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DON'T PANIC, ORGANISE! THE PUBLIC SPHERE AS AN OBJECT OF RADICAL DEBATE

"Social evolution will no longer be political revolution once there is a social order in place that does away with social class and antagonism among the classes."

Karl Marx, *The Misery of Philosophy*

In Poland, as in the USA, the public forum elicits moderate enthusiasm or, at times, panic and fear. Barack Obama's attempt to implement a universal healthcare system in the USA, combined with a genuine contempt for the neo-liberalization of culture and education, is met with fear and tagged with Bolshevik associations. This intriguing reaction, colored with dread, begs for the proper "treatment" and urges an analytical stance. It's worth taking a look at the source of such strong emotions. The subject itself isn't quite so tender, and the authors who are the first to pick it up – such as Jürgen Habermas or John Rawls – can hardly be catalogued among the radical types of the far left.

Where, then, does this panic come from? It has many gradations and causes. What's most interesting is the fact that both sides – supporters and critics of the neo-liberalization of the public sector alike – are squeamish at having to adopt a stance with regard to social issues, issues that require society be considered as a multi-faceted whole, organized principally by the law and its institutions. Sheer terror falls upon liberal radicals and the neo-liberal economists. All of this confirms the intuitive notions of Michel Foucault, who emphasized in the 1970s and 1980s that power, rather than being held by the select few, operates as a socially-driven totality, cutting across the divisions inflicted on this sphere. The category of totality, considered an element of the totalitarian lexicon by the likes of Karl Popper and Hannah Arendt, seems to be the primary source of this panic. What is it about the treatment of society as a complete whole that is so terrible? What sort of threat is tied with this terminology and what are the benefits of constructing the argument in this way?

The title of this text (*Don't Panic, Organise!*) is a slogan from a banner that hung from the London College of Communication during a student sit-in last October. I quoted this slogan during a meeting of the strike committee at California's Berkeley College, where the issue of the public sector has been one of the most hotly discussed in the past few months. Those words fulfilled their purpose – it did away with the fear, but the problem remained: why were people who had decided on the strike (at a college where the last strike took place sometime in 1969) still unsure of how to relay their message, what arguments to use to discourage the dean from raising the tuition by 1/3 (to \$30,000 per academic year)? Not to mention that some of us (Europeans who happened to be at this meeting simply by chance) were perplexed at the idea that a school that already charges \$20,000 for a year of studies is still considered a public institution.

What is the public forum?

The public forum is a place of communication among citizens, involving rational institutions engaged in a discussion on issues common to all. Some theorists call attention to the limited access given to the public sphere (Aristotle or Chantal Mouffe), others don't find it a problem or give it just a marginal significance (Plato, Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas). In the classical Aristotelian model, nearly everyone was excluded because the public sphere was dominated by free-born adult men, well-off enough not to have to work for a living, and who could prove their Athenian citizenship as of at least three generations. Only 10% of the community met these conditions. These exclusions mirrored Aristotle's liberal view of the public sphere, similarly as with Locke and Rousseau, whereupon a great number of individuals are already shut out of the public sphere on the theoretical level. Chantal Mouffe, a popular critic of consensual democratic liberalization that seeks to expunge political conflict, believes that political commonality always generates a form of exclusion.^[1] This opinion is countered by a number of leftist critics of liberal democracies, such as Giorgio Agamben or Judith Butler, who advise the need for a reassessment of the classification of "citizen" and the political rights it bestows upon the individual. Agamben appeals for the reconstruction of existing institutions, while Butler warns against ascribing political action solely to sovereign nations. Her opinion remains that the rank of micropolitics and independent activism is equivalent to that of institutions.^[2]

On the contrary, Jürgen Habermas does not offer a critique of the classification of "citizen." Much like other liberal thinkers, he doesn't call for a reassessment of the exclusive principles of what he considers the

public forum. Habermas separates private life from politics and upholds the controversial divide between the personal and political realms. Here, it's important to note his other observations of the early 1960s, namely the commercialization of social life, which continues to hold relevance in a nation where financial gain is considered a priority within the organization of society.

In his treatment, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, today considered a modern-day classic, Habermas calls attention to the threat of commercialization within the public sphere, particularly within the scope of cultivating culture. "On the road that leads from the public that leads the discourse on culture to the public that consumes that culture, there is a loss of what once functioned as a literary public forum that could be distinguished from that of the political realm. . . . The public forum takes on the function of an advertisement. The more it proves itself handy as a medium for political and economic influence, the more apolitical it becomes as a whole and only superficially privatized."^[3] According to Habermas, the debate on community property, considered a key element of the public forum, is replaced with a sham debate as a result of materialization and commercialization.

Liberal concepts of the public forum legitimize marginalization and exclusion. Critics of these concepts rarely venture to consider society as a greater whole composed of independent groups which can be analyzed against the backdrop of this whole and recognized for their individual interests. If we reject such liberal concepts altogether, we do away with some vital tools. And yet, on the other hand, if we accept a liberal construction without question, we get unable to recognize its underlying exclusions objectively. My theoretical research, along with a large proportion of practical experiments within the cultural domain of social life, is an attempt to obtain the tools needed to create a proper formula for defining the needs and ideas tied in with the public sphere. Stopping short at the theories of Habermas and other liberal theorists, we lose the lexicon needed to explore neo-liberal politics and the transformation it brings about in the cultural and social realms. We can't criticize Habermas for his views as he is hardly a neo-liberal, but we can't properly critique neo-liberalism itself either as it tends to slip through the grasp of our fragmented line-up of contemporary critics. It's a system whose power and efficacy is based on the lack of a common denominator that can be applied to measure its impact on society. I wish Polish discussions and activities operated within the wide scope of the "whole" of society, understood in the spirit of Kant as the transcendental horizon, rather than that of Hegel's determined point of arrival.

Democracy in Culture? Culture in Democracy?

All of this can seem detached from the realm of culture if we consider it an area in which direct political imperatives are set aside in favor of "disinterested pleasures" (Kantian model) or a confrontation with the issue of "otherness," leading to the development of institutions (Hegelian model). Commonly, exposure to culture allows one to move beyond the mundane and the practical and closer to the universal or the aesthetic. This model has been debated by philosophers (Plato, Diderot, Hegel, Benjamin, Adorno, and others), sociologists (Pierre Bourdieu) and artists (Bertold Brecht, Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke and many feminist artists). In their view, culture – and art, in particular – always comes about within a social context. Even if many works manage to touch upon values that can be considered universal, their genesis and recognition are mired within the cultural tools and norms of the artist and the audience. Works of art are always tangled up within the political context of a given era, culture and geography. Since culture is a part of the social realm and is controlled by its politics, access to the creation and the receipt of culture is also limited by the same conditions. Participation in culture has to undergo analysis and regulation according to the needs of society.

Considering culture within the categories of politics requires that it be treated as an element within the larger social structure in which different forms of capital and strategies for social integration are generated in different ways. Within the classic Marxist model suggested by Louis Althusser, an abundance of constructivism generates systems of ideological duplication, whereby delegates of primary institutions "interpolate" subsequent institutions in order to assure consistency and duplication for the base.^[4] Cultural institutions play an invaluable role. However, this model may appear slightly simplified. It neglects to account for the social hierarchy without distinguishing various forms of interaction, which complicates the analysis of cultural products considerably. Complex sociological analyses (Pierre Bourdieu, Zygmunt Bauman, Erving Goffman) assume that society constructs diverse forms and strategies for generating culture, which provide individuals with symbolic worth, operating in tandem with other forms of capital: social or financial. Cultural capital reinforces levels of social stratification. In his *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu describes social diversity

within the context of disproportionate access to culture. In the age of "cognitive capitalism," access to knowledge and its application has become not only a measure of social status and condition for advancement, but also a veritable means for capitalist production and accumulation. Symbolic capital often serves as the primary criteria for determining the functionality of an individual and his or her social status. The process of creating and distributing that capital, along with the problem of access to culture, becomes thus a political issue.

The Polish context

Neoliberal changes proposed in 2009 by the Ministry of Culture and its experts led to a practical limiting of access to culture and art. Budget cuts, considered by some experts as the only effective means in battling the financial crisis, would have resulted, for example, in a drastic reduction of long-term grants for public institutions that support cultural activities. In the long run, this would impact the development of works of art and the nation's cultural heritage. Collections built up and preserved thanks to public funds would also be threatened. Theatres, which spend months working on a single show, would have to put a stop to their activities once a grant has run out and they don't have a chance of receiving another. Institutions would be forced to raise money from wealthy donors and guests, in addition to turning towards heavy-handed commercialism.

From the perspective of the political rules that govern the public sphere, it's interesting to take a look at the changes that have been proposed. No expert interdisciplinary teams were formed, instead external committees were put in place to handle cultural affairs, made up of lawyers and economists. The reformatory body was largely ignorant of the realm of artistic creativity and production, serving a purely instrumental purpose in the matter. Certainly, these individuals are specialists within their own fields, but that is the extent of their competency. Decision-making from above and without regarding a wide scope of social activity seems particularly undemocratic, effectively snubbing the needs of the art world, especially that of society at large. The Ministry and its experts didn't even make the attempt to consider those groups that do not have access to culture. Industrial laborers, immigrants, the unemployed, the underprivileged, residents of rural areas, those without higher education make up a substantial proportion of the Polish society, proven by the statistics about cinema, theatre and gallery attendance, or on literacy and participation in cultural events. The authors of expert reports requested by the Ministry of Culture assume, on the other hand, that everyone participates in culture with equal access. There is nothing more erroneous. This unadulterated form of projecting idealist fantasies on the whole of society has taken on the often well-deserved tag of "ideology." Idealizing a vision of the public sphere slowly becomes its implicit description, and the desire for universal participation replaces a factual analysis.

Cultural Shock Doctrine

Poland has been implementing an absolute version of neoliberalism. Only over the past few years have critics of this strategy ceased treating it as a primitive Stalinist view and begun to see it as a reasonable voice in the debate on social evolution. It's worth mentioning the work of Professor Tadeusz Kowalik, who leads a relentless fight for the acceptance of something other than a neoliberal economic model. In texts published over the years, he's referred to the writings of the Polish constitution which describe a "social market economy."^[5] In many sectors, it's clear that the adjective "social" hasn't been taken into consideration by subsequent ruling orders in Poland.

Neoliberalism is a system of constant change and adaptation. Only when we set it alongside all the problems that it entails, can we see the scope of the damage it ensues. In her Shock Doctrine, Naomi Klein openly compares the actions of neoliberal economic strategists to criminal psychological experiments that took place in the III Reich. Klein emphasizes how a situation of crisis can often legitimize the most drastic forms of social injustice. She describes how the public sphere is subjected to deconstruction as a result of a social or natural disaster. In Chile, in Poland or New Orleans, governments take advantage of such situations to latch on to neoliberal doctrines. Schools are privatized, medical programs are cut, banks gain support for increasingly virtual investments, whereas the poor are deprived of the remains of what was guaranteed to them by the government.^[6] Klein likens these actions to the use of electric shock therapy on patients plagued by a psychiatric crisis. "Shock therapy" brings about instantaneous results, but wipes out the individual and his or her creative potential, or that of society itself. This could result in long-term consequences.

On the basis of the economic crisis, the Polish Ministry of Culture also wanted to implement irreversible changes. "Shock therapy" has mobilized society's potential and we've decided to work against it and, thanks to

the symbolic capitalism of the makers of culture, we could count on some greater action on the part of social and political forces than in other sectors affected by the neoliberal strategy. The prevalence of such situations exceeded our wildest expectations. Currently (December 2009), social committees dedicated to cultural causes and media legislation are springing up like mushrooms, demanding to have a say in nominating department heads for cultural institutions. These are the side effects of our initially marginal and largely intellectual campaign that was started around the Polish Cultural Congress. From the beginning, we considered it an event that paid little heed to the democratic dimension of the public debate over the cultural sector. Debates set up by our organization^[7], critical texts and manifestos were clearly concentrated on the problem of democracy within the management of the culture sector, the issue of access to culture and the meaning of such access within the general scope of social life. We referred back to the works of one of the most important artists of the 20th century, Joseph Beuys, whose Appeal for an Alternative was an inspiration for us to come up with alternatives to ultra-marketable projects for bringing about cultural change. Tying in with Beuys' idea for participation, we attempted to determine how to expand the public's share of decision-making processes and cultural production so that the realm of creativity could be an area of cooperation and solidarity, as opposed to exclusivity.^[8] The tactical reference to Beuys and Habermas turned out to be a step in the right direction. Maybe we didn't find a narrative thread on the whole - creating a theoretical model is yet to take place - but we felt that we could express our needs, ideas and desires. We were no longer merely philosophers or theorists, but we became activists for social change.

Footnotes

- [1] See Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. Paradoks Demokracji [The Democratic Paradox]. Trans. Wojciech Jach, Magdalena Kamińska, and Andrzej Orzechowski. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej Edukacji TWP.[iii] See Butler, Judith, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 2007. Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [2] Habermas, Jürgen. 2007. Strukturalne przeobrażenia sfery publicznej [Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit/The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere]. Trans. Wanda Lipnik and Małgorzata Łukasiewicz. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, p. 330.
- [4] See Althusser, Louis. Ideologie i ideologiczne aparaty państwa [Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses]. Trans. Andrzej Staroń. Available online at www.nowakrytyka.pl/spip.php?article279.
- [5] Cf. Kowalik, Tadeusz. 2007. Blaski i cienie transformacji polskiej. In Futuryzm miast przemysłowych. 100 lat Wolfsburga i Nowej Huty, M. Kaltwasser, E. Majewska, and J. Szreder, eds., 267-279. Kraków: Korporacja ha!art.
- [6] See Klein, Naomi. 2008. Doktryna szoku [Shock Doctrine]. Trans. Hanna Jankowska, Tomasz Krzyżanowski, and Katarzyna Makaruk. Warszawa: Muza.
- [7] The "Laboratorium" [Lab] of Indeks 73 Initiative (See http://www.indeks73.pl/en_index.php), and the BarCamp of the Independent Culture, August 2009. Both events were written up in the September issue of the weekly of the Tygodnik Powszedni. See Majewska, Ewa, and Kuba Szreder. "Apel o alternatywę" [Appeal for an Alternative] in this issue.
- [8] Beuys' text was first published in the art magazine "Sztuka," distributed during the Polish Culture Congress in 1981. After the onset of the Martial Law, the work was censored. See Apel o alternatywę [Appeal for an Alternative]. 1997. Trans. Helena Cieślińska. In: Joseph Beuys. Obrzeża Europy, ed. A. Smalcerz. Bielsko-Biała: Galeria Bielska BWA.