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On the other side of future

Why there is a common belief that culture could and should help in solving political problems such as Kosovo?

The answer to this question is not so simple and self-evident as many think. The sheer historical experience – as far as we have been able to make one – is at odds with this expectation and puts in question every belief in positive political role of culture. First of all, we shouldn't forget that it was precisely Serbian cultural and intellectual elite, or more precisely its most representative institution, Serbian Academy of Science and Arts (SANU), which had opened more than twenty years ago with the infamous Memorandum, the Pandora box of nationalistic hatred and so induced the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia. According to this experience - for sure not a unique one – it wouldn't be wrong to perceive culture as being actually the very illness, of which it pretends to be the cure.

However, this shouldn't be regarded primarily as contradiction. The belief that cultural differences are the main source of actual political conflicts is rather a common place today, as much as it is the belief that a tolerant way of dealing with these differences is also a matter of culture, or more precisely a matter of so-called political culture.

If in a particular society the culture of tolerance towards all sorts of (cultural) otherness is sufficiently developed, it is said that political life of this society will be calm and stable, which simply means that most of the conflicts emerging within the society (or those between the society and other societies) will be, in principle, peacefully resolved.

Of course this logic makes some sense only within the conceptual framework of liberal democracy, which is today, beyond doubt, the hegemonic concept of political theory and political practice worldwide.

A special case of this concept, which has been applied in the regions of former Yugoslavia since the epochal collapse of communism is a strategy called transition to democracy – a set of rationalizations and measures, which aim at managing the so-called post-communist crisis. According to the strategy of transition this crisis can be described as a sort of temporary regression into the state of nature caused by the collapse of communist system; it involves various effects like economic break-down, ethnical conflict or civil war and is expected to last until democratization process is accomplished, that is until an economically sustainable and politically stable society – if possible, in a sovereign nation state – is established.

As one of its major aims the process of transition also implicates already mentioned development of political culture and democratic tolerance towards all sorts of internal and external differences – in the region of former Yugoslavia these differences are perceived mostly in the form of ethnic and confessional differences. In this context a highly developed culture of tolerance is believed to be the major precondition for peaceful resolution of conflicts on both national and international level.

It is within this teleological framework that culture – imagined as a separated sphere of society – should provide assistance to politics. It should speed up and soften the process of transition, especially the development of political culture.

It is therefore no wonder that we expect of people experienced in cultural production and communication – who are supposed to have some sort of cultural competence – to make contribution to this political and/or cultural development and so help their societies in particular and the world in general in making further step towards peace, democracy, prosperity, etc.

Concretely, there is an expectation that the “people of culture” would play the major role in building an atmosphere of tolerance in the region and so help in achieving the final solution to the conflict between Serbs and Albanians.

This is also the reason, why western countries and institutions have been massively supporting both financially and logistically east cultural projects, especially if those were initiated by non governmental organisations, that is, by allegedly authentic initiatives of civil society, and not by state institutions. We may openly say: they have been supported not because of their cultural or artistic value, but because of their expected political impact.

But let us now, instead of uncritically accepting this hegemonic framework and starting to work on a “tolerance to come” (in a more or less foreseeable future) choose the “tolerance *in actu*”: let us put the idea of tolerance into practice here and now and become immediately tolerant towards a completely different perspective on the (political) problem we are facing in Kosovo. Let us do it now, only months before someone else – and not the people living here – will make final decision about the political status of this region.

Our first step into opening of this new perspective would be a radical refocusing of our interest from cultural and all other differences between Serbs and Albanians, including the major political difference concerning the future political status of Kosovo, to something we might describe as common ground not only for both nations, but also for all of us regardless of our cultural and ethnic affiliation or citizenship.

I suggest that we define this common ground in terms of an intrinsic impossibility to achieve one of the most important – if not the most important – objectives of modern political struggles – people’s sovereignty. In other words, both Serbs and Kosovo Albanians in their development as political nations have reached a historical point, which can be described only as the “state beyond sovereignty”. For Serbs is sovereignty today something beyond remedy, for Kosovo Albanians it is something beyond reach. What one side cannot regain any more, the other will never make. This final loss of the very possibility to fulfil their political will in terms of sovereignty is the historical condition both Serbs and Kosovo Albanians today share without having reflected it.

In other words, what they both have in common is rather a common future than, as most people wrongly believe, the common Yugoslavian past.

One of the symptoms of this condition is precisely the fixation on the past. The reason for this fixation is clear: the past is the only dimension of time, which traditional political subject such as nation can still influence. The famous Russian joke – “our future is clear but our past is being changed every day” – tells us precisely this: there is nothing we can do about our future. It is only our past we can still somehow change. One might say that this joke marks the first step in acknowledging new historical condition we are talking about here.

To become aware of historical condition of our life means not only to be able to reflect on it, however critically, but before all, to influence it, to have the ability to intervene in this condition and practically change it. Only in this case we may say that we make an experience of the historical condition of our life.

What I am saying now is that we are not able to make experience of our historical situation and that this lack of experience is a result of our inability to practically intervene in the reality. One of the main features of the “state beyond sovereignty” is this powerlessness of traditional political subjects like, I repeat, nation. This doesn’t mean of course that all nations are powerless today. Quite the contrary, some of them are even more powerful than ever. It is not nation as community of people but its political instrument, nation state as such, which has lost its political subjectivity. In other words, political subjectivity of particular nations is not the question of them having or not having a sovereign nation state, but simply a matter of power decided solely by historical contingency. Subjectivity of a nation, if there is any, can be articulated only in sort of contemporary state of nature – a state not before the social contract is closed but after it is historically cancelled.

This fact gives an insight into the true dimension of the crisis we are dealing with today, not only locally (like here in Kosovo), but globally.

There is an important remark Giorgio Agamben made in his *Homo Sacer* about the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia and generally about chaotic dissolution of the systems in Eastern Europe following the collapse of Communism. According to Agamben we shouldn't understand these events as a sort of a temporary regression into the state of nature, which will sooner or later return to normality – as it is suggested within the concept of transition – but as, he explicitly says, bloody messengers of the new *nomos* of the earth, which is going to spread all over the globe.

The crisis he points at has global dimension. Thus, what we have experienced in the last fifteen years here in former Yugoslavia could be described as a mere symptom of much deeper historical change – the dissolution of more than three hundred years old international order – the so-called Westphalian order.

To understand what Westphalian order actually is, it will probably suffice to imagine an ordinary political map of the world, that is, a picture of the world divided into a multiplicity of coloured spots of different size, sharply separated from each other. This is a world divided into a sovereign nation states, which can be clearly located on a certain territory and which are supposed to politically represent different peoples.

Within this Westphalian order nation state is defined as the major, actually, the only subject of what is supposed to be international politics – even today still hegemonic language of global politics uses this Westphalian expression: international! It is because other subjects within this order are in principle non visible and not representable. It seems as though there are no political subjects beyond these sovereign nation states, or if there are any, like UN or other international organizations, they appear only as a sort of juristic extension of nation states, which simply means that they are based only on the treaties between nation states.

In fact, the Treaty of Westphalia incorporated four basic principles, which are responsible for the picture I have sketched out:

1. The principle of the sovereignty of nation-states and the fundamental right of political self-determination,
2. The principle of (legal) equality between nation-states,
3. The principle of internationally binding treaties between states,
4. The principle of non-intervention of one state in the internal affairs of another state.

Well the problem is that during the last decades this order has been falling apart and none of these principles is really binding today. This doesn't mean that they have ever been truly realized in the international politics, but they had once shaped the normativity of this international politics. Each of these principles had been able once to claim a universal validity, that is, they had had the power of the Kantian *sollen*, "ought to", the power of moral imperative, which had emanated from the ideal Kant called "the eternal peace", a world imagined as a community of sovereign nation states bound together by mutual treaties.

With the collapse of this order the whole normative dimension of international politics has disappeared. It has been replaced by chaotic pragmatism, whose rationality doesn't claim any universal validity.

As you know, what dominates today the international politics is the cause of so-called values but those values are, *per definitionem*, culturally relative. No value claims today its universality.

This is also the case of Serbian and Kosovo Albanian political claims. They cannot be retranslated again into the language of Westphalian order. Neither Serbian nor Albanian political will can claim universality any more. And precisely this is what they have in common, namely the fact that these two wills, however different and mutually exclusive, share this definite loss of an intrinsic normative power.

To repeat again – if Serbs and Albanians have something in common, than this could be only this condition of permanent disorder, an open process of dissolution, which never comes to a closure, a constant contingency, in short a state of total precariousness.

I am not using this last word – precariousness – by chance. It points to a much deeper lever of the global crises I am talking about. This is not only the crisis – or the collapse – of Westphalian order as such but the crisis and dissolution of the whole industrial modernism. I am talking actually about a radical, epochal change in the mode of production. Using the language of industrial modernism we would actually say “a change in the economic sphere of social life”. But precisely this language, altogether with its notion of an autonomous sphere of economy, has lost its meaning, it has faded away in the course of this epochal change. The language of a new, so-called post-fordist mode of production doesn't recognize the division of human experience into different, separated spheres, like the sphere of labour (*poiesis*), sphere of politics (*praxis*), sphere of reflection (*theorein*). It doesn't even recognize a difference between production and non-production. Since the nineties we use the notion of precariousness to describe this new condition both in social and existential terms.

First, the space of labour has become precarious: the original, authentic location of productive labour, the Fordist factory, the central place of industrial modernism, not only in terms of production but also in social terms, has been emptied. However, an industrial factory was never only a place of labour but the pattern according to which the whole social life was organized and perceived. Just think on the binary differentiation between so-called material basis and cultural superstructure; between manual and spiritual labour; between working time and spare time; between employment and non-employment. Even the difference between working place and a place of recreation, of family life, of culture, of art, of literature, etc, doesn't make a sense any more.

Today is the working place in fact everywhere: at home, on the street, among the closest family members, during the night and on the weekends. Once atypical labour conditions – part-time jobs, temporary employment, self-employment, freelancing – have in the meantime become normal. There is no guaranty for pensions for people above the official retirement age, even if they have contributed to the pension funds during their entire working life. The whole life has become precarious. There are no stable and foreseeable patterns we could rely on. No welfare state, no stable juridical systems, in short the state of exception has in many places on earth become a rule, a normality.

What I am suggesting now is to put Kosovo problem – the problem of its undecided political status – into this context ... only to understand that this context is at the same time the context of our discussion about cultural policy and its allegedly crucial role in solving the same problem.

But speaking about this context let me remind you of some crude facts of Kosovo reality, besides the fact of its total political dependence on what we call international community although nobody knows what this notion really means today. By that I mean actually a situation, which is similar to the situation in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There is no mystery about these facts. In fact everybody here is aware of them. Even the late President of Kosovo, Ibrahim Rugova, who was beyond doubt the most civilized and the most democratic politician of the former Yugoslavia, explicitly pointed at them once saying that Kosovo is rich in young people and minerals.

As for the minerals, under the conditions of global capitalism and neo-liberal privatizations we can hardly expect that people living in Kosovo would ever profit from them. As for young people, Kosovo's population is by far the youngest in Europe, with about 70% of the people below the age of 30 (half of them are even below 20). But 70% of these young men and women are actually unemployed.

An expectation that they will find jobs in Kosovo in the near future is totally unrealistic. It is thus clear that most of them must leave Kosovo and search for jobs abroad joining in this way a great number of Kosovo people (estimated to be 400,000) who have been already working abroad, mostly in Western Europe and United States. This only means that immigration is most likely to become the permanent status for nearly all of these young people. It is therefore impossible to avoid several crucial questions: what sort of culture do these young people already have? What sort of culture they are expected to acquire and/or produce in process of their migration and living abroad? Moreover, what sort of crisis do they actually face now in Kosovo and how are they supposed to manage this crisis by means of culture? Is there any culture they really share and will share in their future? Furthermore, in what sort of public space is this culture supposed to manage the crisis we are talking about? Is there any common public space they will be able to address? And finally, what is the political subject they are supposed to address in order to inform new cultural policy, which would serve their interests and manage the crises?

There are many right answers to these questions but only one is really wrong – vision of a cultural policy, which would be really able to help in solving Kosovo problem. Actually it is the initial question about such cultural policy, which is entirely wrong. It relies on a sort of *petitio principii*: It presupposes a rational and politically legitimate subject capable of making this cultural policy. In short, it presupposes a political sovereign who would back this policy, provide all necessary means to implement it and finally take responsibility for its effects including its impact on the crises. The only one subject we can imagine in this role is the people of Kosovo, that is to say, their more or less democratically elected political representatives. But the problem is not only that this sort of political subject knows only one model of cultural policy – the one based on the concept of identitarian national culture – which, however progressive and (post)modern, will never be able to meet cultural needs of the majority of young Kosovarians. This concept is *per definitionem* incapable of coping with new economic, political and cultural realities we have described above. Moreover, the sovereign itself, the people of Kosovo and their government, would hardly have an impact on the crucial elements of Kosovo reality. This reality is already out of their control. The facts we are talking about here are far from pointing at powerlessness of the people who live in Kosovo or would have to leave it soon in search for better future. Radical precariousness of their situation offers actually ground for an identification, which goes far beyond the national one. This precariousness is not a symptom of the backwardness of this Balkan province, which will necessarily disappear after it completes the process of post-communist transition and finally achieves its independence. Kosovo is not catching up with Western “normality”, as so-called optimistic realists are saying to us. It is the other way round. The illusion of normality, which is nothing but an effect of Western protectionism is already giving way to the precariousness of all forms of contemporary life, which has already become Kosovo reality. To cut it short: Kosovo has no future. Kosovo is the future.