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Commentary on the Text by Branka Ćurčić

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What is a “neoliberal art institution”? An institution of neoliberal hegemony? Or an institution under neoliberal hegemony?

As we know, Hayek & Co initially started the battle to realize their neoliberal ideas as a battle for these ideas themselves, as a battle for “hearts and minds”. In fact, these ideas completed a “long march through the institutions” before taking political power: through universities, schools, churches, media, professional associations, various art and cultural institutions, in other words through that which is called civil society. Neoliberal hegemony that is so powerful today thus started out quite small, namely as cultural hegemony. Ideological influence was once ensured in this way, then the next step was to conquer the political sphere, infiltrate political parties and finally to take over entire countries. First people were convinced that there is no alternative to neoliberalism, then the alternatives were eliminated politically (or through military coup), and the “neoliberal” turn was politically completed. Due to this political victory, neoliberal hegemony was ultimately able to establish itself in the form of an epochal condition.

An institution of neoliberal hegemony is consequently an institution that identifies with neoliberal ideas, openly articulating and systematically disseminating them in its activity. In other words, it is an apparatus of neoliberal hegemony.

However, an institution *under* neoliberal hegemony does not necessarily affirm neoliberal ideas or possibly put them into practice. It may even despise or openly question them, but even if it fights against neoliberal hegemony, it cannot elude it. This hegemony determines the manner of its reproduction as an institution. It is in the nature of a hegemony that one cannot simply avoid it or voluntarily take up a position outside it. It is specifically because it defines its own outside that it is a hegemony. In this respect, and only in this respect, all institutions are neoliberal under neoliberal hegemony, even those that resist this hegemony.

The notion that one could freely choose to become instituted outside the neoliberal world belongs entirely to this neoliberal world. In other words, those who believe that the question of whether one is neoliberal or not is simply a matter of *free choice*, do not even need to pose this question, because they have already answered it. Free choice is the form in which neoliberalism has hegemonized or – to stick to neoliberal jargon – privatized or patented free will. Those who can privatize or patent water, plants or even gene-manipulated beings, can privatize or patent the free will as well. It is specifically in the form of free choice that neoliberalism owns the exclusive copyright to free human will. Those who make use of it today are already involuntarily swearing allegiance to neoliberal hegemony. In short: liberty has today become a translation, the original of which is the exclusive property of neoliberalism.

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It is consequently crucial, especially in the so-called post-communist or post-socialist situation, not to understand that which is "not yet completely neoliberal" or that which has been "ruined or neglected after the collapse of socialism" in the sense of a space that is outside neoliberal hegemony. The systematic neglect of formerly socialist institutions or their systematic ruination is also already an effect of neoliberal hegemony. It is therefore not very helpful to distinguish between the old ("not yet liberal") and the new ("already completely liberal") institution. Here again, it is the hegemony itself that arbitrarily decides what is old, belonging to the past and therefore to be neglected or ruined, and what is new, has a promising future or is inevitable or necessary. The same applies to the allegedly intrinsic location of this difference: the developed capitalist West is purported to be a kind of historical origin of neoliberal hegemony, a geographical, cultural location in which it occurs in its authentic and most highly developed form, whereas in the East (in post-communist Eastern Europe, for example), this hegemony is allegedly still trying to become established, to toss the old onto the junk pile of world history and replace it with the new. Neoliberal hegemony does not function according to the old pattern of a colonial power, conquering wild, primal territories not yet integrated into the historical time. It can be said of this West itself that it is nothing more than a historical ruin – the ruin of the welfare state, of ideological and political Keynesianism, of the collective solidarity typical of industrial modernism, of social democracy, of the fighting institutions of the working class, its unions and political movements, etc. Is not Eastern Europe today conversely the place where the neoliberal idea finds its "authentic", its "natural" political environment:

Tsunami-like waves of privatization, in which what was formerly owned by the people becomes the property of the few newly rich literally over night and without notable resistance? In fact, it is in the East where there is really a blind faith in the basic principles of neoliberal ideology, in the omnipotence of private initiative, the self-regulatory power of the market, the elixir of "deregulation", in short in the unfettered market economy as the ultimate realization of liberty. It is here, where even its victims enthusiastically subject themselves to it, that neoliberalism is really at home.

Conclusion: the difference between the West and the (post-communist) East today is not a difference between highly developed neoliberal capitalism and as yet underdeveloped not-yet-neoliberal post-socialism, between actuated neoliberalism and its outside. This differentiation takes place entirely within the neoliberal hegemony. The so-called uneven development belongs to the modus operandi of this hegemony per se.

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The problem with the idea of autonomy or with the notion of an autonomous agent of critique, political struggle and radical change is that, at its core, it emulates the ideological model of the creation of a modern (neo-) liberal democratic society. It is a kind of counter-robinsonade to the notorious "social contract" fairy tale in its versions from Hobbes and Rousseau all the way to Rawls: the subject of a radical change of today's neoliberal capitalism purportedly emerges in the form of an independent and self-organized group, the members of which (all of them free and independent individuals) start with nothing but their authentic will to the better (for instance, "social justice, equality and liberty for all", etc.) – and also perhaps some real estate, like a little house,

where one can organize an autarchic life like on Robinson's Island in the middle of the ocean of neoliberal capitalism.

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As yet untainted by any egotistical or – God forbid – economic interests, these noble savages of anti-neoliberal resistance then have a *free choice*, whether they want to communicate with the outside world or not, whether – as in our case – they want to cooperate with neoliberal art institutions or not. Then the dilemma appears to be simply a moral one: should you allow yourself to become tainted by neoliberal capitalism and, if so, to what extent? Or how much neoliberal filth can an autonomous art institution bear, to protect its hard anti-neoliberal core and not yield to being coopted by the neoliberal hegemony? So-called self-criticism also often follows the same moralistic logic. Instead of making itself the subject of a critical reflection in its own historical reality and based on its own practice of resistance, it fabricates moralistic reproaches about collaboration. The life of critique and self-criticism is quite simple in this perfect world of anti-neoliberalism: there is the enemy, i.e. the neoliberal (art) institution, here are we, who are uncompromisingly and faithfully self-organized and autonomous, and in between are the traitors, the collaborators of neoliberal capitalism. The work of critique and self-criticism thus becomes moralistic denunciation.

On the whole, this moralism is the saddest chapter in the battle against neoliberal hegemony. It is the necessary by-product of the self-proclaimed autonomy that believes it is able to arm itself with positive contents from its own sources and thus challenge neoliberal capitalism. This self-proclaimed autonomy presupposes the state – or the space – of an originary innocence and roots the

affirmative character of its political action in this. In other words, it needs a pre-historic and pre-political – and thus also a universalistic – identity to be able to become a political subject at all. Basically, both of the concepts mentioned here of an autonomous and affirmative political action, specifically both Badiou's and Žižek's, are similar counter-robinsonades. Both articulate political autonomy in the sense of a space imposed by reflection, which is to be defended or expanded. Thus "independent, cultural, public spaces" are spoken of in this context, which are to be reanimated, because they have been largely destroyed by neoliberal privatizations.[1] From this perspective, the battle against neoliberal hegemony appears to be quite simple: us, the public, against them, the private. However, this hegemony is neither articulated exclusively through privatizations, nor can the struggle against it be articulated through the simple antagonism between the public as the good and the private as the bad. On the contrary. We first begin to understand and fight neoliberal hegemony with the certainty that a clear and normatively unambiguous distinction between the public and the private is no longer possible, or with the certainty that the real power of this hegemony lies specifically in the epochal blurring of a clear boundary between the public and the private and their normative attributes.

The political practice of resistance cannot be downloaded from finished philosophical concepts. Instead, we should gain insight into our historical situation through critically reflecting on our own practice of resistance.

Let us ask openly then: Who actually enabled the salvaging or establishment of the spaces of the public sphere, critique and resistance in Eastern Europe immediately following the downfall of communism and the beginning of the transition to capitalism?

Have we already forgotten? It was George Soros, one of the stars of neoliberalism, who attained his power and his fortune as one of the hangers-on and favorites of Margaret Thatcher. At the time, it was none other than Soros, or rather his donations, that was often the only guarantee for the independence of not only "non-neoliberal" art institutions, but also of the autonomy of the critical public almost extinguished by chaotic breakdown and nationalistic authoritarianism, and of an anti-nationalistic, pacifist, even leftist political activism. The archipelago of the OSI (Open Society Institute) and the SCCA (Soros Center for Contemporary Art), which had stretched from Budapest to Omsk and even further, often remained the last refuge of modernity from the post-communist thermidor – a coalition of authoritarian politics, cultural conservatism and neoliberal privatization.

Soros already became the object of criticism even then. It was said that there was actually a neo-colonialist interest behind his allegedly philanthropic engagement in Eastern Europe. The ideology of the open society that he spread with the help of his money was purportedly only a pretext for securing his influence in the post-communist East and thus becoming even richer. In this way, Soros' intention and his neoliberal ideology were stripped of all authenticity. The criticism believed that neoliberalism was thinking of power and money when it said liberty. However, this is not only a naïve illusion, but also a dangerous one.

In October 1993 Soros earned a billion dollars within two weeks by speculating with currencies, which he then invested in the civil societies of Eastern Europe and its cultural, intellectual, artistic, activist, etc. activities. He did so because he believed in the power of ideas and especially in the power of the idea of liberty. He is not interested in power over the people of Eastern Europe, over their oil reserves, industrial potentials or banks. Soros and, with him,

the neoliberal ideology do not want to seize the treasures of the existing world, but rather those of a possible world. They conquer neither political nor social spaces, but rather a dimension, specifically that of social and political creativity and of the subject of this creativity, the dimension of critique.

This is the source of the coopting power of the neoliberal hegemony. It does not lie in the concept of tolerance or in its moral, intellectual ability to painlessly absorb every critique and thus diffuse it, but rather in that this hegemony is capable of taking over the critique, patenting it, so to speak, and privatizing it. Whoever possesses social criticism, or its current version cultural criticism, also controls the utopian dimension of society. That is actually the core of neoliberal hegemony – the conquest or colonization of utopia. Utopia did not simply collapse in 1989 with Real Socialism, nor did it vanish into thin air. We are not living, as it is often said, in a post-utopian world, but rather in a world, in which utopia now only occurs in its neoliberal translation. In the neoliberal hope of freedom, the freedom of hope along with all its social critical potential has become mute.

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[1] We should finally stop regarding concepts like autonomy, political battles, affirmation and negation as well as liberty in the sense of spatial metaphors. Space is the dried up riverbed of the flow of historical time, the fossil of a movement that has long since been halted. Its meaning is archaeological, not political.