

Scholars and intellectuals in transition: on the social position of culture, science and intellectual work in postsocialist Slovenia

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1. Culture in transition

Massive changes have taken place in the former socialist countries of Europe in the last twenty years. The political singularities, such as the creation of numerous new nation-states and radical changes of social and political systems within the newly created state formations, as the Slovenian social anthropologist Irena Šumi pointed out, “no doubt held promise of exceptional social situations which offered unique and unprecedented insights into human sociality”.¹ Namely, in the wake of the collapse of the former Soviet bloc, the socialist states from Eastern Europe and the Balkans have introduced a variety of novel policies and political arrangements indicating radical social, cultural and economic changes. However, as postsocialist and late-socialist states implemented new political values and social initiatives, they acted upon complex social and cultural systems that responded in quite different, also unpredictable ways and unexpected reversals.² This often happened because Western political elites, supported by their globally dominant disciplines of economics, political science, transitology or other kind, promoted models for the postsocialist countries that bear little connection to the social realities of their own countries. “Westernisation” of Eastern societies was among the most crucial emancipatory political paroles of Western as well as Eastern ex-socialist political and academic elites.

However, the everyday moral communities of socialism such as excessive political control, confiscations, absence of consumption and markets, and limited freedom of public speech have been undermined after the 1990s and replaced with new “epidemic societal diseases”, such as postsocialist corruption, criminality, the neoliberal rhetoric of justice and the new social inequalities.³ Many academic disciplines have addressed these

¹ I. Šumi, “Postsocialism, or What? Domestication of Power and Ideology in Slovenia,” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 22, 2 (2004): 76-83, [76].

² See Sarah D. Phillips, “Postsocialism, governmentality, and subjectivity: an introduction,” *Ethnos – Journal of Anthropology* 70, 4 (2005): 437-442, [437-38].

³ For a more insightful understanding of the broader societal consequences caused, directly or indirectly, by drastic political turbulences and transformations in the countries of Eastern European see the following writings: Ivan Bernik, “Politics and Society in Postsocialism,” *International Journal of Sociology* 24, 2/3 (1994): 45-60; Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery eds., *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999); David A. Kideckel, ed., *East European Communities:*

changes, and in some cases, notably that of economics and political science, disciplinary paradigms have been utilised not merely to explain what has been unfolding but also to make changes happen in a particular way. Yet, after more than two decades, many deficits remain in social science understandings of the “transition”. Maybe anthropology, sociology, philosophy, semiotics, rhetoric, communication and media studies and other fields of reflexive social sciences and the humanities were not politically prominent in the study of these major processes that have taken place, in some cases quite dramatically and brutally, in socialist and postsocialist societies of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, but recently they have started contributing significantly to this field, and thus have provided the necessary corrective to the deficits of “transitology” or political economics.

No doubt the sphere of science, scholarship and academic culture was, among many other social domains, strongly marked by these socio-economic and geopolitical changes that caused a break of socialism and the rise of a new social order, imported from the West into this culturally diverse but geographically contiguous area. Sociological, anthropological, ethnographic and philosophical studies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union published in the last two decades have been shaped at least by three major societal circumstances: by the political upheavals of November 1989 in Eastern Europe, more precisely in Eastern Germany, and of August 1991 in the Soviet Union, and by dramatic disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Sociologically, anthropologically or philosophically informed accounts of events and lives in the postsocialist areas of Eastern Europe have in the past decade experienced significant growth. Sociological and anthropological descriptions of postsocialist societies in particular, have focused on the terrain of everyday life in general or specific social domains in order to make claims about the nature, process and essence of postsocialist and “transitional” social, cultural and economic transformations.⁴ The majority of recent studies on postsocialism and transition is, implicitly or explicitly, committed to the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork, which is usually seen as an imperative of an “anthropological” work still generating a unique and valuable form of knowledge. However, although the heterogeneity of this subfield remains remarkable; there are vast areas of social domains which still need to be investigated more systematically and meticulously. One,

The Struggle for Balance in Turbulent Times, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); Birgit Müller, ed., *Power and Institutional Change in Post-Communist Eastern Europe* (Canterbury: CSAC, 1998).

⁴ A hyper-production of different kinds of academic literature on these issues speaks for this argument: for example, Christopher Michael Hann, ed., *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2002); Caroline Humphrey and Ruth Ellen Mandel, eds., *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002); Maruška Svašek ed., *Postsocialism: Politics and Emotions in Central and Eastern Europe* (Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, And What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

among many, is a critical reflection on postsocialist academic spheres, their scientific policies and practices, as well as on research agendas and ideologies that have taken place in newly established “transitional” realities.

2. Science in transition

The dominant focus in postsocialism and transition studies has been more on economic and political factors through analyses generally conducted at the national or international level, while a closer look at what has been happening in everyday life in urban contexts of postsocialist societies has not been brought up very often. It is actually anthropologists and sociologists who, by using ethnographic methods, have made visible problems and challenges that have until recently been obscured, tabooed, or taken for granted; from synagogue restoration in Eastern Europe to gay sex tourism in Prague or to the politics of rock music in Hungary.⁵

All these reflexive accounts have shown that specific issues and local topics can lead researchers to confront complex questions of individual agency and collective practices in the move away from socialism. The field of transitional science and academic arenas also gets a more and more visible position in postsocialism studies. Amy Ninetto, for example, has examined the shifting and contradictory role of the post-Soviet state in science and in the lives of scientists. Her research has been concerned with the ever-changing boundary between the laboratory and society, as well as with the movement of migrating scientists and the meanings attached to such academic mobility.⁶ Her exploration of intersections of the state and the market within contemporary Russian sciences challenges the common view that Russian scientists are overly “nostalgic” for the glories of Soviet science past. Instead, Ninetto demonstrates how scientists and scientific institutions creatively forge a range of relationships with state and market structures in order to adapt to the low levels of state funding available to them in the 1990s. In fact, Ninetto argues, the privatisation of Russian science in the Siberian science city of Akademgorodok requires the active participation of state actors. In this inquiry she highlights the power relations that move knowledge production to the supposedly “non-ideological” sphere of science. In her examination of postsocialist forms of governmentality, she argues that, in transforming “structures that were available under socialism into hybrid state-private ventures”, scientists have “reconfigured, and in some cases even

⁵ See Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl and Martha Lampland, eds., *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

⁶ A. Ninetto, “The Natural Habitat of Science: Shifting Locations of Freedom and Constraint among Migrant Russian Scientists”, *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 18, 2 (2000): 37-41.

strengthened, the relationship between state power and the production of knowledge". However, not certain whether this was a quotation]. Seeing 'the state' as it is constituted in Russian scientists' discourse challenges Western models of the autonomy of science".⁷ Ninetto's research maybe reveals the unexpected or less expected results of market reforms in arenas such as science and academia from a Western point of view.

Certainly this is not something that would really surprise, as many Eastern researchers have been watching from a "native" point of view similar processes of transitional reconfiguration and even decomposition of science that has taken place in many postsocialist countries in the last twenty years. Thus, the Russian example is maybe notorious due to the central role this country had played for the entire Eastern bloc, but is certainly not an isolated island where such transitional processes have restructured numerous domains of scientific life and intellectual work. Ironically, the very social processes that were supposed to remove or displace state control over science have invited the state back into science in different and predominantly not transparent ways in many East-European countries and their academic arenas.

Due to this it is not surprising that postsocialist governances, formal democracy, capitalism, neoliberalism, international alliances and formations (European Union, NATO, etc.) and common European projects (such as the Bologna reform and Lisbon strategy) do not give quite so much credence to the unique social, political, formal, and ideological reconfiguration of transitional European societies. In many postsocialist countries, certain fields like academic arenas, scientific policies, practices of scientists, and the role of intellectuals are hardly a topic carried out in any manner by any public or serious research agenda.

In Slovenia, constant politically and ideologically connoted discussions on "Slovenia's bright future", Slovenian society as a "learning society", "based on knowledge and proficiency", "national priorities of science", "inherent importance of science for Slovenian social progress and cultural development", "inputs and outputs of Bologna reform", etc. — the slogans which have sent all recent dominant Slovenian "scientific", "academic" and "political" *noblesse* into raptures — are actually paradigmatic representations of ideological terror that falsifies and mystifies the real status and the very social position of science, scholarship and academism in the country. These democratised totalitarian ideas, initiatives, expressions, and new administrative ecumenism in science, university, academia, and research — playing the role of an "ideological setting" which serves exclusively to the needs of the local political "despots" and their academic and scientific adherents and *souffleurs*, as well as their protected and submissive

⁷ A. Ninetto, "An Island of Socialism in a Capitalist Country': Postsocialist Russian Science and the Culture of the State", *Ethnos – Journal of Anthropology* 70, 4 (2005): 443-464, [443].

protagonists — were during the last twenty years of the Slovenian “transition period” imported to Slovenia very successfully and without any critical reflection from the United States, while the EU scientific policies remained ignorant of this politically inspired neoliberal academic “instruction”. The fact that the librarian service offered by a private and very profit-oriented company from the USA, Thompson ISI (with high charges for its services also in Slovenia), could have become the alpha and omega of the Slovenian national system of evaluating scientific production is screaming for a critical analysis of the Slovenian provincialism. Nevertheless, such a decision is in Slovenia mainly as a consequence of pressure exerted by so-called “hard”, “natural” science. The analytical objections formulated by some critical scholars proving that the production of knowledge within most of the “hard” sciences is, by its essence, technological and not epistemic, while the production of knowledge in social sciences and humanities is, by its nature, reflexive, and therefore vitally depends on theoretical production, have been neglected systematically.

Although transferring Western institutions (democracy, markets, consumerism, profitable science, etc.) to non-Western settings is a constant topic in political and economic discourses, it still offers a fascinating ground to analyze. Most sociologists and anthropologists have been critical of policies based on the transfer of Western models, which overlook institutional contexts and the strong threads of continuity that mark even the most dramatic of social ruptures. However, economists, politicians and other local specialists who have tended to dismiss such points have also forgotten to ask themselves how expectations of transition, which have consistently not been fulfilled all over Eastern zone, have been produced in the wake of state socialism and how they have been intensively reproduced after it. Peggy Watson puts forward an argument to show how an idea of the West and of liberal freedom is at stake in the interpretation of the events of postcommunism.⁸ Namely, an idea of how to transfer achievements of Western societies, such as western freedom, in itself presupposes that identities and cultures under democratic and communist regimes are the same — what, later on, have underpinned many tensions in West-East communication.

In Slovenia, the whole evaluation system used for scientific production has been practically fully absorbed into the state administrative system. It is impossible to work as a scientist or researcher outside the academic network put forward by state institutions, which should only “administrate” science; but it seems that they create suitable circumstances for the monopoly of the “hard”, “real” science over the “soft”, “unnecessary” science. This “totalitarianisation” to which, under influence of “hard”

⁸ P. Watson, “Re-thinking Transition: Globalism, Gender and Class”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 2, 2 (2000): 185-213, [185].

sciences, submitted not only social sciences and humanities but also the whole academic sphere, is not perceived as a problem in Slovenia. No matter how hard the Slovenian scientific policy tries to domesticate the greatest possible number of neoliberal administrative “innovations” from the American and related academic enterprises, the last years constantly served us with an annual fascination of the Slovenian academic and media sphere: we are talking about the obsession with the most renowned lists of top world universities. The Slovenian scientific administrators and expert bodies, such as the expert council for science and technology, have become obsessed with these lists and, in particular, with the rankings of the Slovenian universities on them. Such lists which are used more for the media promotion of particular academic elites and clientele with an already established global reputation than for proving the quality of scientific work could not leave Slovenian scholars and scientists, and particularly scientific administrators, ministers and their counsellors, indifferent. However, it is interesting to observe that scientific administrators and their academic adherents proposing such lists only strive for ranking on those “magic” lists which are obviously supposed to resolve all the problems of Slovenian science, scholarship and research while they do not mention the striking need for a thorough institutional and expert review of the Slovenian scientific institutions, necessary to improve the conditions of work and study at Slovenian universities, and consequently, also the possibilities for employment of their graduates.

The directives produced by different national expert bodies which feed the rankings of the Slovenian universities on those lists lead us to a conclusion, i.e. that the changes of the Slovenian academic sphere are necessary because of overly mediated lists, and not because of the actual circumstances which are far from being enviable. This indicator is probably reliable enough to convince us that the academic “elite” — confirmed by the state — has not yet overgrown all the transitional diseases, especially those related to the “enthronement” of appearance over contents, to the monopole of declared and fictive reality over the actual one, and to the provincial *forma mentis*.

3. Intellectual work in transition

It was, among others, the work of Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian theorist living in France, which importantly and with a fine intellectual power, challenged the question, definitely still actual in these days, “to what purpose serve the intellectuals”,⁹ scientists, researchers, scholars, etc. Familiarised with the contexts of life in a real-socialist Balkan country, she knew perfectly how it was to live as an intellectual in an environment of continuous and constant fight and risky personal engagements against the power and the terror of

⁹ See J. Kristeva, “À quoi servent les intellectuels?”, *Le Nouvel Observateur* 656 (1977): 20–26.

anti-intellectualism and anti-academism, as well as against human regression of all kinds. Furthermore, there is a newly installed (under the guise of “democratic” and “modern” political vocabulary) pathological resistance, on the institutional level, against the two profiles of citizen, namely against the critical intellectual and engaged scientist in almost all postsocialist East-European and Balkan countries.

Consequently, the real intellectual work and scientific reflexivity seem to become more and more difficult; even more, the rise of a new conservatism and “neoliberal newspeak” (according to Bourdieu and Wacquant)¹⁰ triumphing and dominating all spheres of contemporary societal life evokes in these newly installed European “democracies” a sophisticated risk and danger for all those who would like to practice serious, reflexive and responsible intellectual as well as socially engaged scientific work. No doubt, this social fact is in great contradiction with the political vocabulary represented by common EU projects and scientific policies (among them, particularly the Bologna and Lisbon reforms). Ironically, this internationally homogenised ideological vocabulary is directly opposed to the real social situation in science, research and intellectual activity in postsocialist milieus.

After redundant political negotiating about the “role” and the “importance” of national science, scholarship and academism for postsocialist societies’ future in changing Europe — as it was an intensively communicated topos of political attention in the 1990s — the majority of discussions taking place recently not only in Slovenia but in the EU in general have, not surprisingly, turned toward an absolute neoliberal trivialisation of the intellectual work and an applicative banalisation of science and scholarship.

Thus, we are facing an unconcealable fall and a highly contestable decrease of social value of the real intellectual work and of serious analytical science as well as an enormous lack of social responsibility in scholarship and research. The neoliberal and commercial reduction of the scientists’ work to the condition of temporary employees running from project to project, appears as a normal, accepted and totally unproblematic “social norm”. To paraphrase Bourdieu, this exploitation without limits is exactly the essence of contemporary academic neoliberalism.¹¹ The situation is even more problematic if scientists, scholars and researchers themselves perceive these exploitive “norms” and social processes as the naturally given historical necessity and as something that needs to be done for “their” vision of making and contributing to a “better world”.

In Slovenia as well as in comparable postsocialist countries, it still seems difficult to work as a researcher outside traditional academic

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, “Neoliberal Newspeak: Notes on the New Planetary Vulgate”, David Macey, trans., *Radical Philosophy* 108 (2001): 6-7

¹¹ P. Bourdieu, “L’essence du néolibéralisme. Cette utopie, en voie de réalisation, d’une exploitation sans limite”, *Le Monde Diplomatique* (March 1998): 3.

institutions. This is so because the nationalised academic establishment determines the whole scientific and intellectual habitus.¹² The Slovenian scientific policy of transition has brought the administration of science and scholarship to some incredible absurdities. Researchers and even pedagogues are being continuously forced into competition for projects which usually represent their means for survival and, furthermore, into a frenetic race for foreign (especially EU) project funds which, when they finally get them, actually do not represent for them any increased social security but only an increased work load. In practice this means that all the time of a fully employed researcher is actually divided between applying for projects and writing reports about them. On the other hand, the unemployed or temporarily unemployed, as well as freelance scientists and researchers, or scholars who are active outside the academic establishment, cannot stand as candidates for national projects since only registered research organisations can apply for them. If, for one reason or another, a scholar loses his or her job or if he or she finds him or herself outside any institution which could cover his or her activities, the state behaves as if he or she simply ceased being a scholar, as if he or she lost his or her competences overnight. Such paradoxes are typical *bizareries* of transitional societies with badly formed and differentiated social systems.

Participation in science and scholarship is today subject to serious imbalances: the gap between an unclearly defined working status and the social security is enormous and is getting even larger. Without any doubt, the highest price of this imbalance caused by the “transitional scientific policy” is to be paid by young people who have just entered the field of science and who — without any responsibility or guilt on their part — are daily pushed by actual circumstances to inhuman humiliations, devaluations of their work and struggles for survival. Furthermore, young people are also most vulnerable in the struggle for jobs, continued work and career development since they frequently work on temporary projects. The whole story about the success of the Slovenian “knowledge-based society” is ridiculed by young scholars and experts with scientific degrees vegetating at employment services as they cannot find a suitable employment. The situation is becoming alarming, particularly for the profiles in the domain of social sciences and humanities. It seems that the latter would do better if they stopped existing, the sooner the better: they are socially weak, which is the more obvious the more profiled and critical is their discourse and the more scientific and intellectual is their thought. As we can assume, the process of turbo-neoliberal logic has already become firmly established in this area and has defined the fate of many

¹² For the provincial intellectualism and anti-intellectualism in the Slovenian academic sphere see Irena Šumi's fruitful article “Intelektualno delo v provinci, kaj je to?” [Intellectual Work in the Province, What is This?], *Emzin – Arts Magazine* 14, 1-2 (2004): 60-65.

scholars and intellectuals in Slovenia.¹³

The previously described imbalance in Slovenia results from the intentional cohabitation of two situations: an absence of a plan on the part of the state system and a union of the political, bureaucratic and mediocre scientific local clientele. Nowadays, the universalised and institutionalised “egalitarian” representation of the social world of science and academic sphere actually implements the respect for the images conceived on the basis of the collective definition of inequality. This is why, again and again, we have to deal with the production of new inequalities that exclude the social agreement and abolish what has been already achieved. From this viewpoint, the Slovenian academic sphere is a perfect example of a symptomatic (re)production of new (or the “old new”) inequalities. This is how the autonomous social domains of highly intellectual work, science and scholarship, have been put to the process of systematic transformation into a turbo-neoliberal enterprise of wage-workers, academic lumpenproletarians, anti-intellectual jobbers, profiteers and money-spinners. In “post societies” more and more scholars and scientists serve something other than scholarship and science; more and more researchers serve the fascination of the project, applying rituals rather than real research agendas; more and more intellectuals are forced to meet social margins of all kinds in the “postmodern” EU social enterprise. Is the conception of Sartre’s “engaged intellectual” or Gramsci’s “organic intellectual” still relevant or is it maybe a too idealised, abstract and inappropriate “personification” of today’s forms of intellectualism and reflexivity? Many recent ethnographies on postsocialism and transition offer a powerful critique of the discourse of “transition”. Ethnographic perspectives provide important information and data which can function as profound critiques of ideology, in this case exposing the discourse of transition to be both a regime of signs employed to justify the subordination of these nations and their academic elites to the imperatives of global trade and finance, and a poorly designed and executed blueprint to bring about a new social order. Such reflexive perspectives, also have the virtue of reminding us what the discourses of transition and postsocialism really are: theories which in the collective euphoria and drama between 1989.

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¹³ For more see Vlado Kotnik, “Bizarre Academism and Science in Slovenia: Elements for Anthropological Study of Postsocialism and Transition”, in Vladimir Ribič, ed., *Tranzicija i postsocializam: Antropološka istraživanja [Transition and Postsocialism: Anthropological Explorations]*, (Belgrade: University of Belgrade Press, 2007): 128–171.