



Workshop 06

Who is Who in the Balkans Today: Mythmaking and Identity Mutations, 1989-2009

directed by

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Workshop abstract

The project entitled “Who is Who in the Balkans Today: Mythmaking and Identity Mutations, 1989-2009” will be co-directed by Vjekoslav Perica, University of Rijeka, Croatia and Darko Gavrilović, Faculty of European Legal and Political Studies, Novi Sad, Serbia. It is built on the following assumptions: ex-Yugoslavia’s successor states’ “nationhood” is mostly symbolic, i.e. “discursive”; however, for the reason that the newly formed states have continuously worked on nation-making for the last two decades (states make nations, not the other way around), analyses of the newly constructed national identities should focus on identification of the official national founding myths composed, imposed and maintained by the state. Of course, these official myths are not without challenges so that the states’ legitimacy and the appeal of this type of nationhood remain precarious. More specifically, the project will examine the following topics: the (dis)continuity of the former nation’s myths and the comparison of the old and new myths; the new class structure, particularly the so-called “criminal privatization” and new poverty it brought about; new national founding myths of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia, emphasizing in this context, among other things, the roles of the state and the “negative other (s)” in each case; furthermore, the regional-provincial, urban, rural, clan and similar identities congruent with or in conflict with the national; religious institutions as national co-founders and new religious myths incorporated into national ideologies; migrations, refugees and demographic changes; the role of ethnic diasporas; major historical controversies and conflicting appropriations and uses of certain historical figures, sacred sites, historic places, symbols, etc. The project is seeking to put together an international team of researchers to explore how this mythmaking and identity mutations has affected

the process of national formation over the critical two decades; and to assess the new products compatibility with each other and with the democratization and Europeanization in the Balkans.

Workshop description

1. Overview

For some people it was a living hell and for others it all looked as a TV reality show. Two decades ago, as the problem of the Yugoslav succession was getting complicated day in day out, western media and politics demanded oversimplifications to illustrate one of first wars in history to be televised live. So, it was first said (even before Samuel P. Huntington might have thought of it), that it was a war of ethnicities or religions or something like that. At any rate, it was said that the case in point was a “cultural” rather than “ideological” war (as if the two should be mutually exclusive). More specifically, it was said, for example, that Christians were fighting Muslims. The Christians, in this case, called themselves Serbs and Croats and were concerned much more about nationalism than religion as opposed to Muslims who seemed sure only about religion and undecided about the ethnic label and type of nationhood. Not to mention that these atypical Muslims were neither Turks nor Arabs or Persians but Europeans which made Europe uncomfortable as in the cases of recognizing as such Turks born in Germany or British-born Pakistanis. Yet, in reality the war was actually started by these Christians (of sorts) fighting each other over everything except the religion. Thus, the Serbs -- Eastern-Orthodox and Russophile, (while sending simultaneous messages to the West that they would defend Christianity against the Muslims and to Russia that they defended the Orthodox Church from the West), started war against the Croats, who, incidentally, consider themselves to be greater Catholics than the Pope (therefore looking westward for assistance but the cavalry did not show up). Of course, amidst the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, one should have expected some communists around there. Yet, these kinds of communists were odd in their own right. The ex-Yugoslav communism was an aberration from the East European experience: “titoism” had anyhow escaped from the bloc much earlier than Hungary and Czechoslovakia made their fateful attempts. This apparent success would later cost Yugoslavia dearly, because, had Stalin prevailed against Tito and Yugoslavs became even more miserable than Poles or Czechs, the war of 1991-1995 might have not occurred because they would have exhausted all the hatred on the Russians. Yet, “Titoism” had anyhow prevailed and its adherents utilized their freedom from the Soviet yoke to invent a peculiar “national communism” or whatever they named it; of which they were very proud and for awhile envied by the less fortunate East Europeans. Yet, in consequence, much before 1989, these followers of Marx (Groucho, not Karl, as once remarked C.L. Sulzberger) had successfully transformed themselves into – what else but ethnic nationalists of the notorious “Balkan” sort. So, they were ready for warfare and massive robbery of the property created by all groups under the socialist system. They joined the other ethnic nationalists that were preparing the same (i.e. mass murder and theft of their own people) under the guise of anticommunism, democratization, transition, even peacebuilding and reconciliation. Thus, around the landmark year of 1989 nobody was down there (except a few filmmakers and rock musicians) to call for the preservation of the multiethnic federation. During the ensuing decades, the local people have suffered in one way or another while foreign observers still debated over their identities. This debate overrated ethnicity, religion, nationality and so-called “identity politics” in general, and underrated regional, provincial, urban, clan and similar “micro” identities otherwise more important to the people in these lands than religious or national affiliations. Not to mention turning a blind eye to the restructuring of class relations. In other words, the so-called “criminal privatization” and rise of the “Balkan Mafia” (whose “entrepreneurial accomplishments” are numerous and assassinated victims include one prime minister, several journalists, lawyers, etc.). Only in Russia the inferno called the East European transition might have been worse; yet, at least

you have known that most of the people there are Orthodox Russians and most importantly, that they have preserved the Russian state. Conversely, in the Balkans, there was neither a dominant ethnos nor a strong state. Indeed, who is who in the Balkans? That is the question now.

2. The Reassessment

Twenty years since the collapse of the Yugoslav federation and ensuing wars of its succession, a few things about the landmark historical change in Eastern Europe have become somewhat more clear but a coherent and reliable “who is who” guidebook through the ruins of ex-Yugoslavia and its successor states has remained unwritten. Such a “manual” would still be needed by the Hague Tribunal for war crimes in the former Yugoslavia, the UN, EU, NATO and other overseers of the failed states and international protectorates in the area. It will also be serviceable to scholars seeking to understand and explain this landmark historical change in Europe and in the global context. These include students of collective identities’ formation and identity mutations viewed as side effects of landmark historical processes such as for example, revolutions (Gellner, 1987; Lincoln, 1989, Schoppa, 2006). To make things complicated again, the previously utilized ethno-confessional labels for the Balkan groups have become outdated (not to mention that these labels, like that whole “cultural” discourse when overdosed, have always been more or less misleading). Meanwhile, new nation-building projects advanced in the transition. In the meantime, most of the insiders, i.e. the people of the troubled region, and even some outside observers, have become increasingly aware of their earlier neglected class status. In other words, millions of people, regardless of ethnicity, statehood, faith and nationality have felt on their own skin the new identity of poverty. They realized that they were now poorer than they used to be before the war and that the wealthy ruling minorities and new elites in general, must have had something to do with it. However, this time there was no workers’ political parties or once vibrant and today crippled labor unions, to mobilize them and the ideology that used to move masses and shape history of the xx century was discredited and obliterated. Instead they flocked to churches and mosques to learn how to reconcile with class injustice (but not so well how to reconcile with other faiths and ethnicities). Hence, all the robbed and the confused have nothing else left but to seek the needed sense of identity in the only available and remaining resources, i.e. ethnicity, religion, myth and new forms of nationhood. Thus they eventually became that which they are now educated to allegedly have been for many centuries.

Two decades after the 1989 milestone, the nation-formation in Southeastern Europe is an unfinished business: some successor states of ex-Yugoslavia that take nationhood for granted (e.g. Serbia, Croatia) are in precarious stages of transition; some are even farther from being full-fledged national states (Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro) and not even the EU member Slovenia has thus far managed to escape from the Balkans. Ironically, the part of Europe under consideration here does not even have a single acknowledged geographic, cultural or geopolitical name. The term “Balkans” is considered inappropriate; the more recently invented “Western Balkans” is more confusing and artificial than the new Central Europe, and “Southeastern Europe” (without that Euro chunk of Cyprus) is vague, to say the least. The former country’s national name was deleted from memory leaving only to the Prague football team to keep that (pan)Slavic label alive. Yet, with regard to people(s), the question is, what they have become during the two decades? This project is concerned primarily with states. Regarding individuals, it seems relatively easier: it is known that the Euro football superstar Zlatan Ibrahimović is a Swede; Ana Ivanović is global tennis goddess; Emir Kusturica, the filmmaker, is a classic despite his odd experiments with his own ethnicity and the scholar Slavoj Žižek is a pop cultural icon, too.

3. Key Concepts, Assumptions and Research Topics

Contrary to its myths, collective identities such as national, ethnic, religious and others are changeable and shaped by historical circumstances. Their changes and mutations also mirror social and historical forces and processes that affect them. Furthermore, they are constructed in interaction with significant others and often against others so that the other unwittingly becomes an alter ego, i.e. part of the product (Hall, 1991; 1996, Eriksen, 2002). For this study, however, the study of identity construction is not an end in itself. It is part of the crucial historian's task, namely the study of historically relevant changes (Schoppa, 2006). National formation accompanied by identity mutations in Southeastern Europe will be certainly a "new history" of lands and peoples under consideration. This project presupposes that the ex-Yugoslavia's successor states are aspiring nations or nations under construction. In comparison with the leading western industrial democracies, they would not qualify as nations insofar as they lack some fundamental preconditions, e.g.: sustainable, productive and globally competitive national economies; established democratic institutions, rule of law, a civic culture; certain degree of political sovereignty, military capability and influence in international affairs. Likewise, in comparison with the former state, they lag behind her heyday achievements regarding political sovereignty, military capability, international prestige, economic resources, national market and industrial potential. It could be said that this type of nations' "nationhood" is mostly symbolic, i.e. "discursive", cultural rather than political. These nations are above all "communities of discourse" (Wuthnow, 1990), rather than nation-states. For example, a nation-state that virtually does not have a national economy is still joyful for the fact that it has reintroduced the name of the monetary unit which circulated there in the Middle Ages; likewise, a nation that virtually have no military, believe it has met national security goals by changing labels of military ranks reminiscent of the old regime and "alien" language of the neighboring group. Fighting unnecessary and devastating wars for "more of nationhood", although that which they had attained in the socialist federation might have been a maximum; and celebrating its dubious victories (which the UN Criminal Court in the Hague views quite differently), these peoples have actually been downgraded to the status of de facto "cultural nations" (Meinecke, 1998). With the risk of an oversimplification, this kind of "nationhood" could be modeled as follows: myth-symbol-ritual-pomp-unwarranted pride. However, for the reason that the newly formed states have indeed acquired some elements of nationhood and that they have continuously worked on nation-making for the last two decades ("states make nations, not the other way around"), analyses of the newly constructed national identities should focus on official national founding or formative myths composed, imposed and maintained by the state.

This project chooses the concept of "myth" over "ideology", among other things, because of the remarkable process of "desecularization of the world" (Berger, 1999) unfolding during the period under consideration. An increasing influence of religion, featuring the phenomena such as "religious nationalism" (Van der Veer, 1994) and "religious ideologies" (e.g. "Islamism", various fundamentalisms, etc.) has been the signature of this wave of nation-formation. The case in point is particularly telling: it entails "ethno-confessional" identities, rise of "national churches" and established state religions following period of secularization "from above" (Perica, 2002; Velikonja, 2003; Radić, 2005). The result is the "new nationalism" of postmodernity. It entails a mixture of religious and secular ideas blurring further the ever porous margin between the sacred and the profane. A "sanctified history" as marker of nationhood is one the key features of this type of nationalism. All things considered, the conceptualization of "national myths" seems more appropriate than "national ideologies."

This project considers all nations more or less “artificial”. The former Yugoslavia does not seem more “artificial” than other nations and even if it might have been so, nothing “natural” and “genuine” came out of its ruins. No code of universal rights could possibly guarantee statehood and nationhood to all ethnic groups of the world or whichever movement that declares itself as an ethnicity aspiring toward nationhood. Likewise, a nation cannot be declared “artificial” and “impossible” merely because it is multiethnic and religiously pluralistic or because one of its federated states and peoples got very angry at others. Because, in that case, the so-called “ethnic cleansing” would be a way to restoring “natural order of things” (including reinstatement of backwardness and poverty interrupted by the socialist revolution). At any rate, what matters most for being a nation – especially in cases of stateless groups and movements for national emancipation or states without competitive economies and established democratic institutions but with a sense of pre-modern identity including sets of myths and memories -- is “national” history. History is that which makes a nation and nation needs a “usable past” adjusted to their national idea (Hobsbawm, 1990). Yet, “national” history is always a historical error (Renan, 1882) and taking history wrong is a part of being a nationalist (Hobsbawm, 1990). National history is product of the state and the role of the state is crucial in the nation-formation process insofar as “state makes nation, not the other way around” (Gellner, 1983; Breuilly, 1996).

By the same token, in order to assess the process of national formation in the region and find out what the peoples and states that came out of the former Yugoslavia have become through the two landmark decades, one needs first of all to look at “official nationalisms”. More precisely, this project will explore government-sanctioned national founding and constituent myths in interaction with its rivals and alternatives (or “countermyths”, Kolstø, 2005). It is our assumption that the key founding myth or set of myths, which is usually accompanied by and communicated to the recipients via patriotic rituals and symbols, can be identified in every new national project under consideration. These myths coexist and interact with other myths. They shape collective identities under (re)construction. This myth-making is a dynamic process and companion of the nation-formation that has continued to this day. In order to identify the relevant type of myth and critically assess its role, one needs to look at it as a process in which the state-sponsored “politically correct” mythology interacts with its domestic and foreign challengers (e.g. through historical controversies, disputed heroes, appropriations of prominent figures, territorial claims, interaction of the national and the local, forms of (dis)continuity of the former state, etc.).

The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was straightforward when he defined myth as a captivating narrative about the past that legitimizes relations of power in the present (Malinowski, 1984). Nationalism has “mystical dimensions”. It is a “spiritual principle of the nation” (Renan, 1882) or “secular religion” adjusted via secularization to conditions and needs of modernity (Mosse, 1975). Since the 1990s, scholars have shown a considerable interest in the study of “myths and memories of the nation” and role of myth in the construction of “nationhood” (Hosking and Schöpflin, 1997; Anthony. D. Smith, 1999; A. Nandy et al. 1998; Kolstø, 2005). They offered several typologies and classifications of such myths, e.g. myths of common descent, collective martyrdom, golden age, etc.

Myths are, among other things, building blocks of nations. In some cases, they are the capstones of nationhood as well as principal sources of regimes’ legitimacy. The nation-formation in the Balkans provides such cases. According to some observers, Balkan peoples developed a “hyper-sensibility” to myth. In a polemic on this topic between historians Maria Todorova (Todorova, 2004), and Holm Sundhaussen, (Sundhausen, 1996), the latter detects in Balkan cultures the hyper-sensibility to myth

but the former disagrees arguing that the West has overcome it thanks to uneven development i.e. earlier modernization.

By the “dynamic interaction of the new national founding myths”, we mean process of social change such as that which Bruce Lincoln elaborated in his theory of “discourse and the construction of society through and by myth, ritual and classification” (Lincoln, 1989). Accordingly, myth can facilitate social change by depriving established myths of their authority; by elevating a lesser narrative to the status of myth; and by modifying the details in or advancing new lines of interpretation for an accepted myth’s standard narration (Lincoln, 1989).

4. Teamwork, division of labor, topics and deadlines

To summarize, this project is built on the following assumptions: ex-Yugoslavia’s successor states’ “nationhood” is mostly symbolic, i.e. “discursive”; however, for the reason that the newly formed states have continuously worked on nation-making for the last two decades (states make nations, not the other way around), analyses of the newly constructed national identities should focus on identification of the official national founding myths composed, imposed and maintained by the state. Of course, these official myths are not without challenges so that the states’ legitimacy and the appeal of this type of nationhood remain precarious. More specifically, the project will examine the following topics: the (dis)continuity of the former nation’s myths and the comparison of the old and new myths; the new class structure, particularly the so-called “criminal privatization” and new poverty it brought about; new national founding myths of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia, emphasizing in this context, among other things, the roles of the state and the “negative other (s)” in each case; furthermore, the regional-provincial, urban, rural, clan and similar identities congruent with or in conflict with the national; religious institutions as national co-founders and new religious myths incorporated into national ideologies; migrations, refugees and demographic changes; the role of ethnic diasporas; major historical controversies and conflicting appropriations and uses of certain historical figures, sacred sites, historic places, symbols, etc. The project is seeking to put together an international team of researchers to explore how this mythmaking and identity mutations has affected the process of national formation over the critical two decades; and to assess the new products compatibility with each other and with the democratization and Europeanization in the Balkans.

The projects’ co-directors invite as potential contributors both established and junior academics of diverse professional profiles (historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and related fields). Each participant, including the co-directors will write an 8,000 words paper. First draft of the paper is due in July 2009 and the final version in January 2010. The workshop will take place on 24-27 March 2010. Possible publication (s) will follow shortly afterward.

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