

Violence, Exploitation and Self-organization in the Cultural Work

Observations on the *Workers' Inquiry* initiative and the *The Umpteenth Enemy Offensive* debate

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Within the project **Engine Room Europe** (1) and in the manner of the project methodology of the series of debates **Mission Less Probable** (2) initiated by Cultural Center REX from Belgrade and as continuation of previously held debate in this series, *The Umpteenth Enemy Offensive* (3) in February 2011 in REX, members of two collectives – **Workers' Inquiry Group** from Madrid represented by Alfredo Aracil, Carolina Bustamante, Ines Moreno and Yunuen Sariego and **Radical Education** from Ljubljana represented by Bojana Piškur and Tjaša Pureber (4) were invited to present their recent research work to their colleagues, and potential cooperants, and the audience in Belgrade. The two consecutive discussions were aimed to clarify the possibilities, capacities and motives of cultural workers to engage into analyses and articulation of their own working condition (both discussions in Cultural Center REX were realized under the title 'In the Engine Room: Working Conditions of Cultural Workers'). As the mission of the **Mission Less Probable** states, they were “invited to present and collaboratively analyze one project that they realized but that was (in their present opinion) not up to its initial mission”.

As the **Workers' Inquiry Group**, Carolina Bustamante, Ines Moreno and Yunuen Sariego are also PhD students at the Study program (Centro de Estudios) of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. Together with **Radical Education Collective**, they have initiated an investigation which deals with different modes and levels of exploitation in a cultural institution, as well as the ways in which to employ this newly produced knowledge to work towards social transformation. They have started the investigative process by posing the question: How to invent new political praxis and how to think it within the institution?, and expanded it with the list of couple of dozens of other questions. Those questions are based on Marx's *Workers' Inquiry* from 1881, when the *Revue Socialiste* asked Marx to carry out a study into the conditions of the French proletariat. Based on different opinions, they have provided understanding that relying on Marx too literally would not make sense today as the questions he posed are “largely obsolete” and his “ontology closes off any possibility of innovation” (Maurizio Lazzarato, *Multiplicity, totality and politics*). According to such opinions the potential lies in rereading him: “to read Marx not so much as a thinker, [but] rather as someone who demands his theory to become socially effective” (Jože Barši, *Reading Capital*). That was also partly the idea underpinning the research process of the **Workers' Inquiry Group**: not to simply use his questions but to compose new, situationally relevant ones that would correspond to current working conditions and life situations of workers in culture (5). But, having in mind the fact that precisely in the field of cultural production, there is more and more insistence on the “industrialization” (also literary in terms of *creative industries*) of production processes, production relations and labour force by the ruling elites, we could also ask ourselves about validity of universal significance and more direct reading, or re-posing the questions from Marx's inquiry.

The first talk held on June 26th 2011 in REX and moderated by Jelena Vesić, Vladan Jeremić and Bojana Piškur, went into different directions. From one side, there was a need to find out more

about motivations and urgencies, approaches and strategies of **Workers' Inquiry Group** especially before the realization of the *Inquiry*. From the other, there was a need to continue with analyzing the current production conditions of cultural operators in Serbia, especially continuing debate going on a few months ago, within the *The Umpteenth Enemy Offensive* event, about different levels of *soft* oppressions, abuses and even violation of peoples physical integrity within and by public cultural institutions in Serbia, in present modes of cultural policy and production in neoliberal capitalism. As it was heard about **Workers' Inquiry Group** motivations, the main intention has been examining first their own production and working conditions and nature of working relations within one public institution, where they have performed number of hours of unpaid work as a part of the arrangements within their PhD studies in the Museum. They said that the *Inquiry* for them functions as a tool, as an experiment in exercising the power to formulate/to ask questions about those particular working conditions. To paraphrase Berthold Brecht, it came as urgency to express the truth of our situation. On the first day, discussion went in different directions, and many important questions for politics and concept of the research were asked, for example: if the position of janitors/cleaners in the Museum is taken into account in realization of the *Inquiry*, or regarding the future of the project since it is in plan to realize it in different public institutions in different part of the world (the comment raised was if it might become another 'sexy' international project).

The second day of the discussions, June 27th, was moderated by the co-author of this text (Ćurčić), and it dealt predominantly with the period after the *Inquiry* was realized. In the introduction part, it could be heard that after compiling the list of approximately 45 questions, the members of the **Workers' Inquiry Group** sent-off the questions to the all workers of Reina Sofia Museum through the common mailing list. They received back only couple of answers from several cultural workers, which possibly indicates the lack of interest of majority of workers in public cultural institutions (could we say wider as well?) to reflect, as a group, in an organized or spontaneous way, upon their working conditions, which is not an unusual situation having in mind centralized, hierarchical and often oppressive structures which those public institutions often have and nourish. After realized *Inquiry* and its modest initial/material results (only 12 answers were received, in the institution which employes over 450 people), members of those two collectives co-wrote the text “Can we, the cultural workers, speak?” (6) dealing with wider context of cultural work today. The intention was to publish it in the Reina Sofia Museum's official magazine, *Carta*. But the text was never published, due to the intervention of the Museum's director.

Another attempt to present the *Inquiry* and the following text to the Museum's workers and wider audience was public debate organized in the Museum, with not many people attending. Obvious lack of interest of majority of workers in public cultural institution(s) to reflect, in common and public manner, upon their working conditions, again was present and imposed, which maybe is not unusual for the way of organization of labour and positioning of staff within those institutions, and also for the possibility that the work in culture is a sort of a social privilege that hampers politization and keeps the position-holders in a silent enjoyment of their petite-bourgeois prestige.

The opinion was also voiced, already at the first debate, that cultural workers in Serbia in fact “don't have to work that much” as many other “non-cultural” workers have to or as their counterparts from the Western Europe, for example, so that there is a fear that insight into their own working condition might also reveal or impose some self-denunciating content. The

statement about still prevailing under-productivity of cultural workers in Serbia is usually drawn from the myth of fully developed and splendidly regulated capitalist economy which successfully realizes and “normalizes” production and social relations, and which, therefore, is still not achieved onto satisfying way. It is in such an expectation, in a belief about “unachieved potential” of something which is unquestionably already here, and exactly in that space of unquestionability about labour-reality and postponement/threat of its full realization where a perfect ground for large scale exploitations has being found.

Students, curators, artists, researchers, teachers and other cultural workers and their position in the contemporary cultural production were in the focus of those debates, and especially their relationship with the public institution and level of exploitation experienced within this relation. If the “ideal” worker today is the one who deals with the “informational and cultural content” of the commodity, then the ideal worker is a “cultural worker” - someone whose labor is based on the affect, knowledge and organization of social relations. Or as Antonio Negri puts it: “Art and cultural work are singular forms of the labor force today” (7). It is peculiar position which imposes: constant mobility, flexibility, temporality (of projects working on), networking, ability of fast change of working environment, communication, etc.; but also, it imposes: “free” work, self-investments, blurring of work and leisure time, precarity in material and psychological sense, self-precariousness, unequal proportions between paid and unpaid work, contract based and short-term engagement/employment, loss of social and health insurance, etc.

In present conditions and especially looking at the public cultural institutions, based on some assumed consensus, we are also facing trend which should lead to their transformation. Many of those institutions have been questioning their own roles in the society and current cultural production, they are opening themselves towards critical practices, education, etc., but political contextualization or transformation of concrete working conditions within those processes is exactly what is lacking (Reina Sofia provides yearly budget of 200.000 EUR for activist and critical programs, of Nomad University, for example, but when the question of very working conditions in the Museum is asked, question of precarious or 'nomad' nature of temporarily engaged contributors/workers, the whole apparatus becomes silent, by that answering in practical and truthful way to the question from the title of the text by the **Workers' Inquiry Group and Radical Education Collective**, 'Can we... speak?').

This is just partial trend in Serbia as well, since experiences of cultural workers here are depicting resistance of the institution to cultural practices and practitioners who act in direction of elementary *modernization* of the program and – to such modernization adjusted – transformations of existing or application of new institutional structures. To put it differently, local public cultural institutions, through practical relation towards those who are trying to do something on the level of modernization or transformation, as if answer/speak the following: Why do we at all need Nomad University?, since we are satisfied and privileged representatives of one osseous, conservative and sedentary political system, why this strange application and camouflage? At this place, new problem is being opened – problem of a competition between institutional and independent, self-organized cultural workers, contrary to the potential solidarity. Precariousness and poverty of those cultural workers inside and outside the institutions could become place of their possible political solidarity, instead of their silent surrender to the ruling policy, while the paradigm of their exploitation is changing in the broader field. While outside of the institutional sphere exploitation is unconcealed and obvious, inside of the institutions it is

latent and masked/camouflaged. The reason for weak answering to the *Inquiry* might lay exactly in this division on two paradigms, so those who are already placed inside of the institution don't want to risk common analytical endeavor with those who are not.

It is important to mention that at the discussion *The Umpteenth Enemy Offensive*, there were described situations which in majority of cases are situations of violation of intellectual and physical integrity of workers in cultural field. It turned out that those violent situations are the most often appearing in the (conflictual) relation between an individual cultural actor and a public institution of culture or in the relation of an individual cultural actor and the conservative-nationalists group. In the first relation (individual cultural worker – public institution), cultural worker is the one who is in possession of her/his labor-power and the one who is agreeing to sell her/his labor-power to the institution in order to survive. Within those labor relations, violence is expressed less in terms of physical force (although those cases are not excluded), and more in terms of the *wage* restriction which is successfully disciplining the worker (including control in and outside the work place and potential or realized dismissal) (8). *Policy* (and police-related) level of solving those questions is present and dominant also at the level of institutional *policy* (for example, change of working position or salary) and based on public *policy*, therefore, police and courts which have to be engaged so that they could, in considered cases, protect physical and/or professional integrity of workers. Political level of those conflicts remain unarticulated or seemingly self-understandable in cliched frameworks of ongoing at the political scene (for example, *First vs. Second Serbia*, liberal-modernizers against national-conservatives, etc.).

At the same discussion (*The Umpteenth Enemy Offensive*) cultural workers from Serbia presented individual cases of institutional oppression over the individual or group cultural actors, which could be understood as one of the marking elements of the conditions of cultural production here. And in the discussion *The Engine Room Europe* we could see cultural workers from Madrid and Ljubljana who took examining of those conditions immediately and together with the question: why the class consciousness? This might be important issue/oversight since, at least what is being experienced is that cultural workers are usually fragmentary in their critique; which is often being reduced to the optics of moral corruptness and managerial non-competencies of the objects of that critique. That kind of critique is often focused on the policies of, for example, city government, beadles' (non-)competencies, etc., (9) while looking into more general trends of global social processes is often missing.

What appeared as more interesting and more relevant point in *the Umpteenth Enemy Offensive* discussion was the conclusion by discussion moderator, stating that in the analyzed ambience, the invited cultural workers (and objects of institutional oppression) were refusing to alienate (to estrange) from the results of their own labor, unlike the great number of independent or institutional cultural workers who are constantly and voluntarily alienated from it. It is a statement which opens up completely new space for discussion. The statement might appear as hasty, which only testifies to effects of oppression on our capacities for political imagination and for designing strategies for overcoming of that situation. Facing our own conditions of work (material and immaterial) and politization of cultural production, seems to be necessary.

Now, for the beginning of that kind of coping, it might be interesting to try to shift the paradigm, also language (terminology)-wise and concept-wise. As it is stated in classical historical

materialism, the worker is related to the *products of labor* as to an *alien* object. While humanism (of existentialism) persuaded many that alienation is a-historical constitutive element of the human condition, today the understanding of humanity must be urgently based on the class conflict (mediated and conditioned by the very alienation). Perhaps here we could learn from the Italian philosophers-*Workerists*, who shifted terminology and understanding of alienation for *estrangement*. As they state, it is exactly the radical inhumanity of the workers' existence that a human collectivity could be based on, a community no longer founded on capital. It means understanding of this position as a possible starting advantage, which offers opportunity for common estrangement from all forms of labour dependent on capital – a refusal to identify with the interests of the capitalistic economy (10). This might be not only introduction of antagonism, but the organization of antagonism inside and around conditions, processes and outcomes of our own production. Therefore, possible question No1 could be: Do we want that at all?, and question No2 might be: Do we want to produce illusion and noise with our own labour, about the alleged freedom of speech, artistic virtues and values which only in a cheap way camouflage one deeply unjust, unfree and conservative social and political system?

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