

Conventional Wisdom and Milošević's Serbia: A Review Essay

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The violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia has spawned the appearance of a plethora of books, essays, commentaries, and op-ed critiques. Many of these have simply been the products of overnight “experts” who lack the historical knowledge and language skills requisite to any adequate assessment of the complexities of Balkan cultures and politics. Others, more credibly, are the works of those who have devoted their professional careers to the study of this troubled area of the world. However, to an alarming degree, the analytical and ideological positions of both groups have been notably similar. In other words, a kind of conventional wisdom has emerged as if there existed some sort of feedback loop between the popular media, on the one hand, and academia, on the other. Among many similar manifestations of this unity of thought is the stereotypical example of Branson and Doder (2000:2) who contend that Milošević “dragged the United States and Europe, albeit unwillingly, into the mess he created in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo.” In this brief citation the authors unambiguously absolve the West, the Croats, the Bosnian Muslims, and the Albanians of any responsibility whatsoever for the Yugoslav tragedy, while reaffirming what has become a pervasive axiom regarding the origins of the recent Balkans wars.

This very same conventional wisdom has once again been reformulated in a recent book by sociologist Eric D. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (1999). Professor Gordy's detailed analysis of the monopoly of political power in Serbia by Slobodan Milošević addresses this complex topic in ways which, to his credit, are both unique and imaginative. Nevertheless, I find the book single-dimensional in its approach and prejudicial in its lack of objectivity. It is not so much Gordy's major hypothesis that the regime's strategies for self-preservation involve the repression of political, informational, cultural, and social “alternatives” with

which I so profoundly disagree, but rather with his interpretation of this phenomenon. Moreover, this work is disturbingly biased in its implicit distaste and unqualified disdain for traditional Serbian rural culture and values, which Gordy simply dismisses as retrograde tools of the Milošević regime.

A central theme of this work is that in order to stay in power, Milošević has relied on the “habitual passivity” of the less educated, rural, and traditional elements of Serbian society accustomed to supporting autocratic regimes. In contrast to the negative manner in which he stereotypes this segment of the population, Gordy lavishes praise on young, educated urban elite whom he characterizes as the carriers of democratic, Western values. Although I emphatically dispute his assertion regarding the passivity of ordinary Serbs and the idea that authoritarianism is in all cases a negative phenomenon, the author has correctly identified two seemingly ideologically irreconcilable strata of Serbian society. In this regard, Milošević's Socialist Party

of Serbia is described as having harnessed the support of the traditionalists who are “less open to cultural and political activity that might open up democratic possibilities” (1999: 203). It is then argued that such “democratic possibilities” are further thwarted by the destruction of political, cultural, and social alternatives which might be expressed and propagated in the media, cultural life, and everyday sociability.

Underlying Gordy’s descriptive and often detailed narrative, several axiomatic and widely accepted beliefs regarding the origins and nature of the crises in former Yugoslavia can be discerned. The most abstract and all-encompassing of these is the implicit evaluation of events there as measured against the familiar Western values of democracy in both public and private life as an expression of individualism, self-determination and unbridled personal freedom. A second theme decries the maladaptive role of nationalism and traditionalism, while a third focuses on the evils of Milošević and his regime, and by extension on the ideological deficiencies and shortcomings of a very large segment of Serbian society, that is, of those identified by the author as rural, provincial, or not entirely urban in culture.

It is in the first chapter that Gordy (1999:1) establishes his ideological position, citing Milošević’s unfulfilled but “*dangerous and defining promise* to see ‘all Serbs in one state’” [my italics]. In this regard, it could be argued that, while Milošević’s statement may have been provocative, the author might have equally well characterized it as an entirely legitimate endeavor given the doctrine of national self-determination enunciated by the Western powers in support of the separatist aspirations of the Croats, Slav Muslims, Albanians and others in former Yugoslavia. This lack of any counter-indicative argument or alternative interpretation is characteristic of the single-minded approach evident throughout this entire work.

Professor Gordy has divided his narrative into four topical parts: “The Destruction of Political Alternatives;” “The Destruction of Information Alternatives;” “The Destruction of Musical Alternatives;” and “the Destruction of Sociability.” In the first of these he documents the events, processes and intrigues by which Milošević’s Socialist Party of Serbia has solidified its power by fragmenting and marginalizing the opposition. Among other insightful observations, the author notes that Milošević only became a dedicated nationalist after his ascent to power in recognition of the ideological vacuum created by widespread disillusionment with the former communist regime. Drawing on voting statistics, Gordy identifies the social basis of the regime’s support among the more provincial, older, and less educated segments of the population, i.e., those he sees as “traditionalists.” However, his interpretation of this phenomenon is far from value-free. For example, he makes reference to psychological studies of Serbian political attitudes, the subjects of which characterize democracy in such terms as “anarchy,” worthless freedom,” and “having nothing to eat.” These attitudes, according to Gordy, “define the population from which the Socialist Party of Serbia draws its support”(57). Nevertheless, he might have also observed in a more objective and comparative framework that such attitudes are not at all unrealistic given the consequences of the premature and unstructured introduction of “democracy” and “free markets” into much of Eastern Europe, including Serbia’s impoverished and demoralized neighbors Romania and Bulgaria. For instance, Blagovesta Doncheva writes in an op-ed commentary in the New York Times (11/11/1999) that the Bulgarians were cruelly deceived by the West, and that democracy has only created hordes of unemployed workers, the closing of factories, beggars in the streets, and old people digging in the trash. Her observations

were fully confirmed by my own experience during three recent trip to Sofia, the most recent in October of 1999. However, Gordy draws no parallels in his concerted effort to discredit Serbian traditionalists whom he implicitly portrays as rural know-nothings and dupes of the regime, and as such constituting obstacles to progress through the implementation of Western political, economic, and social values. Similarly, he bemoans the regime's characterization of opposition leaders as traitors (44), while in fact such leaders as Zoran Djindjić, Milo Djukanović and others have in the eyes of many Serbs behaved exactly like traitors in their self-serving courtship of the Western powers which only recently bombed their homeland. Gordy could not make it any more evident that he identifies unequivocally with those urban, cosmopolitan elite whom he portrays sympathetically as people "whose hopes are subject to constant disappointment and frustration" and who must "find a way to live within a system for which they have no respect" (60). Moreover, it is equally clear that Gordy writes with the full expectation that the reader will share with him the same set of axiomatic propositions.

The discussion of the role of media in the "destruction of alternatives" follows very much in the same vein as the exposition of political life under Milosevic. Once again, Gordy fails to propose alternative analyses or to place his observations about the regime's control of the Serbian media in a comparative context. Thereby he studiously ignores the similar propagandist role played by the corporate-dominated Western media, which, from the very onset of the crises in Yugoslavia, has loyally served the foreign policy of the United States and its NATO allies (cf. Ivanović 1995). For instance, Gordy notes that the media monopoly in the republics of former Yugoslavia have acted as catalysts for war, and that each major phase in the development of the Milošević regime has been characterized "by the takeover or destruction of some important media outlet" (62). However, no mention is made whatsoever, even in passing, of the parallel behavior of the Western media in the demonization of Milošević and the Serbs, nor of the influence of such public relations firms as Ruder Finn Global Public Affairs, which was rewarded generously by its clients, the Republic of

Croatia, the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Kosovo Albanians, for turning American public opinion against the Serbs (cf. Flounders 1998:54). In this regard, Gordy could have profitably argued that while the Serbian press, radio, and television have increasingly served as adjuncts of the Milošević regime, in the United States the situation has differed largely in respect to the manner in which bias has been imposed. In other words, in both cases the media have been tools of ideological and political control and manipulation, and in both instances there has been little or no concern evidenced for the distinction between truth and falsehood.(cf. Ivanović 1995:5). Thus, the influence of the media, or of what Analis (1993:41) has referred to as "super-mediatization," as a weapon of political control, diplomacy, and war cannot be underestimated, whether this be employed on the part of Serbia or its Western counterparts. Just as in Serbia, in the United States the truly free media has been marginalized and subordinated by special interests. Thus, much of what Gordy observes about the limitations of information alternatives in Serbia also pertains to America. For instance, he makes the following observation about the media habits of much of the Serbian public (101):

Only a certain measure of the advantages enjoyed by regime-controlled media can be attributed to the institutional facts that operated in their favor. Not all people who had access to alternative sources of information chose to use them.

To place this observation in an American context, one need only substitute “corporate controlled media” for “regime-controlled media,” while noting the relatively small audience enjoyed by NPR, PBS, Pacifica Radio, and other alternative media in the United States. The point is that Gordy implicitly suggests that the Serbian case is somehow unique and that the Serbian public is woefully uninformed. In response to this, it is my impression on the basis of many years’ experience in Yugoslavia that most Belgrade taxi drivers are better informed about the world and current events than the majority of middle-class Americans.

While American media are clearly freer of direct government intervention and offer more alternatives than their Serbian counterparts, the difference is not as great as it might seem at first glance. In addition, most Serbs are able to avail themselves of foreign radio and television broadcasts, particularly those from Croatia, Bosnia, and Macedonia, many of which simply echo the viewpoints of the United States and NATO. Moreover, the Serbs are not as “cut off” in terms of personal contacts from the world as Gordy would have one believe. There is a constant flow of visitors from America and other places to Yugoslavia, and Yugoslav citizens (except those who are stigmatized by the West as influential members or ostensible supporters of the Milošević regime, and as such are denied visas to the U.S. and European Union countries) freely travel abroad, inasmuch as they are financially able to do so.

The most original and longest section of Gordy’s monograph is devoted to the discussion of “musical alternatives.” It is here that the author’s ideology and world view are most directly revealed, as is the identity of that segment of Belgrade society with whom he appears to have mostly associated and whom he clearly most admires, that is, young, would-be-cosmopolitan, Western-oriented, self-anointed cultural elite. It may also be significant that these, in contrast to other segments of the city’s population whom the author depreciates, are among those most likely to speak English, and this is a crucial methodological point since nowhere does Gordy indicate his level of proficiency in Serbo-Croatian. In regard to the author’s apparent sources, *The Culture of Power in Serbia* is reminiscent of another monograph, one dealing with the Bosnian civil war, *Bosnia and Hercegovina: A Tradition Betrayed* (1994), whose authors, Donia and Fine, in spite of a plethora of evidence to the contrary, insist that Bosnia has been typified by a “tradition of tolerance and coexistence that goes back many centuries” (6). This assertion can perhaps be explained by the social characteristics of those who appear to have been the authors’ contacts in Sarajevo, that is, educated Western-oriented elite whose high rate of ethnic intermarriage and privileged position in the society would tend to orient them toward this viewpoint.

Regarding the role of music in Serbia’s social and political landscape, Gordy writes the following(105):

The story of Belgrade’s musical environment in the war period, is one of the marginalization of popular cultures and of the popularization and instrumentalization of marginal cultures.

What the author is actually commenting about is the marginalization in the media and public space of Western musical forms imitative or derivative of rock, and in its place the imposition by the regime and the media of several forms of composed national music (*narodna muzika*) which are the genres of choice of much of Belgrade's working class, as well as of most of people of rural and small-town origins, in other words, of the majority. Thus, Gordy has confused the margin with the center. It should also be pointed out that rock is not the music of preference of many urban intellectuals and professionals, nor are they uniformly oriented in other ways toward the West and its culture. For instance, as the author notes (ii), it was the Union of Serbian Writers (*Udruženje Književnika Srbije*) and the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (*Srpska Akademija Nauka i Umetnosti*) which first publicly enunciated the nationalist rhetoric which has come to dominate Serbian politics.

Against the background of a detailed account of the rise and fall of rock music in Belgrade during the recent war years, Gordy characterizes the vying of rock with two forms of contemporary composed folk and quasi-folk music (*novokomponovana narodna muzika* and *turbofolk*) for cultural space as an expression of the competition between urban Western-oriented values, on the one hand, and a rural-based folk nostalgia and nationalism, on the other. Thus, the regime's closing off of the media to rock music and the propagation of what can be termed neo-folk genres is described as having profound social and political consequences. As Gordy observes (136):

In the war period, the interests of the party in power in Serbia found its greatest resonance among the social groups which broadly constituted the neo-folk audience, and the least among those that broadly constituted the rock and roll audience. In this sense, important political and social divisions came to be expressed in differential access to media and publicity, which were widely interpreted as representing the cultural orientation of the regime.

What most detracts from the credibility of Gordy's findings is an evident underlying bias clearly rooted in ethnocentric value judgments regarding the value of rock music in contemporary Serbian society. While lavishing admiration on the Belgrade rock scene, his scorn is directed at those contemporary forms of national music which enjoy, irrespective of their aesthetic value, very wide popularity in Serbia and among Serbs abroad. For Gordy this signifies the closing off of what he views as sophisticated, cosmopolitan cultural and political "alternatives" from the West. Drawing on the statements of rock musicians, the author repeatedly evokes such terms as "kitsch," "garbage," and "pollution" to describe neo-folk music. Similarly the audience for national music is characterized as *seijaci* ("peasants") and *primitivci* ("primitives") (108). So that no doubt would remain regarding the negative role played by national music in the recent conflicts in former Yugoslavia, rock singer, Zoran Kostić-Cane, is quoted as stating that the three key components of the war are "alcohol, greasy food, and folk music (119)."

Gordy portrays "rock and roll culture" as defining life in the cities (110), as though privileged, rebellious, Western-oriented youth who are propagating a foreign ideology with no indigenous roots whatsoever constitute the totality of Serbian urban culture. In other words, the author has but one model of urbanism. The fact is that rock-and-roll youth comprise a minority

in Belgrade's population of almost two million. Belgrade has a very old history of urbanism dating from the fourth century B.C., and the contemporary city reflects the unique influences of numerous peoples who, in addition to the Serbs, have shaped its culture: Kelts, Romans, Hungarians, Turks, Sephardim, Armenians, Greeks, Austrians and others (Simić 1973: 52-72). Thus, the "rock-and-rollers" (*rokeri*) are but a blip on the screen of history. Moreover, rural influences have always shaped Serbian urban culture, particularly since the nineteenth-century Wars of Liberation from the Turks. It should be kept in mind that perhaps the majority of Belgrade families, even those of the intellectual, political, and economic elite, maintain some ties with the countryside. Nonetheless, this does not make Belgrade any less urban. In fact, due to both its physical density and the traditional propensity for a rich life on the streets, in the cafes, and elsewhere in public settings, Belgrade is far more urban than the suburbs of the United States where most upper-middle-class American youth now grow up. As Evans-Pritchard (1962:51) has pointed out, traditional history forms an important part of the thought of living people. In other words, the urban culture of an ancient city cannot be defined by a transitory style such as rock and roll.

What kind of values are embodied in the rock-and-roll culture which Gordy so idolizes? If the lyrics are any indication, this world view is the antithesis of the traditional collectivist, hierarchical, familial, and personalistic Serbian ethos, an ethos which has been almost as strong in the city as in the countryside (cf. Simic 1988). In other words, the messages of rock music are individualistic, ego-centered, hedonistic (what Gordy has identified as "the culture of pleasure"), and internationalist. It is in the spirit of this ideology that the rock-and-rollers define themselves as the arbiters of culture and civilization. Citing the opinions of rock aficionados and performers, Gordy reaffirms this viewpoint, a viewpoint which appears to be his own as well, since he fails to provide any critical analysis or disclaimers. The paraphrasing of but a few of these statements will suffice to underscore the point (142-145): Culture in Belgrade has disappeared with the suppression of rock; Belgrade is defending itself against the "savages," i.e. the traditionalists, who are attacking it; Rock and roll is *high art* (my italics) and neo-folk is Balkan and primitive; Nationalist ideology equals primitivism; Rock is popular because it is *international music* (my italics). However, in a moment of objectivity, the author does admit that *rokeri* are "every bit as isolated from the rest of the world as their anti-cosmopolitan counterparts," and that "their international identity is narrowly based in a small and shrinking urban minority culture (150). Thus, it is not the importance of the movement to Serbian cultural and political life that is central to Gordy's thesis, but the values he associates with it.

It is curious that in his discussion of the cultural ramifications of the Yugoslav civil wars and Serbian nationalism, Gordy makes no mention of the Orthodox Church or of Serbia's rich Byzantine heritage both of which provide nationally specific examples of "high culture," in contrast to both the rock-and-roll and neo-folk movements. While both rock and neo-folk are most likely transient phenomena, the Serbian Orthodox Church and its associated and derived literary and artistic traditions represent not only centuries of cultural continuity, but they also constitute the very basis of Serbian ethnic identity, whether this be interpreted in religious or secular terms. In addition, the argument can be made that the perceived dichotomy between rural and urban culture is largely superficial and misleading, and that Serbian culture is a syncretic one in which the elements of the Little and the Great Tradition are so integrated that they cannot be easily disentangled analytically. Also, Westernization has always been rather

superficial in Serbia, expressing itself largely in highly visible material façades and in various symbolic expressions which mask a deeper level of traditional behavior and ideology. An example of this cultural substratum is provided by the highly personalistic and collectivist values associated with familism and kinship, and by extension with all social relationships (cf. Simić 1983). Needless to say, throughout this book, Gordy rejects these values in favor of Western individualistic and democratic ideals, and it is this paradigm which always provides his frame of comparison, both implicitly and explicitly. For example, speaking about the discomfort of his informants with the current regime and its “destruction of alternatives” Gordy writes (104):

Conventional political philosophy in Western Europe and the United States codifies such a position [the right to enjoy political, cultural, and information alternatives in public life] and seeks guarantees against censorship by asserting a right to privacy and to all the activities assumed to fail under the categories of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

In respect to the above citation, I would argue that these rights, as interpreted in the West, focus almost exclusively on individual rather than community or other collective rights, and as such, are not congenial with the Serbian world view. Furthermore, in a society such as ours in America dominated by the commercial production and commodification of culture, these rights are at least in part illusory.

In the final chapter entitled, “The Destruction of Sociability,” Gordy argues that the economic and psychological consequences of the wars in former Yugoslavia have drastically reduced the levels of “sociability” by limiting interactional alternatives (165-198). Among other causal factors, he mentions a period of hyperinflation, the destruction of the currency, the loss of savings, the halving of the value of most monthly salaries, underemployment, and difficulties in the acquiring of basic necessities (165-166). He then argues that the economic crises in Yugoslavia have contributed to the survival of the regime in a number of ways (166): by deflecting attention from public events in the struggle to obtain the basics of life; by causing the emigration of hundreds of thousands of young people; by the impoverishment and concomitant disappearance of the middle class; by the lack of disposable income to engage in activities other than survival-oriented ones; and by the collective isolation and economic insecurity which have eroded sociability and contact between individuals. Thus, in this context of poverty, he concludes that people as a whole have not been inclined to organize or protest against the regime because of the difficulty of meeting the exigencies of everyday life.

My own experience in Belgrade and other Serbian cities during the summers of 1996 and 1997, and subsequent regular contacts with recent arrivals from Serbia, suggest just the opposite of Gordy’s conclusions. Economic hardship and the recent deprivations caused by NATO’s attack on Yugoslavia have strengthened both the intensity and frequency of interpersonal contacts and material exchanges. This is manifest in the lively and materially significant reciprocity between village and urban kin. For instance, during the NATO bombings, many families simply left such cities as Belgrade and Novi Sad to stay with relatives in villages or small towns. Similarly, many parents sent their children to kin in the countryside. Moreover, my personal observations in Belgrade were that there was no evident diminishment of public life from the many previous times that I had visited and lived there; the theaters, movie houses, and

cafes were full during much of the day, and especially during the evening hours. The *korzo* (“evening promenade”) was as lively and crowded as ever; after all, it is free. I also witnessed several political protests which were unimpeded by the police, although this has certainly not always been the case.

Even during the most difficult periods in their history, Serbs have devoted a great deal of time and energy to sociability. They are skilled in the management of a complex system of interpersonal relationships and reciprocity in what has always been for most Serbs a cash-poor economy. In other words, even wars have not impeded the Serb’s strong social instincts or the values associated with them. Of these values, one of the strongest is that of hospitality, and as a friend once expressed it, “We are born for hospitality” (*Mi smo rođeni za gostoprimstvo*). Even the most impoverished Montenegrin peasant, who could not afford sugar, would find a bit of honey to offer a guest. It has always been my observation that the Serbs devote a significantly greater amount of time to social interaction than do most Americans. The fact is that Serbian society would hardly function at all were it not for the existence of networks of informal personal relationships known as *veze* (“ties” or “connections”). These connections constitute a highly personalistic system based on the exchange of both economic and bureaucratic favors. The widespread acceptance of *veze* is rationalized as both a pragmatic and moral imperative (cf. Simić 1983: 212-222). Furthermore, the current crisis has surely re-energized this system as an important resource for coping with the problems of everyday life and survival.

A combination of a number of factors, not simply the regime’s policies, have brought about the severe economic depredation in Serbia. Those who have suffered the most are the hundreds of thousands of Serbian refugees from Croatia and Kosovo whose present condition can in large part be attributed to the policies of the NATO powers. A similar situation characterizes many of the retired elderly, whose pensions, when received at all, are inadequate to meet the basic necessities of life. But in respect to the elderly, this is also true in other Eastern European societies which have ostensibly adopted democratic and free-market systems. For instance, anthropologist Asen Balikci describes the plight of pensioners in Bulgaria (1998: 4);

In both cities and villages the situation of the very old and disabled is critical. The elderly rely on pensions and home farming for survival. Each month money is set aside for bread in order to avoid starvation. Meat and dairy products are rarely consumed. Most pensioners live in fear; poverty is like a closing ring of different traps set for them.

Professor Balikci, who has visited Yugoslavia on a number of occasions, has observed that, in spite of the recent NATO bombings, social and economic conditions, as poor as they are, appear to be far better in both village and urban settings in Serbia than in Bulgaria (personal communication, October, 1999).

Gordy largely places the blame for Serbia’s current poverty on the Milošević regime’s economic policies, citing, among other examples, the irresponsible printing of currency, the “illegal” use of money, and curiously, the enrichment of his nemesis, the countryside. Ignoring the profound significance of the economic war which has been waged by the West against Yugoslavia for at least two decades, the author does nevertheless touch briefly on the devastating effects of the loss of trade with the other republics of former Yugoslavia, the cost of war, the external debt, and the sanctions imposed by the West. However, no mention is made of the long-

standing strategic policies of Germany and the United States to destabilize Yugoslavia. According to economist Michel Chossudovsky (1996), since at least 1980, there was a policy on the part of the American government to target the Yugoslav economy in order to destroy any vestiges of communism and bring it into the orbit of market-oriented countries.

Throughout this work Gordy has demonstrated both indifference and negativity toward traditional Serbian culture, as well as a single-dimensional understanding of it. Rarely does he cite any counter-indicative opinions or suggest any alternative interpretations. Moreover, he shows no inclination to transcend his own subjectivity and to reflexively examine his own predilections and value judgements. Gordy somehow has failed to come to terms with his own globalist ethnocentrism. There is rarely even a hint of any criticism of the actions of the West in respect to former Yugoslavia. To cite but one of many possible examples, while extolling “alternative media,” he makes absolutely no reference to the closing down of Serbian nationalist radio and TV programming in Republika Srpska by the Western occupation forces in Bosnia. One wonders, were he to have written this book a bit later, would he have also ignored the destruction by NATO warplanes of the Radio Television Serbia station in the middle of Belgrade on April 23, 1999?

In summary, I can only conclude that this work is as exclusive of “alternatives” as is Milošević’s Serbia as conceived by Gordy. The only value system to which the author seems to attribute any worth or importance is one based on Western commercialism, individualism, and the “culture of pleasure.” His vision of a better future for Serbia is unambiguously enunciated in his discussion of the various symbols which he observed displayed in anti- Milošević demonstrations in Belgrade (208):

The protesters seemed to suggest with their flags that the countries of the world, its entertainment spectacles, and commercial products share a value--and that the places and pleasures of the world, the taste of its bourbon, and the strategies of Michael Jordan belong to them also.

Notes

1. Regarding the age-old ethnic and religious enmities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, see among many others: Bataković (1996:11); Darby et al. (1968: 66-67); McNeill (1977:2); and Treadway (1997:22).

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