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Culture and Crime

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I am accustomed to loneliness. Is loneliness my culture?

Two days ago, a man approached me in a train station restaurant. The newspaper I had been reading reported bomb attacks on German synagogues. The man mumbles: Bombs. Bombs. More bombs. And then he screams right into my face: and for you we need napalm!

Is napalm his culture?

On the same day, four youths assaulted a 50 year old German of Chinese origin in Munich. After yelling "foreign pig" at him, they hit him until he was bleeding. I wonder: has the victim got a culture? Or in this case: which culture got hold of him? And what kind of culture is racism?

Culture is a broad concept. A filmmaker from Chad notes: in my country, war has become a culture. In the global North, however, culture is supposed to promote civilization, democracy and progress. The same concept is interpreted as a chance of emancipation as well as as oppression and violence. Some call it culture - some call it crime. Whatever is designated by the concept of culture is set between these two extremes. If one is to avoid essentialist concepts of culture, then whatever is being mediated by

this concept is to be understood as culture. Violence forms part of it.

I made a film a few years ago, called Homo Viator, dealing with pilgrimage churches. It turned out that in most cases, the ritual of pilgrimage had been established on the site of a crime. Earlier pilgrims had been slain on these sites, because they were foreigners. They had been burnt, beaten to death, strangled or simply lynched. The killings served to establish a coherent community as well as a network of places, where these crimes came to be idolatrized, therefore providing a framework of geographical orientation. The Austrian national sanctuary of Melk pertains to this tradition of tribalization as well.

Culture is founded precisely upon this act of exclusion. Culture is based on crime. The most basic example of an act of culture is a crime committed in common. To yell out "foreign pig" is an instance of this case. A common ground is being established by violently setting the boundaries of social distiction. Culture arises out of the tension between distinction and discrimination. It is an uneasy reaction formed in the light of impending murder. Culture means ritualized violence.

This becomes apparent if we leave the narrow conceptual boundaries of the global North. Feminist writers of the South have often described certain cultural formations as relations of violence, especially towards women. Brutal violations of bodily integrity such as genital mutilation, the immolation of widows, bride sale or domestic violence are made socially acceptable as customs and traditions by means of cultural concepts. Crime is normalized as culture. This strategy is not restricted to the South. After all, the foundational myth of European culture is based on the story of the

abduction and rape of Europe. Whatever is labeled as European culture is set on the background of this outrage.

The categories of culture are evoked in the constructions of all the tacit divisions enabling oppression and violence. Good. Evil. Normal. Abnormal. Honour. Shame. It is in the name of culture that women are kept in the violent darkness of the domestic sphere. That they are silenced, mutilated and exploited. It is to oppose tradition, ritual and culture, that women migrate and break the bonds of tacit consent.

The realm of privacy

Culture as crime happens under specific conditions. One of them is a specific concept of timespace. It is characterized by an eternal repetition of habits, which construct a privatized space. The space of the private denotes the absence of public control. It refers to domestication. Hannah Arendt sharply distinguishes this sphere from the political arena. Where privacy becomes a principle, slavery and arbitrariness rule. This oppressive relation is glorified as a law of nature. It is the founding principle of economy which is legitimized by naturalized needs.

Arendt insists that the temporal and spatial organization of the private sphere is based on the realm of economy and its underlying eternal circulation of production and consumption. It is the place where time is violently curbed into a dead end cycle, so as to repress any potential of change. It is the place where nature rules through ritual, repetition and reproduction. An eternal repetition echoed by industrial production, still ruling the spaces of global peripheries. Reproduction meaning the production of children, nutrition, health and care, in short all types of work which are being devalued and naturalized by the doublebind of nationalist heterosexual ideology and the capitalist division of labour.

Reproduction therefore primarily refers to the process of the reproduction
of power relations as pertaining to the laws of nature.

With the global spread of capitalist forms of production, the zones of privatization have dramatically increased. The realm of privacy is wherever the political sphere has been dismantled and lawlessness rules: in war and civil war as well as through global hyperexploitation in semi-privatized free trade zones, half-colonies and protectorates. In the location of domestic violence. In "nationally liberated zones" as well as in deportation jails. Privacy rules where politics have been purged and the laws of the tribe and the racket prevail.

The meaning of the private is to be deprived of any opportunity of change and to be barred from the realm of politics. This is the original meaning of the word "privatio": to be deprived of something and to suffer a loss, in this case the loss of any alternative.

Domestication of desire
This is precisely the reason why the triangular dark hole between culture, privacy and crime came to be interpreted in Western culture as the territory of bourgeois liberty. The domestic sphere was individually internalized as the bourgeois soul, as the realm of the good, noble and beautiful. Those properties were to be cultivated and appeciated in this interior world - but not in the exterior world of political and economic relations. The site of habitual crime was thus transformed into the sanctuary of ideal values - a site where the timeless utopia of liberalism converged with the endless circular terror of reproduction.

"Culture means not a better but a nobler world: a world, which is not supposed to be created by a radical change of material living conditions, but by proceedings within the soul of the individual." (Herbert Marcuse)

But the desire for a better life is not a piece of furniture adorning the bourgeois interior. On the contrary, this desire has been confined to the dark hole of culture in order to make sure that it will not be realized. The domestication of utopian desire took place because its confinement within the boundaries of privacy precisely ensured that there it could not cause any change of political and economic power structures. The proliferation of individualistic life-style identity politics is such an instance of the domestication of desire. It is the interior design of utopian liberalism, dominated by the rules of economy and its tacit consent to oppression.

Difference or opposition?
Considering this background it seems paradoxical that of all things it was the realm of privacy which was heralded as the arena of liberation by the new social movements. The private is political - this slogan of the 1970s now sounds like a threatening prophecy. It was not realized by the politization of the private but on the opposite - by the privatization of the political. In this context the culturalist practices of individual identity politics can be compared with other privatization raids, for example the massive privatization of public space, the media, social duties, or even whole states and territories. It seems as if the realm of privacy has been massively expanded, including its underlying priciple of a naturalized economy.

In the global North, this sphere of privacy offers a whole range of different life styles. They suggest the complete freedom to design one's own living conditions - provided that they remain private and

remain restricted to the recognition of individually culturalized identities. Difference is tolerated within the system of cultural domestication - but not as opposition to the system itself. Opposition is thus replaced by cultural difference. It is this constant appropriation and integration into the sphere of economy and privacy, which characterizes the method of cultural domestication. Whoever opts for cultural identity is accepted in regard to his or her private life style - while consenting to remain indifferent towards their political framework. Cultural difference thus translates into political indifference.

The law of "uneven development"

What is necessarily marginalized in the discourse of cultural difference are its political conditions: in the context of an international division of labour, only the privileged are in the position to use culture as a tool of individual emancipation. The material conditions of a white middle class existence in the North, regardless whether male or female, hetero- or homosexual are provided by the simultaneous exploitation of, above all, women from the South. The construction of the former's identity takes place at the expense of the latter. Thus, even the most intimate identity politics are involved in the modes of production of global capitalism. What appears as cultural difference for some means social, political and economical inequality for others. This permanent reproduction of inequality forms the principle of "uneven development" in the context of global capitalism. This "uneven development", the law of economic apartheid, is the reason of global polarization, discrimination and exploitation.

Therefore, the relationship between culture and crime, which seemed to result from an overly broad concept of culture, is proven valid in the context of global modes of production. Slavoj Zizek writes: "The postmodern multicultural politics of identity, this ever

growing blossom of groups and subgroups with their hybrid and fluid identities, each of them insisting on their specific life styles and on their rights to act out their specific cultures - this type of incessant diversification is conceivable only within the context of capitalist globalization".

The indifference of cultural relativism masks this fundamental difference: the massive discrepancies in regard to self-determination, agency and the covering of basic needs. The notion of culture transforms the hierarchies of global privilege into a horizontal array of mutually indifferent cultures. It replaces the notion of class - but not its rule.

Negative Universalism

In contrast, feminist critics of domestication are not concerned with culture, but with the crime which is habitually commited in its name. It is those who are forcefully particularized, who demand universal standards. They address human rights, politics, the public sphere, ethics and justice. But nobody listens. The ones who are being addressed have preferred to transform themselves into tribes obsessed with culture and wallow in privacy. Global inequality is expressed in cultural terms and is reified as a fetish object. It is transformed into an ahistoric essence or into an exotic commodity and therefore treated as a positive quantity. The universalism on which the particularized keep insisting has been culturally relativized - as an eurocentric ideology of the West. Nobody would deny that. But the consequence of this conclusion, namely indifference, has to be refuted.

But if the concept of difference is to be respected, it has to remain negative, in its political form of inequality. This concept refers to the only universals which are valid on a global level nowadays: to oppression, exploitation, to discrimination and subjection - in one word, to different positionings within the global class hierarchy and subsequent inequalities in regard to the access to education, work, health care and self-determination. A universalist discourse which refers to these differences is a negative universalism. It is in itself a historical category. It is not based on metaphysical assumptions or cultural analogies but starts from the fact that the modes of production of global capitalism concern almost every human being today: to some they appear as culture - to others as crime.