The Challenge of the Commons in the Post-socialist Cluj

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Abstract: Since the neo-liberal turn of the 1970s and the consequent failure of the state socialist experiment, the functioning of the Eastern European states has increasingly been governed by the rationale of markets. This logic has led to an erosion of the concept of the commons and, by extension, universality. The notion of then alternative but now mainstream culture creates and serves particular class interests under the banner of 'independence' and 'freedom', which aims not to transcend the *status quo* but to preserve it and the property relations on which it is based. My thesis is written as a first step to reclaim the idea of the commons, pointing to the capitalist genesis of the forms in our contemporary culture.

Keywords: commons, art, Cluj, post-socialism, Eastern Europe, class relations, neoliberalism, privatisation of art

The history of Cluj/Kolozsvár after the '89 revolution is the success story of Romanian capitalism. The notorious pyramid scheme of the 1990s, the concentration of capital that resulted from Caritas, gave birth to the technotopia of the "five-star city". Since Cluj did not have, and still does not have, a vast system of artistic institutions (concert halls, museums, etc.), except perhaps for theatres, the cultural needs of the city's new tech-industry middle class had to be met to a large extent by institutions that had neither permanent funding nor a permanent location. During the boom of the 2010s, this was not evident because, on the one hand, the emergence of independent

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art spaces, and the freedom and dynamism of project-based art were a breath of fresh air in the city, shaking up its comfortable art institutions; on the other hand, these art movements also facilitated the gentrification of Cluj, so the city government had every reason to support them.

But ten years later, in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, this picture is very different. Several institutions with a similar profile have moved or been forced to re-profile their activities due to rising rents (*ZUG Zone*, *Fabrica de Pensule*). The housing of young creatives and intellectuals looking for jobs in the city is increasingly under threat, and the continuing uncertainty of project-based funding is a much greater concern. The current economic downturn shows that without a stable infrastructural base, culture is merely a means of recapitalising the city, and once this is done, the precarious cultural workers and creators can go and 'revitalise' another municipality. However, this was not up to the will of individual creators: for instance, *Fabrica de Pensule* initiated a project to reimagine a nearby green area, the Parcul Feroviarilor/Vasutas park, involving the local population, aiming to create a space where the townspeople could meet. The plan ultimately failed because the local government did not provide the means for the long-term use of the park (while it did for real estate investors), and also because the form and the channels used by *Fabrica de Pensule* were only aimed at the urban middle class, university students and yuppies.

Behind the plethora of these unfortunate developments lurks an even wider spreading scepticism, and even disillusion regarding the ideas of the 'public'. This is, however, not just a feature of Cluj: in the countries of post-socialist Eastern Europe, welfare systems and the state in general are subject to popular ridicule for a reason. The most contemporary problem, the treatment of the coronavirus pandemic, reveals all existing flaws in state systems like the proverbial drawing of the veterinary horse. At first glance, one might get the impression that the ruling governments do not understand what the (modern welfare) state is for and why it exists. After all, the legitimacy of nation states is – or should be – based on protecting their citizens from vulnerability to market processes, i.e., representing the interests of workers against those of capitalists.

However, neoliberal capitalism, the prevailing economic doctrine since the 1970s, has assigned the exact opposite role to the state. The so-called 'night watchman state' or 'minimal state' is not a team player but a referee, as it guards the rules of the game against the interests of workers, to ensure the free flow of capital. This neoliberal ideology provides the main topos in the beliefs of the post-socialist transition generations: the state is a bad master, taxes are a robbery, and public institutions are a hotbed of laziness, corruption, and incompetence. The question is: where does this great distrust of the state and the public sector stem from, given that the market transition is the main cause of the disintegration of the fabric of post-socialist societies in Eastern Europe?

In search of explanations, let us examine the idea that equates the concepts of 'state' and 'public.' The state socialist experiment was based on the idea that the state is in fact *res publica*, and that the goods within the territory of the state should be the property of its citizens. In reality, however, centralised state control was in many cases another form of private property to which certain communities were denied access. This was exacerbated by the fact that the state, which was supposed to represent and defend the common cause and the common goods of all citizens, tended to maintain the cohesion of the majority against vulnerable groups of citizens over time.

The next stage in this fatal blurring of 'state' and 'public' came with the neoliberal turn, during which the countries of the Eastern European state-socialist bloc became increasingly embedded into the capitalist world economic system. The example of Hungary is emblematic in this respect: here, a group of intellectuals, mainly economists, looked to the autonomy of market processes as the solution to the fading state socialism and its discredited party apparatus. In the resulting debate, technocratic professionalism emerged as an alternative to tainted politics, and this binary opposition was reflected in the realm of culture as well.

The analysis of culture in terms of the common good is informed by a particular historical development: the emergence of socialist ideas. While the "communist invariant" had already existed in history, manifesting through slave uprisings, peasant revolts, in short, the efforts to liberate man from his unworthy and subjugated condition, the communist hypothesis materialised and became visible in modernity, starting with the French Revolution. The

various iterations of the movement (state socialism in the East, strong communist and social democratic parties in the West, and the Nordic model of the welfare state) made it a fundamental assumption – at least on a theoretical level – that education must become a prerogative of society as a whole, because it lifts man out of his intellectual minority. The universal human emancipation thus sought was seen as a political act, and its material conditions were ultimately to be secured through the transformation of property relations (the transformation of private property into public property).

However, Alain Badiou, writing on the communist hypothesis, made a distinction that will prove important for us later, when he differentiated between the emancipatory tradition of socialism/ communism and the class politics that later led to the emergence of liberal democracies.[2] The intellectual elites who took an active part in the regime changes in Eastern Europe lost confidence in this former communist tradition when they substituted morality for politics as their reference point. In Romania at least, this boiled over at the moment of the revolution of '89, which was defined by the historical conjunction of the revolution against a state socialist regime that was increasingly functioning as state capitalism, and the restoration of liberal democracy, i.e., capitalism.

The tools and ambitions of those who replaced the Ceauşescu regime sought to remedy state socialism with the very medicine that had produced the symptoms of its crisis in the first place: capitalism. The slogans propagated by the dissident intelligentsia who later took part in the regime change[3] – the universal values of freedom and humanism – were detached

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[2] "From the beginning, the communist hypothesis in no way coincided with the 'democratic' hypothesis that would lead to present-day parliamentarism. It subsumes a different history and different events. What seems important and creative when illuminated by the communist hypothesis is different in kind from what bourgeois-democratic historiography selects. That is indeed why Marx, giving materialist foundations to the first effective great sequence of the modern politics of emancipation, both took over the word 'communism' and distanced himself from any kind of democratic 'politicism' by maintaining, after the lesson of the Paris Commune, that the bourgeois state, no matter how democratic, must be destroyed." – Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, transl. David Fernbach (London – New York: Verso, 2008), 100-101.

[3] Ana Bazac, "Az antisztálinista disszidensek és a 'vox intelligent(s)iae'" [Anti-stalinist dissidents and the 'vox intelligent(s)iae'], *Eszmélet*, no. 60 (2003): 68-80.

from their emancipatory political context: freedom was articulated as the anarchy of market activity, and the right to private property. The positive concept of freedom (freedom *to*) of the communist hypothesis was replaced by the negative concept of freedom (freedom *from*) of classical liberalism.[4] Furthermore, the interpretation of universal human rights as exclusively political rights rendered the concept of social rights (the right to housing, education, free and quality health care) meaningless. In Romania, the crisis of the market economy in 2008 and during the coronavirus pandemic revealed all this with sobering clarity. It also showed how the cultural conceptions of the regime-changing intelligentsia, which turned its back on the concepts of public good and public property, led to a dead end.

It was an illusion to hope for the recovery or resurgence of culture's role in shaping society on a foundation that was either inherently sceptical of any idea of the 'public,' or only interested in maintaining pseudo-communities of different identities immune to political contestation or dissent. The ideas of universalism and emancipatory culture that permeate the new context have been transformed into their own antithesis. A typical narrative was, for example, the opposition between private culture, privatised and scaled down by the intellectual establishment, but still presented as a public affair, and mass culture, industrially produced and cheaply accessible but 'democratic' (a well-known example is the middle-class contempt for *manele*). Mass culture, imbued with the ideology of neoliberalism, has given itself to be interpreted from above as the tendency of barbarians to be barbarians, its popularity being underpinned by the laws of supply and demand (cf. the self-colonising view), not accommodating for real alternatives and access to culture.

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[4] "For the 'freedom' of the men who are alive now is the freedom of the individual isolated by the fact of property which both reifies and is itself reified. It is a freedom vis-á vis the other (no less isolated) individuals. A freedom of the egoist, of the man who cuts himself off from others, a freedom for which solidarity and community exist at best only as ineffectual 'regulative ideas'." (…) [I]n contemporary bourgeois society individual freedom can only be corrupt and corrupting because it is a case of unilateral privilege based on the unfreedom of others, this desire must entail the renunciation of individual freedom." – Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1972), 315.

This false dichotomy obscured how the turn to mass culture was partly caused by the fact that high culture claimed universality only at face level, while increasingly becoming the exclusive vehicle for the historical experience and worldview of the middle class. All other social classes remained invisible to it, except when the authors borrowed and used the voices of subaltern groups (cf. 'voice-giving'), while the latter's voice became increasingly structurally impossible to be heard. High culture has increasingly become a rear-guard struggle of intellectual elites[5] clinging to their declining class power against the movement that has been reinterpreting culture itself along the logic of private property and the market, a development which the elites have been more than willing to help set in motion. This also brings into play another opposition, in which professional art is increasingly seen as fulfilling the particular aims of the art institutional system, as opposed to the public service, which is becoming an entertainment industry. The 'commons' in this sense is at best a necessary compromise, an aesthetically inferior deviation from high art.[6]

The particularisation of the commons was accompanied by another development, the depoliticisation of politics. After '89, asking questions about economic production within the framework of politics was considered taboo. Thus, politics, which should have been mobilised for the now privatised common good, has become – and could only be – a substitute and a simulacrum. The privatisation of high culture has thus contributed to the further discrediting

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[5] The retreat and regression of high culture into the art of particularist, middle-class sensibilities can be traced in the literature of Eastern European countries dealing with the traumas of state socialism, whose authors and reception focus symptomatically on the experience of the terror in the eighties, drawing inspiration from it for the continued justification of their anti-communism.

[6] In the second half of the 2000s, some members of the audience started a petition against the management of the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj/Kolozsvár, criticising the theatre's programming policy and use of space. The debate that ensued diverted attention from the responsibility of an increasingly closed (in the spatial sense as well) artistic/intellectual elite by falsely contrasting the bourgeois and exclusive studio performances favoured by the theatre with the conservative, entertaining large-scale performances demanded by the dissatisfied. This elite has in fact discouraged a section of its audience away from the theatre by making performances both linguistically and structurally inaccessible to them, basing their prestige and aura on professional awards.

of notions of universality, the public, etc. The Hungarian counterculture of the 1970s and 1980s has been conceived in the spirit of this depoliticisation. The legitimacy of the configuration of Hungarian culture that emerged at this time (and remained dominant until the Orbán regime took the stage) came from its opposition to the official discourse of the party-state. Suffice to refer here to Péter Esterházy's *bon mot*, according to which the writer should think not in terms of the people and the nation, but in terms of subject and proposition.[7]

The form and nomenclature of this configuration, which has emerged in different ways and at different paces in different Eastern European countries, is telling: independent workshops and residential theatres, alternative bands, civic initiatives, etc., whose contemporary reincarnations and imitations are also independent and alternative. While initially the more fortunate members of the public could turn here from occupied and appropriated public spaces and institutions, the default, canon-forming spaces and institutions of the arts were increasingly structured by this provisional solution after the market transition. This has had incalculable consequences in terms of access to art: the artistic field has been relegated to the private and semi-public spheres, becoming mainly a field for the reproduction and initiation of intellectuals; it has favoured a *l'art pour l'art* logic, perpetuated the mystical authoritarianism of the master-disciple idea and distanced itself from society whilst performing a spectacular (in a Debordian sense) display of 'social sensitivity.'

After '89, public institutions, having internalised the market approach and its functioning, became its best disciples. As a result, the state has increasingly become the embodiment of the private interests that have taken it captive, in the eyes of the classes that have suffered every crisis since the change of regime. The hybrid nature of state institutions (both depositories of a market logic and bearers of the remnants of a community approach) and the systematic extraction of resources have made them more chaotic than their

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[7] Péter Esterházy, "*A szavak csodálatos életéből*" [From the Marvellous Life of Words], Digitális Irodalmi Akadémia, February 2, 2022, https://reader.dia.hu/document/Esterhazy_Peter-A_szavak_ csodalatos_eletebol-395 – The notions of 'people' and 'nation' refer to two traditions in Hungarian political history: while 'nation' is essentially linked to a bourgeois, nationalist vocabulary, 'the people' is inscribed in a plebeian-socialist matrix.

market counterparts, and this has made purely market-based models more attractive to creators in the artistic field. In what follows I will illustrate the impact of such a model on a local scale.

One of the most impactful performances of the Cluj-based independent theatre venue, Reactor, was *Miracolul de la Cluj*,[8] which tells the story of how Cluj became a real "treasure city" through the Caritas pyramid scheme, the primitive accumulation of capital. Part of the uproar was due to the municipality's refusal to allow an exhibition of the production's material in the city centre,[9] while the performance itself used a language of documentary theatre that, like investigative journalism, was accessible to only a few. In this case, the stripped-down language of documentary theatre acts a distancing from the sentimentality of cabarets, telenovelas, and the world of folk-pop music (i.e., the genre of the lower classes). A fact-centred view of the world anchors the understanding of things in individual intellectual effort, naturalising the social and historical nature of perception.[10]

If we accept that our perception of the world is not only optically filtering the information that reaches us, we will be suspicious of the depoliticised universalism that rears its head in another, also Reactor-based performance, *În sfârşit sfârşitul*.[11] The play addresses a very real social crisis, the climate apocalypse and the resulting climate anxiety, the planet-wide scale of which leaves no doubt that it is a matter of public concern. Or is it?

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[8] David Schwartz director, *Miracolul de la Cluj* by Petro Ionescu, Reactor – a place for creative experiment, Cluj, premiered on September 28, 2017.

[9] Lucia Mărneanu, Petro Ionescu, "re.miracolul", *Scena.ro – Revista de artele spectacolului*, May 14, 2021, https://revistascena.ro/arte/re-miracolul-2/.

[10] "The world which is given to the individual and which he must accept and take into account is, in its present and continuing form, a product of the activity of society as a whole (…). Even the way they see and hear is inseparable from the social life- process as it has evolved over the millennia. The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity" – Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, transl. Matthew J. O'Connell and others (New York: Continuum, 2002), 200.

[11] Diana Dragoş director, *În sfârşit sfârşitul* by Brînduşa Ban, Reactor – a place for creative experiment, Cluj, premiered on September 29, 2020.

The performance takes us through the dilemmas of young urban twenty- or thirty-somethings, finding the root of their troubles in the human psyche, in general selfishness, thus trapping the characters in themselves. The *didaxis* is finally represented on stage by no less a figure than Gaia, who, as an embodiment of the neoliberal appropriation of natural religions and syncretic mythological elements (cf. James Cameron's *Avatar*), paralyses those capable of reflection, hammering into them a devastating sense of guilt. This guilt, felt by both the characters and the spectators, knows only the categories of universal selfishness and individual responsibility, which makes it impossible for people to connect with each other, to allow for dissent and mistakes, to act together politically. The trope of guilt thus serves both to make the intellectuals and the middle class acknowledge their responsibility and to shift it from the political to the moral sphere, immediately transforming it into a universal human responsibility.

In order to regain the credibility of the commons, we must first dismantle the illusions that ensure the non-ideological, universal and neutral character of contemporary art forms and means of expression, i.e., we must re-politicise art forms. The immanent analysis of the content of art must be supplemented by an interpretation of art forms as social constructs, because the content-generating capacity of a given form does not merely function as a system that channels the artistic tradition or individual creative abilities, but also reveals a social subconscious.

In this struggle we can seek inspiration from resurging theories, like that of the 'commons', and from the practical approaches of the municipalist tradition. While the former helps us with a historical contextualisation of the ever-reconfiguring matrix made up by class, race and gender (for a wider anthropological analysis see e.g. the work of Donald M. Nonini, while David Harvey mobilizes the tools of geography and urban planning in the struggle for emancipation), the latter addresses the issue from the perspective of working practical models (see the Kurdish municipalist approach or Barcelona en Comú).[12] In Cluj, both are necessary, as capitalist development is inherently

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[12] David Harvey, *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London – New York: Verso, 2012).

based on sets of exclusion (racial segregation of urban spaces in a very affluent city, highly ethnicised townscape erasing the presence of non-dominant communities, class-based access to newly built, mostly private infrastructure, and a car centred approach to urban transportation and development which prohibits and/or regulates access of non-productive citizens).

In this context we urgently need to expand our understanding of art, questioning the paradigm of the author as a singular producer and a lonely romantic genius. As a collective creation, art is akin to both pedagogy and play, capable of mediating different conflicts as well. In this respect, the conjunction of Greek theatre with the ancient polis is as good a model for our imagination as the Proletcult movement in the revolutionary era of the Soviet Union. Instead making individual creators dependent of state- or market-funded scholarships and grants, we need collectives of creators who, as organic intellectuals (in Gramscian terms) are by definition the organisers of communities. Pruning emancipatory theories of urban space out of social sciences and grafting them into the realm of arts would ultimately unleash the very social imagination that is currently shackled by the inconceivability of existing alternatives. The advocated symbiosis of artist and community is the only solution to the cynical parnassianism of the bourgeois intelligentsia and the desperate rightward shift of local intellectuals, abandoned by the state in the long period of post-socialist transition. Only this can revitalise the claim to universalism they claim to represent.

Since the nation-state, the last historical form of political community, has sided with capital, the space and time necessary to re-politicise art must be re-established. The way to establish time is through an exploration of the progressive traditions of the past, revealing the communist invariant they contain. To use Walter Benjamin's expression, we need to shelter our dead from fascism, which, with its absolute presentism, builds every alternative into the fabric of the existing system.[13] The creation of space can be assisted

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[13] "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was '(Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its

by municipalist models[14] that, unlike nation states, no longer connect imagined communities through ideological state apparatuses, but in which art makes available and accessible to community members all the means through which *poiesis*, the human capacity to create and transform the world, can manifest itself.

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receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it." – Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in Selected Writings. Volume 4. 1938-1940, transl. Edmund Jephcott and Others (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 389-401.

[14] Murray Bookchin, "*Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview*", The Anarchist Library, February 3, 2022, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-libertarian-municipalism-an-overview.

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