

“All citizens who left their homes without a real need are responsible for the injuries they obtained.”

The contemporary privatism in the patriarchal guise

by Ivana Perica

I. Changes

In “The Culture of New Capitalism” Richard Sennett makes several interesting remarks on the experience he had with the employees of two USA companies. In two surveys made within the time span of thirty years his focus was on the employees' workplace behavior and their mutual relations, the so-called “informal trust”. The survey conducted in the 60s in an old style factory is compared with the results of a similar survey made at the beginning of the 90s in a Silicon Valley plant. These surveys are worth noting because of the two incidents that occurred in the respective workplaces and the symptomatic way the workers reacted to those incidents: in the first case there was a fire alarm in the building and the workers organized themselves quickly – everyone knew spontaneously what his or her assignment was, so they extinguished the fire without serious injuries or significant material damage. In the second case – the one that occurred in the Silicon Valley plant – there was a problem with the air-conditioning system, which began sucking in rather than ejecting noxious gases. Employees' reactions led to total chaos: people hardly knew each other and because they could not instinctively suppose what the others would do, everybody ran towards the same gateway at the same time, and only a few of them actually tried to solve the problem. In the end the managers had to admit that the thirty two hundred people plant was only “superficially organized on paper” (Sennett 2006: 67). These two stories illustrate well the processes that can be called “radical privatization”, and which are the outcome of market liberalization, flexibilization of working conditions, nowadays symptomatically called “flexicurity”, etc. We know that during the timespan encompassed by the two surveys significant changes in the American “working culture” were introduced. Numerous new developments were under way: because the traditional types of employment turned into short term contracts, the employees gradually lost interest in long-term friendships with their colleagues. They were expected to identify themselves with their career and to become more oriented towards challenging work assignments. Their professional life had to be an essential part of their whole life narrative.

II. The meaning of privatization

This is the frame within which I will use the term “privatism”: although the process of turning the public, state-run companies into private enterprises may be the first connotation connected to this term, I use it more with reference to changes in personal self-apprehension and interpersonal relations brought about by market and related cultural innovations of the “new” or “late capitalism” (Jameson 1991), as well as the prevalent neoliberal, post-democratic state we find ourselves in. As for the popular “pursuit of happiness” (David G. Myers), these changes involve growing importance of one’s own happiness and fulfillment in the sphere of private life, or in the orientations toward his or her (private) goals. Significantly, although not logically, the last few decades have been marked by a declining interest in the life shared within certain political communities. One thing led to another, or vice versa: ultimately we witness an overall loss of interest in politics and active citizenship. In this regard the understanding of “privatization” or “privatism” as “individualization” would surely be misleading, as long as we keep in mind the indebtedness of the latter to the historical-cultural and philosophical evolution of the idea of “man” as introduced by Enlightenment and Romanticism. Any connection of these traditional aspects of “individualization” to what we today call *post-democratic re-privatization(s)* would be thoroughly misleading. So, before we get to the juncture where postmodern psychology and psychotherapy, in turn, de-individualize the traditional concept of the individual, it is necessary to point to several historical and theoretical knots that made the role of private and public so decisive.

Today we can speak of an overwhelming amount of volumes (in sociology, philosophy, political theory, literature theory) that try to come to terms with some aspects of private and public. The reason that Richard Rorty's decisional divide has become so influential lies partly in its seemingly easy applicability: “I want to save radicalism and pathos for private moments, and stay reformist and pragmatic when it comes to my dealings with other people.” (Rorty 1996: 17) However complicated this recipe gets when one thinks it through, it still seems to be very practical and user-friendly. It was not before Rorty’s debate with the deconstructionist camp that his division of private and public proved to be “privatistic” itself. As a matter of fact, it was exactly its universal scope and liberal rhetoric that raised most of the suspicions. The debate over private and public as it was published in

Deconstruction and Pragmatism (1996) showed that to draw a line between the private sphere of the (post-)modern individual and the way he enacts himself in – both in the normative and in the descriptive sense – seems to be a simple task only if we remain on the surface of the problem.

In many recent approaches to this problem, one can observe a certain *phantom pain* of theory that would like to put Humpty Dumpty of private and public together again. Neither privacy, private sphere, nor the public can be taken for granted, nor can they be defined in an easy negation of the other part of the division. Moreover, where modern sociology mourned over the loss of privacy, “it is now the public sphere that finds itself flooded and overwhelmed, having been invaded by the troops of privacy” (Bauman 2010: 11). In reality, the Humpty Dumpty of private and public has never been whole. The ideal of the real public and real privacy continues to be nothing more than a retrospective projection that is optimistically supposed to break a path to a better, less confusing future where everything would be in its place. To paraphrase Alex Demirovic, the “dialectic within the concept of the public arena, I wish to argue, thus creates, out of itself, here, the private and, there, the public” (5) – and this not only in atemporal, conceptual sense (self-identical provoking the non-identical), but in the temporal as well. While we bemoan the “fall of public man” (Sennett 1977), we assure ourselves that there must have existed something like the *real, authentic* public man and the pure, untainted private life. The topic was, unmistakably, of certain interest both to conservative thinkers (such as Carl Schmitt or Walter Lippmann) and to numerous liberal sociologists, nowadays considered as classics (John Dewey, John Rawls, Anthony Giddens). Regardless of the distances there may be between these two sides, one cannot overlook the fact that they all indulge in a similar type of mourning after the lost, classic, ideal (and possible only if re-imagined) relation of private and public. They all cry for the lost *phantom* that still ventriloquizes in today’s social body. I am not thinking here only on Jürgen Habermas, the social philosopher whose *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (first edition, in German, published 1962, English translation 1989), I am also thinking of the allegedly more ‘neutral’ writing about private and public, such as Richard Sennett’s *The Fall of Public Man*. (Bear in mind that Habermas, as he points out in the Preface to his seminal work, follows the historical development of the public sphere of the bourgeois class, whereas proletarian and other *Öffentlichkeiten* remain thoroughly neglected.)

In his critique of Habermas, Alex Demirovic shows the blind spot not only of re-writing the historical development of private and public but of drawing a demarcation line between these two spheres as well, as if this line were self-evident. Demirovic argues for a dialectically informed notion of semantic slide between the two poles that find their own condition of possibility only in the other pole that serves the first as its own negativity, and for the deconstructively envisioned dynamics of the public sphere as always already deferred, suspended:

“For that reason, it is understood as a postponement, a process in which every contributed opinion can be criticized and replaced by other expressions of opinion. The public arena can never come to rest in itself; instead, it must always postpone itself, continually differentiate itself from itself by means of conflicts of opinion. For this it needs the private sphere, and develops itself only through the many private expressions of opinion.” (Demirovic 5)

Lacking space to enter into similar criticism of other liberal projects that try to define and fixate the dichotomy of private and public, I can only agree with Demirovic by saying that every such attempt of defining and dividing is doomed to fail due to the dialectical shifts in the very dynamics of *every* dichotomy. This may be the reason why so many related attempts – those of John Dewey, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, Beate Rössler and, recently, Raymond Geuss – could not bring any significant clarification in the semantically unstable relation of these two phenomena we tend to name “private” and “public”.

Even from today’s perspective, the two-level-disambiguation that Norberto Bobbio proposed at the end of the 70s, still seems to be the most far-reaching. Bobbio draws an additional distinction within the distinction: Firstly, there is the so-called “big dichotomy” of private and public as we find it in the relation of politics and economics, and the collective and individual, respectively. This dichotomy has always been marked by a discontent over the hierarchy – whether the individual or the collective should take priority, or how much is it allowed for the economy to intervene into the specific assignments delegated to the State. In this respect, Bobbio speaks of two conflicting *processes*, of “the publicization of the private

and the privatization of the public” that “are not incompatible and in fact interpenetrate each other” (Bobbio 1989: 17). Secondly, the other level refers to the *visibility* and *covertness* of objects, persons, their actions, and politics. Actually, politics is precisely the node at which these two levels converge. More to the point, the first dimension of *big dichotomy* “maintains its validity intact even when the public sphere, understood as the sphere of competence of political power, does not necessarily coincide with the sphere of the public, understood as the sphere where political power is controlled by the public.” (17) Or, to be more precise: “Political power is always public power in the meaning of the great dichotomy even when it is not public, does not act in public, is *hidden from the public* and is not controlled by the public.” (18, italics I.P.)ⁱ

Apart from some rare studies on private&public (authored by, e.g. Friedrich Engels, Negt and Kluge, or Peter Sloterdijk) leftist thought discussed this problem mostly only marginally, so that – apart from the strivings to dismantle the private and public division typical of the 19th century – no Marxist or leftist “theory” of private and public has ever been proposed. Moreover, the neglecting of the question of women in traditional Marxism and socialist movements of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century – or identifying the women's struggle with workers' struggle, as Engels did, contributed to this blindness to the problems of private and public (Zaretsky 1976).

While lacking a seminal volume on private and public, emancipatory projects have nonetheless always been against this distinction because of its debilitating impact on social life. One can even say: they were passionately attached to it. Emancipation(s) must move and have moved across the separation line between private and public, no matter the particular emancipatory project. Workers' and women's emancipation movements of the 19th and 20th century, LGBTQBT movements, anti-globalization protests, *sans papiers* protests, as well as the ongoing *Occupy* movement undertake the decisive step out of the state of invisibility and deprivation, step out of the privacy where only “idiots”, as both Deleuze and Guattari (2000: 70-1) and Hannah Arendt (2000: 30) classically remember, can live on. Emancipation must be conceptualized as an ongoing going out, stepping out into the light, an enduring being “at the frontiers” (Foucault 1997: 315) that can never result in total emancipation or an all-encompassing publicness: if that were so, we would end up in Orwell's *1984* – a totalitarian state of absolute visibility, with no possibilities to hide. The same happens with the other

extreme – while absolute visibility leads to a totalitarian *State* – the absolute privacy would lead us into an apolitical *state*.

Because of its decisive role in emancipation(s), the distinction between private and public is thus surely a political distinction *per se*. However, if we accept the fact that in the present age of “tyranny of intimacy” (Sennett 1977), of Debord's and Baudrillard's levelling of 'appearance' and 'being', and continuous emptying of the public, and due to the overwhelming mediatization of everyday life (talk shows, therapy discourses, and surveillance practices of state and private enterprises), one must pose the question whether emancipation(s) can still derive their strength from the blurred dichotomy of private and public. The answer is perhaps simpler than the question: yes, they can.

III. *Paideia*

Whereas the traditional distinction between private and public served as a buttress to the authoritarian state apparatuses (Althusser 2008), the current constellation of private and public promotes the needs and purposes of the disciplinary mechanisms of the market. This new version of *paideia*, that reduces ‘citizens’ to ‘employees’, still paradoxically equipped with the wishes and expectations of the former bourgeois individual, is even harder to discern today than it was before. The reason for that lies in the fact that the new *paideia* does not produce mass anger but only radical passivity, typical of the average everyday. One of its main tools is psychology and philosophy of well-being. Furthermore, it is not prescribed as much by the State as it is, paradoxically, at the same time non-prescribed *and* imposed by the market (and, consequently, by the State run by market principles). The messages of this new *paideia* are passed on to us via newspapers and evening news, they appear in commercials, are pronounced on the theater stage, in popular TV soap operas, or in literary bestsellers. We encounter them in conversations with our colleagues, neighbors, friends etc. The new pedagogy functions in the same way ideology functions – it does not call us by name, it affects us by our simply *being there*. It reaches us and captures us. And it does that – as Judith

Butler touches upon in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) – by steering our emotional life, by conditioning us psychologically.

This new form of conditioning and controlling the subjects by making them believe it is their personal happiness and success they gain from ideologically coined promises of competition, self-realization, team spirit, engagement without negatively connoted sacrifices, etc., is sometimes called “emotional capitalism” (Illouz 2007). By naming the modern capitalism “emotional”, Eva Illouz wants to stress the use neoliberal capitalism makes of our emotions. In professional life, it is exactly the omnipresent blurring of the divide between private and public that makes emotional (and by that mutual) manipulation possible and, consequently, makes the workers/employees prone to exploitation both as labor force and as political subjects. The employers do not search for employees as professionals, i.e., people with certain knowledge and/or working experience: it is the person as a whole that is asked for, with his/her personal characteristics, moods, attitudes, willingness and affects – characteristics that are traditionally understood as private. These changes are first to be seen in the economy, the counseling branch, management and creative professions. To illustrate, *Uniport*, Austrian career magazine, does not envision career opportunities according to traditional professions, such as engineer, doctor, ecologist or teacher, but according to personal profiles: trendsetter, strategist, culture freak, globetrotter, idealist, helpful, initiator etc. Finding the vocabulary typical for highly productive, creative and dynamic jobs overreach in allegedly non-dynamic, dully and underpaid jobs is even more indicative. In search for salesmen a food store put up the following ad in the shop window: they were looking for a person that was a) reliable, b) responsible, enthusiastic and ready for teamwork, c) communicative, d) had a cultivated appearance and e) did not have to be a salesman by profession. This highly communicative, adventurous person was expected to work as a checkout clerk (but on modern cash desks). And even more: this communicative, enthusiastic and above all responsible person would also have the opportunity to fill up the shelves and carry out cleaning work!

Furthermore, the search for talents does not begin at the graduate level – it is in the once protected, playful childhood where the selection and skill training start. The introduction of so-called “Lerngarten” speaks volumes. Lerngarten is a kindergarten model based on the precepts of the new education industry, according to which children should not forfeit the

chance of the so-called early learning. Interestingly, the experts express this urge for early learning with the newspeak expression “one should not squander the early window of opportunity”ⁱⁱ. In the Lerngarten children aged 3 to 8 obtain crucial skills and get acquainted with important subjects, such as economy, rhetoric, and natural science. They learn about market research, budgeting and product development. They practice communication skills. They learn by modules and attend courses such as “What do I want and how do I reach it?” (“Was will ich und wie komme ich hin?”) And yes, they even have time to rest – between the courses they work off their stress by practicing yoga.

These examples show what decisive role the personal traits play in today’s economy. It is not qualification, or even experience that counts – what counts is the affective willingness to participate and offer a full-on commitment to professional life. When that occurs, the professional life ceases to be a public-professional matter, traditionally opposed to private-personal life, and the distinction between the private self and the committed self (public, professional) collapses. The question we must ask ourselves at this point is where do the two parallel processes of “the publicization of the private and the privatization of the public” (Bobbio 1989: 17) lead to? Is it some new state of private and public or is there more to it? This “more” is actually “less”: more publicization but less visibility, more privatization but less possibilities to retreat, more activity but less action, more communication but less contact. With reference to Hannah Arendt, Paolo Virno traces back the semantics of the “private” to the Latin “privus”: it does not refer to something simply personal – an introspection or subjectivity. The first meaning of “privus” refers to “to be deprived of something”, to “lack a voice, lack a public presence”. The division and distance between those who lack this voice, who are many, and those who colonize the public arena with their utterances and, finally, own it, is the main distinction today’s neoliberalism relies upon (and the place of Bobbio’s important chasm between the two levels of private and public dichotomy). What is lost is not just the right to speak and to be heard but in the first place the sense of the common life of a (non-essential) community (cf. Virno 2005: 30). Virno anticipates a new version of publicness that would arise from the sole fact that the old dichotomy of private and public is doomed to vanish and that the *general intellect* of the over-employed but underpaid multitude could define the publicness anew, apart from any notion of the State and the bourgeois separation of everyday life in private&public sphere.

Of course, Virno's and similar perspectives rarely consider the possible setbacks of this prophecy of emancipation and democracy – a setback that is inscribed in the very idea of *real*, even direct democracy. Namely, his optimistic vision that the multitude could form new visibilities, a kind of new publicness, is problematic in its conviction that every coming out of the closet, every coming to the fore, into the light, would be an emancipatory process (it can be claimed that this is even more true in the case of Jacques Rancière, another phenomenologist of the political). Recent experiences from Split prove the reality is somewhat different. In the last decade the city of Split has experienced a period of an utmost antipolitical, privatistic politics: Its culmination arrived with the election of Željko Kerum for the city mayor. This election was actually an outcome of bad politics that preceded it and the citizens' thorough political apathy: one should keep in mind that in 2009, when he was elected mayor by a 57 per cent majority, the turnout was only 44 per cent. In reality, Kerum was elected by 25 per cent of the citizens of Split. He was welcomed as an uneducated but allegedly very shrewd voice of the Dalmatian hinterlands, a type of person who, because of his harsh brogue and lack of manners, has always been sneered at. Understood like this, his way up could be seen as a 'political' emancipation of the underprivileged, who could not enter the public stage before that – but, of course, it was a disaster. It was an economic-political installation of a war profiteer who used the city as a ground for his own and his relatives', friends' and colleagues' private enterprises, as a public surface in which the urban space is being neglected, except in following cases: rude and abusive graffiti may decorate the facades of the town, but graffiti that mention his name *in vain* are deleted promptly by the public services.

That is the reason why Virno, Rancière, Laclau and similar theorists should be read only in terms of *radical* democratic politics. In any other case, the coming to the fore, coming out into the light can take on undesirable, even fascist guise and in the end cease to be democratic in the first place. This is the point where, in my opinion, radical democratic concepts have to show their long-lost willingness to confront education-based exclusion, and to pursue education policies that enlarge the amount of politically educated and politically conscious subjects. In other words, the politics of emancipation, if it is to be considered left and 'truly' democratic, has to re-introduce *hegemony* in praxis and thought.

IV. Snowstorm in Split

When speaking of Split and other similar cities and regions – where the nationalist discourse is absolutely predominant and where the colonization of the public sphere (be it in newspapers, schools or in the street and on the walls of buildings) does not mean only preclusion of those who do not fit certain racial, national and gender patterns, but of everyone who, broadly speaking, does not conform to fixed mentality constructs (and in the case of Split there is a famous phrase that expresses this specific mentality structure: “splitsko stanje uma” – Split state of mind) – one cannot ward off the impression that these communities come very close to the diagnosis of “palanka” as put forth by Radomir Konstantinović – a pre-modern political spirit that does not allow any distinguishing and withdrawal of the individual from the collective.

We may believe, especially after the disastrous Gay Pride in Split in 2011, and its 2nd edition (if the first time was a *tragedy*, then the second, police super-protected, isolated march was surely a *farce*), that Split is a clear contemporary example of “palanka”. Without any intention to equate the mayor Kerum's person with the town's inhabitants, I would nevertheless like to stress one point. One of the big problems of the public-political life of Split, no matter how non-democratic this may sound – is that he (and his sister, the city council chair) – *speak*. How do they speak and what do they say? They speak a language that is, on the one hand, pre-political, operating with categories of blood and soil, and on the other hand, economic and non-political, suggesting that ruling the city equates with running a company.

In February 2012 Split experienced a snowstorm of a previously almost unrecorded magnitude. Although there was relatively little snow (in comparison to continental Europe), public services were completely unprepared for snowy and ice-covered roads and streets. In a town of 180 000 inhabitants there were more than 800 injured citizens, the hospitals were blocked and all non-urgent operations postponed, the garbage was not disposed of for days and many citizens remained locked in their houses without necessary food supplies. In the middle of this catastrophe the chair of the city council said the following:

“All citizens who left their homes without a real need are responsible for the injuries they obtained. Furthermore, if these are elderly citizens, then we should have in mind

that elderly people should have had their own children, and children are obliged by law to take care of their parents. If they do not have children, then they could have had nephews or nieces with whom they should have built good relations during their lives. And if they have no nephews or nieces, then they have neighbors with whom they should have built friendly neighborly relations.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Nevenka Bečić's statement consists of a strange mixture of centuries-old traditional societal structure of mutual help and a neoliberal social calculus: 1) you should take care of interpersonal relations in case you need other people's help once in a while, 2) and if something happened to you, it is first of all your own responsibility – and not the responsibility of city authorities that were not able to manage the natural disaster (if it was one at all). Nevenka's statement given during this apocalyptic snowfall in Split is a clear signal of the radical privatism that is being imposed on the citizens by the perverted newspeak of the governing “entrepreneurs”. The radical privatism creates a new idea of man as someone who is radically exposed and insecure: someone who, being in constant danger, should build a social network only in order to protect himself of this very same society. This new idea of man has been introduced from the economic sector where “team spirit” is promoted only as long as it can beat the competition. Where the current governmentality leads to, can easily be traced in the visible (and even more in the still invisible) scenery of Split: changed urban spaces, ruined green outskirts, beaches destroyed by the urban villas and, finally, hundreds of broken legs and arms due to the municipal failures, frozen streets and roads. We can illustrate the level of desolateness the individual is brought down to with the help of a line from the famous poem *Herbsttag (Autumn Day)* of Rainer Maria Rilke:

“Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben.”

“Whoever has no house now, will never have one.
Whoever is alone will stay alone.”^{iv}

In spite of the circumstances and messages ‘from above’, people did organize in the middle of the snowy chaos and prepared meals for those in need^v – although they were not

their relatives or neighbors and couldn't expect any service in return. That I consider to be an act of informal mutual trust and not only mutual interest, but something that surpasses the privatistic ideology of the sermons "from above".

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ⁱ Jacques Rancière defines this state of a simultaneously hidden and public politics, of a political control that is staged form behind, as a *lie* that lies in the very heart of the democratic order. With the detection of this paradigmatic lie even in the texts of the very fathers of political philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, and in their rejuvenation in French political philosophy of the 80s and 90s, Rancière not only introduced a decisive turning point in the discussion of the values and procedures of the celebrated liberal democracies but also gave us as a tool to approach one of the central pillars of the liberal political stance – the dichotomy of private and public. (JR-Unv.)

ⁱⁱ »Es gibt eine Bildungsindustrie, die suggeriert, man dürfe frühe Zeitfenster nicht versäumen«, says the Viennese psychotherapist Martina Leibovici-Mühlberger. „Wettlauf in Windeln. Wenn Eltern dem Schulsystem misstrauen, sollen Privatkurse für Bildungsvorsprung sorgen“. Zeit online. 17.01.2011, <http://www.zeit.de/2011/03/A-Bildungsinitiativen/seite-2>

ⁱⁱⁱ "Svi građani koji su izlazili vani, a nisu imali potrebe izlaziti su sami odgovorni ako im se nešto desilo. Nadalje, ako se radi o starijim sugrađanima, pa svi stariji bi trebali imati ili svoju djecu, a djeca su po zakonu dužna da skrbe o roditeljima. Ukoliko nemaju djecu, onda su mogli imati nećake ili nećakinje i tijekom života uspostavljati s njima korektne odnose. A ako nemaju nećake i nećakinje, a onda imaju susjede pa su trebali graditi dobrosusjedske odnose." (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qC5O3NYE9g0>)

^{iv} Translated by Stephen Mitchell.

^v Zoran & Sandra Erceg: *Grupa za pomoć ugroženim stanovnicima Splita*.