

The "Miladin Životić" Award: Courage and Intellectual Responsibility in the Service of Critical Thought

Ever since its founding, the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory has nurtured critical and socially engaged thinking. The Institute's founders, seven professors from University of Belgrade's Faculty of Philosophy, were removed from lecturing positions precisely for practicing such forms of thinking. This, however, could not prevent them from taking up once again, within the newly founded Institute, the analysis and unmasking of the deviations of the very model communities that they construed theoretically, and from working toward their further practical realization. Their visions of the just and humane society were not identical, but their diagnoses of the existing injustices were. They also held in common the audacity of speaking out in public and supporting their views with arguments, regardless of whether they were defending the right to critical speech in socialist Yugoslavia or rebelling against the insanity of Milošević's Serbia.

Being the heir to this tradition, the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory has established a prize for critical engagement, to be awarded to those theorists of society whose work has had a significant impact on the broader public. The Institute has decided that the Award should bear the name "Miladin Životić". Of all the numerous founding members of the Institute whose work exemplified socially engaged theory and theoretically grounded social engagement, Miladin Životić stands out as the one who acted most consistently – and risked the most. Philosophical critique and the need to speak out in public, interwoven with his personality, were put to the test both when he challenged the political monopoly in the 1960s and 70s, and when he openly, actively and unconditionally opposed violence and crimes during the 1990s wars on the territory of former Yugoslavia. Through incorruptible moral tenacity and compassionate humanity, Životić demonstrated that standing up for one's values must become a binding virtue for every thinker.

Today there is still plenty of room and need for such practice, much as there always has been in the European tradition of engaged thought. Notwithstanding all the devastating effects they have, the challenges of the present day somehow also tease out their own best counterparts: vivid personalities who confront them with reflection and intervention. This, we contend, is particularly true for the volatile region in which Životić acted, home of his own Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory. In establishing an award for one's ability to unite intellectual devotion and acuteness with civic responsibility and courage, the Institute hopes not only to stay true to the heritage of its founders, but also to solidify and expand both their legacy and its own regional and international influence.