THE TRIUMPH OF CHAUVINISTIC NATIONALISMS IN YUGOSLAVIA:
BLEAK IMPLICATIONS FOR ANTHROPOLOGY

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While nineteenth century anthropology often served as handmaiden to colonialism, the dominant intellectual trends in the field in the present century, and particularly since the second world war, have largely been antithetical to colonialism and imperialism and hostile to the myths of racial or cultural superiority used to justify them. Although these trends may appear to some to be evidence of the "humanistic" orientation of modern anthropology, the humanism was explicitly grounded in "science." Thus, the founder of modern American anthropology, Franz Boas, was so empirically oriented as to appear atheoretical. Yet Boas' works were always based on and illustrative of the postulates that race, language and culture are not related mechanically, and particularly that "race" or biology does not determine the specific content of either language or culture (Boas 1940). Boas' pronounced opposition to fascism, and his more popularly oriented writings (e.g. Boas 1945) make this theoretical position clear. With this in mind, it can be seen that Boasian historical particularism served to invert the previously dominant relationship of anthropological "science" to imperialism and colonialism. If races and cultures cannot be ranked as inherently superior or inferior, all justifications for colonialism and imperialism disappear except for arguments based on rights derived from conquest, or simply force.

Anthropology's movement away from the verities of racism and from political theories based on conquest may be seen as part of the general progression of social science and social theory, perhaps as part of the unfolding of the implications of the Enlightenment. These processes are clearly related to the simultaneous development of political, social and economic theories posititing the necessary and inherent equality of individuals, as citizens, legal subjects and economic actors, respectively; an ideological position often associated with modernity (see, e.g., Dumont 1977 and 1986).

The "modern" period, however, has also seen the development of ideological structures that define individuals through their membership in groups, rather than through their inherent rights as humans. Since the late eighteenth century, the concept of (ethnic) "nation" has been a dominant element of European thought (see, e.g., Hobsbawm 1990), contrasted slightly later with the concept of "class" (see Szporluk 1988). Both nationalism and communism reject the concept of a polity based on equal individual citizens interacting more or less freely, for polities aimed at the attainment and maintenance of dominance by either the status group ("nation") or the economic class. Conceptually, in both classical western sociology and in European political thought, these two classificatory concepts were taken to be mutually exclusive; and both are antithetical to the ideal of individuality that struck Tocqueville as central to the American experiment with democracy and that is basic to the "ideology of modernity" explored by Weber.

While anthropology has been hostile to national chauvinism and racism, it has had fewer problems with analytical frameworks based on the concept of class. In this regard, anthropology is no different from most of the other social sciences, and indeed from much of intellectual life in Europe and America since fascism in the 1930s and 1940s discredited racism and chauvinistic nationalism as political philosophies. However, this bias towards class may be inherent to a predilection for scholarly inquiry, if such pursuits imply the need to view critically established verities. A striking difference between nation and class as concepts for political utilization is how much the former seems almost a folk category, resonating with the "common sense" of ordinary peoples' views of themselves and the world, while class has always depended on self-conscious articulation by intellectuals. The Marxist concept of false consciousness is a recognition of the opacity of class analysis to ordinary people; yet nation is easily used to rouse those same people. The practical implications of this point can be seen in a comment in 1991 by Alija Izetbegović, President of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who said "If we hold a rally for democracy, a few intellectuals show up; but if we hold one for the [ethnic] nation (narod), thousands of people will take part."

Of course, it is by now very clear that the supposed eternal verities of nations are themselves constructs in the service of political interests and contests (see Anderson 1982; Hobsbawm 1990). These constructions are also largely drawn by intellectuals; as Eric Hobsbawm told the American Anthropological Association in November 1991, "historians are to nationalist politicians what poppy
growers in Pakistan are to heroin dealers." On the other hand, practitioners of anthropology (and history) who are not devotees of particular nationalist causes have become quite good at uncovering the "invention of tradition" from an external perspective, sometimes to the mutual discomfort of the peoples who see the "authenticity" of their culture challenged as well as to the anthropologists doing the work, as recent debates in the American Anthropologist over Alan Hanson's work on the Maori attest (see also Spencer 1990).

For those who become embedded within a nationalist(ic) milieu, however, the tenets of much international scholarship in anthropology and history are often rejected, perhaps by necessity. In Yugoslavia, the nationalist politics that produced the civil war of 1991-92 were fed since the late 1980s by the work of prominent intellectuals, some of them become practicing politicians, who abandoned previously held humanistic orientations for chauvinistic ones bordering on racism (see Hayden 1991a). It is possible that their adoption of analytical postures grounded on the virtues of their own respective nations and the flaws of the other Yugoslav peoples has often been based on political expediency (cf. Verdery 1991). However, some, at least, of these people seem actually to believe the positions that they now espouse. While political necessity may, as Hannah Arendt showed, induce conversion to the tenets that must be maintained, it may also be that the cognitive dissonance between the basic postulates of most international social science and those of any given nationalism are responsible for the virtual reversal of conceptual polarities revealed by many Yugoslav intellectuals, exchanging a focus on the group identity of nation for that on the group identity of class, bypassing completely any framework that would give primacy to the individual citizen unmediated by these groups. In the process, these intellectuals are helping ensure that the transition in the (former) Yugoslav republics is from regimes of state socialism to ones of state chauvinism (Hayden 1991b).

In Yugoslavia, justifications for the several nationalist causes have been based on the superiority of the writer's own nation and the inferiority of the other Yugoslav peoples. Since intellectuals from each nation were writing similar representations but with inverted perspectives, the result in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a literature that turns the "looking glass" metaphor for imperialist representations of subject Others as degraded inversions of all that is good (see Chakravarty 1991) into a veritable hall of mirrors, in which each national literature reflected the reflections of its competitors. As the major news media in the republics came under the absolute control of nationalistic governments (see Hayden 1991c), this effect was noticeable in news analyses, as satirized by one of the few independent magazines in the country in 1991:

It's not necessary to read both the Belgrade and Zagreb dailies. It's enough to take only one of them, it doesn't matter which, and to know with complete confidence that by changing the adjective Serbian or Croatian into its "opposite" in all news stories and commentaries, one is also reading the "adversary" newspaper. It's that way with [the terms] state terror, with big-state pretensions, with democracy, and likewise with the names and surnames of those killed or wounded in the preceding few days. (Ekonomska Politika 20 May 1991).

With such "reporting" in the supposedly serious news media, the more openly polemical writings of politicians and commentators were even more extreme.

The writings of these nationalist politicians and intellectuals can be critiqued very easily as manifestations of the "invention of tradition" or as Orientalist depictions of despised Others (Bakic-Hayden and Hayden 1992), some of them of a type that has in the past been used to justify genocide. As Bette Denich has noted, some central European nationalisms are ideologies that define states in terms of ethnicity, thus in terms of inclusion of some peoples but more pointedly the exclusion of others, and "[t]he transition from exclusionary metaphor into physical extermination is the transformation of meaning that defines genocide" (Denich 1992:4). While her specific referent was to elements of the 19th century Croatian nationalism invoked by Franjo Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union, victors in the elections in that republic in 1990, the point could also be made for major elements of nationalist politics in other republics (see Hayden 1991b). Thus a major Serbian politician proposed in the Serbian parliament in March 1992 that ethnic Croats should be expelled from Serbia, with almost no critical comment from the other members of parliament, even though these people have lived in what is now Serbia for centuries and are citizens of that state (see Borba 3 April 1992: 10-12). Even this politician's disavowal of genocide uses a metaphor that could be read as implying racist reasoning: "We won't use genocidal methods because such actions aren't in our Serbian blood" (Borba 3 April 1992:10; emphasis added). In the Yugoslav hall of rhetorical mirrors, the reflection is of the Croatian genocide against Serbs in 1941-45, with the implication that such acts are "in the blood" of the Croats.
These depictions of Other nations, based on images of cultural superiority and inferiority and often linked with racist metaphors when not actually racist outright, are premised on tenets exactly contrary to the cultural relativism and rejection of biological determinism that have informed anthropology since Boas. As such, they must be disturbing to practicing anthropologists, since the success of these movements politically indicates either that the discipline has had little impact in its century of existence or that its tenets are, in fact, wrong. Of course, it may be that anthropology has had little impact in Yugoslavia, where "ethnology" was originally closely linked to the justification of nationalisms (see Halpern and Hammel 1969). On the other hand, it may also be that some of the depictions of allegedly inferior Others in Yugoslav nationalist discourses reflect wider patterns of thought in Europe and America. If so, the implications for anthropology are potentially grave.

In this context, it is interesting to examine one brief representation of (erstwhile) Eastern Europe by an American intellectual, apparently of Croatian descent, published in the primary American intellectual newspaper, the Chronicle of Higher Education (Me trovi 1991). While this may seem an unrepresentative example of scholarly discourse, I believe that it is revealing precisely because of its unusual provenance. Its author bridges the categories of external (American scholarly) and internal (Croatian) observer of East European nationalism, while the venue of publication means that the article passed through some process of American intellectual review before publication, even as an opinion piece. The article is aimed expressly at an American scholarly audience, and thus it seems unlikely that the arguments expressed in it are totally alien to the main currents of American intellectual life. Indeed, what is most interesting for analytical purposes is the assured self-confidence of the analysis, which builds its argument by reference to "facts" of European history that need not themselves be proved. If the most basic elements of any system of belief are those that "go without saying because they come without saying" (in James Brow's paraphrase of Pierre Bourdieu), it is the truths that are held to be self-evident that are most revealing.

The article in question exemplifies one of the most intriguing and disturbing aspects of the downfall of "real socialism" in what had been known as Eastern Europe: the widespread revival of an Orientalist discourse that seeks to put the blame for all of the evils of Central Europe (née Eastern Europe) on the dark, mysterious, non-western East. Professor Me trovi, a sociologist, makes a sophisticated version of this argument. He first asserts that Slavic peoples cannot be democratic because of their cultural values: "if the family structure among the Slavic peoples is traditional and authoritarian, how can Slavs learn about democracy and egalitarianism?" But he then refines the argument: Western Slavs may learn about such things, but not Eastern Slavs, because of the latter's "cultural history as part of the Byzantine empire. In contrast to the West, which produced the Enlightenment, Byzantium was always closer to mysticism, irrationalism and other forces deriving from the heart." For this reason, while democratization "might succeed in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and other nations that traditionally have been closer to the orbit of Western cultural ... values, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Macedonia and other parts of the crumbling Soviet Empire are another matter." While Professor Me trovi's analysis is aimed at all of (formerly) Eastern Europe, it parallels closely the Orientalist rhetoric that politicians in western Yugoslavia used to characterize the nations of eastern Yugoslavia since the late 1980s (see Baki-Hayden and Hayden 1992).

An unsophisticated version of the same argument was made by Dr. Petar Tancig, Minister of Science (!) of Slovenia, in an e-mail message to scientists of the world in June 1991:

the basic reason for all the past/present "mess" [in Yugoslavia] is the incompatibility of two main frames of reference/civilizations.... On one side, you have a typical violent and crooked oriental-bizantine [sic] heritage, best exemplified by Serbia and Montenegro.... On the other side (Slovenia, Croatia) there is a more humble and diligent western-catholic tradition.... Trying to keep Yugoslavia afloat ... is very bad geopolitical thinking, as independent (and westernized) Slovenia (and Croatia) could and would act as a "cordon sanitaire" against the eastern tide of chaos.

Tancig proposes explicitly what Me trovi proposes implicitly: the creation of a new iron curtain, one based on religious or cultural criteria that border on racism, and the function of which is exclusion rather than forcible inclusion.

Me trovi's argument is based on what seems to be common knowledge. Yet are his truths so self-evident? Surely, one need not look too far into the history of central Europe to see "such troublesome forces as fundamentalism, populism, racism, anti-Semitism and ethnocentrism," to use a list that Professor Me trovi
implicitly pins to the "irrational" East. Those who would stigmatize "the East" manage to forget that fascism was institutionalized during World War Two in Germany, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, thus cross-cutting all of the boundaries between Slavs and non-Slavs, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christianity, formerly Ottoman and formerly Habsburg. Perhaps, then, the problem is one central to Europe, specifically to Central Europe, not because of eastern pollution of western rationality, but because of the political allure of chauvinistic nationalism in what has been called an "ethnic shatter zone."

This alternative hypothesis is given credence by the tragic events in Yugoslavia. Contrary to the assertions of the Slovenian Minister of Science, the problems of Yugoslavia were not necessarily due to a clash between the enlightened West and the benighted East. Instead, they may be seen as manifestations of a chauvinistic nationalism that resembles most closely that of Central Europe in the 1930s and of such neo-fascist movements as the National Front in present-day France, and that is at least as strong in "western" Croatia as it is in "eastern" Serbia. There is thus a contradiction in the assertion that the western parts of Central Europe are ready for democracy because the "habits of the heart" are derived from the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is not illuminating the 1990s in those areas any more than it did the 1930s, and those "habits" are the cause of the rejection of enlightenment values in west-central Europe as well as east-central Europe.

Professor Me trovi cites Weber's _The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism_ as shedding light on "the secret of Western, capitalist success." Ironically, however, that book may be read as an essay on why the Catholic countries of Europe had not (and implicitly could not) attain the fruits of capitalism: their culture prevented them from doing so. Apparently Weber got it wrong after all: it is only Eastern Christianity that is not suited to capitalism or democracy, news which will be fascinating to the Greeks.

It may be that the analyses of Professors Me trovi and Tancig may be explained as the anguished cries of patriots in war. However, the structure of their arguments is paralleled by the assertions of Patrick Buchanan, challenger for the Republican Party's presidential nomination in 1992, that America has to remain a country of West European culture and must therefore limit immigration from outside of western Europe. At a slightly less obvious level, it is striking how many news analyses and commentaries on the civil war in Yugoslavia were premised on some allegedly special "Balkans mentality" or primitivism -- as if the war in Yugoslavia were somehow more irrational and terrible than the horrors that Germany inflicted on Europe fifty years ago. Yet "the Balkans" are not, somehow, part of the self-styled "Europe" of the European Community.

Taken together, the rhetorical structure of these depictions of Yugoslavia and of "Eastern" Europe have several implications. First, just as Orientalist rhetoric was used to justify the forcible inclusion of non-European peoples into the world market of imperialism, it is now being used to justify the exclusion of "Eastern" peoples from the "modern" world. At the same time, however, the adoption of the rhetoric of chauvinistic nationalism is itself a manifestation of "modernit". As studies from Europe (Hobsbawm 1990) and Asia (Freitag 1990) show (see also, generally, Anderson 1982), "nations" are political constructions in particular historical circumstances; yet they are presented as eternal, "natural" phenomenon not dependent on historical context. This position represents, in essence, a return to a European political philosophy of the early 19th century, before the concept of class arose to challenge the concept of nation for what Ernest Gellner (1990), commenting on Roman Szporluk's work, has called the "dramatis personae of history." But perhaps this return to a certain European political tradition was inevitable, since class analysis has been, at least for now, discredited by the failure of state socialism. European political thought has thus been left with only one of its previous conceptual poles.

Whether this focus on "nation" as a natural category reverts to racism is an open question. In Yugoslavia itself, the tendency for racist reductionism is certainly present. Yet it may also be found outside of "the Balkans." To give one example, an American political philosopher, in an otherwise excellent study of the justifications for secession from established states, argues that political federations are simply a "human artifact" (Buchanan 1991:1), while the historical "peoples" who claim the right to secede appear to him to be a more natural category, perhaps even one based on biological differences. Thus, in coming down firmly on the side of the rights of Latvians to secede from the Soviet Union, and stating that "neither [Russian] colonists nor their descendants should have any legitimate voice in that decision" (p. 143), he makes the following extraordinary suggestion of a means for determining who are "true" Latvians and who are "Russian" Latvians: "Genotyping from blood samples would enable the distinction to be
made in a relatively accurate and objective way -- if it is correct to assume that Latvians are a distinct biologically related group and if those administering the tests or reporting their results could be trusted" (p. 143). The only moral issues that he sees as raising questions about this approach are those of privacy, since "other genetic information" could be obtained from the same blood sample (p. 143; emphasis in original). But surely making determinations of political rights on the basis of genotyping is the logic of apartheid. Its assertion by a mainstream political philosopher in America raises questions concerning the penetration in American intellectual life of biologically-based views on the nature of social categories and the propriety of assigning political rights to them.

Yugoslavia's disintegration into the chauvinistic nationalisms of its component communities should thus be viewed in the context of wider intellectual and political processes in the world. Doing so, however, means that the Yugoslav tragedy has several implications for anthropology, all of them discouraging for the field. At the most optimistic level, it may be that the Yugoslavs have simply not learned the lessons that anthropology could teach them, in which case the discipline must question its absence from public consciousness in the country that hosted the international anthropology meetings in 1988. Rather less optimistically, it might be said that the international political discourse on the disintegration of Yugoslavia also reveals a general lack of knowledge of the teachings of anthropology. At a more dire level, the common acceptance of "nations" as eternal categories defined by race, language and culture implies that anthropology as a field is trying to counter the tide of history in an age of resurgent nationalism.

This last possibility puts anthropology in an intellectual posture that may prove to be untenable politically. If anthropologists and historians have become adept at revealing the mythic character of national "histories," their work is not likely to be welcomed by the political actors involved in promulgating the myths. In such circumstances, "scholars" willing to put forth positions likely to be congenial to the nationalist political authorities are likely to prosper, and those not so willing to compromise their work may land in the dust-bins of their own societies' "histories" -- or worse. Nor is this only a problem in the formerly second world. In western Europe and America, the liberal consensus of a polity based on the equality of citizens is being eroded, with calls for the distribution of benefits within existing polities on the basis of social categories the definition of which may easily slip into racial determinism.

Internationally, the recognition of the disintegration of Yugoslavia into polities defined by ethno-nationalism and thus verging on racism (see Hayden 1991b, Denich 1992) is an ominous sign for those who thought that such political concepts had been discredited for all time.

Anthropologists may try to adopt a Weberian neutrality to politics, seeking refuge in a model of objective science. It will be hard to stay under such a shell, however, because at the moment, the findings of most research in cultural and social anthropology are exactly contrary to what succeeds politically and is thus increasingly established in public culture. In such circumstances, it is hard for anthropologists to keep quiet. Indeed, perhaps it would be immoral for them to do so. Stanley Tambiah prefaces his book on ethnic fratricide and the dismantling of democracy in Sri Lanka with a quote from Rousseau: "If we believe absurdities, we commit atrocities." In Yugoslavia in the 1990s, as in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, anthropological research indicates that the successful political movements have been based on absurdities, and certainly those who believe them are committing atrocities. Yet in this situation, it is probably anthropology that is in danger, rather than the political movements.

Anthropology may thus find itself in an intellectual and political crisis. Should the "naturalness" of ethno-nationalism become established, anthropology will be, increasingly, in the position of one who argues against "common sense:" what every normal person knows to be true (see Geertz 1983). But a person making such an argument is not normal, and is probably a fool. In such a situation, anthropology may also be induced to reverse its own intellectual polarities and return to the verities of racial and cultural superiority that it has rejected for much of this century. In so far as anthropology continues to use the concept of class as an analytical category, it is likely to be particularly vulnerable politically.

Of course, it may also be that Boas was, in fact, wrong, and that race, language and culture are related mechanically and can be valued hierarchically. Recognition of this possibility raises certain ironic questions in the context of the debates within anthropology in recent years between those who see themselves as "scientists" and those whose approach is "humanistic." For the "humanistic" critique of biological reductionism to hold, the scientific underpinnings of the Boasian enterprise must be recognized. Ironically, then, Boasian anthropology becomes humanism with a
scientific face, and Boas, of all people, becomes the patron of post-scientific anthropology.

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