
IN THE REALM OF DEMOCRACY

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Vesna Madžoski is a theoretician and lecturer of critical theory based in Amsterdam whose work focuses on the analysis of cultural phenomena through elements and works of visual culture. In essence, she is searching for ways of detecting limits and limitations of human existence, as well as for the means in which to overcome them. She is currently the fellow at the European Graduate School, Switzerland.

Madžoski's thesis, entitled *De Cvratribvs. The Dialectics of Care and Confinement* (Atropos Press, 2013) focused on curating as a means to investigate power relations and censorship in the presumably open and democratic domain of contemporary art. As a professor and guest lecturer, she has presented in more than thirty institutions, from universities, art academies to museums and galleries (such as MIT Boston, Trondheim Art Academy, Leiden University, Kunsthaus Bregenz, ZMO Berlin, BAK Utrecht, De Appel Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, etc.). In the period 2015-2017, she held seminars and tutorials as a professor of critical theory at the Master Artistic Research program of the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague.

Parallel to her theoretical work, Madžoski tested her ideas in a practical manner as well, primarily as a member of the Amsterdam-based artists' initiative *Public Space With a Roof* since 2006. From 2000 to 2009, she was one of the editors of the Belgrade-based magazine *Prelom – Journal for Images and Politics*.

1 Michel Foucault, "Sexualité et politique." *Dits et écrits III, 1976-1979*. Gallimard, Paris, 1994, p.520-531.

2 Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Daniel Bensaid, Wendy Brown, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Ranciere, Kristin Ross, and Slavoj Žižek. *Democracy In What State?* Columbia University Press, New York, 2011.

3 Alain Badiou, *Ibid*, p.6.

4 Wendy Brown, *Ibid*, p.45.

5 As a concept, the Balkans has proliferated in the wake of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the wars fought in the 1990s, and there have been numerous studies that, first and foremost, revealed its chimerical nature: in addition to being an imprecise geographical definition, it also has an unmistakable emotional connotation that depicts and labels these countries as barbaric. Following this phase, technocratic terms such as Southeast Europe and the Western Balkans, which rests on the assumption that the West indicates an undoubtedly more advanced stage of development, have entered common usage. This new terminology also implied that the newly established countries follow their own course of individual and idiosyncratic economic growth and political development, which is certainly not the case when the notion of democracy is examined. Therefore, in this article, I use the term 'former Balkans' in order to emphasize that these newly established countries have all found themselves in the same situation, and that the problems faced by their citizens nowadays are quite similar.

In one of the interviews he gave during his visit to Japan in 1978, Michel Foucault referred to a difference between the West and Japan that he noticed while watching the film *In the Realm of the Senses* (Nagisa Ōshima, 1976).¹ Namely, Foucault was both surprised and impressed by the different attitude and relation the man and the woman had toward the male copulatory organ: instead of being something that the man unreservedly identifies with and has the privilege and unconditional right to, in this Japanese movie the male organ is presented as a link and a bond between the man and the woman, something that, in different ways, equally belongs to both of them. In Foucault's opinion, this instrument of pleasure will eventually belong to the one who enjoys it more. Therefore, Foucault was not surprised by the scene of amputation (not castration) carried out at the end of the film: as the logical outcome of this, the penis will become woman's. Apart from being a provocative introduction to the examination of democracy, this movie, once considered scandalous and censored in many countries, may shed some new light on the notion of democracy as well. Namely, many of the countries where the film was banned were considered democratic at the time, just like those where its screening was allowed. A question that inevitably comes to mind is how this was possible, but also what would its fate be today?

I was invited by Ana Adamović and Milica Pekić to write an article about their project *Performing Democracy* (2019-2022), which I gladly accepted and suddenly found myself in the realm of democracy: a collection of 62 videos in which various people from Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia give their answers to the question "What is democracy?". Anyone who sees those videos can get an insight into a complex fabric of meanings and interpretations of this term, a term for which we can probably say to be one of the emptiest of all the empty signifiers in modern times. One of the peculiar facts is that most of the interviewees, although coming from three different countries, share the opinion that there is no democracy, that it has never existed, and that it is uncertain if it will ever exist. So, what does this notion actually mean? Democracy seems to be something that we equally know everything and nothing about. We seek for it even though we doubt it is achievable at all. The right knows how to instrumentalize it, while the left keeps debating over its basic principles on and on. That is to say, one gets the impression that most of the interviewees would agree with the statement that democracy is in crisis. In order to better understand the seriousness of the problem, simultaneously showing that it is not a peculiar Balkan issue, I suggest that we look at it from a broader perspective.

Some ten years ago, eight leading thinkers shared their thoughts on this question in the book entitled *Democracy In What State?*² This "untouchable emblem"³, as Alain Badiou called it, serves to grant its bearers a complete absolution of crimes when they are committed in the name of democracy. In the words of Wendy Brown, democracy has become "an altar before which the West and its admirers worship and through which divine purpose Western imperial crusaders are shaped and legitimated".⁴ Moreover, they all agree that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the ensuing global defeat of communism, marked a clear demarcation line in the history and the practice of democracy, a fact particularly important when analyzing the opinions of interviewees coming from the countries of the former Balkans.⁵ In this region, the process of installing a completely different economic system has been hidden behind

the smokescreen of introducing the multi-party system. At the same time, the official internationally-proclaimed narrative promoted democratization of countries and societies that had, at long last, become free from the so-called totalitarian subjugation imposed by different forms of communism. In a very short time, “the protagonists of the cold war – capitalism versus communism, imperialism versus national liberation – faded from the billboards, and a new titanic struggle between democracy against totalitarianism was proclaimed to a drumbeat of publicity”.⁶

In the opinion of Brown, democracy is an unfinished principle which specifies neither *what* powers must be shared among its different agents, nor *how* this rule is to be organized, nor by *which* institutions should it be carried out, while in a short time it served to enable “a merging of corporate and state power”.⁷ The changes that occurred after 1989 all took place so quickly that the people – demos itself – still fail to comprehend them, unable to keep themselves up to date with such changes, and far less to oppose them: “Powerless to say no to capital’s needs, they mostly watch passively as their own are abandoned”.⁸ Meanwhile, the thing that was presented to these newly democratized countries as an extraordinary achievement, democracy’s “most important if superficial icon, ‘free’ elections, have become circuses of marketing and management”.⁹ The process of de-democratization in the West has been fueled by total “domination of politics by capital, the overtaking of democratic rationality with neoliberal rationality, and the juridification of politics, globalization’s erosion of nation-state sovereignty, as well as the detachment of sovereign power from nation-states”.¹⁰

In the words of Slavoj Žižek, on the eve of the collapse of communism, “in the glorious days of 1989, they equated democracy with the abundance of Western consumerist societies and now, ten years, later, when the abundance is still missing, they blame democracy itself”.¹¹ However, what the general public failed to realize at the time is the fact that all those features that were taken to be synonymous with democracy and freedom (trade unions, universal vote, free education, freedom of the press, etc.) have been won “in a long, difficult struggle of the lower classes throughout the nineteenth century, they were far from a natural consequence of capitalist relations”.¹² Or, in the words of Wendy Brown, there is no compelling evidence that “democracy inherently entails representation, constitutions, deliberation, participation, free markets, rights, universality, or even equality. The term carries a simple and purely political claim that the people rule themselves.”¹³ However, for people to rule themselves, “there must be an identifiable collective entity within which their power sharing is organized and upon which it is exercised. (...) Globalization’s erosion of nation-state sovereignty undermines the former and neoliberalism’s unleashing of the power of capital as an unchecked world power eliminates the latter.”¹⁴

As a consequence of these processes, the majority of Westerners have now come to prefer “moralizing, consuming, conforming, luxuriating, fighting, simply being told what to be, think, and do over the task of authoring their own lives”.¹⁵ As it seems, the region of the former Balkans fits perfectly into this global image of de-democratization presented as the pinnacle of democracy. One gets the impression that people can only be forced to be free by coercion, while it has become “hard to imagine what could compel humans to the task of ruling themselves or

6 Daniel Bensaid, *Ibid*, p.16.

7 Brown, *Ibid*, p.46.

8 *Ibid*, p.47.

9 *Ibid*, p.47.

10 *Ibid*, p.48.

11 Žižek, *Ibid*, p.105.

12 *Ibid*, p.104.

13 Brown, *Ibid*, p.45

14 *Ibid*, p.50.

15 *Ibid*, p.55.

16 *Ibid*, p.56.

17 Ross, *Ibid*, p.98.

18 *Ibid*, p.97.

19 Agamben, *Ibid*, p.4.

20 Žižek, *Ibid*, p.111.

21 Ross, *Ibid*, p.95.

22 Bensaïd, *Ibid*, p.43.

successfully contesting the powers by which they are dominated”.¹⁶ In the words of Kristin Ross, “all today’s ‘advanced industrial democracies’ are in fact oligarchic democracies: they represent the victory of a dynamic oligarchy, a world government centered on great wealth and the worship of wealth, but capable of building consensus and legitimacy through elections that, by limiting the range of options, effectively protect the ascendancy of the middle and upper classes.”¹⁷ In other words, democracy has become a class ideology that allows “a very small number of people to govern – and to govern without the people, so to speak; systems that seem to exclude any other possibility than the infinite reproduction of their own functioning.”¹⁸

This fiction, in the words of Giorgio Agamben, may actually be “a screen set up to hide the fact that there is a void at the center”¹⁹, while providing the possibility to project various contents onto it. Žižek reminds us of Peter Sloterdijk’s thesis, “according to which the idea of Judgment Day, when all accumulated debts will be fully paid and an out-of-joint world will finally be set straight, is taken over in secularized form by the modernist leftist project, where the agent of judgment is no longer God, but the people”.²⁰ However, given the current state of prevailing apathy and the lack of any willingness to punish those who violate the law and the (democratic) rules of the game due to the actual suspension of law, it seems that what we are witnessing anew is an inversion and restoration of the belief in higher powers that are one day expected to punish the perpetrators and bring justice to the oppressed.

So, what could be the position of art within this complicated picture? Adding to this discussion, Kristin Ross reminds us of Arthur Rimbaud’s poem “Democracy”, written in late 19th century, which clearly marks the moment when the word democracy ceased to be used to express the demands of the people in a national class struggle, and instead started being used to “justify the colonial policies of the ‘civilized lands’ in a struggle on an international scale between the West and the rest, the civilized and the uncivilized”.²¹ Apart from its potential to reflect the social moment in which it was created, it seems that art can teach democracy one more thing: the production of scandals. Namely, what is needed is a permanent “democratic scandal”, as Jacques Rancière called it, or, as Daniel Bensaïd further argued: “In order to survive, [democracy] must keep pushing further, permanently transgress its instituted forms, unsettle the horizon of the universal, test equality against liberty. (...) Democracy is not itself unless it is scandalous right to the end.”²² If we now turn our attention back to the case of the scandalous Japanese movie mentioned at the beginning of this article, perhaps it will turn out to be an exceptionally democratic work of art, which draws inference from the ideas of liberty, equality and sharing economy to the furthest degree.

In the video material created as part of the project *Performing Democracy*, we are faced with an unusual reflection on the screen: two protagonists (in some cases there are three of them) talk to us directly in our face, and there are several minutes of silence at the beginning and the end of the video that seem to be provoking us to react, to reply, putting each one of them on the same level under observation, cleverly removing the mask we all wear in our everyday lives, at least for a few brief moments. The interviewees tell us that we can learn what democracy means from the bees, that the way we treat stray dogs is a litmus test that shows

how humane is our society, that democracy should eliminate “narrow-mindedness” of the society, that in this region democracy is like an infantile teenager, that its role is to ensure that every individual has the freedom of choice. In many cases, the interviewees identify and equate democracy with liberty, but it also stands as a guarantor for the right to remain invisible and out of the decision-making process; we are reminded that the Nazis also came to power through democracy, that the idea of a group that collectively steers the ship is better than the way Socrates envisioned the captain of the ship, that it is a mistake to believe that there was no democracy in communism, that its task is to prevent individual enrichment and plundering of those who are the weakest, that liberal democracy is not the same thing as democracy, that its aim is to ensure a certain level of quality of life and to grant equal opportunities to everyone, that the personal is political. We hear from them that in this region its biggest enemies are corruption and “party switching”, and that silence means the air is polluted contrary to all guaranteed human rights. For some of the interviewees, life in this region is more like living in slavery, while democracy is just a façade. We can also hear contrary opinions that democracy can only be won in the streets through permanent and unwavering struggle, while those who struggle for their goals in the virtual world expect the state institutions to do the same, fighting on their behalf.

With the arrival of capitalism in this region, individuality has come to the fore, and freedom itself is now defined as personal freedom, while any idea of collectivity has been wiped out. One of the problems of modern democracy lies in the question posed by Alan Badiou: “Of what objective space, of what settled collectivity, is democracy the democracy?”²³ This question also appears to be of key importance when we think about the former Balkans - until it becomes clear with what kind of collective we are dealing with we will not know what kind of democracy are we talking about. As an exercise, it might be useful to imagine how life would be like without it - would the disappearance of democracy also mean the vanishing of a whole range of ideas and phenomena it entails and is related to?

In this brief exploration, it is impossible not to pay heed to the fact that a new normal has arisen as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, which is also noticeable in the difference between the statements recorded before and those recorded after the spring of 2020, when suspension of guaranteed rights was further pushed to the extremes. The crisis of democracy is not just *our* problem, but apparently instead of living in the realm of democracy, we increasingly have the impression of living in a democratic empire. As Rosa Luxembourg once observed, “dictatorship consists in the *way in which* democracy is *used* and not in its *abolition*”.²⁴ Therefore, one might say we are dealing with a much worse situation when the democracy is manipulated and its principles and mechanisms are twisted and abused, than when it is officially rejected altogether. This strategic maneuver, used by many authoritarians to seize power, apparently serves to prevent any revolt and “desperate acts of violent popular self-defense [that] were examples of what Benjamin called ‘divine violence’.”²⁵

It remains to be seen whether democracy is a project that will outlive the 21st century. Because, when there is no collective of people, there can be no “power of peoples over their own existence”.²⁶ We have to wait and see what will be the role of art in all of that, but one of its tasks might be to

23 Badiou, *Ibid*, p.8.

24 Luxembourg in: Žižek, *Ibid*, p. 120.

25 Žižek, *Ibid*, p.115.

26 Badiou, *Ibid*, p.15.

27 Agamben, *Ibid*, p.5.

directly examine this complex problem in all its contradictions; otherwise, in Agamben's words, "any debate about democracy, either as a form of constitution or as a technique of government, is likely to collapse back into mere chatter."²⁷