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On contours of urban revolts in Maribor: waning industrial heritage and shattering of post-industrial dream¹

INTRODUCTION: MARIBOR FROM 1988 TO 2012

Maribor is the second largest city with around 100 thousand inhabitants located in the North-eastern Slovenia, in the region of Styria that borders Austria. In the 1930s Maribor became known as “Manchester of (first) Yugoslavia” thanks to its booming textile industry and it also saw an impressive industrialization in socialist times. However, the city has remained largely unknown -except to its immediate neighbors- until it was catapulted in the center of discussions in 2012: Maribor became the *European Capital of Culture* (ECC), and even more importantly, in late November of the same year the mass urban uprisings against the political establishment took off and sparked the series of protests all across Slovenia. This resulted in mass movement that should be seen within the frame of ongoing struggles of the European periphery against the dominant EU-neoliberal handling with economic crisis.

But if the present crisis is getting ever more brutal face on the periphery, then we must not ignore that certain continuity of crisis and market brutality followed Maribor from late 1980s. Let us not forget that Maribor’s workers set the stage of the biggest workers’ protests in the history of socialist Slovenia. In June of 1988 more than 10 thousand workers from all the factories occupied the streets for a week. In this essay I propose to read together both urban revolts –despite their differences in terms of the class composition and political demands– as the markers of the end of certain historical period. The revolt in 1988 announced the defeat of socialist industrialization, while 2012 shattered the capitalist dream of post-industrialization. The private-public strategy of deindustrialization was most emphatically captured by the ECC’s mission of urban revitalization for the industrially decayed urban milieu. It was hoped that creative industries will overcome unemployment (19%) and growing indebtedness of the city.² Yet, the recent urban revolt in Maribor did not happen as a simple consequence of the ECC’s failure. Rather, the urban revolt was a political

¹ I have to thank Franc Trček and Tomaž Škela for their valuable comments for preparation of this essay, and Aleksandra Berberih Slana (*Museum of National Liberation*, Maribor) for the permission to publish photographs.

² These are officially registered unemployed (source *Employment Service of Slovenia*: http://www.ess.gov.si/trg_dela/trg_dela_v_stevilkah/stopnja_registrirane_brezposelnosti).

answer to a deeper structural crisis. My thesis could be read in parallel to theoretical observation done by Andy Merrifield, who poignantly demonstrates a dialectical relationship between the forces of “strategic embellishment” (here ECC) and “insurrection” (here uprising):

This dialectic is immanent in our current urban-global condition, and respective antagonists feed off one another in dramatic ways. They are both immanent within the upheaval of our neoliberal market economy, just as Marx said that a relative surplus population was immanent in the accumulation of capital; and therein, borrowing Benjamin’s valedictory words, ‘we can begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled’.

This dialectic of “surplus population” and the desired “strategic embellishment” is unquestionably strongly at work in the historico-urban fabric of Maribor, but one needs to be alert of its specificities. Maribor has been undergoing a long process of urban (under)development that brings together the complex interplay of trajectories of the past socialist industrialization and undergoing capitalist de-industrialization. This contribution will outline three important strategies that might shed some light on the recent uprisings: 1. Death of industrial culture and infrastructure of Maribor; 2. Shattering of the post-industrialist dream via ECC and 3. Ongoing urban revolt that is building an alternative infrastructure of direct democracy and management.

JUNE 1988: THE BREAK-UP OF SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA IN INDUSTRIALIST MARIBOR

Andreja Slavec made a good study on industrialization of Maribor, which unfolded in different stages: after the initial phase that expanded thanks to the railroad infrastructure in 1850s -the railroad Vienna-Trieste was of utmost importance for the Habsburg monarchy- the second most important period came in 1930 with the booming textile industry and emerging factories.³ However, Maribor as a city grew tremendously from 1950s onwards when it entered the golden age of socialist industrialization. Three industrial branches were of vital importance for the industrial success: metal (development of cranes, *Metalna*; Maribor’s foundry, production of cars and trucks, *TAM*), textile industry (*MTT*) and electro-metal industry (*Elektrokovina*). The industrial growth brought to Maribor workers from other sister republics. During the 1960s a major breakthrough happened in the cosmetic (*Zlatorog*) and construction industry (montage of

³ Slavec (1992; *Industry of Maribor*, FF Ljubljana). The documentary film *Fabrika Maribor* (dir. Bojana Rudl, 2009) nicely presents 160 years of industrial development.

houses, *Marles*). Slavec correctly argues that Maribor was on the beneficiary side of the market reform that took place in 1965.⁴ The market reform was designed to transfer political power onto micro level, that is, to workers and social(ist) enterprises. Despite its counter-tendency that strengthened the role of management over workers in enterprises, the reform at least in Maribor partially succeeded to further develop independent capitals. Moreover, it was in this situation that a demand for the University of Maribor was created and was also founded in 1975. Broadly speaking, the creation of University answered the need –in a fordist fashion⁵– for the education of new cadres in the growing industries and also was enabled by the investment in the knowledge, which would be used in industry. Maribor’s urban landscape with its social housing, factories and other “industrialist” infrastructure was born in those times and lives vividly in the memories of older generations and in new industrial ruins, such as vacant factories.

However, the fairy tale of socialist industrialization ended in the late 1980s, when Yugoslavia underwent a major economic crisis. The rising inflation, growing unemployment, intensified exploitation (more work for less payment) brought a general sense of social insecurity. The internal conflicts between republican elites were further strengthened by harsh austerity policies from IMF that Yugoslavia needed to implement if it wanted to refinance the debt.⁶ The major political event for Maribor took place in 1988, which announces the beginning of the end of socialist Yugoslavia. In June 1988 workers of the biggest enterprise TAM after months of low wages decided to take on the streets. Their walk was joined by workers of all other major factories. Against the sense of social insecurity and imposed austerity, workers were able to build ties and sense of solidarity. More than 10 thousand workers occupied streets, squares, railroad station and strategic routes in Maribor. The strike went on for a week and pressurized the management of factories, which needed to make some concessions. However, the workers’ opposition –even if strong and important for later trade union movement– came too late. Let us not forget that it was in this period when the whole socialist block was crumbling. Importantly, already next year the very first bankruptcy of the social(ist) enterprise in

⁴ I have researched mostly the negative consequences of the market reform, which resulted in the strengthened competition between socialist enterprises, rising structural inequalities between core and peripheral regions in Yugoslavia, but also intensified exploitation of labour power. See my PhD (2012: 241-319, <http://www.ung.si/člilibrary/doktorati/interkulturni/21Kirm.pdf>).

⁵ One can detect also (proto)postfordist dimension in this process, which saw the rise of technocracy (management) and strategic importance of knowledge for (new) industries. Even the financing of the University started happening through *Self-managed Interest Groups*, which were mostly represented by big enterprises. For the market tendency in socialism see also Johana Bockman (2011, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-wing Origins of Neoliberalism*, Stanford University Press).

⁶ For details see Woodward (1995, *Balkan Tragedy*. Washington DC: The Brookings institution)..

Yugoslavia took place. The shoe factory *Lilet* was privatized in 1990, and due to continuing delays of wage-payments workers started to occupy the factory day and night.⁷ *Lilet* was finally closed down and so began the end of the industrial age of Maribor.

Contrary to the established narrative, which made Slovenia a “success story” of transition without neoliberal orthodoxy, one needs to revise this fairy tale and conclude that the transitory processes on the periphery of Slovenia showed a very brutal face right from the start. The transition started already in late 1980s and after what we could ironically call the first 5-year plan of deregulation and de-industrialization, which took place from 1989 to 1994 and resulted in catastrophic socio-economic consequences for the everyday life of majority of people in Maribor. Most of the above mentioned industries went bankrupt and were closed down (e.g. *Lilet*, *MTT*, *TAM*) especially due to the loss of the Yugoslav markets and also due to their partial integration in the military-industrial complex of Yugoslav People’s Army. A few surviving enterprises were rationalized and massively shrunk their economic activities (e.g. *Metalna*), others were cheaply sold to the foreign capital (e.g. *Zlatorog* was bought by Henkel). The unemployment rate in Maribor reached around 25% and what was even worse around 70% of those stayed long-term unemployed, what Marx would call “surplus population”. Even in the first years after 2000, when the rate of unemployment started dropping and economic situation “normalized”, the major 30 enterprises all together employ less workers than the factory TAM in the 1980s (almost 9000).

It goes without saying that the industrial infrastructure deteriorated and with it, the whole urban landscape became radically transformed. Maribor became the monument to the past, both to *Yugoslavia*, as it brought together many people from all over the former country, and to *industrialist times* that provided Maribor with socio-economic prosperity. However, it seems that recently beside the haunting industrialist specter from the past, the city is haunted by a dream of post-industrialized future.

EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2012: DREAM OF DE-INDUSTRIALIZATION BY CULTURAL EMBELLISHMENT

Every major project holds a promise, or is interwoven with a dream of future. To understand the dream of *European Commission* in the light of the *European Capital of Culture* one does not need to enter into long hermeneutical research, but simply look at the surface, on its most transparent level: the dream-mission of ECC is to commodify the culture and supply Europe with new de-industrialized creative industries. As is written

⁷ See <http://www.muzejno-mb.si/novo/spomenik-mariborski-industriji.html> (in Slovenian). I have to thank to Tomaž Škela for some valuable insight of these events.

on their internet site, ECC fosters tourism in the region, promotes cultural exchange in Europe, and most of all, it works as a re-organization of the creative potentialities.⁸ According to the study of Palmer from 2004 ECC has become the major “catalyst” of urban revitalization and most of interviewed representatives of the local organizations enthusiastically confirmed this thesis.⁹ Initially it seemed that Maribor finally got its historical chance: it became nominated for the European Capital of Culture (2012) with Portuguese city of Guimarães, it was also nominated for European Capital of Youth (2013) and was granted the organization of the *University Winter Olympics* (2013). The last project – Olympics – failed due to the insufficient funds, while ECC started functioning as a collective dream for new Maribor. It was seen as a possibility to overcome the “peripheral” and marginalized position that it acquired vis-à-vis the center (Ljubljana). Local patriotic tensions would be overcome in the team spirit that would be beneficiary for the regional development and revitalization of Maribor that would attract young.

However, this utopian promise of de-industrialized future soon hit hard rocks. The ECC’s organizational committee was faced not only with folkloristic tensions between Ljubljana and Maribor, but also with the troubled local authorities, where now the former mayor of Maribor, Franc Kangler, already by mid 2011 received 15 different criminal charges. I do not wish to enter into discussion of the complicity between the ECC and local municipality, but would rather like to focus on results of the ECC policy, what it actually brought to the city itself. And not all was negative.

Let us first start with positive effects: there was a wide range of inspiring events that connected local cultural groups and projects with exciting guests from abroad. I would like to stress especially one long-term project that sprung and went beyond the mission of ECC. *Urbane Brazde* (Urban Furrows¹⁰) is a collective that runs many projects within the frame of the Center for alternative and autonomous production (CAAP): the project to re-connect urban and rural communities in and around Maribor that would nurture sustainable ecological production and distribution (ecological farm); a project of library to store old seeds; projects that promote urban gardening and bicycle culture; digital nomad workshops that produce video material and lectures; and other activities. *Urban Furrows* ploughed through the old-fashioned division between rural and urban and attempted to build a different community that brought together at first glance odd

⁸ This very uncreative discourse on creative industry can be reached in the promotional video of ECC and introductory text see: http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/doc413_en.htm.

⁹ The study of Palmer was done already in 2004 and showed the positive results of the majority of the interviewed cities (80%). See: http://ec.europa.eu/culture/key-documents/european-capitals-of-culture_en.htm, especially part II

¹⁰ See <http://brazde.org/> (in Slovenian).

mix of different generations, professions and political affiliations.¹¹ This is a project that is self-sustainable and will continue with its work on a more long-term basis.

Contrary to these positive developments one needs to critically conclude that the most important mission of ECC was not accomplished. The mission being the structural embellishment and development of cultural infrastructure. Haussmann of today cloaked in fancy creative discourse of Florida, does not need to destroy anything, since the industrial ruins are omnipresent, rather it integrated arts and cultures in the fabric of urban life, opening the nexus of all social relations to capitalist subsumption. But the creative plan did not work and there will be extremely little cultural infrastructure left in Maribor after the end of local ECC. What was designed to trigger the local and regional creative industries is at the moment (still) running on a large degree of self-exploitation, and voluntary activism. Many “creative” young people and their exciting projects are again left to themselves, that is, to the market discipline. ECC did not prevent the tide of rising unemployment, which has reached almost 19%. Moreover, some of the funds of ECC have been “lost” or spend for unknown municipal activities.

Since this overall evaluation is rather negative, it does not come as a surprise that local organization of ECC was the loudest when late in 2012 massive uprisings took place. It is now an extremely popular thesis that the urban revolt in Maribor happened due to the rising “self confidence” and “spirit” of ECC. In this respect, I share a critique launched by a philosopher Boris Vezjak¹² who correctly demonstrated that this self-imposed narcissism by the organizers of ECC was only interested to credit themselves for the urban renaissance. My thesis argues furthermore that the urban revolt happened as a side effect, or even as a negative reaction to the failure of ECC in its grand cause for the urban revitalization.

NOVEMBER 2012: URBAN UPRISING RELOADED

The global economic crisis started taking negative toll in Slovenia. The last governments, centre-left or right-wing, competed in the upgrading of neoliberal agenda, while the “recommendations” from abroad demanded ever more austerity and privatization of the whole social reproductive apparatus with state enterprises and banks. The apathy has been a frequent expression of the citizens attitude to the structural problems that region and city of Maribor have been encountering for a long time. Beside the rising unemployment in last years, what is particularly worrisome is ris-

¹¹ There were many other examples of positive projects, such as *Cinema Udarnik*, but I would need to evaluate these contributions on another occasion.

¹² For a multiple critical evaluation of ECC see also Dialogi n. 11-12/2013 <http://www.aristej.si/eng/dialogi/index.html>.

ing private indebtedness, which forces many into dependency on charity organizations (*Red Cross, Caritas...*) that deal food and clothes and are already over-stretched. A larger amount of foreclosures and bankrupt smaller enterprises made the situation extremely harsh. In the circumstances of failed cultural embellishment and economic devastation, in autumn 2012, the local municipality with now former mayor Franc Kangler decided to introduce a massive system of radars for speed limits. Boris Vezjak stated that “more than 20,000 people were issued with speeding tickets in only two weeks – in a city of 100,000 inhabitants. There was a sense that residents’ household budgets were being targeted”.¹³ The sense of clear social injustice accumulated, once the information about the company leaked out; it was a certain private public project that went through personal ties of mayor, who has been found implicated in many corruption affairs without any juridical consequences.

People were enraged to say the least. However, nobody expected that the public rage will be articulated or will transgress the usual ranting in the newspaper and critique of intellectuals. This time, as with every emancipatory politics, the unpredictable dimension unfolded in most radical way. What started as trivial, for some vandal, night attacks on the radar systems spread with force in front of the municipality office, where the small group of people started calling for an uprising. The event was then organized via Facebook and in the last weeks of November and early December the main square¹⁴ hosted thousands of people. The major event happened on 26th November, when 15 thousand people gathered and demanded the resignation of both the corrupt mayor and his local municipality. The uprising that started calmly and was full of families and kids was violently dispersed by police who used batons, excessive amounts of tear gas and other repressive methods. This triggered a violent response with groups of young people pushing onto the municipality office, burning trash bins and using fire crackers. The images circulated all Slovenia and public rage – due to the cynical responses by political establishment – accumulated. What was a small sparkle in late November spread all across the country and shaped the nature of the mass social uprising. Slovenia encountered the first major revolt since its independence, which happened without the organizational help of established institutions (party, trade union, church...). In December of 2012 and still going into 2013 the pop-

¹³ For details see Vezjak’s article on the reasons of the uprisings: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2013-01-10-vezjak-en.html>.

¹⁴ See the photo: the square of freedom and in the middle of it the Monument to People’s Liberation by sculptor Slavko Tihec who participated in the modernist movement that created new monuments to revolution in Yugoslavia.

ular uprising happened in many small towns of Slovenia,¹⁵ and was joined in by general strikes and trade unions' support.

The mass protests created new organizational platforms, which radically shook the local ruling political class and also participated in the struggle of European periphery against the austerity policies. Looking retrospectively, one can understand the reasons for the revolt in the light of slow but insistent adoption of neoliberal reforms from 2004 onwards, when both governments "left"-center and rightwing privatized state-owned companies and the social service (what remained from welfare state). But in the last years, the economic crisis has hit hard in the center of the society, and not only on those on the margins. The central demand of the uprisings was negative: It is enough, they are done (*gotovo je, gotovi so*). People demanded the overthrow of the whole political class, while discussing the alternative agenda on transformation of current state of affairs has been only developing recently. What is important to state is that the most immediate political goals of the uprising were achieved: the mayor of Maribor Franc Kangler had to resign under public pressure, but also on the national level due to the mass protests, the government of Janez Janša resigned later, while the coalition partners left the sinking boat.

If the major political demands of the uprising were accomplished, majority of the groups, old and new political organization of dissent do not have a clear agenda, what will come after. The economic crisis is still there and the major institutions of representative democracy remain intact. Moreover, the new transitory government, lead by the first woman PM Alenka Bratušek, has adopted a less aggressive, even reconciliatory tone that attempts to integrate the critique of mass protest. Despite this victory and concession on the side of the ruling establishment, one has to be very aware that this situation is only temporary and that the new political platforms will have to continue working both on the level on streets (social movements) and within more institutionalized forms, which would lead to a veritable Left Party in Slovenia, which would both contribute to the struggles on/of the periphery.

CONCLUSION: HOW DOES "MARIBOR" CONTINUE?

It would not be exaggerated to conclude that the political efforts and effect of the uprising started receiving strongest shapes in Maribor, in the city that saw the first mass political mobilization after almost 25 years.

¹⁵ The last months of mass urban protest have brought together many different social groups and individuals of different political affiliations and generations, young and old, workers and students, queers and precarious, ecologists, anarchists and socialists. All have been demanding a deeper social change. Instead of the usual complaining from the couch, people stepped into the realm of public protest. For details on the emergence of the mass movement see my text: <http://www.newsocialist.org/679-a-ghost-is-haunting-slovenia-the-ghost-of-revolution>.

Political platform of the protest started waging two different and concrete political struggles: *firstly*, some groups organized their support for new program and independent mayor. The local elections in mid March saw the electoral victory of Andrej Fistravec, an independent and critical intellectual, who has been present in the local scene already for years. The trouble remains with the official municipality's council, which is still full of the members of established political parties. The council will unquestionably stall the democratisation of the political process. *Secondly*, there has been an important direct democratic effort done by "Initiative for city council"¹⁶ that organized the district and other communal communities. These new democratic platforms are seen both as forum for the discussion and possible influence for municipal budget and planning, which both re-invents the self-management tradition and also opens the example for other cities.

If both aspect of the political process from below and form already institutionalized form will cooperate and transform the state of affairs is a whole different question, which is too soon to be answered upon. But what is important is that the politics itself was taken away from those that are accomplices of the present crisis. Politics was also taken away both from nostalgia of industrialist times and neoliberal enthusiasm of deindustrialized dreams of ECC. If Maribor already attempted to answer in 1988, it has answered again, politically, in 2012 starting to redefine what their city and also the "right to the city" is. If in 1988 Maribor signaled the fall of socialism that meant also fall of welfare state, could it be that this time we hear the bells of neoliberal death? This remains the question addressed by new Maribor, but is much larger than Maribor. What is more clear is that the uprising opened a future for different Maribor that opposes both the imposed austerity and position of periphery. Opposite to this, the struggle illuminates on ways how the periphery today becomes very center of both politically engaged thought and revolutionary action.

¹⁶ Only in Slovenian: <http://www.imz-maribor.org/>