

**Whispering so radically: Croatian Cultural Studies  
and Liminal University**

by

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*"You are the Borat of this conference! :-)"*

*(A CSN conference participant to the A.P.)*

(YET ANOTHER) DIFFICULT CONJUNCTURE

Almost seventeen years after the act of independence and over a decade after the war in Croatia, questions can be made about the real impact of transitional state (and of adjunct identity politics) on the collective spirit of solidarity and change such optimistically depicted by Turner's *communitas* (Turner, 1969), and by our very field as *transformational power* or even (as Raymond Williams would say) *the long revolution*. While predicting some difficult and gloomy answers to these questions, we have to rethink the true meaning of that evermore present hybrid mental structure of "old-new" that ruptured the newly established narrations of independence through the permanent and subversive work of nostalgia and nationalism interwoven with apparently bright-future-oriented and publicly promoted political metaphors of the "European integration". Instead of enjoying the possible creative spillovers of such hybridization processes, Croatian humanities and social sciences quickly and obediently entrenched in paradoxical

divisions: Croatian studies and national historiography versus philosophy and social studies. Ideological break was (and still is) visible not only in research agenda and grant distribution, but also in public rhetoric or activities of faculties and departments. These processes are mostly related to the central institutions of higher education such as four traditional public universities (in Zagreb, Rijeka, Split and Osijek) and to the several national research institutes (including those established or transformed by the nationalist regime in the nineties in order to produce purified national narrations).

However, due to improved accessibility of information and of newly discovered market possibilities in education some "new" disciplines raised on the margins of traditional Croatian disciplinary mapping. Critical cultural studies, present at Croatian universities for decades hidden under form of Central-European Kulturwissenschaft, mostly as a more or less profound knowledge of Frankfurt school and other continental schools of cultural analysis, entered, under somewhat dusty Birmingham-style umbrella, in to a fragile equilibrium of force with ideological matrix of old disciplines, but also of practice-oriented vocational education. (Education that, in fact, depends on many inherent notions and concepts utterly questionable when read in a traditional «Birmingham» key, and even more questionable when exposed to radicalised optics of virtue ethics.) Curricular reforms and innovations included transformation of previously existed programmes (typical example would be postgraduate module in cultural studies at Department of Comparative Literature, University of Zagreb) and/or formation of various new programmes (i.e. full BA and MA cultural studies major and independent department at University of Rijeka, department and

programme of "culture and tourism" at University of Zadar, gradual development of media studies both in Rijeka and Split).

All these developments created new conditions of emergence for a broader cross-disciplinary education and research within (or in-between) Croatian social sciences and humanities. Still, the traditional organisational framework provided by old faculties of arts and sciences, called locally "philosophical faculties" (Kantian nostalgia implied!) produced many intramural dilemmas, breakdowns and interdepartmental wars. The so-called Bologna reform, European University Area process of unification and standardization of educational structures and practices, promoted forcefully by the Croatian political elite, only partially covered these deep imbalances within old state-owned or public institutions. Not-so-hidden agenda of transforming old bastions of humanities in somewhat enterprise ventures by the means of financial restrictions (i.e. strong limitations in publicly funded tenured posts and research fellowships) quickly followed. New cross-disciplinary environment has been moved towards the wastelands of unpredictable market (at least in theory, but with several palpable consequences: enrolment figures pushed out of proportion and curriculum being constantly "upgraded" in most pragmatic sense of the term). New and shiny curricula, positioned, ideally, on the very margins of the old departments and disciplines such as "Croatian language and literature", "Sociology" or "Comparative literature" was, thus, ideologically mainstreamed by the forces of enterprise university. On the other hand, the self-decided scholarly marginalisation of the new and propulsive academic fields in terms of research agenda, produced (and is still producing) various problems in relations to the old power structures embodied in traditionally formed and highly influential research

councils and boards of higher education, both with regulatory and supervising powers.

All this troubles notwithstanding, some academic collectives have seen that paradoxical unity of primitive entrepreneurship and scholarly marginalisation as a chance of observing and dissolving their own bonds and ties with the forces of centrality/disciplinarity with final second-order slip into the fundamental transgression of scholarly and educational freedom. But, the liminal realm of University (and that same metaphor of liminality is very much true for the cultural studies in general) is not only a chaotic/creative flux of darkness in-between disciplinary identities but, also, the prolonged state of repeated transgression or second-order observing of/on the very extremes of centrality that was subjected to the marginalisation and transgression in the first place – sort of revisiting your abuser (*Stockholm syndrome* included!). So, instead of the real impact on method and analysis, transgressions and inherent hybridity of the new zones within Croatian university produced mostly only mythical or even mystical narratives of educational liberation and grand-opening – the virtual "other side" in overdetermination of research and education oriented collectives' transgressive choices and cognitive shifts. The utopian and superficially ideological character of such narrative structures, including its impacts on everyday undergraduate pedagogy (cultstud preaching!), should be discussed. In the meantime, the juxtaposed and rival poles of centralisation remain ready to attract with their own magnetic fields the academic subject presently enjoying the contingent liberties of the self-proclaimed liminal zone.

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To be able to engage in the ultimate utopian mythopoetics (i.e., for cultural studies, the building of the mythology of multifaceted analytical and/or political engagement in the issues of everyday culture) means to invoke the liberty of acting freely (transgressing) upon marginal insights and positions. Moreover, the very question of difficult liberty for post-post-modern Croatian social sciences and humanities bound in fragmentation and capillary structures of power and capital brings us to the less popular discussion within virtue ethics. Is the acting (or transgressing) possible at all? Who is the subject ready to act? What kind of liberated spirit can overcome the umbrella of ideological overdetermination and spectacle? Within realms of extreme liminality consisting (at least in old-school Turnerian terms) in blurred rationality or even mysticism, this applies apparently only to saints or schizophrenics (first ones, apparently, most tragically excluded from Croatian cultural studies establishment, latter maybe just slightly disempowered and underrepresented). Is it, after all, possible to shift between poles of centrality, between narrated flags of educational ideology, with greater amount of relative autonomy while staying at the difficult task of preserving western Cartesian rationalism and bourgeois pragmatic rationality? Yes, strangely enough, it should be possible. Discussing ethical foundations of University always had much to do with glorious dreams of assuring such relative autonomy of thinking/acting.

University subjects and entities at home with some order or capillary power (constructed, weakly structured, decentred, fragmented and heavily overdetermined), subjects or identities for that matter, are, certainly, being toys in the almighty hands of discursive and cultural dispositions. Liminalist model offers a possibility for that empty, anti-humanist, anti-metaphysical subject a necessary conceptual moving

space, open by fundamentality of "The Incomplete" – i.e. of the essential role that the "no man's land" plays in meaning formation. Research and educational entities can and should act by the power of free will and by higher ethical standards, no matter if that very act is driven by some other pole of centrality or ideological umbrella. University has to provide basic tools for such partial, contingent and relative, but necessary step-out. Cultural studies in Croatia needs to feed utopias of free learning while admitting that such learning itself is easily corrupted by the enemy forces of market and by other forms of non-negotiable hegemony.

However, one should ask, what would be the underlying force of those educational utopias? The imported game of multicultural mechanics? Imposed westernised democracy? Is it only an obvious reification of contemporary globalized net of power relations and futile culture wars imposed by corporate capitalism, a malignant exemplification of Debordian spectacle or Baudrillardian simulacrum? What if Nietzsche in his famous depicting of superficial "journalistic culture" (Nietzsche, 1872) writes about us, about cross-disciplinary efforts marketing most diverse fragments of knowledge in charming little packages, funded by state and by private money, ensuring false, domesticated liminal zones needed for the balancing and preserving of already existing power structures? As one late Croatian philosopher once said: "In their interdisciplinary folkdance, disciplines are performing a dance macabre around the extinguish fire of University!" (Despot, 1991, p. 15)

Most informed and sound authors in our field admitted in various contributions to the on-going cultural studies debate that the very anti-discipline of cultural studies is, among other things, "(...) a product of the hyper-fluid economy and culture of contemporary global markets."

(During, 2005, p.11), being, in spite of its critical and "revolutionary" standing, beneficiary of the market-oriented cultural politics of the University. The position within Enterprise University put some serious ethical burden on the notoriously weak methodological grounds of recent curriculum building activities in cultural studies.

Of course, the very same administrative scissors standing for capital are also attacking other institutionalized parts of humanities and social sciences. Attack includes forced amalgamations, bizarre and shameful employment-oriented modules with take-away and fast food kind of educational offering. New programmes are being formed in order to sell some traditional knowledge "under counter". Philosophy departments are already openly educating future PR-s, while the elite schools of Divinity publish on-line booklets depicting the exciting possibilities in corporative realm, in media and in show business for the future theologians. The Cultural studies departments, self-proclaimed homes of critical humanities, are already enrolling and nurturing the masses of future bureaucrats and servants of globalized capital. This facts, along with close reading of several important documents on European university area (including those implemented in Croatian higher education reform), bring us to the conclusions similar to those nicely put by Teresa L. Ebert over a decade ago: "Representing the marginalization of the critique-al humanities as a progressive act has become part of the new conservative populism on campus. It is the new "truth" of the postnational academy because "it works," and "it works" because it "brings in the money." (Ebert, 1997, p. 2-3)

This gloomy vision became true for the new, marginal and liminal zones of Croatian humanities. However, this is not the only problem. Even

when protected from the more direct enterprise pressures and structure/framework-related subversions, many professors, research fellows and students of our departments are still undergoing various complex rituals of public support of so called Cultural state, most interestingly described by Marc Fumaroli as a modern religion (Fumaroli, 1991). This means to serve cultural sectors and to produce contents not only mediatized, spectacular or marketed, but also related to the glorification of spectre/ghost of "Culture" administrated by State in various self-explanatory and self-sufficient forms, all supporting or articulating such discursive formations as national, ethnic, central. On the other hand, liberal multiculturalism does not help – on a contrary! For the critical core of our discipline it has to be revealed as a mimicry of the most unjust and asymmetric consensus over the foundations of the new world order. Thus, from the ethical point of view (and in regards to the self-proclaimed ideological foundations of critical studies of culture) departments of humanities and social studies – including those of cultural studies – in fact present a domesticated and falsely radical academic and institutional effort. Croatia, once again, makes no exception.

#### NO CONCLUSION: (INTER)ACTION PLAN

Various voices of counter-hegemonic struggle and call of the multiculturalists for diversity and social justice gradually became a constitutive part of the *new world order* rhetoric, along with intense use of such hideous and paradoxical terminological inventions like «(neo)liberal democracy», «civil society», «free market», «sustainable development» etc. A move towards mainstreaming of these (previously oppositional)

agendas had some (un)expected benefactors – mostly the multinational corporations and selected elitist lobbies. Intrusion of market-oriented standards of financing and human resources management has perverted not only the teaching methods and institutional excellence, but the very (relative) freedom of public education. Situation is even more complicated and fragile among societies and cultures like Croatian, in transition from traditional totalitarian power structures and related cultural policy, towards neo-colonial condition of small-scale players in the broad world of capital along with sterile cultural relativism and forced mechanics of multiculturalism from above (i.e. ridiculous and essentialist juxtaposition of various *small-scale* nationalisms and fundamentalisms reinvented and enacted through factitious folkloric outbursts of "collective identity").

In spite of this dynamic, the persistent believers in the strategic importance of already traditional counter-discourses developed within academia often fail to recognize this ethical de-evolution in the intellectual standards, strongly reshaping the very field of “culture”. Broad and never-ending discussion about disciplinary borders and boundaries of cultural studies, covered, apparently in a neutral manner, some of this important questions but without grasping for deeper notions regarding ideological self-reference. Thus, the very market-oriented and commercial aspects of curriculum re-shaping, much needed for survival within transformed university (including diverse modules and sub-programmes in cultural policy, cultural management, journalism, cultural diplomacy, project management etc.) could finish being textualized as “a broader approach to the needs of cultural field” and not as a mere transmission of this new and merciless level of interdependence of academia and job-markets.

The curriculum makers should face these institutional and ideological challenges in a more transparent way, allowing dynamic and critical curriculum solutions for future generation of both flexible AND critical professionals in the field. Strategic importance of counter-hegemony can be preserved along with tactical/practical (even market-oriented!) aspects of study but only within reconstructed institutional and disciplinary framework. This difficult but necessary process should be followed by transparent self-explanatory discourse, and by gradual introduction of newly established counter-discourses, esp. those connected with contemporary social movements on a global scale, and, why not, those inspired by the very old fashioned radical humanism of revolutionary modernity previous to the relativism and virtualisations of our spectacular age. Action plan for Croatian humanities can, thus, be rationally formed around two main issues which are both ethical and political, but with very direct implications on the disciplinary dynamic: around subversion of commodity production and around self-management or radicalised quest for autonomy.

Of course, it would be anachronistic and unreasonably utopian to repeat models such as the Situationist International's quest for the radical self-management or a Yugoslav socialist experiment in self-managing industrial units as a real-time/real-life blueprints for direct action, but if we allow its spirit to contribute to the general effort of "staying clean" it could be easily transformed in to more acceptable principles, usually connected (and we have to admit it once already) with middle-class radicalism, most interestingly described by Stephen Cotgrove and Andrew Duff: small-scale instead of large scale agendas, communal and flexible instead of associational and ordered, public interest instead of

market forces, self-actualization instead of economic growth etc. (Cotgrove&Duff, 1980). The open structures positioned in-between University and Environment (lived realisation of both cultural petrifications/sediments and transgressive fluctuations) should be established as small and autonomous nodal points of social networking – underregulated cells of new learning, both off-line and on-line. Old structures of "civil society" – moribund nets of counter-power relying on State funding, did not answer the very core of scholarly and ethical issues present in liminal zones of Academia. Also, proposals similar to those of Tony Bennett of reintroducing equilibrium through "necessary" dialogue with state apparatus and policy makers (Bennett, 1998) revealed only the very nature of cultural studies acting as a puppet moved by an underlying streams of capital re-shaping Academia and should be rejected as ideologically dangerous and socially malignant. All of these issues should be central to any real-life effort in establishing alternative cultural studies curricula within shifting social framework. Lack of money typical of self-managed structures (such as community-oriented task forces and discussion groups with socially relevant goals and educational outcomes) should be resolved by sharing, by direct contribution, by avoiding hysterical misuse and melancholic obeying of copyright laws, by the promotion of open source and copyleft alternatives, by small-scale recycling of paper-based material and technological leftovers, by selective piracy, by gradual subversion of dangerous and unfair governmental strategies related to "assessment" and "accountability" etc.

However, is all that possible within apparently one and only one imaginable world of production? Obvious difficulties notwithstanding, our "myth of other bank" (utopian narrative of liberty) can still be used in

activating our middleclass radicalism at the margins of university life, without birminghamian mimicry dealing with workers and working class as labels and logos – the same working class by all surveys mostly conservative and already totally consumption-oriented. Is this a difficult and possibly dangerous invoking of the old dreams dealing with "new noblemen", with possible tragedy of misguided Übermensch concept? To some extent, probably yes. So, do we have to rest our case? Not likely.

Of course, there are other means to the goals of liberty. To re-visit the Situationist's colourful universe: "Play is the ultimate principle of this festival /of revolution/, and the only rules it can recognize are to live without dead time and to enjoy without restraints." (SI, 1966, p. 12)

Certainly, extracting freedom from the creation of the "festival of revolution" based in play and hedonism can be read as post-avant-gardist cries of middleclass babies invoking radical solutions for hungry workers in between French brunch and formal dinners at father's place. However, as a metaphor of true liminality, meaning only possible freedom of fragmented subject formed under meteoric rain of ideology it poses almost mystical questions to the discipline unable to deal with its own secret traumas. (Be it, for example, lack of topics in religion within its research agenda, or lack of consciousness of its own middle-class views and analytical tools.) Analytic obsession related to the old concepts of class/group consciousness of deprived groups fighting hegemonic structures and processes is usually left in scene (and obvious essentialism implied) not despite the fact we're often terribly bourgeois, but *because* of it. Setting new subjects such as "Culture of revolutions" or "Critical religion studies" or supporting public activities of several cultural studies professors in dealing with social agendas and problems could be seen as positive efforts, superficially "organic" in Gramscian terms, but

not without full and transparent discussion about relations to the silky *weltanschauung* of young and educated white collars (i.e. the new leftist voters).

All this discussions and views on hidden or visible research agendas and adjacent pedagogies are, finally, utterly important for the Croatian society, transitional (but, is there a society that isn't?) and with proverbially weak and divided civil scene and/or oppositional public sphere opposed to the corrupt transitional elite of policy-makers and politicians immersed in the forces of capital. And even if this quest for the ultimate educational freedom through radical autonomy, displacement, play and "organic" (again, in Gramscian terms) subversion can be seen as a form of intellectual masturbation, lacking in contact with everyday policy-related issues of Croatian and European University life, we should seriously re-consider such radical demands (after all, still so demagogically present in various factions of cultural studies establishment). If we, than, start to regain our "(r)evolutionary" believes or produce new and even more radical myths and utopias as a balancing force of "The Social" we could, naturally, still end as bourgeois as ever, as slaves as ever. But, while openly acknowledging paradoxical nature of such refreshed disciplinary mythopoietics, we can (through institutional breakdown, displacement and play of transgressions) reclaim somewhat less hypocritical grounds for such charming and funny academic field trapped within transitional game of cards played jointly by national narration-makers, by European bureaucracy, and by its own petrified "cultstud entourage" consisting mostly of loud but faithful court gestures.

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