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Who is Afraid of the Political? If Anyone at all...

Antipolitical essays of Dubravka Ugrešić¹

This paper is an introduction to the problem of the antipolitical in the work of Dubravka Ugrešić, which will be subject to further investigation. The primary question is what light the antipolitical sheds on the concept of the political, specifically if these are mutually exclusive concepts or rather complementary ones. If in the name of the antipolitical the political is refused, what is offered instead?

The Culture of Lies is a collection of Ugrešić's essays written between 1991 and 1994, during the years of the Yugoslav wars, being both before and after the emigration of the author in 1993. The texts had been published in various European periodicals² and first appeared in a 1995 volume in Dutch, and then later that year in German. Only following these publications was it published in its original language, as a co-edition of a Belgrade and a Zagreb publishing house. The subtitle and the motto of the book refers back to another essay, that of the Hungarian writer and democratic opposition member in the '70s and '80s, György Konrád, which was published under the title *Antipolitics*³ first in English in 1984 and two years later in Hungarian. The concept of antipolitics has a longer history in the East-European democratic oppositions' curriculum, especially in Poland and Czechoslovakia. However, Ugrešić chooses Konrád's approach and definition, where, as we will see, the personal and the position of the writer occupies a central position. The quotation says:

"Antipolitics is being surprised. A person finds things unusual, grotesque, and more: meaningless [absurd – Zs. L.]. He realises that he is a victim, and he does not want to be. He does not like his life and death to depend on other people. *He does not entrust his life to politicians*, he demands that they give him back his language and his philosophy. A novelist does not need a minister of foreign affairs: if he is not prevented from expressing himself, he is capable of doing so. He does not need an army either, he has been occupied for as long as he can remember. *The legitimization of antipolitics is no more or less than the legitimization of writing. This is not the discourse of the politician, nor a political scientist, nor a technocrat*, but the opposite: a cynical and dilettante utopian. He does not act in the name of any mass or collective. He does not need to have behind him any party, state, nation, class, corporation, academic council. Everything he does, he does of his own accord, alone, in the milieu which he himself has chosen. He does not need to account to anyone, *his is a personal undertaking, self-defence*." (quoted in Ugrešić: *Culture* xi. Emphasis mine – Zs. L.)

¹ Special thanks to Márton Szabó for his almost unimaginable eternal patience and to Balázs Trencsényi for his

² *Le Temps Moderne, Lettre Internationale, Die Zeit, Index on Censorship, Vrij Nederland, NRC Handelsblad, The Times Literary Supplement, The New Left Review, Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and others. (Ugrešić: *The Culture*, 275)

³ Important to note that the English edition does not contain the text from 1986, "Antipolitics of a Novelist" [Egy regényíró antipolitikája], which is a text written on occasion of the award ceremony of the Charles Veillon Prize for European Essay, which was awarded to Konrád in 1985 for *Antipolitics*. The quotations from this essay are my translations. I also included the Hungarian originals in footnotes, for those who might be suspicious about my translations

This text may bring us closer to the notion of *the antipolitical*, at least in the sense of Konrád's *Antipolitics*. What Konrád refuses as politics is the system in which politicians (two persons) decide about life and death, in which "[t]remendous power is in the hands of normally fallible human beings" (Konrád: *Egy regényíró* 159), "and he lists to the "inventory of antipolitics" also "[c]ivil self-defence, [...] opposition to the hypertrophy of the bureaucracy, the state, the police force, opposition to the revolutionary rhetorics" (166).⁵ Antipolitics is "the I in opposition to the We" (157),⁶ "self-defence against the overpower of the political machines" (167),⁷ it is "the victim's point of view. The *object* of the historical actions would rather like to be the *subject* of his own destiny." (165. Emphasis mine – Zs. L.)⁸

The crucial concept chosen by Ugrešić from Konrád's text is self-defence, as the action of the individual in an oppressive political situation, in his case, in state socialist Hungary. He finds *the personal* as a possible way of defence against the collective oppression and uses literature as a means of expressing this personal standpoint:

"It does not matter if the antipolitics is *only* reflection, essay, literature. [...] The teleology of literature does not show beyond literature [...] It is possible to think about public matters in aphoristic references, without the explication of all the connections, in metaphoric combinations [...] It is possible to bring the impersonal back *into the personal*." (167. Emphasis mine – Zs. L.)⁹

In order to fulfil the process, "[i]t is possible to abandon any claim of scientificity and to *take the essay back into literature*, or, if you like, into poetry. By re-anthropomorphising politics we become antipolitical at the same time." (168)¹⁰ In this sense, the author places the impersonal and the political on one side, and the personal and literature on the other. Politics has no human face, it requires re-anthropomorphisation, but through that process it becomes antipolitical.

The [what genre?] genre also deserves attention: it is the essay which is "taken back into literature" and "abandon[s] the claim of scientificity". Thus literature, in opposition to politics, is the terrain where the individual is free to express thoughts and ideas. It is the sovereignty of literature as a form of art, with the inner freedom of art – what is always in the centre of debates between writers, literary scholars and critics – what would be questioned if the genre chosen were not the essay, a hybrid form between literature, political writing and philosophy. This hybrid character allows more freedom for the author at the same time, by allowing him/herself to speak

⁴ „Emberfeletti hatalom normálisan gyarló emberek kezében”

⁵ „Civil társadalmi önvédelem, [...] szembenállás a bürokrácia, az állam, a militáris és rendőri személyzet hipertrofiájával, szembenállás a forradalmi retorikákkal”

⁶ Az Én szemben a Mi-vel”⁴⁷

⁷ „személyes önvédelmet ért rajta a politikai gépezetek túlhatalmával szemben.”

⁸ „Az antipolitika az áldozat nézőpontja. A történelmi cselekvés objektuma inkább saját sorsának szubjektuma óhajtana lenni.”

⁹ „Az se baj, ha az antipolitika csak reflexió, esszé, irodalom [...] Az irodalom teleológiája nem mutat túl az irodalmon [...] Lehetséges közügyekről aforisztikus utalásokkal, nem minden átkötést kifejtve, metaforikus kombinációkkal gondolkodni [...] Lehet a személytelent visszavinni a személyesbe.”

¹⁰ „Lehet [...] lemondani a tudományosság bármifajta igényéről, és visszavenni az esszét az irodalomba, ha tetszik, a költészetbe. Reantropomorfizálva a politikát egyszersmind antipolitikusokká változnunk.”

for him/herself, to abide by the biographical authorial figure and so it allows the genre the personal modality of speaking, taking personal responsibility for every single letter in the text, not only in an artistic, but also in the political sense. There are no other characters to identify with, there is no narrative that can have a standpoint different from the author's except the author of the essay. The author is first of all a writer of literary texts, out of the terrain of the collective, oppressive political.

Another aspect of the antipolitics of the Konrád text is the feeling of strangeness: "Maybe I mean some disengagement or paradox by antipolitics, what I can mostly see in East Europeans. Who not here, not there, neither inside, nor outside; even in his homeland in a no man's land." (166)¹¹ This concept corresponds to the idea of Ugrešić – and at this point I will turn to the texts in *The Culture of Lies* – about the three options for the former Yugoslav writer: "transformation and adaptation, inner exile, in the hope that it won't last long, real exile, in the hope that it is temporary." (*Culture* 166) Ugrešić is writing these lines as a person who has experienced inner, as well as real, exile, and later writing the essays on the *antipolitical* from this aspect. So, her antipolitics have a lot to do with another discourse defined as the *political*, and her writings in this modality can also be interpreted as self-defence. Especially if the circumstances of her emigration are considered: after being strongly attacked in the media,¹² and becoming at the same time object and subject of a political debate, the need for self-defence became inevitable.

There are countless approaches to the concept of the political in this context. Still, I will turn to three of them, which are of course also interrelated: Carl Schmitt's definition of the political, the feminist idea and slogan still vivid since the '60s; "the personal is political" and; Giorgio Agamben's politicization of life in *Homo Sacer*. The three approaches also represent three phases in the thinking about the political with texts or ideas born in different periods of history. Although the interrelation of these approaches and the succession of time of their birth entails the trap of a teleological interpretation, I will try to avoid it since my choice is arbitrary in the sense that there are other approaches which would also be useful for this analysis, and also for the simple fact that these will prove to be equally valid from the point of my investigation.

Going against a certain political discourse, as Ugrešić does with the Tudmanian Croatian ruling politics in the first half of the '90s, this polemic attitude in her antipolitics calls for Schmitt's well known and also by the participants of this conference often discussed *The Concept of the Political*. Márton Szabó's interpretation of the friend-enemy relation as the constitutive element of the political focuses on this polemic feature, pointing out that "it is not only in politics that one may find polemical features. »Numerous forms and degrees of intensity of the polemical character are also possible. But the essentially polemical nature of the politically charged terms and concepts remain nevertheless recognisable.«" (Szabó: *Politika versus politikai* 76) The attempt in *The Culture of Lies* is to illustrate how political discourse worked in the contemporary Croatia: Ugrešić tells stories, some with humorous aspects, as she does not need to go into any bloody details in order to be able to show threatening workings of a political discourse expropriated by certain

¹¹ "Lehet, hogy valami elfogulatlanságot és paradoxalitást értek antipolitikán, amivel többnyire közép-európaiaknál találkozom. Aki se itt, se ott, se kívül, se belül; saját hazájában is a senki földjén."

¹² About this see: Meredith Tax: *The Five Croatian "Witches": A casebook on „trial by public opinion” as a form of censorship and intimidation*, July 1, 1993. Downloaded: 15 Feb 2005.
<http://www.wworld.org/archive/archive.asp?ID=157>

political powers. This is what she calls “terror by remembering” and “terror by forgetting”. “Terror by remembering is a strategy by which the continuity (apparently interrupted) of national identity is established, terror by forgetting is the strategy whereby a »Yugoslav« identity and any remote prospect of it being re-established is wiped out.” (Ugrešić: *Culture* 80) By her essays, Ugrešić creates counterdiscourses which can be opposed to the ruling discourse, and it is the personal aspect which enables the discourse in the form in which it finally happens.

When Schmitt defines the friend–enemy concept of the political, he warns us against taking it “in a private–individualistic sense as a psychological expression of private emotions and tendencies”, since these are “to be understood in their concrete and existential sense” (Schmitt 27-28). This approach disregards the personal debates about private matters and does not consider the personal position taken in an otherwise political matter. While the Yugoslav wars would be regarded seriously political, even by Schmitt. When Ugrešić speaks as a writer and says: “As a writer, I can allow myself such a notion. Indeed, I am convinced that that outside world, that so coveted arbiter of civilisation, that Europe [...] has also played its part, bears its heavy portion of blame, has its problem of a »Western« culture of truth and lies.” (Ugrešić: *Culture* 83), it is her personal position “as a writer” that allows her to utter a political opinion about a political issue still widely discussed.

The problem of truth and falsehoods, as the title also shows, is a central question in the essays. Although the author does not claim to know the one and single truth of her writings:

“In this sense my story about the culture of lies also collapses like a tower of cards, destroying itself. [...] I imagine myself opening a newspaper (and oddly I still want to) and coming across an article written by a colleague from over there, *on the other side*. The article will be about the Serbian culture of lies. As it is, my text is only half the story, half the truth. Or half a lie” (85)

Questioning the ownership of the one and singular truth does not weaken her standpoint and does not weaken the friend–enemy relation I assume to be the defining characteristic of the text either, since the antipolitical nature of these writings of Dubravka Ugrešić is basically due to their opposition to the concept that there could ever be any entity knowing and owning one generally valid truth. By telling “half a story, half a truth and half a lie”, the text is opened to dialogue. If this dialogue, born under the previously described circumstances, i.e. when the dialogue itself is born as a political standpoint, political becomes a question and depends on what is being said and how it is being said.

Schmitt’s definition, drawing a strict line between the fundamental characteristics of certain fields, serves to regain or maintain the sovereignty of the political. This might be the crucial point in the differentiation between politics and the political: the political preserves its substance, as long as its defining element is reserved and can be present in any other field without losing its essence. Therefore the literary – as art, which is supposed to be defined on the axis of beautiful and ugly according to Schmitt – and the political can coexist and we cannot disregard the political features and possibilities in literary texts.

The borders between the public and the private, the personal and the political, are shown differently in the light of the slogan “The Personal is Political” also used by the feminist movements of the ‘60s. The first written trace of the slogan in feminist literature (in the sense of *Fachliteratur*) is Carol Hanisch’s essay from 1969,

defending consciousness-raising against the charge that it is “therapy”. She writes: “One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time.” (Hanisch 205) Her aspect turns my argumentation upside down: in order to reach certain goals (in the feminist movement in the ‘60s for example), the foundations of the private life should be changed and this will lead to changes in the public, meaning the personal becomes political. In the case of Ugrešić we cannot speak about the maintenance of fundamental binary opposition either, which is questioned by the feminist theories following the ‘60s movements.

These “categories whose opposition founded modern politics (right/left, private/public, absolutism/democracy)” return in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, as “which have been steadily dissolving, to the point of entering today into a real zone of indistinction” (Agamben 4), so much that “twentieth-century parliamentary democracies were able to turn into totalitarian states and with which this century’s totalitarian states were able to be converted, almost without interruption, into parliamentary democracies” “with otherwise incomprehensible rapidity” (122). To sum it up simply, and therefore full of theoretical traps: Agamben’s starting point is Aristotle’s concept of bare life (*zoē*) and qualified life (*bios*), the first as characteristic to all living beings, the latter as a way of living proper to an individual or group, or as a good life (*eu zēn*). This simple natural life is excluded from the *polis*, and this exclusion gives the basis for the classical notion of politics. The transformation of classical politics, according to Michel Foucault, is “at the point at which the species and the individual as a simple living body become what is at stake in a society’s political strategies” (Agamben 3). The “lasting eclipse of politics today” is “because politics failed to reckon with this foundational event of modernity.” (4) Agamben, following Foucault’s approach, and revising it at the same time, calls attention to the link between bare life and politics already existing in the classical times, stating that Aristotle’s sentence (“born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life”) can also be read “as an inclusive exclusion (an *exceptio*) of *zoē* in the polis, almost as if politics were the place in which life had to transform itself into good life and in which what has to be politicized were always already bare life”. (7) Agamben also states that “the fundamental categorical pair of Western existence is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion” (8). As he claims, “[m]odern democracy’s decadence and gradual convergence with totalitarian states in post-democratic spectacular societies may well be rooted in this aporia” (11).

Ugrešić reflection on the convergence between democracy and totalitarianism and her doubts if the new political systems of the successor states, especially Croatia, can be called democracies bears much in common with Agamben’s thoughts. Describing the media attack directed against her and four other woman writers – the case of “the five witches”, after which she left Croatia – she writes: “»democratisation« has brought a new freedom for patriarchalism” (Ugrešić: *Culture* 77). The sentence contains too much sarcasm to be left without comment: patriarchalism obviously contradicts the author’s idea of modern democracy, depriving half of the community’s membership of their equal rights and being even responsible for the war.¹³ Patriarchalism became stronger in the new Croatia as a consequence of what Ugrešić described as the “terror of remembering and forgetting”, by sweeping out all the

¹³ See the essay *Because We’re Just Boys*: “The war in Yugoslavia is a masculine war. In the war, women are post-boxes used to send messages to those other men.” (122)

traces of the socialist Yugoslavia, where, apart from the equality between men and women issued by the state – to greater or lesser extent,¹⁴ but this would be the topic for another paper –, even feminist circles were able to work, already in the early ‘70s, following the latest Western (democratic?) streams of feminism.

While discussing the identity of the writer in the essay *Priests and Parrots*, Ugrešić notes the “inappropriateness” “[t]o speak about identity at a time when many people are losing their lives, the roof over their heads and those closest” (45). The fact that one person has the chance to speak and through receiving voice (or, in an Aristotelian aspect: language) becomes a subject, who can write personal essays as *self-defence*, which are antipolitical and thus transgress the border between fundamental binary oppositions, while others are deprived of or are even not given this chance or capability (because they die, are raped or wounded, have no place to live, lose their family members) can also be seen as the difference between bare life and politically qualified life. As Agamben writes, “democracy, at the very moment in which it seemed to have finally triumphed over its adversaries and reached its greatest height, proved itself incapable of saving *zoē*” (10), referring to Nazism and the concentration camps (which is “the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity” [123]). Concentration camps in Europe returned during the Yugoslav wars, together with the massacre of thousands of human beings, and due to the indeterminateness of the definition of the Yugoslav wars themselves (cf. Schmitt’s friend–enemy differentiation and war) the category of war and the categories of the camp and rape (also questioning the *bios* of the living being)¹⁵ as elements of the war slide into each other:

“Just as every tragedy recurs as farce, so all the former Yugo-symbols have been transformed into their ironic opposite: Tito’s baton (the symbol of brotherhood and unity) has become a fratricidal stick (a gun, a knife) with which the male representatives of the former Yugo- peoples are annihilating each other. [...] *The collective human body has become human flesh, all ex-Yugoslavs are today merely meat.*” (51. Emphasis is mine – Zs. L.)

As soon as the definition of the nation is destabilized, *bios* loses its quality as “qualified life” and the only thing left is pure meat: “bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (Agamben 8. Emphasis in the original.). Ugrešić has a footnote about the corpses and meat:

“The following detail will complete our tale from the most grotesque angle. During the Christmas holidays of 1992, a meat factory produced a new salami with the Croatian coat of arms. The coat of arms was printed into the meat of the sausage itself. If we give it mischievous associations and believe those who tell stories of domestic pigs in the war areas feeding on human corpses (Croatian, Serbian, Muslim) and that now those pigs are being turned into sausages with the state coat of arms, then we

¹⁴ Also from *Because We’re Just Boys*: “This picture [...] is so general and so *natural* that during a primary school sex educational lesson (in the communist period, of course, nowadays they teach catechism) a teacher was stopped in her tracks by a question. As she was displaying drawings of the naked bodies of a woman and a man and explaining their sexual features, a child interrupted her anxiously: »But where are the mummy’s plastic bags?« (Culture 113–114) Although the anecdote is obviously a bit extreme, it flashes a characteristic picture of the state socialist image of the housewife and working woman, with a plastic bag.

¹⁵ ⁵⁵ About this see Sharon Marcus: *Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention*, in: *Feminists Theorize the Political* (eds. Judith Butler – Joan W. Scott), NY–London: Routledge, 1992. 385–403.

really must praise the natural organisational wisdom of the new states.” (Culture 53)

If the quality of life is based on its politicization and if “modern democracy does not abolish sacred life but rather shatters it and disseminates it into every individual body, making it into what is at stake in political conflict” and “he who will appear later as the bearer of the rights [...] can only be constituted as such through the repetition of the sovereign exception and the isolation of *corpus*, bare life, in himself” (Agamben 124. Emphasis in the original.), if this *corpus* is protected by declarations of rights (cf. *Habeas corpus*, Declaration of 1789, UN treaties, etc.) and if politicized solely through these, it can always be deprived of its *bios* and be eaten, first by pigs and then by other living beings, whose humanity is thus questioned.

For her action and as part of her action as well, Ugrešić had to be “voluntarily joining that ocean of (willing and unwilling) refugees who are knocking at the doors of other countries of the world.” (Culture 85). She becomes a refugee and this very act (act, as it is chosen by her, since the three options for the former Yugoslav writer: “transformation and adaptation, inner exile, in the hope that it won’t last long, real exile, in the hope that it is temporary.”) has to be reflected in her text while it also becomes the very basis of her texts at the same time. According to Agamben, “by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they [refugees] put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis. Bringing to light the difference between birth and nation, the refugee causes the secret presupposition of the political domain – bare life – to appear for an instant within that domain. In this sense, the refugee is truly »the man of rights«, as Arendt suggests, the first and only real appearance of rights outside the fiction of the citizen that always coverts them over. Yet this is precisely what makes the figure of the refugee so hard to define politically.” (131)

While refugees are usually treated as a group in the host countries and by humanitarian and social organisations, the cause of the exile of Ugrešić – her example can be said to be typical for the European intellectual emigrants, a really small elite group of people – is more about the individual. As she writes: “[t]o say something to the milieu [the majority defined by the politics in power – Zs. L.], is the same as saying it to oneself (for we are the milieu); to say something after all »bloody, criminal and morally sick« would mean to condemn oneself *to exile, to the naked, individual I*.” (Culture 187. Emphasis mine – Zs. L.) For her, exile is to be alone against the many. The mass is a means to cover responsibility, saying “I am” is taking responsibility, since shame is an individual act: “The citizens of a country which no longer exists die from bullets, knives, shells, but not one of the twenty or so inhabitants of that former country has died yet of shame, and nor will they. For shame is a profoundly personal emotion. And so, when I am asked who is to blame for everything, I reply: I am! And I mean it quite seriously” (188). By writing the essays, as a person with voice and language,¹⁶ the double act of Ugrešić through politicizing

¹⁶ Cf. „It is not by chance, then, that a passage of the Politics situates the proper place of the *polis* in the transition from voice to language. The link between bare life and politics is the same link that the metaphysical definition of man as »the living being who has language« seeks in relation to *phonē* and *logos*. [...] The question »In what way does the living being have language?« corresponds exactly to the question »In what way does bare life dwell in the *polis*?« The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own life excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold in which the relation between the living being and the *logos* is realized. In the »politicization« of bare life – the metaphysical task *par excellence* – the humanity of living man is decided.” (Agamben 7–8)

(through the antipolitical which opposes to the political regime, the one reducing human life to the *corpus*) her own life, is preserving her own humanity and is making efforts to give life back its political value.

Dubravka Ugrešić is not at all afraid of the political. For her, being antipolitical is questioning “categories whose opposition founded modern politics”. Experiencing the changes of states, nations, political systems and wars going on around this all, she cannot stand within the frames of the concept of the political, which has actually caused all the events. Antipolitics is her answer, in accordance with Agamben’s claim and need for a new politics. By expressing her standpoint, she opens up the terrain of the political, bringing it out of the *polis*, in order to make it subject to further discussions.

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