



Introductory Note: Why Are We in this Together?

Igor Krtolica, Adriana Zaharijevic, Jelena Vasiljevic

► To cite this version:

Igor Krtolica, Adriana Zaharijevic, Jelena Vasiljevic. Introductory Note: Why Are We in this Together?. *Filozofija i Društvo*, 2016, Engaging reflexivity, reflecting engagement, 27 (2), pp.305-310. hal-03664105

HAL Id: hal-03664105

<https://u-picardie.hal.science/hal-03664105>

Submitted on 10 May 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Igor Krtolica
Adriana Zaharijević
Jelena Vasiljević

Introductory Note: Why Are We in this Together?

One of the opening lines a person browsing the Web – a wandering cyber flâneur, if you will – would read upon coming across the Web presence of our group, are the following innocent-sounding statements: “The Group for Social Engagement Studies ... combines theoretical and empirical research ... realized by the community of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists ... [studying] productive reflection on the civic, public and social forms of engagement, that draws upon the vision which animated the founding act of the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory itself...”. Yet, if one lingered over these words – indeed, if one *engaged* more deeply with the meaning behind them – several issues emerge that need to be addressed.

305

First, there is the invocation of the *interdisciplinary community* of goal-oriented people. Interdisciplinarity is one of those highly praised attributes of contemporary academic endeavours, an almost necessary condition for any scientific project to be funded, yet which has surprisingly low impact on the ways the corpus of knowledge, labelled ‘social sciences and humanities’, is reproduced. Departmentally entrenched divisions of theories, methods, objects of study and academic careers remain. So, how do we, exactly, as a ‘community of various scholars’ come together and perform a group-study of an object?

Second, the object in question – *engagement* – is conspicuous: in the introductory notes above, in our name, in the name of this volume. A word used so often, denoting so many disparate acts, relations and positions. Due to its elusiveness, but due even more to the centrality of its role – in this volume, as well as in our existence as a Group – we shall give it a special treatment in this introductory chapter.

Finally, the last segment from the quote speaks of the rootedness, or simply the historical and institutional background – to be interpreted in different ways: as a contextual background, as confirmation of tradition, as a call to break with that tradition, or a simple fact confirming that every field of study, and indeed every (in)formal group, has its founding fathers and mothers (see Zaharijević in this volume).

We shall address these three issues in reverse order, not because we wish particularly to honour tradition preceding us, but because a brief retreat into

the past will serve as an excellent introduction into the present (im)possibilities of engagement itself.

*

Although Socialist Yugoslavia was, in comparison to other states of the Eastern Bloc, characterized by 'soft' communism, where citizens experienced far less political restrictions than in other communist regimes, the dissident movement did play an important role in invigorating overall social and academic life. Indeed, on several occasions, it did provoke severe state reactions. One such reaction was when a group of university teachers, active in the events of '68, got expelled from the University in 1975. After being deprived of their basic income, these intellectuals obtained strong support from international actors, even compelling the International Labour Organization to wade into the situation, calling on its conventions that forbade discrimination at work. In order to resolve the problem of 'disobedient' professors, the state founded the Center for Philosophy and Social Theory in 1981, within the auspices of the already extant Institute for Social Sciences. The Center provided space for intellectual work, albeit one that had to remain dissociated from teaching and direct transfer of knowledge. The transgressiveness implied in the very act of founding continued to pervade the space where knowledge was to be produced, but without 'spoiling the youth'.

306

Although their centre-stage influence had been formally removed, these dissident theorists would regain prominence at the moment when the Center obtained its current name – the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory – and independent status, in 1992. This was by all means due to the specificities of the era, and the particular understanding of the role of theory, developed in what had thus become an independent institution. Various intellectual activities of its members had a clear political aspect and indubitable influence on public opinion in Serbia. The Institute became a workplace of many researchers and theorists who would become prominent political actors. Among them were: Zoran Đinđić, the assassinated Prime Minister; Vojislav Koštunica, former president of the state, and Dragoljub Mićunović, former President of the Parliament. The Institute was also a hub that provided space for intellectual advancement of many others, engaged in the emergent civil society or becoming leading academics in Serbia.

Thus, engagement, academic, social, and political, became emblematic of the Institute and one of its appealing features. However, times have changed, and the role of public intellectuals perhaps even more so (see Pudar Draško on intellectuals in this volume). The aforementioned researchers (turned politicians) were undoubtedly engaged figures, leaving their mark on society. The legacy, the nature, and the context of their engagement remain

open questions. Yet, some historical distance may help us situate their engagement and analyse it as a socio-historical phenomenon. Setting that time at arm's-length has also been a prerequisite for a new type of grouping to take place within this – in so many ways still transgressive – institution.

The Group for Social Engagement Studies was established in early 2014. And, as it is often the case, the name predated acts. Saying that the time is ripe for something, almost always assumes a series of unintended, contingent, but happy circumstances. Such was the case with the founding of the Group. A performative act of naming produced a loose grouping out of several women and men, strong individuals and ardent scholars with different aspirations, objectives and disciplinary constraints – which this volume represents well. But it was the logic of the name that has imposed itself on us: what was so intriguing about 'social engagement', yet at the same time so common and so ambivalent? Being grouped around such a binding name compelled us to define how we understand ourselves as actors, as agents who engage with the social: do we envision ourselves as engaged subjects, or do we simply want to stand aside disengaged, and analyse engagement of other people (our predecessors included)? Gathered together in a new form of institutional sociality, we wanted to understand what it meant (to have power) to institute, and how we may at times dissociate and de-centre sociality itself? The 'we' (see also Cvejić in this volume) emerged in the process of intruding, traversing each other's disciplinary turfs, interfering and opening spaces and fields of sociality. This we – hidden behind the name of the group – is versatile, broad and delicate, as is the space for critical reflection on what it means to be socially engaged, the space where we encounter each other as an ever-widening group.

307

*

To what does the Group for Social Engagement Studies aspire? When we speak of 'social engagement studies', are we referring to a new field of study? A common sense answer to a preliminary question – what defines a field of studies? – would be twofold. First, we could assume that a field of study corresponds to an objective empirical reality. In that sense, 'social engagement' would define an object or an experience that exists regardless of whether somebody takes it into account. However, philosophy teaches us not to mistake words for things, to distinguish between the language we use and objective reality. That is why, second, we could assume that, on the contrary, a field of study only corresponds to a subjective construction, to a linguistic or a mental object. In that sense, 'social engagement' would define an abstract object an individual or a group decided to isolate in the continuous spectrum of experience. However, this answer raises a serious problem: we must consider certain conditions or circumstances under which an individual or a group is led to abstract an object of experience. From

there perhaps, there is a third answer to our preliminary question: a field of study is determined to exist as long as, under certain empirical circumstances, a group of people is driven to isolate a fragment of reality, to baptise it with a new or an old name (for instance, 'social engagement'), and to study it collectively. In that third sense, *a field of study, be it old or new, would correspond to a certain relation between socio-historically framed experience and an individual or collective effort to respond to it theoretically*. From this last vantage point, our preliminary question becomes: for what reasons did we choose this name and what kind of relation between socio-historical experience and collective response does it express?

308

Many essays in this volume are looking expressly at how to explicate (or complicate) the very word 'engagement'. By way of a certain reduction of the vast historical, linguistic, philosophical, affective or strictly political field of uses and misuses of the word – to which the texts that follow pay much closer attention – we will here only touch upon its double genealogy. On the one hand, in its French resonance, this word is rooted in 20th century existential philosophy, and always calls to mind the fact that philosophical thought is never abstract. It germs and develops in the midst of a socially and historically determined situation. But where the French say '*engagement*', English might say 'commitment', which refers to a different 'practical' side of being engaged. Thus, on these two lexical levels, the word 'engagement' refers to the fact that a *situation* both preexists one's thought and action, and that it is at the same time the aim of the thought and action.

That is well captured by the double act of engaging reflexivity and reflecting engagement, because this parallel defines *critical theory* in its whole movement. On the one hand, 'reflecting engagement' means that theory critically reflects the conditions we live in, and is always subsequent. Our thought is not only situated, but also conditioned by a certain context, which is itself overdetermined. In other words: critical thought is never abstract, but has complex *empirical socio-historical* conditions, and the theory expresses these conditions. On the other hand, 'engaging reflexivity' means that critical theory must have social or political impact: it does not only speak *of* the social reality, it does not only say something *about* the political field, but as a theory it strives to have an impact on it (not to interpret it, but to transform it, as good old Marx said). In other words: critical theory is nothing else than a resistant and maybe revolutionary praxis.

But why social engagement studies *today*? 'Ideology' in the Marxist tradition was meant to explain the paradoxical conservatism of the masses. As Marx put it in the second half of the 19th century: why does the proletariat fight for its own exploitation rather than for its own objective interests? Later, in the 1930s, the Frankfurt School asked: why does the European working class turn towards authoritarian fascisms and totalitarianisms?; and then

in the post-WWII period, they asked: why do the American people and Americanized European masses desire this new opium called ‘consumer society’, ‘leisure society’, ‘entertainment society’, etc.? Today once again we must ask: why do most of the poor and vulnerable in Europe turn towards nationalist far-right movements instead of turning towards revolutionary groups? Thus, to the question ‘why social engagement studies *today*?’ we could say: *the problem is precisely that the nature of our socio-historical situation has become highly problematic, to such a point that the nature and possibility of engagement itself has also become exceedingly problematic.* Indeed, in Europe, resistance to the social order is a claim of far-right parties just as it is of the new Left movements. Then, what could be resistance today? What is radical, revolutionary? What are the potentials of solidarity (see Vasiljević in this volume)? Where does critique reside?

The history of the 20th century, and particularly the history of broadly defined public and intellectual engagement, revolved around the enemy localizable in the sociopolitical field (whether the State, Nazism, Fascism, Communism, Capitalism, etc.). But if such an enemy ever existed in history, an enemy that one could readily know and recognize and then fight against, it is certain that the contemporary foe now wears many different guises. If social engagement is particularly problematic today, perhaps that is due to disengagement, depoliticisation and demobilization have become the new spectres haunting Europe – maybe it is because new forms of engagement, politicization and mobilization, adequate to our historical situation, are yet to be reflected and invented.

309

*

And indeed, *the problematic nature of our historical situation has something to do with the interdisciplinarity we profess.* As far as the latter is concerned, we could say that there are sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and philosophers among us, and that by articulating our different methods and objects we strive together to achieve a joint political goal. Yet both these institutional affiliations and these ready-made formulas barely say a thing about what we are dealing with now, collectively. Much like most researchers today, we no longer believe it is either possible or worth the effort to gather social sciences and philosophy under a unified Critical Theory – one that would, in turn, allocate a role to each discipline, and thus pave the way for a future emancipation of humanity. But this disbelief has historical causes too. What we are dealing with collectively – as well as individually – is a certain historical experience: something has been irretrievably fragmented, in our world and in our minds. There is a gap between, on the one hand, the subjectivity we have inherited from past decades of struggle, successes and mostly setbacks, and on the other, the fact that today there is no social space corresponding to this subjectivity.

Rather, it exists as a ‘free-floating collective habitus’, a disposition without any ground on which to grow (see Krtolica in this volume). We believe that, instead of striving to build a ‘Great Unity’, we may do better in seeking to *refract* this common experience through a prism of our various disciplinary methods, to *direct* this refracted experience onto our various objects and concepts, and to *engage* in the light of this critical work.

With this volume, we wish to give a general survey of our individual and mutual efforts in tackling the small-scale pieces of engagement – within disciplinary, theoretical and subject diversity – to present our personal academic and social preoccupations and put them on a joint platform. We wish to see if and how they work in dialogue, not only with each other, but also with various possible readings. We wish to call for a dialogue, and possibly a long-term conversation with other similar endeavours. This is why this volume should be read as a cogwheel in the machinery of joint research and actions we have undertaken over the past two years, bringing together other passionate researchers at some of the conferences we have organized: ‘Engaging Foucault’ in December 2014, ‘Thinking Beyond Capitalism’ in June 2015, ‘How to Act Together. From Collective Engagement to Protest’ in November 2015, ‘Social Justice: New Perspectives, New Horizons’ in May 2016. Hopefully, many more are yet to come.