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Europe and its „accursed“ share

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„You want a better world, but the better world are we“

Abstract:

In the middle eighties (before the '89 revolution) one of the Romanian intellectuals ended up in the postmodern liberal capitalist country of Austria – more concretely in an Austrian mall. His greatest shock was not related to the abundance of goods and needs, but rather to the gift of free plastic bags. At that time, in Romania, the plastic bag (*le petit objet a roumain*) was very hard to come by. Of course, gifted with commodity-form par excellence, namely the plastic bag, in the mind of the Romanian intellectual just one logical choice appeared, to get as many of those possible. Asked by the cashier of his nationality, my fellow conational ironically answered: Bulgarian. This little true story gives us, *in nuce*, the constitutive elements of the complex rapport between the Eastern and the Western Europe, *le point du capiton* being in this case the fetishism of the commodity-form. The hegelian distance between this concept and its realization being played along the limits of the again fetishized border, between the East and the West, that cuts (and pastes) Europe in half. Seen from across the ocean(s) Europe may appear as a united and unitary political, cultural and economical entity (beyond its heterogeneous constituency), but in fact since the great schism from 1054 the old continent stands in division with itself. There are a great number of ways in which this border is articulated, namely politically, economically, cultural and through different discursive configurations and practices. We are concerned here with the critique of the border-fetish our aim being the lucid deconstruction and analysis of this concept through the lens of the political economy of the East/West separation-fetish. We are of course guided here by the rigours of the rational deliberation upon the European structures, but also by the evil genius of ironic humour regarding the self-cunning rationality of Europe, that repeatedly fails to realize the Freudian goal of the *wo es war, soll Ich werden*. The West and the „accursed“ East remain divided, although their various entanglements keep them in never-ending tension and complicity.

Key words: transition, the fetish of commodity-form, East/West separation

Introduction

The aims of our presentation are organised around the problem of the European division between its Eastern and Western side. Through the lens of the critique of the fetishism of commodity-form and a few alternative perspectives upon the process of transition, we hope to re-question this European segregation. Using critical (Marxist) theory of value, lacano-zizekian considerations on the theory of the subject and few relevant case-studies we hope we come about an original and interesting result

concerning this issue of Europe and its „accursed” share. The concept of accursed share is of Bataillean descent and refers to the suppressed (counter)-part of a totality/object, which haunts it’s „better” half, stopping it to reach a full self-identity.

The fetishism of the commodity-form

Once upon a time, in the middle eighties (so before the ’89 revolution) one of the Romanian intellectuals ended up in the postmodern liberal capitalist country of Austria – more concretely in an Austrian mall. His greatest shock was not related to the abundance of goods and needs, but rather to the gift of free plastic bags. At that time, in Romania, the plastic bag (*le petit objet a roumain*) was very hard to come by. Of course, gifted with commodity-form par excellence, namely the plastic bag, in the mind of the Romanian intellectual just one logical choice appeared, to get as many of those possible. So, my fellow conational filled his shopping cart with as many plastic bags as possible. The cashier surprised by his shopping choice asked him about his nationality. My fellow conational ironically answered: Bulgarian. This little true story gives us, *in nuce*, the constitutive elements of the complex rapport between the Eastern and the Western Europe, *le point du capiton* being in this case the fetishism of the commodity-form. The hegelian distance between this concept and its realization being played along the limits of the again fetishized border, between the East and the West, that cuts (and pastes) Europe in half.

Before we could go any further with the analysis of the rapport between the Eastern and the Western Europe from the perspective of the articulations pertaining to the fetishism of the commodity-form, a few necessary clarifications regarding this complex concept are required. To depict its contradictions, subtleties and entanglements one must take a theoretical moment to separate it into its presupposed constitutive elements, namely: fetishism, commodity, commodity-form, (value) form. Not incidentally, fetishism became a central element not only in the Marxist critique of capitalist political economy, but pertained also to the domain of the psychoanalysis, being introduced there by Freud in relation to his theory of the dream interpretation. Although apparently no correlation can be established between political economy and psychoanalysis (being give the major heterogeneity that exists between the two),

Slavoj Zizek argues that in fact we have there the same symptomatology of the fetishism-process, which is at play in two different places:

„There is a fundamental homology between the interpretative procedure of Marx and Freud – more precisely, between their analysis of commodity and of dreams. In both cases the point is to avoid the properly fetishist fascination of the content supposedly hidden behind the form: the secret to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form, but on the contrary, *the secret of this form itself*“¹.

What is always fetishized is some sort of form (the true and only product of the dream and the capitalist mode of production) and not some hidden content (the plastic bag and not the variety of goods that can fill it). The secret is not behind the commodity form (as the entire cohort of classical economist believed), but in this form itself – and this is truly a revolutionary Marxian perspective. It is worthy here to recall this in his exact words: „Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly it arises from this form itself“². One of the forms of appearance of this type of fetishism being the reification of the relations between people and the subsequent personification of things. In this sense commodities acquire human proprieties, being endowed with agency and goals, and the relations between people are reified, materialized in the sense that they are realized *through* things, and not *for* things –

„this is precisely what gives production relations among people a "materialized," "reified" form and gives birth to commodity fetishism, the confusion between the material-technical and the social-economic aspect of the production process, a confusion which was removed by the new sociological method of Marx“³.

The complexities of the Marxist theory of value and the fetishism of the commodity overwhelm our limited space here, but we think we offered some general outlines of it in the discussion above. For now they meet our required framework for the intentions of this presentation. We shall stop here with these theoretical considerations. Let us now introduce here a case study that provides us with a better understanding of the concepts presented above. The fact that fascination with commodities is in fact just the superficial manifestation of a more real fascination with the form-commodity has many theoretical and practical faces, but when it comes to the Eastern Europe we are dealing with a very particular fascination for the form of commodity, translated in a

¹ Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Ed. Verso, London/NewYork 1989, p. 11

² Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, Ed. Penguin Classics, London 1990, p. 164

³ Isaac I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, Chapter 3: Reification of production realition among people and personification of things, <http://marxists.org/archive/rubin/value/ch03.htm>

fascination with etiquettes (brand tags) that works against the eastern consumers. In the Romanian press transpired recently a scandal generated by the findings of a western based study dealing with the quality of some products designed only for eastern consumption. The names of the important firms that fell under the scrutiny and accusation are not important here, but the truth uncovered by this scandal is, apparently, that big companies that distribute their products all over the world, have a much lower standard of quality of production when it comes to the commodities they distribute in Eastern Europe, but also some parts of Asia, India, Africa, etc... In this case, the fascination with the commodity form takes a very radical turn, in the sense that (in some cases) the only thing that the East-European consumers get is a mere brand etiquette, which justifies the price, but not the quality. We are bombarded with various types of contentless (empty) forms that are consumed in virtue of the western mirage that tags along with them. In the light of this case-study, we can say that the East-Europeans are in the eyes of the West the economical and political distant and poor relatives that only get second-hand treatment; on a more radical interpretation one could argue that, in fact, the Eastern-Europeans are the true lords of the Old Continent being interested only in forms and etiquettes. The old western snobbism is fulfilled (paradoxically) by the East, where etiquettes are all there is to it. This is just one of the different paradoxes that are issued by the complicated rapports between the East and the West. As a closing remark on this subject, we want to recall a particular sixties episode, namely the apparition of Roland Barthes's book – *The empire of the signs*. The French author, after a rewarding journey in Asia (Japan), comes home with the thesis of the Asian (Far East) fascination with forms and rituals, „the form being always empty“⁴. In this sense is quite a surprise that this homeland formalism has gone unnoticed.

The eternal transition over the border complex

But what is the signification of this Eastern hunger for form and what does that do for Europe itself? In 1989, when the Communist block collapsed under the force of the revolution waves, the West was already beyond the illusion of the capitalist consumerism. The critics of this type of society have already become well spread and acknowledged. After Adorno's critique of culture industry, Deleuze and Guattary's

⁴ Roland Barthes, *The empire of signs*, Ed. Hill and Wang, The Noonday Press, New York 1989, p. 66

Capitalism and schizophrenia, Debord's critique of the society of spectacle, Baudrillard's critique of the society of consumption and the social dissemination of critical theory nothing appeared to fool the Western rationality. But with all this taken into account and against it, the neo-liberal economical and political practices, which were in full speed in the West at that time and have already acquired hegemony, depriving of voice any other alternative. The European soul (values, beliefs, rights, etc...) were sold to the devil in exchange for economical efficacy. Nobody believed anymore in the empty forms that the West circulated and consumed, from the loss of meaning and practice of the formal rights of bourgeois democracy to the metaphysics of everyday commodities. But then came the east, with its hunger for the Western forms, values and way of life, unsuspecting the lack of reality of those wishes. When Western Europe stopped believing its myths, Eastern Europe started to do so. And the paradoxical move that was instituted (sold by the Eastern neo-conservatives to the people) consisted in the unquestionable process of adopting the western political and economic measures, which in the end destroy exactly those values that the East was so hungry for. The Old Welfare state that cultivated the European care for human rights, education, freedom of speech, etc. was already in the process of disintegration, when the East started its transition towards it. All there was left was a disenchanted cynical western attitude trapped in a capitalist political economy that was played above everyone's heads. But the empty place of believers was soon occupied by the new democratic states of the ex-communist block. But the oddities don't stop here, if we take into account that since then, the Eastern states strive to survive the transition-process that should take them into the acclaimed but inexistent Europe. In a more radical pose we can say that the East is the paranormal activity of the West, or the life after death on the European values.

Because the transition process is a key element of our analysis of the border fetish, we shall present here a few observations regarding its paradoxes. The constitutive paradox of post-communist transition can be deployed along the many sides of this phenomenon. On the one hand, the Eastern European countries broke with their recent past not only by condemning it morally as 'criminal and illegitimate', but also as deeming it simply 'unnatural': half of a century of actually existing socialism was thus to be explained as an unexplainable experiment in mass delusion, as a long and persistent lapse of social reason. The explanation of this continued unreasonableness

was ultimately found and happily externalized in the Soviet occupation or domination. On the other hand, the proof of the natural thrust of the Eastern European peoples for modern liberal democracy was to be found in their own past, in the political regimes that ruled these countries before the World War II. The fact that these presumably idyllic regimes were far from modern, even further from liberal, and clearly non-democratic was somehow lost – what mattered was, most of all, to construct a democratic continuum by means of bracketing the recent communist decades. A second aspect of the paradox of post-communist transition has to do with the problem of agency. On the one hand, the transition to a form of modern liberal democracy was presumably meant to re-empower the civil society and simultaneously to thin down the central state. However, the operator of this transfer of power from the state to civil society – as it became already obvious in the immediate aftermath of the fall of communism – was to be none other than the state, under the expert guidance of the international institutions. The road to be taken and the way to get there (liberal democracy, and structural adjustments respectively) have been established even before any popular consultation had taken place. The population was thus politely invited to step back and patiently wait as the political stage was prepared for its grandiose entry. Ironically, the post-communist transition was thus repeating the painful paradox of its communist predecessor: the state as the sole political agent which operates in the name and for the sake of the very society which, for transitory reasons, it has to marginalize for the time being. A third paradox has to do with the teleological, or even theological structure of political transition. An aspect in which the post-communist transition repeats, again, the ideology of the communist epoch: the luminous end point which justifies the painful path towards it. In the same way in which the systematic oppression and grey reality of the communist regimes was justified by appealing to the future classless society, in a similar way the pains of transition (the growing unemployment, the raising prices, the stagnant wages, the falling currency, the deepening social insecurity etc.) were justified by the sparkling light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. With the advent of the economic crises and the new austerity measures unleashed in Eastern Europe, the light at the end of the tunnel of transition has once again proved to be the train coming from the opposite direction. From this contemporary perspective, the post-communist transition, just like its communist predecessor, and probably just like any teleological political

construction, has all the characteristics of an endless transition in which the means gradually erase the promised end.

But there is another side of transition that deserves mentioning, the fact that the collective political Eastern subject that overthrew the totalitarian regimes (that succeeded there where all the powers of the Occident have failed), was immediately turned, over night in a political child that needs supervision and guidance from the West. According to Boris Buden's thesis this happened because that the people „who won the revolution must now learn to enjoy it“⁵. Moreover, the West has already sold to the East the tale that the revolution's dream is a full grown reality on the better side of the Berlin wall. Moreover, the political figure of the children of communism has turned into the never yet mature political figure of the children of post-communism.

„It could not be worse: not only are the protagonists of the democratic revolution robbed by their victory and made losers; at the same time, they have been put under the tutelage and doomed blindly to imitate their guardians in the silly belief that this will educate them for autonomy“⁶.

Twenty years later from the wave of revolutions, The Eastern countries are still unable to make the final transition of maturity towards the West - the border is still there, even if the Wall has fallen. The existence of this impossible, but very real and elusive border is the logical consequence of this separation (the specific wound of Europe that can't heal) in the European continent. The question of the geographical situation of this line was raised many times and on a general consensus has come to be placed at the limits of the ex-communist Block, in the Balkans. In fact, the border problem can't be placed or solved so easily, if we take into consideration that the line is not only a cut in a political, cultural or economical reality, but also in a way of European self-defining attitude. Moreover, the best way to grasp the spirit of this attitude is through the analysis of the suppressed objects that haunt it, in the sense that they resist any discursive symbolization/integration into the discourse of hegemony. The border and the East are mere externalized European denegated contradictions, that are always displaced more to the south-east depending on the place of enunciation, „les Balkans sont toujours ailleurs, toujours un peu plus au sud-est...“⁷.

⁵ Boris Buden, *Children of Postcommunism*, in *Radical Philosophy*, nr. 159 of January/February 2010, p. 17

⁶ Boris Buden, *Children of Postcommunism*, in *Radical Philosophy*, nr. 159 of January/February 2010, p. 22

⁷ Slavoj Zizek, *Fragile absolu*, Ed. Flammarion, Paris 2008, p. 12

One of the consequences of this European division is the latent (but real) racism that it entails. Eastern Europe is the place, where all multiculturalists come to put at ease a racist and condescending European attitude through an honest, but personal tolerant attitude.

If we could put Europe on a psychoanalyst couch, just for the curiosity regarding some possible findings then a discussion will flow along the next lines. Europe appears to display schizophrenic symptoms, being unable to integrate its other half in the hegemonic rational discourse about itself. If we take the risky theoretical path, and analyse Europe as a complex form of the subject, then the best framework for understanding its reasons and structuring is the Lacanian theory, via Žižek's interpretations:

„the subject itself is nothing but the failure of symbolization, of its own symbolic representation – the subject is nothing beyond this failure, it emerges through this failure, and the *objet petit a* is merely a positivization/embodiment of this failure“⁸.

In this sense Europe not only is unable to surpass its internal division, but is constituted by exactly this failure, and so the European object of desire is not erasing the line, but thickening it through the medium of particular transitory bodies for it: the Balkans, the communist Russia. The East is still there because the West wants/conjures it there. The only way the Western World can enjoy (in the sense of *jouissance*) the un-enjoyable self-situation of capitalist political economy is through the detour of the East that is the delegated subject supposed to enjoy (in a Lacanian terminology) this new reality of the neoliberal capitalist democracy. In a filmed interview with Slavoj Žižek, which took place on a bridge in Ljubljana, the Slovenian author explained: This bridge is the limit that separates the Eastern Europe from the Western one; on one side (the Western) women are beaten but they don't like it, and on the other side (the Eastern) they are beaten, but they like it. Of course, the woman and the beating don't have a literal sense, but a metaphorical one that points exactly at what we were saying above. What we are trying to prove is the fact, that the border that cuts Europe in half doesn't have only a political, cultural and economical relevance, but also says something about the (discursive) rationality and the historical reasoning that structures and defines this complexity that is Europe. Our thesis is that

⁸ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality*, Ed. Verso, London/New York 2000, p. 119-120

we should re-base our consideration about inter-European multiculturalism starting from this structural bias, that can't be overcome by shallow and empty discourses or misread social-realities. Failing to do so will lead us to the Merkelian affirmation about the death of multiculturalism⁹, which in truth and reality was never realized.

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⁹ Conf. : <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/oct/17/angela-merkel-germany-multiculturalism-failures>