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The Neoliberal Institution of Culture and the Critique of Culturalization

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Neoliberal

We intend to address some of the problems of the post-Yugoslavian condition of institutional critique from the standpoint of the theory and practice of the Prelom kolektiv. Our argumentation is oriented to a materialist account of the institution of culture today and the related material practices of cultural production, as well as to the possibilities of a materialist critique within the existing neoliberal constellation.

The activities of Prelom kolektiv encompass the making and editing of *Prelom* – a journal for images and politics – and also organizing exhibitions, conferences and discussions, as well as participating in other artistic and cultural projects and events.[1] In a terminology often used today, this makes us “cultural workers”, “cultural producers” or even so-called “content providers” for the expanding “cultural industries” in the region now called the Western Balkans[2], but also within the context of the EU. Although we resist, oppose and fight against this kind of positioning and the whole constellation that produces it, this is precisely the starting point for an objective, i.e. materialist

understanding of what the institution of culture is today. There is certainly an institution of culture[3] that is strategically present and operative in the contemporary post-Yugoslavian condition. It is an intricate field of so-called "cultural practices" and the ways in which they are incorporated into the political mechanisms of contemporary peripheral capitalism. We hold that posing the questions of how the neoliberal constellation influences – transforms, enhances or blocks, directs or twists – cultural practices cannot do without taking into account one's own immediate role within this "sphere of culture" – no matter how overtly the "actors" are critical of its structure and functioning.

The term culture has been boundlessly expanded over the last 30 years to encompass each and every "symbolic activity". This hypertrophy stems from the abolishment of high/low, elitist/ popular, official/marginal or mainstream/alternative oppositions, which represented dichotomies that were functional in maintaining post-World War II political arrangements. What is known today as the process of the "democratization of culture" is only superficially about the participation of all the people in activities previously reserved only for the elites. The "democratization of culture" claims that it seeks to promote and realize the vaunted values of equity, access, participation, and human rights.[4] In fact, however, the incorporation of the "third sector" – non-governmental and non-profit organizations – in the distribution of shrunken welfare-state services is a trend that has been under way for some time. This non-profit sector of non-governmental organizations and associations with charitable status currently represents a prospective market for the so-called "creators of culture". The "third sector" is supposed to play the role of a catalyst for the process of replacing the retreating "second sector" (the state) and fostering the growth of the still insufficiently developed "first sector" (the market). It is

a process that has its own definite economic – and, therefore, political – logic.

Recent decades have also witnessed an obvious neoliberal 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. The cultural sector is characterized by a high proportion of freelancers and very small companies or free associations, collectives and working groups. A new type of (self-)employer is emerging in the form of the "entrepreneurial individual" or the "entrepreneurial cultural worker", which no longer fits into previously typical patterns of full-time professions. 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.[5] 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"[6], transforming this raw material of "culture" into little more than temporary entertainment.

The logic of the contemporary usage of "culture" is evident in the neoliberal strategy of the *culturalization* of political relations – as Boris Buden has called it[7]. 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. "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 neoliberal forms of a new social literacy – what Althusser called as *savoir-faire* ("know-how-to-do")[8].

This notion of "culture" as a certain *savoir-faire* is what grounds our basic premise on the "nature" of institutions – a materialist thesis on what an institution is. An institution is less a particular building populated by an administration and upheld by a hierarchy of positions with a top-down structure of decisions, but more an institutionalized – power-structured and socially sanctioned – behavior or conduct. It is an everyday material practice whereby ideological constructs confront their field of operative functioning. For example: the state is not just an intricate network of repressive and ideological apparatuses, but rather represents a material reality created and re-created by the rituals and the conduct of the individuals in their everyday practices. It is precisely this kind of material practice that is constitutive of the contemporary neoliberal institution of culture that Prelom kolektiv seeks to criticize, oppose and change.

"Culture" in the contemporary post-Yugoslavian condition certainly shares the aforementioned general traits of neoliberal capitalism, but it also possesses some specificities formative for the context in which we are working. In the post-conflictual region of the "Western Balkans", art and culture are supposed to play the role of reconciling the opposing sides, with the clear task of enabling the peaceful coexistence of differences (religious, ethnic, cultural, etc.). They culturalize us in order to renounce the "non-civic" or, simply, "un-civilized" ways of solving conflicts by adopting the "non-violent", symbolic mechanisms that the "cultural field" supposedly offers. In short, "culture" has to insure that tolerance for the Other is respected, while the pressing problems of poverty and unemployment, the dismantling of all social security networks, shameless gang-style privatization and waste of natural resources, as well as the control of politics by tycoons, remain hidden behind this screen of folklore or multiculturalism. Therefore, culturalization has an important function within today's neoliberal capitalist system – the function of the pacification and neutralization of contemporary social antagonisms.

It is precisely this culturalization – no matter whether it is folkloristic or "democratic" – that is the main target of Prelom. In that sense Prelom can be seen as an effort to *de-culturalize* those political issues out of their culturalized form. In other words, we are trying to re-politicize them, but not in the sense of poststructuralist relational theories or the "radical-democratic" leftist discourses such as Laclaudian post-Marxism or the omnipresent "multitudism". What we are collectively striving for is a re-politicization in the sense of a certain and definite *partisanship* in theory and in practice that aims for an effective materialist critique. This critique is dedicated to showing and revealing how

politics always-already functions within culture, art and theory. It is dedicated to finding out how this presence of politics could be directed in a way that opposes its usage by the capitalist system. It represents a struggle to debunk, expose and also to oppose, resist and fight against the dominant anti-Communist consensus that unifies such apparently different positions as ethno-nationalism and neoliberalism, religious exclusivism and the struggle for human rights, re-traditionalization and the pro-European culture of democracy, the nation-state building politics of identity and multi- or trans-culturalism.

Although Prelom looks like a standard independent art-and-theory magazine, fairly well and stylishly designed, illustrated with contemporary art from the "region" and spiced up with a sort of leftist discourse, even just a quick perusal reveals words and images that bring into play something that is really "completely different". Over the last seven years Prelom has established itself as a space for the critique of political constellations within socio-cultural theory and political philosophy, in the contemporary visual arts, as well as in cinema and film theory in the post-Yugoslavian cultural space. Even though Prelom has its center in Belgrade, it is a Yugoslavian publication – with collaborators from Ljubljana, Zagreb, Novi Sad, Sarajevo, Prishtine, and Skopje – and represents a collective effort to problematize, theorize and fight against various, heterogeneous and paradoxical forms of contemporary peripheral neoliberal capitalism. Words and images like Yugoslavia, partisans, Socialism, Marxism, Communism ... invoke something which is – for a specific reason – nowadays considered scandalous; actually it is a taboo, even though it could be seen as a mere prank. But the articulation of those words and images – that is, the *tendency* they represent – introduces an active practice of rethinking and reinventing revolutionary politics – something that is in fact

foreclosed by today's neoliberal "rationality" as a relic of those rebellious, naïve and digressive past times.

Now, all this manifesto-like discourse that we have just presented is surely not all we are dealing with. It can function very well on paper – or in theory – but what about the real effects in a given context? Or, rather, what is the actual material practice of Prelom? Prelom operates in a specific context of art and culture production, with all the contradictions, ambiguities and shortcomings that accompany it. This context features foreign foundations, as well as local ministries and institutions of culture as providers of financial support for independent art and activist organizations, groups and collectives, seen as indispensable local "cultural operators" for the creation of contemporary "culture" in this region. It includes dealing with guidelines and keywords of international foundations as well as their obligatory emphasis on "trans-regional collaboration", while at the local level it consists of more perilous juggling with "national programs for culture". It is precisely this institution of culture that has palpable effects on the material practice of culture production, and not only in the sense of concrete programming, but also with respect to the organizational structure and the internal material practice of the very "actors in culture".

In order to elucidate this we offer the case of the history of Prelom as an example. Prelom was established in 2001 as the Journal of the School for History and Theory of Images of Belgrade's Center for Contemporary Art.[9] It functioned as a peripheral project of the Center, which gave the editorial board relative independence and autonomy. Like many other projects, the school was rather subsidiary to the art programs. It paralleled the usual form of discursive events that accompany main art programs with the task of providing a space for reflection and criticism, but those spaces

are actually becoming places where critique is fostered, institutionalized and, finally, neutralized or appropriated. In the summer of 2004 the Center for Contemporary Art collapsed and Prelom lost its former institutional backing. The editorial board entered a long period of discussion on how to proceed further. Analyses of the situation have shown that the type of publication we produced is usually connected either to art or academic institutions or to the temporary artistic projects (exhibitions, art manifestations and events, etc.) that provide the basis for production. Alternative to this was a kind of "separation strategy", which could take the form of what is now called an "alternative economy" – either through the model of collective subscription by the readership or through the transformation of the journal's form into a fanzine, a leaflet or various Internet-publishing projects. The majority of the editorial board finally agreed that this would deprive us in most cases of the possibility of intervening in already existing cultural or art projects[10]. Therefore, we were – in a certain way – forced to start up a non-governmental organization – Prelom kolektiv – as the necessary tool for providing publishing and other activities. Actually, we decided to take the challenge head-on and to confront the perils of succumbing to – what was named in our discussions as – the "NGO logic"[11].

Being formally an NGO – which is the judicial equivalent of a private firm – *Prelom* has to obey all the rules for conducting business – which at least means to employ an accountant for dealing with taxes and other fiscal obligations – and to have, at least formally, a legally stipulated hierarchy. All this is quite at odds with the principles of collective work and the non-hierarchical structure that we had from the very beginning. It also means getting involved in the "business of fundraising", which in turn requires a substantial amount of administrative work and what is

nowadays called “networking”. This “NGO economy” – like the so-called “new knowledge economy” of media, fashion and art in the “creative industries” – relies heavily on a US-style internship system to perform the necessary but routine gofer roles that hold it all together. It is effectively a system of bourgeois apprenticeships or – putting it more bluntly – an elaborated and up-dated system of capitalist exploitation.

Foundations and institutions of culture focus on supporting programs or exchanges – something that is actualized in an evident form of the immediate product such as artwork, exhibition, symposium or publication – but rarely or never on the costs of organizational maintenance. Associations, collectives or working groups are in this way forced to overproduce in order to survive – that is, to have as many subsidized programs as they can get. This process of hyper-production additionally increases administrative tasks, leaving progressively less and less space for the proper conceptualization of programs or for their critical reflection. Thereby what was intended at the outset to be a critical production is replaced with a kind of “aesthetics of administration” – to use Benjamin Buchloh’s term – which represents the predominant form of the neoliberal institutionalization of critique.

How is it then possible to produce a critical stance within this context? Moreover, how is it possible to develop emancipatory strategies in the field of art and cultural production? Well, there is no simple answer to this. The contemporary institution of culture is a contested terrain, a kind of battlefield, and – to paraphrase Foucault – since there is no power without resistance(s), each position is an outcome of struggle. What we can do and what we are trying to do is to articulate those points of resistance with – always “precarious” and “undecidable” – interventions within the existing constellation[12]. But criticism as the discursive form of

an intervention in the "public sphere" can only be a starting point. Critique – a veritable materialist critique – in order to be efficient, i.e. to produce effects in the material reality of social exchange, must be practical; it must intervene within and strive to tackle the existing and ongoing social practices. This kind of criticism entails a self-criticism whereby one reflects upon his/her own role as well as the effects and the repercussions of one's own actions.

Therefore, our position is – strictly speaking – a "non-existing impossibility"[13]. By evoking today's "non-existing" Marxism and Communism, we are invoking the possibility of a definite "impossibility" – a radical alternative to the prevailing material practices of social exchange. At least, this is almost a "natural" position for anyone opposing the omnipresent neoliberal anti-Communist consensus of both the pro-European "democratic" forces of "civil society" and the likewise obligatory pro-European nation-building forces of the ex-Yugoslavian governments. Prelom (meaning break, *Bruch*) is an attempt to break with this given constellation – in the last instance, with capitalism itself. It is a synonym – a makeshift word – for what today appears quite impossible – *revolution*.

Edited by Aileen Derieg

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[1] More info on http://www.prelomkolektiv.org, with all the previous issues of *Prelom* freely downloadable in PDF formats.

[2] This new geo-political space encompasses the newly-formed ex-Yugoslavian countries minus Slovenia, as an EU member-state,

and including Albania, thus representing the states aspiring to EU, which still need "cultivation" in order to achieve full membership.

[3] In various pieces of research dedicated to issues of institutional critique which have been recently re-discussed in many conferences and panels, as well as in magazines like *Artforum* and *Texte zur Kunst*, the institutional field of art and culture has often been reduced to a network of art/cultural experts and specialized institutions for displaying, interpreting and marketing art. Therefore, the term "institution of art" or "institution of culture" was related to an enclosed disciplinary field. Our usage of the term opposes the dichotomy *autonomous institution of culture vs. the rest of society* as its imaginary outside. Instead, it indicates how "culture" functions in the processes of the institutionalization of neoliberal "democratic" society in the post-Yugoslavian political space.

[4] The UN World Commission on Culture and Development clearly states: "[T]he core cultural right is that of each person to participate fully in cultural life."

[5] From this standpoint on "cultural capital" it is worthwhile to examine the recent interest in archiving and the related topics of free access, as well as issues of copyrights.

[6] The terms "funky business" and "karaoke capitalism" appear in the top 10 books for young post-yuppies in the advertising business or in the so-called "creative industries". We find that the metaphor of karaoke vividly explains the contemporary mode of cultural production in core capitalism.

[7] cf. Boris Buden, "The Pit of Babel or The Society that Mistook Culture for Politics" and "Translation is Impossible. Let's Do It!" available on http://eipcp.net/transversal/1206/buden/en; also in

Boris Buden: *Vavilonska jama: O (ne)prevodivosti kulture*, Fabrika knjiga: Beograd, 2007

[8] "The relation between art disciplines and their object (literature properly speaking, the fine arts, history, logic, philosophy, ethics, religion) has as its *dominant* function not so much the knowledge of this object but rather the definition and inculcation of rules, norms and practices designed to establish "cultural" relations between the "literate" and these objects. Above all: to know how to handle these objects in order to consume them "properly". To know how to "read" – that is, "taste", "appreciate" – a classical piece, to know how "to apply the lessons" of history, to know how to apply the right method to think "well" (logic), to know how to look to correct ideas (philosophy) in order to know where we stand in relation to the great questions of human existence, science, ethics, religion, etc. Through their particular relations, the arts or humanities thus impart a certain *knowledge*: not a scientific knowledge [...] but – in addition to the particular erudition needed for familiarity – a *savoir-faire* or, to be more accurate, a *know-how-to-do* to appreciate-judge, and enjoy-consume-utilize this object which is properly "culture": a knowledge invested in a knowing how to do in order to [...]. Basically, the arts were therefore the pedagogical site *par excellence*, or, in other words, a site for cultural training: learning to think properly, to judge properly, to enjoy properly, and to behave properly towards all the cultural objects involved in human existence. Their goal? The well-bred gentleman, the man of culture." (Louis Althusser, *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants*)

[9] The School for History and Theory of Images was a temporary, semi-formalized educational project, which was active between 1999 and 2002. The school was organized in the form of lectures, case studies, workshops, discussions and panels. As a project of

Belgrade's Centre for Contemporary Art – the former Soros Centre for Contemporary Art – it was mostly oriented towards theories of visual arts as a multidisciplinary area in which artistic theories intersected with social and political theories, psychoanalysis, the theory of culture, film, architecture, etc. It had four main courses: *Reading the Image*, *The Politics of Display*, *Pop-culture as Ideology* and *The Image as the Knot of the Symbolic, the Real and the Imaginary*.

[10] Those alternative strategies – of "separation" and "intervention" – could be seen as a form of the inside/outside institution problematic present in most of the discussions on institutional critique. This analogy, however, cannot be applied completely in our case, since we hold that there is no space which is exempted from the institutions – in the sense of everyday material practices – and that the entire field is always-already "taken". In short, since there is no "pure" externality to the material existence of ideology or power-relations, every oppositional position has to be taken or won over on the basis of this understanding.

[11] The "NGO scene" made its appearance in the post-Yugoslavian space during the 1990s and formed an oppositional movement to the prevailing nationalist leaderships of the ex-Yugoslavian republics. These "civil society initiatives" were generously supported by various foreign funds for actions such as anti-war campaigns, education for democracy programs, campaigns for human rights, etc. Particularly in Serbia, since the state was under economic sanctions, the transfer of money was hand-to-hand and without any transparency in its distribution or spending. There are individuals who profited significantly from this "NGO business". The golden age of NGOs terminated with the downfall of Milošević and the establishment of a "democratic society".

[12] By intervention we mean producing an effect that enables the present positions and divisions to become evident. 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. 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.

[13] cf. Louis Althusser, "Is It Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?" in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, NLB, 1976, and *Machiavelli and Us*, Verso: London and New York, 1999, especially on the theoretical dispositive, etc.