

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE IDENTITY LEAP BACKWARD

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Abstract: The goal of this study is the identification of the disintegrative effects that the current cultural politics of the governing elite in the Republic of Macedonia has had on the cultural system in the Republic of Macedonia and our analysis is based on several sociological theories. The starting point of this paper is the idea of a leaping evolution (Veblen) which states that there is a possibility for the imposition of certain leaps in the process of evolution, taken from the cultural dynamics of other societies. The intention to create an identity leap backwards in history is recognizable in the design of the contemporary cultural politics of the Republic of Macedonia. The present national identity of the Macedonian society is being redefined in a pathetic and megalomaniac manner with reference to tradition of antiquity, on the one hand, and to non-existent connections with foreign traditions, mainly European, from the nineteenth century. Simultaneously there is a perfid methodology taking place of latently erasing the collective memory connected to a long period of our history, namely the process of migration of the Slavs on the Balkans and the long-lasting existence of this culture to this day. Our analysis is focused on the cultural politics of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia

in the last decade. It shows an intensifying effort for emphasizing, reshaping and recreating certain elements of our own heritage ("inventing tradition", Hobsbawm). In the core of these endeavours there is a clearly recognizable ideological discourse, put in the function of reshaping the past and our view of it, even with methods of falsifying spiritual and material facts. Evidence for these tendencies can be found in the field of the priorities in the treatment of archaeology, conservation and presentation of the cultural heritage, in architecture and the shaping of the public space in general. The conceptual solutions designed in some of the social and humanistic sciences also allow a frame of preference of this inconsistency of the cultural politics and the creation of additional conditions for cultural trauma (Sztompka).

Keywords: cultural heritage, cultural identity, national identity, preservation of cultural heritage.

THEORY AND IDEOLOGY

In the study of the dialectics of the relation between heritage and identity it is epistemologically correct to start

from a concrete sociocultural area i.e. to move from the particular to the universal. In that sense, certain sociological theories and paradigms have inspired and are essential for some of the epistemological aspects of this paper. Namely, the main aim of our discourse is to apply some of these theoretical models in the study of the specifics of the recent cultural politics of the Republic of Macedonia.

One theoretical basis of this paper is Veblen's idea of a "leaping evolution", which is explained as the skipping of stages in the evolution of some less developed societies and cultures. Namely, under the influence of more developed societies and cultures they adopt readymade models in order to skip certain evolutionary stages in the way of going back and allocating old values in a contemporary context, where they objectively do not belong. If these leaps in evolution occur due to the compensation of social dynamics or as a result of catching up with the information technologies, then it will provide a new quality of conditions that are not retrograde but are just unburdened by the long development of the societal institutions and values that shortens the process of the acceptance of novelties. However, in order to achieve this, political elites need to look towards the future and not backwards to the past. They also need to work on institutional development and on the shaping of a social climate that encourages collective aspirations for the promotion of human existence and the setting of individual goals aligned with the perception of such a promotion ¹.

The Macedonian society and everyday cultural practices are preoccupied by the large number of changes made by the current political elite, that emanate its general politics (which include its cultural politics) and clearly point to the fact that all these political endeavours are not oriented towards an evolutionary leap forward. On the contrary, the leap is directed backwards toward practices abandoned by contemporary societies centuries ago. We will name this state of affairs, or rather this dynamics of a society with a realistic possibility for an accelerated movement forward that is being pulled backwards as "devolution", or as "retrogression".

The motives of the political elite can be first found in its intention of centralizing its political power - of establishing an authoritative system in which one small group (mentioned here as a "charismatic group") starts to occupy the complete power over the society and eventually establishes complete control over it. Furthermore, a glance at the cultural politics of this political elite reveals its emanation of the deeply rooted characteristics of human nature on which Tard bases his theory of imitation. Grounded on a multitude of practices from around the world, Tard infers that imitation, which he raises to the level of a universal law, moves upward down in human societies. Namely, his theory specifically refers to an idea of irrational imitation (as in "extra-logical mechanisms" of which Tard speaks of) related to the need of the inferior classes to mimic the higher classes in a greater sense, as a type of fashion trend where new values are simply uncritically adopted. In this case, our political elite tend to imitate old values (characteristic of past centuries), which legitimize more developed Western societies, or uncritically accepts their cultural heritage.²

The third important paradigm, whose ideologist have been Hobsbawm and Ranger ³, which was also adopted and followed by Giddens⁴, is the one related to the rethinking, the redefining, the changing or the reinventing of tradition. This attitude is initiated out of the postmodern way of eclectically making choices and arbitrarily combining elements from the past with the needs of the modern society. Moreover, it is also a consequence of the duality that spun from the era of modernity, which on the one hand, wanted to reject all rigid forms of previous traditional societies, and on the other, to create a basis for a formation of a new type of identity that would confirm and enable a logic of the capitalist mode of production and the necessary national framework for its development. In that sense, "the collective memory" is loaded up with eclectic and hybridized versions of already existing elements or with completely freely interpreted (invented) traditions (like customs, food, dress etc.), which are seen as more attractive for the promotion of certain

national cultural identities (similar to the example of the Scottish kilt).

Evident in the case of the cultural politics of the Republic of Macedonia are the attempts of "embedding" new traditions supposedly based in the Antique past or in the reinterpretation of historical facts, allegedly falsified by previous regimes. The predominant concept that the ruling elite uses to explain and to defend its actions is the word "reform". The propaganda machinery set up by this elite is used to embed a belief unto the consciousness of every individual maintaining that all of its actions are in the name of one unique goal - "to reform the society", i.e. to effectuate the changes needed for it to become as much alike to societies that have had already become a part of the EU. Consequently, any alleged reform is meant to contribute to the inducement of such changes into the internal structure of the individual itself as the very bearer of the process of reformation, obtaining a contemporary, "European" identity. However, even a superficial analysis of these acts of reform reveals them not to be inspired by the dominant cultural example of the societies that we need to be similar to, but by certain cultural phenomena positioned in certain historical periods in time. That same inspiration for these kinds of acts in the domain of politics, with an accentuated intent to apply an authoritative regime that lacks a legal regulative grounded on the principle of facelessness and equality, can be found as well in the feudal societies of the Middle Ages. The architectonic decor of the capital (Skopje), which symbolizes the undertaken reforms, is inspired by the transitional period from a feudal to an industrial system, all the while finding inspiration for "our identity" in Alexander the Great's famous campaigns. We want to adopt his intercultural and supranational achievements as our own, exclusively "Macedonian" heritage and redress them in nationalistic colour.

The programs of the backward leap, the endeavours to embed elements of long passed cultural strata (based on values essentially different from the contemporary ones) unto an already built cultural model, incite a process of

disintegration of the cultural system, of its segmentation into parts between which the relations of interchange that secure its survival and progress are impossible to be achieved. Namely, culture is a system of interconnected and mutually aligned parts. The connection of these parts is accomplished in different ways, but, as noted by Pitirim Sorokin within his theory of socio-cultural systems, the highest, most essential connection is the one of meaning/context or conditionality of any part of the culture of the leading social values⁵. According to him, the basic values of a society are the main shapers of its culture. Things such as economic relations, political system, architectural and artistic styles - painting, music and literature, the pattern of urbanization and others, symbolize the highest social values, and, we would say, thus legitimize its meaning⁶. Thus, led by Sorokin's opinion that values are the highest and most essential form of connectivity between the element of a cultural system, we arrive to the conflicting conclusion that we are trying to reform ourselves in a society whose highest values are freedom, equality and democracy, but, in turn, we are trying to achieve that by: a) establishing a political system based on lawlessness (or the will of the ruler) and a lack of freedom; b) which is symbolized by the architectonic decor that celebrates the secular power of the absolute monarch; and c) by shaping an identity inspired by a militaristic society with ambitions to conquer the world, that is to say a society with imperialistic ambitions.

We are aware of the many examples from history that, in an attempt to make the leap forward and reach those that have surpassed them, have tried to use the myth of a "glorious past" as leverage to propel them, but have instead created a tense situation from the confused mess of the past and the present. This state of affairs provides fertile ground for the actions of individuals and groups, related to various social elites, towards the manipulation of socio-cultural values.

What needs be mentioned is Bourdieu's attempt, through the concepts of habitus and of cultural fields, to go above the simplicity of the idea of social structure and of social

institutions versus the role of the individual, in particular, from the perspective of overcoming the contradictions that arise between the subjective and the objective factors of socio-cultural dynamics. In fact, habitus represents the relationship between the biological potential of individuals or groups to learn and the active participation of these individuals or groups in the societal processes (such as politics, religion, economics, ethnic relations etc.) of diverse fields. Derived from this is the cultural capital, which forms a sum from the opinions, knowledge and values characteristic for individuals or groups, and the societal capital, which presupposes the web of relations of different individuals or groups⁷.

In that sense, however, the Macedonian society is turns out to be a rare example where in the insistence of proving its own identity and in trying to catch up with the times and to compensate with all the stages that more developed societies have gone through, it creates a schizoid situation of the constructive factors, located in the collision between the traditional, the modern and the postmodern. It is also visible in the contradiction between the socio-political reality (recent policies developed by the ruling elite) on the one side, and the individuals or social groups (ethnic, religious, class, gender, political parties etc.) on the other. Such situation impedes the free development of the habitus, or rather its/their interaction/s with the cultural and the societal fields that affect its existence and that construct the inevitable essence of individual and group activity. Thanks to the "militant" hierarchy and the totalitarian "method" imposed by the political elites the habitus are blocked and undefined, while the diverse societal activities become obstructed as well.

The intention to achieve (or reinvent) an identity by leaping backward into history is evidently recognized in the design of the contemporary (current) cultural policy in Macedonia. There is an emphasized tendency to redesign the national identity of Macedonian society and culture in a megalomaniacal manner, with reference to the ancient tradition on one hand, as well as by weak ties to foreign

traditions (mainly European and mainly from the 19th century), on the other. In the same time, what is evident is a process of an undercover methodology of deleting parts of the collective national memory linked to a long period of its own history (for e.g., the Middle Ages, the Ottoman Empire, some aspects of the history of the nineteenth century, etc.). They are either neglected or used for political propaganda. Namely, those parts of history and cultural heritage and the identities associated with them go beyond the scope of the current priorities of the dominant political elites, which aim to attract the electorate with new and exciting narratives.

In a short period of time, a self-confidence and a sense of dignity arose, grounded in the "glorious past", assisting the mobilization of the collective energy as to achieve the desired backward leap⁸. However, this backward leap aims on cementing the past through the instalment of artefacts that will last, such as monuments associated with heroism that did not happen, architectural styles borrowed from other societies that practiced them centuries ago and urban projects that symbolize political systems outmoded long time ago etc.

Such an effort is not directed towards a leap forward, but is an obvious sign of the intention of returning into some sort of imaginary past, aimed to shape a social climate that will help in building identities characteristic of a traditional type of social organization. Essentially, it is the shaping of identities that adopt values like those of the feudal societies from the Middle Ages. Those identities or, rather, amorphous habitus will not defy the attempts of securing an authoritative political system and will not be proud of their freedom, furthermore they will be obedient subjects and not citizens of contemporary world.

THE "SPINNING" OF THE CULTURAL HABITUS

The political impact in the field of protection of the cultural heritage is not a new phenomenon because of the power of the discourse of cultural heritage itself. It is often

used as one of the mechanisms for imposing the worldview or interest of the elite in power. The manipulation through an architectural and an archaeological discourse takes place even nowadays. This can be observed in the trend of neglecting certain buildings or sites in order to remove traces of specific periods and/or communities, by reconstructing certain buildings that symbolize their own national or religious affiliation, or by selective conservation, in accordance with local or national agendas⁹, a characteristic present not only in the Macedonian society. These trends are particularly accentuated in newly reborn nations that return to classical prototypes upon which they ground their revival in their search for their identity roots. The problem of this kind of approach lies in the fact that the control over the cultural heritage can turn into a dangerous tool for manipulation, both in the terms of identity and in the terms of reshaping of the public space. Naturally, it is not at all the same what type of "methodology" will be used in this context: are the technics used subversive, but refined as well, or (as in our case) are they vulgar, unintelligent and primitive?!

This phenomenon can be observed through the current financial policy for the protection of our heritage that has been carried out by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia. On one hand, it reveals the intensifying efforts to highlight and recreate certain segments of the cultural heritage, while on the other, it shows the need for self-promotion that leads to the financing of expensive, large and imposing restorations and reconstructions or of "cosmetic" treatments of facades. This clearly indicates a certain ideological discourse that is in function of the reconstruction of the Macedonian national identity based on the ancient/mythological past. At the same time, everything that comes out of the scope of this view of the national identity is left outside of the state interest, and hence outside of state funding, by which it becomes condemned to a gradual disappearance. The emphasis on the cultural, ethnic and political continuity singles out primarily archeology, indicating an attempt to transform the past (and the view of it), by focusing on particular historical periods considered to be

politically more important by the ruling elite, for the process of confirmation of the national identity. Hence, sites that carry certain heritage become places of tension between political agendas, public interest, ethnic and religious communities and personal aspirations. We witness, sometimes, certain "parallel worlds" construed out of ethnic and religious traditions, like: Albanian vs. Macedonian, Christian vs. Muslim; as well as such solutions that point toward the need to erase the "socialistic" discourse in the favour of the "civic" one.

In that sense, we'd like to direct your attention to several other disputable issues - such as the influx of reconstructions (from Neolithic settlements to an early 20th century theatre) and of the manner in which the public space in the centre of Skopje is treated.

In light of the growing popularity of the mentioned reconstructions, it can be noted that there is a kind of architectonic creativity being currently ushered in Macedonia, which in a certain sense reflects the (historic) era of the Macedonian Reformation. The emphasized political interests of the ruling elite for presentation and popularization in the media leads the reconstruction, whether partial or complete, to gain popularity in the activities supported by the structures of the state. The political motivations behind the mass archeological excavations and the acts of reconstructing ancient theatres and fortresses/citadels emphasize the nationalistic focus directly tied to the questions of identity. The main problem of this approach is that the goal of the reconstruction is not the (re)presentation of a historical reality, but to foremost underline the continuity of our own nation. The surge of the fabricated and inauthentic "historical" monuments compete with the true heritage and blur the lines between the real and the fictitious, arising the questions regarding the future of the authentic and the complete concept of the protection of the cultural heritage¹⁰.

Another problem that defines the political attitude towards the cultural heritage is its treatment of the contemporary heritage. Modernist buildings from the period of the 50s to the 70s of the past century are being irreversibly reshaped, in such a way that even the possibility of approp-

riate future conservatory intervention is being diminished. This kind of approach illuminates an unprofessional and unethical conduct, as well as an insensibility to the need of preservation of important manifestations that are part of the national memory (such as the ones from the socialist era, when, perhaps unexpectedly, culture and art adopt the language of modernity). Hence, the definitive decisions surrounding the problems of protection become political, while the theoretical and technical recommendations are being swept aside.

There is one more problematic tendency that relates to the previous, which concerns the desire to change the central public spaces of the cities, particularly visible in the capital city of Skopje. These examples of the influence that the power centres exert upon the cultural heritage bring forth a retrograde process in the Macedonian tradition of conservation, with a return toward the tendency of "beautification" and of spectacular reconstruction directed to media popularity. The 'Skopje 2014' project is an architectural, as well as a socio-cultural turning point that clearly expresses the efforts of the current political and, unfortunately, part of the intellectual elite that inclines toward the ruling ideology. It is a brutal intervention, done in an unprofessional manner and without any social consensus in the symbolic and the aesthetic field of representation and adding dynamics to the public space that correlates to the cultural heritage and the collective memory. This is the reason why the urban space is in direct danger of being imposed with the aesthetic values of the uneducated elites and the instalment of those same values as universal. A similar effect derives from the tendency to make their efforts of beautification of the environment perceived as a necessity for every generation, past, present and future.

An inherent part of the "dramatizations" of the public space are the new monuments that are trying to create, in their own narrative, the illusion of the combined, supposedly ancient origins of the Macedonian culture and the ones dedicated to the history of the struggle of the Macedonian ethnic, national and cultural identity, specifically those related to personalities and events from the 19th and 20th centuries.

The eclectic selection of meanings related to the genesis of the Macedonian cultural and political history indicates in itself a desire to change some historical paradigms, especially those opposing the historical narratives that were recognized during the socialist period. Such monumental landmarks cause disputes within the multicultural body of the Macedonian society as well – they represent the preference for the genesis of the Macedonian ethnic culture versus the cultural history of other ethnic communities in Macedonia. Also symptomatic is the insistence on already outdated forms of artistic expression. These forms possess the aesthetics of the memorial landmarks that, besides being anachronistic, also imply cheap and kitsch visual structures that reflect the mind-set of the poorly educated political elite.

Furthermore, another problematic aspect of the current cultural politics is the ever more present model of imitation of historical buildings, which presents itself twofold: as completely new buildings or as a modification of existing modern facades. The old is altered to look new and the new is altered, in turn, to look old. Such practices grow into the formation of new structures, or pseudo-monuments, whose existence is legitimized by a wrongly interpreted national sense. This is also manifested through disproportionate and illogical bricolage of quasi-quotations of an architectural heritage of European provenance, from the period of the 18th to the early 20th centuries, which was only partly and in traces present in Macedonian architecture. The so-called baroque and neo-classical aesthetics, clearly indicates the need to compensate for the monumental-decorative structures that emanate meanings associated with power and welfare. These practices are in complete collision with the actual situation of contemporary Macedonian society, and are closely associated with brutal totalitarianism and cheap design of scenery, aimed to create a false cultural habitus.

In addition to the architectural design, another example that suggests a tendency to conceptualize a new cultural history is the very structure and systematization of the current cultural institutions in Macedonia, such as the museums of VMRO (Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for

Sovereignty and Independence - Museum of VMRO - Museum of the Victims of the Communist Regime) and the Archaeological Museum of Macedonia. The choice of the artefacts presented and the overall conception of the museums is again in the function of singling out those values of the cultural heritage or of history that would confirm the ideological matrix dictated by the new political elites in the context of redesigning the Macedonian national identity. On the other hand, a closer look at the quality and the manner in which the objects themselves, the museum collections and the historical narratives that they represent are carried out and presented, reveals an evident tendency to centralize decision-making factors within state elites who put themselves in the role of absolute arbiters. Thus the professional community loses its power and its role, which results in a decrease of professionalism and in the diminishing of the quality of the museum exhibitions.

„Socio-cultural entities that are historically and constantly exposed to a “cultural trauma” (drastic change in the value systems accompanied by dramatic implementation of the normative regulations) are subjected to frequent changes of the basic principles of building of cultural politics. They also tend to manifest an almost visible manipulation towards the processes of reconsideration of their own identity.”¹¹

Thus, the present Macedonian cultural politics, having its impact on education, science and in the process of creating symbolic public space as well, is at the same time a cause and a consequence of cultural trauma that has been entangled in the tissue of the contemporary Macedonian society.

CONCLUSION

The state of affairs within Macedonian society has shown all the characteristics of cultural trauma in a period of more than two decades, in which it had established its sovereignty and independence, along with the concept of its national identity. This is an ongoing process manifested through the prospect of ideological, political, economic, identity and cultural transformations, often conflicted, economically devastating and politically intense in form. These conditions represent a direct

intrusion into the "collective memory" as well, generating dubious, inauthentic, and downright false "recollections/memories". Even more complex was, and is, the concept of Macedonia's leaning towards euro-integrations, as well as its positioning on the map of the contemporary global tendencies, which very often results in controversial, arrogant and sloppy solutions and products.

In addition to all those already existing problems being a transitional country, the cultural trauma pertaining to the criteria of the valorisation of the past, the present and the future is further complicated by the uncritical, brutal and inconsistent imitation of anachronistic values and megalomaniac tendencies to establish a certain kind of special historical and cultural significance, which results in the alleged archaic story of the origin of the Macedonians. Such collective social frustration takes us away not only from the essential and from the professional behaviour towards our own cultural heritage, but also deepens the existential fears and tensions in the very social tissue of the Republic of Macedonia. Instead of acting as an integrating factor, cultural politics becomes an additional reason for devastating the social integrity and the cultural identity as well.

Defined through local and global cultural politics, cultural heritage represents one of the focal questions and phenomena around which the new architectonics of the dynamics of the relation between past, present and future is built in contemporary culture. The fear of the eventual physical devastation of the material and the spiritual culture as a result of the recent civilizational controversies is as much of a strong motive to preserve cultural heritage, as is the question of identity. Moreover, it can be noted that the diverse cultural values in fact round the image of the universal cultural identity.

ENDNOTES

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