Maja and Reuben Fowkes
New Left East, Socialism as (if) it really existed
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The left critique of the socialist system in Eastern Europe was at best a precarious position and one that tended towards invisibility. In fact, to seriously argue for a freer and fairer version of communism was only possible for a relatively short period of time, from the end of Stalinism with its aspirations for total control of political, economic and cultural life, which was signalled by Khrushchev's Secret Speech at the 20th Party Congress in February 1956, to the complete ossification of the late Brezhnev era. The peak of intellectual criticism of 'really existing socialism' from the Left took place in the late 60s and early 70s, a period that coincided with the emergence and flourishing of the neo-avant-garde in East European art.

Towards the 1980s, a shift occurred from a belief in the possibility of a reformed socialism, to one of resignation, cynicism and frustration towards a party bureaucracy in which even the bureaucrats had stopped believing in the official ideology. This change in attitudes towards socialism can be detected both in the writings of leftwing theorists and the approach of neo-avant-garde artists. It is visible, for example, in the work of Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović, whose collection of slogans from 1980 entitled *Submit to Public Debate*, are inscribed on canvases that for their background take the highly diluted and politically-pale tones of pink, rather than the radical colour red, which had been a regular reference point in neo-avant-garde artworks of the previous decade. The work picks out the empty words of official Yugoslav political discourse, in which the language of the socialist ideals of brotherhood and unity have been replaced by vague references, such as 'common interests', 'key tasks' or 'to completely fulfil obligations', pointing to the fragmentation and decay of political ideology in the late socialist public sphere.

In dissident writing, the shift is present, for example, in the oeuvre of Miklós Haraszti, who in the early 70s could still conceive of worker's everyday creativity as one of the last remaining sources of communism, expressed in the cult book *A Worker in a Worker's State*, to the much more pessimistic tone of his publication from the mid-80s, that was symbolically entitled *Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism*. The enthusiastic and utopian writings of

philosophers, poets and underground activists from that period may appear today, from the perspective of later shifts to a more moderate and non-Marxist political positions, as youthful excesses that are, nevertheless, fascinating to revisit from the position of the search for alternatives to the current system.

The few years around 1970 saw a flourishing of innovative artistic experiments often characterised by conceptual, anti-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian and dematerialised approaches that reengaged with the desire in the radical wing of the modernist avant-garde to break down the barriers between Art and Life. The same period saw the appearance of philosophers that questioned the authenticity of official politics, using the writings of the young Marx to point out the failings of a bureaucratic system, with its economic unfairness and corruption, even making common cause with international social movements and student revolts. This might suggest that there are both direct lines of influence and more subtle inner connections between the two streams of cultural upheaval.

The name of the journal *Praxis* that appeared in Yugoslavia from 1964 to 1975, conveys the importance of the concept of 'praxis' for a neo-Marxist critique of Stalinism. In the words of one of the group's leading philosophers, Gajo Petrović, the term is defined as 'universal – creative, self-creative activity, activity by which man [here we assume he also refers to women] transforms and creates his world and himself.'[1] In other words, Praxis referred to 'human creative activity' as the primary factor in constituting human reality, in contrast to Stalinism's belief in the iron logic of over-determining objective laws. The search for a more humanistic Marxism led the group into frequent conflict with the authorities for their criticism of actual existing socialism. Danko Grlić, in the wake of the crushing of the Prague Spring, condemned 'the leaders of the countries in which socialism is represented as the constant and stubborn castration of all creative powers of the nation and individuals, as a grey rule of bureaucratic know-it-all's, as a system in which police decide what is ideologically right or of artistic value, as an army barracks and the permanent enslavement of time-wasting today, for some apparently better, brighter and

[1] Quoted by James Satterwhite in *Varieties of Marxist Humanism* (University of Pittsburg Press, 1992), 180.

freer tomorrow.'[2] Their left critique of actually existing socialism, led them to be labelled as traitors and 'ultra leftists', especially after their involvement in the student protests of 1968, while at the same time, it secured them a reputation among left-leaning cultural intellectuals.

One of the most happening sites for contemporary art in Zagreb was the Student Centre Gallery, which was run by flamboyant curator Želimir Košćević, who in 1970 initiated an action that would have immediate consequences for the development of contemporary art in public space in Croatia. 'Action Total' was a draft decree for the democratisation of art, which called for the abolition of painting, sculpture, graphic art, applied art, industrial design, architecture and urbanism, as well as the forbidding of all activities in the area of art history, and especially 'so-called art criticism', and the halting of all exhibitions in all galleries, museums, exhibition halls and art pavilions. The art of the day was rejected as 'a purely reactionary influence in society, which today more than ever needs the ideational power of art.' The decree, with perhaps implicit Maoist undertones, denounced applied art as 'servicing a select clientele with luxury goods' and art history as 'serving a small elite to satisfy their luxury needs', while neglecting the need for 'literacy campaigns, and building hospitals and cultural centres in cities and villages.'[3]

The action, which heralded a series of important artistic interventions in the city in the early 70s, involved direct intervention in urban space, such as postering over advertising hoardings with abstract designs and distributing leaflets of the decree. The reason why the action took place on the streets was the organisers' belief that art should be accessible to everyone and go towards the masses - galleries on the other hand, were only be used in bad weather. Košćević explained that his action was a prototype of a new relationship between art and society in which art has higher ambitions that just being a 'form of escape from reality'. He quotes approvingly the Praxis philosopher Danko Grlić, for whom art is a real power that, with the 'enthusiasm of its human mission, speaks about what kind of world our human world should and has to be, if it wants to remain human.'[4]

[2] Danko Grlić, 'Marginalije uz Čehoslovačku i nove tendencije u socijalizmu,' *Praxis* no.1/2, (1969), 319.
[3] 'Akicija 'total',' *Novine Galeria SC* no 22 (1970), 81.
[4] Želimir Košćević, 'Aspekti ambjentalizacije prostora,' *Život umjetnosti* 13 (1970), 62.

The new left of Eastern Europe was to some extent a victim of Cold War cultural politics and was destined to be permanently misunderstood by in particular, the Western left, who were often less than sympathetic to the notion of a left critique of socialism coming from within Eastern Europe. In addition to their tendency to identify with and support communist regimes, Western leftists also acted to maintain their terminological monopoly of the notion of the 'new left', referring to the eastern variety as Marxist Humanism, which sounded much milder than it was in reality. This restricted use of terms might be compared with the way the notion of 'conceptual art' was until recently reserved for a select group of Western artists, while all the rest were engaged in a more generic form of conceptualism.

The Bratislava-based dissident theorist Milan Šimečka recounts his experience of this misunderstanding across the Iron Curtain in his description of meetings with West German student socialist activists in Mainz University. When he raised with them the issue of the difficulty of putting Marx's ideas into practice, he was told that 'in Germany, they would not bastardise Marx's teaching, as we have done in the East. In the homeland of Karl Marx the students and workers would make a better job of socialism.' 'All I told these young comrades', Šimečka continues, 'was that Karl Marx was one thing, and socialism in practice something else. Beside them I felt ideologically burnt out, like a tree after a forest fire, and older than them by 50 long years of victorious socialism.'[5]

The disparity between the political agendas of the New Left in the West and the left critique of socialism in the East, was also the subject of the book *Eastern Left, Western Left*, by the best known disciple of György Lukács, philosopher Agnes Heller and fellow theorist Ferenc Fehér, published in 1986. Their comments about the lack of appeal of Maoism in Eastern Europe – apart from a small circle around Miklos Haraszti in Hungary - are based on the fact that 'without any kind of theory, but with a good political instinct', both political activists and the proverbial man in the street in Eastern Europe, 'had a legitimate fear of presenting social grievances in the vocabulary of equality rather than freedom,' since they feared that this would result in 'the general

[5] Milan Šimečka, *The Restoration of Order: Normalisation of Czechoslovakia* (London: Verso, 1984), 154.

equality of unfreedom.'[6] This issue of freedom would of course be one of the focal points of the East European neo-avant-garde.

A bridge between Eastern and Western approaches to neo-Marxism was created in the context of non-aligned Yugoslavia, specifically in the setting of the Korcula Summer School, which was organised by the Praxis group between 1963 and 1973. These unique meetings of leading philosophers from both sides of the Cold War divide were an occasion for both leisure and creativity. The exceptional atmosphere of the Praxis circle is remembered by Rajko Grlić, a filmmaker and a graduate of FAMU Prague, and son of Praxis philosopher Danko Grlić, who recounts: 'They used to spend their Sundays mountaineering, they used to spend their summer holidays together, they used to celebrate any possible occasion, and at the same time work together. And those gatherings, which I clearly remember, were an unusual blend of Dionysian feast, circus attraction, and amazingly lucid philosophical repartees.' Although this might sound like an ideal post-Fordist, capitalist team-building session, that extracts maximum performativity and virtuosity from all concerned, we have to bear in mind that their output had no economic significance, and was a product of a particular situation within actual existing socialism.

Rajko Grlić continues: 'Here is how I remember 1968 and the Korcula Summer School. Somewhere around 6 o'clock on 21st August, my father woke me up saying, Rajac, the Russians have entered your Prague. We were sitting in silence, listening to the morning news on a small transistor radio. Then we went to the community centre where the school sessions used to be held. The Praxis editorial members quickly wrote a letter of protest and they started to sign it. Before long, a long queue was formed. I remember standing right behind Ernst Bloch, and a few people behind were Eric Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. That was my closest encounter with the history of philosophy.'[7]

The signatories of this document, which was the first international protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia, included several members of the Budapest School, Agnes Heller among them, an action leading to dismissal

[6] Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller, *Eastern Left, Western Left: Totalitarianism, Freedom and Democracy* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1986), 27.
[7] Rajko Grlić, 'I witnessed the rise and fall of possibly the last social utopia,' in *Revolution I Love You: 1968 in Art, Politics and* Philosophy, ed., Maja & Reuben Fowkes (MIRIAD: Manchester, 2008), 39-45.

from university posts and even exile.[8] The privileging of the notion of freedom in the approach of the Budapest School - which is perhaps not unconnected with the courageous decision of the Hungarian philosophers to sign the Korcula protest letter - can be seen, for example, in Agnes Heller's position that 'human rights are only interpretations of the value idea of freedom in different contexts and relations, and from various standpoints,'[9] in other words, for Heller, freedom is the ultimate value from which all other human rights can be derived. A parallel focus on the importance of freedom can be found in the work of neo-avant-garde artists, especially perhaps in dissident artistic circles in Hungary in the late 60s and early 70s.

The artistic gatherings that took place in the early 70s in a rundown chapel on Lake Balaton shared the same heady mixture of leisure and creativity on the margins of socialism that was characteristic of the Korcula Summer School. Originally rented as a studio by the artist György Galantai, the Balatonboglar Studio soon turned into a 'liberated zone' for artistic experiments and the illusionary evasion of party control. As the political atmosphere in Budapest deteriorated following the halting of the reform process, as a result of which several exhibitions were forbidden, the neo-avant-garde were increasingly drawn to exhibit their work in Balatonboglár.

One of the most notable events was the 'Direct Week –Avant-garde festival', which had been banned in Budapest, but was organised by Tamas Szentjoby and Gyula Pauer in Balatonboglár in the summer of 1972. This was closely followed by an exhibition of the Pecs Workshop, which included a work by István Haraszty, entitled *Like a Bird*, which had a live parrot in a cage with electric doors that are open if the parrot is standing on a twig, but close automatically as soon as the bird tries to escape, so the bird stays imprisoned. This work was reported in detail to the police and recognised as having heavily political overtones, and may well have been the trigger for the decision by the authorities to close the Chapel exhibition space in Balatonboglar the following year.

Another event from the summer of 1972 that is worth mentioning in this context is the meeting of artists from Hungary and Czechoslovakia that was

[8] Satterwhite, *Varieties of Marxist Humanism*, 74-5.
[9] Agnes Heller, 'Freedom and Human Rights'in *Eastern West, Western Left*, 151.

organised by art historian Laszló Beke. The high point was an action that involved artists from the two countries playing tug of war with a magazine instead of a rope. The magazine they were pulling apart featured a picture of Warsaw Pact troops playing tug-of-war with the inhabitants of a village they had just 'liberated' in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Another action involved handshaking between artists from Hungary and Czechoslovakia, as if to make peace, apologise for Hungarian involvement in the intervention, and express solidarity over the loss of freedom.

The following year the authorities closed down the chapel in Balatonboglár, although in June 1973 the neo-avant-garde had a final opportunity to express its attitude to freedom there. Tamás St.Auby's action *Be Forbidden* consisted of an A4 paper placed in the chapel's alter space with the sentence 'Be forbidden!' written in small letters. In order to read it - and find out exactly what they had done - visitors had to step over a cordon. The artist insists that the kind of forbidding he was interested in was not just party censorship, but also what has been outlawed by the church and the state more generally, and the process of 'naming the territory of the forbidden.'[10]

In Czechoslovakia, the conditions of normalisation pushed both political dissidence and artistic radicalism underground and to the margins of the public sphere, as well as causing irreparable damage to the idea that socialism could be saved or reformed. While some artists turned inwards, such as to more meditative and body-oriented practices carried out in private flats, others, such as Slovak artist Rudolk Sikora, turned their attention to the cosmos. Sikora in his work from the period points to the existence of a post-national realm that is above every day politics, free from its concerns, looking to higher dimensions.

Sikora's work chimes with the recollections of dissident philosopher Milan Simecka, who in his reminiscences about the sixties in Czechoslovakia, entitled *The Restoration of Order*, offers a poetic description of events: 'At that time my country was like a planet which, as a result of a strange combination of circumstances, had slipped out of its orbit and was flying on its own course in the uncertain hope that it might find another orbit nearer the sun. Within the

[10] See the interview with Tamás St.Auby from 1998 reprinted in *Parallel Chronologies* (Tranzit.hu: Budapest, 2011), 34.

fixed European planetary system this undertaking was quite risky from the very outset' therefore 'they decided that my country was a threat to the order of the universe since it might lead to other planets one day escaping from their orbits.'[11]

The invisibility and precariousness of the leftist critique of socialism – which of course does not necessarily detract from its relevance to contemporary concerns – ultimately lies in the fact that to hope for the reform of socialism from within proved in the end to be hopeless. Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, who in the mid-1950s had been a driving force in the attempt to reignite the utopian spirit of socialism, in the end gave up the attempt to find the reason why socialism in practice had strayed so far from the ideals of Marxism, and was driven to accept that a major reason why 'real existing socialism' turned out so badly, was to be found in Marx's writings, acknowledging problems with the blueprint and not just the way the Party carried it out, and famously concluding that a democratic communism would be like 'fried snowballs'. The epilogue of his three volume history of Marxism published in 1978 concluded: 'Marxism neither interprets the world nor changes it: it is merely a repertoire of slogans serving to organise various interests, most of them completely remote from those with which Marxism originally identified itself.'[12]

It goes without saying that in the early post-communist period attempts to reform socialism from within were seen as a completely irrelevant point of reference for societies that had moved onto a radically different economic and social path. It is worth stressing that in the 1990s, it wasn't just the old photos of Marx and Lenin that found their way onto the scrap heap of history, but also the finely balanced positions of those who conceived of a reformed, humanised or more authentic version of socialism. Today, when views on global capitalism are more nuanced than in the first post-communist decade, both the writings of the leftist opposition of the day, as well as the spirit and working method of the neo-avant-garde, can be seen as a source of knowledge and also inspiration for understanding the present as well as the past.

[11] Šimečka, *The Restoration of Order*, 14.
[12] Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1976), 530.