

The winner takes it all
The loser standing small
ABBA, 1980

The Bank never goes empty

Matthias Reichelt

Criticism is everywhere – in art too. To criticize globalization and unrestricted neo-liberalism as it spreads to almost every corner of the globe is en vogue. The more radical the better. Theater, art exhibits, public art, performances, cinema, symposia. Renowned institutions such as the Kunstwerke in Berlin, or P.S. 1, the Whitney Museum and the MoMa in New York, also devote exhibits to forms of protest that are documented artistically or themselves appear as art.

All this can be integrated into the overall culture because so far, there is no political subject who would turn this protest into action against the system, or against “empire” (Negri/Hardt). Critical art is fed into the cultural circulation of commodities and to a cheering bourgeois intellectual clientele, who is informed in advance what to appreciate. Read the right newspapers and magazines, go to the right places, know what’s hip and talk about it in the right terms. The fact that an audience can appreciate artistically radical treatments of social questions does not however say anything about its political orientation. It has rather become socially acceptable to hold contradictory positions and political opinions. What is unseemly is to stick out, to contradict, to defend a solitary point of view at a party. Opportunism lives. It is in great demand because the possibility of attaining both financial success and social recognition has become quite rare. Thus adaptability and flexibility in opinion and orientation become increasingly important.

Since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the collapse of socialism in practice, political analysts, speech writers and correspondents have spilled vast amounts of ink heralding a new era of peace, globalized democracy, and expectations of economic and socio-political progress in the world’s poorest countries.

Not much of this has come to be. The “liberated” states have not necessarily become democratic. They were, however, thoroughly subjected to the power of the capitalist market, which at the local level seeks out corrupt beneficiaries in the form of pseudo-democratically elected heads of state, so that it can proceed unrestricted in imposing its mechanisms of exploitation on the people. Economies which were more or less functioning toppled and plunged millions of people into a new kind of poverty. Deregulation became a super-weapon. If many in the West believed that oppressed peoples had finally been liberated and would now be able to take their destinies into their own hands and gain access to the social standards of the West, they soon painfully discovered otherwise. Just a few kilometers beyond the old border between East and West Germany, the promise of flourishing landscapes could not be fulfilled. The old industrial combines and collective farms were broken up, and jobs disappeared along with them. Thanks to new reserve armies of workers from Eastern Europe and Asia, Western countries were confronted with an unprecedented level of wage dumping. Collective bargaining agreements, social security, and pensions schemes were put under pressure and gradually modified to the disadvantage of the employees. Armies of unemployed people emerged, accused by German politicians

of being unwilling to work. This line of reasoning justified reduction of welfare to a minimum and increased the appeal of low-wage jobs. While these policies do not produce new jobs, they increase the pressure on those still employed.

It is not so much the lack of jobs that is disastrous, as it is the scandalous living conditions of those out of work; the rejection, the uneasiness forced on all those who become unemployed. And the fear of the vast majority, who subject themselves to ever more severe constraints out of the worry of losing their jobs.¹

It remains a mystery how an increase in work hours coupled with a loss in wages is supposed to create new jobs. The irrationality of these policies, of “voodoo economics,” has gone so far that people are increasingly opting out, switching off.

Meanwhile, there is hardly any sign of a political subject – in the form of labor, or another kind of social movement. The unions tend to desperately try and maintain the living standards of their members, thereby losing sight of the complex international situation. They increasingly propose national solutions to the problem. There is a tendency towards protectionism, against those workers who are forced to go to work for rock-bottom wages because the situation in their countries of origin is so wretched. German workers and unionists often see these people as enemies rather than recognizing the global reach of the development and insisting on international solidarity.

In 1989, all utopian notions of social emancipation disappeared from peoples’ minds and were replaced by a small-minded “politics of the doable.” The result are reforms that do not even deserve the name. The connection between social democracy and the unions means that many officials are only capable of thinking within the system. Terms like “reform,” which used to evoke socio-political improvements for the general public, underwent a transformation of values. “Reforms” today refer to measures that relieve capital and place an ever-greater burden on workers, the unemployed and welfare recipients.² The concept of globalization is usually used today to refer to capital’s conditions of production and reproduction, and stands for the whole program: lower wages, longer working hours, the reduction of non-wage labor costs, the reduction in social spending.³

“In order not to remind people how they got here and who got them here, the label “globalization” is slapped onto the situation. It conceals nothing other than the vanishing of the borders that for a century had been held in place against the free development of capital, and which had been erected out of a fear of the red revolution and, subsequently, its consequences. After the fall of the wall, capitalism could spread beyond where it had first been stopped, not by Lenin and the Red Army, but even earlier by Bismarck and social security.⁴

These policies, which are primarily dictated by the IMF and the WTO, determine the conditions for loans to so-called Third World countries or to the countries of the

¹Forrester, Viviane: *Die Diktatur des Profits*, Munich and Vienna 2001, p.53

² Cf. Scheer, Hermann. “Globalisierung: Zur ideologischen Transformation eines Schlüsselbegriffs“ in: *Le Monde diplomatique* (Ed.): “Atlas der Globalisierung.“ Berlin 2003

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hermann Gremliza, column in *Konkret*, November 2004.

former East Bloc. They subject them, within the briefest period of time, to the neo-liberal strategy with its well-known, devastating effects. Nations are increasingly losing their economic as well as their political autonomy. The market regulates everything and limits the powers of the national governments. The fact that this has nothing to do with democracy was summed up by the Portuguese Nobel prizewinner for literature, José Saramago:

“When I talk about the market in this way, it’s only because in modern times it has been the quintessential instrument of the sole power that really deserves the name, namely the trans-national and trans-continental economic and financial power, a power that is not democratic, because the people have not elected it, that is not democratic, because it is not administered by the people, that is finally and ultimately not democratic, because it is not interested in the happiness of the people.”⁵

In Germany we have settled for the alternative between social democracy and Christian democracy, whose political programs can hardly be distinguished from each other, while the FDP [the Free Democratic Party] and Bündnis 90/Grüne [the Greens] tailor their policies to their clientele, the upper middle class. The working class is meanwhile so domesticated that it obediently endures all the sacrifices demanded of it.

“Life in the late capitalist era is a constant initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies himself with the power which is belaboring him. [...] His lack of resistance qualifies him as a reliable type.”⁶

But the system hardly needs reliable types anymore, as the 24-hour-a-day media onslaught is much stronger than all the parties and unions. Entertainment programming takes over what the politician’s speech can no longer achieve for an audience that would rather go to sleep or change stations than listen to repetitive formulas and platitudes. In a procedure similar to brainwashing, the TV consumer gets a daily delivery of the dominant ideological position: *Survival of the fittest*. In countless TV programs, people who have lost their last remaining dignity are presented to the nation as idiots. We gloat and at the same time are happy that we ourselves have not yet sunk to such depths. The all too clear message is hammered into our heads: You need to look after yourself, be strong and get rid of everyone else. In a further installment of this media pounding, even those who are themselves threatened with redundancy follow the social welfare “detectives” in the docu-soaps as they chase down freeloaders. Viewers take a mischievous pleasure in the merciless dedication of the investigators and the helpless excuses of the delinquents caught doing a small under the table job, or having concealed granny’s savings account from the welfare office. “Florida Rolf”⁷ has become a synonym for freeloading, while people who’ve made a killing like Ackermann, Schrempf⁸ and co. tend to be filed under “clever,” because they understand how to work the system.

⁵ In : *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 2004

⁶ Horkheimer, Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung* [*Dialectic of Enlightenment*]. Frankfurt am Main 1997 (1969), p. 162

⁷ *Translator’s note*: “Florida Rolf” became subject of a scandal when in 2003 it was revealed that he was living off of payments from the German welfare office of up to 1,900 € a month in a beachfront apartment in Miami.

⁸ *Translator’s note*: top-level managers recently accused of violating corporate law.

„Steal a little and they throw you in jail,
Steal a lot and they make you king.”⁹

Never sink so low that you cannot raise yourself above others! At the bottom of the hierarchy are people of other ethnicities, and subcutaneous racism is lived out. If this barrage does not suffice to drum the ideological message into every last person's skull, then there are still mass sports as a wonderful combination of consumption, diversion, competition and selection.

The masses of the industrial part of the world have the impression that it is ultimately about the individual, about favorably presenting their own particular type. But in the end, hundreds of millions of people dress the same, jump the same jumps, follow the same instructions, sweat for the same firm ass, sit silently at the juice bar, monitor each other's observance of the image regulations, and together foster their hatred of smokers, the weak, and baggy sweatpants. They do this without having the faintest idea that they are mass beings controlled by others.¹⁰

These developments lead to greater conformity in companies and offices. Everybody is subject to the pressure of proving themselves to management as important and irreplaceable. A push and shove mentality, intrigues, and defamations are tried and tested means for belittling others and proving oneself to the boss as valuable to the company, at least in the information department. In order to survive the next round of lay-offs, good behavior towards management has to be perfect. Previously flat hierarchies become vertical; formerly leftist set-ups, such as collectively led companies, are transformed into clearly hierarchical structures. The honeymoon period for alternative projects and islands is over.

The so-called 68er revolution has “fired its children” and revolutionaries and critical thinkers have become ardent defenders of capitalism (exceptions here prove the rule). Instead of “socialism or barbarism,” the motto has become “capitalism or barbarism.” That was the title – accompanied by a rhetorical question mark – of a special issue of the magazine “Merkur” in 2003. The authors relatively unanimously tear the – supposedly powerful and dominant – anti-globalization movement to pieces and instead praise capitalism as a benefit to humanity, particularly for poor countries. The accusation that mainstream discourse is determined by leftist theorists and NGOs who are darlings of the media, shows how blind and unrealistic some of these altered intellectuals are. Mathias Greffrath quite rightly points to the ignorance of those analysts who act as if they are the pariahs of a hegemonically leftist society.

There is quite a lot missing in these articles on ‘capitalism or barbarism’: Unemployment as a form of impoverishment for instance is not mentioned, but there are two treatises on the speculator's alienated suffering. What's also missing: The destruction of the environment, immigrants, wars over raw materials, the climate, GM agriculture, the conditions in Argentina after thirty years of IMF dictatorship...¹¹

⁹ Dylan, Bob: “Sweetheart like you” from the album *Infidels*, 1983

¹⁰ Ebermann, Tampert: “Die Offenbarung der Propheten. Über die Sanierung des Kapitalismus, die Verwandlung linker Theorie in Esoterik, Bocksgesänge und Zivilgesellschaft.” Hamburg 1995, p. 125 f.

¹¹ “Barbarische Anpasser,” in the column “Schlagloch” in *taz*, September 24, 2003.

On the other hand, a radical criticism of the neo-liberal development is particularly en vogue in a particular area of culture: the plastic arts and theater. It is as if art has had to take over the criticism of reality from other social entities.

The dialectical flipside of this coin however is the fact that it is precisely in this field that the precariousness of working conditions is being intensified, and that the protagonists, thanks to their commitment and artistic motivation, are willing to work for hardly anything until they keel over. There is a criticism of the conditions and their simultaneous acceptance and realization. Mark Terkessides pointed this out in *taz*.

We can assume by now that a critical exhibit on “precariousness” reproduces neo-liberal working conditions backstage – and this time there is hardly any money at all to compensate for the endless slaving away for the “project.”¹²

The new keyword is “internship status” and allows for masses of willing people to work without wages in the great hope of being eligible for a paid position – a hope that is hardly ever fulfilled.

The fact that, of all people, the heads of renowned cultural institutions are practicing the most outrageous wage dumping behind closed doors is considered a trifling offence no one wants to talk about. In these traditional bastions of leftist ideals, justifications come readily for the systematic exploitation of the weakest members of the team: There just isn’t any money, we’re working for a pittance ourselves and only keeping the whole thing afloat by the skin of our teeth anyway. And besides, you can only survive in the artistic field if you’re profitable – in other words, if you invest money in the program, but not in the staff.¹³

So what are the prospects, given all this pessimism? They are certainly not good, since we are still lacking a political subject capable of transforming a fundamental criticism of current conditions into action. Until then, we have no choice but to not let ourselves be made stupid or crazy by the hegemony of the apologies of neo-liberal capitalism, to engage in fundamental criticism, and to expose veiled euphemisms like “the new social pension,”¹⁴ or “precisely tailored services”¹⁵ for what they are: circumlocutions for prescribed cuts in state services. We have to defend ourselves against the condemnation of alternatives to the system and finally stop thinking of capitalism as humanity’s last cry.

That also means that we have to take every opportunity to express our criticism and make it as vivid as possible. At the moment this is happening primarily in the area of culture. Artists play an important role when they find images that forcefully present the systematic exclusion of people and thus contribute to a propagation of criticism.

¹² Terkessidis, Mark: “Konsumiert, was euch kaputtmacht!” *taz*, October 2nd/3rd, 2004.

¹³ Herbold, Astrid: “Im Land der unbezahlten Tätigkeiten. Der deutsche Kulturbetrieb ruht auf den Schultern von Praktikanten – stresserprobt und humorvoll geht es in die Ausbeutung” in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, January 9th, 2003.

¹⁴ From an ad by the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labor in *taz*, November 8th, 2004.

¹⁵ Ibid.

René Pollesch and Christoph Schlingensief are doing this in an impressive way for theater, and there are hopeful developments in film as well. A new generation of directors such as Hans-Christian Schmid, Oskar Roehler, Christian Petzold, Barbara Albert and others are increasingly concentrating on aspects of social reality. The contradiction, however, of the integration of criticism into the system, cannot be solved. In order for the social question to become a political question, to move from the arts section to an agenda, we need a broad extra-parliamentary opposition. Art could take on the talk of animation without allowing itself to be co-opted in any direct way. Elfriede Jelinek has pointed to the function of the artist in the Austrian context. Her statement can certainly be generalized:

“We hardly have any theoretical minds. There are people who speak up, but we don’t have anything comparable to offer. That’s why artists had to take over. No one else wanted to do the dirty work back then. And artists always do it anarchically. And that’s how it should be.”¹⁶

¹⁶ “Ich renne mit dem Kopf gegen die Wand und verschwinde.“ Interview with Elfriede Jelinek by Rose-Maria Gropp and Hubert Spiegel, *FAZ*, November 11th, 2004.