

THE PERSISTENCE OF ALTERNATIVES AGAINST ALL ODDS: A RESPONSE TO ANDREI SIMIC, "CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND MILOSEVIC'S SERBIA: A REVIEW ESSAY" (AEER, VOL.17, NO. 1 SPRING 2000: 87-95).

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I entirely agree with Professor Simic that many among the "plethora of books, essays, commentaries and op-ed critiques" written about the recent Yugoslav tragedy were of questionable quality. Some of them indeed lacked expertise. Others were created too hastily in an attempt to keep up with rapidly changing reality, or in an effort to appear on the market before the competition, at the expense of serious, in-depth research. Still others were pursuing not scholastic but propagandistic goals and their interpretations were deliberately distorted. I also agree with Professor Simic's view that an extremely complex interplay of various factors leading to the violent dismantling of the former Yugoslavia has at times been overly simplified and presented in an arbitrary, ideologized and stereotypical black-and-white contrasts. The only "dynamics" in this unrealistic bleak picture was the pivoting the "good guys"/ "bad guys" dichotomy depending on what side involved in an inter-ethnic conflict was casting the roles. This black-and-white dichotomization led to another illusion that individual nations of the former Yugoslavia were monolithic entities with all its members following same orientations and aspirations. While this was certainly a dream of every totalitarian ruler, it was, luckily, far from reality. To use Professor Simic's own formulation in a different, more general context, a number of writings were indeed "single-dimensional in [...] approach and prejudicial in [the] lack of objectivity" (p.87).

However, I emphatically disagree with Professor Simic in categorizing a recent book by Eric D. Gordy, "The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives" (1999), as "single-dimensional" and "prejudicial." Contrary to A. Simic, I view Gordy's work as an unbiased and well-balanced study that focuses on intra-ethnic conflicts. It offers a realistic, varied and dynamic portrait of Serbian society at the turn of the centuries and in the midst of yet another radical turning points in its development. By doing that, Professor Gordy brings to light a substantial part of the society which has, due to increasingly

curtailed access to the media in Milosevic's Serbia and neglect abroad (except at the time of mass street demonstrations), largely remained invisible during his entire reign. That other part of the society that gradually grew in strength, number and spatial distribution, finally reaching the critical point in the Fall 2000, sufficient to overthrow the thirteen-year long dictatorship of Slobodan Milosevic and his clique, was the one that criticized and opposed official Serbia. As a native of Belgrade, a member of "Another Serbia" and as an anthropologist who has also dedicated almost all of her research efforts over the past decade to giving a voice and visibility to that other side, I welcome Professor Gordy's book.

Almost throughout the entire period which Gordy covers in his book I was not only an anthropologist going on brief or extended field-trips to Belgrade, but a full time resident crucially affected by all the developments in the society. Therefore, compared with my own experience, I can wholly appreciate the accuracy and detail in which Gordy portrays everyday life in tumultuous times. The empathy he has achieved while reconstructing the ways people were employing in order to survive – mentally, physically, and emotionally - amazed me. In my opinion, Professor Gordy deserves praise for his enviably thorough research, based on keen observations, extensive interviewing and almost religious following of the press and other media. The result is an admirable understanding of a society trapped in the vortex of "special circumstances" that is passed on to his readers exceptional clarity.

This fascinating book made it abundantly clear that Slobodan Milosevic and his regime, directly or through their accomplices, had not only caused destruction and misery outside of Serbia wherever they had intervened, but, primarily, among their own people. Page after page, I was compelled to relive many of the horrors experienced first hand, in real life, years ago, with the same disbelief how they were at all possible. Vivid descriptions have triggered a deluge of memories of how the city under Milosevic was rapidly changing from a

cosmopolitan conglomerate of different life styles, entangled with each other in a relaxed, tolerant atmosphere, to a battleground of embittered adversaries.

The newly renovated core of nineteenth century Belgrade in late 1980s suggested only for a short while that with new facades, paving and street lamps the old urban traditions of building a modern, democratic and prosperous society dating from the same time period were going to be renewed as well. Soon, however, the streets were taken over by long lines of people waiting in wane to recover their saving accounts in front of both state and private banks involved in pyramid schemes for the benefit of the government. Or by those queuing in front of supermarkets that only a short while before regularly carried top quality delicatessen goods, in hope of acquiring, in exchange for coupons and substantial amounts of money, some of the basic yet highly deficient supplies like sugar, flour, oil, coffee, soap or detergent. Or by those besieging tobacco kiosks trying to buy cigarettes, the much sought after grown-ups' "pacifiers," especially since everyday living was becoming increasingly complicated and burdensome. When state, socially or pseudo-privately owned banks could not function any longer, streets were frequented by "state-owned" dealers speeding up the transfer of foreign currency from private into state/party hands. For the same reason trade was taken over by the black market street vendors of smuggled merchandise. All this was all happening long before United Nation sanctions were imposed.

There were many other changes as well. Hi-tech loudspeakers playing full-blast newly composed kitsch patriotic songs (cf. Dragicevic-Sesic 1994: 29ff) soon replaced ballad street singers who used to celebrated love, beauty and life itself in their songs. In 1990 and 1991 when clashes between the Serbian minority and Croatian militia began, Belgrade's downtown area, a traditional fashion arena, gave way to a different kind of display. Streets were then flooded with macho-warriors parading in their fatigues, often fully armed and accompanied with their young sons also dressed in fatigues and carrying plastic replicas of assault weapons. Later, when the Serbian regime was pretending not to be involved in the Balkan wars, these "idyllic" family scenes disappeared. Representatives of a new rich and powerful class that had come to fame and fortune by operating, protected by the regime in return for various favors, in gray areas of war economy emerged as novel "heroes." They were proudly displaying the

fruits of their "labor": expensive imported cars, cellular phones, designer clothes, Rolex watches, and wallets swollen with foreign currency. By that time Belgrade had definitely become a city dominated by a few militant, ostentatious and dangerous lifestyles; even the regime, their ardent promoter in the past, found necessary to polish their rough edges. After the Dayton Peace Agreement their protegees had to be more in keeping with the new peace-loving image. Still, in spite of all efforts, primitivism, vulgarity, xenophobia, isolationism and aggressiveness became fully established as a way of conduct everywhere from the parliament, to business dealings, to TV programming.

What did change was the population structure. Some 300,000 younger, educated professionals have left Serbia in search of a new beginning mainly in overseas countries, while almost nearly twice as many Serbian refugees from other parts of the former Yugoslavia crowded the inadequate reception camps. Society was destroyed through a series of implosions. All social services, health and pension funds were annulled, security and hope were shattered. According to a recent survey conducted in July 2000 (Grujic 2000), only 5% of the population declared that they lived better than before the wars, 10% identified their standard of living as "about the same," while the remaining 85% were much worse off. However, in spite of these very negative changes, it was not only the new rich class or old and new political and cultural elite who had chosen to serve the regime in hope of a personal gain that have supported Milosevic's reign. Surprisingly, the largest number of his proponents came from the classes that suffered the most from his way of running the country. Those were more provincial, older, less educated segments of the population, as Gordy correctly identified them. He also offered an explanation of how it was possible for the regime which had never received a majority of votes in any election, to remain in power in spite of all of its catastrophic failures. The key for understanding its longevity can be found, according to Gordy, in analyzing its survival strategies, which consisted of making political, informational, cultural and social alternative as unavailable as possible. The regime that was so wrong for its people – for any people in general – with no other ambition other than maintain total control over all aspects of life for as long as possible could not stand open competition with other alternative. That is why it had to ban, ridicule, disparage, fragment and, marginalize them at all cost.

In his book Professor Gordy has analyzed the "killing" of four important alternatives in a very detailed, objective and non-biased manner. Yet, Professor Simic, while hardly finding anything wrong with the actions of the regime, claims that the "The Culture of Power in Serbia" is based on "implicit distaste and unqualified disdain for traditional Serbian rural culture and values." It is not my intention to speak on Gordy's behalf or to defend his work from Simic's criticism. The work itself and its author could do that better than anyone else. Nevertheless, I do wish to respond to some of Professor Simic's comments about the Serbian society.

For example, Professor Simic repeatedly refers to "traditional Serbian rural culture and values" which are, according to him, not being respected or considered in an appropriate manner in the analysis of contemporary Serbian society. When we use the word "traditional" what exactly do we mean? Do we have in mind a specific historical context and time in which a certain segment of the population was motivated to think and behave in a particular way? Or, are we rather assuming that "tradition" is a timeless category which compels people who share it to perform repetitive actions just because it is the "way of the people/nation/ethnic group"? Anthropologists, historians and social scientists are well aware that traditions are cultural constructions built at a certain time out of specific elements that had been selected (and/or invented) from the boundless pool of possibilities, and then restructured and value-charged in a way appropriate to address problems and aspirations of the present rather than of the past. Actually, tradition, while implying timelessness, is always open to reinterpretations, reductions or augmentation, filtering and juxtaposing, emphasizing or de-emphasizing. In that respect Serbian culture is certainly not an exception. Like other east and central European *national* folk cultures it was created in the nineteenth century by selecting and standardized local elements that could be offered as a model for the entire nation to follow. This process, not entirely devoid of a specific touch of Ossianism, was made possible by the work of national scholars, notably folklorists, among who Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic was the most prominent one. At the end of the twentieth century, while reviving Serbian traditions, he has repeated the process of selecting and emphasizing all over again so as to make tradition "work" for its ends. Among other selections, the regime has also chosen to propagate the polarization of rural and urban cultures as two

separate paradigms, one represented as the true expression of the authentic *folksgeist*, the other a product of foreign influences and cosmopolitan aspirations. This dichotomy, also introduced by Vuk Karadzic, has been the leitmotiv in ideological and political struggles in Serbia between "traditionalists" or "populists" and "modernists" or "democrats" from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

As we know, the same dichotomy was used by both sides in attacking "the other camp" or explaining the nature of recent inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. At any rate, the nineteenth century has seen the development of both rural and urban culture in Serbia as parallel and also as overlapping processes, which have, no doubt, radically changed over time. After having participated in two world and many local wars, experiencing several economic systems and belonging to different civilization spheres they could not have stayed the same.

What should we then consider as traditional? What is certain is that the segment of the population which many authors dealing with the present Serbian culture (including myself) have labeled "semi-rural" and described with a non-flattering paradigm of attributes (uneducated, inert, provincial, hedonistic, local, intolerant, self-centered, xenophobic, mediocre, nationalistic, authoritarian etc.) is very different from "traditional Serbian peasant culture."¹ This particular segment is the bearer of a particular subculture, a hybrid of commercial and folkloric elements that was created and popularized by the media from mid-1960s, and especially from 1970s and which was an expression of their own quest of identity, affirmation and place within the social structure. As it turned out, and as many serious studies conducted by Serbian scholars confirm, this group of people was particularly liable to simplified and mythologized explanations of reality, megalomaniac perceptions of the self and general "brain-washing" undertaken chiefly by the state-run media.² Cultural products that were created to meet their taste and a need to transcend dreary and restricted everyday living, proved also to be excellent vessels for carrying nationalistic and bellicose messages (Dragicevic-Sesic 1994; Colovic 1994a, 1994b).

At the same time when the "peasant urbanites" were creating their own mass subculture, the young "urban urbanites" in Belgrade and other towns in Serbia were beginning to look for

adequate ways to express their rejection of the restraining Communist values and elitist national culture. They had chosen Western rock'n'roll and pop culture as the basis for building their own identity. In mid-1960s the "cool" thing was to grow long hair (especially for young men), wear jeans or mini-skirts and listen and record music from Radio Luxembourg and Veronica, a pirate station located on a ship anchored off the coast of the Netherlands. In addition to that, at that time the Yugoslavs were already able to travel abroad freely and frequently (the days of shopping in Trieste) which meant a constant supply of new EP records and jeans for teenagers. After years of struggle with school principles who had the authority to send boys to a barber to have a haircut or home to change into prescribed uniforms, teenagers had finally won the war for the right to bear their own subculture in the latter part of 1960s. Pop and rock programs featured on local radio stations, first modest discotheques and record studios were opened and neighborhood kids began to form their own bands. In other words, modern Western music also has a long "tradition" in Serbian urban, and to an extent also in semi-urban and rural cultures. In time the domestic rock 'n' roll scene, extremely varied and of very high quality, has become an influential component of overall Yugoslav and Serbian culture and an obligatory socializing agent for generations of teenagers. It is an excellent example of how a Western-turned-global cultural phenomenon can be successfully adapted "to work" in a local setting. This became especially evident in late 1970s and early 1980s when, among other trends, the New Wave Movement, and its most prominent spin-offs, the *Neue Slovenische Kunst* (Slovenia) and *Neue Primitivische Kunst* (Sarajevo), came into existence. They sprung from the same source, punk, and they were a specific cultural response of the young to the problems that were building up in the country and to their own identity crisis. The New Primitives, "barbaric geniuses," used the aesthetics of primitivism, absurdities, exaggerations and self-irony as media for exposing pretentiousness and quasi-achievements of the society (cf. Prica 1990: 23ff). Rambo Amadeus, whose opus Eric Gordy analyzed so well in his book, is an extension and a further development of this trend (Gordy 1999: 116-119).

The purpose of this lengthy expose on the history of Serbian "tradition" and on the existence of authentic local urban culture was to emphasize that Western influences are neither novel nor foreign to Serbian culture. On the contrary, they are quite

well integrated with elements of other provenience. Even the neofolk, turbo-folk and techno-rave music, sponsored by the regime and consumed by the "hybrid" audiences to which many of the prominent politicians of the ruling party and its satellites belong as well,³ are closely associated with hard rock, rap and other Western rhythms.⁴ If it were not so, the regime would not have had to make such an effort trying to discredit the whole Western civilization in the eyes of the Serbs, and by extension, anyone in Serbia who was even remotely against official policy as a traitor, foreign hireling, Fifth Columnist, Serb of poor quality, and so on. The regime needed the West as an enemy, as a scapegoat to blame for its own failures. It was therefore in the regime's best interest to prevent any direct contact (of the majority of the population) with Western cultures so that their opinions and aspirations could be reinterpreted in the ways least harmful for the regime. As the majority of the population before the latest wars was pro-western in cultural orientation,⁵ the regime had to work hard on reversing that preference. The West was thus increasingly represented in apocalyptic terms as the ultimate Evil engaged in a deadly plot against the Serbs seeking nothing short of their total destruction (Prosic-Dvornic 2000)⁶.

I agree with Professor Simic's claim that traditional forms of sociability have been preserved and even strengthened under the strained conditions of deprivation and hardships. However, the institutions of "veze" (connections) and "protekcije" (favorism, privileges) or, translated into more general anthropological terms "nepotism," "socialist tribalism" (Benovska-Subkova 1995: 168) and client-patron relationships have not been kept alive for the "love of tradition" and continuation of "archaic and authentic cultural forms," but out of necessity. In the case of Serbia they recurred especially with the onset of a prolonged total crises (Prosic-Dvornic 1990), but more generally they are typical for deficient totalitarian systems:

"It is common knowledge that the planned economy paves the way for the substitution of the only real economic laws – those of the market - by a system of distribution of material wealth, tied up in a vicious circle with the widespread practice of privileges. The distribution and the privileges alike have been feudal recurrences, entering into a symbiosis with the forms of traditional mutual assistance...[I]n the conditions of continuous shortages of goods and services

typical of the totalitarian system, the role of money tangibly decreases as a unit of exchange... On the one hand is its obvious compensatory role in a condition of centralized economy, while on the other hand, the exchange was an obvious sign of primitivism and an indicator of economic impotence and sterility of the totalitarian system (Benovska-Subkova 1995: 168-169).

Therefore it is obvious that traditional forms of sociability were a retrograde trend, and it confirms Professor Gordy's findings that Serbia under Milosevic also experienced the limitation of interactional alternatives which resulted in reduced levels of sociability. However, like all other attempts at destroying alternatives, the regime was not able to wipe out completely the deep human need to share thought, actions and emotions in a way that transcends the mundane economic and service reciprocities. Every mass political gathering of the opposition, which were also cultural, "pro-life" movements against morbidity of the regime was a unique experience of a true *communitas* shared by friends, acquaintances and strangers alike, united around a common goal. Proponents of open, democratic society were reaching out both to each other and the world, expressing their desire to overcome isolation and become a part of the global community again (that was the meaning of carrying foreign flags in the marathon 1996-1997 civil and student protest). In its futile striving to destroy everything around it in order to survive, the regime has only managed to consume itself. Silent yet persistent preservation of alternatives has once again proven to be a powerful weapon in the hands of marginalized and deprived groups of people.⁷

One final comment on democracy and free market economy in relation to Serbian culture, as a reply to Professor Simic's implication that these may not be the choices of the Serbian people but impositions from abroad. In other words, they may be premature or maybe even totally unsuitable for the Serbs. What is the problem? Is democracy not good enough for the Serbs, or the Serbs not good enough for democracy? What would be the justification for preferring totalitarianism, be it expressed as traditionalism, communism, nationalism, or fundamentalism, over democracy and modern society? How could the establishment of a society based on the rule of law, human and civil rights and equal opportunities for all, be wrong to take place of the one based on privileges in a caste-like structure? Again, the democratic system is not a novelty to Serbs. The independent

kingdom of Serbia (1878-1915) made the most remarkable progress in modern history while it was diligently trying to shake off the remnants of its Oriental past and general backwardness and attain modernization and Europeanization, the two magic words that spelled "progress" at that time. Life, in spite of all hardships, must have been good since at that time there was practically no emigration from Serbia, while immigrants from all walks of life and of different nationalities were flocking from both underdeveloped south and developed north. Progress that has been achieved then was largely destroyed or at least interrupted and re-routed during the dictatorship in the First and Communism (albeit its soft version "with a human face" and liberties unknown to the Eastern Block countries) of the Second Yugoslavia.⁸

Recently the people of Serbia have made a decision and, it seems, have also successfully implemented it, to give democracy a second chance. The results of the latest election (September 2000) there indicate that urban, democratic, cosmopolitan, modern, free-market oriented, educated carriers of western values such as individualism, self-determination and personal liberty, to whom Professor Gordy has dedicated his book, may not be a marginal minority after all. Democracy does not mean poverty, unemployment, insecurity, or chaos. It does not mean instant transformation and prosperity either. It only offers a chance for a new beginning in which there must be room for all options and all alternatives to compete among each other. Hopefully, the best one for all will win.

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Notes

¹ Defined as, for example, self-sufficient small farmers, with limited yield of cash crop struggling to pay taxes and provide for other family needs living in an isolated hill side village in the inter-war, "First" Yugoslavia.

² Although it is true that the corporate-dominated American media leave much to be desired in terms of objective informing and unbiased in-depth analysis of domestic and international political scenes, there is absolutely no way it could be compared to the situation in Serbia and other republics in the former Yugoslavia. American media burdened with the magic of rating are also offering a type of news package their audiences are willing to take: with a touch of sensationalism and with a challenge of a football or baseball game (scores, numbers, race). An average American news view reminds me in a way of an average Yugoslav view before the war. It was not a big deal to miss a broadcast and sports and weather reports were among the most important segments. This is not only a sign of being uninterested in what is going on in the world beyond what I can perceive with my own senses, but also an

expression of feeling secure in normal circumstances. In the former Yugoslavia only after it became evident that the "history was happening all over again," viewers were glued to their TV and radio sets all day long hoping that those "magic boxes" were going to give them the much needed answers and security of certainty. The media have counted on their viewers' hopes and trust and have shamelessly abused them. The wars in the former Yugoslavia were indeed started in the media. The propaganda was ferocious. Still, most of the material presented there was quite transparent. It was not difficult to see the staging of allegedly spontaneously expressed opinions of "ordinary," "randomly chosen" passers-by or to detect fallacies in "commentaries with no hard facts." The majority, however, chose to believe what they were told to believe.

³ The fact that many politicians in Milosevic's regime were of "neofolk" origin certainly helped the shift of the neofolk music from the margins to the center of the cultural scene. "From a culturological point of view [...] shifting of social and cultural strata" have their own dynamics: "stereotypes and patterns of thinking characteristic of the "low" strata, of the popular culture, are reproduced as a model in those strata of culture, which should be regarded as high, insofar as they are related to the elite of the Administration" (Benovska Subkova 1995: 166).

⁴ New folk music, as Gordy points out, has always been attacked by the national cultural purists as unauthentic creation contaminated by many foreign melodies and rhythms: Oriental, Spanish, South American or Greek. Today's Serbian rock and neofolk music is probably a closer style than ever before. However, between them is a big divide separating them in an ideological and political sense. Folk musicians and star singers had decided to take the opportunity to become lavishly promoted mainstream cultural phenomenon even if it meant siding with the regime. Rockers had decided to stay loyal to their counter-cultural orientation and to resist and criticize the despised regime. Classical musicians have also at times expressed their protest against the regime.

⁵ Western models of culture were ones desired to be followed. For example, from 1960s, together with the opening up of the country towards the West and increased levels of liberty, there were fewer and fewer middle and high school students who were willing to take Russian as an obligatory foreign language requirement. English was the most popular language while French and German were taken as a second foreign language, or as a second choice.

⁶ Prolonged NATO bombing of targets in Serbia and Kosovo in Spring 1999, which has caused considerable damage of industrial plants, environment and infrastructure, has helped promote that image. Although I am not in favor of drastic measures such as bombing of the entire county in hope of speeding up the removal of a dictator, it needs to be said that Serbia's economy had been destroyed due to "internal factors" long before the actual physical destruction of production plants and

traffic communications. On the other hand, the regime has made use of this unfortunate choice of political pressure to prove its point. Professor Simic mentions the bombing of the Radio and TV Serbia headquarters. There is another side to that story as told by the participants and observers at the spot. According to them, although the high executives knew that the attack was planned, they did not pass the warning to their employees. In fact, standing orders were issued that no one was to leave the building. On the other hand, there were many ambulance and fire-fighters' vehicles parked in the vicinity of the headquarters ahead of the time of the actual bombing. How did they know to be there at that particular time?

⁷ After having an "up-close and personal" relationship with the participants of the 1992 Student Protest I was able to see how genuine and strong was their desire to resist to conform with the regime, to reject safety through compliance, and to attempt to change the conditions of life in Serbia and its relation to the rest of the world (cf. Prosic-Dvornic 1993). I will always think of them, and of all their successors, as of the "Swing Kinds." That was the title of an unforgettable, brilliant and deeply emotional movie directed by Thomas Carter that was released in the same year and which treated a similar topic. It was about a group of youngsters living in 1939 Nazi Germany who are trying to come to terms with the reality of their existence. They used American swing music to express their resistance and defiance of the conformity demanded from them.

⁸ My belief is that both the First and the Second Yugoslavia turned out to be failures and both ending in bloodshed of its constituent nations not because they were multi-ethnic states with inherited ancient ethnic hatreds, but primarily because they lacked democratic principles and institutions. Both their existence and break-up would have been very different had that been the case. Therefore, contrary to the authors who have chosen to look for and emphasize the evidence that "confirms" the existence of inter-ethnic conflicts in the Balkans from "time immemorial," I am more inclined to agree with Donia and Fine who ascertain that in Bosnia - but in other places as well - "tradition of tolerance and coexistence [...] goes back many centuries (Donia and Fine 1994: 6). A very fine, meticulous anthropological research that Toni Bringa (1995) has conducted in Bosnia before and after the latest war confirms this claim.