

# INTERVIEW WITH LIEVEN DE CAUTER



by IGOR KOVAČEVIĆ

**I would like to begin by focusing on your reading of the Central European region. Could you formulate your vision of Central Europe with regard to the western world?**

That is very difficult for me, because the idea of Central Europe is strange to me. For me there is only one Europe. When I came to Prague for the first time, what charmed me most about the city was how European it felt. I suddenly discovered one of my capitals! I suddenly discovered I was at home. This idea that somebody from the sea, raised in Flanders, in Belgium, which is some thousand kilometres from here, could immediately feel at home in Prague, was wonderful. I am deeply panEuropean, not so much by ideology, but by sentiment. If somebody would have asked me when I was 13 years old, what are you? I would have responded: a European. And I still believe it in the sense that I am Flemish a Belgian, a Catholic and

an atheist, and I'm many things, but I am first of all European. And of course I can say: I am Greek, because as you could see yesterday, I'm very much inspired by Greeks. And I am also a bit Jewish, because I'm inspired by European Jewish thought. So for me the only identity, which I would go for, is European, for the time being. So you could say it's ignorance, but I would never say I'm a Western European. No. So I never would say Belgium is Western Europe, it's Europe. Maybe I'm completely wrong, but I would say: forget about Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Western Europe. Because if you for instance think of the Palais Stoclet in Brussels built by the Viennese architect Hofmann, and Art Nouveau in general, it was not localized. The same could be said about Baroque. Prague and Brussels are both very Baroque, and are both capitals of Art Nouveau. It was everywhere, I mean it's one movement, isn't it? Maybe that might be just one example. I know, but this complete mixing of influences is what makes Art Nouveau European. Of course, one can say: this is more Austrian Art Nouveau, this is more French, Belgian, Scottish Art Nouveau,

but the most important thing is the exchange. So for me it's one world, one Europe.

**— This experience you're describing is the very goal of our activities, but there are national movements, which have developed very late. You speak about the XIX century, but basically the last independent countries have been realized within neoliberal society. What is important for the understanding of a Central European region, as you pointed out yesterday in your lecture, is the raw capitalism which was rampant here for the last twenty years. The raw capitalism as the first stage of capitalism, happened much earlier in the Western world, in the 19th century. Do you see some kind of correlation with what happened here after the fall of communism?**

Well, that's a big question. Let's start with a short history of capitalism. You had the industrial revolution, which gave lot of impulses, first to England, then to Belgium and then this industrialization spread all over Europe. Of course this industrialization produced lots of money, but also a lot of misery. To be more specific let's look at one of the most important, maybe iconic industries: the coal mines. Together with the train, the coal mine was like the core of steam energy and steam energy was the core of all industrialization. It was grim, it was awful, and it was exploitation. Think of the scenes of Zola, he described in his novel "Germinal", as nobody before him, the horrendous and hellish circumstances of people working in the coal mines. Then came, as described in the novel, a sort of self-consciousness of the workers. So, the second phase of this industrial capitalism was dominated by a gigantic social battle: the collision between

socialism and raw capitalism. This collision produced the welfare state as a sort of synthesis between capitalism and socialism. The synthesis between freedom and equality, via the third term of the French revolution 'brotherhood', what we now call solidarity.

So, this is a very quick history of course. We are already in the postsecond world war period, and of course there were many battles etc. Marxism rejected this synthesis, because, as a good Marxist you can see that the welfare state is maybe too good, there will be no revolution once you have the welfare state. And I think it's a big mistake of Marxism rejecting the welfare state. I don't reject it, because I think it's the best form of society world history has produced. I think we beat the Greeks, we beat the Romans and we beat everybody. If you look at world history and you ask yourself: what moment in history was the best for the population in general, it is definitely the welfare state. I think there is no comparison, the only thing you can say of course against the welfare state is that we were still exploiting Congo and we have to mention it.

Then came Thatcher, Reagan and the whole wave of neoliberalism, with globalization in its trail. They said: this is the moment, we don't like this redistribution of wealth. The welfare state is a bad idea, so let's get rid of it. Thatcher tried to get rid of it, by breaking the trade unions, by deregulating and privatizing as much as possible. She didn't manage completely. The battle Obama is now facing in America, is exactly the battle to rebuild the welfare state. Of course, his opponents say Obama is a socialist and they are completely wrong, but in America the word 'socialism' has evil

connotations, just like communism. So it is the devil, but in a sense it's right too, because the welfare state was and is a synthesis between socialism and capitalism.

I think my short history of capitalism has nothing to do with Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Central Europe; it has to do with raw capitalism. When communism fell, everything was kicked out instead of making the same synthesis the welfare state had made. They should have said: we take the best of communism and keep it within a democratic, capitalist frame: health care, social security for the unemployed free education, free public transport, free museums, etc., all the wonderful things of communism. I am aware that saying this here, in Prague, that there are wonderful things about communism, could sound shocking. But, by making the synthesis between capitalism and socialism, you get rid of the whole totalitarian aspect of communism, you get the heavily corrected capitalism, which is the welfare state. That is, in my opinion, what you should try to do here. It's a task for the whole of Europe (Eastern, Central and Western), because of course we in Belgium have to fight for the welfare state too, because of globalization. For instance, think of the so-called delocalization of industries: industries say: ok, we have to keep growing, keep having high profits, so how can we do that? How did they do that in the 19th century? Easy: very low wages, Marx according to the letter. So they go to the real proletariat, the sweatshops of the second and third world. Maybe it is important to make a point on the concept of proletariat here. In the 80s, people said: haha, Marx was wrong, where is the proletariat? In the welfare state the proletariat seemed to have disappea-red, which of course was

the idea itself of the welfare state: redistribution of wealth. But, the proletariat has never been as big as today. The 'reserve army' of the unemployed, as Marx called it, has never been bigger. I mean there is a huge 'reserve army' in Africa, there is a 'reserve army' in Asia, millions, they're almost billions of people, that you can exploit for no wages. Not low wages, no wages. So that's what they're doing, that's raw capitalism. Another form of raw capitalism is Dubai, which is incredible. I hope Dubai will collapse; it is collapsing in a sense. I mean it could be dangerous also; so much money could be dangerous maybe it should collapse in a gentle way.

So for me that is very important, that's important for Central Europe. Like we were discussing Havel, he might be pro-American, because totalitarianism was so awful. I cannot myself say many good words about communism, my friends know it, I have many communist friends and I've said: people wake up! Bye, bye to the dictatorship of the proletariat, no dictatorship, not even of the proletariat. Totalitarianism is the most dangerous political form. But the idea of social redistribution of wealth, is good, even in the most strict economic terms. I mean if I'm employed and I can keep consuming, it's good for the economy. Because if I'm unemployed and I'm completely poor, I'm a danger to the society, I'm a danger for the economy, I'm wasted. And this is raw capitalism, you have people who make money, a lot of money, and you have people who just fall out of the boat. And that's dangerous, it's bad for your economy, it's dangerous for your social cohesion. This is something like basic lessons in welfare statehood, but I think it's crucial.

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**What happened here after the revolution is that basically the communist elite became the owners, they are in the position of these first capitalists. So they took the same private logic as for public values. I have the feeling that this is happening in a lot of countries, that world politics means just maintaining the money, producing capital, not developing society?**

These are difficult questions and they need specific historical answers, no? I think the battle as I see it is also a political one, for instance from an urban, urbanistic point of view. This idea that politics is about preserving the economy and is like the grease that has to oil the privatization of everything, is of course wrong. Think of the example of the pavilion of the EXPO that is now privatized and all the examples you gave in the workshops on Budapest, Ljubljana and elsewhere. This idea that private is better than public is almost theological ideology. Think of the privatization of British rail; it proved disastrous. Why? Because if you say the company doing it has to make money, it doesn't work, you cannot make money with trains to Scotland, you do it as a public service. So the idea of public service, public goods, and public heritage is crucial and neoliberalism in its most raw phase has no eye for this.

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**I think it's important that these topics are not even formulated by architects. I think that is important for the young generation to see and understand things what happened here. It is as if nobody had time in this last twenty years to look back.**

Indeed, I think it is very important work, what you do as CCEA: to really look at these capitals of Central Europe and to try to get a process going with architec-tural schools,

but also in the youngsters and in the audience, that, the architecture of the city is in fact a crucial way to defend, and preserve the city, but also as a sort of example of what has gone wrong in the last twenty years. For instance Prague is such a wonderful city, because under communism it was frozen, the building mania of capitalism was not there. So learn and learn quickly, because otherwise things will go wrong. I think that's a very urgent project, a very relevant project, and a very beautiful project. Yes, it needs all the support it can get, in both intellectual and financial ways. Also important is to go to Western Europe and get Western Europe over here, as you do already. A next step is to bring you experience back to Western Europe. Because of course all these capitals are now hot, Prague is hot, Vienna is hot. I mean the youth goes to Central Europe, Eastern Europe. I mean even the real Eastern Europe.

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**Too much congratulations.**

My last advice would be to redefine the whole analysis of the publicprivate opposition. You know it's one of my themes: the third sphere. I think it is important to start to think about this third sphere, the heterotopias or the cultural sphere, which is neither political nor economic. I think people need to understand this. The task is to open up this theme and to tell these old Marxists that it's not true that culture comes after eating. It is just as important as food. Culture is not only "superstructure", but it is a crucial, anthropological activity. Whether it is sports, art, religion, philosophy, schooling, it's all one sphere in itself, which should be supported, protected, and defended - critically of course. Museums and universities are not economic enterprises. On the other hand,

we don't have to turn everything into a museum, which is another risk. Heterotopias should not eat everything. What I call the equilibrium of the three spheres (the economic, the political and the cultural) is crucial. And I think this is something that neither totalitarianism nor neoliberal capitalism have understood. In totalitarianism the spheres of culture and economy are eating away, absorbed, swallowed by the political sphere. That is the totalitarian utopia, which of course is a total failure, a dystopia. There is no independent art and there is no real private sphere, nor a real private sector. There is only generalized suspicion and fear. In the neoliberal utopia economy eats everything, there is nothing else left beside economics. People now say to me everything is economy. I hate it! Not everything is economy. To make the picture complete, there is a third utopia. That is when heterotopia eats everything, which is the universal theme park on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other. This utopia is very strong today: the temple, the mosque, the church absorbs the whole social life, it eats everything. So I think these analyses should be made clear to people and to architects. There are many architect students who logically, all of us in fact, are imbedded by management, marketing, and capitalism. We breathe it. We sweat it. All of us more and more become capitali-sts and capitalist ideologists without knowing it. Without being too ideological, this project could be a sort of seed, an action seed, spreading critical thoughts.

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**Thank you very much.**

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 The Expo pavilion of Czechoslovakia presented in Brussels in 1958 was moved to Prague. After the revolution it was privatized as headquarters of a PR company