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Bulgaria

‘A Better Past is Still Possible’. Interview with Boris Buden

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Note from LeftEast Editors: This interview was originally published in Bulgarian for dVERSIA (8/2017) on the occasion of the publication of the Bulgarian translation of Boris Buden’s book ‘Zone des Übergangs. Über das Ende des Postkommunismus’.

Neda Genova: There is a dominant discourse in Bulgaria which often mobilises an anti-communist rhetoric as an explanatory matrix for almost all of the deficits of the current (hyper)capitalist regime: the privation and violence of the present are interpreted as a result of an insufficiently radical break with the country’s communist past. Thus, issues like corruption, for instance, are paradoxically seen as a part of a communist ‘mentality’ or ‘heritage’, rather than as a constitutive feature of capitalism. Can you comment on that?

Boris Buden: Yes, for me this is a very interesting question. It is a question of a certain miracle, I would say: it is the miracle that communism has actually survived in the guise of anti-communism, as a target of anti-communism. And this is the only way it has survived. So, we see that the anti-communism needs a communism even if communism no longer exists. This is a classical situation for an ideological condition, to be compared really with the Stalinist system.

The moment when the collectivisation and generally the new soviet-system in the 30s didn’t produce the expected results, when it started to fail, it started to become clear that the ideas didn’t result in a better praxis, in more production, in more freedom, etc, etc. Then there were two options: either to say openly that the system has failed (or it is failing) or to find a culprit, someone who can be blamed for its failures. And this is the Stalinist mechanism of production of the enemies. They were exterminated and the extermination, the processes and the whole terror had the purpose of covering, justifying the failures of the system. Because they were presented as the cause of the failure of the system.

Now, we see that something similar is happening with post-communism. Not only the end of totalitarian dictatorship was promised in the beginning…There was the expectation that democracy and capitalism would be able to bring growth and an improvement on all levels of human life. Nobody believed that social welfare should be dismantled. People believed naively that they can preserve their social systems and have freedom, a functioning market economy, and being integrated into the world. But this is not possible.

And not only that – it has become clear that there is no capitalism without crisis. And crises produce time and again their own victims. So now the system needs communism as still being the reason for its failures. Or justification. And it finds them in the remnants of the past: not yet erased, not sufficiently cleaned space of bad communist collectivist habits, false expectations that someone else and not the market will solve the problems of the people…

Today, the communist past is blamed for everything. This is why the system needs communism as its enemy, because what is at stake is the crisis of legitimation of the whole post-communist historical project. Which was a project that promised something but couldn’t keep its promises.

Although there are differences amongst the post-communist countries, I think this is a common feature. I come from Croatia where still, nowadays, you have the feeling that the struggle against communism is even more active, more important than 25 years ago. This is possible only because these post-communist societies have accepted the logic of the belatedness. They have accepted the general ideological concept of the post-communist term. As I wrote in the book [1], it is presented in the Habermas’ concept of the ‘catching-up’ revolution, nachholende Revolution, with the idea that communism has cut off Eastern societies from normal historical development (which was possible in the West) and now, after the fall of this totalitarian obstacle, these societies are in the condition of historical belatedness.

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More concretely, they are in a condition of a belated modernity and from this position they have to catch up with the missed historical development, which means to catch up with the West. This creates a weird temporal difference, a temporal gap, which is typical for the way in which for instance in the time of classical colonialism, the metropolis and the colonial empire treated the colonial space. This is also how the knowledge production of the non-Western ‘other’ was structured. Just to remind you that in the concept of anthropology, the idea that the ‘other’ of Europe, of the West, is not only somewhere else but also in another time. Which means that the object of anthropological knowledge never shares the same time with the subject of the knowledge. The subject of knowledge is always on time, while the object of his/her research is in another, historically belated time. This is also discussed in Johannes Fabian’s famous book ‘Time and the Other’. And this has been preserved, it has been repeated in the post-communist space.

Interestingly, without providing any sort of resistance, the societies (which also means the intellectuals and the cultural subjects of the East) accepted this logic of ‘catching up’ development. They accepted the logic of transition, in a kind of self-colonisation. They accepted the ideological concept of post-communist transition – that’s nothing else but this ‘catching up’. I think it is interesting that this logic has also completely unified and in this sense also erased the experience of the historical communism. Which is divided. It is different from society to society, from situation to situation. Yugoslav communism was different from Bulgarian, from the Soviet, and it has different phases, etc. The whole space was retroactively unified under the signifier of totalitarianism. It is supposed that all of us, coming from the East, share one single historical experience, the experience of totalitarianism, and this is what differentiates us from the West. It unifies the whole space from Budapest to Vladivostok as a space, which under totalitarian pressure and terror was cut off from historical normality.

On the other hand, the fact that anti-communism intensifies itself now is a symptom of the crisis of this post-communist narrative and its whole logic. I think that the systems are rapidly losing historical legitimation and there is a sort of panic, which could lead to different solutions. It could lead to what we have been witnessing in Poland, Croatia and Hungary – a right-wing nationalist mobilisation with a revival of the idea of national sovereignty within the European Union. So this has to be connected – the aggressive anti-communism now, a quarter century after the fall of communism, with the right-wing mobilisation.

N.G.: I definitely agree with this latter point – we have many examples of similar processes in Bulgaria too. One part of this talk about ‘communist heritage’ and ‘mentality’ has something to do with what you are writing about in the book – namely, how a translation of social and political issues in the language of culture can become a depoliticising force.

B.B.: I would even say it is an epistemological problem of our relation to the past today. It tells something about a historical inability to critically reflect upon the past, to create something, which could be called ‘historical experience’. You know, after communism ended, the societies would have been expected to have some sort of experience of the past, an experience that could have been connected to the horizon of the future; to the question ‘what have we learned for the future?’. But what we have been witnessing is, again, an erasure of the past: instead of a historical experience of communism, we have different forms of memory cultures that deal with the past. And memory cultures function through the logic of cultural difference. The past is not simply a historical past, the past is perceived as a different culture and it is this cultural difference that creates the temporal dimension of the past. It’s not that there is a past so that we can look into it, but we recognise past as past only through cultural difference. And this obsession is not typical only of the Eastern countries; it is a crisis of history in general. And of historiography. Today there is what Pierre Nora calls ‘the age of commemoration’ – cultural memory has replaced what used to be historiography in terms of knowledge, in terms of dealing with the past. David Lowenthal, an expert on the notion of ‘cultural heritage’ also writes about this in his very interesting book ‘The Past is a Foreign Country’.

In my book, I also analyse more than one museum of communism. *Museums* of communism: these simplified narratives in which the past is posed from a ‘post-traumatic’ perspective, but also as a cultural artefact. It is a pile of

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cultural artefacts, memorabilia, etc… So that in fact communism still exists either in a museum, as an object of memory culture, or as a universal perpetrator, still alive, preventing the future from finally coming. So these are the two faces of communism.

Another point is that if this communist past is presented in that way, in fact it is not worth remembering it. It is something, which should have been better forgotten, it is of no value whatsoever. The past exists only in the form of this cultural representation but there is no historical experience. And historical experience is something that can be articulated only actively, practically and by engaging with the reality in which you live. Then the past tells you something – if you, so to say, *ask* the present about the future, *then* you remember the past. Then it is not simply a cultural issue. So, I would say that these forms of remembering the communist past are rather forms of oblivion.

It’s an oblivion that prevents us from connecting to the past, to see the continuities. The *continuities* are today much more interesting than the differences. The continuities of oppression, for instance. The continuities of failures, especially in former Yugoslavia. It is extremely interesting, because in former Yugoslavia there was a market socialism, there were market conditions. The country *was* already integrated within the capitalist world market; it was part of the problems. To put it very concretely: when they speak today of the failures of Yugoslav communism, meaning the crisis, the rapid fall of living standards and so forth, they say ‘this is communism’. But *in fact*, this past reminds us much more of what is happening now in Greece.

This was the crucial moment in former Yugoslavia – from the 1950s onwards the country was integrated within the world capitalism of the time, which means that it was a member of capitalist financial institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund… it was also taking loans and *dealing* – that’s a big part of it! In the beginning of the 1980s there was a debt crisis in former Yugoslavia and the IMF came and introduced austerity measures. Extreme austerity measures. It was not the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Communist Party that would use the state to freeze the wages, no – it was the instrument of the world financial capitalism that used classical state means (i.e. freezing the wages of the workers) to realise its interests. So in the next 10 years the living standard in former Yugoslavia fell by 40%. Yugoslavia even managed to repay the debt, but it was too late. What I am saying is that this experience is something that can directly connect you to your present – to the situation in Greece, to the situation in Southern Europe, the so-called P.I.G.S.-countries. You can recognise the continuity of oppression, of exploitation, of the power of global capitalism… *Continuity* and not this difference. Now, you say ‘well, it was the failure of communism’ – and not the active colonial politics of the capitalist exploitation!

This is why we need the ‘legacy’ that is still ‘alive’ – in order to say that ‘well, it is mentality’, ‘it is the expectations of people that the state should help them’. ‘These are the old believes but we should know that there is no state and only the market can help…’. Anyway, the point is that this ideologically generated oblivion serves precisely our cutting off from historical experience, it serves the destruction of historical experience… making it impossible to see our current situation in a certain historical genealogy, and in the continuity. To recognise that the struggle should have been continued! The belief that 1989 is the end of the struggle is wrong. This is precisely what the existing system needs. It needs the masses who believe that the struggle has been won once and forever already in the 1990s and we now need only to work hard and accept austerity, and everything will be better.

N.G.: This feeds into my next question and is related to critique and the notion of the political. I believe that in your book Zone des Übergangs [Zone of Transition] you develop two models of how this experience of the political can take place. On the one hand, you write that it arises in the moment in which one realises that there is no societal ground… But on the other hand, there is also another moment, which is perhaps a discussed more briefly in the book. There you write about rage and anger in the face of the already existing.

B.B.: One is Laclau and the other one is Virno. The point is, my major point in the book is that the post-communist condition has been often presented as post-utopian. The idea is that communism was a utopia, which failed and that

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now, after the fall of communism, we live in the reality as it really is, we live in a post-utopian society. My point in the book is: no, the utopia has never ended! It only has left society as the medium of its realisation. It is social utopia that has ended. Now utopia is still alive but it has become culture. Culture is its new medium of articulation – with identities, with memory. Instead of societies in a welfare state, we have national cultural identities in a neoliberal state. So utopia has left society and found its new medium in culture that is no longer turned towards the future, but rather towards the past. But the past is *the* dimension in which identity actually exists. The temporal home of identity is the cultural past. Identity is actually nothing than forms of articulation of the cultural past. Benjamin would say cultural ‘history’. Besides, of course, all acts of identification, which could be struggles for recognition, etc. But the societies and the nations are shaped like museums of identities. Their cultures, educational systems, what kids learn about identifying with their nations… The whole logic is obsessed with the past, which is the proper dimension of identity.

My point is that we should understand this post-communist turn as a turn away from society, as an act of the destruction of society. You know, Margaret Thatcher’s famous sentence ‘There is no such thing as a society.’ She was telling this not as a sociologist whose proper research has found out that society no longer exists, but as a politician. A politician whose politics was nothing but a performative destruction of society, starting with the first clashes of 1979 and the beginning of the 1980s with trade unions. This was at the very core of the neoliberal politics of the Tories: not only to dismantle the social welfare state, but to destroy society as an idea. When she says that there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals and families, this is precisely how you make politics today. You need an individual, a so-called free and equal individual whose figure dominates the whole space of economic production of what used to be called a ‘bourgeois society’. It is no longer an abstract concept of the political state but has saturated the whole sphere of society. You know, the sphere of inequality, the sphere of exploitation, the sphere of hierarchies, of class difference… We no longer think there is a society. Problems like criminality or poverty are no longer social problems, they are problems of our individual failures, and they are totally psychologised. They are without social meaning.

And then, when I say ‘utopia’, this now is the utopia of memory, of this idea that, as Pierre Nora would say, since we have no visions about the future, we collect and preserve everything that is around us in the hope that it will be needed for our identity in the future because we no longer know where we are going. We should do everything to know at least where we are coming from. This is an obsession with memory and memory culture. While people used to think that a better world could be possible in the future, now it’s all about a better past. This also explains the success of historical revisionism. It is such a new phenomenon, for instance in Croatia. The nation, the educational system and the society have created a historical consciousness in which it seems as though the other side has won the Second World War – which means the fascist side.

So in this struggle for a different past all memorabilia of the parties in the anti-fascist war were literally destroyed. More than 3000 monuments were destroyed. All names were symbolically changed, so that – to put it as a paradox – it seems as though Hitler was a victim of communist totalitarianism. You know, this is the logic of the ‘two totalitarianisms’: these nations present themselves as victims of two equal totalitarianisms – communist and fascist – and now they enjoy freedom. Of course, they rewrite their histories. There is a huge attempt in all these societies to rewrite their histories in order to create a better past. ‘A better past is still possible’, you know, because there is no vision of any better future.

Coming back to using this concept of Virno… While in the time of industrial modernity there was still a social state, people believed in a society, in living in a community and their existential structure was corresponding to a life in a community, they were able to clearly differentiate between inside and outside their societies. It was the time of the classical old Fear. This was a social fear – fear of being excluded from the society, but also the awareness that society is something that can protect you. So the idea of society has been ‘protection’; fear is always a call for protection. But what is called the ‘multitude’ today is in a post-social situation. There is no longer fear but anguish. This is quite complicated; it’s a Heideggerian differentiation. Anguish is a new fear, one beyond the feeling of

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belonging or not belonging to a particular community or a society. This is a general anguish of living in the world without or beyond social protection, beyond society. And this is what characterises today’s existential feelings of a multitude. The multitude is a form of life in the post-social condition.

N.G.: Do you think that the recent discussions about the rise of (right-wing) populisms signal a possible return of the figure of ‘the people’?

B.B.: You know, people like Wolfgang Streek would speak very critically about the notion of populism. What is at stake is much more something which he calls ‘a new cultural divide’ between the elites (all sorts of elites, not only political but very much international ones), on the one side, and on the other – the masses who are left behind. The masses in the post-industrial wastelands of today’s even Western capitalism, masses who have no chance, no future, they are the former working class. This is the so-called ‘Rust Belt’ in the United States. Those are the ones who are addressed in a populist way by right-wing politicians from Marie Le Pen to Donald Trump. This populism for Streek reflects a belief that there is something bad in mobilising the masses. There’s a belief that the masses can be activated only in a right-wing way. They used to differentiate between left and right wing populism, but the point is that this is a concept of the elite with which the elites claim their absolute superiority and also their necessity. Because only the elites can deal with the problems of the reality today. And if the masses are asked, then we have either left or right extremism, or at least this is what they call populism. But the problem is the gap. And the problem also is that the elites today no longer differentiate politically amongst themselves.

This is what Peter Mair calls ‘the end of party democracy’ – the processes in the last 30-40 years have shown that the differences between political parties among the elite slowly disappear, but the gap between the elite and the masses is widening. It is difficult to differentiate between Social democrats and Christian democrats because they both have a similar ideological agenda when it comes to international politics and economy – a liberal agenda. On the other side, people no longer vote. The number of people who actively participate in parliamentary elections, the number of voters is diminishing… Take the example of the last presidential election in France, which resulted in what is presented as the great victory of Macron in France. But the turnout was the lowest in France’s modern history with 42% of the people voting, which means that the majority of the electorate no longer believes that active participation in parliamentary democracy can change anything. This is the problem and this is something that Peter Mair and [Wolfgang] Streek openly say – we are facing the end of parliamentary democracy as we knew it. And this is not only in the West but also in the former post-communist East, where with for instance Victor Orban we have new concepts like ‘illiberal democracy’ and a certain neo- and post-fascist movements and options, for instance in Croatia or Serbia…

N.G.: And in Bulgaria we have the National Front, which is now in the government. To come back to the question of critique: how to reclaim and politicise this culturated past, how to work with the continuities you are talking about. The necessity of critique of the present seems bigger than ever and yet every time when we, for instance with the magazine I’m co-editing in Bulgaria, attempt to articulate a critique of the current neoliberal regime, we are being dismissed as archaisms from the communist past. One of the issues we try to talk about is the issue of labour rights, for instance – in the past months and years there are more and more cases of workers’ deaths and severe exploitation. And yet it is almost impossible to talk about labour or class as it is seen as this old-fashioned talk…

B.B.: Yes, absolutely. As if a minimal protection of workers’ rights would mean a communist call to recreate GULAG! Yes, but I think that the crisis is also a crisis of the language of emancipation, I would say. People believe that they are actually emancipated and they believe in the famous TINA – ‘There Is No Alternative’. And the traditional left, liberal, social-democratic parties agreed to TINA, they also never mentioned any sort of alternative to the existing system. So, this is further deepening the gap between the masses and the elites. Using a language in which emancipation obviously can no longer be articulated. The quest for freedom can no longer be articulated.

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This is what I call a ‘revernacularisation’ of the masses. You know, ‘vernacular’ were the languages before they were elevated into the national languages, it was the time when knowledge, politics, the juridical right were all speaking Latin. And the masses were speaking their vernaculars, useful only for everyday life but no discourse of power, no discourse of important decisions was articulated in vernacular, only in Latin. Today we have a similar situation in which the discourse of power, but also the discourse of emancipation, has become a new form of Latin and the masses no longer understand it. So the critique, using this Latin, using also the language of those emancipatory theories – there are plenty of those, plenty of perfect analyses of today’s crisis – they no longer reach the masses, they don’t understand them. The so-called hoi polloi don’t understand this language of clever theory. So, as in the Middle Ages some critical intellectuals started to use vernaculars – like Descartes or Dante, who was the first – to think, to dare to think in vernaculars, the critique should at least start to learn these new vernaculars so as to be able to address the masses. This for me is the new challenge.

N.G.: To me it is a bit difficult to claim that the masses don’t understand. It already reasserts the idea that they are not capable of understanding. Whereas it might be possible that there are already forms of critique voiced out in a vernacular language…

B.B.: I don’t think so. This is also our problem as theorists. You know, we have enough epistemological power – the left, for instance. It is very clever and uses concepts of very high cognitive value; they have a great explanatory function but have no effects on reality. On the other side, we see how the so-called populist language effectively reaches and addresses the masses. But we believe in a new system of ‘diglossia’: on the one side we have the international language – I am not saying it’s English, I’m just saying the international language of the elites, of knowledge, of power, of politics, of critique, of left critique, – and on another side, these masses speaking their vernaculars, not understanding this language.

So this is the challenge for the critique, I am repeating: how to learn these vernaculars and address the masses, who are left behind. They are left behind in the past, in terms of having no future. They are what’s called ‘surplus population’ in a post-industrial world. It is an illusion to expect that we will open up new industries and they will again find jobs.

Let me put it this way – there is a gap, which is not simply social. It is also deeply linguistic, a gap of articulation. It used to be a gap between theory and praxis, but today it is a gap between the language of the elites (which is actually the English of international elites) and local, always local and particular masses who are left behind.

N.G.: Maybe it is a bit of a challenge to not let this linguistic gap become cultural difference?

B.B.: It is cultural – as far as it is linguistic, it is also cultural. Wolfgang Streek uses the notion of a ‘new cultural divide’ and he speaks explicitly of the ‘raw language of the masses’ – it is raw and not civilised. This is precisely how the vernaculars were understood by the elites who spoke Latin in the Middle Ages – the raw language of the masses, which is of no use for concepts, for ideas, for political noble visions, etc… And it is not the language of power.

N.G.: So you are bringing up this old question of the role of the intellectual… Are you saying that their role should be to work with the masses of the oppressed people?

B.B.: Yes, but I don’t think that this critique can be articulated simply by changing our minds as critical subjects. It is not about changing our minds. It is about practically engaging with these masses and this reality. The continuity with the past, learning the genealogy of the present crisis won’t be told and recreated by intellectual and theoretical concepts but only by the activated masses in the struggle. And the question is how to be part, how to think while participating in this struggle.

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[1] Buden, B. (2009) Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus. [Zone of Transition: Of the End of Post-communism] Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag.

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