

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ



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THE AGE OF CULTURE

Abstract: *The paper deals with the presence of culture and its impact on social life as a whole, that is with its transformation from a private pastime to a pervasive social phenomenon. Culture has become ambiguous and while on the one hand it represents a positive social reality, on the other hand it is the enemy of everything that the liberal holds dear – reason, universal right, personal liberty, free inquiry, cosmopolitanism, critical reflection – it becomes the enemy of the civilization.*

Key words: *culture, West, politics, tradition, nationalism, civilization, philosophy.*

One of the most remarkable aspects of the century from which we have just emerged was a dramatic inflation of the role of culture. As long as culture had been confined to such figures as Bach and Balzac, it could have little impact on social life as a whole. It was both too specialist a pursuit, and too minority an affair. In fact, far from exerting much social influence, it could provide a refuge from modern society for those who found it spiritually bankrupt. Culture represented a world of absolute value, which could only be degraded by entering upon the sphere of politics or economics.

With the growth in the early 20th century of what Theodor Adorno named the culture industry, however, this situation was drastically altered. For the first time, culture was now just another branch of commodity production. As such, its influence was to be felt everywhere one looked. It was now the incessant din of culture, not just the bear pit of politics, we needed a refuge from. Culture, once a cloistered private pastime, was now a pervasive social phenomenon. It was bound up with public institutions, just as it was in the days of the tribal bards, court musicians and state-sponsored playwrights. As with the artists of earlier times, it served definite social functions. It was as though the postmodern had returned to the pre-modern.

There was another sense, too, in which culture loomed large in the twentieth

century. This was culture not as the arts, but as a way of life. For revolutionary nationalism, which throughout the middle decades of the 20th century was busy re-fashioning the globe from Vietnam to Angola, culture was the very stuff of politics. Place, roots, custom, tradition, kinship, language, symbol, collective identity: culture in this broad sense of the word was no longer an escape from politics. Instead, it was the very language in which political demands were being framed.

Culture in its 'high' or minority sense sought to embody the most fundamental of human values. In doing so, it offered a common ground on which we could meet, regardless of our social or political differences. As such, it was meant to be a force for reconciliation. Now, however, in a world of clashing ethnic groups, religious sects and emerging national identities, culture had become part of the problem rather than of the solution. It was what people were prepared to kill for. This made one rather nostalgic for the days when culture meant Bach and Balzac. However privileged such an idea of culture might be, it was at least unlikely to dismember human bodies.

How did all this affect the political left and right? In the days when left politics meant class struggle and industrial conflict, culture was simply an agreeable bonus. If some left-wing militants could aspire to reading Rimbaud or admiring Rem-

brandt, so much the better. But it was not politically essential. Nor was the broader sense of culture -- culture as a specific way of life - much relevant to the left. Socialism was about internationalism, scorning what it saw as provincial pieties. Local allegiances were more an obstacle to its goals than an aid to them.

This was not true, however, of the women's movement, for which language, history and identity were paramount. Nor was it true of the most powerful international movement of the time. Its name, ironically, was nationalism. National liberation movements proved to be far and away the most successful revolutionary current of the modern age, as one client nation after another struggled free from colonial power. This represented a momentous shift from politics to culture. What mattered now, so it seemed, was less poverty, property and exploitation than customs, beliefs and traditions. This was one sign of a transition from modernity to postmodernity. Culture, however, was not the preserve of radicals. The far right wing, too, was much preoccupied with the idea. Roots, homeland, symbol, tradition, spectacle, intuition, ethnic identity: after the Nazis, we have no need to be reminded of how such notions can tear men and women to pieces as well as inspiring them to throw off political oppression. Culture in this sense is the enemy of all that the liberal holds dear: reason, universal rights, personal liberty, free inquiry, cosmopolitanism, critical reflection -- in a word, civilisation. Culture and civilisation were now increasingly at odds with each other. The victory of the Allies over the Third Reich could be seen as the triumph of civilization over culture.

The German political philosopher Leo Strauss is one example of such right-wing cultural ideology. As a Jew, Strauss was forced to flee from the Third Reich; but though he was critical of the regime, he adhered at the time to fascist and impe-

rialist principles. In a letter written in the 1930s during his exile in the United States, Strauss observes that 'the fact that the new right-wing Germany does not tolerate us (Jews) says nothing against the principles of the right. To the contrary: only from the principles of the right, that is from fascist, authoritarian and imperial principles, is it possible to protest . . . against the shabby abomination (of the Nazi regime TE)'¹

What is the relevance of this document to today's global politics? It is simply that Strauss, during his distinguished career in an academic Chair in Chicago, became the guru of what is now known as US neo-conservatism. Several of the architects of the so-called war on terror -- Paul Wolfowitz, for example -- came under his formidable influence. In this sense, the presence of this high-minded critic of popular democracy -- an admirer of Plato, Heidegger and the Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt -- lurks somewhere behind the atrocities of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. A neo-conservatism which began as an academic, somewhat eccentric argument, one ridiculed and rejected by a good many mainstream political scientists, seized its moment of historic destiny with the election of George Bush, and became a barbarous political reality. Such a direct translation of abstruse theory into political strategy is remarkably rare. It was as though Scientologists had seized control of the White House, or neo-Hegelians had taken over London's Downing Street. Bush himself has probably never even heard of Johann Strauss, let alone read a page of Leo; but his policies were shaped by his thought.

Neo-conservatism of the Strauss variety has a profound belief in culture. Indeed, it sees culture as a precious antidote to political reason -- one might even claim, to the political as such. Even when social institutions appear to be irrational, they embody for the Straussians a traditional

1 Quoted by Richard Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 155.

wisdom and should be preserved as such. (For neo-conservatives, one might note, this applies more to US institutions than to Iraqi or Afghani ones). You cannot really reason for or against a culture, so they hold, because culture cuts deeper than mere rationality.

Like many right-wing thinkers, Strassians hold a dim view of human nature. He and his disciples are pessimistic about how much politics (as opposed to culture) can achieve. Violence they see as a permanent feature of the relations between states, and only spineless liberals like Obama refuse to acknowledge the fact. Seduced by the false gods of liberal tolerance and pluralism, Western civilisation is in rapid decline. The true determinants of human behaviour are not political but moral. There are children of light and children of darkness, and the latter generally have the upper hand. Politics is about cultural values, both ethical and religious, not about power or economics.

Where has one heard this case before? The answer is surely from Al Qaida. If the neo-conservatives believe that culture takes precedence over politics, so do their mortal enemies. Bin Laden, too, believes that it is values, ideals and beliefs which govern the course of history. He, too, inflates the importance of culture. For radical Islamists, imperialism is primarily a matter of cultural dominion, not of military power or economic control. It is the atheism and moral permissiveness of the West they object to most deeply, not its affluence or technology. This is why it is grotesque to argue, as some Americans do, that they attack the United States because they are envious of its civil liberties. Islamists are about as envious of American freedom as they are of its beef burgers. In their view, the war in Iraq is not primarily about material resources and geopolitical conflict, any more than it is for Tony Blair. As far as Blair and his supporters go, it is about democracy and freedom. For Bin

Laden and his disciples, it is about religion and morality. (One might note, incidentally, that the view that the Iraq war was about freedom and democracy was not one shared by the US State Department before the invasion. In one of its internal documents, it argued that the Iraqi 'towel heads', as it contemptuously called them, were incapable of self-government, and called for a Saddam-like strongman to ensure stability in the country).

In his influential work *The Clash of Civilisations*, the American political theorist Samuel Huntington argues that the 'universalist pretensions' of the West are bringing it increasingly into conflict with other societies. What Westerners need to do, he concludes, is to accept their own form of life as unique not universal', while continuing to defend it against non-Western cultures. We should stop imagining that we represent the very essence of civilisation, and accept instead that we are one culture among many. 'In the post-Cold War world', Huntington comments, lining up with the neo-cons and Al Qaida, 'the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic, They are cultural...'

This is a momentous claim. If accepted, it would mean the end of the 'enlightened' epoch of the West-- the era in which it was prepared to defend its way of life by an appeal to universal values. It is as though, having helped to discredit those values by its own actions, the West must now settle for a more modest kind of self-legitimation. Yet this is not as great a setback as it might seem. For in Huntington's view, the West is entitled to carry on claiming superiority for itself over other cultures, even if it can no longer validate that claim by old-fashioned appeals to some universal civility. In this way, realism and supremacism, or culture and civilisation, can be conveniently combined.

Huntington still believes that the West can launch a rational defence of its way of life, even if this rationality must be

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somewhat scaled down. But it is only a short step from here to claiming, like the late American philosopher Richard Rorty, that no such defence is guaranteed to convince those from other cultures. Why not? Because what counts as a rational argument is itself determined by your culture. There may simply be no common rational ground between ourselves and, say, radical Islamists. If that is so, then the West is in

the deeply unenviable position of seeking to defend itself against those who wish to destroy it, at the very moment that it has cut the ideological ground from under its own feet.

Reference

1. Richard Seymour (2008), *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (London: Verso)

DOBA KULTURE

Rezime

Rad se bavi pitanjima dramatičnog prisustva kulture i njenog uticaja na život uopšte, odnosno transformacijom kulture od privatne razonode do sveprisutnog društvenog fenomena. Kultura postaje ambivalentna pojava i, s jedne strane, predstavlja pozitivnu društvenu stvarnost, dok s druge strane postaje neprijatelj svega onoga što liberali cijene – neprijatelj razuma, univerzalne pravde, ličnih sloboda, kosmopolitanizma i kritičkog promišljanja – postaje neprijatelj civilizacije.

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