



"CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AS THE ESSENCE OF LIFE"

INTERVIEW WITH MILENA ŠEŠIĆ

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“CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AS THE ESSENCE OF LIFE” – INTERVIEW WITH MILENA ŠEŠIĆ

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Milena Dragičević Šešić is former President of the University of Arts in Belgrade and the Head of UNESCO Chair in Interculturalism, Art Management and Mediation. She lectures at various European universities in the areas of cultural policy and cultural management, cultural studies and media studies. Milena has been President of the Board of the European Diploma in Cultural Project Management and, in recent years, President of the Cultural Policy Research Award at the European Cultural Foundation.

Born in Croatia in 1954, Milena is a prominent researcher in the fields of cultural studies and cultural policies. She has devoted her attention to both academic and research work as well as to social activism in Europe, the Arab States, Central Asia and the Caucasus region, where she has been strongly involved in civil society and anti-war groups, particularly in the former Yugoslavia.

Milena also serves as a consultant on strategy building and organization reform to cultural institutions and third-sector organizations and has published a vast diversity of essays and books, among them: “Culture: management, animation, marketing”, “Neofolk culture”, “Art and alternative”, “Horizons of reading”, “Art management in turbulent times” and “Intercultural mediation in the Balkans”.

These are only some of the reasons why we decided to invite her to speak with us about cultural participation. Milena provides us with an alternative and complementary approach to the theme of this present issue – an approach that derives from Eastern Europe, Eastern theory and action research. In this interview, she shares with us a challenging way of understanding and practicing cultural participation in political contexts and societies that also matters to a Europe in construction – or, shall we say, to a never finished European project?

Her contribution helps us reflect on the urgency of building more democratic, open minded and inclusive societies. Her experience instructs us on other possibilities of giving life to cultural participation, or to actively participate in cultural life. Possibilities that come from another Europe.

1 What was your first encounter with cultural participation?

I would like to go all the way back to when I was a student at the Department of Organization of Socio-cultural Activities (Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Belgrade). In the mid-seventies, the professors of the department primarily conducted research in the field of cultural participation. We were a socialist country back then, so it was of crucial importance to enable and enlarge people's participation in cultural life. The major research methodology was researching what people did in their spare time, their leisure activities. So, we focused on cultural activities within the scope of individual free time.

2 Regarding your theoretical and methodological approaches: who are the authors in the field of cultural participation who have influenced you the most?

The theoretical background was mainly French sociology, because that generation of our professors did not speak English; they spoke French, German or Russian. These were the languages that people who started school before World War II used to learn. At that time in Germany or France, the research in this area (leisure time, *loisir*) was very important. Professor Joffre Dumazedier was there, and later, when I came to study in France, he became my mentor. It was empirical sociology, but also very leftist sociology. The department at Paris V - Sorbonne where he was teaching was called "Sociology of Permanent Education". The department's logic (rationale) was that free time was considered a space for permanently upgrading education – not just continuous professional education, but humanistic education in particular. For instance, it was considered important for every person to have one week in a year, where he or she could learn to play the guitar if he or she wanted to. In 1971, a French law was introduced, which gave way to a lot of jobs in the cultural sector, as actors, musicians etc. started developing seminars, courses (singing, voice techniques, presentation skills, acting etc.) that were offered to everyone. Corporations and even public organizations did not see the benefit in providing such courses to employees, as these were rather specific experiences.

Later these cultural offers were replaced by ones prompting continuous professional development.

"We were a socialist country, it was of crucial importance to enable and enlarge the participation in the cultural life. The major research methodology was researching free time and its activities, leisure activities."

So, basically, in terms of our research, we have been backed by French theory on one side and German theory on the other side. University departments in those two countries have educated students for a profession called "engineers of free time" (Germany) or "cultural animators", as they were called in France (*animateurs socio-culturelles*). In Yugoslavia at the time, they were called "organizers of cultural activities", but also "animators of cultural activities". Today this term, animator, has been maintained only in two countries in the world: Brazil and Poland. In France, they use the term "mediator", while in the former Yugoslavian countries the term "cultural manager" is prevailing.

So, what has my research consisted of during that time? I have helped the team at the university to conduct research on cultural participation of different social categories (urban youth, workers, rural population etc.). During that time, being a socialist country, we did not use the term "social classes", but rather "social layers", or, as I have defined, "cultural models". My first survey, as part of a large research project about cultural needs and cultural participation of workers, was conducted in an air plane factory (small planes) in the city of Pančevo. I had to do 10 interviews with workers (two hours each and conducted individually). These interviews were about the workers' cultural needs and how these needs had vanished over time – and this became the specific focus of Yugoslavian cultural studies (of Zagreb and Belgrade schools). It was called "Chreiology research", meaning research based on, or about, human needs. For example, there is a center called *International Centre de Recherches et D'Études Chréologiques* or CIREC (International Centre for Studies and Research on Chreiology), which is obviously influenced by French theory. Thus, cultural theory had NEEDS as the starting point of the research (Agnes Heller, HU), while British cultural studies were focusing on PRODUCTION (based on the British theory of the "value chain" that starts with production and finishes with consumption).

In Yugoslavia, the study of culture suggests a larger value chain, starting with "needs", then moving toward "education", then "conceptualization-creation", and only then

comes “production”, “dissemination”, “distribution”, plus “animation”, prior to “consumption” at the end. However, our theoretical concept had not applied this word, consumption, but instead focused on “reception and experience”. The work of art has to be experienced, so we used the word “reception” in accordance with German philosopher Hans Robert Jaus – who was very popular at that time – working on the theory of reception and the aesthetics of reception. My PhD, which came a little later (1985-1990), was about research on literary communication and cultural animation; hence, it was about all those people who participate in this process, from writers, publishers etc. to the readers.

“This was very important: to show that it is not class boundaries that culturally divide people, its taste which is at numerous cultural practices key identifier of social structuring, showing hidden social divisions.”

The research combined several methodologies. The first part was research about readership, categorized into four groups. It was kind of a classical sociological survey (1.000 samples) with a questionnaire (with 100 questions). It took a long time for the participants to respond, but it was socialist times so people had time. One of the group samples was “users of libraries” (25 %), another 25 % were “buyers in book shops”, the third was “people who have bought by subscription” (at that time it was very popular that a book publisher would announce its publications and people would subscribe), and the fourth group was “people who have bought from book travelling salesmen”. Travelling salesmen would come with their car full of books to a factory or other companies and would sell complete works by Pearl Buck, Dostoyevsky etc. The workers would then sign the credit and take those books home, and a small amount of money was then deducted from their salaries every month and forwarded to the publisher who had a contract with these salesmen (80 % of books sold in Yugoslavia in the 1980s were sold this way). I also did deep interviews with 50 readers that I selected.

I was also inspired by professor Joffre Dumazedier, who, besides leisure time, investigated cultural practices and participation, cultural needs and tastes, how people decide to buy book A or book C. He would propose invented books, with different titles and different front-page designs, and ask people: which one of these five books would you buy?

Through my analysis I identified, for example, groups of readers. Thus, in Serbia we identified “reading types” that read books to obtain knowledge; those who read to get in-

formation; those who are searching for emotional experiences; those who read to be entertained; and, finally, the smallest group, only 7 %, who look for aesthetic pleasure.

I think that today this result is still very applicable. People read for different reasons: women read for emotion, men for information or historical knowledge. Even men who read romance books would describe this as “learning endeavors”. In these books, for instance in the novel “The Thorn Birds”, the men found new information about agricultural work in Australia, whereas women read the book with a focus on personal emotional narratives.

In researching cultural practices, we also apply an ethnographic method. We do a lot of observational work. For example, I did research on “music uses”: different types of research on practices of music and differences between music audiences (classical music, popular music, popular folk music and traditional music). In Serbia, music listeners are not omnivores. Certain groups of people only listen to a certain type of music and do not mix (except on very special occasions). Music taste became a key cultural identifier, crossing class differences. This was very important: to show that it is not class boundaries that culturally divide people – it is taste. And in numerous cultural practices, this is the key identifier of social structuring, showing hidden social divisions.

In cultural research, Bourdieu made an impressive impact in Yugoslavia. In the beginning of the 1980s, we were very much inspired by his work and developed further research related to sociology of culture. We also got to know books by American Herbert Gans about taste cultures, which inspired us a lot.

Polish sociology of culture was also very much present. For example, Zygmunt Bauman had already been translated in the sixties but was not translated into English until the 1980s, when he left Poland. In Serbia, his work was directly translated from Polish and Polish cultural studies (Antonina Kloskowska, Stefan Żółkiewski, and so on), and he was very inspirational for my generation. Now, these authors are forgotten in Poland because everyone is looking to the best generals and literature. But I think it was very good, solid and up-to-date literature with no ideological biases. It was genuine scientific research.

Interestingly, I would like to point out – like the research you are doing now about what inspired us as researchers – the International Journal on Cultural Policy did a similar survey, asking 40 of us, professors in cultural policy: what was the book that inspired us? I thought it was a very good opportunity to represent Serbian and Croatian cultural stud-

ies. When I was a student, the book by Stevan Majstorović, *Culture and Democracy*, was printed in 1974, following the book *Cultural Rights as Human Rights* (printed in 1971), and the book *In Search of Cultural Identity* (in 1972) – and all of them had been extremely influential.

The politics of identity became the topic of cultural studies of the 1980s. Majstorović was a really great researcher, but he was never published in English and was known only locally. I thought it was a good occasion to represent the work of this author. I sent information saying that I was very happy to write for the journal about Stevan Majstorović's book. The response came in five minutes. Oliver Bennett said: "Out of the question! You can choose only books that are available in English". And I was wondering: why are people not curious to discover areas of knowledge they do not know anything about? That was a really good moment for asking: what is available in English? Only French theory. So, I chose Michel de Certeau, *La Culture au Pluriel*, because for cultural policy, this was really the most important book. That was very inspirational for me. For research about cultural practices, another book by Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, was extremely important, as it showed that there is cultural participation even in a working process, when the worker is using his working place to create something he invented (*perruque*), not just to do the job, but using office machines to create something for himself. So, yes, French theory was for me really inspirational.

However, regarding cultural practices, it was mostly British cultural studies. The Birmingham school was important for cultural researchers in Yugoslavia, but we had to discover it ourselves, because, as I told you, my professors could not read English books. So, at the beginning of the 1980s, I co-edited a book called *British Cultural Studies* (with Ratka Maric), where we presented a selection of cultural studies texts that were translated in Serbo-Croatian. After that, I have edited a special issue of the journal *Gradina*, devoted to "French pensée de la culture". It was an important endeavor to present both French cultural theory and the even lesser known British cultural studies to the research community in Yugoslavia and also to the cultural community.

This inspired a new generation to start conducting research in Yugoslav subcultures, in cultural participation within subcultures. We, a group of young scholars, started an academic review called *Subcultures*, and that was an extremely successful and widely read journal, but we succeeded in publishing only four issues, because there was no financial support for our work, as the country entered into nationalistic

euphoria in 1987. Funding a review on cultural studies was not a state priority anymore. As Yugoslavia was positioned between east and west, we could use research from both sides. British cultural studies and Anglo-Saxon theory on the one hand, but also texts of Soviet authors about subcultures in the Soviet Union, like *Tattoo in Criminal Settings*, or subcultures as part of dissident movements. At that time, these phenomena had not been known in the west, because of the language barrier, iron curtain etc.

We had colleagues in Russia, and we used their research data to open the comparative perspective for our research. But their approach was so different. This is not very well known in the international research community. To avoid the pressures of ideology, Soviet researchers used a technological approach, described existing patterns and invented abstract models, so that no one could question their ideology. They explored cultural practices, but put more emphasis on models and the technologies of cultural production, which were more universal and enabled them to run away from ideology (Schedrovitsky, Makarijan etc.).

3 Would you tell us about your knowledge contribution as a teacher, researcher and activist in relation to north-south and west-east epistemologies?

The greatest difference between north-south and west-east is that, in cultural participation studies in the west, the participant is considered from a consumer perspective (specifically in the cultural management field). A key research question is: what (how much) is spent on cultural activities?

On the other side, in the south or in the east, the research focus is more on what cultural contents a person is using, experiencing or even contributing to or developing. Here, culture is seen as a public good, as something common. And our research about cultural participation is less concerned with questions like where audiences are getting information about cultural events, or how much money they are ready to spend, but more with why and how they participate.

Everything people do is cultural participation. I learn a lot from students only if I let them teach me about their clubbing and other ways of cultural participation. This is my way of participating in contemporary youth culture (through re-

search). Key notions are the ones of interest and values.

“South research is more “cultural” as it is more a lifestyle, value based... and not consumer based behaviour.”

I think that in the 1980s, the research I did about cultural practices (where I integrated for the first time questions about values), I was not able completely to understand and interpret the data. It stayed like this until the 1990s. Why? Because the theoretical framework of the research did not enable me during that time to understand many of the dissonant values.

The data had shown that all the participants who were very highly educated described themselves as unambitious persons. For them, success in a job, in a career, was not important. While people with low levels of education, like salesmen or hairdressers, described themselves as very ambitious people, as persons who wanted to “achieve something” in their careers, to have high standards etc. It seemed absurd, as, during socialism, a person’s salary and career development depended mostly on his or her achieved educational level.

Then came the transition period of the 1990s, and then the answers and their meaning became very clear. The entrepreneurial social group, without any education, really took over all the positions. They started to fight for their place in society, while intellectuals stayed on the sidelines – they completely left the public scene. This was reinforced by the sense of loss during the split of the country.

The entrepreneurial group became readers, and they were the ones who took over everything in society. So, we had this research result, and we did not think about how bad it was that ambition was suppressed among intellectuals. Even at a personal, family level, within this cultural model, youth were told to suppress their ambitions, were told that it is not nice to be ambitious, that we are all supposed to be the same, that we should share everything. We were a socialist country.

Anyway, returning to the question: research in the south is more “cultural”, as it is more focused on lifestyle, value-based and not consumer-based behavior.

4 Which are the possible articulations between the methodologies used in artistic/cultural creation and the research methodologies of

the social sciences?

That is exactly the question I deal with now, because I teach a new course called “Methods of artistic research” for the research-based artistic PhD program. Accent is on differences between artistic research and academic research methods in the humanities. Basically, the starting point of those two methodical approaches is different. Academic (scientific research) in the humanities starts with literature and a categorical apparatus (key notions), key terms that are taken from the theoretical literature. On the other side, artistic research starts with an idiosyncratic hypothesis, with a hypothesis from personal experience, from a context-based hypothesis, not from theory. The artist is living somewhere, he/she sees what is important in his/her socio-cultural context. Usually, during lectures, I take one theme – one issue which might be the same for artists and researchers, i.e. “culture of memory” – and I present to them different forms of artistic research in this field of cultural memory. Then they produce and process an artwork. At the same time, I present to them the most relevant theoretical, academic research about cultural memory, which starts with Paul Connerton, Aleida Assmann and so on. Then, I recommend them to read theory also, to find some “appui”, base.

“Artists are also more free in their selection of issues. They do not have to start with a theory. They can just interpret their feelings about forgetting, about oblivion. In academic research, I have to use Connerton theory of forgetting with his seven types, and I need to test if his theory and types of forgetting apply to our cases. That is making science go further. We can identify and add some new categories like in this case. I have added two more types of forgetting: shameful silence and confused silence.”

Also, I introduce to doctoral art students my participatory research, research that includes citizens, artists etc., as well as research about post-memory on Serbian women during World War I. This research holds the hypothesis that women are forgotten, both within family memory and in official memory, despite the fact that women were the only inhabitants of Serbia during World War I (as the whole army withdrew to Thessaloniki in 1915). And although the women stayed alone in the country and maintained the economy and the life of the country, including all agricultural work, family raising, paying taxes etc., families and the country remember only the “heroes” that returned. If I ask my students, “what did your

grandmother do during World War I, how did she survive?" – nobody knows! They all know stories about their grandfathers, who fought, came back, received medals, or did not return because they did not survive, and so on.

"The artistic work is in itself one of possible interpretations, and it offers itself to multiple other interpretations. An academic paper we can read from different optics, but more or less we cannot or should not interpret it differently if it is good research and pretty well done."

So, as there is no memory about the role of women during war, I have conceptualized a participatory research approach using video testimony. As this is academic research, I have to use proper methodologies to make surveys, analyse oral accounts and so on. Artists doing similar research can start with their own family, their own experience, and stay on that. They might also use interviews (like Sophie Calle), but these interviews do not have to be done in the same thorough way. In academic research, for video testimonies, the researcher has to organize samples, monitor them, state at what time, how and why, and do everything in a more systematic way, much more precisely. The whole process has to be transparent. So, if someone wants to verify my research, I can present my data publicly. Artists are not obliged to give public access to their data.

Artists are also freer in their selection of issues. They do not have to start with a theory. They can just interpret their feelings about forgetting, about oblivion. In academic research, I have to use the Connerton theory of forgetting, with his seven types, and I need to test if his theory and types of forgetting apply to our cases. That is how we make science go further. We can identify and add new categories. For instance, in this case I have added two more types of forgetting: shameful silence and confused silence.

Artists who deal with these issues can make a video or other type of artistic work without even theoretically framing the issues, merely showing something that was forgotten, to link this piece of art to the artist's other works. So, artistic research does not result in a very concrete interpretation (theory) that has to be transmitted to everyone. The artistic work is in itself one possible interpretation, and it offers itself to multiple other interpretations. An academic paper we can read from different optics, but we cannot or should not interpret it differently if it is good research and pretty well done.

"Artistic research is always a reflective dialogue with others."

Artists are always situating their artistic work in some implicit research endeavor. It is always based on something that is important for them personally, even if it is of social importance. In artistic research, there is always a little bit of everything (history, sociology, textual analysis etc.). Artists are trained for their artistic skills, for their technological needs at the moment (like digital skills) and for what they want to achieve through their arts. But artistic research needs to be trained too, needs systematization, organization, in order for it to be recognized. It needs boldness, knowledge, but also skills, and it is always very interesting to see that, especially in the collective artistic processes (theatre, film etc.). The rules are changing all the time, we cannot arrive at one comfortable situation, because there should always be questioning. Artistic research is always engaging in a reflective dialogue with others. What is also very important are artistic circles, groups based in different communities, and sometimes also across frontiers, across disciplinary borders. Since the Age of Romanticism, artistic communities have been important platforms for the exchange of thoughts, for collaboration. In contemporary terms we could call them "focus groups".

5 How do you as a researcher situate yourself? What is the limit as to how you can be instrumentalized for a specific purpose?

Doing participatory research about participatory policies and participatory artistic practices is a very complex task in itself.

What those acts of interaction and participation mean for artists and what are its "uses"? Who is manipulating whom? The process could be called participative, but the artist has in his/her mind a clear idea of what he/she wants. We, researchers, we all have our own agenda and try to influence situations to come up with results that we want. Even participatory processes have these types of approaches. So, to what extent are they really participatory? It should be discussed and researched in every case, as part of a reflection regarding the ethics of scientific research in the humanities.

Interview conducted by

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