

ART & CULTURE ON THE BATTLEGROUND OF POPULISM

"... and, I think that the only rule I ever had was the fact that if
it didn't annoy anyone, it wasn't worth doing, if
it didn't create problems, too, it was also not worth doing, if
it didn't have any politics, it was suspect,
and, from that, it then had to have a lot of style, and be sexy,
to sell..."

"Lydon chats..."¹

(by Stevan Vuković)

The nightmares of organic intellectuals² both from the left and the right have come to be realized in the cultural field: the sell-out of avant-guard styles and the advent of popular culture exploring issues of revolt on a massive scale have made one point clearly visible, which is that everything, even a product with highly political content, built on major dissatisfaction with present social values, is liable to be sold, only if it appears to be "sexy and has a lot of style". As opposed to artistic avant-gardes, which were for the time being trusted, popular culture has been regularly defined through its relations to commerce and profit, and accused to be one of the main providers of ideological support for contemporary capitalism. In that respect, both left and right wing critics of popular culture tend to focus their efforts onto disclosing its role in reproducing the system, but without closely researching if that role is ever really successfully fulfilled. What they usually miss is that strategies used by the system are consistently counter-forced by tactics of the ones who don't resist it in an open and frontal way³, but wage semiotic guerilla warfare against it within the area of the popular⁴. More precisely: the happy marriage of cultural with financial economy in the sphere of popular culture is steadily being challenged on the level of libidinal economy, which in fact underlies them both: pleasures provided by hegemonic culture constantly undergo the influx of counterculture joy.

The hegemonic culture of today is mass culture, with its ideology of *multiculturalism as global uniformity*, reinterpreting differences in production, appropriation and symbolization of cultural products as pure differences in taste, socially constructed and related to belongings and affiliations one is supposed to choose in a process of unrestrained deliberation. Mass culture in the age of multiculturalism, presenting itself not merely as *the* popular culture, but as *the vox populi*, brings down the *habitus*⁵ of a specific social group (packaging its subcultural features for mass consumption), from a complex and *distinctive set of values, ideas, and practices, or a collective perceptive and evaluative schema*, into the simple *style of performing everyday practices, dress codes, use of language, comportment, and patterns of consumption*. Mass culture canonizes styles devoid of content, and provides different target groups with popular pleasures in playing with a variety of styles, without attaching any specific values to them. It integrates all available elite, folk and popular cultures as sources for supplying the shopping list offered to its consumers, concealing the fact that they are always pre-formed hybrid configurations, in an attempt to present them as ready to use homogenous products. Resistance to this process comes either from the conservative side, as appeals to preserve the values of high aristocratic and/or authentic folk culture, or from the side of the radical progressivists, as calls for creating new values for the society to come, be it through revolution or a series of popular struggles, are proclaimed.

The *Populist Project* sides with the leftist radical progressivists, who actively get engaged in struggles dealing with the field of popular representation. It questions the relation between artistic authority and cultural micropolitics, rendering the aesthetic quality of a work of art closely tied to its particular social relevance, but in a performative manner, trying to avoid the usual trap of radical and progressive art, to come up with works socially engaged in content, but puritanistic, dried of fun and enjoyment, and, therefore, too hermetic and distant for anyone but the elite art audience. It uses the transgressive potential of passionate attachments to specific types of popular representations in order to question the process of the realization of individual personalities and their relationship to the social system. It raises issues of identity as a result of a complex set of identifications, and brings into immediate visual presence popular phantasms on entering, with one's own image, the range of images which have considerable performative effect in public. By the very same act, it questions the normative utilization of popular images, and simply misuses them to empower oneself and get a hold of the enjoyment condensed in them. That means transforming commercial cultural goods into cultural sources, while circumventing the disciplinary mechanisms meant to assure their normative use. This art of symbolic self-empowerment puts out of

balance the liberal political consensus over visual representation, whereby the actual positioning of social agents is usually being petrified. It constitutes the self as the locus of power, within a plurality of powers, engaged in a plurality of struggles *within* the realm of the social.

The commitment of the *Populist Project* is to the social performativity of art, in its role of redefining the media processed popular iconosphere⁶ thereby effecting the identities acquired through the play of mirrors with the imagery it comprises. This commitment takes into account, as the author of the project asserts, that *Communism, Socialism & Anarchism have lost their battle for the leadership in representation of the social statements and fights of the so-called Lower Classes*, and that *after the total defeat of the Eastern Block, whose economy was primarily based on the ideological postulates of Marxism-Leninism, the flag of social emancipation is in the hands of Declarative Democrats, both right/left wing Liberals and Conservatives⁷*, but it does not bow to the alleged new bearers of the process of emancipation, nor does it fall pray to a revolutionary fever by trying to fight them directly. It keeps fostering a plurality of struggles *within* the social, by the use of cultural (including counter-cultural) means, without phantasizing of an ultimate, sovereign, revolutionary act, as an act of radical refoundation that would become *the source of the social*.

The choice of populism as both the phenomenon sought by the project, and the format within which it was articulated, evolved out of its nature to act on a microlevel, bringing changes not in a structural, but disorganized and grass-root way. As Ernesto Laclau claims, *strictly populist movement cannot be linked to the discourse of a determinate social class⁸*. Its basis is *the people*, which is a term liable to multiple, mutually conflicting interpretations, disclosing already existing social antagonisms, and potentially leading to a kind of a *quasi-anarchistic* point where *the people* is completely unassimilable by any fraction of the existing power bloc. That opens some public space available for different types of tactical moves out of the range of disciplinary social mechanisms. One can always trace back the line of events leading to the state described, going behind the phantasm of harmony, which every system presents as the actual state of affairs: fracture of the power block > general social crisis > crisis of the dominant ideological discourse > populism

Locally, on the Serbian cultural and intellectual scene, populism was until now mainly considered to be a form of the mobilizing of the masses for right wing ideas. From the study of Nebojša Popov, from 1993, under the title of "Serbian Populism: From Marginal to Dominant Phenomenon"⁹ up to the text written a decade later by Vladimir Marković on the ideology of the Otpor movement, which claimed to represent *populism without populism¹⁰*. The elitist character of local *intelligentia* made them blind for the emancipatory potential lying in the populist movements as such. The main question of Nebojša Popov's research, therefore, appears to be: *is populism leading towards democracy and its involvement within the processes of the modern world, or does it go in some other direction?* The answer is more than dissatisfactory. Populism is being related on one hand to the corporatist idea and right wing ideology, and, on the other, to the decline of the local social *milieu* into a the barbaric state of a primal horde. A quote by Istvan Bibo, a scholar characterizing various forms of nationalism in Eastern Europe, states that the space of former Yugoslavia generates the *biggest threat to world peace, as long as it remains the area of greatest anarchy, unpredictability and dissatisfaction*. Popov's scheme of division of social powers between right wing populism, socialist (later nationalist, then liberal-democrat) state bureaucracy and the liberal elite of critical intellectuals, which is still taken for granted by the majority of local sociologists, simply brings to closure any imaginable space for some form of new left. It is mainly used simply for legitimating the inefficiency of the local elite in the field of culture in the times of abrupt nationalism which led to the wars of Yugoslav secession, when they were simply not able to provide any articulation of their critical stands in a form communicable to a wider audience.

In fact, inhabiting the *area of greatest anarchy, unpredictability and dissatisfaction* seems like an utopian idea for any critical intellectual not blinded by a belief in the liberal democratic promise of bringing total and ultimate harmony through mere changes in the process of administering the will and obligations of a given society's citizens. No popular tasks can be fully completed by using those means, and the mission of the *Populist Project* is to point to the missing bearer of the role of the (critical) cultural agent of uncompleted popular tasks. It explores representational strategies of those cultural forms which show to be on a considerable level social penetrability, to use them for altering meanings of certain social experiences, trying to fight the partial absorption and neutralization of those ideological contents through

which resistance to the present system of power is expressed. On the other hand, it works on empowering the consumers of populist imagery by demonstrating a way of shifting the ability of a pop-consumer into that of a creator.

The power of popular culture lies exactly in that. Popular articulates the personal into social. It is more personal and individual than folk culture, and constitutes collective upon a process of deliberation and interpretation of contents, not upon fixed belongings. It is not class related, as is elite culture, and does not require such a complex set of cultural competencies, as the former does. Popular culture is always obviously mediated, through cultural industries, existing patterns, etc, while folk aims to immediacy and tends to present itself as organic, and elite culture claims to be completely out of the reach of the commodified world of merchandize and entertainment. The awareness of pop consumers that they are actually consuming products, not sensing pure creativity, makes them more attentive in not falling prey to mass culture as such.

According to its author, the main issue of the *Populist Project* is to show the interactions between star-system and identity. Its components are titled "God Loves the Dreams of Serbian Artists", "Celebrities", "Hometown Boys" and "Pioneers". The first component, "God Loves the Dreams of Serbian Artists", includes photographic images of the author, posing with the world's most popular football players of the moment, as a form of new icon. The second component, "Celebrities", features the image of the author surrounded by famous artists, movie stars, sportsmen, publishers, politicians or their wives, cartoonists, avant-garde rock 'n roll stars, and other public personalities who usually appear on the cover of lifestyle magazines. The third component, "Hometown Boys", is conceived as the simulacrum of the *First Serbian Porn, Art & Society magazine*, consisting solely of front-pages announcing its non-existent content on issues related to sociology, art & theory, and hardcore pornography. Finally, the fourth segment, the "Pioneers" is made as a set of portraits of internationally well known artists and art related professionals originating from the region of former East Europe, such as Oleg Kulik, Zbygniew Libera, Lorand Hegyi, Yuri Leiderman, or Luchezar Boyadjiev, proudly wearing a red pioneer scarf, in the glorious posture taken from the iconography of socialist realism. Having as its mission the identification the role of the missing (critical) cultural agent of incomplete popular tasks, the *Populist Project* begins by staging an imaginary place meant to host the agent in absence. Considering that being successful in sport and music, or at least in street hustling and semi-legal trades, are the major contemporary tools available for the members of a certain underprivileged community for trespassing social hierarchies and inscribe themselves into the wider representational field, the *Populist Project* has staged the place for the cultural agent of incomplete popular tasks by opening the gallery of images representing success of a formerly described kind for interfacing with articulated social thought and critical cultural efforts. In that respect, the role of the *organic intellectual*, as the *genuine and authentic representative of a certain underprivileged social group*, fighting on behalf of it in the wider social and cultural sphere, to which other members of it do not have any access, is being replaced by the *synthetic intellectual*. As a hybrid form of in-between nature, with different types of belonging and affiliations, it creates a link between the different groups engaged in the popular struggle against the hegemony of the current system, and transforms their position of responsibility with respect to the underprivileged into a locus of universalizing effects, and into a valid starting point for legitimate future social change.

¹ Statement published as the 13th track on the compilation in 1988 by Luanda Music UK, based in London, under the title: *Sex Pistols: Pirates of Destiny*.

² Post-Gramscian politics of organic intellectuals is being very much discussed in the nineties in the British intellectual left, dealing with the model of leadership organically coming from grass-roots, not imposed from above. In its negative image, it is linked to charismatic leadership, or the supreme power of a party. The basis for this theory can be found in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith: *Selection from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

³ Michel de Certeau: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

⁴ Roland Barthes: *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1975.

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

⁶ Mieczysław Porebski: *Ikonosfera*, Warszawa: PIW, 1972.

⁷ Uroš Đurić: *The Populist Project* (unpublished manuscript)

⁸ Ernesto Laclau: *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory; Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, London: Verso, 1982.

⁹ Nebojša Popov: *Srpski populizam: Od marginalne do dominantne pojave*, published as the special supplement to the Belgrade based *Vreme* weekly, on the 24th of May 1993.

¹⁰ Vladimir Marković: "Od Ljotića dva puta": Novi društveni pokret u Srbiji koncem devedesetih i slika njegove ideologije", published in the second issue of the Belgrade based *Prelom* magazine, in 2002.