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Slovenia's social uprising in the European crisis: Maribor as periphery from 1988 to 2012¹

Abstract

This article contextualizes the recent social uprisings in Maribor as a political articulation of the periphery in both the local Slovenian and the more general European context. The case of Maribor is of particular interest to anyone who wants to excavate different temporalities within “transition”: Maribor is not only the name of a failed capitalist de-industrialization, but was, 25 years ago, also the site of a failed socialist industrialization. My thesis explores the continuity and discontinuity of Maribor as a privileged site of popular resistance, while on a more theoretical level, it presents the unfolding of politics of dissensus. The author uses Rancière's concept of “the people” as the most adequate

¹ This contribution is an updated synthesis of two more journalistic pieces: Gal Kirn, “A ghost is haunting Slovenia, a ghost of revolution,” *New Socialist*, February 16, 2013., <http://www.newsocialist.org/679-a-ghost-is-haunting-slovenia-the-ghost-of-revolution>, and Gal Kirn, “Contours of urban revolt in Maribor,” *Occupied London*, October 24, 2013. <http://www.occupiedlondon.org/on-contours-of-urban-revolts-in-maribor/>.

figure for addressing the specificity of the most recent struggles. Also, the question of “periphery” as the site of utmost importance for contemporary political imagination and experimentation is brought to the reader’s attention.

Keywords:

industrialization, Jacques Rancière, people, surplus population, uprising

Introduction

Many historical and contemporary analyses of the Slovenian transition ignore the relevance of Maribor as the central site of mass resistance. It will be argued not only that this is symptomatic for any centralized context (Ljubljana being the centre of the state) and transitologist discourse that excluded the specificity of periphery, but most notably, that Maribor exposed a much deeper historical sign, a truth of its times too traumatic to be dealt with. In this respect I compare the event of workers’ mass protests in 1988, which remained forgotten in the political imaginary of post-socialism, with the social uprisings of 2012. If 1988 was a site of tragic announcement of the beginning of the end of socialist Yugoslavia, could we then argue that 2012 has repeated the history of radical politics, however this time opening up something new within the larger European horizon of crisis?

I will first present the politico-economic contours of the Yugoslavian crisis of socialist industrialization and more recent neoliberal austerity policies implemented in the European context. Secondly, I will argue that despite the importance of an analysis of the situation grounded in political economy, the uprisings should be conceptualized in their interiority, in terms of Rancière’s politics of dissensus. Uprisings as such cannot be predicted and their contingent nature cannot simply be reduced to objective conditions. More concretely, I develop a few theses on the operability of the concept of “people,” which seems more adequate than a simple recourse to the trope of spontaneity of masses coupled with “fear of masses,” or attempting to merge the uprising too quickly into a movement with a clear agenda for an assault on the state apparatus.

Mythologization and demythologization of Slovenia as a success story of transition

The late 1980s represent one of the peaks in recent Slovenian history, usually referred to as the “spring of democracy.” The thawing of totalitarian winter brought a flourishing of democratic civil society, which consisted of a plurality of cultural and political agencies: from environmen-

talists, peace activists, gay, lesbian and feminist struggles, initiatives from various subcultures, radical art groups, dissidents to reformatory and liberal currents within the League of Socialist Youth and even official League of Communists of Slovenia (LCS). The democratization process reached mass momentum after the socialist political leadership detained four protesters (later heroes, especially Janez Janša) and put them on trial before a military tribunal for disclosing state secrets relating to a possible military intervention in Slovenia. The so-called JBTZ affair triggered an immense public outcry, and social movements spread like a virus across Slovenia, with mass protests held in Ljubljana's central square (Žerdin 1997). Very different groups with very different political agendas were engaged in the process of democratization,² and eventually the initial democratic fervour was hegemonized by a nationalist project. In particular, the circle of right-wing intellectuals associated with the journal *Nova Revija*³ translated their theoretical-ideological program into political demands: chiefly, independence for Slovenia. The nation-state became the key political subject, a *sine qua non* of the existence of Slovenian nationhood and its only future. Alongside the teleological movement of the nation there came more poetic longings, dreams of having waited 1000 years for this historical moment. In political reality, the foundation of the new state was defined *per negationem* towards the multinational and federative Yugoslavia, while positively it affirmed a secure course of post-socialist transition to a capitalist mode of production. Fortunately Slovenia's geopolitical position bordering Western Europe and the fact of it being the most ethnically homogenous country in Yugoslavia meant that there was practically no war there, apart from 10 days of fighting in the summer of 1991. Furthermore, due to Slovenia's strong existing economic ties with its immediate neighbours, the national economy could—though not without some trouble—re-direct and solidify trade with Western markets.

² There exist very different accounts of the late 80s; they range from analyses by members of the reformed communist elite, to a more cultural dissident perspective, to the liberal view (Balažič 2004); as well as a more historical account in the works of Božo Repe. We should mention a few other attempts, such as Vlasta Jalušič's, from a feminist perspective (2002), or Tomaž Mastnak's, from left-liberal perspective (1987). I have sketched a panoramic view of pluralistic narratives and attempted to reconstruct the standpoint of the alternative bloc (social movements) against the backdrop of the dominant ideologies of independence, namely, the right-wing conservative (Catholic Church, former dissidents) and the reformed communist position (former ruling class, LCS).

³ The 57th number of *Nova Revija* in 1987 was actually a draft for a national program; this national memorandum was written at the same time as the memorandum from the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts by their nationalist counterparts in Serbia,. For more on intellectual history and the rise of nationalism, see the excellent study of Dragović-Sosso (2002); for media and literature history see (Wachtel 2002).

During the first part of the 1990s, war ravaged through the post-Yugoslav region, while in Slovenia the stage was set for its success story. After a heated discussion and also a split of first democratic government (DEMOS), the new political class decided in favour of a gradual transition to capitalism (social-democratic, share-holder privatized social capital), while fully embracing the neoliberal model of shock therapy was delayed (Mencinger 1994). Despite the temporary defeat of neoliberal ideology, the transition process still meant the enforcement of private property, which in the first stage meant dispossession and transference of all self-managed and social property. The economic policy was wrongly called “denationalization,” on a larger scale, real estate and forests (land) came back into the hands of the Catholic Church and those of formerly aristocratic and wealthy families, while ordinary citizens were granted “certificates.” The government made a rough estimate of “social” shares in the general social property, and in the second step, each citizen could then invest into the economy, that is, in different companies that had started to function on the stock exchange. Most of the major companies were not “de-nationalized,” but “de-socialized,” which meant that most of them remained in the hands of the state: they were actually “nationalized.”⁴ This period saw the advancement of a new economic elite (tycoons) with close ties to the new political class, who would in more or less successful ways run the biggest corporations until the advent of the European Union. The state thus retained partial control over the national economy for more than a decade after independence. Also, a slow deregulation of welfare state capacities meant, at least in relative terms, that there was no gross class stratification in the centre of Slovenia, and the so-called middle classes lived in relative prosperity and even improved material conditions. It was here that the success story was born: Slovenia as *Switzerland of the Balkans*. The ruling class proclaimed its historical mission accomplished after entering both NATO and EU in mid-2000 with the propaganda slogan “Home in Europe, safe in NATO.”

However, with the historical advent of the European Holy Family and the exit from the dark Balkans,⁵ the protagonists of the success story entered a process of disenchantment. The second round of privatization not only meant the sale and takeover of state corporations, but also a much more radical dismantling of the welfare state, which resulted in higher levels of poverty, unemployment, class stratification, exclusion of marginal groups, and all of the other trends that typically accompany neoli-

⁴ I have written on this peculiar process of “privatization” elsewhere (Kirm 2011).

⁵ Rastko Močnik (1999) incisively showed how the exclusive alternative Europe or Balkans rested on the racist culturalist differentiation of West (progress) and East (regression, war) and was the binding ideology of the whole ruling class.

beral policies.⁶ The solid reputation of the Slovenian success story was openly and internally shaken at the end of 2012, when mass protests spread throughout the whole country. The social unrest began in November 2012 in the second largest city, Maribor. But before we address the specificity of these most recent events, I would like to address the historical context, in which Maribor already at the end of socialist Yugoslavia played an extraordinary role. This event has mostly been forgotten in contemporary political analysis and the dominant historiography, since it does not fit the “transitional” success story.

Maribor in 1988: return of the figure of the industrial working class⁷

Maribor is Slovenia’s second largest city with around 100,000 inhabitants. The city developed into one of the most successful industrial centres in socialist Yugoslavia and underwent major urbanization from the 1950s onwards: it grew tremendously as a city, while intensive capital accumulation of three industrial branches was a top priority: metal (development of cranes, Metalna; Maribor’s foundry, production of cars and trucks, TAM), textile (MTT) and electro-metal industry (Elektrokovina). The industrial growth and internal dynamic of Yugoslav economy (e.g. underdevelopment of certain regions (Kirn 1984)) attracted labor power from other sister Yugoslav republics to Maribor. During the 1960s, additional innovations in the cosmetic (Zlatorog) and construction (montage of houses, Marles) industries took place. Andreja Slavec, one of the main researchers on the history of Maribor’s industrialization, rightly argues that Maribor was a beneficiary of the market reforms that took place in 1965 (Slavec 1992).⁸ The market reforms were designed to transfer political power to the micro level, that is, to workers and social(ist) enterprises, and established more market-driven criteria of economic rationality. Improved conditions for workers’ self-management were promised, while what the reforms in fact accomplished was mainly facilitate the domination of management over workers in enterprises. The new, less formal networks of politico-economic power that emerged consisted of technocrats, leading cadres of new (commercial) banks, and

⁶ For socio-economic analysis with statistical data see also (Močnik 2003).

⁷ This section is a panoramic and synthetical view of decades of socialist industrialization, see (Slavec 1992).

⁸ Maribor was on the winning side of market reform, but we should not neglect to discuss the negative consequences of the market reforms, which resulted in tougher competition between socialist enterprises, rising structural inequalities between core and peripheral regions in Yugoslavia, and, finally, intensified exploitation of labour power, see (Kirn 2012: 241–319).

municipal authorities. On the one hand, the market reforms brought structural troubles to poorer regions and encouraged the future tendency towards disintegration of Yugoslavia; on the other hand, Maribor was among the regions that benefited from this process and succeeded in further strengthening independent capital that competed on the market and entered into agreements with foreign capital (e.g. the German enterprise Henkel). It was under these conditions that the demand for a university in Maribor was created and one founded in 1975. The creation of the university answered the "Fordist" economic need⁹ for the education of new cadres in the growing industries, which was also enabled by industry itself investing in knowledge. Maribor's urban landscape, with its social housing, factories and other "industrialist" infrastructure, took shape in that period.¹⁰

The project 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 pay) and fewer funds for expanding machinery and production, brought a general sense of social insecurity (Woodward 1995a). The internal conflicts between republican elites were further intensified by the harsh austerity policies of the IMF, policies that Yugoslavia had to implement if she wanted to refinance her debt.¹¹ Maribor's industrial (re)production imploded in 1988, in some factories salaries of few months were lagging behind. Thus, in June of 1988, the majority of workers of the biggest enterprise of cars and trucks TAM started to strike. This event—together with Labin's one month miners' strike (Kuzmanić 1988) in April/May 1987—had a deep symbolic meaning for socialist Yugoslavia. First of all, it was not an isolated event of workers from one factory fighting only for their wages. The internal workers' opposition and strikes within one factory/enterprise became the normal practice especially during the 1980s.¹² In the case of June

⁹ One can detect also a (proto)post-fordist 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 (Bockman 2011).

¹⁰ Nowadays it lives vividly in the memories of older generations and in new industrial ruins, such as vacant factories. Muzej Narodne osvoboditve Maribor, "Spomenik Mariborski Industriji—Industrijski Maribor v 20. Stoletju." <http://www.muzejnomb.si/novo/spomenik-mariborski-industriji.html> (in Slovenian).

¹¹ For details of the austerity processes and breakup of Yugoslavia see (Magaš 1993) and (Woodward 1995b). Both authors are interested in more general political-economic frame of the break-up.

¹² See for example Goran Mušič's book (2013) on trade union and strike activities in 1980s.

1988 in Maribor it was a very different situation. Once TAM workers started their march across the streets of Maribor, workers from all other major factories along the path to the centre of the city joined them. More than 10,000 workers walked down the streets and met on Revolution Square, while in the days to follow workers occupied the railroad station and strategic routes around Maribor. The images from Maribor's general strike of industrial labor power were telling: workers wearing their blue-collar and other workers' uniforms, waving Yugoslav flags and chanting communist slogans that criticized the austerity and liberal packages promoted by the communist leadership(s). Workers' core demands pressured the "irresponsible" factory management to raise wages or pay overdue wages. Pressure mounted, when the general strike entered its second week: the whole industrial labor force of the city was on the street and started to promote a type of solidarity not favored by the official channels of the League of Communists or even the workers' councils within these enterprises. The workers' opposition was successful in gaining specific autonomy of the working class that pointed to a critical distance both from the "state" and from the management of those enterprises.¹⁵ This was a genuine and also very rare experience of self-management workers' politics that was organized from below and had relatively lasting effects.

Eventually the management made some concessions, agreeing to pay wages promptly and promising the workers' opposition that some heads in the managerial structure would be changed. The general strike in Maribor was successful, but one should say it was only a short-term victory in light of the Yugoslav break-up. Let me also cite a very symptomatic example, the shoe factory *Lilet*, which epitomized the first grand failure of the textile workers' struggle. Lilet was the very first socialist self-managed enterprise that was privatized already in 1990, that is, a year before Slovenian independence, and finally, a few years later, the factory was closed down. It would, then, be empirically correct to read the workers' strike as a temporary short-term victory; however I argue that the strike was much more successful in expressing the deeper sense of the historical moment. The strike reached, in Hegelian terms, the truth of that specific historical epoch, *the beginning of the end of socialism* before it was actually and structurally made possible by later events. In ideological terms, the strike of more than 10,000 workers resulted in disenchantment with the once-celebrated ideological figure of the (industrial) worker and enunciated the historical defeat of socialist industrialization and of urban development. But workers did not want the end of socialism, they were actually enunciating that socialism was already gone before the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, thus making a critique of post-socialism! Moreover, despite the

¹⁵ According to Tomaz Skela, present-day trade union organizer, those events were extremely important for the future formation and strengthening of trade unions.

tragic break-up of Yugoslavia, workers' political enunciation should not be retrospectively identified with the position of liberal or national dissidents who called for market capitalism and the nation-state—workers have predominantly been represented as blind followers of nationalist leaders¹⁴—but from the (nostalgic) position of a return to the previously strong dedication to industrial development. The call for a return to socialism became tragic and impossible in the late 1980s, especially in light of structural geopolitical shifts and the defeats of real socialisms in the East, but also in view of capital's reaction to workers' struggles against exploitation. The post-socialist transition had been underway for more than a decade by 1991.¹⁵

Contrary to the established narrative of the Slovenian transition as a “success story,” the periphery embodied by Maribor played the role of antihero in this tragic fairy tale that was never as magical as was claimed. The transitory processes on the periphery of Slovenia were brutal from the early 1990s onwards: within the period of the first 5-year plan of deregulation and de-industrialization, which took place from 1990 to 1995, the everyday life and urban fabric of Maribor went through massive structural changes. Most of the established industries mentioned earlier went bankrupt and were closed down due to the loss of other Yugoslav markets and due to their partial integration into the military-industrial complex of the Yugoslav People's Army. A few surviving enterprises were rationalized and massively reduced their economic activity, while others were cheaply sold to foreign companies. The unemployment rate in Maribor reached around 25 % in the early 1990s and, even worse, around 70 % of those fell within the category of the structurally unemployed, that is, long-term unemployed. This population was famously defined by Marx as “surplus population”:¹⁶ the industrial reserve army, all those made redundant by the economic and political force of the (new) cycle of primitive

¹⁴ In an important forthcoming article, Goran Music discusses the situation of Serbian workers and strikes, and the fact that even very late in the 1980s they still were not simply embracing Milosevic. We should read the political responsibility for rising nationalism, apart from the economic crisis, as belonging to the political and cultural bureaucracies that, beginning in the mid-1980s, started flexing their muscles and writing historical memoranda on the Slovenian and Serbian nations.

¹⁵ In my dissertation I discuss structural reforms, especially the market reforms in 1965, which already introduced the strengthening of the logic of capital and the underdevelopment of certain regions, and which announced the end of egalitarian and just distribution on the one hand, and the exclusion of workers from self-management in enterprise on the other (Kirn 2012). For a general historical overview, see Samary 1988.

¹⁶ See (Marx 1999), Vol. 1, Chapter 25. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch25.htm>.

accumulation of capital. However, industrialization had already been consigned to the dustbin of history as a response to workers' organization earlier, and now the time of the deindustrialized, redundant army approached. Until then, the "surplus population" had to survive, and it therefore combined two strategies: it was largely dependent on ever-decreasing social (state) aid and informal networks of charity (Karitas, Red Cross), and it also developed survival strategies around the informal subsistence economy. In the first years after 2000, when the unemployment rate started dropping and the economic situation "normalized," the 30 largest enterprises all together employed fewer workers than the TAM factory in the 1980s. It goes without saying that industrial infrastructure deteriorated and, with it, the whole urban landscape became radically transformed. Maribor became a monument to the past, both to *socialist Yugoslavia*, as it brought together many people from all over the former united country, and to *industrialist times* and socio-economic prosperity, which for the last (?) time re-invigorated the idea and the *politics of the industrial working class*. The industrialist spectre from the past soon found a companion, the dream of a post-industrialized future.

European Capital of Culture 2012: Maribor dreams of de-industrialization 20 years after the deluge

Every major project holds out a promise and launches a dream. To understand the dream of the European Commission as regards the concept of the European Capital of Culture (ECC), one does not need to enter into long hermeneutical research, but can simply look at the surface, at its most transparent level: the dream-mission of the ECC is to commodify culture and supply Europe with a new infrastructure of de-industrialized creative industries. An ECC fosters tourism in its region and, most of all, it works to re-organize creative potential.¹⁷ ECC has supposedly become a major "catalyst" of urban revitalization and most of the interviewed representatives of local organizations have enthusiastically confirmed this thesis.¹⁸ The hour of Maribor arrived and the city finally got its historical opportunity by becoming the European Capital of Culture (2012) and the European Capital of Youth (2013). The expectations fostered by becoming

¹⁷ A not-very-creative discourse on creative industry is displayed in the promotional video of ECC and its introductory text. European Commission, "European Capital of Culture," January 17, 2011. http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/doc413_en.htm.

¹⁸ Palmer made a study in 2004, which showed the positive results for the majority of the interviewed cities (European Commission, "European Capitals / Cities of Culture," July 5, 2013. http://ec.europa.eu/culture/key-documents/european-capitals-of-culture_en.htm, especially part II).

ECC and the previous positive experience of Graz as ECC¹⁹ fostered a collective dream for a new Maribor. The platform of the mayor of Maribor sought this opportunity to overcome the “peripheral” and marginalized position that it had acquired vis-à-vis the central position of Ljubljana. Local patriotic tensions would be overcome through the team spirit that would benefit regional development and the revitalization of Maribor, again able to attract some of the younger population.

The reality was different, and in retrospect, one can conclude that the most important mission of Maribor's term as ECC was not accomplished. The project failed to create long-term employment and develop cultural infrastructure: there is extremely little cultural infrastructure in Maribor after the end of its ECC term.²⁰ What was designed to trigger local and regional creative industries is, at the moment, (still) running to a large degree on self-exploitation and voluntary activism. Many “creative” young people and their exciting projects were left to themselves, and finally to the market's discipline. ECC did not prevent the rising tide of unemployment, which reached almost 19 % at the end of 2012. However, this failure should not be ascribed simply to ECC, or to the futility of calls for creative industries, but should be contextualized within the global financial and particularly European economic and political crisis of recent years.

Mass protests reloaded: the spark of new politics, or antipolitics?

As the economic crisis started taking a negative toll in Slovenia, recent governments, centre-left or right-wing, have competed in their efforts to upgrade the neoliberal agenda, while “recommendations” from abroad, from the ECB, European Commission and IMF have demanded ever more austerity and privatization of the whole social reproductive apparatus. The austerity measures adopted in 2012/2013 included: the privatization of banks (manipulating a public referendum on setting up a “bad bank” to handle defaulted loans);²¹ the imposition of special “holding-expert” institutions that sell all domestic capital (an evidently profitable move) to foreign investment firms; massive layoffs and dissolution of collective bargaining agreements in all social sectors; and drastic cuts in the social budget (the budget for research and universities fell by between 10 and 20 %; cuts in the field of culture are in some fields as high as 50 %; some groups of pensioners receive merely 250 Euros per month, with prices for everyday goods steadily rising).

¹⁹ Graz is a city in the near vicinity of Maribor, where many citizens of Maribor also commute daily to work.

²⁰ There are a few exceptions, such as Urban Furrows (Urbane Brazde).

²¹ See (Žižek 2013).

Austerity, in short, has become the most prominent financial instrument for the intensification of exploitation and is the official stamp of approval for the general process of pauperization. Austerity is adopted solely to lessen social regulation of capital, which means that the costs of the crisis are being paid by the general population (e.g. public bailouts of private banks). In this already severe situation, Slovenia is registering ever-higher unemployment (13 % according to Eurostat²² in late 2012, and it continues to grow in 2013) and has also witnessed the most drastic relative rise of youth unemployment in Europe, going from 15 % to 25 % in the last months of 2012 and continuing to grow steadily in 2013. On top of this, the economy is stagnating, the GDP has shrunk and the prognosis for this and next year is not very optimistic.

Apathy has long characterized citizens' attitude to the structural problems that the region of Maribor has been encountering. In the circumstances of failed cultural progress and economic devastation (foreclosures, small enterprises filing for bankruptcy), the local municipality led by then-mayor Franc Kangler introduced a system of hundreds of radars to measure speed limits. Boris Vezjak stated that "more than 20,000 people were issued speeding tickets in only two weeks—in a city of 100,000 inhabitants. There was a sense that residents' household budgets were being targeted."²³ The sense of clear social injustice grew once the information about the radar initiative leaked; it was a private public-partnership, which benefited the mayor and his partners.²⁴ The mayor has been found to be implicated in many corruption scandals in recent years, but without any juridical consequences. People were enraged, what was initially a small group of citizens protested in front of the municipality, and a few critical articles were published in the newspapers: nothing spectacular, it seemed. However, in the weeks that followed, thousands of people gathered on the streets. This unexpected turn of events fits a typical pattern for the politics of dissensus and rupture:²⁵ first, the contingent nature of the politics of rupture means that such ruptures cannot be anticipated, and second, the politics of rupture cannot simply be reduced to the objective conditions of the situation or explained by economic arguments. If we stick to a purely economic analysis of the situation, we see

²² See Eurostat News Release, "Euro area unemployment rate at 11,6 %," October 31, 2012. http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-31102012-BP/EN/3-31102012-BP-EN.PDF.

²³ Boris Vezjak, "Slovenia's uprising," *Eurozine*, January 10, 2013. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2013-01-10-vezjak-en.html>.

²⁴ The new mayor Andrej Fistravec attempted to nullify the contract, but the company is suing the municipality and the radar saga continues.

²⁵ I rely on the conception of politics developed by Jacques Rancière in his seminal book *Disagreement* (1999).

that the early 1990s or some other historical moments were even worse in terms of statistical index. In contrast to expectations or wishful thinking, no mass politics or protests emerged in those times.

The installment of radar systems to monitor speeding might seem trivial at first glance, but it was the symptomatic point where *the objective conditions of poverty were subjectivized* (Žižek 2000).²⁶ It was at this moment that most citizens started feeling that something was rotten and called for decisive subjective action against objective conditions. The largest event was coordinated by citizens of Maribor via Facebook and, in the last weeks of November and early December the main square was occupied by thousands of people. On 26 November, 2011, more than 15,000 people gathered and demanded the resignation of both the corrupt mayor and his local municipality. It all started peacefully and gathered together groups and citizens of all kinds; some came with their kids, as it was to be a cultural event. The event 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 into the municipality office, burning trash bins and setting off fire crackers.²⁷ The images circulated all over Slovenia and public rage accumulated, fed also by the cynical responses from the political establishment. From that point on, it made sense to refer to it as uprising (*vstaja*). Many critical and mass media reports covered the protests and helped create a critical public sphere. What began as an isolated spark in late November 2012 in Maribor²⁸ spread to other cities and, weeks later, culminated in an “All-Slovene uprising” in Ljubljana accompanied by unprecedented mass protests across the country.²⁹ The images of riots, broken windows, tear gas and police repression also documented unprecedented political violence on the streets. Even in the late 1980s mass protests had occurred practically without violence. This time, the situation was clearly more urgent.

In 2012, the Slovenian ruling class was faced with the first major spontaneous and mass rebellion since before independence. Unquestion-

²⁶ Žižek has on several occasions spoken of this moment in the context of Hegel's “concrete universality” and political subjectivisation, which is at work in a similar vein in the strategic moment of class “in itself” becoming class “for itself” in Marxian political theory.

²⁷ Police made many arrests and several of the youngsters very recently received imprisonment and financial fines.

²⁸ For some footage from riots that followed peaceful protests on 26.11.2012: mbHC Report, “3. Mariborska Vstaja // Riots in Maribor—MBHC,” *YouTube* video, 3:07, December 3, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nqvkI9RuaY>.

²⁹ For a good video-reportage from 21.12.2012: Dejan Pogačnik, “1. Vseslovenska Ljudska Vstaja 21.12.2012,” *YouTube* video, 28:52, December 22, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTUI6UUqVA>.

ably, we ought not to forget about many other mass protests that took place over the last decade in Slovenia. However, they were organized by established institutions, by the trade unions and the alterglobalization movement. Most trade unions united against successive governmental attempts to either extend privatization of the welfare state and change legislation that protected workers' rights, or to impose a flat tax rate (2004).³⁰ General strikes did not mean that people simply stayed home from work; instead, they came to organized mass protests in the tens of thousands, and at least temporarily succeeded in suspending the privatization and austerity drive of the governments in power. This was an orchestrated political action that contributed to the autonomy of trade unions vis-à-vis the state; however, it largely remained within a conservative position of protecting what was in the process of being destroyed (the welfare state and the industrial labor force) and within the political space of the liberal state and its organized political apparatus. In late 2012, trade unions and other political parties were caught by surprise, or remained silent about the uprising. It was as if all the major cities saw a veritable democratic eruption and spontaneous protests from below without any solid political platform. Just a few months earlier, Slovenia had seemed to be a relative stable democracy of the Balkans, a successful new member state of the EU and Eurozone; but now, people were waking up from the fairy-tale of a painless transition to find themselves engulfed in a real social catastrophe (Tomšič 2012).

Theoretical note on political subjectivity: from People to surplus population responding to the capitalist crisis?

Instead of using the official-formal channels or strategies of the dominant established institutions (petitions, pressure groups, parties, trade unions, civil initiative), the uprisings brought out a sharp dissensus, in Rancière's terms, "disagreement" at the core of the society and its order of "police." The uprising was not interested in making a compromise with the political class, but rather launched a rigorous critique of transitional democracy that targeted the core of the foundations of liberal democracy: the (capitalist) state and its representative apparatuses. I would argue that the central message of the politics of uprisings radically challenged the very meaning of democracy and could be read along the lines of Rancière:

Democracy is not, to begin with, a form of State. It is, in the first place, the reality of the power of the people that can never coincide with the

³⁰ On the relevance of trade union for rethinking alternative politics see also (Močnik and Lukič 2009).

form of a State. There will always be tension between democracy as the exercise of a shared power of thinking and acting, and the State, whose very principle is to appropriate this power.³¹

What had previously been the recognized and established “distribution of the sensible” of liberal democracy, with its logic of counting voices and parts of society in order to manage the population and adopt capitalist subsumption, was now disturbed by the political force of social uprising. The state apparatuses attempted to treat those involved as criminals and minimize their appeal by promoting a conspiracy theory about the recrudescence of old communists; however, all such cynical remarks only made the movement stronger. Those on the streets did not agree to follow the formal procedure of being citizen-subjects who wait to perform a ritual every four years and choose what has already been chosen for them, voting for people who are partially responsible for the existing situation. They participated in a political process that brought together many people who had never had any political experiences. In terms of social structure, it engaged a variety and plurality of social groups and individuals with different political affiliations and from different generations, young and old, workers and students, LGBT activists, feminists, partisan veterans, precarious workers, ecologists, anarchists and socialists. The picture was rather different than in 1988, when the large majority of protests consisted of industrial workers. But in 2012, despite the differences and heterogeneity of the mass uprisings, people were united around the political slogan: “It is enough!” “It is over with him/them! [Gotov je! Gotovi so!]” “They are all crooks!” [Lopovi!]. These statements express a central paradox of the uprising, which is common to most recent movements on the periphery. On the one hand, one could firmly claim that these uprisings are the greatest mass and political events on the periphery since the 1980s, but on the other hand, we should bear in mind the very strong “antipolitical” tone that can be recognized in the demands, desires and interpretations of many participants in the protests.³² The rejection of corrupt individuals and the whole political class could well signify an “escape” from or a rejection of the dominant order of the police, thus emphasizing protesters’ desire for an angelic position of not wanting to dirty their hands with politics. On rare occasions, this radical position functions in a more productive way, as the departure point for a more sys-

³¹ Jacques Rancière Interview: “Democracy is not, to begin with, a form of State.” <http://hiredknives.wordpress.com/2012/01/21/jacques-ranciere-interview-democracy-is-not-t/>.

³² For more on the antipolitical current of protests see the analysis of Bulgarian protests by Ivancheva and of the Russian protests in Artemy Magun’s article in this issue.

temic critique of the political representation and reproductive mechanism of the whole political class that implicated in the transitional process. With the demands for the overthrow and resignation of all leading figures and questioning of the functioning of the established (democratic) institutions, the dissensus grew bigger with every manifestation. It was by this uncompromised political act of split that a process of democratic action by “the people” started.

The political concept of “the people” should, then, not be defined as a homogenous majority of those engaged, who have a unanimous consensus on political demands. Rather, I see the people as the demos in Rancierean terms, that is, as a political figure of dissensus, of those excluded, invisible, and exploited, who take politics out of the hands of experts, professional politicians, and opinion leaders. Based on their own experience of acting and thinking, they not only rejected the order of the “police,” but also began formulating diverse demands. In this respect, the internal differences in demands are, I claim, a constitutive mark of the very “people” itself. The people, in this sense, cannot but preserve its heterogeneity and constitutes a “partial, politically constructed universality” (Laclau 2005: 240). The people as a political category and practical entity is only formed through struggles full of splits and differences, both against those in political power, but also internally within the social uprising. One can easily see how diverse and barely reconcilable positions may exist: from liberal-moralism (“we need new good people to uphold the rule of law”)³⁵, and nationalism (“for a better Slovenia, we need to bring forward sincere Slovenians; politicians have betrayed the national cause”) to strong tendencies in support of social transformation (demand for democratic socialism and anarchist demands for change in everyday life).

This diversity, on the one hand, helped unite people in the struggle against the political class; on the other hand, it provided intellectual tools to help them understand the deeper structural crisis of our time: the crisis of the global and particularly the European capitalist system and the peripheral role that Slovenia assumes in it. Apart from the negative speeches against the corruption of governmental and other officials, most notably, against the mayor of Maribor (Franc Kangler) and the Prime Minister

³⁵ The moralistic critique was very popular already in the Occupy protests, where the whole dynamic of the capitalist crisis was reduced to an antagonism between 1 % and 99 %, and where only certain representatives of financial speculation (in that case: bankers, in social uprisings: politicians) were seen as corrupt individuals, the source of all evil. Some interpretations even pointed to the unfinished revolutions of 1989, which now are viewed as demonstrating a backward eastern European mentality and lack of political culture and democratic institutions. This appears to be a mix of orientalism and conspiracy theory and succeeds in keeping people blind to the more structural nature of social relations and the logic of capital’s functioning.

(Janez Jansa), participants in the uprising organized an alternative program through a series of performances, cultural events and new popular councils, committees, and initiatives that took seriously the search for the broadest possible democratic platform. These included the Committee for Direct Democracy, the Coordinating Committee for a Cultural Slovenia, and the General Assembly of the All-Slovenian Uprising and Protestival, to name a few.

Short note on the political idea of the people

But is the concept of “the people” still adequate or operative enough to describe new uprisings and transformations on the horizon? Shouldn't we speak of movements, masses, or even the formation of a new proletariat? In the history of radical political thought, the concept of “the people” is rightly looked upon with some scepticism. Some Marxist and critical theorists claim it is symptomatic of the post-socialist condition,³⁴ where instead of privileging the category of class (or masses), there is a tendency to privilege a much more oblique and vague category of people that reconciles and even neutralizes class antagonism. Furthermore, the term “the people” cannot easily be unbound from its Enlightenment legacy, which goes back to social contract theory, the ideological legitimacy it historically provided to the bourgeois struggle, and its inclusion of the Third Estate into the modern political apparatus. Karl Marx correctly stated that the turning point should be analyzed with much critical scrutiny: the bourgeois revolution comes at the moment when the bourgeoisie ceases to be an organic element in society, only one of the three estates (*Stände*), and becomes a class (*Klasse*), which represents, at least symbolically, the interest of the whole society and no longer simply its own.³⁵ Putting aside the theoretical subtleties of social contract theories—I simplify for the sake of brevity—Rousseau's theoretical matrix of transition from the state of nature to the political state always already binds the “general will”³⁶ of “people” into the presupposed entity of the state, which is posed as a *fait accompli*.³⁷ The trap of popular sovereignty lies in the

³⁴ An excellent study of the theoretical transformation of Marxism into post-Marxism in the Yugoslav situation of 1980s was done by Ozren Pupovac (2008).

³⁵ The section “The relation of state and law to property” (Marx 2000).

³⁶ The most pertinent and Badiouian defense of the “general will” has been recently developed by Peter Hallward (2012).

³⁷ Althusser's long research on Hobbes and especially Rousseau shows how there is a theoretical inconsistency within transition, and how the agent and the end process is already inscribed in the perspective of the accomplished fact. In other words, according to Althusser, the process of political transformation and novelty is wholly ignored in (Rousseau 1971). Obviously, if we had not read the posthumously published

heart of the social contract tradition.³⁸ Instead of popular sovereignty, the central goal of the political process is hidden in the perspective of state sovereign(ty). This type of political philosophy would, with Althusser's Machiavelli, either suture politics to morality and God's providence, or suture social contract to legal/social state and civic religion. In other words, this type of reasoning proves to be limiting when considering novelty or rupture in politics which issue rather from the "fait à accomplir," from the not yet accomplished fact. According to the critical and Marxist theory, contractualism and the state are thus the arch-enemies of the People as a political category. The People comes to life only when it unbinds itself from the existing codification within parliamentary democracy (legal), differentiating itself from the empirical majority (statistical counting), or national substance, which fuses nation and people.³⁹ A politics of demos then brings the split into the core of the meaning and functioning of the established order and poses itself as an immanent threat to that order. In this respect the concept of the people can be still defended, especially in light of plural orientations and tendencies within the current uprisings, which cannot really be defined as a new class formation, or a temporary public unrest.

For anyone from the post-Yugoslav conjuncture, it is of particular importance also to mobilize forgotten historical and theoretical material that already dealt intensively with the concept of "people." Due to its semantic polyvalence in Slovenian context,⁴⁰ it relates closely to the revolu-

texts from Althusser on Machiavelli (1999), a very similar argument could be used against Althusser himself. Hallward's reading, for example, is much more sympathetic to the use of Rousseau in the communist tradition (2012).

³⁸ For the most eloquent critique of this model and its radicalization in a state of exception see Agamben's *Homo Sacer*; from a very different, more affirmative perspective but proceeding from the side of "the people" or "the multitude," see Negri's defense of "constitutive power" against the "constituted" (1999).

³⁹ See also (Balibar 2002). This does not mean that the parliament cannot become a space of democratic, radical, or even revolutionary politics; however, the established ruling parties have by and large been discredited and the public mistrust and low level of confidence in parliamentary institutions has been an acute problem in most European countries. With political sovereignty "externalized" to the European Commission, ECB, and IMF, most people feel extremely alienated from any kind of imagined community.

⁴⁰ The Slovenian language allows for differentiation between people (*ljudstvo*) and nation (*narod*), although the term "narod" is sometimes used interchangeably for both meanings depending on the situation. For a specific development of the terms nation and nationality in the Yugoslav context see Banac (1984: 23–27). Banac embraces the thesis that if it is true that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, it does not mean that certain national affiliations and a certain national consciousness did not

tionary experiences of people's liberation struggle / national liberation struggle during WWII. Mobilizing historical resources is a part of the current alternative partisan revival,⁴¹ which attacks the anti-totalitarian demonization of the past or nostalgic rehabilitation of partisan struggle into Slovenian nationhood. Contrary to the nostalgic recuperation of partisan struggle into Slovenian state sovereignty, the vital lesson of the people's liberation struggle is that it consisted of both the antifascist solidarity struggle among different Yugoslav and non-Yugoslav nations, and also, in the Yugoslav case, an affirmative social revolution, which resulted in the new federative political entity with its socialist platform. It is noteworthy that in the postwar years the conception of the people was given a political twist and was revised to "the working people," functioning as a disjunctive synthesis of class and national questions in socialist Yugoslavia.

The defense of "the people" as a strategic lens for understanding social uprising is thus built on both politico-theoretical and historical premises. This type of discernment does not necessarily contradict a more economics-based analysis, which is a necessary but not sufficient frame for grasping the novelty of the uprising. The point, now, is to connect the concept of people to the framework that binds it to a particular intersection of other categories, such as class, gender, and race, as Balibar and Wallerstein famously announced decades ago (1991). This intersectionality becomes much clearer in times of crisis; all the different complexities and temporalities of uneven capitalist development point to the unified character of capital and its contradictions (falling rate of profit, speculative volatility). What used to be the fragmented and invisible, even dissolved bonds of a working class moulded as a mass of (self-) employees with diverse working contracts and conditions, are now replaced by a working class increasingly conscious of sharing the same predicament: dispossession, privatization, intensified exploitation, and most of all unemployment, which made redundant millions of people across Europe. Marx's argument of "surplus population" seems more valid now than ever, instead of an industrial reserve army of labor, we can speak of a ve-

exist prior to the late 19th century. However, this thesis over-emphasizes nationalist ideology as a kind of eternal ahistorical formation. Karl Deutsch has a good definition of nationality: the people that are on their way to achieving political, economic and cultural autonomy (1996). During WWII different terms were used in the partisan struggle, with the exception of the French-derived version of "nation" (*nacija*), which was left out due to the negative pejorative unitaristic connotation from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia ("integrative Yugoslavism").

⁴¹ The most important study on the status of partisan art, 600 pages long, was written by Miklavž Komelj (2009) and is crucial in terms of understanding the deep rupture that took place also in the field of culture.

ritably “deindustrialized reserve army,” an ever-growing part of the population that will probably never enter into work relations, and is even less likely to return to industrial production. If this movement of capital appears as an economic necessity, then what we find in the reality should be a spontaneous answer, an individual survival strategy. But the existence of various political uprisings in recent years rather points to the increased political articulacy of those who have undergone “pauperization.” All the famous “middle classes” have started in the race to the bottom and found themselves in the masses of the working class and *Lumpenproletariat*.

Evidently, the political articulation of new popular political forms (people’s assemblies) and their degree of class antagonism and level of organization varies radically in the different countries of the periphery. There are definitely a few shared political marks of the uprisings: first, it is their mass element, and secondly, their “antipolitical” mood, expressed in the refusal of all official modes of politics and political parties. A conjunctural analysis would show that some movements tend more towards right-wing populism, especially those historically connected with a strong anti-communist tradition (in the East⁴²), while others are generally more open to the leftist alternative. However, nothing is decided yet. The question is rather, to what extent these new groups and movements will be able to continue building new organizational forms and affirmative political platforms, which, in a Gramscian way, expand mass intellectuality and political forms in a new hegemonic block?⁴³ How to insist on developing new popular institutions while being completely ignored by their own governments and European leadership? Despite many of these politico-theoretical questions that deal with the people, the masses, the (sub)proletariat, and Left parties, which should be further elaborated and debated, what also needs to be said is that some of these question can be responded to (only) by the political work of the people within a new socialist-oriented hegemonic bloc. Evidently, even if there are some strong emancipatory traces all throughout the European periphery, there is no guarantee that the political tendency within the people will necessary go in the direction of socialism. The other pole of the Luxemburg’s famous

⁴² Obviously, there is a strong fear that has to do with what Balibar called “fear of masses” (2008). The latter is feared both by the official Order, ruling class and by antiauthoritarian progressive orientations, which—also from historical examples—rightfully detect pro-fascist elements among the masses. However, instead of disinvesting from the masses and not dirtying hands with politics, an emancipatory politics has to enter these difficult struggles and keep both its feet on the ground.

⁴³ See Sotiris on political experimentation and left strategies in (Greece 2013). Importantly, in what way will the political struggle be able to prevent and neutralize the scape-goating strategies (from above and below!) that target the marginal groups of a society (Roma, immigrants, Muslims)?

choice is simultaneously taking shape in the rise of right-wing populist movements and extreme right-wing parties both at the center and on the periphery.

The maturity and limits of mass protests in Slovenia: after the overthrow

Social uprisings in Slovenia continued well into 2013 with demands for further resignations even after the mayor of Maribor resigned. The first months of 2013 catalyzed protests against austerity. Trade unions joined the tide of protests and also organized (23.1.) a massive general strike with 20,000 workers on the streets of 14 different cities across Slovenia. March 2013 brought a huge boost and a victory for the social movement. Central political figures and some other functionaries had to resign due to the mounting pressure in March 2013. Most notably, Janez Janša resigned from his position as PM (replaced by the more moderate centrist government led by Alenka Bratušek), while Zoran Janković, the leader of the Positive Slovenia Party had to resign from the presidency. This seemed to be a historical victory for the uprising, which during the winter months and tough austerity measures brought to life a new sense of solidarity and popular emancipation. However, by the time of this victory, new political forms had not yet been created; furthermore, they did not form a historical bloc with a coherent political program that would challenge the new government and the crisis situation. After April 2013, the popular enthusiasm and the interest in building institutions from below came to a halt. Some individuals who took part in the protests called for a no-compromise struggle against official politics, while others urged waiting for new governmental policies that were supposed to take a different course. The new government consisted of old parties and, while it did tone down the social Darwinist discourse, the general direction remained the same: all the austerity measures and privatization processes blissfully continued. It seemed the protesters' energy had wrongly concentrated on the overthrow of individual figures. The years-long obsession with Janša and the fear of a right-wing authoritarian regime became one of the major impediments to a real emancipatory politics. When the mayor of Maribor, France Kangler, and Prime Minister Janez Janša were thrown out of political power, the majority of the movement gradually disappeared from the public's attention, and only the most engaged groups remained active. A new political project, which is working on developing connections between the people, the movement, and a (new) party, is a long-term project.

Only very recently have the most engaged parts of the uprising started to articulate stronger political aims. A few groups have announced their future participation in new political initiatives, but concrete action was taken by three agents, namely, the Society for Justice and Solidarity,

the All-Slovenian-Uprising, and the Network for Direct Democracy, who, in mid-December 2013, organized the founding congress of the Solidarity Party, whose goal is to tackle official politics from within. Furthermore, the most consistent and politically radical group formed an “Initiative for Democratic Socialism,” which launched an alternative development program for Slovenia and will work on the model of Movement-Party. The near future will show how far these initiatives can change the existing coordinates of the political landscape. However, what has already been changed is the fact that the political aspirations that used to be unthinkable or marked as extreme only a few months ago, such as demands for direct democracy, a participatory budget, cooperatives, and democratic socialism, have come to the forefront in mainstream media and other public discussions.

From Maribor’s periphery to the core: a call for a different and social Europe?

The effects of the uprising were strongest in Maribor, in the city that saw the first mass political mobilization since its massive self-organized workers manifestations 25 years earlier. The political platform of the social uprising in Maribor articulated two different and concrete political struggles. *Firstly*, some groups organized their support for a new program and an independent mayor to come after the resignation of the current one. The local elections in mid-March saw the electoral victory of Andrej Fistravec, an independent intellectual critical of the status quo, who was involved in the uprising and has been on the local political scene for years. There remains trouble with the official municipal council, which is full of members of established political parties. The council will unquestionably stall the democratization of the political process. *Secondly*, an important direct democratic effort, based on organizing the district and other local communities, has been undertaken by the group “Initiative for City Council.” These new democratic platforms are a forum for discussions which could influence the municipal budget and planning, working on small day-to-day projects and thus contributing massively to the re-invention of the self-management tradition as an example of the people’s *right to the city*.

Whether both elements in the political process—those from below and those from institutionalized politics—will cooperate to transform the existing state of affairs, is a whole different question, and it is too early to answer it. But what is important is that political power itself be taken away from those who are complicit in the development of the present crisis and have actually contributed to the prevalent extreme antipolitical attitude. The protests have also undercut the nostalgia for industrialist times and the neoliberal enthusiasm for the ECC’s deindustrialized dreams. Maribor attempted to break the deadlock in 1988 by expressing

the historical sign of the defeat of socialist industrialization. In 2012 all eyes were turned again to Maribor, when it started to redefine the city and to campaign for citizen's right to the city. If in 1988 Maribor signalled the fall of socialism, which also meant fall of the welfare state in its post-socialist condition, could it be that this time we hear the death knell of neoliberalism? This remains the question posed by the new Maribor, but it is, of course, much larger than Maribor. What is clear is that the uprising opened a future to a different Maribor that works against both imposed austerity and the idea of periphery. Maribor's struggle illuminates the ways in which the periphery can become the very center of politically engaged thought and revolutionary action.

This said, it is important to recognize that the Slovenian uprising is only one part of the mosaic of struggles on the periphery of the EU: popular struggles in Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, but also beyond, in Bosnia and Turkey—these struggles bring to light the logic underlying structural inequalities within the EU: *the periphery rises and reinvents both a popular democracy and a socially-oriented politics*. However, the periphery should move beyond (self-)isolation and orient political demands toward the center: what and how to democratize the European institutions and to regulate financial capital? How to make the socio-economic relations between North and South more equal? This is not only to be answered by the periphery, but should be the major question for anyone who wishes to continue the collective socially-oriented project of Europe.

Despite our reservations about the state (and its sovereignty)—as our theoretical note on political subjectivity emphasized—we need to remain critical towards the immersion of people into the state apparatus—a conjunctural analysis shows that the current neoliberal project in the EU actually embraces the critique and dismantling of the state. A direct consequence of austerity packages is stripping the state of all political and social apparatuses except the repressive one. The state in a new European order would have a well-trained and obedient army with police and will be ruled by expert-technocrats. The fiasco of the shutdown of Greek public media is another symptom of this experimentation with austerity. In this respect, building people's political institutions under democratic, direct or delegated control, is of utmost importance, even if it means at least temporarily strengthening certain state elements against economic policies directed from the European center. Moreover, the local struggles of the peripheries must necessarily be connected to the struggle for an alternative Europe.

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