

Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War

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1.

We are living in a time of global wars. Since the beginning of this supposedly promising millennium, wars are erupting everywhere globally. 9/11, the U.S.-led 'conquest' of Afghanistan, the current War in Iraq, the endless conflicts between Israel and Palestine, the Darfur crisis, Chechnya's resistance to Russian domination —just to name a few of the most spectacular cases— are a testimony to an unprecedented situation of global warfare due to complex and contradictory confrontations and fights for various geopolitical, economic, cultural, ethnic and religious interests of the protagonists. Ultimately, one can understand such a situation as an 'eternal state of exception' imposed by the Empire, as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt point out in their book *Empire*; it is a result of U.S.-led superpowers that seek to impose, through arms, a New World Order dominated by liberal capitalist economic systems and their related values.

However, looking closely at the big picture, one can also recognize that most of the wars, conflicts and clashes have been happening mainly in the developing world. Certainly, the centre of the Empire has ruthlessly exported violence to the other parts of the world in order to impose this world order that it has planned to its own advantage —this is a continuing form of colonization. On the other hand, one should also understand it as a revelation of the difficulty facing the developing world in enduring and suffering the challenging transition from decolonization, independence to modernization and globalization, similar to the pain the former Eastern Bloc had to carry in self-reinvention after the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Many of these countries are, in turn, rapidly being 'converted' to the side of the developing world.

In sum, it shows the collapse of a certain Utopia, a project of modernization in the non-western world, and according to Vijay Prashad's *The Darker Nations*, it is the assassination and collapse of the 'Third World'. As Prashad stated, the Third World is a project by the non-western world to become independent after long and dark years of colonization, to invent their own nation-states based on the principles of self-recognition, independence and equality in the global map. Modernization is the very route towards such a goal. Modernity —the universality of enlightenment, progress, humanism, secularism, democracy, socialism, nationalism, etc.— is the ideology embraced by these new born nations and reinvented to adapt to their particular geopolitical and historic conditions. International solidarity amongst developing countries, embodied in different forms in alliances like the Non-Aligned Movement, the UN etc., is an outside condition towards the

success of the project. In other words, the Third World is by definition a global project, or an alternative project of globalization. It is a complex but creative process of interpretation, negotiation and reinvention of modernity, largely defined by Western influences. While recognizing local traditions such as cultural, social, economic and religious differences and diversity, this 'Westernization' even becomes a strategy to obtain an equal position in the Western hegemonic world. Hence, different, diverse and culturally hybrid modernities have been created and implemented in the process of the modernization of the Third World, and this has become a significant force in the restructuring of the world order in the late 20th Century and in this millennium. However, looking back at the historic processes of the past decades, especially after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Communist Bloc, the Third World as a potential 'Third Power' has been largely divided and fragmented in the age of the globalization of 'liberal' capitalist economies —some developing countries are seeing themselves moving towards truly modernized economies with mixed results in terms of social progress and democracy while a majority have fallen into economic regression and social turmoil. The Third World is now facing the deepest contradiction; it has become both a crisis and challenge to arrive at a 'renaissance'.

The key question is whether the non-western world can still reinvent effective models of modernization and modernities to face the challenges of globalization which are driven by liberal capitalism and dominated by Western powers, but are associated, to a large extent, with the bourgeoisie of developing countries. Examining the exciting but sometimes gloomy history of the Third World, Vijay Prashad critically analyzes the top-down model of modernization in postcolonial countries, arguing that its very failure is due to the modernization project of the Third World being largely conceived and promoted by its elite class. To convince the masses of the importance of modernization and often 'westernization' as the only way for the Third World to negotiate its place as an equal power in the international arena —its measure of internal progress— the elite class has to resort to top-down models of imposing modernities and reforms that depend on the acceptance, cooperation and support of the 'lower' classes, the military forces, and international aid. This imposition has often been violent, dictatorial, and has generated the excesses of power and corruption —it is here that many developing countries are pushed into social, economic and political impasses. The people have to respond to the degeneration of their living conditions by protesting against the privileges of the dominant classes, reclaiming their social rights through mass mobilization and protestations against external and international agencies of liberal capitalist powers such as the IMF and the World Bank. These social mobilizations have also awakened some longtime 'buried' conservative ideologies and values such as rightwing nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism and religious fundamentalism, and have allowed these groups to be 'resurrected' and become popular within dramatic social vacuums.

As one of the first non-western modern republics and a key player in the modernization of the developing world, Turkey's history and recent situation have proved to be one of the most radical, spectacular and influential cases in this direction. The Kemalist revolutionary project to establish a secular, nationalist and modernized nation-state, which has been largely informed by an ideological choice of westernization, has been a relatively successful adventure. However, like many other comparable cases, this project has essentially been created and implemented through force by a section of the social elite when

the old empire was rapidly disintegrating. It is a typical top-down model of forced modernization. After 80 years of 'experiment', in today's reality of republican Turkey, there are some crucial contradictions; and despite considerable achievements in political, economic, cultural and social progress, the established republican powers and cultural values are now being questioned as a populist 'political Islam' has gained considerable support of the population. There are numerous and complicated reasons for such a drastic change: the rise of populist classes, migration and urbanization of inland populations, the 'rebirth' of religious consciousness and influences in the Middle East, the global deception of globalization, etc. However, a fundamentally crucial reason is that the modernization model and modernity promoted by the Kemalist project have clearly been a top-down imposition with some unsolvable contradictions and dilemmas inherent within the system: the quasi-military imposition of reforms, while necessary as a revolutionary tool, betrayed the principle of democracy; the nationalist ideology ran counter to its embracement of the universality of humanism, and the elite-led economic development generated social division. The 'backlash' from the populist classes seems to be inevitable. Populist political and religious forces have managed to recuperate and manipulate their claims from the 'bottom' of the society and have turned them to their own favour. This tendency has been insightfully and eloquently analyzed and commented by Turkish scholars like Çağlar Keyder's "Whither the Project of Modernity? Turkey in the 1990s" and Haldun Gülalp's "Modernization Policies and Islamist Politics in Turkey"¹. Interestingly, the political program promoted by the democratically elected, new 'post-Islamic' power, is openly pro-business, pro-European and carefully restrains itself from 'Islamisation'. In other words, the 'post-Islamic' AKP managed to turn itself into a normalized institution in the age of 'populistization' of democracy itself. It embodies a global tendency even when democracy itself, as ideology and institution, is forced to deal with the pressures of social divisions and reorganization prompted by globalization and global wars.

Çağlar Keyder states: "Thus, the current struggle in Turkey seems to be between the old authoritarian-modernizationist, paternalistic state, with its crumbling nationalist and populist legitimation, and a modernist conception of political liberalism and citizenship."² And he concludes: "If the project of modernity is to divest itself of its modernizationist encumbrance, then political liberalization, ushering in civil rights and the rule of law, is the next step. For the promises of modernization to be fulfilled in all spheres of life, for Enlightenment ideals of emancipation to be realized, and for individual autonomy to be attained, full citizenship rights have to be instituted. Only then may it be possible to predict the overcoming of the inertia of indigenous culture and its communitarian predilection and to avoid the slide toward a diluted form of hyphenated modernity. But first it is necessary to perform radical surgery on the moribund state tradition—in order to prepare the legal and

1. in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, (eds. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba), Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.

2. Çağlar Keyder "Whither the Project of Modernity? Turkey in the 1990s" in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, edited by Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba, p. 48

political coordinates within which the public space of autonomous individuals may flourish.”³ In other words, a bottom-up, truly democratic project of modernization and modernity that is based on the respect of individual rights and humanist values is necessary to bring the Turkish society out of its current contradictory situation. This directly echoes the claim of the multitude—a whole consisting of singularities, a multiplicity of groups and subjectivities—founded on the common value of love, as is defended and promoted by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their theory of “The Multitude” (in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*). Looking at current popular movements increasingly prevailing in the world today—from anti-imperialist to anti/alter-globalizationist, from environmental protectionism to anti-gentrification activists—one can witness the rise of a third force in all social domains. Defending and improving positive sides of diverse modernization projects and modernities are by no means empty promises but true hopes. They are optimistic by nature. In the face of the age of global wars and globalization of liberal capitalism, it is not impossible but also necessary to revitalize the debate on modernization and modernity and put forward activist proposals to improve social progress. Today, modernization should be carried out in diverse models, relevant to local conditions and ideals, and in the negotiations between individual localities and the ‘global’. And modernity can only exist as a plural concept. Or, modernity means modernities.

Concluding his critical examination of the “Kemalist Certainties and Modern Ambiguities”, Reşat Kasaba emphasizes: “Equating the collapse of state-centered models of modernization with the collapse of modernity itself would mean that we are still reading history through the lens a very restrictive model. Far from extinguishing the promise of modernity, the ongoing eclipse of these models releases, in theory and in practice, the liberating and enabling dynamics of modernization. Stripped of the artificial certainties and uniformities of yesteryear, the world appears not chaotic and insecure but of possibilities.”⁴

It’s not only possible, but necessary to embrace this optimism!

2.

Contemporary art has been a product of modernization and modernity. Along with globalization and the integration of many developing countries in the global system of production and communication, contemporary art is now being created and presented everywhere, far beyond the West. In fact, the most exciting and innovative works and events are being produced in numerous non-western regions, rather than in the established Western centres. The phenomenon of the proliferation of biennials in the non-western world is an obvious and powerful expression of the rise of such fresh and different voices. Founded 20 years ago, İstanbul Biennial has been an ‘avant-garde’ of this new wave. No doubt, its creation should be understood as a part of the modernization project of Turkey, in her search for both internal cultural development and international status. From a global perspective, it

3. *Ibid.* p.49

4. Reşat Kasaba “Kemalist Certainties and Modern Ambiguities”, in *ibid.* p. 33

should also be seen and understood as a part of the renaissance of the Third World project. The Biennial has gained a certain maturity and is now facing the task of injecting new blood and reinventing itself as a forerunner of the creation of contemporary art with unique and original terrains for diverse, innovative and relevant experiments rather than a showcase of products of sure values.

A biennial in such a context is an event, or a space, for creation. It is a site for imaginative and creative production. It is necessary to encourage artistic activities to go beyond traditional notions of production and presentation, namely within established museum-like institutions and the market spaces. It must consider the most efficient and effective means to engage artistic activities within the social reality and provide innovative visions for social change. Bringing both local and international artists and their works together and encouraging them to carry out dialogues with the local community, the biennial is a space in which creative forms of global-local negotiations take place. Ultimately, it is a continuous process to produce new and ever-changing localities as a part of the constantly restructuring global artistic and cultural order. Dealing with the specific realities of Istanbul, and the larger context of the developing world, the Istanbul Biennial exerts more and more influences on the global art and cultural scene with its specific and unique visions and strategies generated in the process of the making of the biennial. In today's geopolitical reality, it is necessary and urgent to deal with the question of modernization and multiple modernities and their dynamism in the age of globalization. It's through this engagement that the Biennial itself will obtain new energy and significance.

Urbanization, or explosive urban expansion in the Istanbul fashion —a city that has grown immensely in the last decades— is the most visible and significant sign of modernization. This development is a natural way to engage the Biennial, hence artistic activities, in the new reality in order to reinvent itself in the contemporary world.

The urbanization process of Istanbul, like many other metropolitan cities in the developing world, has been remarkably creative and original, beyond any traditional methodology of urban planning. Spanning both across Europe and Asia, the multilayered urban texture combining historical and modern buildings, the incessant two-way movement of expansion and densification, and a mixture of legal and illegal constructions, have made the city one of the most spectacularly hybrid and dynamic metropolis in the world. Migration and urbanization of the population are constantly changing the social, economic, cultural and political structures of city. The 'chaotic' appearance of urban change is in fact a sign of a new order with totally new understandings and practices of city and urban life. It represents a typical 'post-planning' city: urban actions and constructions transgress the pace of any systematic planning attempts — planning only becomes a retrospective corrective recourse.

Contemporary art as an avant-garde in cultural, social and even political experiments should be intimately engaged with such a vibrant movement of reality making and renewal. An event like Istanbul Biennial, gathering and engaging some of the most interesting cases and projects of such a process, should naturally be merged with such energetic and urban mutations. It should become a laboratory for innovative projects and strategies, and a site for experiments and productions with different, multiple models of modernization and diverse modernities, both artistically and practically.

In fact, the Istanbul Biennial has always been closely related to the urban reality.

It does not have any fix, isolated, or museum-like venues. For the last two decades, it has been in a search for permanent sites within the city. The conception of the Biennial has always been organically driven by this endless search of sites. Therefore, it's by definition an urban event. This has proved to be a very successful example of production of a new locality: thanks to İKSV, a vital and original experimental art community with numerous artists, critics, curators and independent spaces, and lately, with museums and galleries which are often multidisciplinary, socially and politically engaged, contemporary art has been given a new lease of life and has grown up rapidly in Istanbul during the last decades. It's also natural that the 10th Biennial continues with this highly productive approach and develops it in a more articulated manner. Exploring the urban and architectural conditions of Istanbul has hence become a starting point and a central reference for the conception of this Biennial.

Istanbul is not only a historic city with many layers and traces of human dramas in the past with its the eternal negotiations between West and East, but has engendered some of the most beautiful projections of nostalgia and melancholia. As the cultural and economic centre of Turkey, it is also a laboratory of the formation of an extraordinary 'Turkish' modernity, a dynamic urban power to drive the nation-state's modernization. It is this fabulously contrasting and complex coexistence and juxtapositions of old and new architectures that makes the city an extraordinarily vital site for imagination and creativity. To articulate the urgency and necessity to critically re-examine and optimistically re-embrace 'the promise of modernity', we have chosen some of the most significant modern edifices and venues including the AKM, İMÇ, Antrepo No.3, **santral**Istanbul and KAHAM. They symbolically and physically mirror the various facets and models of urban modernization in the city, embodying the political, social, economic, industrial and cultural realms. In these sites, the utopian project of the republican revolution and modernization meets with the lively, ever-changing and 'chaotic' reality in the most vivid fashion, at once harmonious and conflicting, and ultimately electrifying. They are sites where the top-down vision of the modern city clashes with the bottom-up imaginations and actions to defend and promote difference, hybridity and vitality in real life. The hegemonic 'official' modernism has to confront the vital force of the multitude —a synergy of truly multiple modernities. In many parts of the city, these clashes are producing the most amazing experiences of urban life, and new spaces for critical reflections on crucial issues regarding how we live and create. And these processes will lead to the production of spaces for an eventual new urban society —one that produces new and more relevant public spheres to counter the current trend of privatization and gentrification. As in Antonio Negri's comments on the metropolis of today, this project is "the mirror of the contradiction of globalization".⁵ By bringing public attention to these venues in the name of this Biennial of muscular and engaging artistic interventions, we hope to launch new debates crucial to our life.

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In such a debate, artistic actions, including the Biennial itself, can certainly find their roles in prompting cultural and social changes through innovative forces of intervention —a form of

5. Antonio Negri, "The Multitude and the Metropolis", published in the journal *Posse*.
(circulate on multitudes-infos@samizdat.net on 20/11/02)

urban guerrilla. Facing this infinitely dynamic, complex and exciting reality of a metropolis on the crossroads of globalization, artists and other creators are highly inspired to mobilize their imaginations and creativities to push their artistic experiments radically. Their works are often contextually specific, performatively engaging with the urban reality—from street life to political struggles, from private contemplation of the city's secrets to activist 'insurgency' against gentrifications, from creation of "Temporary Autonomous Zones" to critiques of geopolitical events and global wars. Obviously, these experiments are by no means limited to conventional art forms but cover various disciplines and expressions, including architectural and urban studies, street actions, theoretical and practical proposals for social reorganization and changes, cinematic visions, musical and sonic expressions, multimedia and online activism, and real life events; and push contemporary art practice beyond its frontier and merges it with the real life of the city. They provide new visions for the next change of the city itself as an ever-mutating and open-ended system of innovation and production.

The 10th Biennial seeks to accommodate, encourage and manifest these radical but relevant experiments with equally radical intellectual commitments, curatorial strategies and physical infrastructures. Facing an extremely complicated reality, both in terms of urban life and artistic actions, the Biennial actively opts for the logic of complexity; it accepts and benefits from the dynamics and tensions generated by contradictions, conflicts, hybridity and difficulties, which are in fact the very elements that make the city so invigorating. From the very beginning, the Biennial project has been clearly defined and structured beyond a conventional exhibition model; and it embraced the rationale of merging it with the vibrancy of real urban life: from research to the development of the project, selection of venues and forms of actions and presentations in these sites, dialogues and collaborations among artists and other participants, designs and realizations of the interventions and transformations of the spaces, as well as defining communication strategies. It has been a long and convoluted process.

The eventual realization of the Biennial, or the opening, however, does not announce the achievement of such a process. On the contrary, it will announce the beginning of a new step. Spatially, the Biennial project will cover a wide range of urban zones, from the European to Asian side, from central areas to the peripheries. In terms of time, the project goes beyond conventional 'office hour' presentation and takes on the reality of life in this sleepless city; it will function twenty-four hours a day continuously in different sites. It is a huge effort. And to produce a new reality for the city, it can only be accomplished through the contributions of artists, curatorial and production teams, organizers, sponsors, and most importantly, the public. In other words, this is a collective intelligence-based experiment of production of new localities. With four major 'exhibitions' and numerous special projects and parallel events, the Biennial is a dynamic complex system. It is an unending machine for production of new urban life. It is an endless urban maze.