

Also, simultaneously with the activities of the aforementioned foundations, a certain local interest in the new Kosovo art scene started to arise in Belgrade art circles. This probably has to do with a certain kind of nostalgia for something that is seen nowadays as non-existing, or as having faded away – namely, a virile and potent contemporary art scene, one which could generate not only a substantial quantity of art production, but also one which is perceived as politically engaged, humorous, as well as fairly organized and networked both locally and internationally. This nostalgia is directed, seemingly paradoxically, towards the second half of the 1990s, and, especially, to the activities of Belgrade’s [Soros] Center for Contemporary Art. The dominant perspective within those circles appears to be that after the Yugoslav Biennial of Young Artists in 2004 – as the last project of the CCA – the Belgrade contemporary art scene died out or, at least, dissipated in various directions.

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1 According to the word by organizers – Contemporary Art Institute EXIT, Peja, in cooperation with the Laboratory for Visual Arts and the Center for Humanistic Studies Gani Bobi, Kosovo – Missing identity queries the attempts to establish a unified national identity and propagates the protection of difference. The project also seeks to create an artistic reality of what is experienced as absent in Kosovo: cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity. Cf: http://www.projekt-relations.de/en/explore/missing_identity/index.php

2 Centre for Contemporary Art - Belgrade was established in 1994 with the aim to promote and support the production of arts&culture in Serbia and Balkans by organizing exhibitions, conferences, presentations, screenings and lectures. The Centre for Contemporary Art succeeded in the creation of the new cultural community and in promoting a new generation of artists, mostly through establishing the institution of “annual exhibitions” which often included budgets for new art production. However, the art production in Serbia between 1994 and 1999 rarely took a political direction, and mostly resigned in what is referred to as active escapism – the option bordering with political conformism and social apathy chosen by numerous social and cultural subjects who, faced with a catastrophic social environment, resolved the imposed dilemma of “withdrawal or participation?” by retreating to “inner habitats” (more about active escapism in: Art in Yugoslavia 1992-1995, Centre for Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 1996 and On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989 – 2001 - the exhibition catalogue, Mica, Belgrade 2005). After 1999, the Center took a more concrete critical-political direction with the project of alternative education embodied in the activity of The School for History and Theory of Images. The work of the School produced a new community of critical artists, theorists and curators, comprising of both professors and the students, and which also led to the establishment of Prelom – Journal for Images and Politics, active since 2001.

3 Yugoslav Biennial of Young Artists was held in Rijeka (Croatia), but at the beginning of 1990s when war started, it was moved to Vršac (Serbia). Its main institutional function was breeding and promoting the new generations of young artists. The Biennial in 2004 under the title Untitled (as Yet) have, among other things, explored the idea of ‘peripheral’ biennials and their role within the art system. This was the first Yugoslav Biennial which was realized as an international exhibition and the last Yugoslav Biennial ever. The new city authorities of Vršac broke with this tradition and removed all the documentation available online along with the entire Biennial website, hosted on the city servers.
The situation from the year 2000 on, after the ‘change’ brought on by the October 5th events, allowed for many actors to find their way into the official cultural institutions. On the one hand, one of the epicenters became the Museum of Contemporary Art, serving the function of constructing the recent local art history and organizing big international shows. On the other hand, the majority of the art institutions have turned to a market-driven eclecticism of sellable object-art, commercial design, corporate art and cognitive entertainment – the approach taken by Remount gallery, Zvono gallery, Ozone gallery and various other art and multimedia centers. This was the context in which the Kontekst gallery started operating. One of the first activities of the new gallery was taking care of the Mangelos prize for young artists which was previously part of the program of CCA Belgrade. This meant accepting the role of an institution in charge of direct engagement with young artists and emerging art – or, in other words, this represented the symbolic continuation of the activities of the CCA. Therefore, Kontekst gallery came to the fore as the place for socially engaged art. But, here we can pose the question: in what way exactly is this concept different from the usual civil-democratic politicization of art, based on an idea of the representational public sphere under its negotiatory and discusssional guise? Maybe it is precisely the analysis of the case of the exhibition Exception, Young Artists from Pristina, opened and closed at the same day, which could point to some of the problems embedded in this cultural-political approach.

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One of the central issues questioned through this exhibition is the relationship between contemporary art and national representation. The form of the exhibition was based on a certain modality of diplomacy – that is, on the visit of Kosovo artists to Novi Sad and Belgrade and the exchange with a local public interested in cultural-artistic affairs. As the curators themselves wrote, Serbia today does not know the Albanian culture and society in Kosovo, as it was the case in the past decades [...] The project presents both women and men artists, theoreticians and people active in culture who will discuss art, culture and society in Kosovo focusing especially on artistic and cultural relations between Serbia and Kosovo.\(^4\)

In the colloquial speech of contemporary art, exhibitions based on national representation are usually connected with launching of new trends on to national artistic scenes (e.g. the New French Art, the British Art Today, etc). Although those are in fact national projects of culture organized from ‘above,’ supported by national funds and institutions and promoted by diplomatic cultural representatives and cultural centers (confirming thus that the representation of a national culture is an affair of the State), such projects are unquestionably not being brought in connection with notions of ‘nationalism’ and the ‘national question.’ Quite probably it could be a consequence of the acting of ‘the universal language’ of Western contemporary art which takes over the place of (and in advance prevents the use of) the tag of ‘cultural imperialism.’ As it is the common phenomena in the constellation of 20th century national states, culture was, first of all, based on exchange between the nations – as it was often the case of presenting foreign contemporary art in the socialist Yugoslavia.

Then again, nowadays, the context of cultural exchange is mostly international as presented through thematical and review-type shows of different formats and scopes. Moreover, to make an international show is today a kind of dictum of contemporary literacy in culture – an exhibition is not ‘contemporary enough’ if it is not an international one. Nevertheless, this umbrella of internationalism shelters the same old process that is unfolding underneath since the presence of the artists is still being primarily determined through the mechanism of national representation, especially in the cases of artists from ‘the periphery.’ While the universal paradigm of contemporaneity remains to be the undeniable privilege of the artists of the Western countries (whose national identity seems to be unimportant, as the funding for their participation is almost never in question), the ‘periphery’ on the other hand, appears as the ‘otherness,’ in this way

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serving its role of completing the multiculturalist image of the ‘peoples of the world.’

According to Rastko Močnik, identity is an ideological mechanism and as such it has its material existence above all in state regulations: National (cultural) identity legitimises the state intervention within the field of culture and eventually justifies protectionist measures, such are quotas and alike. It is interesting that the EU has introduced a “European” quota and has been, to a certain limited extent, slowing down privatisation and commercialisation of cultures in the name of “cultural diversity,” it seems that “diversity” actually refers to “identities” as they are seen from (the side of) a more comprehensive European perspective. And yet, at a closer look, both notions seem misleading: they are a presupposition that cultures are homogenous blocks, an understanding that seems to be a kind of simplified version of the 19th century folkloristic enthusiasm promoted by nationalist intellectuals. Therefore, to understand better the background of the (unsuccessful) diplomatic activity conducted by the exhibition Exception, we should give a closer look to the singular developments of the Kosovo and Serbian contemporary art scene, not only in relation to the issues of cultural identity and the national state agendas, but also in relation to the wider European context.

The contemporary artists from Kosovo produced numerous artworks which, on the conceptual and representational levels, directly hosted actual ‘national questions’ present in the real-political field of both the under-construction Kosovar State and of the supra-national political

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bodies in charge of resolving the issue. One of the examples is the work *Fuck You* by Sokol Beqiri (2001) which presents a group of people standing in a line from the oldest to the youngest, holding up small Albanian flags and spelling the expression ‘Fuck you’ by using the semaphore flag signaling system (often mistaken for ‘naval signals’). Edi Muka has pointed out that “this work articulates the difficult position in which the artist finds himself – caught between nationalism on one hand and the invisibility of his people in the international political arena on the other”\(^7\). Another example would be Erzen Shkololli’s ‘comical’ montage of the image of an astronaut placing the Albanian flag on the surface of the Moon (*Albanian Flag on the Moon*, 2005). This ‘event’ is dated to the June of 1999 – the moment in which NATO ground troops entered the territory of Kosovo, remaining stationed there ever since. Also, several artworks on this topic were produced by Albert Heta. Within the context of the Cetinje Biennial in Montenegro, he performed the tactical action of placing the Albanian flag on the building of the old Serbian Embassy in Cetinje, (*The Embassy of the Republic of Kosova*, 2004). This work was

![Image](image_url)

*The Embassy of the Republic of Kosova, Albert Heta, 2004*

censored by the citizens, media and art institutions and discussed many times in various intellectual and artistic circles in Belgrade and Pristina, in the aftermath judged as both progressive and reactionary. Only a year later, the artist used e-flux news to promote the non-existing *Kosovar Pavilion in Venice*. In this media hack, Heta appropriates the work of Sislej Xhafa who exhibited in the Albanian pavilion, playing thus with the lack of distinction among the international art community between what would be the Albanian pavilion and the Kosovo pavilion. We can add to this group of national-identitary statements the famous work *Hey You* by Shkololli (2002) – the video in which the popular folk singer Skurte Fejza is singing the following lines: ... *Hey Europe I’m addressing you a letter | As Albanian of Old Albania | How are my sons | You know well that they are in emigration ... | Do you remember my territories? | Do you remember Albanians in one homeland ... | How did you cut off the borders! | My brothers and sisters were left outside... | You cut off the eagle in two parts ... |


The Serbian, or more precisely Belgrade libertarian intellectuals, observe those national and State-building questions in contemporary Kosovo art mainly through the optics of the ‘movement for independence,’ interpreting them as a struggle for de-colonialization, or as a process of ‘liberating’ the new national states. In the framework of the dominant ideology and its binary choices (where any statement is weighted by whether it is for or is against the independence of Kosovo), the critique of those works as ‘nationalist’ seems to be entirely impossible. Any critique would be interpreted as a reflection of Serbian nationalism/patriotism, while any affirmation of it would be (at least on the local level) deemed as an act of treason.

Artists from Serbia also dealt with issues of national identity and with the project of State-building within the framework of contemporary art and in the context of post-Yugoslav crisis, but it seems that they less frequently resorted to an affirmative approach, at least within the field of so-called critical art. Raša Todosijević in his work Gott liebt die Serben (1989 onwards) parodies the freshly resurrected national myths of the 1990’s, identifying them precisely as a constituent part of clero-fascist politics of the ruling ideology of the Serbian state (the slogan “God Loves the Serbs” is in this work related to the image of swastika as the symbol of fascism). Another example might be the work by Milica Tomić I am Milica Tomić […] I am a Serb, French, Korean, German, etc. (1998), where the notion of national identity is being examined within the corpus of post-modernist relativism and the globalization of society, within which the artistic subject is perceived as a citizen of the world. But, and despite this, the artist in her statement underlines that the basic drive behind her work is the impossibility and the rejection to speak out or pronounce clearly her nationality as a consequence of the political circumstances of nationalism, war and violence of the official Belgrade of that time.8

8 “The statement I am Milica Tomić. I am a Serb in the context of state policy, which produces the hallucinatory effect of a collective identity, loses the meaning of self-determination or intimate choice and becomes a ‘ticket’ into the club of the dominant ideology. The paradoxical choice to publicly deny my national and religious identity is inversely proportional to the very paradox that lies within a national identity: it is a totally artificial product, but on a personal level it is still experienced as completely natural and necessary, so every community is an imagined one, but only imagined communities are real,” Milica Tomić, Artist statement 1998, Cf. Inside/Outside, Independent artists from F.R.Yugoslavia, Galeria Zacheta, Warsaw, 2000, page 22.
On the other hand, the myth of Kosovo during the 1990’s becomes the flagship of the nationalist and fascist politics of Milošević’s and post-Milošević’s Serbia, resulting in renewed interest in artistic representations which thematize and consequently, revitalize this national myth. At the end of the 1980’s and the beginning of the 1990’s, the Kosovo myth replaced the socialist ideology of “Brotherhood and Unity” as the new cement of social cohesion. In the sphere of real-politics, it was revived on the occasion of the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo at Gazimestan in 1989, the event after which Milošević definitely grasped complete control over power. Ever since that moment, history becomes the active force in defining national roots and in the ‘grounding’ of national identities. The ethno-nationalistic myth of the heroic sacrifice of the Serbian people in defending the ‘gates of Europe’ and the Christian world from the Ottoman invasion is phantasmagoric and anti-historical, and exactly as such it appears in a large number of works situated in the official discourse of the politics of the 1990’s. Some of the paradigmatic examples of this are the paintings The Death of Murat (1982) by Dragan Malešević Tapi and The Battle of Kosovo (1985) by Olja Ivanjicki.

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Moreover, the eclectic discourse of post-modernism uses its gravitational force to attract this representation to the field of the ‘new image,’ as exemplified by the work Kosovo Maiden by Predrag Nešković (1991) or Final Solution by Čedomir Vasić (1999). In both examples, it is a case of the remixing and recycling of the Kosovo myth, mediated through its academic-sentimentalistic representations from the period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1945) – more concretely, both images refer to the painting Kosovo Maiden by Uroš Predić (1919) which portrays the heroes of ethnic epic poetry: the wounded but surviving knight – a “hero of Kosovo” – and a beautiful and merciful local girl, who walks the battlefield in the aftermath, nursing the wounded. Observing the digital manipulation of the image in the work of Čedomir Vasić, which erases the mythical representation of the battle, leaving the landscape (the field of Kosovo) completely deserted, we can hardly avoid the allusion to the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the Serbian population in Kosovo after the NATO intervention of 1999. The fact that the landscape stares empty at the viewer after the Serbs have left is, at the same time, both the negation of the existence of the Albanian population, and the melancholic picture of the loss of territories, that is, of all that fits into the nationalist State ideology of the Republic of Serbia.
Yet, the most active and most functional power of mobilization, in the political sense, we can find in the movie *The Battle of Kosovo* (1989) by Zdravko Šotra. Shot in a very short time, without any regard for the historical facts, mythological narration and cinematic culture, the basic message it communicates is the one of the inevitability of war. The protagonists of the battle are being portrayed as a kind of kamikaze-crusaders\(^\text{10}\) – they readily and without any question rush to their deaths, for the sake of defending Christian honour from the Muslim infidels, apparently with no

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\(^{10}\) Or it can be said that they were being portrayed as a sort of ancient suicide bomber squad, in a similar manner in which the ‘fundamentalists’ of today are being represented: as the group of people who are underpowered in their battle against what is perceived as the ‘oppressors’ or ‘invaders’ but who decide to make up for this disadvantage by investing their own lives in the battle and using the tactics of acting ‘undercover,’ locating their ‘reward’ not in this life, but in ‘the eternal one.’ Another paradigmatic example is the *myth of the assassination* of the Ottoman sultan and chief-in-command Murat (a historical figure, Murad I), who was according to this epic stabbed by the Serbian knight Miloš Obilić (not confirmed as the historical figure according to the data available), who managed to approach Murat by pretending that he came to surrender to the sultan himself. The myth states that Obilić was slain at the very spot of the assassination and that he announced his attention to sacrifice himself for christianhood at the dinner arranged by the Serbian chief-in-command Lazar the night before, the event which resembles the Biblical myth of *The Last Supper*. 
political agenda whatsoever. Through a special broadcast of this film on national television the evening before the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 started (the event which itself was promoted as ‘the second battle for Kosovo’) the direct political instrumentalization of this film was once again manifested (as had been the case before with its utilization in shaping public opinion in the wars in Bosnia and the oppression of the Albanian population in Kosovo). The persistent denial by the official national historiography to explore in a critical manner the question of the political causes and constellations of the 1389 battle of Kosovo contributes to the alignment of this myth to the order of greatest national taboos.

Here it is also important to pay attention to the formal transformations the Kosovo myth went through during the period of Yugoslav socialist modernism – the cultural and political project which represented the form of emancipation from the Stalinistic dictate of soc-realism, after Yugoslavia broke with Informbiro (Cominform) in 1948. At the Sao Paulo Biennial, the Yugoslav painter Petar Lubarda exhibits his series *The Battle of Kosovo* (1953) as the example of ‘high modernism’ – the myth is here denationalized and subjected to the universal politics of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors, the weak against the strong, which in the given ideological setting could be read as ‘pre-figuration’ of the class struggle and the battle against fascism (that is, of the battle of Yugoslav partisans against the more powerful enemy).

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11 As argued by Ljiljana Blagojević, socialist modernism was built upon a double negation: on the one hand, on the repudiation of the between-the-two-world-wars modernity, e.g. functionalism and constructivism as the supposed products of capitalism and on the other, on the distance towards the Soviet model exemplified by the aesthetics of ‘formalist eclecticism.’ Cf. Ljiljana Blagojević, “High Hopes, False Premises, and Bleak Future”: The Case of New Belgrade,” in *Modernity in YU*, Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000, p. 5.
The exchange and mutual introduction of artists from Serbia and Kosovo, which is, according to the words of curators and organizers of the exhibition one of the cultural-political goals of the *Exception* project, was happening mainly ‘outside,’ in the so-called international context and not through the forms of (inter)national exchange on the local level, in between and within the very two societies themselves. The exception would be the exhibition Përtej, held in Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade at the end of the 1990’s, which displayed the works of the currently active generation of artists from Kosovo and which, because of the place of exhibiting and its modest format, somehow went undetected, passing underneath the radars of nationalistic politics of the official Belgrade.\(^{12}\) Considering the reactions in Kosovo, here it is worth noting the recollections of the artist Sokol Beqiri: *I do not know about the organizers, but we were prepared for various kinds of reactions. The reactions were not devastating, however. The worst that happened to us was that we were branded as traitors. A Professor of the Art Faculty in Prishtina did it publicly, through a newspaper.*\(^{13}\)

In the framework of different Balkans-oriented shows\(^{14}\), the exchange between the artists from Serbia and Kosovo was mainly curated through the ‘politics of EUropean integrations,’ that is, through the discourse of “truth, responsibility and reconciliation” or of overcoming the consequences of conflicts by means of art and culture. The images of ‘belated modernity’ of those societies, of a cultural lagging behind, ethno-nationalism and national struggles typical for the “Imaginary Balkans” – as conceptualized by Marija Todorova\(^{15}\) – were selected to confirm the given cultural-political agenda. The position of the artist in this exhibiting context has been reduced to the task of a “context translator” or “an illustrator of cultural difference who reflects and reinterprets the paradigms and stereotypes of the cultural milieu s/he works in.”\(^{16}\)

Differing from such an approach, the Kontekst gallery profiled itself from the very start as the place for art-activism and politically engaged artistic practices, putting the emphasis on exhibitions dealing with the problematics of different minorities and covering a wide range of issues – from lesbian and feministic issues through to collaborations with various counter-globalist groups and projects and, finally, to the debate about the ‘art of periphery.’ Already at the beginning of their work, in the first months of 2008, the Kontekst curators organized a series of lectures, discussions and screenings which included a number of theorists and artists from Prishtina and Belgrade and which raised no visible turmoil and conflicts in the public sphere. Those events were, at the same time, a prelude to the exhibition of the young artists from Prishtina.

The exhibition *Exception* itself, according to the curators, consisted of two conceptual units: *The first is about the critical interventions of the artists from Kosovo in the fields of global art representation and the art market dominated by the West; the other unit encompasses the artworks that deal with the problems of Kosovo society and of the state (and the State!) of being*

\(^{12}\) The exhibition “Përtej” was set up during June 1997 in the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade. Exhibited were the works of Magzut Vezgishi, Mehmet Behluli, Sokol Beqiri and the composer Ilir Bajri. The curator of the exhibition was Shkelzen Maligi and the organizers were the Center for Contemporaty Art, Fund for an Open Society and CZKD. (“Përtej” in Albanian means ‘above, across the, besides, at the other side.’)


“under construction,” focusing on the problems of national and gender identities. My aim here is not to deal directly with the events surrounding the exhibition, but to investigate the exhibition itself, since all the social critique that came out as a reaction to the act of the violent closing of it was already present in the curatorial conception, as well as in the questions raised through the artworks exhibited. After the closing of the exhibition, it seems that the curators and the artists, and actually their whole joint effort, were being in a certain way sanctioned in a two-fold manner: by the fascist organizations and the repressive apparatuses of the state, but also by the professionals, the audience and the informal groups which appropriated this event through the ‘ban’ on the discussion of the content of the exhibition until it opens in a proper way.

One of the problems of the Young Art scene in Kosovo, the one that the exhibition Exception clearly shows, is the number of works which are uncritically approaching the problems of establishing the Kosovar state and the formation of the new national identity, in this way avoiding tackling the more urgent problems of unemployment, “wild” privatization and the general economical dependence on the international donations and investments. The most obvious example here is the media work www.pavaresiakosoves.com (translated as www.independenceofkosovo.com, the work seems to be offline now) by the young artist Artan Balaj, which shows a schematic group of figures: a teaching figure stands for the international representative of a bureaucratic machine in Kosovo – UNMIK and the student figures stand for representatives of Kosovo society, while the clock standstill at the time 12:44. This number is representing UN 1244 Resolution upon which a temporary UN management was sent to Kosovo and thus initiated what is being considered from one side to be the process of the institutional constitution of the new state, but also as a resolution which is interpreted from the other side as to further consider Kosovo to be a part of Serbia, hence maintaining the status of the province to be 'in between' any permanent solution. According to the curatorial claim, this rare new media art piece from Kosovo does not make a move forward in relation to the thinking of the “under construction” government of official Prishtine – what it does is to merely repeat it in a tautological manner.

Also, the group of feminist works by artists Fitore Iusufi – Koja, Aketa Xhafa and Nurhan Qehaja clearly show that the issue of feminist emancipation is still considered to be strongly linked to the issue of national emancipation. They repeat the similar strategy of the involvement of the national symbols of flag, emblem and anthem, just like the older generation of their male colleagues whose works have been discussed in this text before. However, these national symbols appear in the form of “detourned images” – as the demonic-backwards singing of the national anthem by the naked woman (Nurhan Qehaja, The Flag, 2006), as the flag of conservativism and patriarchalism embodied in the stain of blood of the virgin on white bed linen.

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after the first wedding night (Fitore Iusufi – Koja, *Japan*, 2006) or as the national-ethnical emblem of the double headed eagle on shorts, the only piece of garment on a naked woman-lamp, which outlines the decorative position of woman in the nationalist-macho society (Alketa Xhafa, *Baby Doll/The day After*, 2007). Inspite of their critical attitude towards the status and the representation of women in contemporary Kosovo, they are situating their critical observations within the framework of the national state-building, thus in a paradoxical manner standing in line with the very society they are trying to criticize.

Additionally, placing such works within the context of the exhibition-as-the-national representation shows not only how the tools of contemporary art such as media art interventionism or feminist criticism can be limited to the pragmatic goals of the legitimization of the official national identity, but also how conservative politics can appropriate and utilize contemporary art for its own purposes in general. However, the world is based on paradoxes and it is difficult to fight with each and every one of them each step of the way, in attempting to anticipate all the outcomes and contexts of circulation possible for the original message. Maybe the works by Fitore Iusufi – Koja, Alketa Xhafa and Nurhan Qehaja would function differently in some other possible context for the exhibition which would, for example, give a historical overview of the position of women in the post-colonial struggle – but in this curatorial narrative their emancipatory potential stays limited, encompassed by the boundaries of the program of diplomatic exchange between Serbia and Kosovo.
However, some of the works included in the exhibition do clearly point to the problems of national representation and to the troubles within contemporary art in general. The work by Lulzim Zeqiri unambiguously settles these aforementioned paradoxes within the very field of contemporary art, showing how the international positioning of the artist dictated by the politics of national identity and neo-liberal inclusivism go together, ‘energize’ and ‘feed’ each other as in the concept of Yin and Young. In his video Heroes (2003) he presents an image of typical village interiors with traditional furniture, where male members of the Albanian (patricrhal) society in Kosovo spend their evenings singing and playing sharqia, the local mandolin-like instrument, performing oral-epic songs about heroism. Within their particular song he interpolates the new heroes – the famous protagonists of the contemporary art scene of Kosovo (according to some claims, young Kosovo society was very proud that eight artists from Kosovo participated in a Balkans exhibition), in a similar manner in which in most societies people are proud of the large number of their teams participating in the Olympic games or in different football championships, etc.). The folk singers sing the epic about the heroic gestures of Kosovo artists – their appearances at important international events (Manifesta, Istanbul Biennale, Kassel Exhibition), therefore alluding to the national cultural development, advancement and modernization of the Kosovo ‘under construction’ state.

This work seems to make another point as well – one which says that the national identity of the artists from Kosovo is instrumentalized from two sides: first within the general tendency of building the new national cultures in post-Yugoslav states (in other words, each state needs its contemporary art to serve the purpose of contributing to the building of the State), and secondly within the international art scene as institution where the quality and thematic scope of the artistic work is not enough, but the signifier of ‘from Kosovo’ is needed in order to confirm the vaunted image of ‘all-inclusive internationality.’ The artistic statement does not reveal much about the personal position of the artist Lulzim Zeqiri with regard to what I read in his work (his other work titled White Map presents the timeless image of the Balkan conflicts and fulfills all the tasks of its stereotypical representation), and I can only guess the position of curators while placing this work in the terrain of the exhibition (besides their dedication to reviewing in a comprehensive way the young art scene of Kosovo). But my observation would be that inside this particular exhibition Lulzim’s Heroes has the same function as Duchamp’s Pissor – they point to the exhibitionary order and institutional context in which they are momentarily placed, discovering at the same time their own ideological function.

The abovementioned artwork Heroes also shows that the issue of the nation, or of national identity, is very much international (within the hegemonic representation of the contemporary internationalism), and that the national identity of an artist from ‘periphery’ is always already inscribed into the dominant model of exhibition making and the contemporary art system. That may be the reason why the curators decided to dedicate significant space to the chapter Artist, curator, market and to analyze the art system structure, its hierarchies, the balance of power in relation to... I would add to this the concept of (national) cultural representation. In their criticism of the art system, the curators of Exception: Young artists from Prishtine, they mostly

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18 See Sezgin Boyük, ibid, page 218
19 According to the dominant art historical narrative, there was no contemporary art in Kosovo before the 1990s. For example, in the interview for the catalogue On Normality, Sokol Begiri says: “The Kosovo art scene of today - I think it has great success and energy behind it. I could also point out that I totally agree with Branko Dimitrijević in one of the meetings we had, when he said: There is a sense in which the young Kosovar artists start from zero-point, which liberates them from the chains of any tradition and which puts them in the position of ‘total contemporaneity,” Cf. On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989 – 2001 (the exhibition catalogue), Mica, Belgrade, 2005, page 379
focused on Balkans exhibitions which, according to them, played a certain role in Euro-Atlantic integration and in the preparation of the ground for global capital in the so-called region of Western Balkans. That is, the curators and artists have shown their positions and opinions towards the production of the mythologized and commodified representation of the Balkans conflicts.

They also raised the issue of the famous Western curators playing the role of discoverers of new and yet unrealized marketplaces as (re)sources of talents. The examples of the works which are dealing with this topic are Jakup Ferri’s Save Me, Help Me, Driton Hajredini’s The Uncles, Waiting for a Curator as the joint work by Hajredini, Ferri and Zeqiri and Free Your Mind by Alban Muja. While Driton Hajredini utilizes the American national symbol – the figure of Uncle Sam – to speak of the power of Western curatorial experts for Kosovo/Balkans/East European art (replacing the famous sentence “I want you for US Army” with “I want you for Contemporary Art Army”), Jakup Ferri points to the logic of investment in art from the East which, according to him, “is based on the potential that the artist’s fame is the factor that multiplies the value of the merchandise.” All these works are based on a strategy of “subversive affirmation”\(^\text{20}\) – the tactic that allows the artist/activist to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously keeping a distance from what is being affirmed. It destabilizes such an affirmation and turns it into its opposite.

This approach is characteristic for the large part of the production in the region of former Yugoslavia and is based upon the experience of conceptual art and its transformation from the producing of the ‘representation/object’ to delivering an ‘attitude/statement’\(^\text{21}\). In this light, the purposeful naïveté of these works manifests itself as an ironic tool that is utilized to challenge the enforced identification with the liberal Western Weltanschauung (world view). In all the cases the artists appear as ‘peripheral subjects’ whose national origin is undistinguishable from their personal names whilst appearing on ‘the art scene’; so it can be said that their very possibility to act is already determined and limited by these designations.

This is the framework in which we can read the work by Driton Hajredini called Sin. The video presents a document of an event performed in a Christian church in Münster and recorded with a hidden camera, in which the artist (Driton Hajredini) enters the confessional booth and confesses to the priest. He asks him unorthodox questions such as: I am actually a Muslim but I wanted to ask if it is a sin to be an Albanian born in Kosovo? Can it be called a sin, in a way? The confused priest replies with No. Not a sin. Sin is something we, people, do of our own free will, and something which is opposed to the God’s commandments. Or, ironically speaking, we may draw the reverse conclusion. That national identity and nationalism are not dependent on free will and thus are in accordance with the God’s commandments.

\(^{20}\) Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation”: On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance, Maska (Ljubljana) vol XXI, no 3-4 (98-99), page 6

\(^{21}\) Some of the examples are the artworks How to Become a Great Artist by Vladimir Nikolić and Vera Večanski (Belgrade), Choose Life by Nikoleta Marković and Zsolt Kovacs (Belgrade), Explosion by Primož Novak (Ljubljana) and many others. All of this works (like the works by young artist from Prishtine) are using a similar strategy to express their ironic stance towards the obsession with marketing, self-promotion, and obsessive networking in art – all of which being the phenomena that accompanies the artistic production of transitional societies.
It is the standpoint of the curators, which was repeated by many others later, that the *Exception* project is about a certain kind of getting-to-know the Albanian culture – in other words, that it is about the ‘otherness’ to which we are to be introduced for the very first time. This diplomatic strategy in the field of art fits entirely into the political guidelines of the European and international foundations, according to which culture serves the social programme by ‘introducing the other’ in order to respect ‘cultural difference,’ and which all leads to the final ‘reconciliation of the sides in conflict.’ The programmatic text *Using of Culture and Art in Conflict Resolution in Contemporary Times* may serve as one of the indicators of dominant prejudices related to the negotiation techniques and ‘use value’ of contemporary art. It states: “While political talks and diplomatic activities are going to reduce the tension between the two countries, the exchange of artists including painters, musicians, film makers and others will bring about cordiality and amity,”

Curiously enough, the violent closing of the exhibition and the accompanying media rampage which mediated this event, empirically challenges such a standpoint and rejects this kind of approach of the institutionalization of artistic practices. The exhibition *Exception* was made as ‘the national selection,’ obviously and first of all because it was the only format through which it could assure the funding for its realization – paradoxically, it is precisely the platform of such ‘assuring of the production’ which is being radically denied through the act of the violent closure of the exhibition. Returning to the beginning of this text, here we can again raise the question of the form and the format of the exhibition. That is, of the way in which the curator acts within the apparatus of production. Would the exhibition, if envisioned to be unfolding in a different and ‘autonomous’ field, one which does not take on the role of diplomatic mediation between two national cultures, have had a different outcome or have opened up a more productive space for discussion? Would the exhibiting of, for example, critical works dealing with the place and role of culture in ‘peripheral zones’ and representing the collective problems of all the artists from the region, including the issues of nation-building we all witnessed during the past decades [so, the exhibition which is not based on the principle of ‘otherness,’ but the principle of ‘sameness’] have brought about different effects?

From this perspective it seems to be the case. The exhibition *Exception* carried very concrete critical potentials in itself but it was the choice of the form that effectively prevented the very possibility that such questions could be raised for public examination and discussion. Through choosing the form of the national representation of the artistic scene, the exhibition *Exception* limited its scope to being pro- or counter- in relation to the question of the independence of Kosovo and thus corresponded with the given framework of the existing choices in the field of *realpolitics* and its existing social polarizations. In that sense, in the local context it proved no more then the confirmation of the expected state of affairs: the Serbian fascism towards Albanians on one side and the condemnation of the violation of the politics of human rights including the right to public expression on the other... And it is the task of art to think beyond, and to discover ‘the possibilities undiscovered’ which are certainly to be found outside of given choices imposed by the dominant politics of culture.

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22 This text currently appears to be offline – or at least no search engine can find it.

23 In this case the curators have defined the field of art in a completely different way and through a direct link with the representationalist politics. The field of art is a place where, among other things, people talk about something that has to be talked about publicly, in media and parliament, and this is the issue of the past and the issue of the future of co-existence in this area, the issue of the very subjects. Cf. The catalogue Odstupanje: Savremena umetnička scena Prištine/Exception: Contemporary Artistic scene from Prishtine, Introduction by Vida Knežević, Kristina Lukić, Ivana Marjanović and Gordana Nikolić, page 19
Politics of Display and Troubles With National Representation in Contemporary Art
Jelena Vesić

The Image, Nikoleta Marković

What we see on this image (underneath the ‘intrusion’ of the Albanian flag) is a reproduction of the Monument to Kosovo Heroes – a public sculpture in the city of Kruševac, central Serbia, built by the academicist Đorđe Jovanović in 1910 – a typical colonial object of the École de Beaux Art, mixed with national romanticism. In the year 2003, the artist Nikoleta Marković proposed that this image be exhibited as a serial repetition around the walls of the gallery. She used the Albanian flag in place of the flag of the Kosovo hero – Boško Jugović (a character derived from Serbian epic poetry which belongs to the cycle of ‘Kosovo Battle’). The event of the exhibition was Nikoleta Marković’s solo show in the city of Kruševac – the artist’s birth-place but it was cancelled by the director of the National Museum in Kruševac. The work also caused problems in the “37th Winter Salon” in Herceg Novi (Montenegro). The exhibition curator, Branislav Dimitrijević, was accused of approaching the exhibition with “a surplus of politics and the deficit of art” and consequently quit as the curator. So, I’m concluding this text with an artwork which presents a type of centaurlike connection between “Serbian-hood” and “Albanian-hood” in their common apotheosis, a work which is a container for both nationalist images and presents yet another example of an unsuccessful “diplomatic approach” in the socially engaged art.
Four acts and the pair of socks
Vladimir Jerić

Let's start with a little quiz.
Why would a politician open an exhibition?

A. Because he thinks he paid for it.
A. Because he thinks he gains from it.
A. Because he can.

And, the correct answer is... A!

"Yes, we can" maybe could have been the preferred position of Bojan Kostreš, at the time the President of the Assembly of the Autonomous Serbian Province of Vojvodina, when deciding to personally open in Novi Sad, the capital of this northern Serbian province, the exhibition of young artists from Pristina (Kosovo), titled "Exception." Maybe he was invited to do so by the organisers and producers of the show - as far as I know, it is perfectly possible, and here I have in mind particularly the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, Živko Grozdanić Gera, and his apparent belief in engineering public 'scandals' and 'upsets' as a publicity tool for different projects. Or maybe Mr Kostreš decided for himself or was consulted or instructed that this is something to be done; but it does not really matter to what is of interest here. It is the very fact that he did it, along with the (quite) predictable consequences... Being an active local politician he must have known that on this occasion he could not represent himself and his personal political convictions, or his taste in contemporary art, he could not even represent (in any but the strictly bureaucratic sense) the Assembly of Vojvodina (being its current president), as the Assembly was being torn apart at the time by fights between opposing political blocks, and (as always) was pretty close to becoming dysfunctional; so it could be only his political party (LSV – League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina) and its biggest strategic ally, the Democratic Party (DS), one 'concrete' political block, that he could possibly stand for when opening this exhibition. Considering the timing, all of this happened in January 2008, in the midst of the (as usually) quite desperate and 'dirty' electoral campaign, in between the first (undecided) and the second (at the time perceived as very uncertain regarding its outcome) ballot of voting for the president of Serbia. The "Pro-EU" political block Kostreš represented here was faced in the previous round with an almost completely equal (hence the 'second ballot') number of votes for the nationalistic right-wing political block, heralded by the Radical Party. And the 'renegade province' of Kosovo, through its current 'representatives' (of whom there is no reason to think they are any 'better' or 'worse' or more or less 'legitimate' then the average Serbian politicians, or the majority of any politicians for that matter), had just announced that it was about to declare 'independence' in two weeks time. The media were already programming that 'Kosovo is Serbia' - some issuing calls to arms again, as they did so many times in the recent past, some already cursing the 100th generation of the offspring of any Serbian politician who even thinks of recognizing Kosovo, and the vast majority exploring in a very creative manner all the different ways you can call someone 'a traitor.' ..
The very word ‘Kosovo,’ representing the symbolic (and only possibly factual) ‘cause’ for the NATO "air campaign" (read: the bombing of Serbia on a daily basis for a period of three months) just 9 years ago, proved to be the most successful detonator of national sentiment around here for ages. Now, obviously, 'the situation' was charged, on a countdown to inevitable detonation... This kind of social (dis)balance had its ups and downs, but in this period it seemed that critical mass was almost there and that anything connected with this issue, however ‘tiny’ or ‘marginal,’ may trigger the chain reaction.

We know now that ‘the unspeakable’ happened, and that the enactment of the independence of Kosovo was announced some weeks later, on February 17th. Just to give a brief insight into the media situation surrounding the issue, here are the news headlines as archived by B92.net for this date, as they are paradigmatic of the whole media sphere during the period:

"Over 60 injured, Slovenian embassy ransacked - at least 30 policemen and 30 civilians were injured as protesters demonstrated against U.S. and EU Kosovo policy.

Serbia annuls Kosovo independence declaration - PM Vojislav Koštunica addressed the nation today as ethnic Albanians unilaterally declared Kosovo's independence.

Ethnic Albanians declare Kosovo’s independence - ethnic Albanians have today at 15:00 CET unilaterally declared independence of the Serbian province of Kosovo.

U.S. takes note, Russia wants declaration scrapped - the United States took note of the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo’s Albanians.

UN SC meets tomorrow in emergency session - the United Nations Security Council will hold emergency Kosovo session tomorrow.
No violence in Kosovo, says Bush - U.S. President George Bush says he will work with his allies to avoid violence in Kosovo.

Albania, Saudi Arabia first to recognize Kosovo? Beta News Agency says an analysis shows Kosovo's unilateral declaration will first be recognized by some Islamic countries.

Czech lawmakers ask intl. community to support Serbia - a group of Czech lawmakers today reacted to the announced unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence.

U.S. analysts paint grim, bright Kosovo picture - Kosovo's declaration of independence will deteriorate the stability of the Balkans, John Bolton says.

But, let us go back to the period several weeks before all this happened, and to the Novi Sad opening of the exhibition of young artists from Pristina. Regardless of whether he was invited or instructed to open the exhibition, if he was aware of his own position, the 'sensitivity' of 'the situation' and the possible consequences, why would Bojan Kostreš do it? Whatever the possible reasons for Kostreš to open the exhibition, there is a clear advantage, or self-interest, for himself or his political block, which is connected to the act. Not to enter into an elaboration of each possibility, be it the verification of investment (after all, MCAV is funded from the state and province's budget), the advertising of certain values (it is so European to do it, right?) or demonstrating the strength of the political block he represents (whatever the right-wing opposition says, just look at us - 'yes, we can'), his involvement would not happen if a clear interest of some kind was not outlined.

Which leads to what appears to be the complementary question: why was it in the interests of the 'authors,' producers and organisers of the exhibition, for this (or any other) politician to open the show?
Here comes the moment to (once again) discuss what happened on the evening of 7th of February 2008 in the Kontekst gallery and the streets around, the evening which will be remembered by the unsuccessful attempt to open the exhibition ‘Exception: YKA’ in Belgrade, and by the deliberate destruction of one specific artwork. Actually, this story could be rather short — it may even fit into a single sentence, like: “after the Novi Sad part, this exhibition was supposed to open in Belgrade; but a fascist lynch-mob disrupted the attempt, destroyed the one work considered to be the most provocative, and the rest of the exhibition was packed up and removed, never to be opened again.” And, more or less, all these ‘facts’ would be ‘correct.’ But here we are not only interested in exactly what happened — this information would not mean much and there would not be much use to it if we do not try to understand why it happened, and what constellation of powers brought this event into being...

What I am about to offer here is one personal account. You can maybe consider it as, for what it
is, a story. Not what is often called a critique or comment or, in the word mostly used nowadays, 'the text,' but really - the story...

After numerous re-tellings and interpretations, this particular story became the commonplace of contemporary art history for some local social circles, namely those involved with 'critical art' or 'civil society activism,' while the vast majority of other social circles on the very same locale couldn't care less; for those involved in it, this story became one of fascism and violence, or the one about the absence of the rule of law and of denying the institution of the autonomy of art. For the rest of society, those who just followed the headlines of the period, it flashed briefly as a piece of news, never to re-emerge again. Many would claim the situation is self-explanatory – pictures of rallies and demonstrations, Kosovo celebrating independence, unrest and looting on Belgrade streets, trash and burning of shops and foreign embassies, politicians trembling about possible coalitions after the elections and similar imagery was beaming out 24/7 from all the papers and screens available. One modest exhibition in an independent gallery, however unusual and provoking it may have been at the time and however paradigmatic its outcome may have been for the situation on a wider social scale, couldn't survive in the media for more than a few days.

I was one of those who decided to support the exhibition, without entering into too much details about its conception and articulation, and however flawed I may find it in certain aspects to be; one of the obvious flaws of this way of representing is the matter of identification within the framework of 'the politics of identity,' where it was not possible for the Prishtina artists to escape the identification with 'being Albanians' and therefore 'separatists,' while the audience had only but two choices: you are coming to this exhibition to either support 'the Albanian cause,' or to defend the integrity of Serbian territory.'.. But, after all, the exhibition was made by a certain 'professional' circle of friends and acquaintances for more-or-less the members and supporters of this same circle, and the 'provocativeness' surrounding it may only help to give the show some more focus of public attention and some additional media space, which is usually, considering contemporary critical art, right there below zero. Yes, I did expect a strong reaction from different right-wing youth sects and hooligan gangs, and the activity on fascist forums and web sites indicated that the ultra-nationalistic block will once again instrumentalize the usual crowd of violent football supporters and fans of war criminals and famous gangsters from the recent past, so I was prepared for a very tense atmosphere and significant police presence; well then, around here we got used to 'rough' conditions of working in public - the exhibition was opened in Novi Sad, and somehow survived, so the similar could be expected in Belgrade - or so I thought.

But, I never made it to the actual 'opening.' For the chronology of the event from the perspective of where Jelena and I were at certain moments of the evening and what we could see or hear, you may read here, in the blogpost we wrote right after everything happened. Also, from there you can follow some links which could help a foreign reader to be introduced to certain characters and insignia which were part of this public performance. Once I eventually made it to the gallery, navigating around the police cordons, different raging gangs and other 'obstacles,' I conducted my own little forensic investigation and, based on that, constructed the following drama, involving three actors and a pair of Walter Benjamin's socks. So now we start with the script...
Four acts and the pair of socks
Vladimir Jerič

Act two

The actors in this play appeared as 'icons' - they came embedded in their own images. Two of them were standing inside the gallery, one recognisable as Adem Jashari and the other as Elvis Presley, the first in his combat/tribal uniform, casually holding an automatic rifle, and the latter as represented at the time by Andy Warhol, dressed as a cowboy, pulling out a gun and aiming at whoever is looking. These two came visiting as part of the work "Face to face" by Dren Maliqi. The third 'icon' was brought outside the gallery to confront Jashari - it was Legija, the famous war and civilian criminal, who was eventually found guilty and is serving a prison sentence for the assassination of the then Serbian prime minister Zoran Đindić. His life-size image was brought by the usual lynch mob of fascists and ultra-nationalists to defend them from what they perceived as the "armed invasion" of the image of Jashari - no doubt they really believed that the image of this dead Albanian rebel, whose known history tells that he was not much more different then Legija in terms of his ruthlessness, use of violence and conducting of cold-blooded murders, was the 'Jashari himself,' who rose from the grave to haunt 'the Serbs' once again. Apparently for them this horror of dealing with Kosovo insurgency was happening in the very center of Belgrade this time, not in some remote hills down south - the place they pathetically recognise as 'the holy land of Kosovo,' but which most of them never actually seen for themselves, so for them it exists only in the space of contemporary mythology - behind TV screens and on the pages of the yellow press. Therefore they brought a life-size image of Legija, dressed in his military uniform, sprinkled with medals and decorations, believing that this powerful criminal/war hero himself will lead the 'exorcism campaign' and chase the menace out, both from the gallery and from 'our society' at large. They might have believed that the image of the dead Adem Jashari was there to herald an attempt to invade Serbia, announced by the Kosovo politicians intended aim to formally claim independence for their province.
'situation' couldn’t be more serious: Serbia is under siege, and the first enemy commando units have just started to position themselves in, no less, the very heart of Belgrade. They sent the best they got - we need to answer by mobilizing our finest... So, send for Legija!

Act three

As for the dispositions within this drama, the starting positions of these actors-images were as follows: Jashari and Elvis standing in the gallery facing each other and Legija on the street outside, facing towards the gallery. The dialogue between the images in the gallery, one presenting what is among some, quite possibly the majority of Kosovo Albanians, dubiously perceived as the hero of the armed liberation struggle, and the other presenting fast-paced consumerism and the smoke screen of nihilism of contemporary capitalism, was very tense. They were facing each other, Elvis pulled out the gun first and had an obvious advantage over the still unaware and unprepared Jashari, so the outcome implied is obvious - Jashari goes down. Maybe he is 'down' already, if we take the Warhol-esque style of rendering the images as an indicator of 'whose aesthetics/politics rule' - Jashari, rendered like this, goes straight to t-shirts and coffee mugs and postcards and whatnot, becoming the commodified image for mass consumption of pop-nationalism, with hysterical consumerism embedded - so not only is he down and out as such, but his remains, his image, only serve to further feed the dominance of 'the principle of Elvis.' Whatever search and struggle for 'distinctiveness' and 'identity' Kosovo Albanians have tried to achieve, presented in this unfortunate but (apparently) unavoidable image of Jashari, it is already doomed to fail and to become part of the 'One world, one dream' of consumerist culture and politics as conceived by Hollywood or 'Viva Las Vegas'.

Act one

If this was the intended problematic of Dren Maliqi when he contemplated the work in Pristiné, the one of capitalism and cultural hegemony and contemporary societies-in-transition and their dilemmas and positions, then it could be read as such in all places but Serbia - this is where this image would mean something else. It is only in Serbia that Jashari could overshadow Elvis in their mutual confrontation, and come out as a temporary winner, as the one whose 'meaning' weights more. But it was only in Serbia that his 'meaning' could be different from what Maliqi could have possibly meant by facing the two - here, Elvis had to resort to the tactics of acting from 'behind,' appearing in the local context as a silent and almost invisible escort to Jashari, but arranging in advance that Legija will wait in ambush, so that Jashari will be taken in the cross-fire at the very spot. But, how Elvis did it? What is this strange alliance between Elvis and Legija, and how did it come into being? Did he call Legija in advance, saying: "Listen, Elvis here. I know you don’t really like me and that you prefer some local chetniks or at least that Stallone guy as your pop icons; but never mind that now,. (now singing in his deep and smooth voice:) Soon I’ll be visiting with the one you really hate, and I can deliver him to you on a plate, so here’s the place and the date... (now, getting serious again:) I’ll keep this Jashari guy entertained and watching at me, so you can sneak in from the back and do your thing. Just pretend I am not there and that I never called, OK?" Here we can imagine Legija listening with a grin on his face, but, being experienced in the business as he is, asking, just in case: "What do I owe you for this?,” and Elvis answering: “Nothing. My pleasure. Just forget that I called,” and then hanging up.
If we read the images so that they tell us that Jashari was not aware of what Elvis was plotting from the very beginning, so that he was caught by surprise by Elvis pulling out the gun first, then in a similar manner Jashari couldn’t be less prepared to face Legija on Legija’s own terrain - after all, in this story he had his eye on Elvis, trying to understand this threatening gun-pulling move by what he thought was his ally. So we could conclude that only in Serbia Jashari may be tricked into believing that it is he, and not Elvis, who is of significance here, just to find himself in the very next moment under ferocious attack by Legija, from behind, with Elvis laughing in the ‘audience’. In this play, it seems that Jashari had no choice really, but to go down - the very nature of his static and two-dimensional image made him look in just one direction at the time - towards Elvis. He could not do anything against Legija at his back; if he turned to face Legija, he would expose his back to Elvis and his cocked gun...

It seems that Dren Maliqi had in mind just one story, the one of dialogue (or rather a two-fold dramatic monologue) between Jashari and Presley, between the new subjected subjectivities whose production is being outsourced to Pristina, and the ‘headquarters,’ the ‘source code’ of it; that is, the one about the (im)possibilities of radically new subjectivities within the hyper-capitalism of the global scale of today, and about ‘the market of identities’ as the borders of the contemporary ‘world-as-we-know-it.’ But to this other, entirely different story, involving Legija in ambush, the images of Jashari accompanied by the stealth presence of Elvis, were invited by the organisers and producers of the show. To them, and to Maliqi at the end, it should have been obvious that it is precisely in Serbia that the historical/materialistic aspects of the work and the 'original' position of the author would be rendered in a different meaning, the one in which the work questions the idea of a nation, and not a class, and where the target of the critique is not in the headquarters of a chain store or a bank or at the other side of a TV screen, but behind the closest national border. They should have known that Elvis had Legija’s' number set on fast dial in his comprehensive phonebook. Allow me for some therapeutical paranoia here: sometimes it seems that Elvis has a phonebook with all the numbers out there, even the ones which we think do not have any subscribers yet...
This kind of ‘misreading’ could have been avoided only if the exhibition was not realized in the form of national cultural representation, as it was articulated; if that was not the case, the intended position of Jashari’s image would not so easily become the victim of Presley’s plot. But within this ‘national selection’ scenario, the only one who could benefit was Elvis, and so it happened: the quick outcome of this staged encounter of the three was that Jashari was left lying on the floor, torn to pieces by Legijas people, and that Legija himself was easily handled and chased away by the police, exactly like the convict he is. He once had his moment in which this kind of disgrace would have been unimaginable, but now ‘the real bosses’ see no purpose in having him around, except for such low-level dirty jobs such as street mobbing. And just a short remark here: we shouldn’t assume that in this text it is Jashari who is of concern to us at all, and that in this script the writer sees him as ‘the victim’ of some kind; what is of interest here is this dialogue itself, the dialogue which renders some important relations visible, of which we always should try to learn more, even if it is only Jashari echoing in a distorted manner whatever Elvis says (like when an adult is trying to learn a difficult new foreign language). It is this dialogue which is missing now, broken and silenced by the sudden disappearance of Jashari, or any similar counterpart or twisted mirror image of Elvis – but, you know, Elvis doesn’t like to be mocked with. Nor does he want his business practices to be revealed for everybody to see and discuss - his relations to Jashari or his calls to Legija is no public affair. In public, he wants to be taken seriously, at all times. He does not need nor like a spotlight on him anymore, as of today he is in the training and teaching business, like the old prima donna of the Russian ballet mentoring the new generation - his wrinkles are not for showing, really. But catching headlines and being in the spotlight is what he teaches his students to be good at. By any means necessary.
Act four

The last man standing

So, as so many times before: Elvis successfully disappeared at the beginning of the story, only to emerge as the last man standing at the end... It does remind of the story of Walter Benjamin and his childhood fascination with socks. According to his own memories (Berlin Childhood Around 1900), the socks in Benjamin household were put away in the closet and wrapped up in a way that little Walter always thought that they were actually a 'present,' contained in what he proclaimed to be 'the pocket.' After each careful intervention to get to the present hidden in the pocket, he had to unfold the thing, and it turned out that there was not much of a present inside, the 'pocket' itself disappeared, and the third thing suddenly emerged as 'true' - a sock. There are different interpretations of what this story actually means, including a few from Benjamin himself. The most common is the one in which he says that "It taught me that form and content, veil and what is veiled, are the same." Then, some years later, he added: "They (the present and the pocket) were one - and, to be sure, a third thing too: the sock into which they had been transformed." This may have been the reason why, in some of Benjamin's' stories, there is something (like a dwarf) hiding in something else (like a ball, or automaton). In a similar manner, in what most people may have seen as 'the battle of icons,' the one between Jashari and Legija, when trying to determine what is the essence of it, and who may have won - as victory has to be the outcome of the battle - all of a sudden we discover that both Jashari and Legija vanished into thin air, and that there is only the image of Elvis, appearing 'out of nowhere' to answer on our inquiry...

But it seems that the 'sock story' doesn't end here.
The Applause

The same may actually have happened with the whole event around the ‘Exception.’ It was supposed to be the exhibition of young artists from Pristina; but, eventually, there was no exhibition (it was never opened), and there were none of the artists from Pristina around (this is a different affair altogether, which also seems very important to be analyzed, not on this occasion, though) - anyhow, what emerged as ‘existing’ at the end was RUK!, an ad-hoc initiative of self-proclaimed ‘workers in culture’ of Belgrade’s’ contemporary critical art scene (and, for the record, of which I was a sort of the auxiliary part of). RUK! felt that the attack on the autonomy of the institution of art from the side of fascists and ultra-nationalists had to be countered by the organized response of the united members of what is perceived as ‘the field of culture.’ And, truly enough, there was no attempt, not even a symbolic one, to ‘protect’ the exhibition and its producers by any formal institution - the police did the legal minimum of keeping ‘the situation’ under control, in a way they have seen ‘appropriate.’ Their tactics point to the possibility that they allowed for ‘controlled detonation’ through allowing the destruction of Maliqis work to happen inside the gallery, in order to prevent a wider escalation of such an overcharged atmosphere onto the streets outside. This clearly demonstrates that they related to the works in the gallery as to a ‘non-art,’ denying themselves their own policing function, which in this discourse would be to protect the art by all means, both in a symbolical and historical/material sense. But, in this order of things, the first instance has to be the place from where the canonization is being conducted; an instance of power, walking around and pointing the finger at whatever, saying "This is art. And this. This is not. This is also not..." Police walk behind, taking notes, making lists of orders, and then delegating forces around the things marked as ‘art,’ so as to police them. Regarding this particular event, the very place from where such canonization should arrive was perceived as powerless, or wrong, or plainly ‘outside the system’; so the police decided on their own that it is not ‘the art’ but ‘public order’ which they are in charge of protecting in this case - in other words, the police refused to take down notes in which the image of Jashari, or the other images and objects encompassed by this exhibition, could be designated as ‘art.’ This denial of function continued with the police insisting that the exhibition can not be opened and that the rest of the ‘objects’ should be removed from the space as soon as possible, as they can not ‘guarantee the safety’ of the organisers, visitors and works - a decision really, to which the Kontekst gallery had to comply with. Again, the police refused to accept that this event could be canonized into ‘the exhibition,’ and that those ‘things’ could be verified as ‘art.’ So RUK! decided that through their wider joint initiative, involving some ‘more established’ and perceived-as-powerful ‘workers in culture,’ another and more successful attempt should be made towards achieving the position of power necessary to execute this canonization.
But, the rest of the official 'institutions' did not bother to fulfill even their 'functional minimum,' not even in at least a form of communiqué, a statement, a condemnation of violence and/or a call for the exhibition to be open and accessible - which may look odd, as the unofficial leadership of RUK! itself consisted of people who were in prominent positions at the Ministry of Culture, the National Museum of Contemporary Art, the University, powerful NGO's... Worth noting: all those high-profile public figures decided that they will not act from the position of their official functions, but from the position of their personal names. This is, again, something which seems to be very important to keep in mind and to analyze further in attempt to understand both the previous social constellation, the conditions of the emergence and the consequences of RUK!'s actions. Also, there is the moment of 'self-marginalization,' which is characteristic of not only this particular initiative, but of many others; however, on this occasion we will not explore that route. To continue: what followed, whatever RUK! contemplated at its several subsequent (and quite vivid) joint meetings and in numerous smaller-group/private exchanges, was a complete institutional silence. Yes there was a newspaper issued and the public conference organized at the end, but the final outcome clearly demonstrated that this group of people had no power to canonize what was once already rejected as 'a work of art.' This seemed to come as a bit of a surprise for some of the actors involved, as it appeared that they believed that their personal names had more power in the 'public discourse' on all things art; and there may be certain reasons for why they might have believed so, but which is a topic of separate analysis. Of course, it is so easy to be analytical post-festum, from the distance of historical perspective, once 'everything is over' - to be analytical in contemporaneity of the event is where the kung-fu is...
"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge - unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable."

Walter Benjamin: *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Spring 1940)

Translation by Harry Zohn (wbenjamin.org)
The Exception and State of Exception
Dušan Grlja

Calling the exhibition of young Albanian artists from Prishtinë (the capital of Kosovo) “Exception” and showing it in the two biggest cities in Serbia, Belgrade and Novi Sad, may seem at first glance quite appropriate. In a highly polarized situation – that of bringing the decades’ long conflict to a resolution by unilaterally declaring Kosovo as independent state or by the Serbian government’s firm contention that Kosovo remains an integral part of the internationally recognized state of Serbia – organising the kind of exhibition that brings together people from Kosovo and Serbia can undoubtedly be rendered as an exception. Nevertheless, the sequence of events that drove the (non)realization of the exhibition proved that the most of things that have happened are not exceptions, but almost rules of the game which could be called the peripheral politics of culture.

Exception: What’s in a Name?

Starting with the very title of the exhibition we immediately notice the incongruities of the organisers’1 conception of the show that, eventually, enabled the events to drive it in a direction that is far from being exceptional. Given that it is reasonable to presuppose that the title was initially made in English during the course of conceiving and discussing these art events with people from Prishtinë, the “translation” to Serbian language is, at the very least, strange. The show’s title “Exception” was translated to Serbian as “odstupanje.” Well, the exact translation of the English word “exception” into Serbian is “izuzetak,” meaning precisely an exemption from the rule or from the usual state of affairs. In contrast, the meaning of the word “odstupanje” is twofold. Firstly, it stands, in military terminology, for a tactical retreat of troops or, in everyday speech, simply, for stepping back, therefore actually meaning withdrawal. The organizers certainly did not have this in mind when they were planning the exhibition. Nevertheless, it is precisely this meaning that remained to haunt the event, since it was deferred a couple of times, and, finally, the Belgrade show actually never managed to open.

Secondly, “odstupanje” means aberration or, even, deviation. It is this second meaning that I had in mind – since Preluom kolektiv was invited to take part in the preparation of discussions that were supposed to happen in Belgrade in relation to the exhibition – when communicating with the curators of Kontekst gallery and some of our friends and colleagues from Prishtinë. I understood the title in the sense of diverging from the imposed political choices. Those imposed political choices are always forged, since they represent the binaries upon which a dominant political discourse is grounded. This means, giving the acute polarization of this whole situation, that one supposedly has to choose between the two prearranged political positions. Concretely, in this case, the “choice” was: either you are for the independence of Kosovo (meaning that you are Kosovar Albanian or a traitor of the “Serbian national essence”) or you are against it (meaning that you are loyal citizen of Serbia or a Kosovar traitor).2 It is clear that those “alternatives” serve precisely to restrict and enclose the field of political possibilities, since no matter how one chooses, s/he always finds her/himself within the positions delineated and determined by the dominant political discourse.

Now, this non-correspondence of the title of the exhibition and the Serbian translation of it is a symptom of a problematic field of operating as a local NGO funded by mostly European and US

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1 The exhibition was organized by NGOs Kontekst (www.kontekstgalerija.org) from Belgrade and the Institute of Flexible Cultures and Technologies Napon (www.napon.org) from Novi Sad, and the curators were Vida Knežević, Kristijan Lukić, Ivana Marjanović and Gordana Nikolić.

2 For some commentators the main culprit for producing the dominant Serbian political binary is the media. “In such critical macro-political conditions, mass media in Serbia reporting about the exhibition mostly failed, as they did many times before. With a precise political plan or just without responsibility for the public discourse, they played a remarkable role in empowering tensions and divisions of the public. They forced the public to decide: PRO (for Europe, for democracy, for tolerance, for internationalism) or CONTRA (which means for Serbia, for nationalism, for preserving history, for the national dignity, and anti Euro-Atlantic integrations, anti tolerance) the exhibition.” (Ana Vujanović, “No Exception!” in: Kontekst arhiva/archive 06/07/08, Kontekst, Beograd, 2008, p 168, available on-line on: http://www.kontekstgalerija.org/pdf_08/KontekstArhiva.pdf as well as a previous version of the text published in the newspaper Reartikulacija 3, available on-line on: http://www.reartikulacija.org/RE3/ENG/stateofexception3_ENG_excep.html)
foundations. It reflects the inescapable duality in working on a “project.” In order to get funding one has to formulate an application that follows the guidelines of the foundations, which are predominantly formulated in the spirit of contemporary neo-liberal politics of interculturalism—a term which is used by the official EU cultural policies. In the post-bipolar world the dominant political divisions are not running any more along the lines of the 20th century’s two paramount political ideologies, but are diversified by assigning them to specific and different cultural identities. The policies of interculturality aim to facilitate “meeting the Other,” getting informed on that “Other” in order to understand, appreciate and respect it, as well as to enable the communication of respective “Others” thus supporting the post-conflict reconciliation process of the formerly warring sides.

Therefore, what one really does with a “project” depends on the skill to present it exactly as those guidelines demand in order to obtain the necessary finances for producing it. In the concrete case of the exhibition “Exception,” this almost certainly meant to present the project as one that would enable the war-disrupted communication between the two supposedly singular cultures. The organisers of the project sincerely identified with this apparently noble and certainly perilous task, as it was clearly stated in the catalogue of the exhibition: “[...] it is not surprising that society in Serbia today does not know the Albanian culture and society in Kosovo, as it was the case in the past decades. A total blockade of information about the Albanians and partial about the Serbs from Kosovo in everyday media reporting in Serbia creates an unease feeling and it is not appropriate to speak of people who live there, which presents informational genocide of a kind. The idea of the ‘Exception’ exhibition is to, together with roundtables, presentations and publication in the forthcoming period, analyze certain facts that an average person from Serbia was not allowed or did not want to know. [...] What is in this case the field of art? The field of art is a place where, among other things, people talk about something that has to be talked about publicly, in media and parliament, and this is the issue of the past and the issue of the future of co-existence in this area, the issue of the very subjects.”

Now, if this project was conceived as entirely focused on the (re)installation of communication between the two cultures in the sense of getting informed about one another, then it would just blindly follow the aforementioned guidelines. The interculturalist scheme of bringing each other’s “Others” together is not actually such a progressive move—as it is always officially proclaimed to be—since, at the same time, it is only affirming those cultural identities as separate and incomparable “Others” which should just learn to tolerate and respect—in terms of their “cultural rights”—each other. The organizer’s concept that the exhibition should be accompanied with roundtables and panel discussions clearly shows that the planned events should have gone well beyond this interculturalist “paradigm of communication.” It was precisely within these discussions that a veritable exchange could be established on the grounds of elucidating the common problems, situations and strategies in the field of art and culture activism, as well as in

3 In their text on peripheral cultural industries Janović and Močnik give an outstandingly insightful description of the “independent cultural activists”: “The group of marginal culture-oriented agents is composed of various alternative cultural producers and audiences. They struggle in the inter mundo of contemporary cultural scene, practice ‘small business’ or masquerade as ‘socio-cultural’, parasite on ‘cultural diversity’ and ‘minorities’ policies, evade regulations that favour transnational oligopolies or invent spaces not yet regulated by the ‘free trade’ legislation. Common to all these alternative forms is their direct affirmation of the socio-cultural character of contemporary means of cultural production, and of the socially productive potential of contemporary communicational technologies able to create worldwide audiences without the mediation of private appropriation. In other words, alternative cultural practices suppress the separation between the individual and her or his sociality, they perform material liquidation of that ‘rapprochement, mediation, so typical of the 19th century and which made industrial capitalism possible. In this way, alternative practices directly confront and combat the endeavours of transnational capital privately to appropriate what has historically and materially already been socialised. [...] Policies of the third group create alternative spaces of socialisation and cultural production, while being simultaneously exposed to the pressures of economic marginalisation and legal criminalisation by the powers-to-be on one side, and to the processes of systemic recuperation and commercial exploitation on the other. [...]”


5 http://www.kontekstgalerija.org/pdf_08/odstupanje.pdf, p 19
general social and political terms. This was much more clearly stated by Vida Knežević, one of the curators of the Kontekst gallery, in a discussion with an Italian journalist, than in the catalogue of the exhibition: “[We want] to be an exception to the dominating prejudices, silences and taboos between Serbs and Albanians. This exhibit should have been our exception to what is happening here.” The point here was not only to discuss, but to discuss in order to elaborate, articulate and expand the collective material practices such as this whole exhibition-event envisaged. Now, this would precisely be a true exception in terms of practicing an active opposition to the dominant politics of culture.

On the Shores of State Politics

In spite of this emancipatory plan, the course of events progressively revealed that the chances for this kind of exception are close to none and that the whole thing produced not exceptional but regretfully expected effects, since the project ran aground on the shores of state politics. This was quite clear from the opening of the exhibition in Novi Sad, where one of the key-note speeches was held by a local politician in the midst of an electoral campaign for the presidency of Serbia. By allowing this to happen, the organisers in Novi Sad opened up the floodgates for a type of politicization of the exhibition that they were surely not aiming at. This opening event immediately fell prey to the media’s unappeasable appetite for scandals and to politician’s urgent need to stir up the worn-out masses and absentee voters in a fifth consecutive attempt to make the elections successful. It also made a perfect target for nationalist outbursts of “righteous anger” for “tearing Kosovo from its primeval Serbian orthodox fabric.” After Novi Sad, it became clear that the Belgrade exhibition that was supposed to be opened on February the 7th in Kontekst gallery will be just a demonstrative exercise for rehearsing a response to the “real thing” – the unilateral declaration of Kosovo independence that happened just ten days later.

The curators, faced with the canceling of planned discussions – since the Prishtinë collaborators had an reasonable change of heart regarding their presence in Belgrade – and with the obviously worsening series of events which confirmed that the Kontekst gallery would be the target of the extreme right organizations, resorted for help and support from one part of the circles that were called from the mid-1990s “Other Serbia.” It was this move that finally sealed the political trajectory of the exhibition, since it precisely suited the dominant Serbian political binary: pro-European democratic forces vs. nationalist-chauvinist ones. Thus the stage was set for the inevitable: the exhibition could not be opened since a crowd of young members of “Obraz” (“Honor”) was protesting in front of the gallery while inside some people – members of the Serbian Artist Association and the Association of Refugee and Exiled Serbs from Kosovo – took over the microphone from the organizers and tore down Dren Maliqui’s piece “Face to Face,” which led the Commanding Officer of the police forces present to state that they could not guarantee any more the safety of the event, so the gallery should be closed immediately. In the absence of Albanian guests from Kosovo, this event turned out to be precisely a clash of the

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5 It turned out that some of the organizers and collaborators had an almost naïve opinion that the artworks themselves can supplement that: “Essentially, reactions of hatred and blind destruction were triggered by the fact that Serbian cultural racism could not bear having its stereotype of ‘uncivilized Albanians’ be strongly contrasted, and therefore nullified, by perfectly articulated artistic positions of Prishtina’s contemporary art scene.” (“Exception Proves to be a Rule: A Report by Eduard Freudmann and Ivana Marjanović” in: Kontekst arhiva/archive 06/07/08, Kontekst, Beograd, 2008, p 175, available online on: http://www.kontekstgallery.org/pdf_08/KontekstArhiva.pdf).


7 The term “Other Serbia” gained currency especially after the 1996/97 mass protests against the Milošević regime that lasted continually for three months all over Serbia. It was the moment of full-scale manifestation of the existence of this “Other,” pro-Western, civic and democratic Serbia diametrically opposed to the “official” Milošević’s Serbia, the “First Serbia” characterized in whole Western political discourse as “authoritarian,” “totalitarian” and “nationalist-chauvinist.” This “Other Serbia” comprised the parties of the opposition and the NGO sector that boomed during the 1990s, but, in political sense, it was quite diverse. It ranged from traditional liberals to nationalists that were more radical than Milošević himself. The aftermath of those protests and, ultimately, the “October the 5th Revolution” in 2000 marking the down-fall of Milošević, showed that those supposedly diametrically opposed representations of Serbia were, in fact, mirror-images and that the changes were almost exclusively superficial – the same methods of criminal privatizations, gang-like organizing and shameless exploitation were given a plastic surgery that strived to make Serbia’s image more appealing to the EU and the “international community.”
“defenders of Serbian national pride” and the “traitors” to it – the compassionate “defenders” of civic conduct, civil rights and tolerance for the “Other.”

The whole incident quickly became obsolete to the media and public opinion in general, since a Kosovar declaration of independence was coming soon, however some groups and initiatives demanded that the official institutions enable the (re)opening of the exhibition. One of those initiatives came from the group RUK (Radnici u kulturi [Workers in Culture]) that comprised all the curators, and who even published a newspaper entitled “The 7th of February.” Putting aside the obvious issue of being self-proclaimed as workers in culture⁸ – since some of the members were or still are employed in high-ranking positions within various cultural state apparatuses, e.g. a consultant for the Minister of Culture, the Dean of Belgrade University of Arts or the chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art) – the main objection to RUK’s newspaper is that it enclosed the problems of the exhibition within a very limited framework of Belgrade and its art-and-culture scene. This narrowing-down was the outcome of the editors’ decision to treat the exhibition as yet to be opened and to focus exclusively on the violent incident of the (non)opening itself.⁹ It meant that there was no mention of the events in Novi Sad, which were crucial for the actual politicisation of the exhibition¹⁰, and that there could not be any discussion of the curator’s concept or about the artworks with the artists from Kosovo, since the exhibition could not be seen.

For the RUK group and its newspaper – as in the most of the critical reactions – the main actor culpable for the closing down, i.e. not opening, of the exhibition was the Serbian state: its governmental, administrative and policing bodies. In taking the reaction or, more precisely, the lack of reaction on the side of Serbian state apparatuses as the target of criticism, the main point was an appeal to the rights of art(ists) to be defended by the authorities if verbally or physically threatened¹¹. Now, this is an objection directed at the state’s incapacity to uphold and defend the basic civil rights of its citizens.¹² The ultimate consequence of it is that all we can do is to appeal and wait for the action of state apparatuses in order to restore the “normal” and, also, normative circumstances in which the autonomy of art is respected and officially enforced. Moreover, the emphasis on the enforcement of civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution and the critique of the state for not doing that have effectively situated RUK at one side of the dominant political dualism. One of the contributions in the newspaper even conflates the “progressive” citizens with the “reactionary” ones.¹³ Now, this opposition of “progressive” and “reactionary” citizens is precisely mirroring the abovementioned dominant Serbian political

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⁸ In the very “The 7th of February” newspaper, within a section where different professionals answered to a questionnaire regarding their perceptions of the event, their presence or absence and their motives for it, was published a “class-based” critique by Nebojša Milikić – a program coordinator for Belgrade’s cultural center Rex (a part of B92, which had been privatized and nowadays is one of the largest Serbian media enterprises). Milikić states: “It is very odd that a group of managers in culture calls themselves workers in culture. This is a case of a theatrical redressing of the bourgeoisie in working-class costumes […]” [Nebojša Milikić in: “Everyone speaks…” The 7th of February, p 6 [translation mine]]. What Milikić – undersigned as a worker in culture – oversees is that his ouvrierism is precisely a bourgeois device for repenting the sins of actually occupying the structural place reserved for the members of the ruling class.

⁹ “The first issue of this newspaper aims to reconstruct and analyse the incident of the interrupted opening of the exhibition as well as the politics behind it. At the empty place of the exhibition remained the incident!” (“Why the Newspaper of Workers in Culture?” the editorial in: The 7th of February, p 1 [translation mine])

¹⁰ Actually, if the events in Novi Sad hadn’t happen, the Belgrade exhibition in Kontekst would most probably have unfolded without any disruption – as it did in 2006 when Kontekst organized the first presentations of young artists from Kosovo – since those kinds of events are considered marginal, raise no significant public interest and pass by almost completely unnoticed.

¹¹ “Perhaps we can see the incident in the KONTEKST gallery as an alarm bell warning us that the white cube walls are not anymore a guaranteed shelter but an imagined one where we dream of freedom of the artistic expression….” [Dejan Sretenović, “Alarmni signal” (“Alarm Bell”) in: The 7th of February, p 5 [translation mine]].

¹² The editors of the RUK newspaper state: “The political space within the art is abolished, and the freedom of thought and expression guaranteed by the Constitution banned.” (“Why the Newspaper of Workers in Culture?” the editorial in: The 7th of February, p 1 [translation mine]). “From now on the indicator of the presence of human and political rights of the citizens of Serbia consists in the existence of an object that is the exhibition Exception. If the exhibition remains closed, the matrix of apartheid and civil war stays in power, and the citizens deprived of their human and political rights.” [Branimir Stojanović, “Tamo gde je bio Šiptar bice savremenja umetnost” (“There Where Shiptar Was, Contemporary Art Shall Be”) in: The 7th of February, p 3 [translation mine]].

¹³ Cf. Branimir Stojanović, op. cit.
binary, thus showing the RUK’s inability and, finally, incapacity to escape it, let alone to attempt to critically dismantle it.

For all these reasons the RUK effort – same as the most critical reactions – remains on the fringes of dominant politics, never actually managing to radically question it. The dominant politics uses those efforts in the same manner as it uses the extreme nationalist groups – just to create a functional political dichotomy within the constituency, to pitch the opposed positions against each other, and consequently to manage this conflict in favour of their own impunity and survival in power. The authorities allow such “extremist” groups to enter the public political scene in order to stage the “happening of people” and present it as a display of “general will.” In this way, the authorities create a situation in which they can only shrug their shoulders and say, “What can we do? This is evidently the will of a large portion of our constituency, and we, as their elected representatives, have to respect that.” This is certainly not an abdication of state power in the face of the “extremists,” since it actually forms a part of that power’s mechanisms. On the other hand, the authorities also feel obliged to justify their actions, or the absence of them, to the “international community” by actually stating: “We are for EU integrations and for the Rule of Law in terms of defending the civil rights of all our citizens, but we are unable to do anything since our constituency is still culturally backward and it will take time for the democratic culture and respect for other cultures and life-styles to take hold among the people.” This is precisely what completes the vicious circle of the dominant politics of culture, since it gives reason for further international funding for “cultivating” the people of peripheral areas and, accordingly, for implementing the official geo-political agenda.

State of Emergency and the Emergence of Identitary State

The RUK newspaper ends up with a blank page with only one line at the bottom of it: “The RUK group finds that the state of exception in contemporary art is on!” Taking the state of exception as the main explanatory notion became almost obligatory in the majority of critical writings concerning the (non)opening of the exhibition. Now, every modern state recognizes that there are moments and periods in which the situation – of natural disasters, of civil unrests or civil war, of declaration of war, etc. – necessitates some extraordinary measures to protect and, eventually, restore the given social order. A state of emergency is, then, a governmental declaration that may suspend certain normal functions of the government itself, extend the competences of executive power, declare martial law and, therefore, effectively suspend the constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties (especially the habeas corpus).

The term “state of exception” (re)gained global currency in relation to the events of 9/11 and the subsequent George W. Bush’s declaration of “war on terrorism.” Since it proved to be a permanent tool in both domestic and foreign policy of the US, the critics of it sought parallels with another historical period when the state of exception was also permanent – Adolf Hitler’s raise to power in the Weimar Germany and the subsequent Nazi government. Some theorists even proposed to treat the state of exception as a form of governance characterized by suspension of the democratic legal process in a favor of extra-judicial state violence against specified groups. Guantánamo is an obvious example of such governance that results in the prosecution and incarceration of the “threatening elements.” Authorities declare such “elements” to be deprived of their legal status, making them thus – to use a well-known expression from the French revolution – hors la loi.

It is precisely this extra-judicial encroachment of the state upon a certain individuals or groups that raise the post-humanist voices against the violation of the “sacred” human rights. Almost immediately, the old Cold-War device of totalitarianism is summoned to do its work once again.
by offering itself as a theoretic-political ground for critique. Even such an esteemed radical leftist as Giorgio Agamben seems to confirm this perspective: “We can define modern totalitarianism as the institution, by way of a state of emergency, of a legal civil war that permits the elimination not only of political adversaries, but whole categories of the population that resist being integrated into the political system. Since then, the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including the so-called democratic ones.” Therefore, the state of exception and its form of legalized violence is seen as threading on the Rule of Law and destroying the autonomy of civil society as the most prominent achievements of the two centuries of constitutional democracy.

The whole conundrum surrounding the usage of this notion in critically analysing the event that prevented the exhibition to be opened leads precisely to a position welcomed by the dominant cultural-political agenda. It perceives local democracies as not yet ripe for the enforcement of tolerance, the culture of rational dialogue and truly democratic procedures of the Rule of Law as those so-called liberal democratic systems in the “civilized world” supposedly adopted a long time ago. Therefore, this position serves to establish and, eventually, perpetuate a supposed cultural and political “lagging behind” of the peripheral states, thus making the Western “liberal democracies” an etalon for all the others, and so allowing the big powers feel better about themselves. However, any constitutional parliamentary democracy comprises more or less hidden traits of this perpetual “state of exception,” since they form a constituent part of the exclusions upon which the contemporary nation-state or the principle of citizenship is based upon (more recent examples are the cases of the sans-papiers in France or, geographically closer, that of the “erased” in Slovenia).

The newly-formed nation-states in the region of ex-Yugoslavia emerged precisely from a type of situation that supposedly could only be resolved by the measures of the state of exception – in the case of Kosovo, the NATO bombing campaign entitled “Merciful Angel” could be rendered as such since it suspended one of the basic principles of international law, that of sovereignty. Moreover, it seems that the state of exception in this area really tends to be a permanent one. The point is that all those newly-formed states are based on the ethnic majority principle – constitutionally, Slovenia is the state of Slovenians, Croatia is the state of Croats, Serbia the state of Serbs etc. making none of them a state for all their citizens regardless of ethnicity. Not only for that reason those nation-states could be termed as identitary states. Since none of them is ethnically and religiously homogenous, there are always “others” – various minorities – that should be integrated into the existing political and judicial structures or, conversely, declared hors la loi.

Now, the only available way for those “others” to be heard is to appeal to their own specific identity or “culture.” If they manage to present themselves within the dominant discourse as a case of exception then they fall under the multiculturalist “politics of recognition” as a particular minority whose rights should be acknowledged. If not, then they suffer from the state’s extra-judicial violence as in the permanent state of exception. “When the self-submission to a presumed universality succeeds, the particularity of the subordinated discourse becomes identity, and is thus culturalised. Culturalisation is how an eventual excess of sociality is tamed, controlled, reduced. When the operation fails, the excess cannot be mastered – it has to be made illegal, by illegitimate force, if necessary.”

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17 “[...]The exhibition’s non-protection is the continuation of the state of exception in Serbian public space after the overthrow of the Milošević regime in 2000.” (Exception Proves to be a Rule: A Report by Eduard Freudmann and Ivana Marjanović, “loc. cit.)
18 The following argument is developed in: Nikola Janović and Rastko Močnik, “Three Nexal Registers: Identity, Peripheral Cultural Industry, Alternative Cultures,” op. cit.
19 Ibid., p 15
It is precisely these processes of culturalisation\textsuperscript{20} that form the veritable global context of the exhibition. Culturalisation stands not only for the displacement of political struggles from the modern sphere of politics into the dispersed field of competing “cultural options,” but also for culturalisation in the sense of learning, accepting and applying the vehicles of “culture” for conflict solving by using culture’s allegedly non-violent, symbolical mechanisms.\textsuperscript{21} Therefore, culturalization playing an important role in today’s neo-liberal capitalist system – that of pacifying and neutralising contemporary social antagonisms, the ones which the exhibition was supposed to bring into focus.

\textsuperscript{20} The notion of culturalization gained certain currency mainly through the writings of Boris Buden and Rastko Močnik. “What, at a first glance, seemed a ruthless occupation of the cultural sphere by the economic sphere, what seemed to be the destruction of culture by the logic of commodification – actually establishes an autonomous cultural sphere as a collage, as a Sargasso Sea of free floating bits and pieces of what used to be mechanisms of social cohesion that had to yield under the onslaught of free economy and its organised repression (WTO, IMF, WB etc.). What really vanishes between triumphant economy and emerging cultural diversity is the political sphere. Consequently, it is not the suppression of the cultural sphere by the sphere of economy (or the threat that this may happen), as the advocates of ‘cultural exception’ want us to believe, that is the most fascinating socio-structural event of our time. It is the disappearance of the political sphere – or, more precisely, its transformation into various branches of ‘management’ of society. Political parties no more represent social groups and their presumed interests, they are all together, as fractions of one and the same political apparatus, involved in the management of the whole of the society and, merging with administrative apparatuses and apparatuses of ‘governmentality’, they reproduce the effect of social totality. […]”

\textsuperscript{21} “[C]ulturalisation of political questions is not a forced, if inadequate, response of political forces that are denied legal existence – it is induced by the very transformation of the legal political apparatus itself. And hence it is ‘productive’ […] it is productive up to the point that certain states themselves (or entities that are considered as such) can presently exist as merely ‘cultural’ constructions.” (Nikola Janović and Rastko Močnik, “Three Nexal Registers: Identity, Peripheral Cultural Industry, Alternative Cultures,” http://www.pozitiv.si/petrovaradintribe/pages/Rastko-Nikola-PolicyBook%5B1%5D.doc, pp. 11-12).

\textsuperscript{22} “[C]ulturalization exceeds the simple translation of political issues to cultural ones. Culturalization is also a “school of culture”: the education, cultivation, and breeding of subjects for the dominant culture. “Culture” is, therefore, only one moment in the ideological education or, better yet, formation (the German word Bildung encompasses both of meanings) of the ‘popular masses’ – properly speaking, of the subjects (in both senses of this term in English) of the capitalist order. The culture of tolerance, the culture of communication, environmental culture, digital culture, etc. are all neo-liberal forms of a new social literacy – what Althusser called savoir-faire (know-how-to-do).” (Dušan Grlja and Jelena Vesić, “The Neo-liberal Institution of Culture and the Critique of Culturalization,” http://eipcp.net/transversal/0208/prelom/en)
On the Exhibition “Incidents of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary” and the Attack on the Exhibition

Balca Ergener

Narratives can make us understand.
Photographs do something else: they haunt us.
Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others

On September 6-7 1955, a large-scale attack targeted Greek, Armenian and Jewish citizens of Turkey living in Istanbul.1 Approximately 100,000 people organized in coordinated gangs of twenty-thirty committed acts of violence in neighbourhoods and districts where Istanbul’s non-Muslim population was mostly concentrated.2 Using various previously acquired tools (i.e. stones, levers, logs, shovels, saws, welding machines) residences and shops were ruined and pillaged; their contents wrecked, thrown into the streets, trailed behind vehicles; and churches, community schools and cemeteries vandalized. The attacks comprised a key reason for the subsequent large-scale migration of non-Muslims from Turkey, especially that of the Greek Orthodox community. On the same dates in İzmir, attacks targeted not only shops, homes and churches belonging to the Greek community, but also the Greek Consulate, and in Ankara mass student rallies supporting the attacks in Istanbul were organized.

On September 6, 2005, an exhibition titled “Tümamiral Fahri Çoker’in Arşivinden: Ellinci Yılında 6-7 Eylül Olayları” [From the Archives of Rear Admiral Fahri Çoker: the Events of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary] was organized at Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları in İstanbul.3 The exhibition showcased previously unreleased photographs taken during the events along with documents evidencing high-level state involvement in their planning. It also displayed information and testimonies quoted from a study by Dilek Güven that had been recently published, providing the most comprehensive analysis of the incidents to date within a framework of homogenized nation-state building and socio-economic policy: Cumhuriyet Dönemi Azınlık Politikaları ve Stratejileri Bağlamında 6-7 Eylül Olayları [The Events of September 6-7 in the Context of Turkey’s Minority Policies and Strategies]. The opening of the exhibition was attacked by a group of 20-30 militant nationalists. Upon entering the gallery, in protest of the exhibition, the attackers hurled eggs on some photographs, ripped up and threw some photographs out of the windows.

In this paper, I will reflect on the significance of publicly exhibiting these photographs previously seen only by a handful of people along with archival documents and Dilek Güven’s research, and I will discuss the attack on the exhibition in this framework. Like written documents, photographs can serve as evidence – a function that should not be underestimated – but what other significance and function can exhibiting and viewing these photographs have? This will constitute the central question of my inquiry.

The Incidents of September 6-7, 1955

Rumours and warnings of an action against non-Muslims in Istanbul had begun to circulate weeks in advance. On September 6, state radio announced a bomb-attack on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s birthplace in Thessalonica, and the popular evening paper İstanbul Ekspres announced the incident in two separate editions. (Previously, on the night of September 5, a bomb was set off in the garden of the Turkish Consulate in Thessalonica, adjacent to the house where Mustafa Kemal was born. The damage was limited to broken windows. Greek authorities arrested and prosecuted as suspects Oktay Engin, a Turkish secret service operative studying law in Greece on a Turkish state-funded scholarship, and Hasan Uçar, the security guard of the consulate. Additionally, the Consul General and the Vice Consul were accused of instigating and instructing

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1 I have gathered the details of the incidents from Dilek Güven’s study; Dilek Güven, Cumhuriyet Dönemi Azınlık Politikaları ve Stratejileri Bağlamında 6-7 Eylül Olayları (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2005).
2 These were Beyoğlu, Kurfürst, Şişli, Nişantaşı, Eminönü, Fatih, Eyüp, Bakirköy, Yesilköy, Ortaköy, Arnavutköy, Bebek, Kadıköy, Kuzguncuk, Çengelköy and the Princes’ Islands.
3 Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları is an art venue which primarily hosts exhibitions of visual art, documentary and activist photography as well as documentary and film screenings and discussions.
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In the afternoon of September 6, The Association of Turkish Cyprus (KTC), having as its agenda “defending the Turkish minority in Cyprus against the United Nations and other organizations, and organizing country-wide protests,” along with some student organizations linked to this association, organized a protest rally in Taksim, Istanbul. Following the rally, attacks began on previously identified and in some cases already marked locations in various neighbourhoods in Istanbul. The attackers included Istanbulites as well as people brought from other cities, and they provoked other members of the public to join in by appealing to the question of Cyprus and the general “aversion to non-Muslims.” The security forces merely watched, failed to intervene even in situations which could be easily prevented, and in some cases, aided and abetted the attacks. According to court records, “in Istanbul 4214 residences, 1004 shops, 73 churches, 1 synagogue, 2 monasteries, 26 schools and 5317 other venues including factories, hotels, bars, etc. were attacked.” The fact that cases of burglary, injury and murder were relatively few considering the magnitude of the attacks is interpreted as an indication that the attackers were instructed to refrain from such actions. There were 300-600 people—including attackers – wounded, 15 deaths according to the Helsinki Watch report and 11 deaths according to the Turkish media, and 60 (reported) cases of rape. Martial law was proclaimed at night in an attempt to quell the uprising, though in some areas the attacks continued for several days. Some of the perpetrators were arrested and prosecuted in closed military trials (three in Istanbul and one in each of the other two cities). Most suspects were released by the end of 1956.

In his initial statements, the then-prime minister Adnan Menderes claimed that the acts of violence that took place on September 6-7 in Istanbul and Izmir were patriotic and “自发的” reactions to the news items in the national media. The first of these was the news concerning the bombing of Mustafa Kemal’s house in Thessalonica. And the second was an article in the daily newspaper Hürriyet stating that a Greek attack on Turks was imminent in Cyprus and that there were “plenty of Greeks in Istanbul whom we could attack.” Menderes also stated that even though the government was informed of the plans to hold demonstrations, they did not expect a reaction of such proportions. Shortly thereafter, the government assigned guilt to “communist provocateurs” and on September 7, an arbitrarily drawn list of 48 people who had nothing to do with the events, but who had been under surveillance due to their leftwing activities, were arrested and not released until the end of the year.

In her book, Dilek Güven draws on documentary evidence and testimonies to demonstrate that people involved in the organization and execution of the incidents of September 6-7 included the then-president Celal Bayar, prime minister Adnan Menderes and other members of the ruling Democratic Party (DP), secret service operatives, and members of KTC, student organizations and labour unions instructed by governmental and state actors. In the trials held in Istanbul, no members of the government or the secret service were prosecuted in relation to the attacks, and KTC members suspected of involvement were acquitted. However, the Yassiada Tribunals, held after the 1960 military coup, convicted Bayar, Menders and Foreign Affairs Minister Zorlu of instigating the events, in addition to other crimes. Güven points to the Cyprus talks held in the United Kingdom at the time as one of the reasons for state and DP involvement in organizing the attacks: a Turkish “reaction was necessary” in order to secure support for the Turkish side in the

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4 Dilek Güven gives an account of what followed the prosecution of these four people by the Greek authorities: “On 17 July 1956, the Turkish ambassador in Athens threatened to shut down the Turkish Consulate in Thessalonica and the Greek Consulate in Istanbul. As a result, charges against the Consul General and Vice Consul were dropped, and Uçar and Engin were released pending trial. Engin had been promised financial support and a good post in return for his service. The Turkish Consul in Komotini / Gümülcine intervened to enable the repatriation of Engin on 22 September 1956. Engin was appointed to a municipal post upon personal instruction by Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and Istanbul Governor Fahrettin Kerim Gökay. After undertaking various duties for the secret service, he became district governor and later governor in the city of Nevşehird.” (Güven, pp. 71-2) Consul General Mehmet Ali Balin, Vice Consul Mehmet Ali Tekinal, Oktay Engin and the security guard Hasan Uçar were tried on charges of “acquiring bombs and causing explosion in the garden of the Consulate General in Thessaloniki” in the special military tribunal (Yassiada Tribunals) formed after the 1960 coup d’état. All four were acquitted.

5 Güven, p. 57.

6 6-7 Eylül Olayları Fotoğraflar-Belgeler Fahri Çokar Arşivi (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2005), p. ix.

7 Güven, p. 3.
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talks. Güven also explains that DP had a vested interest in distracting the public with foreign affairs at a time of turbulent internal politics and economic difficulties, while bolstering its control by means of martial law and censorship. However, Güven argues that an explanation based solely on the socio-economic and political conditions of the day is not sufficient, and provides an analysis of the events of September 6-7 as a perpetuation of the official policy towards non-Muslim citizens since the foundation of the Republic, and as part and parcel of attempts to create a homogenized nation-state and a national bourgeoisie. Her approach makes it possible to reflect on the events of September 6-7 in relation to other instances of policies of discrimination and assimilation which non-Muslims and other minorities have historically been subjected to, rather than as an isolated instance for which the (duly overthrown and convicted) DP government alone was responsible.

The Exhibition

The exhibition at Karşı Sanat displayed a selection of photographs from the personal archives of the late retired Rear Admiral Fahri Çoker who had served as the presiding judge in Beyoğlu District Martial-Law Court, one of the three such courts established in Istanbul immediately after the events of September 6-7. Çoker had donated these previously unreleased photographs to the History Foundation of Turkey (Tarih Vakfı) and willed that they be made public only after his death. The originals were small black and white prints. Karşı Sanat reproduced them in large format for the exhibition. In addition to Dilek Güven’s study, another book published by the History Foundation to coincide with the exhibition was 6-7 Eylül Olayları Fotoğrafar-Belgeler Fahri Çoker Arşivi (The Incidents of 6-7 September Photographs-Documents, the Fahri Çoker Archive), which includes a biography of Fahri Çoker, all of the photographs and documents that he donated to the foundation, and a foreword by Dilek Güven. The exhibition was co-organized by Dilek Güven, Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları and the History Foundation, with support from Dr. Ayhan Aktar, Helsinki Citizens Assembly and the Human Settlement Association.

During her research, Güven studied the photographs in the History Foundation archive, and identified the locations in many of them. This information was also included in the above-mentioned book. In my interview with Güven, she said that her main motive in organizing this exhibition was to reveal the existence of these photographs by exhibiting them publicly so as to stop them from “disappearing” in any way. I would argue that the desire to expose the photographs and invite others to become witnesses so as to prevent their cover-up is quite significant when thinking through the possible meanings of the attack on the exhibition.

The attack on the exhibition

The attack on the 2005 exhibition had obvious similarities to the original events of September 6-7. The venue had secured a permit for the exhibition from the Governorship of Istanbul in advance. On the day of the opening, approximately two hundred police officers were positioned across the street from the exhibition space. Officers in plain clothes were placed inside the gallery. Two hours before the opening, Kemal Kerinçsiz walked into the gallery with two young

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8 This description of the attack is based on Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları Director Feyyaz Yaman’s account.
9 Currently Kemal Kerinçsiz is a defendant in the Ergenekon trial, charged with “membership of a terrorist organization” and “inciting the public to an armed uprising against the government.” Previously he had served in the same trial as the legal counsel of retired colonel Müzaffer Tekin, who is accused of planning the 2006 gun-attack on a high court which left one judge dead, and three bomb attacks on the daily newspaper Cumhuriyet. Some of the former “activities” of Kerinçsiz are as follows: “In October 2005, Kerinçsiz appealed the sentence that Hrant Dink received for ‘insulting Turkishness,’ his objection being that it was a low-end sentence. He filed a complaint against Orhan Pamuk for ‘denigrating the army.’ He participated in the campaign to expel the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul to Greece. In December 2005, freedom of expression charges were brought against journalists İsmet Berkan, Erol Kav回事oğlu, Murat Belge, Haluk Şahin and Hasan Cemal, as well as Agos journalists Hrant Dink, Aydı̇n Engin, Serkis Seropyan and Arat Dink—all upon complaints filed by Kemal Kerinçsiz. During Pamuk’s trial, Kerinçsiz’s group held a banner that proclaimed Pamuk and his supporters ‘sons of missionaries.’ In January 2006, Kerinçsiz was part of a group protesting the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and its cross-finding ritual held annually on the Golden Horn. Their slogans included ‘Fuck off patriarchy’ and ‘Istanbul is Turkish, will remain Turkish.’ In June 2006, upon a complaint filed by Kerinçsiz, charges were brought against novelist Elif Şafak for ‘insulting Turkishness.’ Kerinçsiz and his group protested Armenian Supreme Patriarch Karekin II’s visit to Heybeliada (one of the Princes’ Islands), during which a protestor from Kerinçsiz’s gang reportedly assaulted an elderly woman. In July
men carrying a parcel containing Turkish flags on thick wooden sticks. They “inspected” the gallery and walked out. Later, the opening was disrupted by two people shouting and loudly reciting poetry, announcing to the visitors and journalists present that the exhibition misrepresented the events and omitted what the Turks had suffered in Cyprus, Western Thrace and Crete. Afterwards, a group of 20-30 people including Ramazan Kırık10 and Levent Temiz11, former youth leader of the nationalist party, walked into the main hall. They distributed pamphlets, threw eggs on the photographs, and shouted slogans such as “Turkey is Turkish, will remain Turkish,” “death to traitors,” “love it or leave it,” “why not the pictures from Cyprus but these,” and “don’t defend those who set fire to Atatürk’s house.” The organizers first alerted the plainclothes police officers when the two people started shouting, but no measures were taken. Visitors who were standing on the balcony immediately signalled to the police teams in front of the building when the attackers began to tear the photographs and throw them out of the windows, but it took the police about fifteen minutes to go upstairs and intervene. Following the attack, Karşı Sanat director Feyyaz Yaman gave testimony four times in various police stations and court houses, and identified three suspects who had been detained. However, the ensuing trial, framed solely in terms of “attack against property,” is inconclusively underway with only a single defendant who had not even been involved in the attack. It is legally impossible to file a claim for another trial until the existing one is concluded.

In the interviews I conducted, Dilek Güven, Feyyaz Yaman and attack witness Mihail Vasilyadias (the editor of Greek-language newspaper Apoyeumatini published in Turkey) all stated that they did not take the attack on the exhibition seriously at the time due to the small number of attackers, and the strong public support the exhibition received. In the end, the exhibition was visited by a large number of people, the visitors’ book was filled with pages of praise, there was good media coverage of the exhibition, and the attack was widely condemned. Dilek Güven stated that the most interesting outcome for her was that for the first time, the press, including mainstream papers, wrote that the events of September 6-7 were organized with support from the state, the secret service and the government. Furthermore, it was obvious that the target of...

2006, TESEV’s (the Turkish Economic and Social Research Foundation) press conference announcing the publication of their report on forced migration was violently disrupted by a group of people who had attended the conference in Kerinçsiz’s company. Kerinçsiz sat back and watched, and later declared to the media that “the statements made by TESEV in this conference are identical to PKK’s declarations. Hence, naturally, the public’s reaction is a legitimate one.” (Erhan Üstündag, “Kerinçsiz İlk Kez ‘Etnik Ayrımcılığı’ն Hasabı Vercek,” Bianet, 28 July 2008, http://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/108635-kerincciz-ilke-etnik-ayrilmciligini-hesabi-verecek, retrieved on 13 August 2009.) Also, Kerinçsiz was “known as the lawyer who secured a court order banning the conference ‘Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire’ which was initially scheduled for May 2005 but later postponed to 23 September upon the intervention by Minister of Justice Cemil Çiçek.” (Nilüfer Zengin, “‘Bir Hukukunun Milliyeti’ Olarak Portresi: Kemal Kerinçsiz,” Bianet, 23 January 2008, http://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/104360-bir-hukukunun-milliyeti-olarak-portresi-kemal-kerincciz, retrieved on 13 August 2009.)

“According to a news article published in the daily Tercüman prior to the attack, Kırık stated that the exhibition and the panel discussion were organized with the aim to provoke: ‘This Soros-sponsored foundation is trying to create controversy in the country by distorting the events of 1955. Their aim is to create a new controversy in the country, and to secure reparations. In short, it is to create a new controversy in the country by distorting the events of 1955, to prove that Turks are barbarians, and to secure reparations. In short, it is to create a new controversy in the country. We oppose both the exhibition and the panel’. The article also noted that the Turkish Union of Non-Governmental Organizations, which Kırık is affiliated with, had petitioned the president, the prime minister, the minister of justice, the minister of interior, the president of the Higher Education Council, and the head of the General Directorate of Foundations, calling on them to ban the exhibition and the panel.” (Kemal Özmen, “‘6-7 Eylül Sırısında Saldırılar,” Bianet, 6 September 2005, http://www.bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/66620-6-7-eyl-ergenekon-ve-merkez-saldirilari, retrieved on 13 August 2009.) Kırık had also disrupted the “Incidents of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary” panel organized at Istanbul Bilgi University. Kırık’s other activities include the attack on TESEV’s press conference announcing the publication of their report, Coming To Terms with Forced Migration: Post-displacement Restitution of Citizenship Rights in Turkey. Also, like Kerinçsiz, Kırık was one of the people who tried to obstruct the conference on “Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Questions of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy.”


the attack was not the specific contents of the exhibition, but rather the fact that it concerned non-Muslim citizens of Turkey. Coming from people who seem to have developed a habit of targeting events of a similar kind, the attack was hardly shocking.

This attack on the photographic reproductions could be seen as a small-scale symbolic re-enactment of the 1955 events. This sense was certainly corroborated by the fact that the exhibition venue was located on İstiklal Avenue, where many of the exhibited pictures were taken and which was one of the most heavily damaged areas. A group of photographers, and members of the Fine Arts Association highlighted this symbolic significance of the attack in a press conference they held in front of the new reproductions that were put back up within a few days.  

The Photographs

As I have mentioned above, what makes these photographs unique is that unlike previously published images, what they show is not limited to the landscape of wreckage caused by the attacks, but they also map the emergence of the events from the very beginning. Photographs constitute “irrefutable” proofs to the presence of their contents at the very moment they were taken. Every photograph is made up of “natural” traces – traces of the light reflected from their contents – inscribed on film or digital memory. This is the result of a process in which the photographer, after having pushed the shutter release button, can no longer interfere.13 The photographs showcased in the exhibition render the attacks of September 6-7 undeniable and constitute key evidence for identifying the perpetrators.

Some of these photographs were taken by members of the secret service, and others by national and international journalists. Following the declaration of martial law on the evening of September 6, 1955, their publication was prohibited, and hence their national and international circulation prevented. Later they were used by security forces and courts to identify and arrest some of the attackers, as indicated by the pen-marks on some prints and the notes accompanying some images such as “X = Son of driver Aziz in Cihangir.”14 But more crucially, the photographs contain details evidencing the role of the state and state-sponsored institutions in the organisation of the events.

The selection exhibited at Karşı Sanat was carefully chosen from among a total of 246 photographs in the archive in order to give a chronological account of the events and to illustrate that the attacks were premeditated and organized. The series of images included in the exhibition (and in the book) begin with student groups assembling around Taksim, carrying Turkish flags and banners that read “Cyprus is Turkish.”15 We see that about forty people address the crowds, and it is documented that some of the same people deliver speeches at various locations. Later, we view the actions of people whom Dilek Güven calls “provocateurs” in her study – carrying flags, banners and portraits of Atatürk and Celal Bayar, they call on members of the public to participate in the attacks. Also, in order to avoid damage to their stores and property (i.e. car) people put up flags, “Cyprus is Turkish” banners or signs indicating that the

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13 The largest group condemning the attack consisted of 424 photographers who signed a common statement. Photographer Özcan Yurdalan, the initiator of this action and the spokesperson at the press conference, told me in an interview that they chose to call on the photographers to express their opposition individually rather than via the organizations they belonged to, and that this was important for protecting a medium where photographers express themselves and articulate their opposition. The statement speaks of the “conscience awakening” function of these photographs, as well as how they enable the remembrance of the “organised atrocity and aggression” they depict. The statement condemns violence, oppression and policies of creating a society of “uniform identity.” See http://www.fotografvakfi.org/turkce/haberlist.asp?haber_id=139. More recently, Fotograf Vakfı (Photography Foundation) and Galata Fotoğrafhanesi (Galata Photography House) Özcan Yurdalan is affiliated with undertook a similar action to protest the gendarmerie intervention in, and later a university-imposed ban on the photography exhibition on 8 March Women’s Day and the local elections, organised as part of the 6th UFAT Photography Festival. See: http://www.fotografvakfi.org/turkce/haberlist.asp?haber_id=226


15 6-7 Eylül Olayları Fotoğraflar-Belgeler Fahri Çoker Arşivi, p. x.

16 As described in 6-7 Eylül Olayları Fotoğraflar-Belgeler Fahri Çoker Arşivi.
Dilek Güven, these photographs reveal three key points: first, the workplaces were raided and damaged with exactly the same instruments and methods; second, the police remained passive; and third, the attire of the attackers indicated that many people were brought in from other cities. When I asked about the elegantly dressed women among the attackers, Güven said we could infer from their clothes that they probably had just walked out of a theatre or cinema, and decided to join in the ongoing pillage. This was one of the many types of reaction given by members of the public who had neither been instructed nor prepared for the attack: some took up axes and joined in the raid, some tried to help their neighbours.

Another terrifying detail documented in these photographs is the delight and contentment seen on the faces of the attackers. Some even posed for the cameras upon noticing the photographers. In my opinion, inferring from this that the photographs make us witnesses to a state of frenzy, is not a sufficient conclusion. Writing about the images of American soldiers torturing Iraqi detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison, Susan Sontag stated, “the horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken – with the perpetrators posing, gloating, over their helpless captives.” Sontag notes that this is rare in the history of photography. For example, photographs taken by German soldiers of the atrocities they were committing in Poland and Russia during the Second World War rarely ever included the perpetrators themselves. According to Sontag, pictures of torture in Abu Ghraib can be compared to pictures of white Americans posing in front of black victims of lynching, taken between the 1880’s and 1930’s: “The lynching photographs were souvenirs of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done. So are the pictures from Abu Ghraib.” I believe that a similar interpretation befits the photographs exhibited in Karşı Sanat, even though they do not show the victims and the atrocity they depict is of a different magnitude. As Mihail Vasilisadi told me in an interview, the photographs show that the attackers had no doubt that they were executing their “patriotic duty” and thus doing the right thing.

For all these reasons, the photography archive that Fahri Çoker donated to the History Foundation consists of important historical documents. Nevertheless, the view that making public, exhibiting or publishing these documents and photographs is not a political action in itself – because they are historical documents – fails to acknowledge the attempt to relate to truth and to the past by means of the exhibition and books. According to this view, it is as if these photographs and documents lay the past in front of our eyes in all its transparency and the organizers and visitors of the exhibition become passive viewers, as if these documents and photographs endowed with objectivity can claim their own place in history which in turn is understood as a totality of objective knowledge, and therefore allow September 6-7, 1955 to claim its place in history. And yet we should not forget that the pictures and documents in the archive cannot articulate a narrative on their own. Dilek Güven’s reconstruction of the incidents and her analysis of their background within a framework of various institutional policies constitute an important step in the attempt to dispel the ambiguity around the events and to begin making sense of them. In this way, the events of September 6-7, shunned by official history, denied and unspoken though its living witnesses abound, are remembered and spoken of, owing to the power of these photographs and testimonies. Furthermore, by making these pictures and documents public, the exhibition prevents their “disappearance” behind locked doors, as is the case with many archives in Turkey. In this sense, the attack on the exhibition could be seen as a reaction against exposing evidence for and breaking the silence around a crime which should have been kept hidden in collaboration with the state.

17 In his article about the exhibition Fatih Özgüven refers to the nostalgia for Beyoğlu as once upon a time a neighbourhood where people would go out only in their finest clothes, and write that the photographs “turn this nostalgia topsy-turvy.” (“Beyoğlu Nostaljisinin Çöküşü...,” Radikal, 15 September 2005. Available online: http://www.radikal.com.tr/Default.aspx?Type=RadikalYazarYazisi&ArticleID=757386&Yazar=FAT%DDH%20%DD%20%DCV EN&Date=16 02 2009, retrieved 13 August 2009.)
19 Ibid.
Meltem Ahska’s problematization of how power relates to memory and history in Turkey, and her discussion on the possibilities opened up by archives, can contribute to comprehending the aim of the exhibition as well as the attack that targeted it.** Meltem Ahska argues that the formation of modern nation-states occasions the emergence of archives as sites that preserve and publicize registers of memory. Archives establish the past as an “objective and authentic space” which in turn can be cited for the construction of history. The presumption maintained by positivist historians and official narratives that archival records consist of transparent and impartial documents, effectively “reduces the distance between power and truth.” Nation-states instrumentalize archives (by organizing, classifying and making them public in certain ways) for constructing official history, for governing the past and the present, and for legitimizing the present.

Yet, even though archives provide an “objective space” for the construction of history by preserving the traces of the past, historical generalizations can never fully account for the singularity of each archival record. Archives can be used to formulate different meanings in different contexts, and questions concerning what is preserved and what is not, how and in what kind of a narrative a record is made public, render archives “the sites of a political struggle for the present and the future.” According to Ahska, history can position singularities on a “common plane,” relativize them, and open up a space for the past which will not “oppress” the present, while memory allows us to call on singular experiences in an effort to make sense of the present. It is this mediation that archives can effect: “History provides a common plane on which singular experiences can be interconnected; but only when it is claimed by present memory does history become a living force.”**21 Singular and subjective memories, “the voices of others,” and “different demands for justice” contained in archives can be wrought into a narrative that challenges official history.

According to Ahska, in Turkey, where archives are damaged, left to rot and not made public, the present and the past are governed by the construction and maintenance of two discrete orders of truth: one which is “in appearance” and “for keeping up appearances,” presented to “foreigners,” and another consisting of “concealed” truths, conducts and possibilities that become shared secrets between the state and its citizens. In other words, on the one hand there is an “ossified” truth which does not allow for singularities, and on the other hand, there are practices that circumvent this without disturbing it. The singular remains unacknowledged unless it is in line with the general; what is “visible and experienced” does not constitute an evidence if it is at odds with official records and rules. And yet, there is always room for covert practices, which remain shared secrets. In fact, by means of the “deep state,” the Turkish state itself exercises its power within an additional order whose existence depends on the knowledge that official truth is in fact a keeping up of appearances. The destruction of archives serves this exercise of power and impairs memory:

When archives are damaged to such an extent that they can no longer answer today’s questions, our memory is crippled; it can no longer become relativized by coming into contact with “others” and their suffering, it can no longer access the vast universe of the sense of history. In other words, memory is not afforded a place in or a right to history. When the act of remembering fails to appropriate history, memory fails to gain public meaning and recognition, instead becomes suspect and disposable like archives.**22

Going back to the question of photography as an archival register, since the technological leap of photography at the beginning of the 20th century, almost every (known) social “event” and tragedy has been photographed by journalists, documentary photographers, surveillance mechanisms or amateurs. These photographic records are then transmitted by various media.
On the Exhibition “Incidents of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary” and the Attack on the Exhibition
Balca Ergener

and archived by various institutions. Photographs, and especially those that are striking and shocking (and it is usually photographs that meet this criteria which are circulated widely) leave lasting impressions on memory, so that most historical events are remembered through photographs which were published.\(^{23}\) It would be pertinent at this point to take into account both Susan Sontag’s and John Berger’s writings on photography as a means of communication, and think them in conjunction with Ahiska’s claim that archives can be organized so as to enable different constructions of the past.\(^{24}\) Photographs do not assist us much in understanding their contents, because they only provide a (momentary) glimpse of something that happened in the past. They rip their content out of temporal continuity and the context within which it occurred. This is why their meaning is ambiguous and multiple, inviting us to imagine and speculate beyond that which is visible. Captions and the context in which they are exhibited can narrow down the set of possible meanings and guide the viewer as to how the photographs should be read.

Clearly, when the photographs in question are of suffering, atrocity, war and poverty, “reality” is always much more complicated than what the photographs are able to show. Understanding what it is that we see and what it is that the photographs evidence, requires a comprehension of who caused what the picture shows, and in most cases, understanding the role of the means and methods of state-organized violence. Without this kind of inquiry, photographs become just another reminder of the evil and painful aspects of human nature and life. (According to Sontag this is indeed the fate of many photographs. The actual events and their causes are forgotten, all that remain are images fixed in memory.)\(^{25}\)

For all these reasons, I believe that it is very significant that the pictures, documents and oral testimonies were exhibited at Karşı Sanat along with Dilek Güven’s study (and that the book of the archive was published with Güven’s foreword). Photographs may seem to invite us to share the experience they depict; however, they only allow us to see a limited appearance of it from within another context and a certain distance. But at the same time, they bring events from what seems like a distant past and a remote place somewhat closer, render them familiar and thus can facilitate their association with the present. Mihail Vasiliadis told me that since he had witnessed the actual events of September 6-7 in Istanbul, the pictures on display did not have much of an effect on him. Still, he believed that they may assist viewers in imagining the fear of the victims who, not knowing that their attackers were instructed not to kill, were afraid that along with their homes, shops and other belongings, they would lose their lives. While the photographs and oral testimonies enable us to listen to and imagine to a certain extent the experience of the victims and witnesses, the book draws on the evidence in the photographs and the documents to provide a framework in which we can make sense of all of this.

This is when the exhibition venue becomes political. As I have tried to explain with reference to Sontag, when pictures of poverty, pain and atrocity are exhibited without such a framework, as they often are, the reaction of the viewer (if not already acquainted with the framework) will be limited to sympathy and perhaps sorrow. Sontag asks what to do when it is not possible for us to immediately intervene to stop the suffering and injustice we view in photographs, either because it is in the distant past or occurring in distant lands. Her answer is to contemplate, to be aware that we live in a world where these things have been experienced and continue to be experienced, to think about who caused the exhibited atrocities and how they can be brought to an end. Writing about the release of new photographs of a past event, as was the case in the exhibition discussed here, Sontag states: “... photographs help construct – and revise – our sense

\(^{23}\) Sontag writes that everybody who is fairly familiar with the Spanish Civil War can summon to mind Robert Capa’s photograph of a Loyalist soldier at the moment of death. In a similar way, prior to the release of the photographs discussed in this article, I believe the events of September 6-7 were remembered with the image of heaps of fabric and wreckage covering İstiklal Avenue. According to Sontag, one reason for this is, “in an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form of remembering it.” (Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 19-20.)


\(^{25}\) “Eventually the specificity of the photographs’ accusations will fade; the denunciation of a particular conflict and attribution of specific crimes will become a denunciation of human cruelty, human savagery as such.” (Regarding the Pain of Others, p. 109.)
of a more distant past, with the posthumous shocks engineered by the hitherto unknown photographs. Photographs that everyone recognises are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about.”

We could argue that this was the very aim of the exhibition “Events of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary.” Also, it is obvious that this is what the attacks targeting the exhibition and other similar events (such as the conference on “Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire” or TESEV’s press conference related to the publication on forced migration) were intended to prevent. It seems to me that the method of the attack on this exhibition, namely the damaging of the photographs, make it clear that the attack was meant to preserve the dual order of truth about which Ahıska writes. We can think that the photographs were attacked because as material evidence they make it impossible to deny what took place. And yet once made public, their destruction does not invalidate their evidentiary status. In this case, it does not even guarantee that they are seen by fewer people, because the original prints remain undamaged and can be infinitely reproduced. Moreover, some of them are already published online and have therefore entered a network of circulation the limits of which cannot be mapped. On that account, the damage inflicted on the reproductions is in fact a threat made to those who betrayed a national secret. It draws its power from the determination to preserve “truth” and official history as set out by the powers that be, unchallenged by both archives and memory, as illustrated by the attackers shouting “don’t defend those who set fire to Atatürk’s house,” in reference to a scheme drawn to provoke and legitimise the events of September 6-7, 1955.

Translated from Turkish by Başak Ertür
Slow Bullet II
Erden Kosova

The relation of contemporary art in Turkey with the political has been the focal point of some recent heated debates. The political tone which characterised and shaped the art practice from the second half of the nineties forward has become difficult to be sustained, or at least problematic due to some recent structural changes in the scene. The old constellation of artists, which was formed around a discursive cohesion, seems to be dispersed now and this loss of proximities has produced a slippery ground for approaching the political. Risking generalisations and reductions I will start with a chronological retrospection.¹

If we consider the formations of the artists who initiated the experimental artistic language of the eighties in Turkey, which evolved into the contemporary art production of the present, we see that most of them have been, in one way or another, involved in social mobilisations, political organisations in their schools or in direct affiliations with radical groups. At the same time we observe that these affiliations have not been resumed in the traumatic aftermath of the coup d’état of 1980 which suspended all political activities by brutal force. The social vacuum of that time created an empty mental state which paradoxically generated an urge for opening up a fresh ground, which in artistic terms triggered experimentalisation and occupation with epistemological problems of art production. Studies on the already established practices of art movements in the West such as Conceptual Art or Arte Povera have been the starting point for them. In this context, the trauma of the coup and the following discussions on the political agenda did not condition the content of these new practices – at least not directly.

Besides the difficulties in enunciating a political position in that period (with all complications of the defeat of the left), we also have to take into consideration the art historical context in local and global terms, in which artistic experimentations of the eighties were still not fully divorced from the mental traces of high modernism (or from counter artistic reactions to these traces and concentration on institutional critique). Hesitancies about the role of politicality within art practices partly stemmed from the conviction that convergence of political and cultural fields should be limited and the arts should proceed through aesthetic-cognitive reflectivity and expand the resulting achievements gradually to the social sphere and reinforce cultural progress. In this regard, art practice will effect the political sphere by generating values outside of it and reminding that another existence, another world is possible. When political signs are employed, it will be in the form of tropes and symbolism and not formulated as concrete references to specific contexts and geographies. For instance, the brutality of the 1980 coup would be touched on by the generic image of an electric chair, or tents built up during union strikes will be carried onto the canvas in the abstracted shape of triangles as sings of resistance. Visual elements would be taken from an iconography appealing to international scale, conceived as communicable more or less in any context. Somewhat speculatively, I would also relate this hesitation to a concern about sounding too provincial within a framework formed by universalist terms.

In the nineties the use of the political within art practice took a less reserved course. The re-heating of the political agenda in the country, the increased visibility of some previously conflicts, frozen throughout the republican period and more intensively during the junta period, violence that mounted to the level of civil war and its effects in everyday life presented a different social landscape. Deepening agony created a new atmosphere of politicalisation and a sense of urgency, which facilitated the perception of contemporary art as a new terrain which can enunciate the inner burst. Also the new regional conjuncture that surrounded Turkey (collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe, consequently released mobilities around the Black Sea basin, self-critical debates within leftist thinking) enhanced the tendency towards politicisation.

The preoccupation of theoretical investigations of the same period with notions of space and spatiality were supplemented with a renewed interest in issues such as culture and identity in their geographical specificity. Ramifications of this theoretical shift on the art practice left marks on the works of young artists from Turkey studying abroad, especially in examining the then

¹ This text is the revised and expanded version of an earlier text published in the book Dersizimiz Göncel Sanat, Azra Tüzünoğlu (ed.), Outlet İhraç Fazlasi Sanat, Mayis 2009, Istanbul.
widening use of installation. In the works they started to present immediately after their return to the country, there were no traces of reluctance to criticise the militarist, statist and patriarchal structure that shaped (and shapes) the fate of Turkey, or to give controversial reference to Turkish history, recent past and present. Instead of the universalist language of inter-nationalism, which claimed to transcend the constraints and attributed provinciality of local contexts, or reduced them to abstracted or idealised representations of nations, this new production pursued the decisive strategy of scuffling with all dimensions of its geography-culture. In a political atmosphere in which different sorts of nationalism found the occasion to thrive, violence organised by the state began to shape everyday behaviour of masses, imposition of the prototype ideal citizen resumed despite its obvious lack of credibility, patriarchal values were adopted in the exploding channels of popular culture and mass media (after decades of state monopoly), this new artistic ground seemed to be conducive for elaborating a counter enunciation and attracted younger people for whom there seemed to be no professional horizon for the future, scarcely any institutions to exhibit their work, and no manipulative gaze of western curators scanning through their portfolios, as it has been argued recently.

This anti-nationalist, anti-militarist and anti-statist stance was feeding from the intellectual output of publication initiatives from the leftist positions (journals, publishing houses) which have been purged out of academia during the military regime. In addition to the resumption of May 1 demonstrations that had been suspended in the eighties, the mobilisation of universities as exemplified in the Student Coordination, meetings for Saturday Mothers (silent, weekly gatherings of relatives of people who disappeared under doubtful circumstances), which were apparent signs of re-polarisation, there were also dynamics that tend to radicalise all niches of cultural and everyday life: the multiplication of subcultural formations, the sense of emancipation and connecting to the rest of the world youth by the opening of private radio channels, criticism that reacted against the stupefying effects of the expanding pop-culture, alternative initiatives in the field of publication, the encounter with new theoretical position such as actual generation of feminism, post-structuralist thought, post-colonialist critique, new positions within the left after self-critical mediation, the maturation of anarchist groups and so on.

The frontality and bitterness that characterised the artistic call for political sobering in the early nineties slowly transformed into something else. A set of factors that were conceived as parts of normalisation (subsiding of the negative effects of the economic crisis, the detention and imprisonment of Öcalan, the corrosion of the radical rhetoric of the ultra-nationalists during their years in government as part of the coalition, increasing interaction with global art circulation and the consequent recognition of various artists, a few new institutions that were designed to exhibit the works of this new artistic output) released a portion of vapour from the boiling pot. Instead of a dedication to decipher the ideological manoeuvres of the state, an expanded approach to domination led the artists to investigate the operation of power within separate niches of everyday life, and to accentuate previously used motives around migration and gender. In the mean time, a group of artists reviewed their position regarding the canon of modern art history and tried to reverse the centre-periphery duality with an ironic twist. In addition to problematising the asymmetrical relationship between geographies, these works foregrounded the self-referentiality of art and hinted at an exaltation of narcissistic self-trust among artists that mostly surfaced through the exposure of the libidinal investments and corporal presence of the (male) artist. Another side effect of this process was the incorporation of a certain extent of edgy humourism.

The expansion of this artistic field through the adhesion of two successive generations produced the impression that there was a sociological varification emerging. Yet, the most of main actors were from middle and upper-middle classes who could pursue production under relatively protective conditions, people with university education and mostly residents of metropolises like Istanbul, Diyarbakır, İzmir and Ankara. People holding different political positions could come together and initiate a synergetic interaction: people with a liberal creed who followed the political agenda as participatory citizens, active members of socialist organisations, people who tried to contribute to the emerging field of anarchism, ones who set to foster subcultural languages and
related urban formations, and people who simply pursued radical lives... In a period in which the borders of the compartments of political criticism was not as strict as it currently is, no irreconcilable differences were imposed, and mutual compromise was made in favour of the continuity of the ongoing creative expansion. The self-positioning of the artist roughly matched a leftist ground confronting the right in classic terms of the political terminology.

The tendency towards institutionalisation that has intensified in the last five or six years caused a disintegration of this organic constellation. The new rhythm of professionalism interrupted the interactivity between artists and led them to retreat to their personal pursuits. Whereas the lack of infrastructure and the accompanying condition of obligatory idleness in the early and mid nineties had had a dimension of facilitating artistic productivity, the working method in the last couple of years is shifted towards responding to invitations from art institutions, and art practice has turned into a profession. While the city of Istanbul geared up in the race between the megalopolises of the planet, actors of existing and emerging capital (bourgeois families and financial companies) invested in new art institutions, which would be instrumentalised to facilitate a modern and progressive image for their corporate identity, especially during the negotiations with Europe for Turkey's full membership. Despite the existence of critical elaborations on other sorts of domination, the weakness in covering problems related to economy-politics prevented contributors of contemporary art practice from developing an institutional critique in light of what was happening. The disintegration of the aforementioned constellation was also conditioned by different positions as to how to approach ideologically this new wave of institutionalisation. Some people within the field got uncritically integrated into the new panorama – it was even a preferable episode for those who wanted to withdraw into the frames of aesthetism, psychologism and self-referentiality of art. Some artists retained the political tone in their work but consented to present them in rather sterilised exhibit spaces. Others withdrew from the already stagnating circulation by producing less. And still others who felt uneasy about institutionalisation energised by corporate initiation channelled their forces to open up an alternative field of project spaces (of course, one can debate to which extent the umbilical chords have been cut). It was not really possible to talk about a consistency and continuity within a single constellation2, but rather there were groupings and shifting alliances that were hard to conceive and bring together. Friction was not the only source of tension, also a reaction towards the field of contemporary art was formed outside of the field.

Although Sarkis, one of the most important inspirations of the expanding field of contemporary art, intensively employed motives related to the traumatic effects of war and violence perpetrated on masses, he never specified them by naming geographies or ethnicities. Yet, he was attacked by Sezer Tansuğ, an art critic, for his contribution to a group exhibition of Armenian artists held in Venice in 1991, and was accused of working against the national interest of Turkey. The art critic’s blatant arrogance articulating a language marked by being a member of the privileged ethnicity of the Ottoman golden age and supporting anti-Armenian official politics, gave way to a collective reaction from the contemporary art field (at that time still trying to differentiate itself from other artistic milieus) that condemned its racist tone. Distance to nationalist rhetoric seemed to be an unspoken accord after that incident. In another case, a review on the Iskarpit exhibition that was held in Berlin in 1998 published in a painting-based journal, contained hints of diagnosing a “betrayal to the nation,” pointing at either Sarkis again, or most probably to Halil Altindere, hinting at his Kurdish identity and his criticism of Turkish nationalism. At that period, this sort of reactions were rare and were considered to be manifestations of an anti-cosmopolitanism that would evaporate in time, but after 2005 they emerged as a major challenge.

The nationalist paranoia triggered in the aftermath of September 11 and the invasion of Iraq started to target intellectuals who criticised official politics related to Kurdish ethnicity in the country and Armenian genocide, and voiced this criticisms abroad. The organised psychological,

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2 One might rightly argue that what is meant here by constellation did not cover all practitioners of contemporary art, and from the start it was based on some sort of heterogeneity. I risked the exclusivity embedded in the term to make my point clearer.
legal and sometimes physical terror targeting people like Orhan Pamuk, Perihan Mağden and some other journalists managed to recruit militants against these “rootless self-haters.” Deep splits emerged within the left, which until that time seemed to be a more or less bloc-like entity allowing different positions to correlate. Political polarisation drawn along the axis of nationalism also had an impact on the cultural sphere. The dispersed panorama of the contemporary art field has been defined by this external inspection as a whole entity, and portrayed as the ultimate example of decadence. As a field that progressed from a limited frame to a considerable visibility; came to a point of being hosted in exhibitions that have been designed to represent the geography; has access to different sources of power despite being denied from academic posts; presented its output mostly abroad until the local infrastructure landed; and, on the top of all these, marked the fault line which would later crack the ideological might of Kemalism, contemporary art has been branded as a platform where complaints about here were directed outside by agents of a permitted and manipulated cosmopolitanism that sought to corrode national identity. They were not from “here”; they spoke an imported language. Therefore, they deserved the reaction of those who claim to be the authentic bearers of “here.” In this respect, the rich artistic output from Diyarbakır, which outdid some other metropolises, annoyed some people as yet another proof for the conspiracies of external forces trying to divide Turkish national unity. The booted lists of betrayers shouted out during the massive republican demonstrations may have as well included “contemporary artists,” ranking just below the “Europeanists” and “Sorosists.” Shouldn’t the addressee of the question about why this sort of support goes to Diyarbakır and not Ankara have been those who held power throughout the republican period and did not flinch about the sufferings of the region?³

Against the arguments that claimed the language of the contemporary art to be “imported,” it can be said that contemporary art already got a hold on the urban imagination of Istanbul and was integrated into spaces which hosted subcultural formations. The visuality and spatiality proposed by contemporary art was silently received and internalised by those willing to know what was going on worldwide. The open-call exhibitions in the project space Hafriyat (2007), the minor-scale exhibition organised along the Antimilitarist Meeting (2005), and the performance on campus demonstrations of the social sciences club at Bosphorus University (2008) exemplified the ways in which forms of expression such as performance and installation have been adopted by people from outside of the art circuit.

An external gaze inevitably conditions internal production. If one is not content with the mental and physical framework of what is called the “inside,” the risks of interaction just like benefits, should be welcomed. If the problematic is reduced to adopting formal and epistemological novelties, a reminder is in order, that once upon a time notions like painting, gallery and artist were also seen as “foreign.” As I stated before it is hard to talk about the presence of an external gaze in the period of initiation in the context of contemporary art. The field emerged not because someone asked for it. Füzun Onur was marginalised and mocked in the seventies, when she infused her three-dimensional works with conceptualist ideas. The works of Gülsün Karamustafa from the eighties, which concentrated on the hybridisation of urban codes and cultures of people who recently migrated from the rural parts of the country, and thus precisely looked at what was going on “inside,” were dismissed for being merely “arabesque.” In the early nineties, there was no western curator around when Hale Tenger produced her precious installations that unfolded as screaming allegories of the state of things in Turkey. Again in the early nineties when Aydan Murtezaoglu presented her work that investigated the traumatic effects of state-run modernism on various chambers of local culture, she was ignored – or people came up and asked her silently whether she was an enemy of the regime or not.

It is true that the contact with western art institutions is problematic. Some mistakes were made during the initial enchantment of an encounter with another geography – the contexts of the

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³ There have been similar reactions in the recent past which portrayed Halli Alindere as the cultural extension of Kurdish separatism; condemned Hou Hanrou, the curator of the 10. Istanbul Biennial for his criticism of Kemalism in his catalogue text; and most flamboyantly, accused WHW, the curators of the 11. Istanbul Biennial of plotting against Turkish national unity and repeating what Croatian secessionism did to the Yugoslavian unity.
exhibition to be participated were sometimes not fully examined and in some cases artists found the specific content of their work distorted with orientalist and representational motives. Yet, discomfort about representational distortions led to a collective awareness of how to react. The united decision of several artists and a writer to withdraw from the exhibition Focus Istanbul: Urban Realities held in Berlin in 2005, was an example of the new critical awareness about the contexts of invitations. Also the ethnographic position of translating the local specificity for an external observer is relativised by artistic works that talk critically about the context of the observing culture and hence reverse the positions. Nevertheless, there have been cases in which the external support given to the politically motivated art practices have created artificial and emptied occasions of consensus. Figures who have not touched upon any social issues before made swift turns to be opportunistically tuned into the existing networks, and exposed themselves as exotic objects of exhibit.

The reaction against contemporary art, which fixed it nearly as a hate object, was conditioned by some other severe mistakes within the field: while trying to open a ground for this emerging field, there were some occasions in which other modes of art practice and visual production were disparaged and exposed to generalising attitudes (just like that field itself is being exposed to nowadays) in an avantgardeist arrogance; the repulsion of conflicts of power between curators; deformations along the process of professionalisation, especially after 2003; the transformation of one part of the field into a self-contained, expat-like community... all these dynamics help the reaction to receive a tone of resentment. Also, among those who were trying to articulate a critical stance there were deficiencies in proposing an alternative trajectory: being stuck with some artistic formulas that had previously received success, failing in innovation, carrying the critical content to performatonal form and enacting it in public space; not being able to get in contact with the peripheries of the urban core that have no access to culture – although there was an intention to do so; sniffing at other colleagues’ ways of dealing with the political; melancholic withdrawals, exaggeration of personal conflicts, and so on.

Under these circumstances, two events prompted a sharpening of consciousness. The raid of a coalition of ultra-nationalist militants (left and right versions) of a documentary photography exhibition about the 1955 pogrom against non-muslim communities in Istanbul revealed the fragility of spaces dedicated to cultural activities that had been considered untouchable so far. In the same year (2005) a photographic work by Burak Delier was withdrawn from the exhibition Free Kick (a side event during the 9th Istanbul Biennial) by the artist himself after a series of debates. The work, which involved an implication of a physical threat to a guardian private of the Turkish army, caused trouble for Halil Altindere, the curator of the show. The exhibition catalogue which included Delier’s work and a couple of other works with direct references to the army was brought to court and charged with the now infamous law against “degrading of Turkishness” (reminding the trial on Hale Tenger’s wall installation I Know People Like These II in 1992 charged with “degrading of the Turkish flag.”) At that time, Süreyya Evren and I discussed Delier’s work at length⁴; in short, I voiced my concern about the structure of the piece in addition finding the content problematic as well. My concern was not about the instrumentalisation of art practice – just the opposite; what I wanted to stress was that this work and other artists’ works preceding this one chose the simple way for applying politcality and did not challenge the audience, the producer and the presenter, and failed to offer possibilities for reflection.⁵ The pre-designed gestures that relied on a single visual effect and prompted astonishment/anger/smile seemed to be too fragile to resist instant consumption. Being wary of the dominant ideology of over-visualisation I found the strategy of minimalising structural elements problematic and stated that I preferred the effort to find enriching and resistant strategies of mediation and folding – which I still do. In relation to this issue, Kâmil Şenol argued that the criticism against instant communicability and calls for mediation and refinement are conditioned by patterns of class interests, in this example, of the bourgeoisie.⁶ Considering retrospectively, I can say that I

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⁵ I don’t meant that this strand I criticised was the single approach to political use of art. Along with several individual artists, groups like Xurban, VideA and Oda Projesi exemplified other routes.

“understand” the strategy I criticised more; and I concede the motivations behind this functionality. Yet, I also want to underline that the tendency towards directness has not stemmed from a search to transcend the limitations of class-based imaginations, or to snatch artistic practice from the grips of bourgeois conformity, or to gain access to the masses, but from the urge to respond to the intensity of the political agenda, to deal with the sense of urgency deriving from this intensity, and to defy social paralysis and mass-scale silence. This sense of urgency would blast in our skulls with the warmth of a bullet on a slightly later date... January 19, 2007.

In the immediate aftermath of our loss of Hrant Dink, the sense of acting, sobering up and gathering was also shared by the field of art. Many examples can be cited but we can remember the overnight change of the title of the exhibition held at Apartman Projesi from the ironically formulated Everything Will Be Alright to the soberly put Nothing Is Alright, and how the added changes to the content of the show revealed the feeling of anger and confrontation. The contribution of Ceren Oykut took the logo of Hürriyet, a daily newspaper responsible for manipulations that facilitated the escalation of the tension that paved the way to this murder, underlined the racist implications of the subtitle under the logo Turkey Belongs to the Turks that strangely bothers no one, and with a hand-made intervention corrected it and changed it to Turkey Belongs to Its Peoples.

Another work prepared with a similar swiftness was by Evrensel Belgin who is distributing most of his compositions through his web-project anti-pop.7 What he did in the days following the assassination was a black obituary design, bearing under the name of Hrant Dink the dates “2007-1915.” Besides repeating the conventional appearance of the obituary, it came close to the aesthetics of the early conceptualist works of Joseph Kosuth, but the striking element of the composition was the message embedded in the slightly awkward-looking dates. The beginning was equated with the re-birth of Hrant at the moment of his death, which brought the political project he dedicated his life to a higher level. And the year 1915 marked the date of his death and hinted at the completion of the process of coming to terms with what happened at that date, which would also fulfil the main struggle of Hrant’s life and let him rest in peace. The image was placed on badges and stickers, left anonymous and distributed to the massive crowd at Hrant’s funeral, and it was also carried to the pages of the daily Birgün and political journal Bînktım. A very minimalist design linked to a fine and touching implication achieved a monumental effect and was embraced by masses who are not directly familiar with art. It was of course not meant to be presented as an art piece, but it answered the need of visualisation in the face of a tragic loss.8

It did not harm the composition’s value, but to remember the way in which Belgin’s visual composition was appropriated by an opponent ideological formation, we have to talk about the “Are You Aware of the Danger” campaign of the daily Cumhuriyet. One of the images of the campaign went beyond the limits of being inspired, it directly appropriated the structure of Belgin’s work on Hrant. Using exactly the same colouring and obituary styling, the newspaper came out with a huge caption with the dates 1881-2007 written in the middle of it. The attached sentence ran “May 2007; the presidency election is coming soon; are you aware of the danger?” The dating again had a semantic cipher: Citizen, remember the birth of Atatürk in 1881, our modern reign started with his life; we thought it would be forever; but citizen look, if the presidency chair is grabbed by one of the head figures of this counter-revolutionary AKP then our glorious days will be over and Kemalism will be buried to death; are you aware of the danger and will you do something about it [in my words]?

Besides the far-reaching power to influence a public medium like a daily newspaper – even if from a different ideological position – and the awareness about it, we might be cautious about

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7 www.anti-pop.com
8 I mentioned the lack of a performational dimension in the contemporary art practice in Turkey. The emphasis given to inter-disciplinarity in the mid-nineties disappeared later and contemporary art withdrew to two-dimensional presentations such as video projection and photography. In the aftermath of Hrant’s assassination an experimental theatre group, Çiplak Ayaklar Kumpası [Barefeet Company] intervened to fill in the gap.
the possible problems that arise when responding to an urgency, and trying to intervene in the actual agenda. A series of works Belgin designed from late 2007 onwards were faced with obstacles about grabbing the rapidly changing agenda. In one of them, we see a stage-like decoration and a desk with crystal jugs and microphones placed on it to make an association with a speaking stand in the parliament. The liquid in the jugs is not water and the red colour gives the impression that it is blood. Anyone who followed the political agenda could make the link between the image and the parliamentary discussions at that time about the permission to be given to the government to launch air raids in Northern Iraq and to bomb the facilities of PKK. While the idea of shedding blood in a foreign country was being naturalised in the mass media, Belgin’s composition found a place on the back cover of the leftist monthly magazine Express and attracted the attention of a considerable amount of readers. In another composition, Belgin took the image of an ordinary pastoral landscape painting from the internet and using photoshop hid on the surface of the river in the painting the minute shadow of a F-16 fighter which could only be detected after careful inspection. The effect of astonishment at the moment of detection was meant to displace the mind of the viewer in relation to the then ongoing air raids in Northern Iraq. It was a very striking piece, but could not produce a similar effect as the former example since it could not be circulated in a medium open to public access. Today, when we come across these works we need someone to explain/remind us about the context of the historical moment so that we can decipher the message. To be efficient, they had to be circulated immediately.

Another discussion about visual materials promoted to relate to political urgencies is about whether they can be conceived and presented as art or not, whether there is a need to define what they are, whether they should disclose the signature of their authors or remain anonymous. I already mentioned that the initial objective of the composition 2007-1915 was to be functional in a social ritual and it had nothing to do with art — hence, it did not require a signature; signing it would be absurd and disrespectful. There might also be other reasons to veil the name of the authors of similar images. This is especially the case when they are designed as counter-provocations against political groups that have been terrorizing the lives of ordinary people including the intellectuals and artists themselves, and therefore when there is a possibility of being exposed to physical threats. Besides works that have remained anonymous so far, there have been some compositions which were initially meant to be kept anonymous, and sometimes produced as materials that were suitable for anonymous circulation such as stickers and stencils, but were later brought back to the art context and unveiled with an attributable signature. For example, the work of Burak Delier which transformed the ultra-nationalists flag with three crescents (also the Ottoman flag) into a composition with three bananas was printed on stickers and spread throughout streets, and later, without really contradicting the original idea, it was exhibited in the exhibition Election Posters held in Hafriyat. A reference to the same party flag was also used by Vahit Tuna in a composition which associated nationalism with threats to human kind. Conceived as an anonymous work, it was later titled Bio-Damage and operated as one of the pieces building up the conceptual integrity of the artists solo exhibition Exercise (again

9 Of course the archetype of this sort of works was Delier’s photographic composition of a woman veiling with an EU flag, which was spread out throughout the streets in Istanbul as a poster (and then photographed and publicised in European newspapers, and even used by the Austrian ultra-nationalist party as a material for anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish propaganda) and later exhibited in the Free Kick exhibition with proper printing quality, dimension and framing. It became, most probably, the most known work of contemporary art from Turkey.
in Hafriyat, May 2008). The context of the image was transferred from an immediacy and urgency to a reflexivity. *Come to Daddy*, a work designed by Erinç Seymen for an anonymous fanzine project and depicting a SM couple walking towards the mausoleum of Atatürk, was again used in a solo show by the artist in a later period (*Hunting Season*, Galerist, 2007).

![Image of Hafriyat Karaköy, May 2008]

The works I have cited above were not conceived as artworks at the start. They were prepared with feelings of political urgency and were meant to leave the framework designated for art, but after a period of time in which the produced images proved to be effective, their context of presentation was and they were reclaimed by their authors. Another comparable model was the image production process of *iq mihak* collective whose aesthetics comes very close to the aforementioned examples. Having developed from a theory-based affinity group, the collective set out to disclose recklessly the paradoxes of narratives shaping official history with humorous trans-contextualisations. Being cautious about possible reactions, the collective decided to remain anonymous and operate mainly through the web environment. Although they do not relate their production to the framework of art, and define themselves primarily as an interface willing to serve other political formations by providing them visual necessities, they have had occasional contact with art-related presentations (such as *Moderate* [Makul] a group exhibition in Hafriyat, April 2008).

A series of successive exhibitions organised by the open call of the Hafriyat team tested the possibilities of visual production to propose instances of the interruption of mechanisms of

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10 I used the expression “image engineering” in relation to Delier’s pieces in *Free Kick*. This was not meant to dismiss them. The same impression could have been used in relation to other works mentioned in that text – all in all they are inheritors of John Heartfield’s magnificent legacy. It is also necessary to note that Delier switched to another sort of production and presentation that can be defined as “project-based,” starting with his piece *parkaing*, protective clothing designed against possible beatings and lynching by security forces or fascist militia (exhibited in the 10th Istanbul Biennial in 2007). His work *Counter-Attack* (presented in the show *I Refuse to be Normal* in Outlet in 2008) was based on the extension of the electricity source from inside of the building to the outside – ironically problematising the differences between the sociologies of the art institution and its surrounding. His collaboration with Eylem Akçay and Güneş Terkol in the project *S.T.A.R.G.E.M.* (using the project space PIST as its base) concentrated on mutuality and humane contact established with collectors of recyclable waste found on the street.
representation within everyday life and interventions into actual political debates. The exhibition *Intervention* (2007) spread the use of graffiti and stencil, which became an integral element of contemporary urban life, to the project space and its near surrounding, invited practitioners of these activities to the event, and presented a context involving art and non-art, exhibition space and the street, specified public space under protection and public space open to contingencies, and risks and surprises. Another exhibition, *Alternative Election Posters* (2007) again took a visual element that temporarily covered the wall surfaces in the urban text and reproduced it within the project space from an ironic and critical perspective. The examples of works and exhibitions I have given so far were produced by some figures who have had formations or production experience in graphic design – Evrensel Belgin, Vahit Tuna, Memed Erdener, iç mihark. These works might hint at efforts to step out of the self_referential introversion of art practice and come into contact with the perception of masses through a minimalist language that increases the efficiency of the message. In a period in which the political content is increasingly shared, and the coordination of events are communicated through the web, the consequent speed brings in a new aesthetics that can respond to the urge to leave the confines of working in closed spaces dedicated to art and to strive to minimalise the mediation and the interval between the event and the representation. A side effect of this tendency was the transformation of the platonist interest of contemporary art practices in circles producing contemporary theory and critique to mutual contact. A singular example of this mutuality was the cover of the journal *Defter* (Spring 2001) which used the image of Hale Tenger’s installation *We Didn’t Go Outside; We Were Always on the Outside/We Didn’t Go Inside; We Were Always on the Inside* (1995). In the last couple of years the interaction intensified. When talking about Belgin’s work we already mentioned his contact with *Express* and *Birikim* magazines. When this text was written, the issue of *Express* on sale had the 11th Istanbul Biennial on its cover and the current issue of *Birikim* enriched its collection of essays with visual works designed for the topic of the journal’s main dossier – examples that gives hope for future convergences.\(^{11}\)

Another model that set out to consider the interstices between fields of artistic and political activities was the January 19 Collective, which gathered in the immediate aftermath of Hrant Dink’s assassination artists, curators and writers who shared a concern about what to do. The group that would later re-form, narrow down and survive through a series of inner turbulence, decided at its initial stage to initiate purely political acts and two successive groups made public declarations in front of a state prosecution court, recited the sentences that led to the court decision for Hrant’s imprisonment and consequently his assassination, made legal complaints about themselves in order to complicate the future use of the corresponding law. In a later phase, the collective discussed the involvement of artistic practice and decided to produce a project that would not use the names of the participating contributors, bracket out their personal identities, and use a collective signature. On the first anniversary of the assassination, the collective opened the exhibition *Münferit* [a word that denotes the meanings of sporadic,
individual and singular; the reference is about the use of the word by official authorities who dismiss crime incidents in debate for being unprogrammatic, unplanned and not plotted brought together the names of thousands of people (and information about the date, the cause and the location of the killings) whose right to live was violated by armed violence emanating from the state, unidentified sources or illegal groups since 1980 up until now. Against the use of the word by authorities, which pushed individual lives into the anonymity of cold statistics, the show invited the audience to remember the value of each individual life.12

There have also been occasions of contact between people who use the language of contemporary art, reflect upon political matters and try to find alternative ways to present their works, and people who have been participating in activist groups. The exhibition entitled ironically as Moderate (organised by Lambda Istanbul, the prominent LGBT organisation of the city and held again in Hafriyat in 2008) brought together art producers who had been involved in socialist, anarchist and feminist movements and people who came from feminist, queer and anti-militarist initiatives, and had not produced or presented artistic work before, but took the force of the visual seriously. It was a meeting worth remembering for its facilitation of alternative networking.

I need to open a bracket here. All the examples I have mentioned so far were produced by artists who feel a discomfort about the constraints of the existing conventions about art, and explore the ways in which they can feed from the interaction between art practice and the political field and expand the socialability of their production. By experimenting with alternative models of the visual, performative and relational, they seek to propose clues to the actually operating formations within the political field, and to support directly the mechanisms of representation needed by these struggling formations. What they do is not proposing an alternative to political practice. No one is saying something like, I am not interested in politics, “instead” I do produce political art; which is to say, they do not claim that their production is a replacement of the political field. Anyway, most of them are actively participating in different political compartments – “besides” their practice in art.

One can propose that the will to come, think, work and produce together is a political act in itself. That kind of undertaking is even more attractive in the context of art – a field in which the term of “genius” has been mythologised, the notion of the creative individual has been identified with the fulfillment of the liberal ideology, especially during the Cold War, and still lies beneath the current structure based on signature and individual career. Yet, it is hard to omit the obstacles confronted when engaging with collectivities such as fatigue, coordination, inefficiencies, personalisation of differences of opinion and intimidation due to all these factors. Although the start of Ergenekon trials temporarily tempered down the previously existing tensions, a continuous flow of conflictual issues started to shake and corrode the ongoing projects based on collectivity: the stance that the Kurdish party in the parliament has to take, the concept of genocide, the critical tone in relation with the state of Israel and the related risk of anti-semitism, the issue of whether sometimes violence is legitimate, the way to criticize the strange and despicable assault of a certain famous intellectual on his wife, the logo of Koç in the biennial, the violence committed by and against the Diyarbakırspor supporters, Freudian slips emerging during discussions (I mention these as a result of my subjective experience)... all of these led to insurmountable tensions, withdrawals, splits, divisions, complete disintegration and poignant situations in which it gets hard to bring three people together.

Nowadays we are faced with a second split that is completely different from the previous big rupture around the theme of nationalism but bears some continuity with it: the split within the left (I mean the remainders from the previous mass-migration to nationalism) into two poles named with mutually pejorative descriptions as “liberal left” and “orthodox socialism.” The first split had severed the links between parents and their children; this split now severs the links between friends and even lovers. An early indicator of this split surfaced in the dossier published

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12 The collective later appealed to the same model in the context of a scandalous series of accidents that cost dozens of shipyard workers’ lives.
in the cultural pages of the BirGün newspaper: the title ran “the examination between the left and contemporary art” (January 28, 2008). The formulation of the opposition between leftist politics and contemporary art disclosed accumulated prejudice. The “left” implicated in the caption did not refer to a plethora of different ideological positions, an umbrella term for different traditions, but to a specific position that the writer identified with, that is seen by him as the authentic position. On the other hand, the term “contemporary art” does not refer to a plane of expression or a heterogeneous ground that uses this plane of expression in Turkey, but to a monolithically defined scene. This opposition and double-generalisation is supplemented with another sentence in the caption: “why are people interested in contemporary art being associated with adjectives like ‘liberal’ or ‘cosmopolitan’”? I don’t how this pairing of conflict would sound in the context of other cultural disciplines: what is the problem between the left and cinema/electronic music/painting/modern dance? Instead of this perspective that seeks verification by negating its object of opposition, reducing its complexities, fixing it as a monolithic structure, could the series of questionings not have been formulated like this: why has the field of expression that is called contemporary art been more susceptible to the recuperative mechanism of the logic of capital in the last decade? Which positions and attitudes are easily co-opted, which positions tried to articulate a critique and managed to resist? What are the material conditions of establishing an alternative field? How are the dynamics of these tendencies operating in different geographical and cultural contexts? What would happen if there was any source of public funding in Turkey – would it give the production a higher legitimacy?

The instrumentalisation of a field of expression, which was for a long while squeezed in a narrow living space but managed to expand, by capital for producing a modern-, western-, progressive-looking corporate identity; the rechanneling of financial sources from collections of Turkish modern painting or Orientalist painting to this new ground; establishing art institutions that are more interested in surface sterility than any vision for content; social filtering through security mechanisms and psychological effects; methods of presentation that reduce the function of art to consensus and visual appeasement, the strict division between producers and consumers... awareness about these symptoms and a search for articulating a critical stance in relation to them is not less in the field of contemporary art than other disciplines – one might even ask whether there is any other cultural platform that problematises its conditions of presentation so much? Then, why is this totalising reaction? In other words, if the critical energy is found insufficient, why not try to enhance the existing critical voices but posting everyone in the field to hell?

In the aftermath of the beginning of the Ergenekon period, one of the major debates within the left concentrated on the decision about which type of domination should be the target of political critique. One of the sides argued for foregrounding (or singling out) the critique of capitalist domination; defining it as the overdetermining structure; there have even been supporters of this opinion who declared that conceiving the rights of gays and lesbians and the rights of labourers together is impossible – it is also interesting to observe that the motif of gay and lesbian rights is constantly used as a counter-position. The proposition to conceive different modes of domination as an interlacing complexity and to offer the use of a plurality of methods and their combination is seen as a diversion, an interruption of time and waste of energy. The preference goes for rewinding the tape, for enjoying the easy gratification of saying I was right and still am, rather than self-questioning with modesty and reservation as if no trace has remained from the rich interaction between different theoretical positions.

As Süreyya Evren well observes, the field of contemporary art, which is in itself a problematic and heterogeneous field, reminds a specific leftist position the loss of altitude it suffered.13 Whether the correlation is established between the traumatic defeat of the whole leftist ground in 1980 and the first tendencies towards conceptualisation in the eighties, or between the collapse of state socialism and the emergence of contemporary art as a visible entity, there is something nerveing to be found in it – something that reminds this specific leftist position of its political displacement and periodic loss of words. The enriched positions within Marxist thinking,

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post-structuralist theory, post-colonial criticism, new generations of feminism, anarchist positions that replaced their state fetishism with a plural analysis of relations of domination, queer theory that reinforced the problematisation of fixed identities, investigations of mobile and plural identifications and the synergy between all of these have been the sources of people who have been involved in the field of contemporary art. But their discursive cohesion established through untimely attempts to deconstruct Kemalist taboos and iconographies, to map out political extensions of the patriarchal value system, to investigate the vast sociological effects of recent waves of migration does not mean much for their critics, who can make the incredible claim that “the oppositional tone of the language of contemporary art can reach at best nihilism unless it is based on a class-based identity.” In this view the discursive field in debate is “indexed to every-day casualty” and its politicaity is “light” – I really wonder what kind of art works are favoured by them for being “hard.” What makes art interesting is its potential to open up contingent gates to the infinitely rich dynamics of life – there are light ones, there are hard ones; there is blue, there is pink, there are different colours...

The arrogance in formulations like what is political is how I define it, is everywhere these days; it defines who the socialist is, who the Marxist is, who the leftist is... When this obsessive appeal to authenticity that never has doubts about itself begins to operate in defining the locality, it harbours on the borders of some ideologies of other sort. The implication that the person chosen as the opponent does not belong here and hence the truth of here firmly belongs to the self leads to exclusionary and essentialist impasses.

An argument that accompanies the suggested dichotomies between contemporary art and the left, politically light language and its hypothetical hard version is the positing of contemporary art (or its examples with political content) as something that declared its rivalry to radical politics – which is followed by the condemnation that it does not deliver any sort of radicality. What I have tried to do in this text was to exemplify the transversal crossings between art and politics, and to hint at a potentiality for mutual enhancement, but I also have noted that there is no contest, comparability or demand for a full overlap between the two fields. Unfortunately, untenable comparisons are being made, coming also from activist circles recently. Speakers of this view list a series of radical gestures, some of them quite striking and significant, carried out by activist groups, and they turn to the contemporary artists and say, “can you do this as well; if you cannot, we don’t need the discourse you produce anymore.” The logical conclusion of this position would be the abolition of contemporary art (of course, this defiance is never directed towards other cultural disciplines such as cinema, poetry or literature). And at this point, the ground for communication evaporates and offering art as a tool for reflection loses its meaning.

Previously I mentioned that in the field of contemporary art the issue of economy-politics has not been as intricately and visibly dealt with as other modes of domination. This situation renders it clearly fragile to the reactions I have exemplified above. Furthermore, it hampers the articulation of an institutional critique and an alternative approach in light of the structural changes in the recent past. For the few figures who remained dedicated to such an alternative, the ideal route seems to be working harder, hopefully with new collectivities, by retaining the inheritance of the critical richness accumulated so far, not omitting the theoretical and practical facilities for the critique of capitalism, disclosing the inner compromises and paradoxes, and bypassing melancholic withdrawal. Plenty of obstacles... For sure a beam of light will be reflected from the broken pieces lying on the ground.
The Opposition of Power/ The Power of the Opposition
Zeynep Gambetti

In a series of conferences titled “Dialogues Between Civilizations,” which took place in Istanbul in the beginning of June, an academician from the USA sprang up from his seat and uttered a sentence beginning with, “Six members of my family have been massacred in the Holocaust.” This sentence became his excuse for declaring illegitimate everything that had been and could have been said about him. In this way, he justified his absence from a panel on the apology campaign to Armenians. He was able to say that the relationship between Turks and Armenians did not concern him; and he condemned those who condemned him. In short, he transformed victimization into a tool of power.

In the same conference, again an academician from the USA who found the label liberal democrat suitable for himself resorted to the argument of freedom of conscience for justifying his country’s invasion of Iraq. The issue at stake was rethinking laicism and secularism. However, let alone questioning laicism, the discussion evolved towards its unconditional vindication. The argument on the legitimacy of resorting to bans, force, and even war if the need arises in the struggle against fundamentalism was brought up, whereas the intention of the panel was to be able to debate that laicism did not have a single definition and that Islam as well was open to different forms of laicism-secularism. Leaving aside the correctness or incorrectness of the chain of logic that derived from the freedom of conscience the right to invade Iraq, there was something that this argument actually did. It dissolved the effect of the listening and understanding practices that the academicians from the USA, Italy, Turkey, Iran, and Egypt had fortuitously formed in the first few days of the conference. The closeness that had been built up even among those who were not of the same opinion came to an end; different sides were created; individuals were confined into various representations. Advocates began to applaud each other. The stake was no longer to persuade; what mattered was to overwhelm.

The subject of this paper is this very dialectic I have witnessed in the recent past and which preoccupied me a lot. A liberal democrat who in effect violates the principles of plurality, rationalism, and common good which he defends in discourse; a victimized member of a minority who turns this into an excuse for not laying claim to the sorrows of another minority – these very states of inversion, these instances of the most innocent discourses peculiarly turning into their opposites, their potential to create counter-effects ... these are the invisible faces of a very insidious violence. Yet even those sharp eyes which can detect the disparities between what one says and what one does may not see what they are doing as they say something or by saying something. This violence, which especially became apparent last year in Turkey during the Marxism and Ergenekon discussions, revealed that a very masculine sovereign reflex was a trap that even those who defend liberty fell into. I am afraid that to claim we are struggling with power is nothing other than self-delusion as long as this violence is not disclosed, deciphered and thought over. This is why, in this paper, I claim that in Turkey the questioning that will pave the way for freedom should begin from here. As a woman who dares to say a word in this male sphere, I claim that no matter whether we support the Ergenekon operation or we perceive it as a battle of elephants, whether we are leftists or we label ourselves as liberal democrats, none of us can be either a democrat or a freedom fighter unless we question the ambition for power in our minds and in our language.

I suppose that the problem begins with the perception of words as “merely words.” In the dualist ideational system, which, according to the dominant history of Western philosophy initiated by Plato, who mercilessly campaigned against the sophists, the true function of words is to refer to the idea which constitutes the essence of a thing. Although Plato was aware of the pedagogic importance of rhetoric, he did not philosophize over it. On the contrary, he reduced speech to an instrument. This understanding, which constitutes the backbone of Western metaphysics since Plato, is in eternal ease with the assumption that words are/do nothing other than description and communication. It is thought that discussing an idea would have no consequences for the reality that is referred to by that idea since reality exists outside speech. Likewise, the culture of debate, that is, the ground on which liberal democracy rests, focuses on the content of
statements. It is not concerned with the phenomenon John Austin specifies in the title of his book *How to Do Things with Words*.\(^1\)

In fact, many things are done with words. Sophists were the first to understand this; however, later on, different currents, which for centuries remained marginal in Western philosophy for not being able to adjoin theology, rejected Plato’s dualism, at times by following the path of the sophists and at times by departing from them. They did not give up arguing that speech is not only an instrument, but creates actual effect, which would later on be named as “speech acts.”

To explain the term speech act with an example John Austin gives, there is no outer reality referred to in proposing marriage to someone. The ground of the marital relationship between two people is founded by words. As the phrase “bind with a word to wed” very well elucidates, in this situation the words do not refer to anything other than themselves. Or rather, the content of the utterance (the condition of being bounded with a word) is produced at the moment it is uttered. A speech act is performed independent of the desired effect of the utterance. For example, you can talk in a romantic tone or you can strike a humorous attitude as you propose marriage; but, in either case, the act of your speech is a “proposal.” Of course, there are minimal conditions that make a proposal pass as a proposal – for example, a proposal that is not made to someone is not a proposal. However, from the moment these conditions are met, the desired effect does not have an impact on the act itself. We may talk of a good proposal, or a bad proposal, or a proposal that is expressed in a bad way; but, in the end, there is a proposal.\(^2\) The act and the effect do not have to overlap. And maybe this is what renders the act invisible; the effect of a gentle utterance containing humanist words can conceal the acts of oppression and violence it performs.

There is no doubt that the space of power is constituted with discourse besides various material and institutional practices, and that discourse plays a significant role in the organization and classification of public space. It would be faulty to perceive power as a tool of oppression belonging to only specific actors. And neither opposition nor democracy is imminent to a single-ism or group. A drawback of the comfort that stems from thinking this way is being unable to resist the reproduction of power in domains that appear to be oppositional. It is assumed that the state of being victimized denotes purification from power. However, to conceive power as a state of being or an object that can be owned makes both the victims and the opposition partners in the establishment of power, since it conceals that power is a mode of relating that is constantly reproduced in practice and in discourse. Therefore, it is crucial to examine not only the content, but also the acts performed by words.

### On non-Discussion

Since the Enlightenment, discussion has been attributed grand normative meanings in political life. Discussion is not only the alternative to conflict, but it also ensures that the principles which make collective life possible are situated on rational grounds. Both in Kant and in Mill, discussion and debate are the sole paths that lead to public good. In a plural community, the correction of one’s mistake by another by means of discussion is the prerequisite of the formation of the common mind. In layman’s terms, people communicate by talking. There is a strong belief that if the factors that prevent discussion are eliminated – for example, if freedom of expression, as well as freedom of thought and conscience is secured – then an agreement or a consensus that oversees common good will be attained. The power of this belief, which can be considered to be optimistic, is such that in politics the lawmaking institutions, such as the senate and the parliament, are designed as discussion forums. According to this understanding, the parliament, besides being a quantitative space in which different interests in the society are represented in terms of numbers of seats, has qualitative characters. It is assumed that through the expression

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\(^2\) In fact, what Austin tries to explain is a bit more complicated. An utterance both refers to something (it signifies, fixates, and describes), and creates an effect (it effects psychologically, it repels or attracts), and it is an act (it creates a situation, it forms a relation). These three dimensions of speech cannot be separated from each other.
of different views common mind will be constructed in the parliament. The social segments and ideologies which get into contact with each other with no recourse to force or violence will go beyond their limited interests and attain the capacity to determine what is good for the whole society solely through discussion – that is, solely through speech.

Although I have absolute respect for this belief, I am convinced that unless we evaluate thoroughly the conditions that make it possible for discussion and debate to contribute to freedom and democracy, it is inevitable to witness totally contrary developments. This is a total paradox; that is, even a method, which appears to be the most democratic, the most rational, and the most reconciliatory, has the potential to give way to polarizations and divisions, and even beyond that, to generate new polarizations.

I think that Turkey constitutes a perfectly convenient starting point for understanding this paradox. The performative quality of speech and its relationship with power became very evident in the directions a discussion in 2008 that evolved around Marxism took. Our political life which has been quite active (and exciting) in the last few years was already occupying the media and the public opinion a great deal by means of generating a new discussion material every other day. A major part of the discussions that have been carried out since the Justice and Development (AKP) rose to power – in a sense of urgency that had not been matched even in the 15-year period of civil war that was waged in the Southeast – revolved around religion and laicism. However, later on, a second track was opened up in the framework of the Ergenekon operations. It was highly significant that the discussion, which determined what democracy is through a criterion of stance such as on which side a true democrat should stand, revolved around “true left” and “liberal left.”

In this paper, aware of the fact that as a point of view it is quite restricted to search for the problems in intellectual patterns, I will try to understand especially the latest rupture in the left through the practices of relatedness constituted by speech, rather than indulging in an analysis of mentalities like the intellectuals of this geography regularly do.

The shift in the ideological horizons of the “libertarian left” intellectuals, who gathered around the Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP) and especially Birikim journal and Radikal iki newspaper, from class to identity politics, had already created a tension in the left. This group that was accused of defending bourgeoisie values, of being third way proponents, and of falling prey to the postmodern discourse of the post 1980, tended to justify itself through the concept of democracy. They thought, the Cold War left could not realize how downtrodden human rights in the Eastern Block were as they equated democracy with bourgeoisie dictatorship. And even when they realized the situation they could not criticize it for the sake of not betraying the cause. Those who criticized the libertarians had in the past buttered up Stalinist totalitarianism, and especially, they were short of seeing that the world had changed after 1980, that the phenomenon of class had changed, that the vanguard party tactic would no longer work, and that the oppression and exploitation relations excluded by class-based politics also carried an emancipatory potential.

The disparities within the left became even more apparent during the Ergenekon process and the closure case against AKP; new polemics emerged. To summarize it crudely, the apparent discussion exacerbated because a group of “intellectuals,” who came from the leftist tradition (those who had distanced themselves from this tradition as well as those who made sense of the world still from within the leftist imagination) perceived AKP not as a conservative, but rather as a progressive party, or at least a party that opens the way of Turkey; they made pro EU and/or anti-Kemalist contributions to the newspapers and meetings of various religious communities; and lastly, they supported the Ergenekon operation. A group of leftist intellectuals accused the other leftist groups (no doubt, they are of a great variety) of not siding with the AKP and the Ergenekon case and they declared themselves to be the only democrats. According to this formula, if you were not on the “right” side in the Ergenekon process, then you were not a democrat. In other words, “a radical break was being experienced between those who said ‘I am a leftist; therefore, I am a democrat’ and those who said ‘I am a democrat; therefore, I am a
On the other hand, all the other leftist groups (from the neo-nationalist to the revolutionary and the libertarian) had declared war against this group which they qualified as liberal leftist. For example, those who saw AKP – which is assumed to represent conservatism – as the only party that can meet the EU membership criteria, were labelled “deviationists”: a deviation tendency, which relies on the Islamist movement, is being promoted among some of those who come from the former (traditionalist) leftist sections. They are being garnished and then put on the market especially by the big media empire that is in the hands of the new power loci; and through the confusion they create, they contribute greatly to the nullification of the left. Likewise, “the Soros-ists or the Open Society guardsmen,” “the fair weather leftists who have not been to a single May 1 demonstration in their lives” who gather around “Taraf, the intelligence bulletin that is the gunman of the power, the ‘love boat’ of the artsy-liberals” and the CIA agents did not even feel the need to conceal their inconsistencies. The difference between the living-room socialists who thought that academic discussion was action itself and the leftist who came from the roots, was so huge that it was impossible to amend it.

In short, two different baskets, one with the label “orthodox left,” and the other with the label “liberal left” had been knit; and everyone was free to place people into one of these baskets as they wished. Nobody paused to think before being split into a thousand and one pieces. Nobody had considered the possibility of contracting one or the other of our habitual illnesses such as bearing resentment, the tendency to take things personally, labelling, and squabbling while the intention was to criticize the past of the left or the progressive groups in Turkey. The risk of reproducing the mistakes of the past just when we thought we had been purified of them had not made anybody hesitate. To be sure, the existence of a tendency to label in Turkey, which is not peculiar to the intellectuals, cannot be denied. Moreover, these kinds of reflexes are not the simple by-products of the official discourse which allows the world to be perceived only in black and white. Non-official discourses can express other, more complicated relationalities. For example, as the groups of belonging get smaller the chance of running into more nuanced labels rises (as in “the inhabitants of our village are very good but the men of the neighbouring village drink” or “those from Kayseri are very cunning in commerce”). In a spectrum that extends as far as calling Africans, who are the most distant to us and about whom we have the least knowledge, “cannibals”, these categories do not only draw the limits of identities but they also determine the right to speak. More precisely, every label contains cues hinting at how the speaker should be listened to. This is what lies at the background of the reflex to evaluate any claim according to the quality of the speaker rather than that of the spoken. According to this form of argument, which is called ad hominem in logic, speech does not have a being or a value independent of the speaker; its meaning changes according to the identity of the speaker. Of course, this is a logical error; however, formal logic is helpless in understanding the deeds of speech in all their intricacies.

However, the phenomenon I want to emphasize here is the state the Turkish left is in as we are about to close the first decade of the 21st century. What and how do leftist movements, which

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3 Etyen Mahçupyan, Kuyerel.com, 05.08.2008.
4 Kuyerel.com, 29.08.2008.
5 Taraf, 27.05.2008.
6 Oğuzhan Müftüoğlu, BirGün, 10.08.2008.
7 The word in the original text is “libas,” which is a derogatory term for “liberal.” e.n.
could never again recollect their social bases that had been dissipated by the 1980 coup, represent in a Turkey where its very army introduced free market regime and which has covered a longer distance in terms of being indexed to the market than many other developing countries, is a question mark. Maybe it was inevitable for these leftist groups who have been squeezed into a thought and literature universe with no material practices, who either did not understand or did not want to understand how much the reality referred to by the concept of “people” which they held in such high esteem in their discourse had changed in comparison to the pre-1980 period, to fall out with each other, as I will explicate at the end of the paper. Yet, what is ironic is that all these groups – who lay claim to opposition – were willing to decipher one another’s alliance with power and they have begun to oppose each other. On the other hand this discussion, which promisingly began as a discussion on Marxism, on the renewal of the left, and on being a democrat, drifted towards a binary codification because it developed around a criterion of stance in relation to power (that is, being with or against power).

On Opposing the Opposition

One of the convictions that Orthodox Marxism (paradoxically) shares with liberalism is that the world of thought and the world of action constitute separate planes of reality. The ground of this conviction is the “11. Thesis on Feuerbach.” According to a very superficial reading of this thesis, it is now time to make revolution, not philosophy. Whereas, if the first thesis, which is much more complicated and incomparably more profound, could have been read correctly it would not be overlooked that Marx’s objection to Feuerbach was an objection to vulgar materialism, that Marx was big enough a thinker not to take the easy way of acting before thinking, and, before anything else, he was not a man of action but a thinker. It is worth reminding the reader since it is relevant to this paper: In the first thesis, Marx articulates the dialectic between theory and practice, the objective and the subjective in a perfect way. According to him, materialism was incapable of conceiving the active, and subjective form of reality since it perceived reality as an object or a passive being which was meditated on. Idealism, on the other hand, focused solely on this, but, through abstraction. The uniqueness of the theory developed by Marx, who refuses to choose between these two, lies in the dialectic which is defined in the last sentence of the first thesis as “critical-practical activity” and which, I think, could not be apprehended very well by the revolutionary tradition. Instead of perceiving reality as an exteriority and detaching thought from it, this dialectic, which has been the source of inspiration of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, constructs thought as a material practice that produces effects, and practice as an order which shapes thought and subjectivity. In this way, it lays bare the power relations and the emancipation potentials that go unnoticed.

When viewed from this perspective, a discussion which is so dense in between the lines appears as a struggle for hegemony rather than an intellectual discussion. In this sense, it is in fact a practice of power. And this is what is insidious and invisible. A mode of relatedness which begins as criticism invokes another relationality as it turns into a practice of labelling and robbing the other of his legitimacy; it loses its quality as a gesture of thinking together, correcting, complementing, and expanding, and it evolves into a gesture of nullification. It creates antagonism rather than difference. Whereas difference could enable ideas to walk side by side without necessarily overlapping, a view in the form of antagonism blocks the way of the other.

It is not very hard to see that at best power would benefit from the antagonistic relation that two (or more) leftist groups engage in. Unfortunately, the best examples of the “divide and rule” formula can be found in the history of the left opposition. However, it is considered less remarkable that the very reflex of nullifying the positions other than one’s own is itself productive of a power. The belief that violence is in the monopoly of government evokes the feeling that those who remain outside the dominant ideology, ethnic group, gender, religion, and language are bestowed with a “self-sustained democratic identity.” However, the phenomenon which we can name as “the power of the opposition” surfaces at this point.

The power of the opposition is like the mirror of government. It reproduces the violence it criticizes and supposedly opposes. It is as exclusionary as power; it draws boundaries; it
stigmatizes those who do not share its worldview and deprives them of their legitimacy. It is a lawmaker and an imposer of bans just like the sovereign. Moreover, it mobilizes two exclusionary mechanisms as it designates its inside and outside. On the one hand, it struggles with the pressure groups which it designates as government, while, on the other hand, it attempts to struggle with others in opposing positions just like itself. Not only does it reproduce power in the structural sense, but it also actively plays into the hands of government since it weakens the opposition other than itself. Just at the point it assumes itself to be situated opposite power, it actually stands by its side. The actual effect it creates as it plays the most innocent, most victimized, most democratic, and most progressive is completely the reverse. It does not realize what kind of a model of relatedness it produces as it sharpens its ego by way of dragging other opposition through the mud. While attempting to defend democracy it actually crushes it, accusingly points its finger towards the other, plays the headmaster, cuts into others’ words, does not listen. While intending to support power that will arise out of unity, it actually renders it completely impossible.

If you do not have any doubts about the moral superiority of your vision, then it is unlikely that you will be inclined to question your practices. To see oneself as hundred percent right, to mobilize one’s defence mechanisms when faced with any kind of difference or criticism is an instinct peculiar to power; on the other hand, to develop the reflex of questioning oneself before anyone else does is the sine qua non of recovering from the sovereign reflex.

To make my point clearer and more concrete, let me state that by selecting one of the innumerable structural obstacles to the formation of a free and democratic society in Turkey (for example, Kemalism, neo-liberalism or conservatism) and underestimating all the others, that is, by favouring only one of the sides in the existing system, we would be supporting a form of power while struggling against another. Although it seems to be a politically correct strategy to play puss-in-the-corner in a space which has been conjecturally opened to tactics, it neither promises a long-lasting transformation for the coming period nor eliminates the domains of micro-power that arise out of our specific position. A “liberal democrat” who, for the sake of not playing into the hands of anti-democratic powers, refrains from criticizing AKP for its reluctance to solve the Kurdish problem until very recently, for pursuing neo-liberal policies at full speed, for silencing the legitimate demands of the workers with clubs and bashing on every May 1 and on every other occasion, for shelving the new Constitution process, for the reluctance it exhibits regarding the rights of Alewis and non-Muslims, for knowingly and willingly making the problems of the universities graver, actually defends a kind of instrumentality that can be phrased as “if you are going to make an omelette you do not ask the eggs how they feel.”

Likewise, a “revolutionary leftist” who, for the sake of not playing into the hands of conservative powers, does not want to appreciate AKP for its relative success gathering different sections together, for its appearance as the sole democratic hope in the face of the frustration and disorganization of the democratic powers apart from itself, for creating the ground that can recover the concepts of Kemalism-republic-laicism from their dogmatism, for its courage to play puss-in-the-corner with the TSK, for its attempts to free from Kemalism’s grasp the pious and the covered who have been excluded from public space until today, for its accidentally beneficial public utility services, is, in the formal sense, not a bit different from the above-mentioned liberal democrat. In his eyes too, there is no inconvenience in the sacrifice of some eggs today for the sake of the future.

Unless the means and ends overlap to a certain extent, it is almost impossible for the resulting outcome not to turn into a structure that conditions the actors. The words of a leftist who shouts at Trotskyists, “I am a democrat, you are social fascists” are not only words, but they are at the same time acts. A “liberal leftist” who pinpoints and bashes BirGün for not taking sides in Ergenekon simultaneously performs an act: he actually excludes BirGün, questions its legitimacy, and tries to deprive it of its right to speak in public space, its right to speak in the name of the left or democracy. When they attempt to judge the left of all times through criteria such as who is more democrat or who stands where in relation to Ergenekon, they end up chopping off the potential of generating an alternate meaning and solidarity that is expected of an oppositional
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Zeynep Gambetti

public space. Hence, let alone producing a collective power, they end up accumulating a load of animosity and wounds of honour grave enough to close off the already existing oppositional-
alternative interaction space.

There is no third way other than these two mindsets. Their way of relating to the “Other” is the same. They suffer from the same instrumental logic, the same passion for sovereignty, and the same mental closure. Both mindsets determine their positions according to power. They are either on the side of or opposite to a locus of power. They succumb to one of their existing styles instead of conceiving many alternate grounds for politics such as the possibility that not power, but a force coming from below will establish democracy, that the establishment of democracy will call for the merging together of many different sections, and that, probably, the criterion of unity will not be the normative stance or the ideology people identify with, but rather, the ability of people to question the absoluteness of their position or cause. The actual effect of this is to create a vicious circle. Regardless of their success in the cause they give priority to, democracy keeps on being a state that is waited for in vain, like Godot, since they leave intact other sovereign reflexes.

Those that the table separates and those it unites

Besides being pathetic, the condition of filling in the ideal of fighting in the name of a cause with squabbling, has a lot to say about the present state of the social. The absence of struggle practices that are made in the materiality of everyday life makes the ego the main axis.

To explain it through a metaphor Hannah Arendt employs, the existence of a common concern/attention/interest among people is like being seated around a table. The table is a material reality that both unites and separates people. Arendt expresses the reality signified by the table with the term “inter-est.” This is a multi-layered play on words. On the one hand there is the literal meaning of “interest”. However, “inter” accounts for in-between-ness; “est,” on the other hand, is the conjugate of “esse,” that is, the verb “to be,” in Latin. When conceptualized in this way, “inter-est” connotes a concern that can be common to all rather than a personal-egoist interest. The table is the centre of attention, the common concern of those who sit around it. It represents a concreteness, a material interest that makes us partners. As long as we sit around it we are refrained from falling onto each other. For, the table stands in between us. The table is both the link and the rift, what makes us individuals. We all occupy a different place around the table and employ different perspectives. Because “you” and “I” occupy different places around the table we are not identical. “You” see the table and the ones around it from a specific angle; “I” see them from a different angle.

But what happens if the table between us suddenly disappears? Metaphorically, we are transformed into figures who are looking at each other but who do not have a materiality that will simultaneously both unite and separate them. Under these circumstances, “you” are my single focus of attention. My relation with “you” no longer goes through the mediation of the table; we encounter each other immediately. We do not have a concrete “interest” that will make us partners; we lack “inter-est.” The only relationship we will form in the absence of the materiality that will relate us to each other is between your personality and my personality. Our interests have become personal. From now on, we are each an ego.

I believe what I want to express with this metaphor is explicit enough. What keeps the ego in the background in the struggle for the change and transformation of concrete practices, what prevents it from turning against those who struggle in the name of the same thing, is “inter-est.” We are struggling for the same concrete goal even if we do not become the same. The diversity of the obstacles on our way is a factor that represses our egos, and constantly draws our attention to concrete practices. Our speech constructs a state of being potent bestowed by our common struggle rather than concretizing in acts that will produce a power effect on each other. In the absence of the practices that limit our egos the factors that prevent our positions from becoming absolute diminish. The state of not being able to become partners or unite that I have
mentioned above; that is, the expansion of the state of being the power of the opposition, I believe, is a sign of being disconnected from the roots and the concrete struggle.

At this point, it would be helpful to analyze the power-opposition dichotomy from another angle and to dwell on the Zapatista example.

From emancipation to freedom

Let us begin with the claustrophobic quality of the concept “resistance,” which -especially with the influence of Foucault- became a buzzword among university students in the recent years. According to this early-phase Foucaultian conceptualization, which contains a binary understanding of the social, resistance does not have the chance to destroy power. As the two generate and nourish each other, a successful resistance would construct a new power, and an unsuccessful power would turn into a resistance. In other words, the system is without an exit. The space of resistance is, in essence, determined by power since resistance is resistance to power; it draws its inspiration from power. It is not an attitude, but a counter-attitude. Despite this, in the eyes of the students and social scientists of our day it has become the slogan for struggle.

I think that this understanding of resistance caricaturized above, has a lot in common with power. More precisely, this kind of binary codification should be seen as self-fulfilling-propspecies rather than as ontological determinations. The reproduction of power is imminent to the logic of existential domains that are constituted not as action but as reaction. The very state of reaction dialectically turns into the thing that it reacts to, that is, its opposite – just like the vengeance of the slaves who envy the power of their masters in Nietzsche.

Is there a political alternative other than action-reaction politics? This is a question which has been weighing on my mind for a very long time. As a member of a generation who believed — who was made to believe – that the main thing was to become independent, I had not even felt the urge to ask the question whether we would attain freedom by being emancipated from something, that is, by breaking away from something that keeps us under oppression, hinders our freedom. However, now I am convinced that the relationship between emancipation and freedom is not immediate or unproblematic. Does not the dilemma of the discussion described above make it crystal clear that freedom is not a necessary product of resistance or struggle for independence? It seems almost impossible for the opponents who are not even aware that they are reproducing power not to generate other and new oppression mechanisms even if they dispose of one of the forms oppression takes.

I believe this is one of the points where the Zapatistas can offer an alternate way out. What renders the Zapatistas unique is their devotion to developing a genuine and principled form of politics that goes well beyond masculine politics which is dubbed real politics, conflict and challenge strategies, the end justifies the means logic, the interests of the leader who is disconnected from the roots and the qualm over votes. Such that, the seven founding principles of the Zapatista organization are oriented towards developing a behavioural ethics that the prevailing types of politics can very easily overlook, and even idle away: serving the others instead of serving one’s own interests, obeying instead of issuing orders, representing others instead of speaking in their names, descending instead of ascending, persuading instead of defeating, constructing instead of destructing, suggesting instead of imposing.

The best answer to be given to those who claim that primitiveness to such extent is a bit too “idealistic” for politics and that it renders the struggle impossible, is the fact that the movement and the insurgency have been going on for twenty five and fifteen years, respectively. The sustainability of this struggle that does not die down despite the intensive paramilitary activities of the Mexican army in the region, despite the tension between the Zapatistas and the traditional left parties, and despite the excessive poverty and deprivation of the region, is actually related to the condition of having principles. It should be understood that this is the reason why the international support given to the Zapatistas never ceases and the number of the voluntary
activists who flow to the region never decreases. And this is the only way to dream of building an alternate world.

In my opinion, the difference between freedom and independence lies here. According to the Zapatista understanding, no people, no ethnic identity, no religious group or class can be “free” just because they are struggling against the power that oppresses them. Of course, they can guarantee the precondition of freedom — that is, independence — if their struggle is successful; however, there is no guarantee that they will not be subject to other masters just at the moment they think they have attained the right to determine their own destiny. In order to transform a “victimized” subject into a “powerful” subject, besides struggling against an external power, an organizational model should be constituted that will prevent a similar power structure from being generated inside.

Zapatistas refuse to establish a party and take part in the existing political space. Their aim is to generate an alternative mode of politics. They think this is the sine qua non of principled politics; they believe it is inevitable for political parties to degenerate, and to disconnect from the people. They say: “We think that a people who do not keep their governors under control are doomed to be slaves; we have struggled for freedom, not for changing masters every six years.” The villagers in Zapatista communities who alternately undertake administrative tasks have been building a self-governing mechanism in the real sense of the word since 2003. They exhibit admirable experimentation and creativity in several domains such as collective agriculture, a justice that is not abstract, alternative health, revolutionary education, and autonomous governmentality.

Even beyond the apprehension that the struggle cannot be one-dimensional, and that freedom cannot be attained through several rights solely granted to the indigenous identity, the consciousness that domination is a multi-dimensional system has stemmed directly from this concrete experience. They move along by learning in and through their participation in the process that an indigenous person who does not own land would remain captive even if he was entitled to Constitutional rights, that if an alternative economic model to neo-capitalism is not produced political independence by itself would not have a meaning; yet, on the other hand, an alternative solely reduced to economy would remain insufficient in terms of political and social freedom. “Previously, that is, in the beginning, we did not think about all these; our sole thought was to struggle. But today we are working for the establishment of autonomy”, says a member of the agricultural council.

What I want to underline here is this: the concreteness of everyday life, which is summarized in the previous sentence as “all these,” presents the Zapatista communities with a series of problems so complicated that it is impossible to exhaust them with simple logics. Autonomy is grappling with a diversity and variability that no -ism can foresee and formulate solutions for in advance.

For example, the answer to the question how should an alternate education be, can only be given in the process through trial and error, gropingly finding solutions. In an international meeting in July 2007 I attended, delegates coming from five autonomous Zapatista regions told us about the problems they have encountered and the solutions they have produced in a few domains of which they were trying to build the alternatives. Rather than being preoccupied with presenting a collective image to their supporters like me or propagating themselves through various empty slogans (such as “the fraternity of the peoples” or “our legitimate struggle”), they preferred to make self-criticism. Someone coming from our part of the world would have expected to be silenced on the basis of arguments such as “family secrets” or “in the name of the cause” for the kind of self-criticism that the Zapatistas did not abstain from making in front of “all the world”. Zapatistas thought otherwise; they believed that this was going to strengthen them. For instance, it had been necessary to consider the fundamental needs of children and communities when an educational program that did not stick to the curriculum specified by the Mexican ministry of national education was being prepared. Separating the children from their families who depended on their labor during harvest times created problems in the agriculturalist communities in the already impoverished regions. Zapatistas also thought that the grading
system — a system that individualized the students — had no other benefit than serving the needs of capitalism. Certainly, it was desired that the alternative system be collectivist; however, it was not desired that the collectivity oppress differences. Among the solutions they came up with in order to deal with this dilemma, the ones can recount here and which I found striking were the following: There is nothing like a minimum or maximum period of study; every child advances in accordance to his/her capacity and speed. This has been thought as a method of preserving their differences without rendering them individualist. Not only is nobody is expelled from school, but there is no grading system either. Parents evaluate the success of their children. The boarding school system is adopted. Depending on the needs, after spending a month in school the children go back to their family houses for a month or 15 days and fulfil their tasks in the fields or the village. Learning mathematics, for instance, through fruits and vegetables, or through shopping in the bazaar, in order not to separate theoretical and practical work, to use traditional measurement systems such as span besides the metric system, to give priority to team work over individual work are among the methods used in the Zapatist education system. As one pedagogue indicated: “Education is learning to analyze, not learning to imitate whatever you see.” Zapatistas hope to develop critical thinking rather than making the children unquestioningly memorize the traditions, and to ensure that the child understands phenomena such as poverty, injustice, and dominance both conceptually and within their historical developments. They are trying to embed an ethics based on sharing and participation.

To give another example, it may be stimulating to share here what a Spanish psychologist who has been working for eleven years with communities in coping with trauma told me: We – Europeans – immediately run to the doctor when we are ill and ask for medical treatment. However, the majority of illnesses are psycho-somatic. Indigenous communities begin the treatment from the heart of the person; that is, his/her state of mind, his/her coherence with his/herself and with the environment. I have witnessed that they cure many illnesses with incenses and plants, through touching or talking. This is a completely different understanding of health. By virtue of an integral look that does not reduce the person to his/her organs, teeth, or body parts, they significantly decrease the need for medicine or clinic attention.

Likewise, the Zapatistas are involved in a multi-faceted struggle against criteria and standards that capitalist modernity has rendered natural. Against abstract labour which makes commodity fetishism possible, they place on the use item the name of the labourer who has produced it and the amount of time he/she spent for the production together with the price of the item. The abstraction of the labor time from real time for the aims of exchange, and the fact that the subject of the exchange becomes the product rather than the producer, are elemental qualities of commodity fetishism which renders exploitation and the surplus value invisible. The correlation capitalism forms between efficiency and time is also among the apprehensions that the Zapatistas fight against. For instance, be it in the workplace or in politics, what capitalism understands from an “efficient” meeting is one which takes place within a previously determined period of time (1-2 hours) and in the end a decision is taken in conformity with the majority rule. Zapatistas, on the other hand, do not block the way of the discussion of a problem that concerns everybody through fetishizing numbers. If the decision to be taken is an important one and if there are differences in opinion then the meeting may last for three days. Within that period of time people talk, eat and drink together, and spend the night in that same place. When the will of the majority crystallizes, those who are not of the same opinion are asked whether they have a serious reservation about agreeing with the majority or not. Even if the decision is made in conformity with the majority rule, the minority should be convinced that the discussion and the decision-making process have been “fair.”

As a matter of course, egos clash against each other and different imaginations collide with each other in the processes of constructing alternatives to capitalism and to the modes of living, thinking, working, producing, possessing, and living together that it imposes, renders natural, and generalizes. However, the advantage of a participatory struggle stemming from below and from inside the materiality of everyday life is this: the perspective of any single ego cannot be sufficient to solve all the problems by itself. Moreover, the implementation of every solution reveals its deficiencies and breaches; it needs to be corrected and reconsidered. Hence, no ego
can render its legitimacy and rightfuless absolute. Sovereign reflexes are rasped in such a thorny process as the actual construction of autonomy and no longer constitute obstacles to the foundation of communalization.

What is even more important is that, in the process of the transformation of the negativity of reaction to the positivity of construction – that is when striving to achieve freedom itself beyond a struggle for emancipation – unity against a common enemy is replaced by an interest in a common world. Instead of thinking against something or some people, the ethics of thinking together with others develops in this very process.

According to the very striking expression of a Zapatista teacher, what the Zapatistas are doing is: “what we at the moment construct ... are subjects that are going to walk a different path.” These are not subjects who occupy a corner in the politics of action-reaction. Neither are they subjects who select an -ism or a political attitude among the existing ones and slip it on like a ready-to-wear piece of clothing. They have not been constructed before the struggle, independent of their practices. On the contrary, they are the products of the efforts of becoming related, of communalization, and of generating alternative practices. They have an ethical awareness arising out of the acknowledgment through both mental and practical processes that the social state is ambivalent and ambiguous. The communalization ideal, which is assumed by the parliament in democratic political regimes and therefore confined to only one institution of living together and which is expected to come to life through mere discussion, takes on a material reality in all areas of life in the Zapatista communities.

I suppose the most striking way of concluding this paper which is in fact endless is to give the Coca Cola example. In the classical left and/or anarchist world imaginations of the Western activists who are not products of real struggles, Coca Cola has a different representative power. Coca Cola is not only the symbol of American imperialism, but at the same time it represents capitalism’s colonization of everyday life and its construction of new addictions through the ideology of consumption. To refuse to drink Coca Cola is imagined not only as a symbolic resistance but also a practical one. For example, in anti-globalization forums to drink maté – the traditional herb tea of South America– instead of Coca Cola has become a signifier of alterntiveness. Western activists who have been equipped with such imaginations were shocked to see the abundant consumption of Coca Cola when they came to the second “inter-galaxies” meeting organized by the Zapatistas in July 2007. They even expressed the discomfort they felt. The response of Subcomandante Marcos of The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was something like: “Because water has been privatized in Mexico its price is 10 pesos. Coca Cola, on the other hand, because it is being imported from the USA as a product backed by the American capital, is sold for 6 pesos, meaning Coca Cola is cheaper than water. How can I tell the indigenous people to drink water instead of Coca Cola? Moreover, to criticize Zapatistas who are all struggling to construct alternative modes of production, solely for their consumption preferences, to attempt to teach them a lesson on morals, is a great disrespect!”

In other words, what the Western leftists who attended the Zapatista meeting did not understand (and maybe will not understand) is the following: Criticizing Zapatistas for drinking Coca Cola is an act of classification and organization that flattens the intricateness and difficulty of the local struggle. To label Zapatistas for having bourgeoisie consumption habits is to confine them into a binary codification such as “either they are alternative and do not drink Coca Cola or they are not and they drink Coca Cola.” It is to make the power Coca Cola represents the criterion of one’s actions and attitudes. It is reaction rather than action politics. And at the same time, it casts doubt on the image of a movement whose struggle is not a reaction against power, but a struggle to create a genuine alternative life-style, and thereby sabotaging the aid that comes from the West that they really need.

The moral of the story is: the line between claiming to oppose power in discourse and actual opposition is not as smooth as it is presumed to be.

Translated from Turkish by Ayşe Boren
The Ergenekon Trial, left-cynicism and liberal counter-cynicism

The Ergenekon trial sparked a fiery quarrel unrevealing a resentment almost equivalent to that released by the Ergenekon community, in other words, the irregular war machinery of the state, extra-judicial networks and organized crime gangs.  

First, we should indicate without hesitation that from the standpoint of socialism and the left in its broadest sense, it is completely unacceptable to trivialize the Ergenekon trial, and doing so is a typical instance of one of the structural problems of the left, namely that of cynicism. As such, this gesture stands as a dividing line within the left as well as in the larger network of social relations. It is true that the trial in its current form reveals only the tip of the iceberg that culminates some of the founding elements of the “state tradition” in Turkey: the irregular war machinery and extra-judicial relations devised for provocation... It is also true that the trial sweeps under the rug the horrifying consequences of the 70 year-long history of this network operating in the East of the Euphrates River in Turkey; limits the prosecution to the personnel who have already fallen out of grace within the establishment; and dilutes the process by extending it to some rather insignificant individuals and especially political opponents of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), thus concealing the structural mechanism that belie this organization and its mode of thinking. Nevertheless, it is of no small gain that the existence of such an establishment has been acknowledged publicly and the fact that (in the language of the former President of Turkey, Süleyman Demirel) “such businesses” constitute criminal offences has been officially recognized. The detainment of a group of individuals who have come to poison life in Turkey with the provocations they have devised and executed, with the murders they have ordered and the racist language they have reaped and sown in Turkey, and the restriction of their freedoms and “activities” – albeit temporarily – is at least alleviating, if nothing else.

Naturally the left cannot be expected to turn a blind eye to the incompleteness of this trial, the calculating approach it is carried out with and the limits set by unspoken lines drawn by its political and stately character. Similarly, the left cannot overlook the fact that the Ergenekon trial “exploded” due to a scramble for power within the ruling classes/the system/the regime. But what exactly constitutes our motivation for seeing this? Why “see everything”? Is it in order to expose the structural decay of the system and lay bare the opportunism of the government/AKP? Or, is it to claim “it is obvious where all this is leading to within the established order,” and to label the process as “a battle of elephants,” while lying comfortably in our chairs? This is cynicism; it is a conformism with tragic consequences and constitutes an outright anti-political stance.

In respond to this trial, the reflex of the left should not be limited to an exhibitionism defined by cynicism, taking on a sterile “political stance” completely preoccupied with suspicions – certainly not unfounded – about the instrumentalisation of the Ergenekon trial. Instead, the left should insist on the process to lay bare the roots and to inquire a confrontation with the underlying thought mechanisms of this establishment. A left that devotes its energies to the pursuit and materialization of the results of such an inquiry (both within the political and legal realms) would be capable of transforming its ethical stance to political action, which is already premised by its own ethics.

1 This text was translated from the original published in Birikim 234 (October 2008). We would like to thank Tanıl Bora and Birikim for giving us the permission to publish it again.

2 Behçet Çelik makes a similar claim in his article titled “Buzdağının dibi”, published in Virgil 122 (September 2008), p. 57.

3 I have been discussing the issue of cynicism in the left for some time now: “12 Eylül Bozgunaşının Süreklliliği: Sol ve Sinizm”, Birikim 198 (October 2008), p. 43-50 and “İki Sinizm, İki Pragmatizm – eylemi yeniden düşünmek”, Birikim 210 (October 2006), p. 16-23.

4 Jacques Rancière claims that in the aftermath of the 1830 revolution in Paris, the workers on strike did not strive to reveal that given the material conditions, the promises of liberalism regarding political and legal equality are “in vain” (illusions), but instead they were concentrated on demanding that this discrepancy between the promise and the actual material conditions be overcome. (Siyasalin Kyıssında [On the Shores of Politics], trans. Aziz Ufuk Kilç, Metis Yayınları, İstanbul 2007, p.55-57.)
Luckily, there exists a left in pursuit of such a goal. Many leftist intellectuals, public figures, left circles, organisations and political parties are hanging on, as much as they can, to the already parted veil of the Ergenekon establishment. For example, it is worth noting that Ezelilerin Sosyalist Platformu [Socialist Platform of the Oppressed] famous for its sterile radicalism, is leading a campaign in this direction. Similarly, we have seen that even in the daily newspaper BirGün which has presented an extreme example of cynicism with their headline running “Go at One Another” and therefore has come to be recognized as the embodiment of this cynical attitude, there are columnists concerned with laying bare the “truth” of Ergenekon and we have seen headlines in the newspaper in this direction.5

Yes, there is a sound basis for the existence of cynicism in the leftist community, but the left is not solely comprised of cynicism. And yes, this is a fundamental criterion of differentiation, but if differentiation stands for clearly distinguishing one thing from the other, one should carefully refrain from sweeping generalizations in the process. When we consider the example of BirGün in this regard, we should state that any labelling that does not consider the inner division and debates in this ground/environment becomes not only unjust, but it will also hinder the process of political and intellectual crystallization. It is true that the cynicism within the left has hindered the possibility of intervening with the events of the time with a clearer voice; yet it is also true that designating a significant amount of one’s resources (and for certain people their utmost capabilities) to the exposition of this cynicism, and finding here an opportunity to slander the left, helps muddy the waters of the urgency of daily events. As such, those gestures are themselves nothing other than cynicism.

We have touched upon the cynicism of the left and the counter cynicism against the left. This debate has often been labelled as one between leftists and liberals. Leaving the work of looking beneath label(s) for the later parts of this paper, let us move on to the indications of this debate between leftist and liberals. The first question is: What is the source of this wrath and anger? To what do we owe all this steam?

The anger of liberal public figures, the anger on the left

Years ago, Can Kozanoğlu resorted to the definition “irritable liberals.” He felt obliged to coin this phrase to refer to the authoritarian attitude of a section of liberal public figures – who were only recently becoming popular at the time – that did not really comply with the doctrines of freedom and tolerance they were advocating. To be sure, most liberal public figures in Turkey – whether they are in support of this liberal line openly, ostensibly or by implication – are prone to adopt in their discourses the very attitudes that they love to question, namely that of “positivist social engineering” and of authoritarian Kemalism, and thus are inclined to speak with “contempt.” 6 This is a local contribution to what we can call the “universal” stylistic characteristics of the liberal attitude (I refrain from saying this attitude is “unique to us,” since one can observe it in different places around the world, but here it retains a distinct taste). These “universal” stylistic characters of liberalism which render it so repugnant are bound with cynicism (exemplified to me suitably via oft-used phrases such as “that is your problem,” or “I cannot do anything about that”); this carefree language specifically irritates the left in its encounters with liberalism. There is plenty of this in “Turkish Liberalism”; the conceited and magisterial attitude I referred to earlier

5 The articles of Mithat Sancar in BirGün newspaper are strong examples to this kind of pursuit and the multi-dimensional analysis of these issues. See especially the articles on July 7th, July 14th, July 18th, July 28th, August 26th 2008. The articles can be retrieved at: http://www.birgun.net/writer_2008_index.php.
6 One fresh example of this liberal attitude is the designation of talks about the state terror on May 1 or the Tuzla murders as attempts to put the government on the spot in its fight against the status quo, or even as attempts that try to cover up the Ergenekon trial. In Umit Kuvanc’s definition: “being a democratic policeman.” Taraf, 21 June 2008.

and furthermore a distinct fervour to slander the left.\(^8\) The topic of this current endeavour is specifically this fervour.

One can search for the roots of this stream of anger coming from the liberal-leaning public figures and intellectuals, in their cultivation upon the soil and greenhouses of the nationalist-conservative climate of the Cold War era. It is truly hard to spot a liberal intellectual who has been able to distance himself/herself from the fanatical anti-communism which maintained its “Free World” rhetoric focused on geo-strategy and its McCarthyism for decades from the 1940’s to the 1980’s. We cannot consider this to be a perennial genetic heritance, yet we must acknowledge that it has left a deep mark. The fact that upon being faced with any kind of criticism, one of the first words that [Ankara Mayor e.n.] İ. Melih Gökçek and [Prime Minister e.n.] R. Tayyip Erdoğan have recourse to is the labelling notion of “communist tactics,” testifies to the longevity and permanence of anti-communism in this country’s political culture. Granted, the new liberal intellectuals of the post-Cold War era did not refrain from questioning their old anti-communist habits, their indoctrination, and their obsessions. Specifically, certain members of the Association of Liberal Thinking who were reared by one of the vocational schools of anti-communism in Turkey, namely the Yeni Forum magazine, produced a clear self-critique on the utilization of “the threat of communism” as a means of perpetually restricting freedoms. Even so, we can claim that the ideological utility of anti-communism has come to an end; yet the confusion and the anger that it perpetuates is still in good use. It lingers on, evolving into a type of sarcasm at certain instances. Another constant employed by intellectuals that have come to lean towards liberalism from nationalist-conservatism (including the constituents of Islamism that consider themselves to be part of the same group) or intellectuals who seek a synthesis between conservatism and liberalism, is “localism.” This discourse, which demotes liberal democratism into an authentic representation of the local/national, is always ready to criminalize the left, which it stigmatizes as foreign/ness.

Ultimately, the group of liberal public figures with their roots in nationalism-conservatism, were viewing the left from a distance. However, the group of liberals whose roots are in the left and who have gained a voice after the mid-1980’s, have had a more sustained settling of scores with the left, as expected. Perhaps, we should talk about an attitude that sought an unproblematic severance of ties over and above an actual settling of scores. In many instances we can observe that the mentality structures that were once espoused by the left/socialism have enslaved these groups. This is an enslavement that begets either a trite repetitiveness or reactionism. Those who “knew” it as a mechanical-positivist automatism, a dogmatic guide or an authoritarian language, desired to demote socialism to a caricature and to trample on it in order to get rid of it. Even if there was any liberal critical voice – or the possibility of culminating one – that tried to contribute to a genuine and serious reckoning with this damned historical heritage of socialism and its serious paradoxes, it was impossible to hear it amidst the ongoing hassle. This impulsive and reactionary attitude was followed up by a repetition of the very same mentality structures, albeit with a little bit of reparation. Among them, we can count a shift towards an economist and technologist determinism especially in the context of the process of globalisation while making a mockery of the social engineering and determinism of the left... Or, sustaining the fanaticism and demagoguery of the pro-“Aydınlıkçı”\(^9\) attitude within a liberal context.

In trying to understand the furore of the “Turkish liberals” we should consider their approving attitude towards and their engagement with the Motherland Party (ANAP) and AKP governments, whether in the context of the self-articulation of the trajectory of the New-Right in the globalisation process, or opposing the status quo in Turkey [t.n. Kemalism] (undoubtedly in proportion to the existence and extent of such an engagement). An indirect “responsibility” for power ossifies attitudes even if it belies consistency. The crown ennobles as it renders its holder irascible!

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\(^8\) In his multi-dimensional interview on the debate between the left and liberalism, Şükrü Argın also raises his eyebrows to this “curious” fervor: “Sol, kendi adına konuşmam,” Mesele, September 2008, p. 26-35.

\(^9\) A leftist movement established in the late 1960s. The group’s Maoist sympathies had an impact on revolutionary groups in the late 1970s. In the late 1980s some of its members became defenders of political and/or economic liberalism whereas its core leadership intensified the nationalist tone and adopted a radical Kemalism. (e.n.)
Let us not limit ourselves to a talk over people with designations such as “Ex-...” or “of-...-origin,” for the species of liberal intellectuals (or half-intellectuals) have come to find larger breeding grounds than their seedbeds in the corners of the leftist and nationalist-conservative milieus. This change is related to the changes in the cultural climate of the middle classes. Among the younger generations of the urban and educated middle class, there exists a section that is as distanced from the pedantism of official ideology and its adherent political culture as it is from the heroic narratives of the nationalist-conservatives. Equipped with a wit that is sharpened through their constant entertaining encounter with popular culture and culture of consumption, they are bent towards a libertine attitude. They are distanced from the awe expressed in the oft used phrase “We/our country that don’t/doesn’t resemble any other,” and even a little sarcastic about this locality as they are open to the rest of the globe. One way or another, this social profile has been under the influence of the left, both culturally and politically, for the last decades. They have viewed the left with a certain interest, remaining sympathetic or at least in goodwill. Now, as they cease to be a relatively small group and begin growing in numbers, the left becomes an object of their prudence. Why?... Because of the Zeitgeist... Because of the left’s stiffness, because the left lost its charm after its gestures for revival failed at the end of the 1980’s and the 1990’s... Together with these, deep down because of the conformism of the middle classes... After all, in the eyes of the social profile that we have been describing, the left has become a bore! It does not need to be an indoctrinating liberalism; an attitude we can call liberal disposition, a sort of “everyday/ordinary liberalism” is more suitable for this group.

This social profile, expanding among the younger generations of the middle class, gives birth to a new group of liberal intellectuals, or to be more precise, it becomes the ground upon which this new group can grow. I presume we can include the three-year-old activist initiative Young Civilians in this group – not as the sole representative of the new liberal intellectual public figure, but as an example, an extension, a symptom of it. The desire that this group of intellectuals have invested in their scuffle with the left can be related to an effort to create a break inside this social profile: it can be explained as an effort that tries to separate the libertine attitude that exists within the middle classes from leftist sympathies, leftist reiterations and left-cynicism. There also exists a dimension of competition to this. A new group of intellectuals is trying to gain ground and that ground exists virtually within the territory that is in the possession of the left.

This is the profit that this new liberal group of individuals reap from their scuffle with the left, the social and political logic behind their designating the left as their primary opponent. But what about the hostile reaction of the left to the “liberal intellectuals”? Why would the “liberals” be deemed the worst of demons with the ugliest faces? Is this only a reaction against the merciless attacks coming from the liberal intellectuals (be they of leftist or of conservative origin)? Or does it indicate a determination to take the opportunity to expose the “real/ugly” face of liberalism, or, in relation to this, an effort to hinder the increasing influence of liberalism along the leftist ranks?

These ways of explanation should be taken as warnings advising us to think about the middle class existence/appearance of the left/being leftist, or about the fact that the left/being leftist has been increasingly confined in the middle classes. The growth of a tendency we can call “daily/ordinary liberalism” – that could also transform itself to an able liberal discourse – among the middle classes would “upset” the left, for this would indicate a partial loss of the territory that is in possession of the left. If we are to make sense of the level of aggression in the reaction against the “liberal intellectuals,” we should seek the share of the anxiety stemming from the...
competition over an already (restricted) space, when the left and its structures of public opinion have been squeezed into the middle classes. This is why a discussion is taking place, even though at times it becomes ugly and thus (rendered) impossible to sustain. It is obvious that in this case, as opposed to speaking to a “Neo-Fascist,” or to a self-declared supporter of Ergenekon, or to a radical Islamist terrorist, you are speaking to your opponent considering the possibility of convincing third parties, comprised mostly of a crowd of “confused individuals,” and even your opponent herself!

I certainly do not think that becoming middle class or being in contact with the middle classes are signs of degeneration. It is indeed a disgrace for left that takes itself seriously if its horizon of influence is limited to the middle classes, if it is unable to touch upon the “bottom of the ladder,” upon the subaltern, if it turns a blind eye to them especially given the current extent of polarization between the poor and the rich that makes one seek the most naive form of social justice around. Yet, from this juncture we should not waver into a language that is a “childhood disease,” one that preaches purification and obtaining a clear-cut class line, and tries to cover up its political shortcomings by recourse to a moralist fanaticism. The socialist left has always been attached to the middle class (in the old terminology “the petit bourgeois”), be it through its cadres or its voluntaristic/progressive attitude, or through its populist strategies that included them in the context of the classes that constituted the public in general. More importantly, in an era of the expanding reproduction of capitalism when commodification finds its way to all compartments of life, not only do social contradictions, especially reification/alienation (within the context of the production of non-material commodities) keep on injuring and agitating the middle classes, but also crystallize a very productive contradiction for socialism (for it is a contradiction that provokes to envision a new society/societal-order). The diffusion of the social contradictions of capitalism in the middle classes is becoming an organic process. In short, today the left can neither sever its ties with the subaltern, nor disregard the middle classes. With a perspective that acknowledges the possible inadequacy of the “labour oriented struggle” formula and with a horizon that goes beyond the puritanism of purging the middle classes of the middle class ideology, the left should embrace the principle of equality and find a way to address “humans” and “humanity.”

But this is not our topic, and our resources here will not be sufficient to cover it. We can take on an easier approach... Are we going to consider the slow distancing from the left of bright kids from good families, educated in good schools, and their courting of liberal tendencies, as a class dependent “natural event” and remain at ease, or are we going to view it as the decay of the intellectual enamel of the left and worry?

Let us put these questions in our pocket and continue the analysis of the “problematic” of anti-liberalism within the left

The seductive nature of anti-liberalism

One should be able to discern between slander and critique. One stands against slander, refuses it, reacts to it and passes one’s judgment on the person responsible for it; yet upon sensing the existence of even a slight amount of critique, one should carefully consider the statement, taking it in earnest without seeking a commensurability (exemplified by the words “if you look it that way, then …”), without giving way to any inferiority complex. This must be the defining “characteristic” of the left. And is not this exactly what distinguishes the left, the leftist ethics? It is capacity to turn around and look back at itself... For example, when Etyen Mahçupyan and other liberal columnists detect racist-nationalist symptoms within the Birgün newspaper circle and therefore in the “left,” it becomes imperative to question the validity of the case, to react against the indiscriminate language of slander, and to deny any “allegation” that claims that the ultimate culprit of racism in Turkey is the left (by way of its relation with Kemalism). On the other
hand, even if the allegations carry only a grain of truth, it is our responsibility to problematize the really existing nationalistic prejudices and modes of thinking – which truly exist within the socialist left. One should never forget that upon the ground of political ethics, the trials that the left goes through are harsher; as in the example of the racist-nationalist discourse, a tendency that does not constitute a real problem inside the thought climate of the right is problematic from the perspective of the left. There should be no stains on the white! Other stuff might rot, salt should not!

For a long time now, the name and adjective “liberal” is used as a derogatory term within a large spectrum of the left and this tendency reaches such a level that it presents “liberal intellectuals” as worse calamities than torturers with blood-stained hands, or even murderers. Especially when it is extended to leftist, socialist intellectuals who do not prefer to define themselves as liberals, the intention to insult becomes clear, and if it is not an insult, it harbours a quality that instigates an “otherness.” Obviously, it is necessary and important to delineate the socialist left from liberals and to explicate the difference. Yet, is not there a bit too much of a fanfare for anti-liberalism within the left, a fanfare that goes farther than the intention to designate the difference? The waters that lie ahead of falling prey to the seduction of anti-liberalism are dangerous. It is not in vain that fascism conceives of socialism and liberalism as of the same origin; for the charges that are being utilized in slandering liberalism, such as “foreign,” “of Western origin,” “materialistic,” “distant to spiritual values,” “cosmopolitan,” “intellectualist,” are the very same inducements that the left is charged with. It is possible that a left who has gone into a frenzy on anti-liberalism will start using such motifs, and this is not a rare sight. I am not going into the complacent consent over the usage of cuss words like “liboş” and “entel” [derogatory terms for liberal and intellectual, respectively e.n.], which are blatantly sexist.

In short, it is not a good sign if “being liberal” is easily degraded into an insult, not only because it will lead us to the aforementioned dangerous waters, but it is problematic because it hinders the modes in which socialism could take up its “problem” with liberalism in earnest.

Liberalism and socialism: what sort of adversaries?\textsuperscript{13}

I would like to mention one point Ömer Laçiner reminded us in the last issue of Birikim\textsuperscript{14}, namely, the shared roots between liberalism and Marxism-Socialism and the dialectical relationship between them. Socialism became a distinct political current and movement through the course of the 1848 revolutions. Marx came to his own thinking by way of liberalism through a questioning and critique of it, overcoming it. Here over coming comes to mean, through a recourse to one of Marx’ favourite Hegelian terms, “aufheben,” that is, overcoming via inclusion/preservation. Specifically for Marx’ socialism, the critique of liberalism is of founding value. This implies that the critique of liberalism is immanent to and contiguous with socialism. That is, is not a job finished by the “great masters” when they realized this grand idea and political break; it is a critique, a defiance, which should be renewed with each passing generation and the historical changes and political experiences that accompany them. This is not only to remain alert against liberalism, nor is it to be inoculated to become immune to its perils. It is to venture out into the open to grow stronger at the risk of coughing and sneezing. If socialism is a diamond, this is the way it will be chiselled.

We mentioned shared roots. We might as well call it a shared space, which is none other than the simple and grand problematic of rights and liberties. Liberalism bases itself upon the notion of the abstract individual, promising an abstract set of rights and liberties. It is tied to the rights of negative freedoms. It is formalist; its conception of democracy is procedural. The abstract

\textsuperscript{13} Let us remember the subtlety of the concept of adversary on this occasion. One of the major adherents of the anti-global movement, Susan George, who is a “liberal-leftist” herself, prefers using the term “adversaries” since she finds the concept of rival to be “too sportsmanship” and the concept of enemy gives rise only to the thought of an absolute victory and the annihilation of the opposing side, which is above all impossible. To her, the struggle against adversaries require “knowledge, political judo and long-term engagement.” Susan George, Another World Is Possible, If..., Verso, New York, 2004, p.89.

individual, that we mentioned above, is where both the strength and the shortcomings of liberalism are located. To attribute value and to hand rights to people regardless of their material conditions, adjectives, and the state they are in, is a mighty and “noble” ideal. Yet, when conditions, material resources, social obstacles and inequalities do not allow concrete individuals to use their abstract rights, this promise of rights and liberties gets transformed into cynicism. The contradiction between abstract liberties and their concrete impossibility is the centrepiece of the conflict between liberalism and socialism. At this point, liberalism, in as much as it could appropriate the defiance of socialism, acknowledges this contradiction and tries to cope with it. A liberalism that is unable to venture against this defiance or one that overlooks it (or rather one that is “relaxed” about and “liberated” from it to the point of disregarding it completely); is transformed into ultra-liberalism, an absolute and ugly cynicism; and in the final analysis, it is reduced to a utility for legitimizing capitalism. At the extreme end is neo-liberalism, which is liberalism transformed into something beyond cynicism, into a dark sarcasm that has no “opinions” or ethics beyond the metaphor of the market.

Socialism differentiates itself from liberalism by questioning why everyone is equal but some are more equal than others, and by preoccupying itself with the positive content of rights and liberties and the material-objective conditions of their realization. Looking at the material conditions and concentrating upon the “path to be taken” allows socialism to overcome via inclusion not only the principles of liberalism but its goals as well. The socialist conception of freedom is beyond the liberal conception that is based on liberty bereft of any coercion or necessity; it opens up to a horizon, is full of active participation, execution and creation. It does not allow democracy to be consumed on a structural-procedural plane; democracy does stand for the means/premise/principle of freedom, but it cannot be a substitute for the project or utopia of emancipation.

It is true that socialism can also “benefit” from the liberal critique. Liberal critique stands as a warning against the risk of the transformation of materialism and administrative interventions in humanitarian processes into a positivist and patrimonious-protective attitude – and we know from the history of socialism that this is a plausible risk. The possibility of a drift from a cynicism directed against an understanding of freedom that is based on the abstract-individual, to an overall cynicism of rights and liberties, retains its power; giving up the “discussion” with liberalism would give more momentum to this drift. It could be said that socialism does not need liberalism to come up with this self-critique. This might be true, but it is true as long as socialism holds on to the conscious effort of overcoming liberalism via an inclusion of it. For this reason, people who were attentive to and sensitive about maintaining this critique during the experiences of “one-country socialism” and real socialism were the “liberal leftists/socialists” of the time; or to put it more accurately, they were suspected of having “liberal-left” tendencies and were chased away.

In short, an anti-liberalism that merely accuses liberalism, does not give a genuine discussion with liberalism its due, renders the left inept and only suffices to cover its own wounds.

Left-liberal, liberal-left

As it seems fit now, we need to underline the fact that it is imperative to differentiate the noun and adjective forms of the terms “left” and “liberal” in compound phrases. I believe making this distinction has a political, conceptual and strategic “significance.” Left-liberals are liberals who are relatively susceptible to the issues of equality and social justice. Liberal-leftists, however, are bound to the problematic of negative rights and liberties with passion, they are leftists whose engagement with socialism and social-democracy is registered through these notions. If we are to utilize a familial metaphor, we can say that for ‘pure’ socialists/leftists, or more precisely for leftists who are in search of such purity (this might as well be a type of “abstract individual”!),

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liberal-leftists are siblings, (some as soul-mates, others with certain discord); left-liberals, however, are cousins and nephews/nieces (some of first degree, others of third).

We should not forget that the political thought of the liberal-left has a deep-rooted tradition. For some people its roots reach all the way to John Stuart Mill (whom I prefer to situate as left-liberal) and then continuously bifurcate to its prime-adopters such as John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, C. B. Macpherson all the way to Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls (whom I would also like to designate as left-liberal) and becoming a delta which gets nourished by many different sources. We can include within this family post liberalism\(^\text{16}\), which holds that the well-being of human beings and the objective structure of the polyvalence of human society remains at odds with the fundamental principles of liberalism (individualism, equality [in the eyes of the law], universality, optimism), insisting that it is impossible to design a society based on rights, and furthermore that the ideology of liberalism corrupts the principle values of liberalism, and that the only remaining concrete premise of the political philosophy of liberalism is civil society (one that is pluralist, secures the basics of freedom, and thus restricts governments).

The burlesque article that Perry Anderson wrote on the political adventure of the Italian thinker Norberto Bobbio\(^\text{17}\) is the proper food for thought on the constraints and horizon of liberal-left thought\(^\text{18}\). Under the specific conditions of Italy which were determined by fascism, the anti-fascist resistance and the democratic struggles of the post-fascist period, Bobbio tried to come up with a “third way” (this is new!) by synthesizing the liberal and socialist traditions. I find it worthwhile to ponder on Anderson’s writings on the paradoxical status of liberalism in Italy by relating them to the situation in Turkey – not simply to claim an affinity but rather to compare the two and to think about the differences:

“The fact that the classical ideals of liberalism were simultaneously praised while they were turned into a parody allowed these ideals to retain their normative power they had lost in other places, and this allowed these ideals to become the most unexpected and adamant aspects of the opposition to the established order.” (p. 147-8)

For Bobbio, socialism is an ideal that subsumes the liberal ideal – whereas the opposite is obviously not possible (we can consider this as a distinct criterion that separates the liberal-left from left-liberalism). He refrains from giving up the gains of liberal democracy in the name of an ambiguous “dictatorship of the proletariat.” He considers liberal institutions to be components of material culture – he thinks they are “neutral,” incontestable. What allows him to hold on to liberalism is the notion of natural rights and the principal importance he pays to the constitutional assurance of fundamental human rights. In the words of Anderson, “he maintains a deep commitment to constitutional government rather than a special attachment to the market.” (Ibid., p.152) Yet, even though he is repeatedly disappointed, becoming a victim of his good will, Bobbio’s eyes are not blind to the reality of the state apparatus of the bourgeois establishment. We, who live in the country of Ergenekon, comprehend well the below claim that he makes as an engaged anti-fascist from the country of the Gladio:

“The representative government has never been able to subjugate the executive government. The military, the bureaucracy and secret services are the secret elements operating beneath the surface of parliamentarian democracy. Even the best constitution can only present a deceitful appearance of the grand and complex structure of the contemporary state. It does not even reveal what is hidden behind or inside this façade – let alone revealing what lies deep down.” (p. 165)

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\(^{16}\) John Gray’s book, which I mentioned in the 6\(^{th}\) footnote, is enlightening in this regard. (Especially the last chapter: “Liberalizmde ne öldü ne kaldık?,” p. 305-352) [“What is dead and what is living in liberalism?” p. 283-328, in the original.]

\(^{17}\) The book he wrote after the “fall of the bi-polar world,” is a humble yet extremely explicit answer to those declarations and statements that decried the death of ideologies and the disappearance of the distinction between the right and the left, underlining the “primordial-perennial” characteristic of these fundamental distinctions. Norberto Bobbio, Sağ ve Sol [Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction], trans. Zulal Yılmaz, Dost Kitabevi Yayınları, Ankara 1999.

Perry Anderson's observations on “where” capitalism stands within the thought of Bobbio are as such:

“In Bobbio’s thought, besides being an unjust system of distribution, capitalism as a system of production is nothing more than a mere background that can be criticized without overdoing it – it is rejected as a whole, but can never be fully analyzed.” (p. 173)

From the vantage point of socialism, this is the fundamental constraint, problem and shortcoming of the liberal-left. Accepting capitalism almost as an event of the “material culture”... Within the liberal-left, or following Bobbio’s self-definition, within liberal-socialism, there does exist an ethical anti-capitalism and an overall discomfort with capitalism. Yet, either due to the disillusionment caused by defeat, or to the observation that the political conjuncture or powers seem inadequate to create an alternative to capitalism, often times because they prioritize more immediate, more burning issues, such as those pertaining to democracy and human rights, and other times because they truly regard capitalism as an event of the “material culture” (which marks the threshold between the liberal-left and left-liberalism); Bobbio, and the liberal-left in general are kept from problematizing capitalism (more precisely from politicizing this problem in contemporary contexts) and engaging with issues pertaining to class.

As is the case with every mortal soul, the swings, the holes and sometimes the inconsistencies that we can observe in Bobbio’s political adventure and thought should alert us to the fact that the liberal-left, rather that being a full-fledged doctrine or a rigid position, is a political-conceptual port of call, and it should be regarded as such. A place “frequented” by thought and practice, as the discursive connotation of the concept suggests: a moment of Praxis...

The “liberal” agenda and the “left” agenda

“Liberals” and “leftists” cannot easily walk together to protest the conditions in Tuzla [docks t.n.]. (Theoretically, they might as well, but as long as the opinion of the voiced majority of this country's liberals’ interest in Tuzla remains on this cynical level, as exemplified by their common outcry “if there were any proper leftists in this country, they would take an interest in Tuzla,” this is very hard to accomplish in practice.) But, we also know that “liberals” and “leftists” walked together for Hrant Dink. Or, they were able to sign and continue to sign common statements related to the Kurdish issue.

From the perspective of a bookish left, the fact that the current agenda is co-opted by identity issues and issues pertaining to fundamental rights and liberties, is related to the loss of the class perspective and the ideological hegemony of liberalism. These issues are viewed as “superfluous matters that globalisation has burdened us with.” We need to “pay our respects,” but what we really ought to do is to change the agenda, to foreground our issues and to foreground the “principle problem” in each issue. Thankfully, together with the dogmatic left that views issues such as ethnico-cultural discrimination, the erosion of the status of citizenship, the patriarchal gender regime and ecological destruction as “secondary” matters – when the archenemy capitalism is still standing high – there is another left that indeed sees the connection between them and capitalism. They also make the following distinction: On one hand, these contradictions are inherent to capitalism and belong to its constitution; capitalism re-produces itself through these contradictions. On the other hand, these contradictions which are shaped today by commodification and the process of the re-production of capital, have had a life of their own prior to capitalism; thus they possess a degree of autonomy both in relation to history, and the specificity of experience (that of appropriation, of adoption, of resistance...). These contradictions are not always/absolutely/unconditionally articulated in capitalism inside the “logic” of labour-capital. Instead, as external factors that have become inherent, they adhere to the labour-capital relation/contradiction through a matrix that could best be likened to the operation of addition-subtraction rather than one of multiplication-division, just as non-economical coercion and informal economies are “regulated” exceptions inside the capitalist economical system.
The way ethno-cultural, sexist, etc., modes of discrimination, inequalities, systems of domination are articulated in capitalism is not a division without a remainder, i.e. they cannot be divided by the labour-capital contradiction without a remainder. There is certainly an outstanding balance – one that is deposited to capitalism’s account! “Objectively,” if these contradictions are tackled outside the matrix of capitalism one can only be preoccupied with the remainders, the outstanding balances of these contradictions and the social and political problems they give birth to. But lest we forget, sometimes it is possible to become aware of and to analyze a situation through its “extra” appearances.

We can expand this point by recourse to the oft-mentioned “Küçükömer Paradox” that we always come across in the context of the antagonism between the left and liberalism and in their discussions over democracy. Presenting the tyranny and patrimony of the state elite/the bureaucracy/the caste of kapikulu as the primary axis of the democratic struggle in Turkey, is a liberal (left-liberal) position. (Presenting this as a class contradiction unique to Turkish history-society, viewing the military-civil bureaucratic elite as “the” sovereign class; this is a liberal-left position.) Turning a blind eye to the state’s patronimous-authoritarian apparatuses of coercion and ideology in Turkey, or considering them to be completely appropriated by capital in the name of proving the governing laws of class contradiction is a dogmatic left position. From a different left position, it is possible to carefully consider the ways in which the tyranny of the state “tradition” and the sovereignty of capital are articulated. The fact that these forms of articulation, which are of course subjected to the “overdeterminism” of capitalism, are not fixed and never follow a straight path is a vital resource for politics, for Praxis.

It strengthens one to know that capitalism is the source of all evil; but the danger in seeing only this in all perils is that it can impel people who are trying to fight against “a” malice that is very much bone and flesh to cynicism.

Sometimes the “liberal” agenda and the “left/socialist” agenda do really clash, as in the case of the problem of Equality, around the notion of the Public, and around the idea of the social state. Other times, the “liberal” agenda and the “left/socialist” agenda are in contact or are prone to be in contact. There exist clear buttonholes between the demands concerning the recognition of rights, liberties and identities, and class contradictions and the issue of poverty. But, some buttons may as well remain unbuttoned. For example, if the Kurdish problem is “exaggeratedly” reduced to class-based discrimination and poverty, it can bring a leftist close to the position of Bülent Ecevit. Let us remember my invitation to think through ports of call rather than rigid “positions”; here, there is a liberal-left port of call – or a left-liberal tension.

We can observe the manifestation of this port of call or this tension in Immanuel Wallerstein’s After Liberalism. Wallerstein holds that, after assimilating both socialism and conservatism for a century and a half, the hegemony and the paradigmatic dominance of liberalism has demised at the end of the 20th Century. Now, the crucial ingredient in political resistance and future perspective is demanding what liberalism has promised in the first place. This is a radical demand; for keeping the promise of giving everybody equal rights, liberties and the status of equal citizenship has become impossible within capitalism or its impossibility has been unmistakably posited. In these dark times, instead of insisting on an organic intertwining, Wallerstein proposes a politics of bringing together oppositional political demands without stitches, allowing them to walk the same path side by side.

Yes we are going through “hard” times. Hard and complex. Calamitous and malign. And we are weak and highly ineffective. The fragmentation of our collective experience, when multiplied by

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19 The well-known formula of professor Küçükömer (1925-1987) which asserted that the political notions of left and right were established in completely reversed positions in the specificity of the Turkish Republic. (e.n.)

20 In reference to the distinction “liberal-libertarian” which I have not utilized in this article, see a clear proponent of this attitude: Yavuz Yıldırım, “Liberal değil liberter,” Radikal iki, 14 September 2008.

the pace and complexity of the current “headlines,” renders it difficult to politically conceptualize what is going on. It becomes difficult to connect each calamity and malice to each other, and to maintain a “consistency” while doing so. It is natural for those who have come to “grab” the underlying common patterns behind these issues or for those who have gone down to the roots of the matters, to embrace that common ground, that root. It feels good to embrace a “clear and concise” way of explanation together with an Us, an identity, and to be able to define and position oneself accordingly. Yet, the side effect of this is that it locks the political mind and attitude into a “position,” reducing them to an identity. The side effect of this is – here I will repeat the danger of cynicism – becoming blind to and losing contact with the ways in which people relate to concrete issues in a direct manner, and their lived experiences in this regard. To be reduced to an identity dries up the left. “Leftists” cannot substitute the Left.

Breaking away, separation/differentiation, is a conceptual and political experience that revolutionary socialism has romanticized. In fact, it has been increasingly fetishized as such; we know how a discourse of “purification” that has come to be viewed almost as the ultimate political activity can lead to a cruel purge. It is just a pathetic and desperate consolation to seek ways of confirming one’s righteousness by getting rid of defected elements, throwing out the sandbags, differentiating oneself from the others in times of crisis, retreat, or after a defeat. To differentiate between socialism and “left-liberalism/liberal-leftism,” to transform this distinction into a politically productive one... Yes, we do need that. However, it cannot be achieved through a campaign for purification that bans the issues that pertain to the “liberal agenda,” and transforms the critique of “formal freedoms,” and “formal democracy” into cynicism. Socialism cannot be imprisoned by its “anti-”s; liberalism cannot be overcome with such a sterile anti-liberalism. A separation that seeks to protect an identity and is fuelled by the fetishism of breaking away/separation, would only be an ineffective disintegration. The left should know of ways to tap into the lines of high voltage between liberalism and itself. Never only and especially from there, but from there as well... Yes, we do need a theoretical-political clarification; nonetheless, this does not cast aside the necessity and vitality of a broad definition of the left – try to adopt the rule “operating within the largest possible group with the narrowest of cadres” to the plane of common-sense!

Translated from Turkish by Emir Benli

22 Yet another point that Şükrü Argın insits upon; see the interview in September 2008 issue of Mesele.