

THE END OF POST-COMMUNISM?

Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs. Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 213 p. ISBN 9783518126011.

The iconic image of the fall of the Berlin Wall could have been a succinct starting point for Boris Buden's *Zone des Übergangs. Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* [The zone of transition: On the end of post-communism] – and in a way it, indeed, is. The discussion of the “image”¹ of this historic occurrence sets the point of departure for part one of the book and opens up one of the book's driving questions – why is the gaze of the actual actors of the 1989/90 revolutions, of the people who *felled* both the wall and the communist regimes whose oppressive nature it has come to symbolise, *missing* from the image? The author then sets out to describe the political consequences of a forced infantilisation of those very same Eastern Europeans who, after having themselves effected the democratic revolutions that brought about the collapse of the regimes in their countries, were stripped of historical agency and captured by the hegemonic effects of the discourse of post-communism.

It is worth asking, then, why Buden strategically chooses in fact *not* to begin with his critique of this image, opting instead for a kind of formal and temporal displacement. In lieu of an introduction, he retells a traumatic story which took place in the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia. The 1993 event, which provides the point of departure for the book's preamble, chronologically comes after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and for Buden it represents one of several propositions for conceptualizing and narrating the “end” of post-communism. In order to understand the book's political and theoretical commitments, it is important to take seriously Buden's decision to *start* from the “end” – one of the book's central motifs is precisely a preoccupation with the “end” of post-communism (which is fittingly reflected in the book's subtitle). Post-communism's “end” alternately becomes a diagnosis, a matter of historiography, and a political demand for a refusal of collective immaturity and innocence.

¹ An image which need not be tied to any specific illustration in order to instantaneously summon all kinds of affective and narrative commonplaces related to the conditions and consequences of the historic event.

For Buden one of post-communism's possible ends came on a February night in 1993 when a Serbian paramilitary group stopped and searched a train en route from Belgrade to Bar. Twenty passengers were "disappeared" that night, after having been robbed, tortured, and executed by a group that had been given license by the Serbian government. We know that eighteen of the victims were Muslim – either from Montenegro or Serbia – and one was a retired Croatian from the Yugoslav army. Thanks to testimonies and information obtained by NGOs and the families of the missing, we have since learned the names and former workplaces of nineteen of them. The twentieth passenger remains, however, nameless and unidentified. The only thing we know of him is that he was "black" and heavyset, that he was beaten up "less" than the rest of the group and that one of the murderers kissed him and called him "little brother." To the present day it is still not known whether the twentieth man managed to escape or ended up in the Drina river along with his fellow passengers. "Dead or alive, 'the black' is insignificant because he is without a society"² (p. 11), concludes Buden.

We will come back to the point about the lack of society in post-communism, but for now it is crucial to ask why precisely this episode was chosen to set the tone for the entire book? It is against its backdrop that we need to consider the stakes involved in examining and dismantling post-communist discourse. One of its symptoms, as Buden writes, is a jargon which persistently uses the metaphor of a child. A significant part of his book is devoted to exposing the political effects of the subjectivisation of Eastern European actors – actors of the democratic revolutions that toppled regimes from Warsaw to Bucharest and from Berlin to Sofia that were seen to be oppressive, as well as the actors of the so-called "transition" period. They are subjectivised as children who need guidance, patronage, and education. The figure of the child, with its characteristic traits of innocence, naivety, and immaturity, becomes the "ideal subject of a democratic restart" (p. 35), but its future-oriented optimism masks a fundamental structural inequality, while naturalising the logic of domination inherent to the child-parent relation. This seemingly natural and benign relation can produce extremely violent effects, and this is perhaps why one can read Buden's proposition of an end to post-communism as a call to put an end also to the narrative of innocence: how can one come to terms with events such as the ones which took place on the Belgrade – Bar route and still claim that their perpetrators were only children? Buden writes that the child as a governing figure of post-communism not only is an instrument of control but also has a structural meaning – indeed, the child is "freed *a priori* from any guilt for the crimes of communism" (p. 48), but the figure of the child also absolves those of the post-communist period who were complicit in its criminal privatisation projects, "nationalisms and fascisms, bloody civil wars and even genocides" (*ibid.*). These

² This and all other translations from German that follow are mine.

things can only appear as unavoidable infantile disorders in the teleological narrative of post-communist discourse.

If one part of the dangers involved in perpetuating the children's narrative of post-communism includes stripping its subjects of agency and, consequently, of historical responsibility, then what might be the motivation for enforcing and maintaining this oppressive infantilisation? Buden is suspicious of the euphoric enthusiasm with which the Eastern European revolutions were met in the West, which he reads as a symptom of Westerners' narcissistic self-identification with their own position within and attitude towards a liberal democratic order whose faults are well perceived even by its most vehement proponents. The figure of the liberal ironist, brought forth by influential liberal thinker Richard Rorty, is precisely one which, as Buden writes, is aware of the *gap* between the democratic ideal and its realisation, and yet stoically keeps maintaining that *democracy* is (to put it in Winston Churchill's words) the *worst* form of government, except for all the others. This sober, ironic attitude becomes partly suspended (only to then be stabilised) in the image of populations toppling communist regimes across Eastern Europe. Rather than acknowledging the heterogeneous, democratic character of movements such as Perestroika, Glasnost, and Solidarność, which managed to radically politicise the foundations of society as it was given to them, Buden writes that:

. . . in the revolutionary acts of Eastern European actors, the Western audience found only an objective confirmation of its own passivity towards the already established. (P. 57)

This kind of narcissistic self-identification not only produces an asymmetrical situation in which the Eastern European actors can only ever be seen as "catching up" with Western modernity (whose incarnation is envisioned to be liberal-democratic capitalism [p. 59]); it also ultimately means that Western populations themselves fall victim to the logic of this narrative, while the possibility of revolting against the already established, the *status quo*, remains foreclosed: "The so-called catching-up revolution in the East is the counterpart to the absent revolution in the West" (p. 72).

In line with thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe and with explicit reference to Oliver Marchart, Buden draws a distinction between politics and the political: while the former is considered to be a clearly delimited, separate sphere that operates within pre-existing formal boundaries and never explicitly asks what constitutes the foundation of a society, the political moment appears precisely "in the *rift* between the collapsed ground of an old society and the ground of a society which has not yet been laid out" (p. 81; italics mine). The driving question of the political – which Buden identifies as a feature of the democratic movements that brought about the collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe – is directed at the foundations of a given society. In the post-communist context the political emerges in the moment of realisation of the

absence of such a foundation. The subjective experience of a loss of society thus appears as one of post-communism's defining features.

One crucial aspect of Buden's critique of the post-communist discourse of Eastern Europe "catching up" with the West in a process of an endless transition to liberal democracy is the way in which this catching up is translated into cultural terms. The logic of the teleological narrative presupposes two counterparts which are constitutive of each other: on the one hand, a culture presenting itself as universal and, on the other, a culture that is particular, immature, inferior (cf. p. 60f). Buden writes of an inherent paradox in the apparent purpose of the process of inclusion: in order to level out differences, these first need to be construed in cultural terms. Culture here appears as a reactionary discursive ground:

An oversized notion of culture has absorbed everything which had previously articulated itself as political and social experience. (P. 61)

The language of cultural difference appears seemingly harmless and yet can have very violent effects – similarly to the child metaphor discussed above. Its apparent benignity precludes an engagement with issues ranging from social inequality, poverty and the experience of a loss of society, to religiously motivated violence and the consolidation of power – all these being features of the post-communist condition. Instead, each of these essentially social and political issues is flattened out and presented in the language of culture and cultural difference. Rather than being a matter of popular struggle and a politicisation of the foundations of society, democracy itself then becomes a matter of cultural acquisition, to be achieved when "catching-up" societies and cultures learn to absorb universal Western civilisational "values."

The question of cultural difference is a recurring motif in Buden's book, and in its second part Buden examines the relationship between politics, the "return" of religious faith in post-communism, and a conservative notion of culture.

According to Buden, religious discourse has also come to adopt the language of cultural difference and thus has dispensed with the possibility of offering a social critique. By examining the accounts of two Serbian Orthodox priests, Arsenije and Ćuli-brk, Buden shows how the re-discovery of religious faith is meant to offer consolation for the hardships of life on Earth and the broken promises of a better life (p. 116). The language of these priests, who have each crafted a narrative of their conversion to God by appraising cultural phenomena such as rock 'n' roll or debauchery and drug use in communist Belgrade, is in fact driven by a double negativity: "a retroactive negation of communism and a current negation of liberal-democratic capitalism" (*ibid.*). The two priests, however, systematically eschew the necessity to translate the conditions of these earthly hardships into social and political terms. Buden demonstrates the impotence of the newly discovered religiosity as a medium of critique:

The post-communist return to God is mute as a critique of concrete social reality. [...] [This new faith] is proclaimed as a socially superior culture *vis-à-vis* another, decadent culture. (P. 117)

Buden argues that God's "return" in post-communism actually constitutes his re-socialisation and integration into the public sphere after having been relegated to the private sphere during communist rule. This "banishment" can in fact be seen as continuous with efforts dating back to the Enlightenment. However, the subsequent post-communist "liberation" of God and his "release from the privateness of the church into public life, into the media, schools, and barracks, into the political parties [...], into the artistic and cultural scene, and, finally, also into the market" (p. 110) necessarily means that God would "want more back than has been taken away from him by the communists" (*ibid.*). This statement can be read as an earnest warning – indeed, the voracity of this liberated religiosity can be identified in the effortlessness with which, for instance, the priest Ćulibrk's discourse moves from a discussion of world history as a history of rock 'n' roll to an explicit siding with Serbian national-fascism in the concrete politico-historical context of the destruction of Sarajevo.

Buden adopts Habermas's notion of a "postsecular society" to describe the entry of religion into the public sphere; he then vehemently critiques Habermas's proposition for coming to terms with this new epochal situation. Habermas suggests that religious language needs to be translated into the language of the official discourse used by secular citizens, the rationale being that a conversation between religious and secular communities could actually turn profitable for liberal democracy. An attempt to apply this strategy to the language of the two Orthodox priests, however, quickly makes clear that there is not really much to translate – their languages are already hybrid, and they are already a product of political translation (p. 141). The problem, according to Buden, lies in the reductionist character of Habermas's notion of translation, which betrays a faith in homogenous and clearly separated languages:

By placing the authority to translate [*Übersetzungsvorbehalt*] at the border between an informal community and a formal, or rather a "proper," political community, [Habermas] reduces his notion of translation to the function of linguistic purification and homogenisation. (*Ibid.*)

Not only does this notion fail to grasp the complexity, hybridity, and impurity of any language, including religious language; it also places the power over translation in the hands of elites, who would have privileged access to the mediation of the "true word" (cf. p. 138f). What is more, the postsecular condition is primarily defined, according to Buden, by a persistence of religion in the form of a cultural translation (p. 148). In this realm too we can observe how trust in the possibility of a completely transparent

articulation of cultural identities and differences turns out to be complicit in precluding the articulation of social conflicts in political language and in stabilising religious fundamentalism, which comes to play the role of society itself (p. 150).

Buden's sceptical appraisal of Habermas's notion of translation is crucial to Buden's overall critique of the discourse of post-communism, and to his insistence that translation can't be simply a matter of rendering different "cultures" commensurate – it is rather necessary to think both language (including religious language) and society as hybrid and impure. Furthermore, the adequate grasping of their driving logics necessitates an engagement with the historical experience of their political actors and the conditions of possibility of the (dominant) social phenomena of the present.

The final part of Buden's book looks at the contemporary role of culture from yet another point of view, focusing on the question of utopia and on the reconfiguration of the relation between past and future in post-communism. He picks up the previously formulated diagnosis of the experience of a loss of society and, through a discussion of Charity Scribner's *Requiem for Communism*,³ he shows how the collective mourning of this loss again articulates itself in cultural terms, namely in the form of cultural translation and cultural memory. While Scribner sees the workings of cultural memory as bearing emancipatory potential and making it possible to re-evaluate what has been lost with socialism (both in the East as well as in the West), Buden is warier of the implications of delegating social hope solely to a depoliticised sphere of culture (cf. p. 168). This is not to say that he presupposes two clearly separated, homogenous realms (of culture and politics), but instead that these need to be investigated from the point of view of the strategies of translation and articulation occurring between them. There is also need to consider the ways in which these strategies pose questions of the social, of the future, or, as it were, of the value of what has actually been lost with the past.

Hence, utopia as a discursive and imaginative ground where such issues are continually relayed seems to be a suitable point of departure for examining the specificity of the ways in which the hope for social transformation is posed differently in post-communism in comparison to other historic moments. Buden writes that the utopias of both capitalist and socialist modernity have always been oriented towards the future and driven by a hope for a better one (p. 170). Unlike these old, but necessarily *social* and *prospective* utopias of modernity, the new utopias are, according to him, *cultural* and *retrospective*: "The possibility of a better world currently opens up only from a utopian retrospective" (p. 171). Buden discusses artistic movements of the 1980s such as the retro-avant-garde of the Slovenian art scene and Russian post-utopianism of the same period, as well as the shift in the relation to utopia which can be discerned in the emergence during the 1990s of yet another movement, *retroutopism*. The latter's

³ Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2003).

main artistic strategy, argues Buden, is to approach the past “in order to extrapolate its unrealised ideas in the future” (p. 178); this detour through the past is thought to bear an imaginative potential. The main difference between the new retroutopism and the classic utopian phantasies of the past (such as those of the Russian avant-garde) lies in retroutopism’s capacity for and interest in social articulation. Whereas the old utopias sought to actively partake in the reconfiguration of the world, Buden sees no such social articulation or desire for transformation in the artistic retroutopist movement of the 1990s (p. 181). Its translation of unexplored potentials of the past into the present and future occurs solely in cultural terms:

[...] the future itself has become a category of the past – not in a post-utopian but in a post-social sense. [...] In other words, a social experience of the future is only possible in a cultural retrospective. (*Ibid.*)

If the ideological narrative of post-communism as a transition to liberal democracy considers the question of the future to be settled once and for all (p. 46), then what does it mean to put an end to this teleological narrative? How to release the question of the future from its position as a cultural artefact of the past and let it exert a politicising force in the present? Is it possible to turn the issue of the future into a question of and for the social? Can the concern with an absent future become a shared ground and point of departure for an investigation into the social and political conditions of inequality, indebtedness, poverty, systemic exclusion from the public sphere both in the so-called West as well as in the East – and that without flattening out crucial historical and geo-political differences?

It seems that Buden proposes at least two possible scenarios for putting an end to post-communism. One of them, involving a rejection of the narrative of innocence, was already mentioned at the very beginning of this review. The second also implies a rejection of a different kind – that of shame. To articulate its necessity, Buden engages with the final lines of Dušan Makavejev’s 1971 film *W. R.: Mysteries of the Organism*, spoken by the severed head of the film’s main heroine: “Comrades! Even now I am not ashamed of my communist past!” Despite the critical stance towards the failure of communism’s emancipatory project that it voices (p. 100), the film according to Buden is post-communist without being anti-communist (p. 101). This already distinguishes it from the dominant discourse of post-communism. What is more, the explicit and radical rejection of shame also makes the film appear, to Buden, as a radical critique of post-communism (p. 102) – even though it is set and shot well before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Buden writes that:

One should never be ashamed of one’s struggle for freedom. This concerns all those who brought down the Wall twenty years ago, but even more so those who are facing new walls today. (P. 103)

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Both episodes that tell stories of alternative ends to post-communism – the traumatic, violent event that took place in February 1993 on the Belgrade – Bar route and the fictional account contained in Makavejev's 1971 film – effectively put us at a time *after* the end of post-communism, that is, in post-communism's lived future. They put a halt to the narrative of an endless transition towards a predetermined, yet always elusive, point in the future, and they provocatively state that we are *past* this point already. This means that one of the crucial tasks today is not only to imagine other possible presents and futures, but also to actively critique, interrogate, and transform of the political conditions that make these presents and futures possible.

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