**Sea for the Workers – a Call to Dignity**

*Sea, if it loves, loves workers on holiday
who don’t sleep for three nights until they reach the sea;
and when they do, they say: “our beautiful, sea”,
then rush to tan and go back home.*
Branko Miljković, *Sea for the Workers*

“We need to have confidence in the workers,” said Josip Broz Tito in his speech on the adoption of the Basic Law on the Management of State Economic Enterprises and Higher Economic Associations by the Work Collectives ─ which implemented into immediate practice the action slogan of the workers’ movement “Factories to the Workers!”[[1]](#footnote-1). The socialist self-management system, which operated in Yugoslavia from 1950 to 1989, despite all the political and ideological deviations, was the only one (at least in this part of the world) where the workers were in its epicentre. The *dictatorship of the proletariat* turned socialist Yugoslavia into a country where even the poorest workers had the opportunity to spend their annual leave by the sea (just like in the opening quote of Miljković’s poem of the same name). What happened with the SFRY, the most organized and humane state we have ever lived in, happened ─ not without the “merit” and fault of the workers themselves, who relatively easily gave up “their” factories and “their” country (“We will rather die than give up our country”), thus sharing the blame for their current situation. Doesn’t the reality that followed prove Josip Broz right? Presenting it as the antipode to the values of the socialist state ─ in the same speech in a recognizable ideological *key* – he points out that “the bourgeoisie and the exploitative class need the state only as a permanent force to keep the exploited classes subjugated”

Are we now witnessing Lenin’s *death of the state*, and why hasn’t anyone warned us that the death of the state also entails the death of humanistic values that are traditionally associated with it (such as justice, solidarity, dignity, participation)? So what has happened to the workers’ rights today? How and why have workers and the working class transitioned from the former *owners of the state* to a marginalized group whose social and economic status in the public sphere is almost non-existent? No matter how flawed the ideological construct of egalitarianism tailored to the communist party elites may have been –predatory capitalism of today makes us look at the privileges of socialism more and more often as a distant, never-realized dream. To put it simply: workers as social actors are hardly taken seriously by anyone today.

**How much human dignity costs**

Conformably to Gramsci’s thesis that “in the period when the old is dying and the new is struggling to be born, monsters rule”, exploitation and inequality have become axioms of post-globalisation. Instead of the expected dispersion, concentration and abuse of power have become so immense that *the so-called primitive accumulation*, as stated in the most controversial VIII Chapter of Marx’s Capital (“So-Called Primitive Accumulation”), not only completely alienated the workers from the means of production, but also turned them from the *creators of social goods* into depersonalized executors. Into screws, so to speak. Class antagonisms have been overcome by simply erasing one class (working class) ─ while social (read: party) regulation has been replaced by market regulation. The proletariat has become the precariat, and *productivity* has become an ideological mantra to which the values and principles on which (declaratively) well-ordered societies rest capitulate; hence it seems that the end of political economy has resulted in the twilight of the concept of humanity. Considering that such “practices” operate even in societies with credible legal and moral systems for (self) protection – in the zones of the economic (and political) periphery, where pandering to *foreign investors* is elevated to the level of national strategies, these “investors” become colonizers. However, in order not to be unfair to the “investors”, it should be noted that the characteristic of the global periphery is precisely that it is designed to remain so forever. I will illustrate it with the example of the South Korean company Yura, whose name has become synonymous with the inhumane treatment of workers and the trampling of not only workers’ but also human rights. According to publicly available data, Yura received subsidies from the budget of the Republic of Serbia amounting to 25 million euros by 2016 only (the amount is undoubtedly much higher today). The company also *enjoys* infrastructure support as *state aid* – namely, the right to free use of (public) land, which is certainly not an isolated case. If we assume that the thesis of media expert Lazar Džamić that “our civilizational options are currently reduced to a choice between precariat and totalitarian slavery”[[2]](#footnote-2) is true, we could conclude that colonies are actually auto-colonizing. His thesis is as true as it is wrong ─ since, in the era of post-truth, the relativity of every theoretical model is also systemically projected. And when theories are relativized to this extent, we have no choice but to turn to (immediate) practices.

**Instruction for Use**

As an artist, Nikola Marković has been delving into the analysis of not at all simple structures, mechanisms and/or causes of corporate (manipulative) power for years, and his recent focus is on the immediate consequences that power leaves on people. The cycle *Instruction for Use* focuses on questions from the domain of trampling (trampled) dignity ─ both personal (worker’s) and collective, and even national. In an effort to locate, specify and explain the circumstances that have conditioned, and to some extent determined, the nature and character of his approach, Marković – in his video work *(Un)Official Version* – takes testimonies from workers about contemporary slavery, whose actors they are: “Here, the worker is essentially just a screw. A free and easily replaceable part of production, good only as long as they work flawlessly!” or “The boss mourns more when a machine breaks down than when a worker dies. They replace the worker for free, but a new machine costs them”. Plunging into the reality of “neoliberalism”, where people become screws, Marković attempts to make this process reversible, at least on the representational level, by shedding light on the circumstances under which this unnatural *transfer* became possible and offering conditions under which *screws* could once again become historical subjects, i.e., upright and dignified people and citizens. Speaking out about problems that we all more or less know exist, yet pretend they don’t – Marković, as the most drastic example of dehumanization, takes the “recommendation” that exists among a number of foreign “investors” for workers to start wearing adult diapers so they don’t waste precious production time with frequent trips to the toilet! Appearing to accommodate the demands of exploiters, wanting to make public what workers talk about exclusively off the record, *Marković has branded an exclusive model of adult* *diapers for workers called* “Prol et”. The diapers are designed in a ‘unisex’ (female and male) variant, with instructions for use provided in the situation “While the worker can stand” and the version “When the worker can no longer stand”, printed in Serbian, as well as in Chinese, Korean, Russian, Italian, Turkish and German ─ as the official languages of the countries from which the foreign “investors” come. Taking on the strategies of transgressive games, Marković created a series consisting of twenty 50x50 cm paintings, made after models and in the style of “old masters”, and put them in golden frames, that, besides a clear allusion to the “golden age”, according to the artist, *accentuate the impression of “museum-like” (petty-bourgeois) hideboundness*. Using young and attractive female and male bodies, he very realistically depicts the process of putting on, wearing and disposing of diapers after use. With the profound grotesqueness of these scenes, the artist addresses the workers themselves, their employers, but also the wider social community, those who “mind their own business”, seeking to evoke feelings of empathy, solidarity, and humanity. In the context of the society we live in, as well as globally, Marković’s works contain a dose of cynical idealism that can be interpreted on multiple levels of meaning. On the one hand, the artist is devoid of illusions regarding the existence of worker (class) consciousness ─ after all, in his paintings and drawings, workers, even in situations when they can no longer stand, put on diapers themselves (while in the case of “classic” diapers for adults, it is always done by someone else). On the other hand, by addressing the exploiters, bringing their “recommendation” to a paroxysm, Marković reminds us of ideals of a more just and humane world, i.e., the fact that the abolition of forced and slave labour is a civilizational aspiration that dates back in the early 19th century. Also, pointing out the fact that the problem has wider, national implications, with brutal directness, the artist creates a template for the “Flag of the Contemporary Precariat-Proletariat”, which, on a representational level, consists of crossed screwdrivers and a wrapped three-wire cable in the colours of the Serbian tricolour flag. At the end, we return to the introductory quote of the text, that is, the “legally guaranteed” possibility and necessity of providing rest for workers. Entirely in the spirit of “values” promoted by the local “investors”, Marković offers this “possibility” by installing a resting place in the form of a large diaper-lounge chair, where one could literally *take a nap.* Thus, the circle is closed, as we have gone from sea for workers to diapers for workers. Female and male, of course...

As a rather rare example of dealing with this topic, in a country where the culture of memory most often includes an element of the catastrophe of forgetting and an awareness of how dreams of equality, freedom, solidarity, fraternity are dreamed by few here today ─ Nikola Marković’s exhibition *Instruction for Use* can be read, that is, seen, as a kind of appeal and call to dignity.

Nebojša Milenković

1. Marshal Tito's speech marking the proposal of the Basic Law on the Management of State Economic Enterprises..., in: *Fabrike radnicima* [*Factories to the Workers*], Rad, Belgrade, 1950 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lazar Džamić, *Sistem kao sudbina?* [*System as Destiny*], feuilleton, Nin, Belgrade, August 4, 2022, p. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)