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**KLINIKA: THE STRUGGLE FOR AN AUTONOMOUS
SPACE AND COMMONS IN PRAGUE**

ARNOŠT NOVÁK

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Arnošt Novák

Charles University in Prague

arnost.novak@fhs.cuni.cz

ABSTRACT

In post-socialist Czech Republic there is strong dichotomy between public and private, between state and „free“ market. There are almost no alternative ideas and praxis which would question and challenge them. This paper deals with the struggle for Klinika, an one autonomous space and commons in post-socialist Prague. Klinika is an autonomous social centre which began as a squatted place, but with public support, was legalized for one year by the state authorities´. During this time Klinika became a successful autonomous geography which has contested market logic and became visible symbol of not only a different kind of politics, but also non-capitalist everyday action. Klinika also became a contentious issue and target of right-wing and anti-immigrants political forces due to its stance in solidarity with refugees within a Czech society largely not welcoming refugees. From these reasons the state authorities´ decided not to renew the agreement with the centre. After one year legal Klinika is now a squatted place again and is under strong pressur of eviction. The state authorities´ in Prague don´t accept cultural but as well political alternatives, based on radical-left positions and don´t use „creative city“ to co-optate these political alternatives or seek to stop them. The paper deals with the struggle for Klinika as an important example of commoning in the post-socialist city and society, where the public discourse is limited on this dichotomie.

The paper is based on qualitative research and presents the struggle for the social center Klinika, but also engages with internal struggles to be someone other than neoliberal „entrepreneur of the self“.

KEYWORDS: autonomy, commons, social centre, post-socialism.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of November 2014 squatters occupied the building of a former medical clinic in Prague (Czech Republic) that belongs to the state and which had been empty for more than six years. Within this space they opened an autonomous social centre named Klinika. After ten days they were evicted by riot police, but before this they had organized concerts, lectures and discussions, exhibitions and film screenings, and gained quiet wide support from the public. After two month of demonstrations, happenings, culture events, direct actions and negotiations they temporarily won a contract for a one year (Pixová, Novák 2016).

During this year they ran the social centre they sought to break away from the market logic of neoliberal capitalism and prefigured different social relations based on self-management, solidarity, and mutual aid. In post-socialist and neoliberal cities where there are more and more activities that are commodified, the struggle for Klinika as an open space for commons moves beyond the ontology of the nation-state and the „free“ market. Despite its one-year legal agreement with the state, Klinika sought to be still antagonistic, resisted co-optation to become classical nongovernmental organization and where space for grassroots activities and radical left-politics.

Klinika, as an autonomous geography (Pickerill, Chatterton 2006) is a visible example of the politics beyond the state and NGO's within an emphasis on the politics of commoning. It is an interesting effort in Czech society, as the commons is not a commonly understand notion, for example there is not even a commonly used Czech words for „the commons“. The paper focuses on this struggle for an autonomous space and the commons, and deals with the problems of how these practices can survive in the neoliberal city - where the pre-eminence of private property rights has been coupled with neoliberal norms of citizenship (Schinkel and Van Houdt, 2010) and suggests the declining possibilities for transgressive politics in European and North American cities (Swyngedouw 2009).

This paper is based on qualitative research. I used both ethnographic methods of observation through participation and informal and semi-structured interviews, as well as analyses of materials produced by activists and of their websites. Due to my direct long-term involvement in autonomous activism, squatting, and the struggle for Klinika, as an active member of the Klinika collective from the beginning, rather than participant observation, it is more accurate to talk about participant observing (Cattaneo 2006). The research and my subjectivity is anchored within a so called third space between activism and academia (Routledge 1996).

2. COMMONS IN POST-SOCIALISM

Since 1989 the Czech Republic went through a period of transformation from actually existing socialism to market society of actually existing neoliberalism. The emphasis was placed of deregulation of state-planned economy and gradual privatization of state and public property. (Sýkora, Bouzarovski 2012) Private property became a core value as market society was implemented. Anyone questioning the „sanctity“ of the private property is often described as a follower of actually existing socialism (Holy 1996). In the Czech Republic there is now a discourse of a false dichotomy between public and private, where the state is bad and ineffective and the private is good and efficient. The political imagination of Czech society is dictated by this false dichotomy public-private and there is no place in-between for the commons. In Czech language there is not even a commonly

used term for „commons“. That is the reason why the struggle for Klinika is so important, because it brings to light the ideas and the practices the commons and can provide alternatives to – and an escape from – this proclaimed false dichotomy. According to Hardt and Negri both real socialism and capitalism are regimes that exclude the commons (Hardt, Negri 2009). So it is the instituting of the commons that has the potential to cut „diagonally across the false alternative – neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist“ and to provide opportunities to open „new space for politics“ (Hardt, Negri 2009, p. ix).

De Angelis and Harvie (2014: 280) define the commons as „social systems in which resources are shared by a community of users/producers, who also define the modes of use and production, distribution and circulation of these resources through democratic and horizontal forms of governance“. So the commons are based on practice of everyday direct democracy from below, autonomy, self-management and have a potential aiding in the fight for greater urban (not only) justice. Chatterton outlines three areas (2010: 627): firstly, the commons provide us with a new perspective to understand the city itself as „the ultimate contemporary commons“ (see also Harvey 2012), a site of „resistance and struggle, and an articulation of alternatives.“ Secondly, through rich encounters and activities in these commons, they also provide an exemplary setting for people to exchange ideas and share resources, and thereby help to de-commodify urban life (see also Hardt, Negri 2009). And thirdly, the commons open up „new political imaginaries,“ to „control and imagine governance in new ways.“ This is particularly important in the context of post-socialist Czech Republic.

Since 1989 post-socialist Czech Republic has been a country of „political stability“. In spite of the recent economic crisis neoliberal ideology has become hegemonic in the post-communist Czech Republic through an emphasis on individualization and the commodification of everyday life. This has happened despite general disillusionment with capitalism, and without any large social movements or protests having emerged yet. (Cisář, Navrátil 2015)

Whereas in other countries social protests and demonstrations have arisen, in the Czech Republic demonstrations against neoliberal austerity can be counted on one hand. Moreover even the radical left, anarchist and anti-authoritarian activities have declined after anti-IMF and anti-NATO summit protests at the beginning of the 2000's, and squatting has practically disappeared. It seems thought that this has started to change and that the struggle for Klinika is proof of this. (Pixová, Novák 2013) The neoliberal domination isn't total and the cracks in capitalism still exist - as Klinika shows (see, Holloway 2016).

3. KLINIKA AS AN AUTONOMOUS GEOGRAPHY

Autonomous social centre Klinika is one of the most visible cracks in the contemporary neoliberal capitalism in Czech Republic. Klinika works in accordance with different logic and resists the imperative of market logic. Klinika declared that it wouldn't accept any grants, public subsidies, or sponsorship from companies, and its economy is based on do-it-yourself principles. Klinika strives to be the commons beyond the false dichotomy public-private. For one year it has been the space for everyday activities such as language courses, a freeshop, lectures, workshops, a space for kids, a library, concerts and theatres and political activities - all based on sharing and solidarity. Klinika has provided an important space for encounter and informal grassroots activities, and by its openness it has been an entrance gate to radical left-alternative milieu for a lot of people. So Klinika is the autonomous geography, it is the space „where people desire to constitute non-capitalist,

egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation“ (Pickerill, Chatterton 2006: 730).

All activities are free, only for voluntary contribution, and this concept works. The main logic of Klinika is everyday communism (Graeber 2011). By communism Graeber understands firstly human relationship that operate on the principles of „from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs“, and communism is the foundation of all human sociability. It is possible to suppose that this everyday communism offers a basis for resistance to the antagonistic market logic of contemporary capitalism and its tendency to calculate and account all and maximize profits. For the activities of Klinika this everyday communism could be understood as an intentional resistance strategy to constitute communities in defiance of market logic, individualization and commodification. Klinika is the most visible example of intentional prefigurative politics and transgressive utopianism in the Czech Republic (Maeckelbergh 2011, Sargisson 2002). For the Klinika collective running the social centre is part of the politics of process. The collective has tried to prefigure the values of autonomy, solidarity, equality and self-management in the everyday decision-making and at the regular weekly assemblies of Klinika. Through this prefiguration they have tried to educate themselves and to be an example and form of inspiration for others. This is a struggle for the social center but also internal struggles to be someone other than the neoliberal „entrepreneur of the self“. (McNay 2009)

In the summer 2015 activists from Autonomous social centre Klinika initiated a material support for refugees. They collected money, clothing, food, hygiene supplies, ecetera and sent more than 150 cars and vans to not only Czech detention camps, but also to Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia. /There has probably been several hundred people from the Czech Republic going to help refugees in other countries, and Klinika was key to initiating this support, and also had an influence on the form this support is based upon - horizontalism and self-governance beyond the state and big NGO´s. Klinika also framed this support as solidarity not as charity. The form of Klinika´s solidarity was what Richard Day (2005) calls groundless solidarity and infinite responsibility. He defines groundless solidarity as „seeing one´s own privilege and oppression in the context of other privileges and oppressions, as so interlinked that no particular form of inequality [...] can be postulated as the central axis of struggle,“ while infinite responsibility “means always being open to the challenge of another Other, always being ready to hear a voice that points out how one is not adequately in solidarity, despite one´s best efforts” (Day 2005: 42, 123-129, 140-141, 163-177, 203).

This struggle is important because it transgresses the dominant norms of the post-socialist status quo and opens new perspectives and foster a political imagination in, against and beyond contemporary post-socialist capitalism in the Czech Republic. Even repressive authorities have recognized it.

4. REPRESSION AND STRUGGLE FOR A SURVIVAL

At the end of April 2015 the police launched the Operation Fénix against what they claim is left-wing terrorism with big media publicity. Two anarchists were detained in custody and they were accused of preparing terrorist attack on the military train. According to police alleged threat of the left terrorism is due to contention about the social centre Klinika too, because they see Klinika as contentious and having mobilized the „left-wing extremist scene“.

Moreover, because of the visible support for refugees, Klinika has become a symbol of this solidarity and in the country where the majority of society aren't willing to help refugees Klinika has become a target of this animosity. In the Czech Republic there are almost no refugees now, so Klinika attracts more and more of this hate that would otherwise be directed at refugees themselves. 6th February 2016 after anti-refugees demonstration several dozen masked football hooligans attacked Klinika with stones and incendiary devices. Several days after this attack, local authorities (predominantly ruled by centre-right wing parties), used it for their own purposes and labelled Klinika as a centre of left-wing extremism and a security risk for this district of Prague and called on the state (as owner of the building) to terminate the legal agreement. Also, the anti-immigrants initiative „Islám v ČR nechceme“ (We don't Islam in Czech Republic) started to organise a public campaign against Klinika.

After a couple of days the state agency that owns Klinika announced the non-renewal of the agreement with Klinika because of building regulations, the alleged security risk, and complaints from people more generally. In spite of Klinika having refuted all three reasons, the state agency has insisted on not renewing the contract. Klinika refused to leave and declared it would engage in civil disobedience. At the demonstration in support of Klinika, roughly two thousand people came to one of the biggest demonstrations in the Czech Republic this year. Several dozen NGO's declared their support for Klinika and, the highly acclaimed film festival "One World" did an initial screening at Klinika, now already squatted again.

More and more people from the anti-islam initiative's milieu have started to campaign against Klinika, and right-wing politicians and some mainstream media have used the voices of seemingly ordinary people, sometimes from Klinika's neighbourhood, to accuse Klinika of extremism, left-wing terrorism, security risks, and other problems. Accusing the center of subverting society by rejecting laws, noise, graffiti, trespassing, etc. the media's representations of Klinika have also changed. After the squatting of the building at November 2014 and even during most of 2015 the media image of Klinika was surprisingly positive, but after the February 6th attack, and the termination of the contract, the centre's image has worsened. Klinika as a most visible praxis of an autonomous radical-left politics has now been connected with left-wing extremism, violence and left-wing terrorism. The struggle for Klinika shows how Czech society is now polarized.

„ Our bubble has never been so great and simultaneously the society has never been so brownish“. (Klinika activist)

State authorities seek to destroy Klinika despite having no plans for the building. They simply seem to know they don't want to give space to the Autonomous social centre Klinika. However, due to strong public support for Klinika, the police have repeatedly rejected to evict Klinika and are waiting for the court to decide its fate. It is the first time in the history of Czech squatting that the police have made such a decision, as before they had often evicted squats immediately and without a court order.

Part of the public support for Klinika is the Green Party, which is part of the city of Prague's government coalition. And because of this public support, Prague City Hall has decided to buy the building. But the position of the Green Party is not so strong, and the decision of the Prague City Council is to buy the building, to renovate it, and to rent it to NGO. During this process Klinika could stay there until renovations began. Prague's government coalition was created by the right-wing party ANO, Social-democrats, and Greens and also with Christian democrats. With the exception of the Greens the rest of these political parties don't support the possibility of legalisation for the autonomous

centre, yet neither have they wanted open confrontation with Klinika. So they have tried to solve it by establishing a house for NGOs as a public institution. And in a country where the political imagination is limited in dichotomy between public-private the struggle for autonomous space, Klinika is a struggle between public hierarchically controlled from above and commons democratically managed from below. This struggle gives an opportunity to enlarge this imagination by the concept of commons.

In the post-socialist Czech Republic with a strong emphasize on the value of private property, the argumentation for the commons is difficult and has its limits. The building of Klinika belongs to the state and this is probably one of the important reasons why Klinika has gained such public support, bigger than previous squats occupying private real-estate (Pixová, Novák 2016). In post-socialist society there has still remained a distrust of the state as an administrator. The Autonomous social centre Klinika struggles with this one-side animosity to state in behalf of the private property and capital. From the beginning Klinika declared itself as an anticapitalistic project which has tried to be a space „in, against and beyond“ capitalism and state (see Holloway 2016).

In contrast to Berlin, for example, in Prague there isn't fully developed discourse and politics of “creative city”, which would intentionally try to include and exploit some political and cultural alternatives for a developing city (see Van Schipstal, Nichols 2014). While apolitical, cultural alternatives are welcome, supported and used for enhancing attractiveness of the city, political alternatives are rather repressed and marginalized. To carve out a political space between repression, autonomy and potential co-optation in neoliberalizing city the activists have to demonstrate and proof their right to be in the city. The activists from Klinika stress their important contribution to the societal and cultural makeup of the noncommercial and citizenship of Prague and they have also made a concerted effort to maintain their mobilization capacities by reinforcing their solidarity and authenticity in the radical activist networks of the city. But compared to Berlin, with discourse of the creative city (Van Schipstal, Nichols 2014), they stress and use rather a model of a “political citizenship”, based on a political participation and non-market logic, so they don't reproduce neoliberal model of citizenship so strongly and try to counter-conduct with it (Death 2010).

5. CONCLUSION

Political squatting and autonomous politics are currently enjoying the unprecedented attention of Czech society. Klinika represents a new type of radical autonomous activism in post-socialist Czech Republic that is able to build coalitions, to set an agenda, to be visible and also antagonistic. The Autonomous social centre has inspired and mobilised a lot of people to be active and gotten an unusually high degree of public support and solidarity. For some people Klinika is a „space of hope“(see Harvey 2012).

Nowadays Klinika faces eviction. Because of solidarity with immigrant the autonomous centre was a target of neo-Nazis arson attack, and after that the local right-wing politicians declared Klinika as a security threat for the district of Prague.

One year successful working, the Autonomous social centre Klinika has shown that another kind of politics, based on direct action as preferred ways of doing things, is possible. And this is one of the main reasons why the state authorities are trying to suppress and end the centre. Czech state authorities' don't use a discourse of “creative city” to co-optate this kind political and cultural alternatives and rather they try to repress them as in the case of Klinika.

After three months of the state pressure Klinika surprisingly still exists and resists, the activists use a direct action, civil disobedience as well as legal tools and seek to win legalization of the autonomous centre.

The future is unwritten, but what is certain, that after one year the autonomous social centre has influenced political discourse of the Czech society.

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