

Primož Krašovec

SMETNJAK VS. LJUBLJANA: SINGULARITY OF HUMOUR AND POLITICS BEYOND ELECTIONS



PostScript^{UM}

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Similar to a man caught in a loop of constantly performing his masculinity and demanding its validation, the urban status of Ljubljana seems an ever present issue. In other words, when a city is truly a city, it does not need to constantly underscore its urban status, as it is obvious. Ljubljana, however, seems to need to use the word *urban* in the names of its festivals, cultural institutions as well as in any discourse on the city. The affirmation of Ljubljana's urban status is supported by a set of rigid dichotomies that prove Ljubljana is not part of the rural landscape: progressive electronic music vs. regressive folk music, liberal vs. conservative politics, "woke" attitude towards otherness vs. rural backwardness, hip urban style vs. cringe rural fashion, art cinema vs. commercial cinema, reading culture vs. semi-literacy, alternative vs. mainstream, cosmopolitanism vs. nationalism, clubs vs. discos, exhibition openings vs. football games, craft beer vs. lager etc. Ljubljana's urban culture is far from confident, nonchalant and playful, as it is continuously compelled to reinforce its distance from rural culture.

However, the constant neurotic attempts to prove that Ljubljana is not rural merely represent a psyop that masks the obvious: The fact that Ljubljana

is not a village does not mean that it is a city. Ljubljana is a suburb pushed into the role of a city and forced to pretend it is an urban centre. It has spontaneously appropriated some of the most characteristic traits of American suburban mass culture that it otherwise despises: skateboarding, day trips into nature and hiking. A common criticism of Ljubljana is that it is petite bourgeois; however, it would be more accurate to say that it is sub-bourgeois. The triumph over effectively banishing “America” from Ljubljana’s reading lists as well as film and literary festival programmes is ruined by the fact that it returns in the form of low rises, two-car households and lawns. The Central European petite bourgeois form of life entails resentment of sovereign and nonchalant bourgeoisie and/or (post)aristocracy, Bavarian judgement of the Berlin decadence, etc., while the characteristic numbness and stiffness of Ljubljana is defined in relation to the rural landscape.

Suburbanites need to constantly mind their behaviour – not in order to conform with the rules and norms of petite bourgeois decency, but in order not to become overly relaxed and start behaving like a country bumpkin. Even at its most relaxed, when dancing in Jet bar or weaving ironic references to American trash into their cultural portfolio, the suburban faking of free spirit and experimental living never forgets the ultimate taboo: village fetes and rural dialects. That is, the Ljubljana simulation of urbanity is unavoidably pre-occupied with the staging of non-rurality.

Because of this, the Ljubljana pseudo-urbanity inevitably assumes the form of taking a stand, taking sides, positioning itself within a discourse, etc., which is a method of constantly keeping tabs on the cultural, political and social mutations of the opposite rural side and actively distancing itself from it. Ljubljana’s left-wing politics are defined in opposition to right-wing mutations, Ljubljana’s habitus in opposition to the mutations of rural culture and Ljubljana’s intellectuality in opposition to the technicality, practicality and utility of low thinking. Paranoia is a necessary effect of dependency, thus internal confrontations, censorship and excommunications in Ljubljana’s micro milieus are not remnants of the socialist past, but a basic form of Ljubljana’s

contemporary political, cultural and intellectual formation. Ljubljana's urbanity is eerily similar to its right-wing fascistoid other: both cultural bubbles define themselves as the inversion of each other through constant snooping and spying, which only intensifies the contempt and hatred between the urban on one side and the second-class on the other.

An outcome is that Ljubljana is, in terms of everyday culture, a police suburb – not in the sense that it is under the hand of the actual police (though this is currently changing, as the police presence is becoming increasingly invasive, yet this is not a trait or result of Ljubljana's culture), rather in the sense of the presence of informal surveillance, which forces thinking into taking sides, limiting it into signalling tribal belonging (pseudo-urban vs. rural tribe), establishing and maintaining a state of permanent elections and patrolling the mental and cultural borders. Did Foucault go too far in his fascination with neoliberalism? To what extent should one understand Freud literally, and from where onwards should he be read with reservation? At what point should Marx's reservations towards the state be corrected by Hegel's philosophy of right? Burning suspicion is the dominant trait of Ljubljana's affective economy: one must not show, or even feel, enthusiasm; everything (new theoretical, fashion, music, film, technological, political trends) needs to be scrutinised by one informal committee or another before it is inducted into the culture of Ljubljana (or excommunicated from it), for only once these committees have reached a verdict can one start engaging with something, if only in a restrained, and certainly not enthusiastic, way.

The basic offence against the Ljubljana etiquette is speed (which is always interpreted as recklessness and immaturity) – if you are enthusiastic about cognitive science before the psychoanalytical committee gives its opinion on it, about accelerationism before it is verified by Marxological patriarchs, or about Senidah before the gatekeepers of urban culture reach their verdict, you are naïve and thus a target of ridicule, a person with suspicious political ideas or both. For those who do not have the honour and privilege to be a part of the gatekeeping committees, the basic activity is snitching, that is,

snitching to the gatekeeping authorities on suspicious subjects who have come too close to the border of the unsanctioned, while reminding them that they have been denounced and of what might follow. Ljubljana's cultural atmosphere is characterised by inhibited numbness – to be safe is to conform and agree, and even this should be done with a certain protocol of restraint (i.e. in a reflective manner).

Enter Smetnjak. Smetnjak is a factory of irresistibly attractive and straightforward memes. As we look at Smetnjak's memes, we realise what we have been deprived of: spontaneous laughter, enthusiasm, a thought that is not limited or pre-ordained, and how deep that deprivation runs. As inhabitants of Ljubljana, we are not even aware of how meagre our cultural and intellectual experience is until we are confronted by something different. Smetnjak's memes are intellectual, political and artistic, but not in a cringe way, characteristic of Ljubljana. Or, the cringiest thing about the Ljubljana culturosphere (my favourite expression coined by Smetnjak – I adopted it in 2016, when they, in their own style and to the utmost horror of the Ljubljana intellectual elite, started translating Nick Land's texts)¹ is that in the 21st century, it is still obsessed with dividing the world into the mainstream and the alternative, with mainstream being evil and alternative good.

In this awkward dichotomy, the mainstream is the commercial side of culture, analytical philosophy or cognitive science, the neoliberal centre and/or right-wing politics, etc., while the alternative is represented by world music, psychoanalysis and/or Badiou and left-wing politics. The obsession of the alternative with the mainstream and its criticism of the mainstream is a reflection of the characteristic Ljubljana obsession with and criticism of rural areas. Similar to the suburban contempt for the rural lifestyle, the contempt for mainstream culture is also classist. The critical thinking that Ljubljana's culturosphere is so proud of is always and inevitably class ridicule, which emphasises its own incompatibility with and distance from the mainstream,

¹ Smetnjak (2016, May 26). *Sadie Plant + Nick Land: Kiberpozitivno*. Smetnjak. Retrieved June 14, 2021, from <http://www.smetnjak.si/2016/05/sadie-plant-nick-land-kiberpozitivno/>

mixed with moralism that emphasises the dangers of evil elements found on the other side. For instance, private mainstream media are simultaneously lowly and vulgar as well as dangerous, as they can contain hate speech and right-wing propaganda.

Smetnjak, on the contrary, merges what is otherwise firmly separated in the Ljubljana culturosphere and shows that the countryside and the suburbs are not two individual and discrete entities, but two poles of the same spectrum (for instance by merging Laibach and Atomik Harmonik).² By eliminating this imaginary distance, Smetnjak automatically eliminates any basis for contempt and moralising; once the elevated position of the alternative no longer exists, the classic forms of Ljubljana's criticism are no longer possible. However, the Ljubljana culturosphere remains Smetnjak's prime material, for its motto is *We make beauty out of shit and mediocrity*, which is also a realistic description of Ljubljana's intellectual, artistic and political production. A perennial cover for Ljubljana's alternative and critical scenes is the necessary prevention of the realisation that what is happening in Ljubljana is, in fact, merely *shit* and *mediocrity*, even if it does happen to be politically engaged, reflective, theoretically informed, politically progressive and critical *shit* and *mediocrity*.

On this level Smetnjak exhibits the same attitude towards the LDS³ and post-LDS⁴ left-wing parties and their intellectual "not-so-much whisperers as yay-sayers", as they do towards the right-wing and the SDS⁵ right-wing. In the same way as they show that there is no divide but rather a continuity between rural areas and suburbia on the level of culture, they show that the great political drama between the left and right wing is, in truth, in the local context, an internal ZSMS⁶ affair. This triggered Janez Janša, the current prime

2 Smetnjak SoundCloud. Retrieved June 14, 2021, from <https://soundcloud.com/smetnjak/laibach-meet-atomik-harmonik>

3 Liberal Democracy of Slovenia, the dominant central-left party that governed between 1992 and 2004.

4 Here, I have in mind the parties that emerged after the disintegration of the LDS and which tried to take its position.

5 Slovenian Democratic Party, the main right-wing party.

6 Socialist Youth of Slovenia, a predecessor of the LDS in the 1980s.

minister of Slovenia, who was betrayed and outcast by the ZSMS as a yokel who did not read Lacan and could not hide his accent, to carry out his own version of the alternative, which pretends to be an inversion of the LDS but is, of course, still obsessed with the LDS (and the continuity of communism). The situation is the same on the other side (or, to be more precise, at the other pole of the political spectrum): all post-LDS variations of the left wing are anti-Janša and obsessed with him. Janša is like a Mourinho of local politics but without the singular virtuosity characteristic of the dark anti-Barcelona genius, and what remains is merely a pathetic histrionic figure that politicises its own deprivileged position, its oppression and rejection.

The other political side acts in a similar fashion: as the ZSMS outcast presents an alternative, post-LDS structures need to show that it is, in fact, the mainstream, and in opposition to which they are the true alternative. The only tools at their disposal are thus to adopt a pathetic and moralistic stance and to (re)produce slogans such as *on the right side of history*. Smetnjak's interventions into this situation are twofold: firstly, at the peak of the escalation of political hostility they find and translate a fragment of Francisco Varela's text on the Chilean Civil War⁷ which explains that the problem of political hostility and violence is an epistemological problem, i.e. a problem of incomprehension, which stems from mirroring (each of the two sides is desperate to show itself as the opposite of the other) and can be solved only by the destruction of the other side.

Secondly, Smetnjak provokes the well-established political common sense regarding the intellectual superiority of the left-wing. In the local context, the philosophical establishment attached to left-wing politicians might be superior to right-wing intellectuals; however, if we look at the broader picture, it is numb and backwards – numb in its inability to confront the theoretical flows that emerged outside of its usual references, and backwards

7 Smetnjak (2020, November 17). *Francisco Varela: Razmišljanja o čilski državljanski vojni (odlomki)*. Smetnjak. Retrieved June 14, 2021, from <http://www.smetnjak.si/2020/11/francisco-varela-razmisljanja-o-cilski-drzavljaniski-vojni-odlomki/>

in the sense that it has not updated its repertoire of Hegelian and Lacanian phrases mixed with a few quotes from Marx for almost 40 years. At the same time, Smetnjak's interventions reveal that today's right wing, when viewed outside the local context, is intellectually more vital and productive than the left wing and is winning the internet culture wars. International "woke" reactions to the insurrection by subjugated right-wing knowledge are enforced through thought policing and censorship while adopting the form of a defence mechanism on the local level. Here, they show their own technological underdevelopment as a virtue and desperately try to present internet knowledge as something that is supposedly too mainstream (which only escalates its cringe factor).

There is something zen-like in Smetnjak's political interventions, but not in the everyday meaning of zen as inner peace and spiritual fulfilment, rather in their technique of interventions. In the same way as zen masters use enigmatic and paradoxical statements to challenge ingrained thought patterns of their students, Smetnjak use memes of homoerotic tenderness between right-wing politicians or their androgyny⁸ to open cracks in the established division between the good, tolerant left-wing on one side and the evil, intolerant right-wing on the other. They problematise these simple dichotomies to reveal the stubbornly concealed theme of the importance of homosexual bonds for the genesis of historical and present-day fascisms and the historically ambivalent attitude of the left-wing towards male homosexuality. This is by no means a reflection; on the contrary, the moments of tranquil, thoughtful, deep reflection are moments in which we succumb to the established and become "appropriate", while Smetnjak's interventions function quickly and directly, without the distance from the evil other, without the distance that causes the political reflection to have predictable and unproblematic results.

As they are not based on reflection, Smetnjak's interventions are not only characteristically unpredictable, but are also extremely funny. For instance,

8 Smetnjak (2020, September 8). *Queer Fascism*. Smetnjak. Retrieved June 14, 2021, from <http://www.smetnjak.si/2020/09/queer-fascism/>

Marjan Podobnik⁹ who is otherwise in the suburban imagination a hillbilly who stereotypically deserves to be ridiculed and despised, appears in Smetnjak's remake as an accelerator of milk that is overflowing into oil, the motor of capitalism.¹⁰ Smetnjak also show Janša as a hipster innovator and pioneer who was the first to import and sell Apple computers in Slovenia, and not as a country boy from Grosuplje who was not sufficiently evolved for his suburban and sophisticated colleagues in ZSMS.¹¹ It is impossible for reflection to be funny, as it is slow, boring and decent. Culturosphere, whose basic mental method is reflection, can only be dismal. On the other hand, Smetnjak are funny precisely because of their speed (Smetnjak's memes function in the same way as a comeback in a conversation, where speed is of key importance – if you are quiet and think it over, you behave in a reflective manner: you lose) and unpredictability (the comical effect of displacement, when the punchline always comes as a surprise).

Apart from abandoning the either-or blackmail, in which every political situation is reduced to an election, the second important virtue of Smetnjak is the singularity of their humour. Smetnjak's texts and memes have something that makes them hard to interpret (as interpretation always includes the judgement of equals, i.e. peer review, which Smetnjak always found annoying) and can therefore only be admired. The comments that appear underneath them on social networks usually ruin them, since they function as explanations of a joke; as in Bateson's well-known example of the dancer who says that if she could explain in words what she is expressing through dance, she would not need to dance. The singularity of Smetnjak's humour lies in skill, not in the contents or in what can be done with certain content. And, as is characteristic of all humour, it is unrepeatable and cannot be imitated, making it both undemocratic and non-authoritarian, which is a further example of evading

9 A populist politician in the 1990s, the president of the central-right Slovenian People's Party.

10 Smetnjak (2019, March 20). *Mlekocen*. Smetnjak. Retrieved June 14, 2021, from <http://www.smetnjak.si/2019/03/mlekocen/>

11 Smetnjak (2011, November 19). *Janša vs. hipsters*. Smetnjak. Retrieved June 14, 2021, from <http://www.smetnjak.si/2011/11/jansa-vs-hipsterji/>

the either-or blackmail, since Smetnjak intervene into politics and culture without taking sides or adopting views.

Smetnjak's interventions show that it is possible to be political without taking sides. It is impossible to say whether Smetnjak's views are right or wrong (we might even say that it is impossible to call them views), and it would be impossible for them to become involved in the creation of a political organisation or programme (which is unfortunate for the organisations and programmes). Smetnjak do not see politics as scalable in the sense that they are thought or mind patterns, truncated to the point where they can be accepted and imitated by the masses (the usual mode of operation of political propaganda). Instead, they show virtuosity on the level of production that is accessible on the level of reception. In opposition to the former division between the alternative and mainstream or theory and ideology (where the former operate as a *cosa nostra*, and by accepting them we differentiate ourselves from the evil other), this is closer to contemporary, intelligently written and produced television series, which are nevertheless massively popular. Smetnjak's politics exists in its singular virtuosity on the side of production, without decision-making, agreement or imitation on the side of reception.

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