



***It Is About ‘Now’, Comrades.
On Gal Kirn’s Partizanski prelomi***

REVIEW OF

KIRN, GAL, 2014: *Partizanski prelomi in protislovja tržnega socializma v Jugoslaviji*. Ljubljana: Sophia.



'Always historicize!'—if this famous slogan with which almost a half century ago Fredric Jameson (9) opened his seminal book on *The Political Unconscious*, a claim in which he saw a “trans-historical” imperative of every dialectical thinking, has ever found an authentic addressee in the post-Yugoslav spaces (and beyond), an addressee who not only understood Jameson’s message but also practically realised it, than it is Gal Kirn. This is precisely what Kirn has accomplished with his *Partizanski prelomi in protislovja tržnega socializma v Jugoslaviji* (The Partisan Ruptures and the Contradictions of Market Socialism in Yugoslavia), a book that historicises a past that has already lost any contact to our present, let alone to our future.

This was far from an easy task. First and foremost, we live in a time that is generally reluctant to any sort of serious historical analysis. This is not to say that we are not interested in the past; quite the contrary, our age is almost pathologically obsessed with it, yet this obsession no longer has the form of historiography in terms of knowledge of the past. As Pierre Nora has shown, historiography has been replaced by memory. Professional historians have lost the monopoly over the interpretation of the past; today, almost everyone, in whatever form of cultural memory, can participate in the production of the past. We live in an age of commemoration, Nora argues, emphasising the connection of this upsurge in overall memorial concerns with all sorts of identity politics.

It is in this general context that Gal Kirn’s book opposes its time in a most radical way and, what is more important, uncompromisingly challenges the dominant narratives on the past that concerns its object of inquiry, namely the former Yugoslavia. Moreover, the book does all that in a time of increasing general interest in the Yugoslav past. The reason for this renewed interest is to be found in our pre-

sent, which Kirn explicitly defines as the catastrophe of democratic transition. This is to say that the promise of democratic capitalism, which a quarter century ago motivated the peoples of Eastern Europe to bring down the Communist system and open new historical perspectives, has failed. This is undoubtedly true at least for those living in the spaces of former Yugoslavia, whose actual reality is in many respects worse than the Yugoslav socialist past. Their dreams from the late 1980s about a new Europe, a democratic community, free market economy and national independency turned, as Kirn explicitly states, into a nightmare.

While there is no wonder why those people look back into the past, the way in which they do it, which is almost exclusively reduced to a sort of nostalgic cultural retrospectivity, seems to prevent them from establishing any cognitively meaningful and historically productive relation to it. In the memory of today's generation, former Yugoslavia exists mostly in the form of cultural heritage. Yet the more books, films, exhibitions and discussions are dedicated to the truly impressive cultural achievements of Yugoslav socialism, the more distant and obscure it appears from today's perspective. A past that is perceived exclusively through the prism of cultural difference, that is, merely as another, different culture, is at the same time lost for us as a space of our experience—which for Reinhart Koselleck is just another name for history in its modern meaning. In other words, what seems to have been saved culturally is in fact lost historically. In being reduced to a mere object of cultural memory, former Yugoslavia dies once more. All that remains of it now is a sort of monument to an unknown history, highly praised for its cultural value yet thoroughly untranslatable into the political present, that is, into the reality of global capitalism and the social forces that inform it and struggle along its fault lines.

Gal Kirn's book challenges this historical stalemate at two neuralgic points of the post- and anti-communist discourse. The first point is the discourse's historicist developmentalism, a feature that legitimates the process of the so-called transition to democracy after the fall of Communism. From this perspective the whole space of the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe appears as historically belated, that is, as having been prevented from a normal historical development by Communist totalitarianism. After the so-called democratic revolutions of 1989–1990 have removed this totalitarian obstacle, the developmentalist line goes, the societies of the former East were able to catch up with the historical development, which simply meant the West. Understood in that way, the transition to democracy is on the one hand reduced to a historically predetermined process whose teleology can be best described as a simple case of westernisation; and, on the other hand, the transition to democracy has retroactively deprived the Communist past of Eastern European societies of any historical value whatsoever, which is why it was possible to leave it to oblivion.

It is at this point that Kirn reaches deep in the Yugoslav past—more precisely, in the historical origins of the Partisan anti-fascist struggle and the social revolution that was intrinsically tied to it—in order to recover what he calls the 'politics of rupture'. At stake is a concept that revives the idea of history in its truly modern sense, as a subject able to create its own temporalities and open spaces of new experiences. It is only within such alternative temporalities and on the ground of an unprecedented experience that what is commonly called a historical event can occur. In the case of former Yugoslavia such a historical event was the People's Liberation Struggle of 1941–1945, a break that created a radically new sense of what is historically possible. In only a few years, a relatively small illegal Communist Party

managed to mobilise a mass political movement that not only liberated the country from fascism but also initiated a social revolution. Kirn calls this event the 'Partisan rupture' in order to stress the fact that it had activated an enormous amount of emancipatory energy which was subsequently discharged in additional historical aftershocks. The first of these additional ruptures was the traumatic break with Stalin and the Soviet block, even with what up to then was an ideologically and politically homogenous Communist movement, which in turn led to yet another rupture in the geopolitical order established after World War Two, namely the establishment of the Non-Alignment Movement and a radical redefinition of the international role of Yugoslavia as the state that has historically connected the anti-fascist struggle and a social revolution with the anti-colonial struggle of the Third World. And the second crucial historical rupture following from the Partisan 'politics of rupture' occurred at the national level with the introduction of self-management as a new radically democratic model of social relations at both the level of economic reproduction and the level of (anti-statist) organisation of the state.

In order to save the legacy of these historical ruptures from contemporary ideological oblivion, Kirn himself had to make a series of theoretical ruptures. First and foremost, he liberated the figure of the partisan from Carl Schmitt's quasi-dialectic of order and disorder. But at a much broader theoretical level he also had to liberate the concept of historical temporality from the historicist constraints of the everyday empiricist notion of linear, chronological time, the notion that is still the norm in contemporary developmentalist ideologies, particularly in the teleology of the post-communist 'transition to democracy' as well as in its dogmatic Marxist versions insofar as they still follow the historicism of, say, the Second International. It is no coincidence that in

order to accomplish this task Kirn chose to seek theoretical support in Louis Althusser, the most radical Marxist critic of historicism (besides Walter Benjamin) who has been haunting the Communist movement like a ghost, fighting its omnipresent tendency to reduce the dialectical complexity of historical materialism to the simplest version of a common-sense Hegelianism. As is well known, Althusser (106) countered this tendency by producing the concept of the real historical present as a reflection of the temporal structure of social totality. It is important to note that Althusser did not understand the real historical present as a simple temporal co-existence of all the elements of the social whole. On the contrary, these elements, that is, the structural levels of the social whole, have each their own particular time and their own temporal rhythm. These different ‘presents’, different constitutive temporalities or histories that co-exist within the social whole as a complex structural unity, never transpire in what Benjamin (395) has called ‘homogeneous, empty time’. Instead, we experience them only relationally as a series of absences.

It is clear that from the perspective of this concept there is no place for the experience of one common social temporality, of one single history, and therefore for the idea of the development of the social whole as a social whole. As a consequence, this theoretical concept also rules out the idea of the historical transition from one social formation to another. As such, it necessarily undermines the whole ideological edifice of the so-called transition to democracy, the ideology that was imposed on the post-communist societies after 1989–1990 as their only historical present. From the Althusserian standpoint, the process of historical transition can be thought only in terms of breaks or ruptures between different temporal conjunctures. This is how we should understand Kirn’s Partisan ruptures: as both the true historical

and political legacy of former Yugoslavia and as a radical critique of the historicist developmentalism that is at the ideological core of the post-communist transitology.

But the same theoretical perspective makes it also possible to critically address yet another neuralgic point of the post- and anti-communist discourse, namely the notorious claim to the end of history. I am thinking of the well-known vulgar Hegelianism of Francis Fukuyama's (see Fukuyama). Eclectically misusing Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of history, Fukuyama has argued, at the historical threshold of 1989–1990, for a sort of post-historical quasi-break, the transition not only from one social formation to another, not only from the totalitarian system of the so-called actually existing socialism to capitalist democracy, but a transition from history to post-history, that is, a break between a historical temporality and a post-historical one. In relation to the Yugoslav past, it would hardly be an exaggeration to state that the obsessive memorialism that finds its concrete expression in what is not without good reason derogatively called 'Yugo-nostalgia' is but a sort of ideological parasite of the alleged turn to post-history.

However, the Althusserian theoretical perspective, which is consistently implemented in Kirn's analysis of the Yugoslav past, does not allow for the idea of such a clear-cut break between a failed social and political praxis (such as that of former Yugoslavia) and its post-political and post-historical cultural commemoration (such as that of Yugo-nostalgia). There is no such thing as a wrong historical praxis that can be properly remembered in a purely cultural retrospective. Moreover, Kirn's book compels us to find curious continuities beyond the alleged historical turn, continuities which are cognitively and politically much more conducive to the thinking of our historical

present. Kirn's analysis of Yugoslav market socialism clearly shows deep ambivalences in the process of the socialist transition both at the level of the political organisation of the society and in the mode of the latter's economic reproduction. The past cannot be understood in terms of a clear cut between socialism and capitalism, totalitarianism and freedom, history and post-history. What is commonly presented as the post-communist process of transition to capitalism, Kirn's interpretation of the Yugoslav past traces all the way back to the 1960s. Again, the past of former Yugoslavia cannot be conceived of in terms of a continuous, homogenous time that started in 1941, 1945 or even 1918 and ended in 1990 or 1991, but rather as a conflictual co-existence of socially, politically, ideologically and, finally, historically specific temporalities that, in today's critical retrospective, disclose a historical drama which could have ended differently than it actually did, but which at the same time could also be carried forward today in terms of its emancipatory stakes. This is why we cannot say that Gal Kirn's book is simply about the Yugoslav past. It is not about the past at all, but rather about our own historical present and its radical openness to different futures. Kirn's book *Partizanski prelomi* is even less a book about the theory and praxis of emancipation. Rather, it is a book that emancipates our knowledge about the past from today's ideological constraints; moreover, it emancipates our political imagination from its post-historical and post-political commemorative baggage as well as from the moralistic burdens of anti-totalitarianism and anti-communism. Simply put, it is a book about the possibility of a better future. This is why Gal Kirn and his work could be seen as positive examples of what Mark Fisher, the author of *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, meant when he recently proposed to left thinkers that 'instead of depressively reclining at the end of history, looking back

longingly at all the failed revolts and revolutions of the past, we need to resituate ourselves in history and claim the future back for the left' (Andrews). Fisher went on to say that today the right has no monopoly on the future and that it has manifestly run out of ideas. In this sense, Kirn's book addresses what Lenin once called the 'current moment' (Lenin), what Althusser conceptualised as the 'real historical present', and what we can understand in terms of historical temporality as the time of politics. ♡

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