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(Tragi)comedy of errors: state double and student plenums

Abstract: The paper is based on the assumption that workers' self-management as a road of leaving the "monopoly for power possession" of the state and party bodies developed a hybrid "state double" model as a Yugoslav predecessor of the anarcho-liberal idea of de-etatization, i.e., that self-management direct decision-making and financing social activities of common interest is the beginning of direct democracy of the plenums during the students' university blockade. The research is aimed at perceiving the roadmap of the Yugoslav liberal "state double" model which has developed into a West-centric post-Yugoslav model of direct democracy of plenums as an alternative form of civic activism at the faculties and universities in Serbia. The research methodology is founded on the comparative historical analysis of the "state double" model in the sphere of social activities, starting from workers' self-management. The empirical research refers to the alternative system of extra-institutional decision-making of the student plenums at the universities in Serbia supported by university professors and interested social groups which has articulated the crisis of democratization and institutionalization through introducing participatory and direct democracy of plenums.

Keywords: anarcho-liberalism, civil society, state double, social activities, comedy of errors, plenum, self-management, transition

Introduction

Although by all its characteristics it constituted the structural change of the attitude of the ruling Communist Party towards the state and society, the

Yugoslav model of workers' self-management was integral part of the communist ideology as a coherent set of political goals, social values, beliefs and meanings developed by the Yugoslav communist ideology. However, after the "purge of liberals" and

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their exclusion from public life, Yugoslav liberals developed their policy of workers' self-management as a road of leaving "the monopoly for power possession" of the state and party bodies (Perović, 1971, p. 47) into subversive strategies of resistance to authority. The fore, after the breakup of Yugoslavia, the self-management model in post-Yugoslav left liberal circles evolved into the model of civil resistance to the oppression of the state and its repressive apparatus. Unable to get citizens' support in elections for forming the authorities, the followers of Yugoslav liberals in political parties of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia coalition holding high public functions, together with the members of the new class of post-Yugoslav "independent" intellectuals, professional artists and cultural workers, university professors and students, developed a hybrid state double" model [Đukić, 2010, p. 227; Đukić, 2022, pp. 96–117; Đukić, 2023, p. 17, 27, 30, 51, 58] as civil resistance to the dominant way of thinking about the role of authorities in the mediators, the process of democratic transition and consolidation of the state and society.

The model, on the one hand, inherits the ideas and experience of Yugoslav liberals and, on the other hand, civil West-centric neoliberalism through which European and Euro-Atlantic integrations lead traumatized post-communist society to new structural changes, contrary to the principles of democratic transition and consolidation of the state and society. Changes are reflected in the extra-institutional pressure of civil organizations, which weakens the institutional system founded by the state and reduces the influence of the authorities on public policies to the benefit of the "counter-authorities" (Đukić, 2023, p. 13), which see themselves

as a representative of post-Yugoslav civil society independent of the state and authorities.

The results of this experiment were first evident in the sphere of culture, where the cultural system was reduced "similarly to the period of Yugoslav self-management, by reducing the role of 'the family of decision-makers' on the vertical axis, in which the authorities act and budget financing is limited according to the criteria established by the independent artistic scene, and by strengthening the role of 'the family of mediators', 'independent' university professors, art critics and media that, as a 'privileged audience', establish a new value system I culture" (Đukić, 2023, p. 18).

Similarly, the structural changes in the higher education system are also manifested, where the law guarantees the university autonomy and the authorities have no effect on the "family of decision-makers" but their role, just as in the cultural system, is limited to budget financing. In this family of mediators the same actors mostly appear from the group of university professors, artists and the media that try, through the "plenum" phenomenon, to establish a West-centric neoliberal value system of a neutral, passive state with limited functions which does not interfere in the affairs of "strong civil society" (Đukić, 2023, p. 40, 47).

"State double" and direct democracy

The "state double" concept, publicly known as the "deep state", theoretically denotes an alternative model of governing the state and society, the purpose of which is to destroy the constitutional order

of representative democracy. In the territory of Yugoslavia, it appeared for the first time in the establishment period of the new social order of workers' self-management, based on direct exchange of labour and direct financing of social activities of common interest to Yugoslav society. It involves formal transfer of power from the state bodies to the working class, initiated in the area of "social services" by transferring authority from state authorities to "non-state, social bodies" (Dimitrijević, 1965, p. 128, 129). In that manner, "de-etatization" of the state and the concentration of bureaucratized power began in self-management interest communities of social activities which began shaping into a "state double". Contrary to the mediating role in direct exchange of labour, liberating labour from "all directive influences", self-management interest communities became a substitute for the state organization against whose direct influence they were supposed to protect the self-management negotiation and agreement procedure (Đukić, 2010, p. 227; Đukić, 2024, p. 337). Although it left the management of social activities to direct exchange of labour in self-management bodies and direct financing without the state's mediation, the Communist Party established the reward and punishment system based on the ideological suitability and ranged from numerous incentives to art and artists through improving their social status, the development of the art education system, international cultural cooperation and other privileges for ideologically suitable actors of social life, to repression and restriction through censorship, e.g., of the Black Wave in film etc.

The "state double" model emerges for the second time in the context of post-Yugoslav European

and/or Euro-Atlantic integrations. It may be considered a continuation of the initiated process of state de-etatization through advocating neoliberal values of the Western civilization by applying subversive strategies of civil resistance to the alleged oppression by authorities. The model does not develop in the political arena where citizens express their political will, but in the arena of civil society in which self-organized social groups, movements and individuals, relatively autonomous in relation to the state, try to express political ideas in which they believe (Linz, Stepan, 1998, p. 21; Đukić, 2024, p. 336). They are led by part of the left liberal cosmopolitan intellectual and cultural elite, which acquired its social position and reputation in the period of Yugoslav workers' self-management and which strives to preserve that status in the post-communist period of democratic transition and consolidation of society. For that purpose, it uses the bureaucratic apparatus of public administration which destroys from inside all three branches of power: legislative, executive and judicial, and prevents the establishment of a functional state.

Therefore, in the changed political, economic and cultural social context of transition and democratic consolidation, the Yugoslav liberal model "against the monopoly of the authorities" (Perović, 1971, p. 47) assumed the characteristics of post-Yugoslav neoliberal counter-authorities (Đukić, 2023, p. 13). Namely, subversive strategies of self-management bureaucracy assume the characteristics of the mediator neoliberal West-centric smart soft power of the post-Yugoslav left liberal intellectual elite, which resists from inside the hard power of the authorities. It produces crisis situations and makes the unstable democratic

system more unstable. When those in power cite their legal, political and financial authority based on the citizens' trust won in the political arena of democratic society, the hybrid self-management/neoliberal "state double" model proclaims it a populist, non-democratic, restrictive and repressive power that threatens human rights and oppresses citizens who think freely and critically. That is how the closed circle of the struggle is created between authorities and counter-authorities, or between the state and the "state double", from which citizens are mostly excluded unless when, exposed to the sophisticated methods of political marketing, they think that they are expressing their own will in elections or in civil protests.

Although, in both cases, liberalism is the ideological background of the "state double" model through which the privileged intellectual and cultural elite develops an alternative system of participatory direct democracy, opposed to the dominant system of representative parliamentary democracy, the difference is that the self-management "state double" model was a constitutional creation of the communist regime, developed through institutional channels of self-management bureaucracy, while the post-Yugoslav neoliberal model was developed in informal extra-institutional communication channels, in the closed circles of the post-Yugoslav left liberal cosmopolitan university elite which does not accept the principles of representative democracy of post-Yugoslav national states.

Guided by anarcho-liberal ideas of the civil state and self-government direct democracy, the post-Yugoslav bureaucracy elite established a network of new "independent" media and civil organizations which finance and logistically support

global transnational networks and humanitarian organizations, citing the citizens' right to actively participate, through extra-institutional channels of direct democracy, contrary to the constitutional and legal provisions of the legal state, in the process of making decisions important for society or certain social groups.

The alternative system gradually developed during the first transition decade through the legislative activity of parliamentary left liberal and social-democratic parties. It may be perceived through minimum two constitutional and legal provisions which enabled the theoretical "state double" model to be operationalized gradually in practice as a system of direct democracy of plenums. The first provision refers to the autonomy of universities, higher education and scientific institutions which independently decide about their organization and work (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006, Article 2; Law on Higher Education, 2008), while the second refers to the freedom of association which frees the civil sector from the state's supervision and/or tutorship (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006, Article 55; Law on Associations, 2009).

After the adoption of the Law on Associations, in Serbia about 36,000 non-governmental organizations were registered in Serbia, which organize projects in the area of media, culture and art, human rights protection, development of democracy, Euro-integrations etc. They are financed from the budget of the Republic of Serbia, but also from donations by foreign governments and private foundations. Although most of these sources of financing are known to the public in Serbia, it was only after the appointment of President Donald Trump that the US administration announced the amounts and

purpose of part of donations by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) directed against the authorities in many countries worldwide, including Serbia.

Owing to the legal framework established in this manner, the hybrid “state double” model in Serbia has developed a whole series of practically applicable subversive anarcho-liberal strategies of resistance to power and the society’s dominant value system in which, allegedly, it sees the cause of oppressing free critical-thinking citizens and “the root of all evil” (Đoković, 2007, p. 12). Hence the emphasis on “alternative forms of political organizing, based on the principle of freedom and free expression of every individual’s opinions and will. The followers of anarchism advocate the abolition of the existing constitutional order, laws and authorities, believing that afterwards they will develop a more natural and spontaneous social order” (Projović, 2013, p. 68, 69). This allegedly more natural and spontaneous social order is advocated by the student plenums as a post-Yugoslav model of direct democracy of the minority of the students ready to sacrifice the academic year and acquiring academic titles in the name of “higher” goals of the “just” state.

Using the experience of workers’ self-management and theoretical sources about anarchism, the minority of the privileged anarcho-liberal intellectual and cultural elite of civil society, relatively independent of authorities, tries to dispute the legitimacy of the state apparatus established within the existing constitutional order and to take over power outside the political arena where through democratic elections, legally and legitimately, processes of consolidated democratic society take place (Linz, Stepan, 1998, p. 22).

In theoretical terms, the model is the work of social philosopher Proudhon who is considered the father of the anarchist theory, as well as the Marxist critical theory of Guy Debord “The Society and the Spectacle” (Guy Debord) which is considered an important text of the situational international and unavoidable anarchist literature of the hybrid “state double” model in the left liberal intellectual circles. However, the monograph study *Anarchism as an*



Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, French social philosopher,
the father of the anarchist theory.

Photo: Wikipedia

Ideological Basis for Modern (Leftist) Terrorism (Projović, 2013) shows that anarchism constitutes a complex basis of political violence and a serious threat and challenge to the modern era.

The plenum phenomenon

The plenum is devised as an extra-institutional form of organization of the students blocking the work of the faculties and universities in Serbia. It is an alternative to the institutional form of students' parliament, just as the state double is an alternative to the state. Since allegedly there are no mediators and self-proclaimed leaders, decision-making is reduced to the level of the plenum in which all interested students and professors participate.

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In public, it is represented as a form of the citizens' direct democracy, although plenum decisions are not made by all the citizens but by the minority of the privileged social group of students and professors able to be organized and mobilized in the name of "higher goals" at a given moment and to obtain in return financial and logistic support in the country and abroad.

In that way, the holders of hard political power with legal, political and financial authority to make decisions made of internationally networked highly-educated university intellectual elite. Thanks to its social position in the country and abroad, it ascribes itself the characteristics of the leader of social changes, just as the Communist Party saw itself as the workers' class avant-garde leading dictatorship of the proletariat.

During the six months of the blockade of the faculties and universities in Serbia, the "state double" model has developed a multitude of subversive strategies of acting that primarily take place in the civil society arena as one of the five arenas of democratic transition and consolidation (Linz, Stepan, 1998, pp. 20–31). They are devised so as to spread the spirit of rebellion to the citizens who

show empathy for the students and create the impression of a mass social movement. An important role in this process is played by the one-way media propaganda which uses the electronic media and social network channels to promote the idea of the students' protests and provide organizational and logistic support followed by several hundred thousand people.

The first strategy implies the formulation of the students' demands that "institutions should do their job", i.e., establishing the political and criminal liability for the collapse of the roof at the railway station and violence against the students. That it is not devised as a solution to exit the crisis but as a means of deepening the crisis created by blocking the faculties and suspending lectures is proved by the refusal to accept the Government's resignation, pressing charges against the suspects and amnesty from criminal prosecution of the students and professors as the fulfilment of their demands.

The second strategy continues to deepen the social crisis through informal initiatives of the employees in higher education, science and culture („Rebel university", "Free university", "Culture in blockade" etc.) which invite to the protests of workers in education and culture, the strike of the theatres and radical actions of "liberating" educational and cultural institutions (e.g., the Students' Cultural Centre, the Cultural Centre of Belgrade) under the slogan "all power to the plenums".

The third strategy is developed by the network of independent media, cultural and artistic organizations which continue to dispute the legitimacy of the existing public authorities and the state apparatus. In the first stage, together with the students, they participated in well-devised actions

of guerrilla political marketing that strengthen the spirit of rebellion and solidarity among the students and the citizens. Walking and cycling pilgrimages are organized to different cities in Serbia (Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, Belgrade, Novi Pazar etc.) and abroad (Strasbourg, Brussels etc.) where, after the arrival of the “pilgrims”, carnival celebrations are organized and students’ programmatic documents are presented (the Students’ Edict in Niš, commemoration of the Sretenje Constitution in Kragujevac). In the second stage of the rebellion, the civil organizations throughout Serbia organize informal gatherings of citizens whose decisions

can initiate different actions as an additional form of pressure on the municipalities and municipal officials which, in most cases, turn into violence (Obrenovac, Niš etc.).

The third strategy implies political articulation of the ideas presented during the students’ protests. The most pronounced one is the informal initiative of university professors, cultural workers, artists and a group of citizens “ProGlas” which organizes panels in the cities, calling for the change of the socio-political system and of the ruling regime in Serbia. Finally, the students’ protest was politically articulated after six months of the blockade of the



A group of students on a protest walk to Vršac, at the exit from Zrenjanin.

Photo: Shutterstock

faculties and universities in Serbia, and the plenums decided to adopt the programmatic document “Directive 134-25.0: How we have won”. Apart from being unsigned and the unknown author, and the fact that the intriguing title points to the repeated victory – although it is not known whose victory – this programmatic manifest by its form and content reflects the bureaucratic manner of communication of the authoritarian minority which imposes “from above” its way of thinking and looking at the social crisis.

46 | The Directive demands that all the students’ plenums should take a clear attitude about the modalities of political articulation of the “fight for freedom, truth and justice” through the participation of the list “Students in blockade” in the electoral process, whereas candidates cannot be students. The document states that the adoption of the proposal is decided by the principle: one plenum – one vote, as was the practice at the level of university cities that had already voted by the same principle, but without the possibility of the plenums’ active participation in amendments and supplements to the content, but voting “for” or “against” of the offered modalities of the political struggle.

In this manner, the university which should, due to its autonomy, defend the academic community from the influence of politics, becomes the centre of political organizing and acting of the rebel students and professors, similarly to self-management interest communities because a substitute for state organization, exactly from whose influence they were supposed to protect the direct self-management negotiation and agreement procedure.

Discussion: tyranny of plenums and (tragi)comedy of errors

The analysis of the research results shows that the students’ plenums are not legal and legitimate bodies since they gather only the rebel part of the community and do not reflect the broader will and interests of the majority. Such a model causes dysfunctionality of the authorities and the polarization of society although its legitimacy is not based on the rational decision-making of all the plenum members about matters of common interest, but on the ability of the privileged minority of civil society concentrated in social activities of culture, art, media, education and social policy, capable of rapidly mobilizing with the logistic and financial support of the global, left liberal transnational centres of power in order to establish a dominant role in creating social crisis of the sovereign national states in Europe and the world. That is why this form of acting is based on tyranny and authoritarianism of the privileged minority that, owing to its position in the social hierarchy, without adequate control and space for the pluralism of opinions, assumes a dominant role in proposing topics and decision-making, which excludes from the decision-making process all actors of the social scene disagreeing with these decisions.

The role of art, artists and media in the conceptualization of the rebellion of the students’ plenums is transferring the light genre of the comedy of errors from the boulevard theatre to the public life by turning the citizens into “active audience” involved in the “plot” of the theatre performance and making them believe that they actively participate in the civil rebellion of the students fighting for freedom, truth and justice. Only after six months it has become

clear to the public that the students are actually actors in a directed performance “the plenum as the only proper road of the citizens’ direct democracy”, while their professors are scriptwriters, playwrights and directors of this tragicomic performance with which, together with the conductors of “blockade choirs”, they are taking the examination in the eyes of the democratic public. Although during the first months this comedy of errors, of the light genre and quite popular among the citizens, seemed to have the effect of excitement, cheap sympathy for the “students’ struggle” and the simplest moral message contained in programmatic documents, from the “Students’ Edict” to the “Directive”, it is gradually turning into pre-electoral political marketing devised to attract a large number of voters outside the political arena and political parties, substantially larger than the number of voters attracted for decades by the opposition political parties.

However, one thing must be admitted. Namely, this tragicomic political “show” of the idea that there is only “one proper road”, at the national and global levels creates a repressive atmosphere in which all those who disagree with the dominant attitudes of the plenums are marginalized. It is a phenomenon seen in many radical movements against dominant cultural models, regardless of the ideological background, starting from the French Revolution and the October Revolution, via the US hippie movement, the 1968 demonstrations in Europe, including students’ demonstrations in Yugoslavia, to the revolutionary movement of Yugoslav workers’ self-management. In Serbia, it began to develop after the “purge of liberals” in the 1970s and, since then, there have been several generations of dissidents by vocation who for their subversive

activity against the authorities use the experience of workers’ self-management in combination with the ideology of neoliberal West-centric globalism. Thus, the “plenum” phenomenon becomes the guardian of self-management, direct, participative democracy of social activities, whose beginning in the field of the rule of law during the period of post-Yugoslav transition and democratic consolidation of Serbia is contained in the constitutional and legal provisions about the autonomy of universities and free association of citizens with no supervision by the authorities and the state apparatus.

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Conclusion: inserting clips into the wheels of sovereign states

The research results indicate that the “plenum” phenomenon as an extended hand of the hybrid “state double” model is, in theoretical terms, an alternative to the state’s hard power, while in practical terms it is a demonstration exercise of the “deep state” which abuses students in order to show its soft power. Although the state does not apply repression over the students and citizens participating in the “plenum” rebellion, it is still shown as an authoritative and repressive force that threatens citizens, thus, in fact, concealing the actual state of affairs – the repression by the autocratic minority of the intellectual and artistic elite that hides behind the students’ rebellion. From a short-term perspective, six months of the “plenumization” of society shows that the meaning of rebellion is in absurdity because both the students and the professors could have made their own electoral lists outside universities since the Constriction of Serbia guarantees everyone the right to elect and

be elected. That is why the meaning of plenums can be sought in the long-term gradual destruction of the constitutional order of representative democracy. The radical idea of globalism, that only “one road is proper”, may become practically effective only if the majority of citizens accepts absurdity as meaning and allows the repression by the minority, which is passing itself off as the “guardian of self-management, direct, participative democracy”. From the perspective of large geopolitical changes in the world, it seems that the neoliberal ideology,

faced with the change in the foreign policy doctrine of the United States of America, shifts to the geostrategically important points in Europe and the Balkans region where, by a similar scenario of “inserting clips into wheels”, there are rebellions against the authorities of sovereign national states, preventing the establishment of a new world order of the multipolar world with several centres of power, in which the unipolar West-centric ideology of globalism is losing the influence it used to have in the last decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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