

Andrej Kurnik, Barbara Beznec
— Resident Alien:
The Rog Experience on
the Margin

At the beginning of 2006 a spatial-political intervention upset the business-as-usual routine of the city of Ljubljana. The main targets of this critique through action were the changing landscape of the city and its outskirts, the loss of the public realm through privatisation, the authoritarian management of populations and practices and the reduction of diversity all for the logic of profit. The creation of a new and open autonomous space was a response to the ever-tightening control of production and forms of use and exchange (in private as well as public institutions – religious, commercial and governmental) and thus of the production of political subjectivities. Rog aimed to become an institution of free production that could reappropriate the conditions of biopolitical production, in short, an institution of the *common*. The experiment has revealed some of the key elements of the power of spatiality, especially in the context of its recent transformations that highlight the political, social and subjective dimensions of space.

In his extraordinary study *La production de l'espace*, published in 1974, Henri Lefebvre reflects on the insufficient understanding of space as an objective, neutral background of socio-political action and production, by emphasising the increased hybridisation of what he called “perceived” and “conceived” space into a mixed but different, an-other or “lived” space: “Space is becoming the principal stake of goal-directed actions and struggles. It has of course always been the reservoir of resources, and the medium in which strategies are applied, but it has now become something more than the theater, the disinterested stage or setting, of action . . . Is space indeed a medium? A milieu? An intermediary? It is doubtless all of these, but its role is less and less neutral, more and more active, both as instrument and as goal, as means and as end” (Lefebvre 1991a: 410-11).

Deriving from Lefebvre's critique and the growing awareness of the inseparability and interdependence of the spatial and social and their immersion in the complex and ever-shifting relations of power, Soja tries to overcome rigid binaries and categorical equivalences by coining the concept *Thirdspace*. Being an accurate description for the experience of Rog and other autonomous spaces, institutions and practices, Thirdspace is never a simple summary of the First and Second, perceived and conceived space, it is always their disruption and reconstitution into "knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions, events, and political choices that is . . . marked out materially and metaphorically in *spatial praxis*, the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into (spatial) action in a field of unevenly developed (spatial) power. Power is ontologically embedded in the center-periphery relation and, hence, also in the ontology of Thirdspace" (Soja 1996: 31).

It seems that spatial knowledge and action are mostly highlighted at the front line that is being drawn by the transformations taking place in the spaces of aggregated power, in contemporary metropolises, borderlands and cities like Ljubljana, where growing uncertainty of autonomous cultural, social and political production coincides with privatisation, gentrification and normalisation of public space, with the crisis of representative politics and new forms of governability defined in institutions and modes of control over mobility and multiplicity, with new articulations of the public-private relationship, with new frontiers of exploitation, enclosure and expropriation of the common and with the crisis of the modern dichotomies that had defined political subjectivity. "The multi-sidedness of power and its relation to a cultural politics of difference and identity" constructs and maintains "modes of social and

spatial division" of class, gender, race or nationality, creating a system of authoritative management, where "we' and 'they' are dichotomously spatialized and enclosed in an imposed territoriality of apartheid, ghettos, barrios, reservations, colonies, fortresses, metropolises, citadels, and other trappings that emanate from the center-periphery relation" (Soja 1996: 87).

The increased territorial peripherisation and subjugation of the non-hegemonic social, political, cultural practices and discourses, of the non-profitable and solidary production and exchange, of the "working poor", comprised of precarious and migrant workers, implies "two inherent choices: either accept their imposed differentiation and division, making the best of it; or mobilize to resist, drawing upon their putative positioning, their assigned 'otherness', to struggle against this power-filled imposition. These choices are inherently spatial responses, individual and collective reactions to the ordered workings of power in perceived, conceived and lived spaces" (Soja 1996: 87).

The occupation and reanimation of the former bicycle factory Rog was clearly a choice of mobilised collective resistance, a radical rupture, disruption, and subversion of the deterritorialising and reterritorialising dispositives of power in the "Ljubljana Enterprise". Having been empty for more than a decade, several individuals and groups injected life into this new space, which was initially conceived as a short experiment with temporary use as its defining concept. The spatial-temporal intervention intended to provoke a discussion on the conditions of production of the cognariat and to oppose the negative effects of privatisation and denationalisation (and the subsequent disappearance of public spaces) in order to articulate new cultural and social policies in the city.

Rog as Generational Event

Rog has been a generational experience. It started as an attempt to break away from the conceptual, practical and political hegemony of the generation that had been in power since the beginning of the 1980s. On both the right and the left of politics, in the inner circles of the ruling Communist party, in the growing nationalist milieu and in the new social movements, the concept of civil society had become the hegemonic concept of the 1980s. The struggle over the interpretation of this concept ended with the triumph of the bourgeois notion of civil society in the beginning of the 1990s: the separation of politics and the economy, where the rule of capitalist market logic over the economy and political autonomy were seen as a guarantee of the integration of society into the global market. This hegemony was sealed with the Hegelian order that determined the relationship between civil society and the state, where the former had become the sphere of the realisation of the idea of the latter.

The discourse about rights was based on the assumption that they have been granted and constituted once and for all, thus blocking the possibility of producing them. The production of life became impossible outside unilateral capitalist command. Alternative forms of production of life were only tolerated as exceptions. This resulted in practices of localised resistance, identity politics and verticality in relation to the state. Notions of alternative culture, lifestyles, identities and minorities were incorporated into the system of multiculturalism, which allowed for some specific expressions of difference without endangering the machine of the social reproduction of capital. The *funding* institutions of the civil society in the 1980s became the *tolerated* institutions of the leftist neoliberal multiculturalism of the 1990s. One of the

rare expressions of autonomous desire and social antagonism that survived the transition without losing its autonomy and rebellious spirit was the occupation of the former Yugoslav military barracks and consequent rapid grass-root development of AKC Metelkova in 1993. This huge complex in the centre of Ljubljana remained one of the few centres of cultural and social dissent, a factory of alternative production of subjectivities.

By the end of the 1990s, the transition had almost been accomplished, with the economy fully integrated and conflict successfully delegated. The enormous energy and self-confidence of the spectrum of subjectivities of the 1980s have scattered and faded, especially in the aftermath of the extreme, tragic consequences of the disintegration of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. On entering the European Union and NATO at the start of the new millennium, Slovenia became a territory of complete imperial articulation, deeply immersed in the global consensus about the triumph of liberal capitalism and *the end of history*. With the words of Naomi Klein: “Democracy and radical capitalism were fused not only with each other but also with modernity, progress and reform. Those who objected to the merger were not just wrong, but ‘still in history’, as Fukuyama put it, the equivalent of being left behind after the Rapture, since everyone else had already transcended to a celestial ‘posthistorical’ plane” (Klein 2008: 183). On the other hand, like in all “posthistorical” realities, also in Slovenia the development of the new biopolitical regime produced new antagonistic subjectivities that identified with new social movements for alternative globalisation. The new political generation, emerging from the global struggles, rooted in experiences like the Zapatista uprising and the Seattle and Genoa protests, could no longer lean on the institutions of the movements of the 1980s.

One of the biggest sites of confrontation of this new generation was also the specific form of biopolitical production, characteristic of former socialist countries, that is defined by the extreme difficulty to abandon the Manchesterian paradigm in which the valorisation of immaterial and cognitive work is poor or nonexistent: economic growth is based on hyper-exploitation in traditional terms (extremely long working hours and unpaid overtime) and simultaneously concentrated in the labour-intensive sectors (especially construction), dependent on authoritarian management and exploitation of migrant workers in a regime based on blackmail. The key instrument of profit extraction is restrained and controlled vertical (social) and horizontal (cross-border) mobility. Consequently, the rate of unemployment and precarisation of highly educated people is relatively high and growing. Culture is still largely considered to be a sphere for social reproduction or the sphere of the reproduction of ruling (nationalistic) ideology.

Reproduced by capital and labour representatives, the Manchester paradigm of production (in which the source of value is produced by quantified labour, that is, hours worked) and “black protectionism” (where decreased national sovereignty is compensated by control over cultural production) defined the context in which the new political generation encountered the cognitariat (facing either capitalist recuperation or repression) and migrant workers. New subjectivities, a new order, new conceptions of space and time and, above all, the new articulations of postfordist immaterial production and exploitation, demanded a new node of visibility, exchange and organisation.

Opening, Encounters and Self-Valorisation

Mass production of bicycles in the Rog factory came to a halt in the beginning of the 1990s and this soon became a symbol of the corruption of the so-called transition to the market economy. What had been social property was initially nationalised in order to be denationalised, that is, privatised. This process was conducted as a political attack against workers co-ownership and self-management, and was thus accomplished through the destruction of their political and economic power. The factory complex has been bought and sold and bought again by the municipality of Ljubljana and for reasons linked to property speculation left empty for fifteen years. The intervention of Rog opened a space that was taken from the multitude. It was an act of re-appropriation and a critique of the process of privatisation.

Rog started accidentally, as the result of wonderful encounters. The idea of opening up and revitalising the space into art galleries grew among young architects and activists – many of whom were then fighting the most brutal phase of expropriation in the 1990s, which led to 1% of the population being erased from the register of permanent residence.¹ The newly established right-wing national government tried to introduce a set of neoliberal economic reforms, mobilised against “erased” people and other minorities and tightened the grip on cultural production. This meant that the increasingly fragmented and defensive cultural and social production encountered serious problems accessing funds and infrastructure. In the city of Ljubljana power was in the hands of the left, which had no idea what to do with it except servicing the powerful real-estate lobbies. In this situation, during the “Swarming of the Multitude”² festival,

the opening of the former factory Rog offered a new space of encounter, *métissage* and visibility.

Immediately after the occupation, the significance of the newly-opened factory spilled beyond its physical boundaries and the boundaries of the communities directly involved in the self-management of the space. The Rog occupation became the generator and testing ground for the changing of production paradigms. For this reason, the occupation was initially supported by many arts and cultural organisations and individuals. Different concepts of the postmodern factory Rog were invested in the newly opened space. A strategy of communication with the owners was initiated. It was based on the notion of temporary use and the need for new institutions of artistic, cultural and social production, institutions for the valorisation of immaterial production: “It is not a classic occupation of space, but a temporary alteration of its purposes. The 7,000 square meter large factory has already been left to decay for 15 years. As long as MOL (City of Ljubljana) doesn’t develop and begin implementing a clear strategy to solve the problem of these empty premises, we self-initiatively wish to open it to all individuals and groups engaged in the non-profit sector, for the realisation of independent production of cultural and social content” (Collective Statement, 2006). But the discourse of occupied Rog and immaterial production was simultaneously a discourse against its exploitation, based on the very organisation of the space itself. Practices of organisation and communication, such as an assembly of users and a decision-making process based on active participation, openness and self-management were set up in order to strengthen a common identity and self-valorisation. The strategy of the “temporary users of Rog” was to achieve continuity in the forms of organisation and communication

between the squatted factory (temporarily occupied Rog) and the idea of a new public institution (a kind of a centre for contemporary art, named New Rog), that was starting to be developed by the owner after the occupation: “We want to share ideas and gain knowledge on how ideas, needs for, and actualization of temporary use practices can present an important new precedent for different kind of re-use, re-generation and flexibility in contexts of cultural and production spaces in urban environments which is beneficial both for the city, their councils and underprivileged communities” (Nova 2006). This meant that temporary use was not only a tactic used in a context of extremely unfavourable power relations. It was a mechanism of defense of the public realm through its reconstruction into a common space. Therefore, the role of the assembly of temporary users was to ensure that Rog remained open (against the municipality’s attempt to evict users), to organise it on the notion of “commons” (to defend it from attempts of privatisation) and to contribute to the concept of New Rog, so that the programme, activities and forms of self-management produced during the temporary use period would find continuity in the future projects of the municipality (and therefore enable the development of alternative institutions beyond bureaucratic control of the public and/or profit orientation of the private).

The project was tolerated for eight months, then municipal elections interrupted the seemingly calm development. The newly elected mayor was an independent candidate from the left who has been sacked as the chief manager of the biggest Slovene trade corporation Mercator, majority owned by the state. He promised efficiency and planned to run the city as an enterprise, carrying out projects that would allow the seemingly stagnant city of Ljubljana to make a leap forward. His team included people who prom-

ised a change in forms of production and a new style of governance that would take its strength from citizen initiatives. For a while, it seemed that the Rog project would profit from the dynamism of the new city administration. Negotiations with the city council to legalise the temporary use of the space got under way, and the project of New Rog was initially opened up to content produced by the temporary users. Then, suddenly and without warning, mayor (the role of the city council is extremely marginalised, since it was already then personalised by the mayor and the overwhelming majority of his candidates in it) unilaterally stopped all negotiations, cancelled all agreements and started a process of marginalising and ghettoising the temporary users. Rog soon became another symbol, a symbol of the degeneration of public power – the suspension of democratic, public debate, introduction of authoritarian rule and the lack of democracy in public administration. Rog has also become a paradigmatic example of the future evolution of institutions of cultural and social production in the city and in the country. The mayor's management practices from the Mercator corporation left their first traces in the municipality of Ljubljana and its administration.

Already at that stage important lessons could be drawn from the Rog experience. First, in the city of Ljubljana (a paradigmatic case of a peripheral semi-urban city) the only possible way to establish cultural and social management is by destroying the forms of organisation of collective appropriation and production of the common. Power was not able to exploit the common, so it was decided to fight it. On the second anniversary of the occupation and during the struggle against the second attempt of the mayor to evict the factory, temporary users published their understanding of his acts: “Rog is an open place, where things are done differ-

ently. The mayor obviously does not appreciate forms of creative living, uncensored expression, actual exercising of freedom of assembling, respecting human dignity and cherishing heterogeneity. Therefore he is intentionally trying to make impossible some truly autonomous and self-determined activities of individuals and groups, who reject to do exclusively what the hegemonic model of organization of social life expects them to do” (Rog Calls for Solidarity, 2008). This seems to be a very important lesson, keeping in mind the paradoxes and ambiguities that result from the nature of the peripheral economy (as in Slovenia). In peripheral capitalist economies, the struggle for development always has an ambiguous relationship with the struggle against exploitation. While in the 20th century it was possible for the struggle for development to overshadow the struggle against exploitation (with tragic consequences), this seems impossible in an age of immaterial production. Today, the struggle for development must necessarily be a struggle against exploitation. And the struggle against exploitation must be a struggle for the re-appropriation of the conditions of the production of life. Any action that seeks recuperation or integration is doomed to fail. For this reason, the idea of temporary use was at risk of sacrificing the common in favour of capitalist accumulation.

Second, the occupation of the former factory Rog has clearly raised questions about the possibility of democratising public spaces (re-making them as common spaces) and about institutions of cultural, artistic and social production in a time when public power is increasingly occupied by the logic of corporate management and the authoritarian tendencies – which are the inevitable result of this logic – are simultaneously strengthened through partnerships with private investors. This reciprocal strengthening of the authoritarian command is called private-public partnership.

The mayor's office plan of the New Rog is a plan of a contemporary art institution that was to be built in this form of 'partnership'. In this way, the council intends to impose for the first time that art institutions in the country be defined by the subordination of the public interest to corporate logic and private business interests. It is important to highlight the new scenario of class struggle that arises when immaterial (cultural, artistic and affective) labour is harnessed into the regime of capitalist accumulation. In this scenario, it becomes necessary to address issues connected with the relationship between freedom, creativity and discipline, and the relationship between eventuality, singularity and the unilateralism of capitalist valorisation. This also applies to the issue of the subjectivities of immaterial work and their relationship to institutions and public power.

And third, local political and administrative articulations of imperial rule, revealed in the case of Rog, can be similarly observed in the fields of health, social security, education and mobility. The complete integration of social life into the regime of biopolitical exploitation finds its hallmark in the process of deconstruction and reconstitution of space through borders, which are projected into urban centres where the new mechanisms of discrimination that sustain the imperial apparatus are defined. In this process of extreme segmentation we can trace a similar convergence between the public and the private, but also the emergence of an antagonist constituent common with spaces as Rog as one of its key conditions: "Autonomous spaces are essential to exercise democratic values for people, who cannot be or do not want to be a part of the established cultural, political and other social institutions" (Rog Calls for Solidarity, 2008).

From Temporary Use to Permanent Autonomy – the Experience of the Rog Social Center

The attempt to become subversively integrated into the new cycle and the new institutions of cultural, artistic and social production had perverse results: it encouraged private investment and expropriation, gentrification, and a violent attempt by the city council to restrict new productive subjectivities: "The paradox that presently confronts the city of Ljubljana is well known. With progressively deeper integration to the cultural circuits of Europe, due to the audacious brilliance of groups and individuals acting only on the strength of their own desire and their own spiritual and intellectual gifts, property values have risen. It is now mathematically 'interesting' to devote the former sites of abandonment and rust, not to further explosions of culture and philosophical freedom, but instead to the banal and mathematical increase in the values of property" (Holmes 2008). For these reasons, the Rog experience of autonomy had to spread beyond its walls and boundaries, beyond the question of a singular space and temporality. This expansion was the only possible response to the crisis, since "[p]ower, the power to maintain the relations of dependence and exploitation, does not keep to a defined 'front' at the strategic level, like a frontier on the map or a line of trenches on the ground. Power is everywhere; it is omnipresent, assigned to Being. It is everywhere *in space*. It is in everyday discourse and commonplace notions, as well as in police batons and armoured cars. It is in *objets d'art* as well as in missiles ... [P]ower has extended its domain right into the interior of each individual, to the roots of consciousness, to the 'topias' hidden in the folds of subjectivity" (Lefebvre 1976: 86-7).

The municipality's attack on Rog and the practices of free organisation pushed the temporary users of the space into the front line of the struggle against forms of domination and exploitation based on expropriation, privatisation and segmentation of populations.

A node of ideas and practices inside the Rog galaxy of initiatives, that tried to initiate this kind of process of political re-composition in the city, based on bringing to light and communicating different struggles, found its continuity and development in the concept of The Rog Social Centre. Its defining position is the constant formulation and re-formulation of spaces of alternative subjectivation and self-organised struggle. The project is based on a critique of the segmentation and verticality of the relationship between civil society and the state, identity politics and the (re)presentation of independent cultural centres as traditionally protected islands of difference. The extreme precariousness of Rog itself, which is struggling against the municipality's attempts to stifle it, offers an opportunity to understand and communicate conditions that are common to precarious statuses and institutions. The self-organised militant researchers, the erased, asylum seekers, *sans-papiers*, precarious and migrant workers who are all injecting life and struggle into the Social Center are experiencing new ways of doing politics in post-national and postfordist conditions.

In its struggle for the deconstruction and reconstitution of the traditional (nationalist) conceptualisation of the right to territory the Social Centre tries to go beyond the modern dichotomy between individualism and communitarianism that has been, at least in Slovenia, decisive for the constitution of two opposed but complementary political blocs. While the so-called left followed the path of liberal individualism and produced a discourse of rights that legitimates

privatisation and neoliberal accumulation while advocating human and minority rights as a lever for integration, the nationalist and the racist right uses the discourse of exclusive ethno-nationalist communitarianism. The movement of self-organised asylum seekers, that has been 'territorialised' in the Social Centre, called against authoritarian management and control of migration and articulated an alternative way to claim the right to territory: through enacting practices of citizenship in an attempt to build a community on the border; a border that is extrapolated in the metropolis as the border of the political and the constitution of citizenship, a border that is "physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individual shrinks with intimacy" (Anzaldúa 1987: unpagged preface).

While the hierarchically inclusive heterogeneity of citizenship presents us with the challenge of self-valorising citizenship practices as an alternative to formal citizenship, the crisis of the system of representation involving major labour and capital interests (in Slovenia it is the crisis of the neo-corporative model of overcoming conflict) offers us the opportunity to invent new forms of struggle against the political constitution of wage labour, which is moving towards an extreme form of precariousness. New forms of biosyndicalism, developed in the movement of self-organised migrant workers in and through the Social Centre, seem to offer inventive and efficient practices arising from the rejection of the paternalism of the "social partnership" and its focus on the balancing of the wage system. The network organisation with the policy of an open end towards different forms of discrimination and exploitation is discovering the joy of class struggle as a struggle for better life in general, against work

and the social reproduction of capital. The transformation of political subjectivity that is taking place in the Social Centre was thus a result of the complete re-articulation of the relationship between the social (economic) and political struggle. The struggle for control over the conditions of the production of life is both social and political. That is why representative politics can no longer claim the exclusivity of representing and organising interests. Institutions and modes of governability that criss-cross constitutional political orders have become decisive. The Social Centre is an intervention and construction against them.

Given the inherent attempt to harness spaces or forms of immaterial production into processes of normalisation and the subsequent destruction of memory and social networks, the only possible political positioning of this new space of contestation was the anti-integration stance. On the other hand, the Rog Social Centre also rejects the status of exceptionalness, which is used by the politics of difference to legitimate the existence of alternative spaces as a kind of multicultural reservoir for different minorities within society. This kind of postmodern liberal discourse and practice has also been strongly criticised by the Afro-American activist and feminist bell hooks. In her essay on “Postmodern Blackness” she strongly rejects it for its “white male exclusivity” and especially its “persistent separation” of a generalised “politics of difference” from the more specified and lived “politics of racism”. In this way, the positioning of the Social Centre could be better understood through her concept of the *margin*: “I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility... We know struggle to be that which

pleasures, delights, and fulfils desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world” (hooks 1990: 153). The position of the margin, as opposed to the safety of integration or exclusivity, is “a profound edge. It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance” (hooks 1990: 145, 149). It is a position of the “resident alien”, “a deeply peripheral consciousness, existentially heretical and contra-centric, a spatial consciousness and geographical imagination shaped in the region of resistance beyond the established centres of power.” But it is simultaneously “a consciousness and imagination peculiarly able to comprehend the innermost workings of the power centres, to know their perils and possibilities, to dwell within them with the critical ambidexterity of the ... insider who purposefully chooses to remain outside” (Soja 1996: 30). Encounter, convergence and the hybridisation of the Rog Social Centre give meaning to the new experience of autonomy inside and against the overall spectrum of imperial dominance in postfordist and postnational cities. The common spectrum of struggle and counter-power that shapes the “radical acceptance of vulnerability” (Spivak 1990) is enhancing the emancipatory potential of each singularity while at the same time strengthening the radical and multivocal space of common resistance and subjectivation.

1. For an excellent analysis of the case of the erased and their struggle, see the forthcoming English edition of Časopis za kritiko znanosti, *Once Upon An Erasure: From Citizens To Illegal Residents In the Republic of Slovenia*, 2008.

2. The festival included a set of events, dedicated to the publishing of the Slovene translation of Hardt and Negri's *Multitude* (Časopis za kritiko znanosti, 2005). After a public presentation at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Antonio Negri officially opened the factory the next morning by attending the press conference of the festival.