09 2000

A Prejudice in the Culture

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Whenever I was invited to speak at a Western university I was always expected to speak about what was going on in eastern Europe. Even the most theoretical paper I delivered provoked questions such as ‘How are things for women in eastern Europe?’ In a way, there is a special kind of prejudice at work in this attitude of Western intellectuals. When, for example, Western feminists speak about feminism they can discuss such abstract issues as ‘woman in film noir’, ‘the notion of the phallus in feminist theory’, etc.; but someone coming from Eastern Europe must speak about the situation of women in her own country because of the ‘horrors’ going on there. [1]

Doesn’t the West give the very same sort of prejudice-induced reception, described by Renata Salecl with regard to eastern European intellectuals, to other comers from European East? Artists, for example? For some time now, there has been a trend thriving in the Western contemporary art scene, the trend that can be described as obsession with corpses: a considerable number of artists are using (or referring to) corpses (human, animal; excreta, viscera, body parts, etc.) in their work, so we can even speak about some sort of cadaverous spectacle. However, while works of Western artists such as Damien Hirst or Mona Hatoum can be grasped within the most diverse schemas of reading, an eastern

European artist, on the other hand, will always be expected to put a corpse, as an object of art, into the post-socialistic context: war, totalitarianism, etc.

Is there any way to remove this prejudice? And what would be its function in the first place? The recent movements within the domain of politics and economy regarding the East-West relationship offer a possible answer. Let's approach it through the paradigmatic case of transitology discourse, constantly imposed by the West as a framework supposed to offer us an insight into the European East after the collapse of Socialism.[2]

What is transitology? Let's disregard for a moment the precise semantic meaning of that term and start with an anecdote which illuminates 'transitology' in a way that psychoanalysis could find considerably symptomatic. Monroe Price once described his first encounter with the notion of transitology in the following manner: „Some graduate student told me he's working in the department of transitology at the Central European University, I thought it was trams, (...) mass transportation or something like that." [3]

In a very specific way, Price was right: transition stands for a concept of mass transportation („or something like that") from communist authoritarianism to liberal democracy. Thus transitology at its very core excludes any interpretation through standard concepts of movement provided by Lacanian theory. On one hand, referring to the Lacanian concept of drive, we cannot say that transition is a process which has no goal (the final achievement, the ultimate destination), but only an aim (the process itself). Precisely the opposite: transition always presupposes the final goal that must be accomplished, its ultimate consequence is strictly defined. On the other hand, we can not render transition as an act in a Lacanian sense either, as the transgression in which

the subject undergoes radically unaccountable change. Again, completely opposite: the subject has to accomplish her/his goal through an active, rational intervention rather than shifting through temporary annihilation (symbolic suicide). The ultimate goal is, of course, democracy, and the problem of transitology lies precisely in the Western doxa of democracy as the only solution for post-communist problems.

Of course, we must constantly bear in mind the fact that the West (just like the East) doesn't exist. Bosnians, for example, discovered this fact after realising that West (the international community) was not able to stop the war in Bosnia because the wide range of interests of different Western political factors simply couldn't be integrated into one consistent policy toward Bosnia. For another revealing example of how different Western strategies are coping with the post-communist phenomena, we can refer to Price again. This time, to his insight into application of American, British and German media-regulation models in eastern Europe, especially in the case of the transformation of mastodon-like state broadcasting entities (Ostankino, Hungarian television, etc.):

To take these several models and these several prejudices, under a British model they [state broadcasting institutions] would move from state institutions to public broadcasting, they would become repositories of a kind of cultural identity, but independent of the state and with kind of a character and culture of their own. (...). Under the American model, they would virtually disappear. From an American perspective, people can't figure out what these institutions are, they're so unlike anything, and there's no belief that they should have a substantial future, except as privatized institutions, they should be privatized the way in which every other major state industry should be privatized. (...). Under a German model, these public institutions might continue, but you would

pay a lot more attention to an elaboration of the governing process, etc. [4]

Here American, British and German models shouldn't be seen as mere scenarios of the transformation of the state broadcasting institutions. Let's focus here on the obvious fascination of the Western agents with these institutions. These gigantic television companies were efficient tools of the ultimate power in eastern Europe (the State, the Party), thus showing, as the final instance, how the public can be influenced and molded by an ideology to the greatest possible extent. In the West this arouses a certain uncanny fascination: if a society can be influenced by the obsolete, primitive, bureaucracy-stuffed, state-controlled media in an absolutist, Orwellian fashion, can't the same happen in their own societies, which are saturated with more sophisticated media? Here we can recall the way XVII- and XVIII-century French thinkers were, in a similarly uncanny way, fascinated by the Orient and projected their own impasses and practices in dealing with power onto its fantasy framework of oriental despotism.[5] Similarly, Western media experts, by dealing with the spectre of communist, state-controlled broadcasting enterprises, are actually dealing with the mirror image of their own media systems. Thus American, British and German models are not mere solutions for media regulation policy in post-communist Europe. They primarily function as fantasies, convincing the Westerners that they can not be fully influenced and manipulated by the media (in the American model, the media can not manipulate you because behind them there is no ultimate authority who would like to do so; in the British model, ultimate authority exists but has no intention of controlling you, etc). Thus eastern European state broadcasting entities must be transformed neither because of themselves nor because of the eastern European

public, but for confirmation of the fantasy frame by which West pacifies the impact of its own media.

On a wider scale, the same goes for transitology. A standard complaint directed at transitology can be formulated in this way: isn't transitology, like orientalism or any other form of the West's prejudice of symbolic supremacy, nothing but a framework whose function is to establish the distance from the Other, a distance which can never be traversed? The Other (the non-West) is supposed to begin a hopeless movement in order to reach the West, but perfect harmony can never be achieved- some asymptotic distance will always remain. But a more radical reading should point out that the distance from the East matters only as a cover-up for the distances, barriers and delays that characterize the West itself, the West not as coherent and deprived of any antagonisms, but as a heterogeneous and inconsistent system. As a result the phantasmal framework of transitology - the desire to appear likable to the East, to be desired by the East - exists in order to maintain the West's fantasy about itself, i.e. to help the West maintain the illusion that there is solid ground for the East to step on after its troubled journey of post-communist 'tram-sition'. [6]

This is hardly an optimistic lesson: if we apply it in a domain of cultural policy, the situation will be no less grim than in the field of politics or economics. Here I refer to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. In that process antagonisms within the domain of culture were misused by thriving nationalistic regimes, thus becoming more crucial for the post-Yugoslav conflict than, let's say, economic or political issues. [7] Having in mind this sort of supremacy of culture over economics and politics, we can argue that the reversed pattern of Eastward expansion (unconditional supremacy of politics and economics over culture) is the extremely aggravating circumstance.

And it is precisely at this point - the priority of 'hard' politics and economics over culture - where ideology/propaganda comes to play. We can exemplify it with a specific myth that is, at this very moment in Bosnia, operating through demagogic speeches of local politicians, but through optimistic-at-every-price arguments of agents of the international community as well. Unwillingly gathered in an odd alliance, they keep on convincing Bosnian people that „all we need is the market". Their appeals could be described as a paraphrase of the Marquis de Sade: Dear Bosnians, one more effort if you want to become 'capitalists'. To be a capitalist here means not simply being a member of capitalist society, but of a society deprived of war. In accordance, establishment of a flow of commodities and capital will dismantle the ancient nationalistic myths of hate. Living in a Milka-and-honey society will thus bring us ultimate salvation, purifying us from the wish to fight and kill our neighbors. Unfortunately, eruptions of nationalism (in both the West and the East) have already confirmed that capital as such doesn't necessarily pacify nationalistic desires, i.e. capitalism and nationalistic strategies are far from being mutually exclusive. For example, Bosnia is already a part of the capitalist market, but by means of financial and economic crime sprouting on the soil of nationalistic elitist policy.

Every future design of guidelines, not only in politics but in culture as well, must start from the very suspension of the capitalism (democracy) vs. nationalism dichotomy. But, at this point in time it seems impossible to expect the West to change its policy (in the domain of politics, economics or culture), to give up its doxa, or - to put it into the psychoanalytic schema - the fantasy of itself. Any Eastward expansion strategy based on the symbolic supremacy of the West is inevitably doomed to repeat the fate that has already struck such political and economic strategies.

For suggestion of an alternative mode of strategy, I'll refer again to Lacan, more precisely, to the shift in his notions regarding the end of analytic therapy: from subjectivization to subjective destitution. Subjectivization would mean that by the end of analysis the subject has to assert his/her constitutive guilt, to internalize his/her contingent fate. On the other hand, subjective destitution is a process of the subject suspending his/her need for internalization/ symbolization, interpretation, searching for 'deep, true meaning': s/ he has to understand that traumatic experiences shaping her/his life are merely contingencies, deprived of any 'deeper meaning'.

We can render destitution through the following vivid example: in Foucault's Pendulum Umberto Eco constructs an imagined conversation between Shakespeare and his publisher. In this dialogue, the publisher, after reading the first version of the play, starts to make remarks concerning the story and style the: rather than in some castle in France, it would be better to set the play in Denmark („In a Nordic, Protestant atmosphere, in the shadow of Kierkegaard…"), in the castle of Elsinore; furthermore, he suggests that the father's ghost should appear in the first act, not the last one, thus motivating the young prince's behavior and establishing the conflict with the mother; finally, the publisher suggests that speech „To act or not to act? This is my problem", should be replaced by the question of whether to be or not to be. In the light of the dialogue, all details of the play known as its very essential elements become consequences of the publisher, purely contingent activity: what appears to be the fate of the play (it was written precisely to describe the young Danish prince haunted by his father's ghost; the speech „To be or not to be? That is the question?" is the very core of the play, etc.) transforms into the result of a series of contingent, incoherent operations. [8]

So let me close this paper with a modest proposal suggesting the similar, destitution-oriented path for the cultural segment of the Eastward strategy: the notion underlying this strategy must be the one of the pure contingency and incoherence of any Western recipe for culture of the East. The only way to remove the prejudice toward 'the East' renounces the symbolical supremacy of the Western/European cultural concept over the Eastern one through the utter acceptance of the fact that even the major features of Western/European culture could be nothing but a contingent set of intrusions made by some anonymous publisher. This gesture can be accomplished only as a part of a wider project of dismantling the Western doxa, including its master-like notions of liberal democracy and capitalism.

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[1] Renata Salecl, The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis and Feminism after the Fall of Socialism (London and New York: Routledge 1994), p. 2-3.

[2] For an elaborated account of transitology, see: Dejan Jovic, Problems of Anticipatory Transition Theory: from 'transition from...' to 'transition to...', paper presented at The Concept of Transition Workshop, Zagreb, 22-23 April 2000

[3] Monroe Price, quoted from the transcript of the Democratic Politics and Policy Workshop (Cardozo School of Law, Dec 5 1995), http://www.newschool.edu/centers/ecep/price.htm.

[4] Monroe Price, ibid.

[5] I owe this notion to Mladen Dolar. See his paper 'The Subject Supposed to Enjoy', an introduction to: Alain Grosrichard The Sultan's Court (London, New York: Verso 1998).

[6] Here we can apply Zizek's famous definition of the relation between fantasy and ideology: transitology is nothing but a set of means for the Western doxa to take into account its own failure, to gratify it with some positive existence. Precisely for this reason, transitology should be re-approached, but this time not with the intention of discovering and analyzing eastern, post-communist Europe, but to redefine the doxa of the West.

[7] The recent example for this can be seen in the fact that lot of Serbs today keep accusing Milosevic but not the concepts of "Serbhood" or Greater Serbia. These concepts existed before Milosevic and have outlived his pragmatic use of them as a justification for territorial wars: listening to Milosevic's opponents in the forthcoming FRY elections will be sufficient for confirmation of this.

[8] This example I owe to Zizek again, though he used it for a different purpose, that of elaborating the difference between transgression of an identity and the conception of identity itself as the result of a certain 'transgression'. See: Slavoj Zizek, For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor (London, New York: Verso 1991)