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**Autonomy or Disavowal of Socioeconomic Context? The Precarity of Cultural Workers
in Slovenia Since the 1980s**

Introduction

It has been argued that cultural workers have been contributing to the process of (self)precarization by embracing ideas of autonomy and freedom, hence concomitantly contributing to neo-liberal policies and economy. (Lorey, 2009: 188) Cultural workers often criticize capitalist modes of production, but they repeatedly fail to apply that criticism to their own working conditions. They tend not to see their production process as part of the capitalist system because they understand themselves as situated in an autonomous social sphere. I scrutinize this claim for the autonomy of arts and cultural production in Europe by focusing on the position of the freelance cultural workers and artists during the period of transition from self-managed socialist Yugoslavia to the independent nation state of Slovenia.

In Slovenia (one of the six republics of former socialist Yugoslavia), the process of precarization of cultural workers started in the 1980s with the introduction of special legislation for independent cultural workers. Based on the ideology of entrepreneurial freedom, this measure was welcomed as a mechanism to increase the autonomy of cultural workers and artists. I argue that the claim for autonomy of art is in

fact a structural disavowal of socioeconomic context, and therefore a reaction rather than a progressive response to the deconstruction of the welfare state during past three decades. Drawing upon policy analysis, artists' responses to the new legislation and fieldwork, I investigate the issues of autonomy and artistic labor in two ways: as it appears to cultural workers (i.e. on the level of ideology) and as it can be seen from the systemic point of view (i.e. on the level of social relations within the dominant mode of production). I furthermore argue that cultural workers address the issues of their working conditions in ideological terms (autonomy), instead of approaching them in terms of class relations and social relations that govern the cultural production process (labor issues).

Before presenting my argument, I will briefly sketch some relevant traits concerning the geopolitical context I am considering in this essay. Therefore I will (1) provide some historical context concerning socialist Yugoslavia that are informing my argument. Then I will (2) briefly sketch the contours of the cultural system and its changes. After that I will (3) present my two arguments concerning (a) the specific trait of the cultural system that I describe as structural disavowal of socioeconomic context and (b) the tendency of cultural workers' struggle for better working conditions that is unfolding on the level of ideology instead of class struggle.

1. A couple of remarks on socialist Yugoslavia

Let me then begin with a couple of historical notes regarding socialist Yugoslavia.

1. Yugoslavia was a socialist *welfare state on the periphery* that didn't do away with exploitation, division of labor and value production. It did however transform social and working relations and distribution of surplus-value – all of which resulted in a more socially just society. After the schism with USSR in 1948, Yugoslavia developed a different type of socialism, self-management socialism (as opposed to state socialism), which was intended to abolish the state apparatus into self-managed associations and workers' councils.

2. Yugoslav *self-management was never a homogenous model* of economic and social regulation. It went through several stages of development, where economic governance and implemented decision-making processes were often in conflict. I need to note as well, that self-management was implemented in a top down fashion. Many recent analyses show that elements of capitalist mode of production were introduced in self-managed socialism as early as in 1965. (Kirn, 2010; Močnik, 2012) These analyses also show that self-managed socialism never managed to fully implement direct control of citizens over social affairs as well as to empower the workers. Since the break up of Yugoslavia in 1991, which ended in a brutal war fueled by severe nationalism on all sides, a peripheral type of capitalism prevails as the hegemonic formation in this geopolitical context (Močnik, 2010).

3. In Yugoslavia, property was public, or better, social -- and not state property. Yet there was still a very particular legal-political construction in place that supported this self-managed socialist state. On the one hand, public services like health, education, culture and the arts were run technocratically via self-managed interest communities that were established for each respective field. These communities disposed with public funds and served as intermediate bodies between larger interest groups, political structures, enterprises and local municipalities. This entire system of governance was called social management and can be understood as an alternative type of state apparatus. (Hence, Yugoslavia never managed to abolish the state despite this being a proclaimed goal of the League of Communist of Yugoslavia that was to distinguish their version of socialism from the one develop in the USSR.) On the other hand, enterprises as basic economic units were run by participation of the employees. Each enterprise had a worker's council comprised of representatives of the entire worker's collective. Workers' councils were the main site of strategic planning, decision-making, or better, the politics of each economic unit. As Kirn points out, the importance of workers' councils in enterprises lies in the fact that they "became a cornerstone of the self-managed micro political system, where communication and agreement on the exchange and distribution of products and services with other enterprises took place." (Kirn, 2012: 248)

II. The cultural system and its parallel structures

Given the functioning of the state, it is therefore not surprising that when we analyze the relations between the arts and these alternative state apparatuses, we come to the conclusion that structural position of the arts within the state was very similar as in other bourgeois/capitalist countries. The position of cultural and art practices in socialist Yugoslavia has not been reconceptualized within the social structure. Ultimately, arts and culture have been organized and also appeared as a relatively autonomous social sphere. They have been supported as a public (social) activity, while most of its institutional framework resembled the one in capitalist western societies. That is, cultural production was organized in traditional cultural institutions (theatres, ballets and operas, galleries, museums, libraries, professional associations) that were managed by artists and arts professionals in collaboration with government authorities. These institutions were financially supported by public money through taxes collected by self-managed interest communities (via employers' so called self-contributions which was a type of taxation). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the calculations regarding the amount of financial resources that would have been needed for cultural production, were (a) made in 1950s and (b) were based on the systematization of jobs and positions in cultural institutions (Čopič and Tomc, 1997). In short, despite appearing otherwise, there was no popular involvement in decision-making regarding overall economic distribution of resources to public services. In addition, once the portion of state budget was relocated to the self-managed interest communities, there was a further top down hierarchical mechanism for redistribution of the public money. The

Cultural community of Slovenia (as the self-managed interest community for the field of culture was called) was comprised of two bodies representatives of

An additional structure started to surface in the cultural system in the mid 1970s. New rules for establishing associations were introduced, which planted the seeds for the emergence of the so-called “civil society” in the late 80s and 90s.¹ What made this possible was liberalization in terms of establishing associations. Namely, after 1974 it was possible that a group of (private) citizens - apart from the state - could establish an association. Furthermore, in the early 1980s the appearance of new structures within cultural system was due to the new Law For Independent Cultural Workers (passed in 1982). Hence, besides the artists and arts professionals employed in the cultural institutions, there was now a new official category of “the worker” in the cultural system, i.e. the independent cultural worker. Along with the new Law that regulated operations of the independent cultural workers, another form of organization was instituted – the so-called workers’ community. Both associations and worker’s communities still exist in the new nation state, which was founded in 1991. However, they did so under changed legislation and slightly altered names. Both associations and nonprofit private institutions are today more commonly know as non-governmental organizations (NGOs); they are private non-profit organizations regulated by civil law and largely supported by public funding from national/state (Slovenia) or supranational (European Union) budgets. This structure today belongs to the domain of civil society

¹ For the purposes of this paper I am here strictly adhering to conceptualization of ‘civil society’ as understood by Marx in “On the Jewish Question” (Marx, 1972).

and is perceived as being private, despite the fact that NGOs are largely supported by public money and are developing public cultural programs. The existence of this double structure (cultural institutions, and those of independent cultural workers, their associations and workers' communities today known as the NGO sector), form the basis for class divisions in the field of culture. On the ideological level, public cultural institutions function as representatives of more traditional arts and national culture, while the NGO sector presumably represent transnational, experimental art and so-called alternative culture.

III.a) Autonomy of art as structural disavowal of socioeconomic context

When analyzing the position of artist and cultural workers during the 80s and 90s, one notices that this position can be interpreted at least in two ways. The first one is how the artist and cultural workers experience their situation. The second one is from the point of view of the cultural system. The first interpretation therefore concerns the level of ideology, or, better yet, it manifests itself on the level of ideological battles. The second interpretation concerns the social relations and the mode of production (larger socio-economic situation), where class struggle becomes more apparent. The confrontation of both perspectives shows that the claim for the autonomy of art is in fact a structural disavowal of socioeconomic context.

I will therefore first address the ideological plane by presenting the response of artists and arts professionals to the implementation of the Law For Independent Cultural Workers. This legislation for independent cultural workers was convened under the idea of providing artists the option to operate as 'free enterprises' in the framework of the socialist market. The Law on one hand made possible for independent artists and cultural workers to operate (legally and business wise) and to establish workers' communities. On the other hand, new independent cultural workers were now legally bound to take care of their social security, health care and retirement. Even so, they could also be granted the support of the state, which would cover social security, basic health care and retirement provisions, if the artist was perceived and granted the title of exceptional artist. Salaries of artist and arts professionals employed in cultural institutions covered the expenses of social security, health care and retirement provisions and granted to them other worker's rights. With the new Law artists were therefore no longer strictly bound to operate through state established professional associations or as employers tied to cultural institutions but could freely design their own projects and activities. The new Law For Independent Cultural Workers was well received and not problematized at all because it allegedly supported artists' autonomy and freedom. (Bele, 1987)

Yet this freedom was a mirage. If we look at some facts about the cultural system, they reveal the nature of relations on the level of cultural production that were, as we will see, dominated by inequality and exploitation.

On the one hand we can see that the number of newly established cultural institutions was starting to decrease after the mid 70s. From WWII until 1973, the authorities established 95 cultural institutions. From 1973 until 1991 (when the Yugoslavia broke apart and independent nation state was established) they established an additional 35. (Čopič and Tomc, 1997). On the other hand, the number of independent artists increased 2.8 times from 1979 to 1980 (250 in 1979, 715 in 1980). (SURS, various years) In 1984, only two years after the implementation of the Law for independent cultural workers, the number of cultural workers was three times higher. The number of the students enrolled either in art academies or university programs for culture and/or arts related professions also continued to increase; from 1974 to 1989 it increased 1.3 times (573; 783) and from 1989 to 1995 it increased 1.4 times (783; 1114). (SURS, various years) In short, in 20 years the number of students was almost two times higher. Strikingly, the percentage of public budget for arts and culture during the 80s stayed relatively the same 4,1% to 4,3 % of the entire budget.

What the Law For Independent Cultural Workers therefore achieved was that it reduced the pressure on jobs (permanent employment) in the public cultural institutions. The Law can be seen as a purely legal formality that introduced a new type of administration and enabled business operation for the independent cultural workers, but was never followed by an increase in the cultural budget, or even less by any discussion about workers' rights protection for these independent artists. I therefore claim that the Law For Independent Cultural Workers was the first sign of neoliberal policies in the cultural

system. These policies were not unrelated to the global economic crisis of 70s, which manifested itself more visibly in the periphery and continued to influence economic and social processes throughout the 80s and the 90s (after the violent break up of socialist Yugoslavia). The effects of economic crisis that also contributed to the rise of neoliberal policies manifest themselves in the cultural system during the 80s in two aforementioned phenomena: (1) in the introduction of the Law for the independent cultural workers and (2) in new organizational structures – workers' communities and associations.

While the cultural system has been organized to support the ideology of art's autonomy, it also appeared as a relatively autonomous social sphere. Because this situation was embraced (and not contested) by the agents in the cultural system the ramifications of the independent cultural workers legislation remained unquestioned. The Law that supported entrepreneurial logic was welcomed as a bearer of freedom, even though it was reproducing relations of exploitation and inequality in the cultural system. Instead of democratization of the mechanisms of the welfare state and mechanisms of mutual solidarity, this law introduced the logic of every man for himself. This is precisely the logic that contributes to the hegemony of self-precarization in the cultural system. It is exactly this unquestioned embrace of the law for independent cultural workers under the flagship of ideology of autonomy and cultural entrepreneurship that I interpret as *a structural disavowal of the socioeconomic context*. The law as such neither solved the problem of cultural workers' opportunities to earn their means of subsistence, nor did it

protect workers' rights. That is why I argue furthermore that disavowal of socioeconomic conditions is a structural trait of the cultural system fundamentally intertwined with ideology of the autonomy of arts.

III.b) The struggle for art through defense of its autonomy

This trait observable in the cultural system (i.e. the disavowal of socioeconomic context) remained the same also after Slovenia became an independent nation state in 1991. (Slovenia was the first of the former Yugoslav republics to enter the European Union in 2004 and also the first to enter the Eurozone in 2007. In 2010, Slovenia also joined OECD.) A period of so-called transition was a mask for the introduction of neoliberal policies, mostly in the form of privatization and dispossession of the commons. In the Slovenian case this has happened in a less direct way as for instance in some other East European countries, yet in the long run consequences have been severe.

As the cultural system has kept its organizational structure as a relatively autonomous social sphere – the inequalities and parallel structures within the system as such have become even more visible. (This is also due to the fact that the consequences of economic crisis in the capitalist center became more severe.) Cultural institutions are now considered public (they are in responsibility of national or local governments), while people working in non-governmental sectors are understood as belonging to the private sphere or civil society. As I already mentioned and I need to reemphasize, both depend on public funding, which is of course unequally distributed. The ratio of

redistribution of public money between the two structures (i.e., public and private cultural organizations) has been 4:1.

Let me briefly introduce some of the facts about the cultural system during the 90s.

Employment in public institutions grew for 10%, while the state budget for culture, its distribution and proportions within the cultural systems stayed the same. The number of newly established institutions stagnated (five new institutions were established between 1991 and 1996), but there has been an enormous increase in the number of new private non-profit (i.e. non-governmental) organizations, their number has doubled in only five years (from 497 in 1991 to 1024 in 1996) (SURS, various years). The number of students enrolling in the art schools and culture related university programs kept increasing also during the 90s.

New and younger generations of artists and cultural workers live and work in underprivileged conditions, often with no social security, low production budgets, and lack of working space. After the introduction of the public and private sphere as well as public and private property in the new Slovenian nation state, we see the rise of three different types of workers in the cultural system. On the one hand there are (1a) the independent cultural workers existing under a new name “self-employed creators in culture” (status awarded by the state as an ostensible privilege) and (1b) independent cultural entrepreneurs. On the other hand we have (2) employed artists/arts professionals that work in public cultural institutions. Public sector unions protect the latter’s workers rights.

Furthermore, in the unfolding of the historical events, i.e. after Slovenia became an independent nation state at the beginning of 1990s, it has become more clear that the 1982 Law for independent cultural worker is one of the factors that has contributed to the commodification of culture in the process of deconstruction of the welfare state. Because of the relatively good welfare provisions and relatively low social stratification in socialist Yugoslavia, during the 80s the economic differences between different type of workers in the cultural system were not perceivable; hence, the class struggle was veiled by ideological battles between traditional and alternative culture. Even if the Law for independent cultural workers introduced a specific differentiation in terms of workers in the field of culture that particularly pertained to the future economic conditions, the agents in the cultural system didn't perceived it as such. The ideology of autonomy and the belief that artists and arts professionals choose their own working and living conditions prevailed. Besides, we can clearly see how this ideology is linked to liberal theories of free market economy where disparities in ownership and income are obscured because market is perceived as a neutral regulator. But I need to stress that no such market for arts and culture existed in socialist Yugoslavia because self-managed interest communities (i.e. state apparatuses) were the ones funding culture. Moreover, the state-funding model of culture has been prevalent also after Slovenia became independent in 1991. Cultural activities are therefore still highly depending on public funding due to traditionally paternalistic relations between public authorities and the cultural sector as well as weak tax incentives.

The effects of the Law for independent cultural workers has also contributed to the process of real subsumption of culture under capital. As I mentioned in the beginning, in socialist Yugoslavia culture and other public services were removed from capital accumulation. Understood as public goods (i.e. the distribution and consumption of which are regulated by the state because they are not considered appropriate for private ownership) the logic of profit and commodification were not the dominant principles according to which these services were being operated. But with the introduction of neoliberal policies, especially after the break up of Yugoslavia when Slovenia and other republics became independent nation states, these spheres have become a prime site for the accumulation of capital through privatization and commodification.

The fact that independent cultural workers address the issue of their working conditions in ideological terms (defending art's autonomy) is visible also in (mis)understanding of class division arising from distinctions in the double-sidedness of the cultural system. Instead of struggle for workers rights and questioning the lack of these rights for independent cultural workers (now called self-employed) and independent entrepreneurs, these agents focus merely on redistribution of public funding within the cultural system. Moreover, these struggles for redistributions within the cultural system are still appearing as battles of different aesthetic ideologies. Independent cultural workers (self-employed creators in the culture) have so far not taken an issue with the commodification of cultural work that is manifesting itself in their own position and

individual existence of de-privileged workers, as well as ignoring inequalities that arise from the two-sided structure of the cultural system. Furthermore, cultural workers and the entire cultural sphere (public institutions and private NGOs) are in the trenches to defend the sacrosanct “autonomy of the art”. But cultural workers should recognize that the institution of art and its autonomy is the effect of the rise of capitalist mode of production. From the outset, “the idea of the autonomy of art is thus at the same time a compensatory gesture and a utopian enclave in which the ideal of ‘liberated labour’ is both formed and preserved.” (Čurković, 2012: 46) Yet the demand for the autonomy of art is a mere illusion because the institution of art has always been either co-opted by the market or instrumentalized by nation states. Hence, the romantic conception of the autonomy of art has thus been highly problematic, likewise the arbitrary status differentiations and inequalities specific for the institution of art. Therefore, the struggle for art as a public good that is wagering on the autonomy of art and its producers seems to be a strategically misdirected tactic. This tactic obscures class divisions within the cultural system that are arising from the differentiation of workers (employed vs. self-employed) and doesn’t allow the problematization of inequalities. It is even less productive in resisting the privatization of public domains by which the commodification of art and its real subsumption under capital is taking place.

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