



Zbyněk Baladrán „Things Fall Apart (Interim Report)“

Exhibition from January 12 to March 28, 2020

Opening on January 12, 2020

In *Things Fall Apart*, a novel written by Chinua Achebe in the late 1950s, the author describes the incursion of expansive European colonialism into the thousand-year-old agricultural civilisation of the Niger River basin. In a few striking sentences, he creates an image of the violent replacement of the dominant logic of power by another logic – more aggressive and even more powerful. The old world collapsed very quickly. Seen from the vantage point of the new hegemony, the old was labelled primitive, childish, and backward. Over the course of a few decades, this imperialist expansion reached almost the entirety of the so-called Third World, preventing its autonomous development.

Thirty years ago, another chapter of the same story began, this time focusing on the Second World. The Eastern bloc collapsed, and with it the modernist alternative in the form of socialist state capitalism – an attempt to change the flow of history. Over the course of the years that followed, this part of the world also capitulated to the irresistible economic power and expansion of the consumerist world. A softer form of colonial dominion spread, creating a global hegemony.

Today, it seems that there is nowhere left for exploitation to expand into. What remains are the countries of the former First World with their democratic institutions – considered until recently to be necessary conditions for capitalism. The neoliberal hydra, risen from the expansive logic of capital, as described by Achebe, has replaced the logic of Enlightenment modernity, calling it outdated and childish, inappropriate for the ideology of uncontrolled growth of power through accumulated capital. Just like Africa in the past, the eastern part of the European continent can be considered the “avant-garde” of changes that now probably also await Western Europe.

Economic colonisation, the dismantling of the welfare state, the stabilisation of the job market, social and salary dumping, an acceleration of the “race to the bottom”, and the oligarchisation of politics and economics are phenomena that have already been successfully realised on the eastern periphery or are currently coming into being there.

The Eastern Europeans, having toppled their governments and rejected the story of the socialist alternative to the modern world, force themselves to even greater performances under the never-ending torment of self-criticism. With the stubbornness of children, and with feelings of insufficiency, inferiority, and dependency, they strive to become part of the “adult” world.

They probably never will. The foundations of capitalism are based on the imperative that core countries develop more dynamically than peripheral ones, while the underdevelopment of the periphery is an essential condition for the success of the core.

Today, however, the “adult” world of the developed countries is also afflicted by infantility and helplessness. The neoliberal establishments of these countries compete to see which will be the first to lose control and give itself over to the sovereign power of unregulated private ownership. The “adult” world is increasingly paralysed by the shock of this new paradigm of threat.

Perry Anderson describes the current European community as an order based on the restriction and privatisation of public services, the dissolution of democratic control and representation, and a deregulation of production processes. Is there still a shared, joyful perspective on the future, or are we only an impotent object colonised by a new hegemony of ownership? The world is falling apart; in some places, people haven't noticed, and where they have noticed, they still do not realise how great the threat really is.

What function can art serve in such a world? If it is a tool for accumulating capital or artwashing taxes, then it is fully in the grip of the new order and has therefore perished. However, if it is still possible to be critical within this social institution, to create space for self-reflection, or at least to attempt realistic observations of what goes on around us, then there is still hope.

The artistic research presented in this exhibition is the result of several years' work dedicated to social and other changes observed from the position of the global European semi-periphery, which – for various reasons – defines itself as Central Europe. However, the captured explorations have universal validity and are comprehensible to anyone; in the end, all of us on this planet are part of the same system.

As the Serbian philosopher Miško Šuvaković has written on the ideology of exhibitions, it doesn't matter what is written in the text that accompanies the exhibition; what matters is the difference between what was intended by the exhibition and what wasn't, between the acceptable and the unacceptable. Between the conscious and the unconscious, the literal and the fictitious. The ideology of the exhibition isn't what should be accepted by public opinion; it's what creates public opinion and presents its opinions through shared social values and movements.

This threatening new hegemony is based not on public control but on a small minority's acquiring total ownership of the world. Achebe's novel ends with a reflection by a member of the colonial government on the title of the book he wants to write: “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger”. The author thus perfectly captures how every exploiting power sees the world – an inferior local deviation that must be suppressed. This is what the current struggle for a better world is about: not allowing these things to happen.

Zbyněk Baladrán