

WORLD TRANSFORMATION,
SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION -
AND WHAT ABOUT THE THEATRE?

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It has been my fate in recent years, on very many occasions, to talk to members of the so-called elite of the societies: upper echelon bureaucrats, corporation leaders, intelligentsia - and politicians. My role in such talks has definitely been that of a court jester, or with a less venerable term, simply that of a clown. This time I am addressing an audience of theater people, administrators, writers, actors. In other words; I am together with fellow clowns, proud members of that profession as opposed to the audiences. I usually am with people who also are clowns, but unfortunately not knowing it. Unfortunate for them, I mean.

I have chosen three points of departure for this presentation. The first one deals with the world transformation as I see it, a major geo-political process of historical significance, the kind of thing which I think future historians will talk about much in the same way as they today talk about the decline and fall of the (Western, and later also Eastern) Roman empire and the decline and fall of the Middle Ages. What I try to say here can be stated very briefly: there is a general transition of point of gravity in the world capitalistic system, from the Northwestern corner of the world where it has been residing for a very long time (five centuries or so) to the Southeastern corner of the world, with Japan as its first carrier, followed by the four mini-Japans, then by the other ASEAN countries, and then - possibly - by China. This cannot but have major implications on the world economy, and one of them is already rather well-known to us: an economic crisis in the Northwestern corner of the world, the one that refers to itself as the "first world" that does not seem to disappear, only to increase

in strength and depth. These are other aspects, but I shall not let this become a talk about international relations so I refer readers to a brief review of that to the appendix of this paper.

Second, some reflections on this. Are we at all capable of seeing what is going on? Did the people at the end of the Roman Empire know that this was the end of the roman empire, or was the historical speed with which things happened not sufficiently high for them to notice the difference from one month to the next? Difficult to say. They were talking about crisis as we are talking about it, but maybe most of them felt that it would be overcome provided the right people were put into the right positions and used essentially old remedies for what was not seen as a very new type of disease. But we do not have that excuse. There is nothing wrong with the speed. To take only one example: compare the British Empire before the Second world war with the little that is left today, deriving some glory only from a war over some small islands in the South Atlantic. Think of the perennial danger hanging over us, the possibility of an all-encompassing nuclear war. And think of something less apocalyptic: the social and human drama that is taking place every day when countries in the First and Second worlds (see the appendix!) are trying to push countries in the Third world up to the type of mixture between national bureaucracy (with its planning) and national corporations (with their markets) that they think is the solution to all human problems. Think of the Third world elite trying to transform their countries from family and village oriented cultures to nation states, gambling on planning and bureaucracy if the socialist countries are their model, on corporations and markets if the capitalist countries are their models and on the mixture of the two if they receive their inspiration from the social democracies in the northwestern part of Europe. And at the same time: the many, many people in those "developed" countries who find development rather bitter and are trying to reverse the trend, back to the small groups, to the green communes, back to the local levels, highly sceptical both of national bureaucracies and of national corporations, both of plans and markets. Precisely there, in the dialogue usually unheard between Third world elites on the way "up" and First, First and a half, and Second world youth on the way "down" is the drama of our time, the search for a valid paradigm,

illusions and romanticism competing with each other.

But where are the authors picking up these things? Where are the authors who can portray First world leaders in their desperate search for an explanation of why everything goes wrong under the constraint that there is one thing they are not permitted to think, perennial racists as they are: that they have simply been outcompeted by a little country in east Asia, washed by the waves of the West Pacific, by Japan. Answer: they don't ask; the perspective is too global.

The third point of departure has to do with some social transformations that are emerging, very slowly, in our societies in the North-western corner of the world. Roughly speaking they can be sketched as follows. In the Middle Ages several societies were predominantly what could be called vertical/collectivist: the feudal order left no doubt as to who was high, who was in the middle and who was at the bottom in the well organized system of rights and duties. But at the same time people felt a tremendous belongingness; an identity with the collectivity to which they belonged.

At the time of the Renaissance this collectivity burst open and out came individuals, a new social construction. Verticality was certainly not abolished: the old layers of caste society reconstituted themselves as classes. And although mobility of individuals from one class to the other was now possible (incidentally not only upwards, but also downwards - feudal society by and large protected them against that) - flagrant inequalities in power and privilege persisted in this vertical/individualistic construction.

And that, then, opened for the third possible social form: horizontal/collectivist. Why not take the step more fully, why not destroy the vertical aspect of a society, through job reconstruction or job rotation? Possibly this can only be done through a new type of collectivism, a very high level of solidarity within the unit -

the model in the 1970s being the Chinese People's Commune. But as , that commune seem to wither away in the country of origin the movement in this direction stopped. It came to a halt and we are to some extent back again to the struggle in the second social form against too much difference in power and privilege between the classes. And one can not even talk about the logical fourth social form, horizontal/ individualist or, if one so wants, a pluralistic society where again there is much mobility, but this time sideways rather than upwards and downwards; people changing location, changing jobs but living very different lives in different settings, none of them above or below the other, profoundly self-reliant as they are.

I let that suffice here as a sketch of social history, past present and future. It is not to be taken too seriously except as a frame or reference for further analysis. We are essentially in social form number two, usually known as "liberal" as opposed to the "conservative" form number one. And the social reality in which we find ourselves is that of a class-society. But however much I have looked I never managed to find much meaning in the marxist idea that there should be two classes. Almost always societies seem to be me to be better understood if they can be seen in terms of four classes. What I find, for instance, in both the First and the Second World Countries is that the marxist distinction between a bourgeoisie that has much command over means of production and a working class that merely subsists by selling their labour on the condition stipulated by higher classes, makes sense. But it is not the whole story. There is also usually a bottom class, marginalized but very important: most peasants. In the Soviet Union, for instance, it takes the very concrete form of the kolkhozniki. In other societies very many of the small farmers are in that same marginalized situation. And this is where the women have been or still are; it is a class not only below, but also on the outside - precisely what the word "marginalized" expresses.

Nor does it make very much sense to describe a society without looking at its top a real leadership, the nomenklatura. This is the

elite, a concrete list of names, people who may represent something but also are there by virtue of their individual capacities. Whereas members of the other three classes are substitutable and society hardly notices when one passes out and the next one comes in all members of the nomenklatura get an obituary when they die in which it is always stated that "Mr. X will leave behind him (it is usually a man!) a hole which it will be difficult if not impossible to fill". But don't worry: it will be filled, e.g. by the author of the obituary.

Social history is to a large extent the history of alliance-formations between these classes. There are actually many possibilities. The mathematically inclined will immediately point out that there are three ways in which the structure can be simplified by having alliances in pairs. Thus, the classical alliance in many societies- the nomenklatura together with the bourgeoisie against workers and peasants. But it may also be that the Soviet Union, for instance, today is better understood as an alliance between the nomenklatura and the working class against a non-alliance between bourgeoisie and peasants. And one may go one step further: There are four ways in which a four-class society can split by having three classes unite against the fourth one. Thus, Mao Zedong's revolution in China was, it seems, an alliance between the intellectuals on top together with the next class of farmers and then the next class of workers against the most despised class at the bottom: the merchants, who had nothing but money - neither wisdom nor land, nor real skills! Not so strange that he won if the three at the top united against the one at the bottom - at the bottom in terms of social prestige that is.

Why am I saying all this about the theory of the classes in various societies around the world? Not only because it has to do with social transformation: it also tells us something about how complex societies are relative to highly simplistic two-class models, though permitting many different outcomes of a conflict and perhaps also something about how difficult it is to really change the society. Perhaps it would have been easier if society only had two classes and one could fight it out against the other! A four-class society is more flexible, hence more resistant.

However, this is not an exercise in sociology. I am also trying to say

something about theatres because I am convinced that there are four classes in that theatre system. It is certainly not only what meets the naked eye of the person working inside the theatre as an organization, day after day: on the one hand management, on the other hand the personnel, the latter divided into actors and others. On top of this is, as always, the nomenklatura: usually in the form of a board, composed of nomenklatura people from the surrounding society. If the theatre is a mirror, reflection of surrounding society of course the nomenklatura wants to be there, not only to be reflected but to be really there in order to control the shape of the mirror. And equally obviously there is at the bottom of all of this a rather large underclass often conveniently forgotten: the public. A complicated system with precisely seven possibilities of alliance formations as indicated above - each of them no doubt carrying an interesting message for those who are more conversant with theatre life than I am.

Let us now try to pull this together, a little bit. On the one hand there is the world transformation, certainly not incorrectly referred to as a crisis. One very concrete outcome of that crisis is that there will be considerably less money available as surplus money in our societies. The trend was set a couple of years ago with Madam Thatcher's first budget after she took over: military expenditures and police/prison-expenditures up, social expenditures and everything that has to do with culture down. The reason is rather obvious: the military are there to try to handle the external policy consequences of the crisis, the police and the prisons are there to keep the population under control. Cutting down on social welfare will at least for some time make the population manipulable, and culture is what gives them the wrong ideas anyhow. Needless to say most other countries in the First World will follow in the same direction and have been doing so, sometimes more, sometimes less; the Nordic countries being by and large more decent and reticent in this regard than the others.

Then, on the other hand, there are demands for social transformation at home and these demands also concern the theatre community. It would be incorrect to say that they are reaching the theatre community from the outside, from the social surroundings - the general experience

rather being that artists are among the first to sense, often intuitively, new developments. Artists are the antenna of our society, more sensitive than people in general. For that reason it is not strange that so many theatres make highly audacious and very interesting innovations into the third social form indicated above; a much more horizontal organization with actors rotating between management, artistic and whitecolored/bluecolored roles inside a theatre. This is done independently of the nomenklatura. No officially appointed board is needed. There is one price that has to be paid: For any human group to be more horizontal it also has to be small, bigness can only be administered in vertical settings.

And some theatres go further, they also involve the public. Not only do they seek them out rather than inviting the public to come and visit them ; they go into the streets, to where people are. And they go still one step further: they try to get the public to participate on the stage, and they mix with the public, the actors sitting in the audience, trying to obliterate the classical dividing line between the third and the fourth class from the top in my little scheme. More or less successfully so, among other reasons because there is a limit to how much the actors really want this to happen. If the public were capable of acting then what would be the need for actors?

All of this is green theatre: to do without nomenklatura, to try to obliterate the class lines between management and staff, and between those two and the public! It is well-known from the cooperative movement: get away from the Board of Trustees and similar bridge heads for large scale surrounding society, organize a cooperative where not only the dividing line between labour buyers and labour sellers has been abolished but where also the customers are taken in as consultants, advisors, as subjects in a true dialogue, not only objects to be manipulated. Maybe it should be noted in passing that this last point is totally disregarded in Yugoslav self-management theory.

Opposed to the green theatre is the blue theatre of the first social form surviving well into the second one, and the pink or red theatre which is the logical consequence of a society with a heavy

state. Blue theatre depends on private money, pink/red theatre on state money - and of course he who pays the piper can and will to some extent call the tune. The first becomes the theatre of the aristocracy and later of the bourgeoisie, the second the theatre of the state and the welfare state with its properly regulated court jester roles to perform. They tend to be organized like the model organizations in the society of which they are a part: the business corporation in the first case, the ministry in the second. In either case the nomenklatura on the top will legitimize not only its existence but sometimes also its heavy hand by seeing itself (and trying to make others see it) as representatives of the public, of the marginalized fourth estate in the system. Of course that public never elected them; nomenklatura usually appoints itself. But if it is a clever nomenklatura it will find groups in the public whose grievances they can articulate and use to steer the two classes in between, management and staff; e.g. pro-conventional forces.

Equally obviously other alliances are possible. The nomenklatura may be the tool the management needs in its perennial struggles with the staff and vice versa: it may also be a court of appeal. The management may use the public as a rather obvious lever in its deals with the staff by referring to how the public votes with its money; which plays pay and which plays do not. The staff may try to counter-balance this through appeals to the nomenklatura and hidden subsidies, creating a divide between a staff/nomenklatura alliance seeing itself as representing artistic interests and a public/management alliance more viewing a theatre performance as a commodity to be marketed. Who wins out is a question of power, and power is a question of who can convince whom, who can reward whom, and who can punish whom.

Green theatre is the institutionalization of a three party alliance at the bottom against a nomenklatura; it is detachment from the generally centralized mode of organization in almost all countries in the world today. Of course the nomenklatura is free to participate as public, even on the stage where it might be invited to play itself - if willing to do so. But other alliances are also possible. The nomenklatura might buy off the theatre, have it play for itself, literally speaking closing it to the public like a theatre group playing for royal

courts only. Much of modern science, incidentally, is like that: scientists and their assistants working together in a think tank producing results for the nomenklatura of the society and only for them. At that point, incidentally, it actually stops being science if one sees the public element as a conditio sine qua non of science as an institution. And I think the same can be argued for theatre: a theatre that is not open to the public is no longer a theatre.

What kind of development is likely? Personally I think we are already in the development, it is not a question of predicting it. We shall have all of this happen at the same time and even more so in the confusing future that we are now entering. Actors will be torn between their inclinations to be free and honest and to be close to the public - this will make them more and more interested in green theatre alternatively. But at the same time they also want like all other members of society the type of security that can guarantee them the bourgeois way of life with non-manual work and non-material comfort. Blue and red theatre can offer this, but only at a certain price. There will be limits to how far one can go in criticizing fundamentals. And the most fundamental aspect of blue and red society is this: that after all has been said and all has been discussed, after all criticism is out there will still be a blue and/or a red solution to the problem. State planning or capital markets or both of them will still be key institutions, carrying the future. They may be criticized, even torn to pieces, but never be seen as entirely superfluous. Small is beautiful - but something big is necessary

How will theatre people handle this? One possibility, of course, is to try to do all at the same time. And here very interesting solutions have come up in recent years. The nomenklatura is, of course, composed of top bureaucrats as well as corporation leaders and politicians and some from the arts and sciences. In doing so channels are kept open both to the blue and the red segments of society. But at the same time, within the theatre itself, green elements are growing, even blooming. There is often a smaller stage somewhere in the building with a much more intimate relationship between actors and the public, maybe also with the rest of the staff. Maybe this is the place

where the leadership suddenly jumps on the stage, less rehearsed than on other occasions. In short: the green as an oasis in the blue, the pink and the red. But kept under control, within the womb so to speak, not necessarily taking the risk of being fully borne into the free as independent theatre. Those groups will probably tend to come more from the outside, and will probably also sooner or later end up in the search for blue, pink or red money. What a theme for a drama!

I do not think there is any simple, clear-cut solution to this. As long as people in our societies demand such a tremendously high material standard of living, and as long as that is obtainable only by having money, it is very difficult to see how the public alone can sustain a theatre ensemble, or an institute of researchers for that matter. If theatre people and research institute people scale down their demands and were willing to/able to live in a less monetized society then it will be possible to be a group of entertainers with very serious intentions, supported by the local economy of a community of villages. In South Asian countries this can still be found, the theatre group trekking from place to place, living in a way not too different from Buddhist monks, receiving much of their material goods in natura, only some of it as money. Obviously, both blue and red society have solid handles on artists and scientists as long as the demand for material goods is sufficiently high and the economy is sufficiently monetized - and spiritual people sufficiently materialistic.

Quite another possibility would be that artists become more capable of, and also more fond of, teaching their skills to the public. What about de-professionalization, what about the public learning how to act, how to give expression to their feelings and experiences? And the same for the writers, those who create the mirrors in front of which the actors perform, those who set the stage? Could they not also share their skills a little bit more with the public?

And that brings me back to the point of departure. We are living in a world transformation of a highly critical nature. But it is not my experience as a social scientist that what I see on the stage is even remotely related to what is happening in the world. And I think I can

see a reason for it, even a very simple one. Take drama as created by Ibsen and Strindberg: it is at the micro-level. It is inside people, it is being acted out - its in a little group, the family, the work place, the small town. The Greek conditions of unity of time, space and action are adhered to, but that is not all: drama is inside and between persons.

Take the world transformation that takes place today. Of course there is drama at the micro-level, but in general it looks as if the world is governed by the drama that takes place at the macro-level, even at the global level. There is drama within countries, between the classes of which they are composed; there is drama between the countries. There is a transition in nothing less than the location of the point of gravity of the world economy. There is a tremendous build-up of omnicidal weapons. Western imperialism in the Third World is entering its last stage. Both the first and second world empires seem to be on the verge of collapse, at least morally speaking. But how can one express all of this as something that takes place in the mind and the soul of a handful of persons, say, in a family, in a school, and office, or maybe a little town?

Answer: one cannot. One needs a stage that at least takes in scenes from the first, second, the third and the fourth worlds as described in the appendix, and if at all possible from several of the four classes in all places. I am not demanding that theatre should be an exact reflection of the world as a social scientist sees it; that would be social science, not theatre. But it should at least come so close that it is capable of mirroring what is happening!

Let me mention a little experiment I made myself when I was asked by BBC, Open University, to make three programs on the economic transformation of our times. I insisted that this should not only be an interview with me as a social scientist - a role I of course enjoy. One should also try to act out this drama, and I suggested a stage that would harbour at least four roles: the corporate manager from the center of the Center, the working class leader in the Center, the local bourgeoisie in a Periphery country, and the representative of

the proletariat in that Periphery; a simplified model with two worlds and two classes in each. And they did it! They produced some remarkable persons to perform the four roles, they had background material of a more documentary nature very close to the rather skimpy plot that was constructed, and it made an awful lot of sense the moment one could see the complexity of the problem, who can corrupt whom, and so on.

Actually, in a theatre I have always been thinking that one could make use of the rotating stage and simply divide it in four quadrants, have the four worlds sit in each one of them, or the four classes in one society, and then have a theme that could pass from one quadrant to the other so that one could see how something highly concrete is handled in the four worlds, in the four classes, or in the four social forms.

And maybe there will also be the need for a narrator, the person on the side of the stage, dressed up as a clown, who in the tradition of Elizabethan theatre could tell the morale of the story in his own way. And guess who would like to have that role?!-

Johan Galtung