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Editorial

'Worksites of the Left

Silvija Jestrović (University of Warwick) and Ameet Parameswaran (JNU)

Performing the Worksites of the Left, emerges from the ongoing research project *Cultures of the Left: Manifestations and Performances* whose editors and contributors have been an integral part of this special issue. Funded by the British Academy Partnership and Mobility grant (2016-19), this project has brought together an interdisciplinary group of scholars from Warwick University (UK) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (India), as well as researchers, artists, and activists from other European and overseas institutions and places. The initial research started as a retrieval project asking *What's Left of the Left?* What is left of Left institutions, practices, critical discourses, and its other cultural manifestations at the present juncture? During the lifespan of this project, Narendra Modi solidified his power in India, Donald Trump became the President of the USA, fuelled by right-wing populist rhetoric of xenophobia the Brexit vote was cast, Victor Orban's right-wing government erected razor blade fences at the Hungarian border to prevent refugees from entering, the pro-fascist oriented Luigi Di Maio became the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, and, most recently, the dictatorship-loving and openly anti-LGBT Jair Bolsonaro won the Brazilian presidential elections. It has quickly become apparent that our initial research question *What's Left of the Left?* is no longer a tentative, but an urgent question that directly calls for a re-examination of both the legacy and current activism of the cultural Left . In other words, the goal is no longer to retrieve and reevaluate, but to make more immediate links between the cultural and political Left, past and present, and foreground its potential to generate and sustain a resistant response to the rising Right of our time.

This collection explores how theatre and performance offer ways of seeing and experiencing the Leftist thought-in-action: as it unfolds within specific time/space frameworks (Štikš), through distinct rhythms and on different scales (Parameswaram), as accumulating critical legacies of the past (Dutt), and how it exposes new forms of inequalities in the present (Jestrović, Gluhović). Theatre and performance as embodied practices that easily spill from specialist circles into the wider public sphere emerge as worksites of the Left through which to grapple with what Left means historically and for our times. The international and collaborative dimensions of our project has enabled us to think about the cultures of the Left through a cross-cultural lens to understand context specific forms of practices and struggles of the Left underpinning its broad theoretical framework.

In recent years, the political and social sciences have been vigorously and extensively engaged with the question of the Left and the need for its reconsideration, most notably in the works of Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Srećko Horvat, Chantal Mouffe, Jodie Dean, Susan Buck-Moss, Partha Chatterjee, and many others. In return, politics has been inextricable from various aspects of theatre practice and scholarship both historically, in works of figures such as Bertolt Brecht, Utpal Dutt, and Augusto Boal, to mention a few, and in the contemporary writings of scholars such as Baz Kershaw, Rustom Bharucha, Adrian Kear, Jenny Edkins, Nicholas Ridout and many others. Yet our approach to view the cultural Left through the lens of both Political Science and Theatre and Performance Studies truly embraces the sub-disciplinary field of Politics and Performance that has only begun to fully comprehend its hermeneutic potential. This is most notably the case in Shirin Rai's and Janelle Reinelt's collection *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (2015) and, more

recently, in Tony Fisher's and Eve Katsouraki's *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance and Radical Democracy* (2017).

The notion of worksites – the conceptual framing device of this special issue – reflects the interdisciplinary synergies of Politics and Performance. A version of this concept first appeared in the work of political philosopher Étienne Balibar titled *We, the People of Europe? Reflections of Transnational Citizenship* (2003). Balibar proposed the notion of worksites, that is, laboratories of democracy, to identify sites where the conflicting and alternative aspects of the social fabric could be perceived and where democracy could be fought for. He argues that these worksites reinforce the relationship between discourse and practise and are places where the implementation of ideas could be observed and where further interventions could be made. Balibar identifies borders, trade union struggles, and translation among the keys to understanding the workings of both modern citizenship and democracy. In her essay 'Performance at the Crossroads of Citizenship' (2015), Janelle Reinelt proposes theatre as an additional worksite with a unique potential to embody, model, and make visible both the agonistic aspects of the social fabric and the discrepancy between discourse and its practical implementations. Initially in our research, the concept of worksites emerged in its amalgamated, interdisciplinary form, as 'Balibar/Reinelt's worksites of democracy.' It also emerged as a common denominator to a number of research strands and discussions generated from the *Cultures of the Left* project that included scholars in Theatre and Performance Studies, Politics, Social Sciences, History, Women's Studies, and Cultural Policy, and from our numerous workshops and colloquia from Coventry to New Delhi and from Belgrade to Kerala.

In this special issue, the worksites, while maintaining their key features, make a shift from being laboratories of democracy, to being laboratories of the Left. 'Left'

is understood here as a large umbrella term for a range of progressive cultural productions, ways of living, and political positions both historically and in contemporary times. While Marxism produced the first general theory of the total social relations that is capitalism, integrating into its ideological framework economical, political, cultural, epistemological and other dimensions, the notion of the worksites of the Left offers a bottom up perspective. The focus on plural cultural Lefts draws attention to different histories of leftist political and cultural practices and also to the dialectic between official and unofficial Lefts: between the Left as an ideological dictum of the State (as for example, in the case of the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc) and the Left as an emancipatory cultural and activist practice that advocates equality and solidarity. This approach has also allowed us to adopt a comparative cross-national and cross-disciplinary understanding of what constitutes a Left cultural practice not only in opposition to capitalist ideology and to the Right, but also in and of itself, and as a means of critique within the Left itself, in the past and in the present. In the contributions featured here, the exploration of Left self-criticality encompasses different geographies and ranges from the re-examination of iconic figures of the Left such as Lenin (in Dutt) to a critical analysis of leftist responses to the European refugee and migrant crisis (in Gluhović). Nevertheless, the cultural Left is not only positioned as a critical and corrective force to the State communism, but also as a means to rethink and reimagine the State promulgated policies that became everyday practices of communal solidarity and social equality, as well as to recuperate its anti-fascist ethos (in Jestrović, Štikš).

The junction of history and contemporaneity has emerged in our work as a critical device through which to explore the mutations of the Left, its cultural specificity and its potential as thought-in-action. In the conclusion to his edited

collection *The Left Hemisphere*, Razmig Keucheyan, referring to the credit crunch of 2008, notes: 'From the late 1970s until the middle of the first decades of the 2000s, liberalism enjoyed three decades of unchallenged supremacy, which the current crisis has possibly shaken.' (Keucheyan 2014, 251). When Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek organised their famous conference *The Idea of Communism* at the Birkbeck College in London, in March 2008, they also sensed the inevitability of the Left turn. In their introduction to the subsequent essay collection of the same name, they point out the need to rethink the concept of commons in our time:

Neo-liberal capitalist exploitation and domination takes the form of new enclosures of the commons (language and communication, intellectual property, genetic material, natural resource and forms of governance). Communism by returning to the concept of the common, confronts capitalist privatizations with a view to building a new commonwealth. (Douzinas, Žižek 2010, x)

Their idea of the new commons is grounded in returning to the past to understand and recover the legacies and values of the Left for the present. The intersection of past legacies and current manifestations and possibilities of the Left have a 'cumulative' build up. Perry Anderson, who identifies the 'cumulative' aspect of revolutionary processes across time and space, notes the trajectory originating in the French Revolution, followed by political upheavals across Europe, known as The Peoples Revolution (1848), the Paris Commune (1871), the global leftist coalition of the Popular Front, and May 1968.ⁱⁱ We might add that the repertoire of action and symbolism of more recent political events such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement could be viewed as part of this cumulative genealogy. Moreover, Perry points to the mutation in the matrix of the original, when for instance, feminism emerged as a strand of the 19th century labour movement. In our time we could envisage asylum and migrant rights, ecological issues and a shift from the economy of growth to the economy of need becoming integral to the leftist thought-in-action.

The ‘cumulative’ aspect and energy of the revolutionary traditions, as well as of radical political thought-as-action, is based on a repertoire of gestures, strategies and doings – that is, on performance scenarios and embodiments.. The stage is not only a theatrical metaphor for these political manifestations, but performance, in a broader sense of the term, is key to formulating the activist repertoire. The ‘cumulative’ nature of radical leftist thought and revolutionary action does not merely borrow strategies and devices of theatre and performance. Rather, the role of culture becomes vital in transmitting the political knowledge and common sense in terms of the Gramscian *senso commune*—a sense of collective knowledge formed through encounters rather than through philosophical reflection. Culture is important for our understanding of workings of the Left ideas and movements and even more so, as a practice that makes visible how the inequalities of class are lived in everyday life and how they are reproduced over time. Even though their roots might be in the economic foundation, these structural inequalities can take many forms, permeating other spheres including gender, race, ethnicity, asylum and ecological issues. The notion of culture in the term ‘cultures of the Left’ is understood here as having an anti-hegemonic potential. Theatre and performance in particular are well suited to fulfil this potential as worksites of the Left that facilitate encounters through which the knowledge as a mobilising force of social thought and political activism could be transmitted.

The featured essays speak back to the cultures of erasure of leftist history and legacy and formulate an effective repertoire of resistance against the rising Right. Some of the essays deploy the worksites of the Left as their key conceptual features, others engage with them in indirect ways; yet the worksites of the Left emerge as the

connecting tissue of this special issue. Bishnupriya Dutt and Silvija Jestrović find their worksites of the Left in various forms of retrieval and excavation of leftist legacies. Exploring the legacy of Lenin and the Russian Revolution through performances of commemoration and theatre, Dutt looks into the past to revive both the leftist legacy and its self-criticality. Dutt analyses four theatrical works from the second half of the 20th century from different cultural and political contexts (Germany, the United Kingdom, and India) to argue the possibility of agonism as distinct from the binaries of iconisation and iconoclasm that reifies the cult of personality. Jestrović finds the leftist ethos of former Yugoslavia in contemporary worksites across a variety of forms, from street protests to theatre productions, that all have a degree of rupture in common. Placing the notion of worksites alongside Badiou's theorisation of the event, Jestrović argues how theatre rather than simply its 'subject-matters and modes of its representation,' also works 'through a degree of unpredictability inherent in the theatrical event.'

Ameet Parameswaran's and Igor Štiks' worksites of the Left stretch synchronically and diachronically as their excavations uncover sediments of leftist history in India, Germany, and Bosnia through various document formats: documentary materials interwoven in a feature film, documentary theatre, and photography. In their respective contributions, both Štiks and Parameswaran prioritise space and time, which are also integral to the concept of worksites. Parameswaran connects the idea of worksites to Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space through different scales and rhythms, while Štiks' performative writing intervention in the form of a photo-essay deploys Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes to take us for a walk on one single street –the Marshall Tito street in Sarajevo–through different temporal frames between 1945 and 2014. Milija Gluhović's contribution is a

deep examination and critique of the Left's approach to issues of migration and the refugee crisis in Europe. Drawing from the work of European critical Left scholars such as Étienne Balibar, Seyla Benhabib, Slavoj Žižek, and Michel Feher. Gluhović articulates his critique of the responses to the refugee crisis and migration issues (or the lack thereof) from the European political Left. He sees in the cultural Left, epitomised through theatre, 'a worksite that can help us think in more concrete terms how to move forward towards a more affirmative biopolitical border imaginary, while investigating how migration also identifies a mode of social resistance and political becoming'. For Gluhović, the leftist response to the current migrant and refugee crisis is one of the defining and determining factors in reconfiguring the new global cultural and political Left.

We have asked Janelle Reinelt to revisit her and Balibar's concept of worksites of democracy in the form of a final reflection/intervention on this special issue. Yet in her 'Epilogue', Reinelt does not chart a full circle to the concept she has popularised in our field. Rather, she reflects on the transition from the worksites of democracy to the worksites of the Left, suggesting that worksites are places of works-in-progress that, as the contributions in this collection demonstrate, unfold at times in a continuum and at other times through ruptures.

The Left that the essays interrogate is not an already defined and formed category with inherent and imposed ideological setups. Instead, the practices in differing geographical sites and historical periods that the scholars analyse in this special issue simultaneously critique and broaden the ideal and imagination of the Left itself. They reflect the process of reconfiguring the Left for our times. The performance analyses, as well as the forms of performative writing (as featured in Igor Štiks' photo essay/intervention) offer hermeneutic tools of understanding and

reconfiguring the multifaceted Left in context-specific terms. This framework enables us to explore scenarios that have been unfolding through the interplay between radical political thought and performative manifestations of the cultural Left as embodied political, social, and cultural practices.

In retrospect, the research and other activities of the *Cultures of the Left* project in general— and the *Performing Worksites of the Left* special issue in particular— have grappled with a rather old, yet famous question, ‘*Chto delat?*’ (‘*What is to be done?*’). The title of the 1854 novel by the Russian author and moral philosopher Nikolay Chernyshevsky was made famous by Lenin (apparently an avid reader of Chernyshevsky) when he, too, titled his 1901 revolutionary pamphlet ‘*Chto delat?*’. This question, as it were, also sublimates the methodological approach that links together the essays in this collection regardless of the differences in their styles and focal points. On the one hand, ‘*Chto delat?*’ is immediately associated with the leftist revolutionary history, legacy, and excavation into the cultures of the Left. On the other hand, to ask, ‘*Chto delat?*’ does not mean ghosting the Russian Revolution or resurrecting Leninism in some shape or form. Rather, the question is understood dialectically: what does it mean to ask ‘*Chto delat?*’ in response to the issues of our time and in light of the global histories of the Left and the discourse of failure of communism? ‘*Chot delat?*’ is not a rhetorical question— neither for Chernyshevsky and Lenin, nor for us. The notion of the worksites of the Left can be understood as emerging from the need to respond to this question through specific examples and critical frameworks.

The term worksite itself is immediately linked to the verb *to do/delat* – it is the site where ‘doing’, ‘work’, ‘labour’ of some kind or another takes place. In her ‘Epilogue’, Reinelt also points out the primary meaning of the term as a site where

something is made, built, created, tried out, tested, never quite finished – a site where works-in-progress unfold, a site where a process unfolds. In the vocabulary of theatre dramaturgy, doing is action. It implies conflict, *agon*. Various doings/actions take place when a worksite is shaped into being: legal and juridical, political, social, artistic, discursive, and embodied. In Brechtian terms, however, the key question is not so much *What* is this action, what is the doing, but rather *How* is this action/the doing performed – *Kak delat?* rather than *Chto delat?* (to paraphrase the famous question). Accordingly, the worksites are defined here as spatial and temporal points in the social fabric where acts of participation and intervention take place; they are junctions where one can both observe and intervene, survey the battle field and join the battle (to borrow the military vocabulary from Štiks's essay).

In his book *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism and Love*, Nicholas Ridout theorises 'theatrical communism' (2013, 148) as a means of interrogating the political potential of theatre under capitalism. He identifies 'theatrical communism' as a theatre in which 'there is always some kind of distance' (Ridout, 2013, 11) and where presence is always complicated 'by the appearance within it of people, things, and feelings from other times' (Ibid.). 'Theatrical communism' counteracts the assumption that the agency of theatre is in its capacity to establish a unified community. In separation, rather than in collectivity, Ridout sees the agency of 'theatrical communism' to 'involve the potential 'compearance' of figures from both the past and the future' (Ibid.). Somewhat conversely, in Štiks' contribution to this special issue, the authorial *I* gradually merges into a *We* (or rather various *We*'s). This merging of the individual into the collective body is a profoundly political moment of solidarity and agency. However, this moving from *I* to *We*, this merging of the individual into the collective body, this new unity, may or may not mean consensus.

Could the collective be unified and agonistic at the same time? How do we engage together and separately through the worksites of the Left to formulate a culture of resistance in a multiplicity of dissonant voices and gestures? This is what all the essays in this collection grapple with, each in its own unique way.

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ⁱⁱ See Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement*, London and New York: Verso, 1992