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CONFRONTING THE NEIGHBOR. THE SITUATION AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNIST SYSTEMS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Although there have always been different forms of information exchange between the western countries and the so-called Eastern Bloc (that means, the communist countries under Soviet hegemony as well as Yugoslavia) during the Cold War period and later, during the *perestroika* and *glasnost*, a constant *mystification* of the political, social, cultural, mental reality of the eastern countries by the western media has been present in the western world. We could say that western society's understanding of the eastern reality was somehow *naive* and *immature*. While the western population regarded its own social, economical, political, ideological situation with a rationalistic and analytical view, this rationalism completely disappeared in the context of the political, ideological and even cultural confrontation with the eastern countries. *Mystification*, *naivety*, a lot of prejudices, a dramatic lack of information, an a-historical and moralistic stance characterized the western attitude towards the East, which was completely anachronistic and did not help to reveal the real structures and mechanisms of power and social organization. Even the philosophical and ideological questions were handled incorrectly, because of the head-on confrontation between the two super-powers: the western population and media did not accept that there were different ideological tendencies and different philosophical trends, schools, movements inside the communist block which looked for their legitimization in different traditions of the Marxist philosophy and that of the Marxist and Leninist political movements.

After the dramatic political changes at the end of the eighties in the central and eastern European areas we are still confronted with the fact that the western part of Europe obviously does not know the culture and the history of its eastern neighbors. There are some prejudices, some naive or superficial information, there are misunderstandings and above all there is a *dramatic lack of information* about art and history in central and eastern Europe.

One of the most important challenges of our days is the cultural integration of the future members of the European Community and the consequent elaboration of the culture and history of the central and eastern European countries. It is not only the quantity of information but above all the quality of the elaboration and analysis which could change the actual situation.

1989 became a *symbolic date* in the European history. The fall of the Berlin Wall symbolized the end of a 40-year period in Europe. The so called "Iron Curtain", namely the border between the western military alliance and the Soviet-Bloc – which was technically realized in 1949 and demolished symbolically as well as physically in 1989 with the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria, and even more demonstratively with the *destruction of the Berlin Wall* in late autumn 1989 – was not only a product of the "Cold War Period" but also a *metaphor of the division of Europe* in two parts: the West, where the capitalistic economical system and the parliamentarism guaranteed a *certain model* of freedom and democracy, and the East, where the communist system tried to realize a *egalitarian collectivist society* without classes and without private ownership of the means of production.

The "popular democracies" newly established after 1948 represented *another model* of democracy which opposed the western type of "bourgeois-democracy" and were legitimized by the *communist ideology* based on Marxism-Leninism with its romantic view of equal distribution of goods as well as of collective ownership of the means of production. The concept of *collective ownership of the means of production* and *state-controlled distribution of goods* is not a strictly communist phenomenon: after World War II there were a lot of western-type democracies – like France and Italy, first of all – where the *state intervention* into the economical life and into the distribution system was radical.

COMMUNISM AS SALVATION

It is a very important point that the communist ideology regarded itself as a *revolutionary salvation*, which *continued* the Marxist philosophy and generally the humanistic and rationalistic tradition of the European thinking. That means that in the eastern countries the political consciousness, created by the communist power-system, interpreted the "people's democracies" as the realization of the *old dream of equality and democracy*, in which everybody has the same rights, the same position, the same fortune and means. In this image "existing socialism" was a *society of higher values*, a society which was able to realize humanism and real democracy and a society which *involved the whole humanist and democratic tradition* of mankind.

According to the Marxist theory the communist society represented a *higher level of social organization* than the capitalistic society and manifested the *highest form of the evolution of the human culture*. Because of this – Hegelian-Marxist – theory of *evolution*, which always has a certain kind of hidden *religiosity*, the communist ideology interpreted the "existing socialism" at the same time as *continuation and revision* of the former social models and emphasized the *evolutionary* aspect.

From the western point of view the *communist system* was a *break* with the

western humanistic and democratic tradition. In the political interpretation as well as in the *moral judgment*, the communist society was not only unacceptable for the West and not only a *dangerous attack* against the social order based on private property and on the parliamentary system, but also an *immoral and irrational* phenomenon which *undermined the complete western ethical and political value system*.

Instead of the rational interpretation and the historical analysis of the development of the communist ideology and ethic from Hegelianism and Marxism to Leninism and Stalinism, the *moralistic condemnation* dominated the western view of the eastern system. This is the reason why the "Iron Curtain" had to function *not only as a practical military protection* of the western world, but also as a wall, which had to keep the dangerous – immoral and irrational – virus away from the West.

THE "EXISTING SOCIALISM" AND THE IMAGE OF THE EAST

The "existing socialism" in the central and eastern European countries – that means the communist system, created after the Soviet model of a *centralized, paternalistic and administratively directed* communist state – collapsed in 1989 and the Iron Curtain lost its function. With the physical demolition of the Berlin Wall the *most evident symbol* of the division of Europe disappeared. But in the minds of the majority of western European people the 40 years of division stayed much deeper and the *consciousness of the difference between western and eastern values* stayed much more constant than in the political and moral consciousness of the eastern European people.

The *image of the East* for the western people was and is still today connected with the almost *religious and irrational conviction* that it is something profoundly *different from the West*, something *barbarian and obscure*. This naive and completely ahistorical attitude often manifests itself in the common opinion that the East is something *not European, like an alien*, without any cultural and moral connection with the western world. The border of the European Community is often regarded as the border of Europe.

After 1989 the so called "post-communist-reform-societies" began to create a new economical and political structure as well as tried to re-organize their relation to the West, although the *consciousness of the basic and profound difference* from the West was *never so strong* as the feeling of difference among the western people, neither during the communist system. According to the vast majority of central and eastern European people such a "*gap*" between East and West *never existed*, especially in the cultural domain, and the consciousness of the continuity and unity of cultural history was *evident*.

The new "reform-societies" based their cultural policy on the feeling of this *common European cultural tradition* and regarded their own culture as obvious and

natural part of the European – and “western” – cultural community. Nevertheless, on the side of the West, a certain feeling of difference from the East *survived* the collapse of communism or became even stronger in the last years and has still today *negatively influenced* relations with central and eastern Europe.

THE ECLECTIC NEW SOCIETIES

The political, economical and social structure of these “post-communist-reform-societies” manifests an historically completely new and pretty *contradictory mixture of neo-capitalistic economic phenomena and post-communist, centralized juridical and administrative practices*, in co-existence with a lot of new institutions of the modern civil society as well as with the mechanisms of the modern decision processes. New values of the democratic political activity are mixing with old *authoritarian and paternalistic* methods, but with changing ideologies behind this *eclectic practice*. It seems to be a paradox, but it is not, that the new conservatism (nationalistic, religious, or even fundamentalist ideologies) feels very comfortable in the old system of the centralized political structure, because they can more easily change the system with the inherited *anti-democratic, paternalistic* status quo. Interestingly and at the same time tragically enough, the anti-democratic and paternalistic decision making had a long tradition in the central and eastern European Countries, almost independent from the actual, current ideology. Paradoxically this phenomenon guarantees a certain continuity of *the style of the political action* especially in the cultural politics and in all areas of ideological and philosophical argumentation in context of the political power.

THE INNER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE EASTERN COUNTRIES

In the central and eastern European “existing socialism” we can differentiate not only among *ideological legitimizations* in different countries, but also among the *practices of the political power-system*. It is incorrect that the Soviet-Union always and in each country of the Eastern Bloc insisted on establishing of the same power-system. Indeed, after the World War II, the Soviet leadership practiced *different strategies* to get the power for the communist parties and to assure a relative stable support for the new communist system. On the other side the communist parties in the central and eastern European countries represented *different conceptions* about the alliances with different social classes and groups, as well as *different tactics* for establishing the hegemony of communist party. Even in the economic policy, in the industrialization plans of the different countries and especially in the *agrarian policy*, there were *basic differences* between the members of the Eastern Bloc.

As a result of these *different strategic conceptions*, the “existing socialism” manifested even during the Stalinist period a sort of *heterogeneity* concerning the political practice. After Stalin’s death, in 1953, the ideology of the “de-Stalinization” intro-

duced the category of the “national way to socialism”, with which the pragmatically determined differences were declared as legitimate. In the political practice we can observe the *co-existence* of “soft dictatorships” with certain limited democratic elements and “hard dictatorships” with a completely centralized and administratively controlled political system. The collaboration between the different types of dictatorships was regulated in the frame of the *Pact of Warsaw*, at the military level as well as in the frame of the *COMECON*, at the economical level, both controlled by the Soviet Union. Both the “soft dictatorships” and the “hard dictatorships” practiced a paternalistic style of decision-making and self-legitimization. This *paternalistic style* could allow certain limited liberties and critical opinions against some elements of the political regime, on condition that certain basic values and especially certain *basic elements of the political status quo* (such as the absolute leadership of the Soviet Union and the hegemony of the communist party) should not be questioned.

THE “SOFT DICTATORSHIPS”

This long surviving paternalist style of political acting and of public service was based on a certain kind of “soft dictatorship” in which the ruling forces were acting in the frames of a quasi-democratic, apparently open political structure and at the same time like an ethically legitimized elite, who is *responsible* for all problems of the society and who is *predestinated* to decide all the questions of public life.

This “soft dictatorships” have never been totalitarian, except the short periods of nazi-type fascism or that of the Stalinist political system between 1949 and 1953. The “soft dictatorships” allowed a political and intellectual opposition in a very limited parliamentary system as well as in the cultural and ideological life. They never established a totalitarian ideology, neither a totalitarian political practice; rather they developed a sort of heterogeneous and “liquid” system in which different values and different ideological arguments were used, depending on the actual situation and the concrete methods of the solution of conflicts. These “soft dictatorships” could keep the image of the “good emperor” who is not only responsible for his empire, but also acting as the “good father” who can praise or penalize his “children.” This paternalistic image of the power was connected with a very complicated structure of *representation of very different political and economical interests* of different social classes and circles who had very *different relations* with the ruling elite.

Although in acute conflict situations the authoritarian and paternalistic regimes did not hesitate to use *extreme violence* to destroy the revolting groups of a radical opposition, generally they were acting much more with a *pragmatic method* of making compromises and *dividing* the possible alliances of the different opposite forces through *different advantages*.

With this permanent – and in the praxis cynical – “Janus-Face” of the ruling elite a certain – controlled – political freedom, a limited and never consequently defined area of free expression of philosophical, ideological, moral and even aesthetic values could co-exist with a relatively stable and basically authoritarian political structure.

HETEROGENEITY AND THE DIFFERENT WAYS OF SOCIALISM

We should critically regard and research the origin and nature of the common prejudices. The so-called Eastern Bloc never was culturally and politically *homogeneous*. Great differences and a very specific set of historical and cultural determinations characterized the conditions of art and culture of the central and eastern European countries. Among the post-communist “reform-countries,” especially Hungary and Poland showed a *more liberal, pluralistic and tolerant* cultural policy during the last period of the former communist system. The cultural life and the frames of artistic creation in Hungary during the eighties were characterized by a certain pluralism and by the *co-existence* of different aesthetic and ideological values. In Hungary as well as in Poland the last decade of the communist system allowed a radical process of the re-interpretation of the past, of the cultural history and that of the modern and avant-garde art. All the artistic innovations of the eighties and nineties were involved with this *process of self-analysis*.

If we consider some paradigmatic situations of the artistic and cultural history in central and eastern Europe during the last half of the twentieth century, in *different political constellations*, we can realize that all of these phenomena can be interpreted only in the context of the definitions and changes of cultural and philosophical values.

The western public should know the aesthetically relevant – and quite less known in the international art-scene – aspects of artistic creation in central and eastern Europe after World War II, concentrating itself on aesthetic strategies which deal with general and universal approaches to some central questions of art: the *relation between present and past*, individual and universal, the actual political situation and the existential questions of life, the *deconstruction of the language* and the *reinterpretation of tradition*. All these questions were thematized in western art too, but in the eastern European context they were connected *more radically* with *political* and *moral* aspects.

CONTRADICTIONS WITH THE CATEGORIES EAST AND WEST

We should avoid the *popular cliché* of “East Art” and we should go deeper in the analysis of the cultural milieu in the different political constellations. At the same time, we should create a clearer view about the mental and aesthetic connections between East and West, between the “old” tradition of the avant-garde and the new, actual impulses. Because of the *long survived tradition* of the historical avant-

garde in the central and eastern European countries – which was repressed in the Fifties and Sixties and just tolerated but not supported in the Seventies – the new tendencies after World War II had a complex and *contradictory relationship* to classical avant-garde values and *moral attitudes*.

An *irrelevant mystification* and an almost *naive heroization* of the “pure” avant-garde created a *less critical attitude* from the side of the young artists towards the historical avant-garde and actually pervaded all the new experiments and innovations until the end of the Seventies. One of the real radical turning points in this process of “self-liberation” from this naive and a-historical regard on the “pure” avant-garde was the revision of the role and nature of the avant-garde as “victim” of the different totalitarian regimes. The deeper and more differentiated analysis showed that in the avant-garde itself there always were certain par excellence totalitarian elements and hegemonic ambitions.

The newly re-founded “radical irony” and *subversive skepticism* introduced certain linguistic innovations connected with the *deconstruction of systems of signs* which involved a new regard on history, art history, cultural sociology, and erased the naive nostalgic historicism.

The following subjects seem to be relevant for a new discussion about the culture in central and eastern Europe and for a deep cultural political analysis of the mental, ideological and socio-cultural situation:

1. East - West: Categories of Separation or Historical Reality

Questioning of Homogeneity of Europe

Hegel, Marx and Evolutionism

Industrialization, Capitalism, Modernization

Civil Society, Democracy, Emancipation

Nation, National Sovereignty, Nationalism

State, Society, Paternalism

2. Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Western Europe: Different Models

Divergence of Social Structures

Questioning of Autonomy of Culture

Language, Ethnicity, Religion and the Question of Identity

Social Role of Intellectuals

Politics between Social Service and Utopian Moralism

3. Tradition - Modernism - Avant-garde

Cultural Tradition and Modernization in Central and Eastern Europe

Radical Avant-garde and the Revolutions after World War I.

Avant-garde between Proletcult and Transcendentalism

Official Avant-garde and the Design of the New Society in the Soviet Union

Constructivism, Dadaism, Surrealism in Central Europe Avant-garde:

Internal Migration in the Communist Bloc after World War II.

4. Progressive Tendencies in the Parallel Culture

Tolerance and Intolerance: Communist Paternalism and the Autonomy of Culture

Stalinism, Post-Stalinism, Reform-Communism, Post-Marxism and the Arts

Post-utopian Avant-garde in Isolation

Institutionalization of the Alternative Culture and the Periods of Opening

Re-discovering of History, Rehabilitation of Narratives

5. The Contemporary Art in Central and Eastern Europe

Euphoria - Disillusion - Consolidation

Re-evaluation of Avant-gardism and its Political Utopianism

Awareness of the Questions about Center and Periphery

War and Voyeurism: Perversity of Cultural Consumerism

Personal Narratives and Historical Determination

If we regard the different positions in the contemporary art of central and eastern Europe in the context of the newly rehabilitated narratives we can well understand why the moments of the historical determination and the ethno-cultural authenticity are playing a very important role in the interpretation and perception of art.

The lecture concentrates on the localization of the artistic creativity in the socio-cultural context as well as in the historical process, without creating aesthetic isolation for the art.