

Student control in Croatia

In the twenty years since the nationalist takeover of state power in Croatia, the idea of collective good, beyond its mandatory and narrow identification with the nation, has been absent from public discourse. In those rare moments when it appeared on the margins of public life, evoking the economic aspects of the collective, the state and media were successful in containing it, narrowing it down, rephrasing it ideologically, and preventing it from spreading in undesired forms. For the previous forty-five years, Croatian citizens had enjoyed the benefits of free education and health care. Even the most efficient ideological engine, the liberal parliamentary capitalist one, could not erase that overnight. As less and less remained in the carcasses of industries to be ripped apart and stolen from the people (in Yugoslavian socialism, they were formally owned by the people, not the state), the capitalist vultures turned to one of the remaining mainstays of the 45-year socialist project: free education and health. Their problem this time was that they found a formidable opponent. The privatization of education has been introduced gradually – most likely in the hope that no one would notice. Not this time.

Two large student occupations at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, one in spring 2009 (lasting for thirty-five days) and one in the autumn (lasting for fourteen days), were executed through a series of strategic moves: openness, discipline, refusal of negotiations; statements by different anonymous students making personalized attacks by the state and media impossible; utilizing links and support for rebelling workers and peasants; distribution of a seventy-page ‘Occupation Cookbook’ and Workers-Peasants FAQs, printed and distributed to occupied factories. Through all this, and the simple yet powerful demand ‘free publicly financed education at all levels, available to all’, the students have stunned the state-capitalist machinery, pushing it onto the back foot. Consequently it has been forced to defend and in many cases publicly discuss what has thus far been a standard process of Croatian political-economic life: uncritical implementation of the worst aspects of the neoliberal doctrine. This was by no means the usual ‘we don’t like neoliberal educational reforms’ chant

from the Left, supplanted by student activism, but a constantly theorized and developed, coordinated attack on the ideological foundations of capitalism in Croatia and its parliamentary undemocratic form, through which the enormous amount of socially distributed wealth produced in Croatia under socialism has been either destroyed or stolen under the guise of ‘dysfunctionality’.

Unusually, only regular classes were blocked – the administration, the library, the bookshop and other facilities within the faculty building were allowed to function as usual. Plenums at which all decisions were made concerning the functioning of the occupied faculty were open to participation and voting to everyone who turned up, not just to students. These were directly democratic: delegates could be elected to ‘communicate the decisions and the will of the plenum, as well as pass back offers and questions to be considered by the plenum’. But ‘the plenum cannot at any time elect a representative who can make decisions or agree to certain terms on his/her own.’

Viktor Ivančić, co-founder of *Feral*, the long-standing and best critical political journal of the past twenty years, and the sharpest political commentator, put it succinctly:

Depersonalizing their public appearances, organizing student plenums (plenary open to all citizens) daily, rejecting selecting of the delegates or charismatic leaders, refusing negotiation scuffles and tradings, girls and boys from the Faculty of Philosophy have unmasked the lie of so-called representative democracy, which, after passing through party and inter-party machines, appears as an authoritarian model. (April 2009, <http://bit.ly/b0pUBW>)

Ivančić’s thinking cuts to the bone: not only have the students demonstrated, for almost a year, the possibility of a new model of participatory, inclusive *direct democracy in practice*, but they keep showing the extent to which the capitalist parliamentary model is corrupt, undemocratic, and directly against the interests of all but a tiny minority. A central argument the students bring to the fore, which challenges the core tenet – financial independence based on managing its

own resources – of the nationalist state project, is that by entering the EU the national state is signing away a wide range of rights and benefits that the vast majority of citizens had in abundance under (international) Yugoslav socialism.

Financial violence

This is a scenario that was a significant factor in the break-up of Yugoslavia, and in the social disorder and wars in other states subject to neoliberal violence: physical violence is preceded by financial violence. The conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) upon Yugoslavia in the early 1980s in order that it pay back its debt gave rise to nationalist groups, and eventually assisted them in claiming their stake on power, transforming their nationalism opportunistically into an anti-socialist project. The Yugoslav state was unable to withstand financial violence: it fell apart in the war led by nationalists seizing the moment of crisis, exploiting the long period in which citizens had to queue for basic foods like milk and bread, resulting from the Yugoslav leadership's failure to defend the country from IMF pressure. In the early years of the new century, after a decade of systemic destruction and theft of the state economy by the Croatian government and its criminal accomplices, Croatia sold off its entire banking system, earning the praise of the EU for 'liberalizing' over 94 per cent of the financial sector. Croatia thus repeated the Yugoslav socialists' mistake from the 1980s: failing to defend itself from imperialist financial attacks, it thereby narrowed the possibilities for state intervention in a time of crisis.

The rosy picture that neoliberal revolutionaries have painted for the past thirty years, which directly and violently shaped the fortunes of both Yugoslavia and Croatia, has perished with the financial crashes of 2008. The logic is almost painfully simple: had not the state intervened in the markets with huge amounts of money, effectively nationalizing large parts of the financial sector, it would have collapsed.

Although the decisions made by Rohatinski, the governor of Croatia's National Bank, can be seen as proof that the Croatian state still has mechanisms of internal economic protection from external financial upheaval, the worst economically is yet to come for Croatia. A recent report compiled by the Austrian National Bank paints a depressing picture of rapidly growing debt and declining production. Croatian foreign debt was around €10 billion in 2000; at the end of 2009 it was over €42 billion, close to 100 per cent of GDP. Between 1993 and 2002, around 75 per cent of foreign investment was related to privatization

projects, mainly in the banking, telecommunications and pharmaceuticals sectors. In other words, it was not investment, but a sell-off of massively undervalued assets built up during socialism.

This history of financial violence, imposed from outside, but accepted and executed internally, is the story of a repeated mistake – the 1980s in Yugoslavia, the 2000s in Croatia – with no lessons learnt by the ruling political elite, so far. The student occupations in Croatia speak up against this violence, against neoliberalism, imperialism and capitalism, and for new egalitarian political projects, based not on twentieth-century militaristic hierarchical and representative models (the political party, parliament, the unions), but on directly democratic models of political organization, starting in the workplace.

Few peoples of the world have more to say on this topic, having witnessed its failure and learnt from it, than the people of ex-Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia's self-management was a bold yet failed effort whose theoretical re-evaluation is overdue. The technologies for self-management and direct democracy did not exist at the time to make such a participative model efficient, or open, or transparent, or accountable to its egalitarian political subjects and to society at large. The actions of Croatian students show that the means of communication and organization (as well as the means of production of discourses and organizations) we have at our disposal today allow for a new, directly democratic set of organizational structures and processes – blogs, email lists, plenary sessions, working groups, all used without representative bodies. However, for their utilization to be effective, many strategic political decisions, informed by the application of theory to the concrete situation in which intervention occurs, have to be made, and, most importantly, carried out with discipline.

Not only do rebelling Croatian students deserve our unconditional support and comradely critique; it will be a missed opportunity for the left anti-capitalist struggle if their work is not assisted, studied and reapplied appropriately to other contexts. One of the founding approaches of many martial-arts disciplines is that a force directed against us is often best not confronted frontally, but better undermined by being contained and redirected against political enemies. Badiou, Negri and Žižek insist that the idea of communism needs to be thought anew, outside of the worn-out forms of the party and unions. Students in Croatia have demonstrated how it ought to be: bold, directly democratic and strategically open.

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