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Yugoslav Communism and After: The Continuity of Ethnopolitics

The introduction of modern, or relatively modern, political life in socialist Yugoslavia, accompanied by the establishment of a public domain from which religion was excluded, led to a certain retreat of the *ethnic*. However, this retreat seems to us now somewhat ambiguous after the post-communist raising/birth of ethnic consciousness. There is no doubt that confessional identity – the form of collective identity that had dominated for so long – did retreat when faced with the onslaught of aggressive secularization. Between these two events, however, marking the beginning and the end of the previous regime, there was no ethnic vacuum. On the contrary. If we now have the impression that religious identity has absorbed ethnic identity, it was not previously so. It is in fact thanks to those fluctuations of religion—the waxing and waning of its role in shaping ethnic identity—that it became possible to observe dramatic metamorphosis in the historical constitution of that identity.

The recent history of the southern Slav peoples has produced two major *ethnic reconstitutions*. The first resulted from the introduction of a modern political identity, the identity of the working class. Despite the violent repression of religious identity, ethnic identity continued to play

a major role in Yugoslav society (even if it was secondary to political identity.). Ethno-religious identity was transformed into ethno-political identity. As a result of the first radical intervention of a modern political institution in the domain of the traditional collective identity, ethnic identity appeared relegated to the position of inhibited/repressed religious identity; or perhaps the latter simply manifested itself as the former. If one insists on this shift in the context of the specific Yugoslav (political) modernization, one may hold that *the ethnic* emerges as an *apparent political form* of confessional identity (in the age of state imposed secularization).

Interpreted and institutionalized by modern political means, ethnic or ethno-religious identity became *national identity*. Yugoslavia remained multinational, however, which is to say that each ethno-religious identity became separately “nationalized”. These identities were institutionalized all together, but as distinct from one another. It can be deduced from this that their substance was strongly ethnic, since it did not permit the creation of a common national identity, a Yugoslav identity, despite all the powerful tools of socialization and shaping public opinion that were available to the political project. If this project was a militant attempt to create a common identity (i.e. a class-consciousness of the proletariat), it was not its aim to replace or remove ethnic identities but to bind them together again.

From the very beginning the ethnic was embedded in the foundations of the new political order. It was ethnic plu-

ralism that imposed a federal solution on the Yugoslav socialist state. The union of republics reflected the reality of associated ethnic communities – in fact their defensive alliance - rather than that of a single people led by the proletariat. On the other hand, it is this underlying political unity that has undermined the establishment and development of genuine federal relationships.¹

The ethnic, marked by an absence of religion (component that had essentially determined it) in the public political domain, acquired the sense of a cultural reality, or rather, of a cultural heritage. In a sense one might say that the ethnic was constituted qua ethnic only with the retreat of religion from the public domain. Thanks to the radical intervention of the *political* in the domain of the social, the ethnic came to manifest itself as culture, not as religion, despite the fact that this culture was scarcely more than a religious culture. In the context of political, social and economic modernization carried out through the two Yugoslav states, ethnic identity, conceived as a phenomenon of modern consciousness, appears at the time when religion begins to withdraw from the public sphere.

It is this adhesion to the ethnic, in its full symbolic richness and extension, that reveals that politics - i.e. the communist ideology and its political institutions - have taken the *place of religion*. It is as though at one point in history religion had been compelled to cede concern for the ethnic to politics (which transformed it from its traditional, pre-modern form into a modern, national form). Though politics became more important than religion, this did not mean that the ethnic lost its significance. On the

contrary, the ethnic was sufficiently important, indeed more so than either politics or religion, therefore it may be assumed that in taking the place of religion, politics also had to take on its role: to become a political or secular religion. Only then could the ethnic be faithfully preserved in its allegedly inherited form. The ethnic emerges here in an entirely modern form: it is a name for the place or framework within which politics and religion relates to each other.

After the communist revolution and the incursion of the political into the social reality, the ethnic continued to maintain its political impact. In fact, between the political and the ethnic a *logic of supplement*² began to work. The revolution was undoubtedly an *event* marking the onset of political modernity³. Following the collapse of the “First Yugoslavia,” a new, more powerful wave of politicization ensued, promising a final modernization of the society. However, the revolution did not have, as it were, its own event, for the event of the revolution was at the same time an event of *ethnic liberation*.⁴ As elsewhere in Eastern Europe the anti-fascist resistance was interpreted as a socialist revolution, mostly due to elements of civil war that have strongly marked the Second World War.

The return of ethnopolitics in the form of ethnonationalism that has taken place after the fall of communism indicates how fragile has remained the building block of modern nation: citizenship. It is the civic or republican conception of nation that authorizes one to speak about

“the weakness of the strictly national tradition of the former Yugoslavia”.⁵ There is no doubt that the reign of the “comprehensive doctrine” of communism was not a very fertile ground for the introduction of the *political culture* characteristic of the contemporary democratic age.⁶ The existing communities bear too heavy ideological burdens and are too much anchored in their ethnic traditions to be able to function according to demands of modern political institutions: as communities of free and equal citizens.⁷

The ethnic has supplemented Yugoslav politics to such a degree that there is every reason to define already this politics as ethnopolitics. The ethnic should figure in the most succinct definitions of Tito’s politics: as an element heterogeneous to it. Yugoslav politics never succeeded in genuinely incorporating it within its own domain. The ethnic was never “nationalized.”

This non-political supplement to politics generated an ethnopolitical duality of the entire historical and social reality. There were two principal subjects of history, one purely political—the working class or the people led by the Communist Party in the name of that class—and the Yugoslav ethnos in its fraternal unity, gathered around the political project to constitute a supra-ethnic corpus. There were two discursive universes: the universe of political ideology and the universe of the traditional narration of tales of war, acts of heroism and great deeds. There were two myths of origin: one modern and political, the myth of revolution; the other traditional and epic, the myth of the struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors. The first was a myth of the founding event that marked the start of history proper; the second was a myth of the final event with which the history of the struggle

for ethnic liberation ended. In short, there were two historical times in play (or rather, one historical and one non-historical or cyclical time),⁸ two principal collective subjects, two sources of legitimation for social and political action. In the final analysis, there were two social, political, historical, and semiotic universes; or rather, one doubled universe.⁹

One may be prompted to recognize in this a strategy for deferring the disenchantment of the world,¹⁰ typical of colonial and post-colonial societies in which one encounters the resolute resistance of the ancient world to modernization.¹¹ The forcible and revolutionary introduction of the modern political institution could not take place without major upheavals leaving deep scars on traditional culture and the “organic” social body inherited from the pre-modern era. The ethnic here designates the heterogeneous element – this instance of the pre-modern in a modern context – that local politics was unable to do without in its inaugural constitution. It needed the ethnic on the one hand to reinforce its constitution; on the other to mitigate its impact. The ethnic was what brought to light the weakness or fragility of the political, as well as the threat it posed to the inherited social body and its pre-political tradition.

The “social impact on modernity” turned out to be the most baneful, since the ethnic was the most powerful resistance to the “historical transformations of the Self”.¹² At the heart of every opposition to modernity was the collective, communitarian Self, which aspired to prevent modernity from going beyond the limits of an outward,

essentially economic and institutional modernization. However, without an advanced level of individualization, civism – that prerequisite for the constitution of a modern political regime – could not see the light of day.¹³

Thus it was that, in default of civism, the ethnic became entrenched in the political institutions instead of withdrawing from the political domain.

Given the resistance and tenacity of the ethnic, and the number of ethnicities acknowledged as leading subjects of political life, it could be said that – notwithstanding political centralism and ideological monism – there was pluralism in Tito's Yugoslavia. This essentially ethnic pluralism was none the less political, for all that. It is this very ethnic physiognomy of the political that can explain the fact that Yugoslav society was not multiethnic in the true sense of the word.¹⁴

The complex co-existence of the Yugoslav ethnicities certainly called for a powerful political project. As it turned out, though, the project garnered its strength, or at least its supplementary strength, from the soil in which ethnicity had its roots. To stave off ethnic pluralism as best it might, the political goal that was set was to forge the strongest possible multiethnic or interethnic unity. This kind of rapprochement of ethnicities, which took the shape of fraternity, could have given rise to a new ethnicity. If the relationship had become genuinely fraternal, it would no longer have been possible to differentiate between interethnic and intraethnic relations. The multiethnic union would of itself have become a single ethnos, a macroethnicity.

The only way ethnic pluralism could be warded off was by the ethnic monism secured by the political project. There is no more powerful alliance between ethnicities than fraternity, in which ethnic union manifests itself as a reconstituted ethnos (which adverse historical circumstances had long since fractured and atomized). The federation of socialist republics was the political framework or state and institutional mould within which the dismembered ethnic body was to reamalgamate into a living organism, into an ethnopolitical corpus of all the once dislocated bodies. In its promise of freedom of association and humanist socialization, communist ideology offered a *telos* for every current ethnoarchaeology, presenting itself as a kind of orthopedic ethnic corporeality.

The official ideology, which suffered from the lack of a working class and industrial society, launched the salvific *ethnic formula*. Tito's famous slogan, "brotherhood and unity", was not just one of the most over-worked of political phrases; it was also the password for the ethnopolitical basis of the communist regime: for the ethnic supplement that lay at the foundations of the political reality.

The long-lost proto-ethnic unity (which lies at the basis of the concept of Illyrian brotherhood), could have been restored – despite all the profound cultural differences – only by a certain political construct, above all because the *instance of the political* made it possible for every ethnos to be addressed from a place that neither belonged to nor was foreign to any of the historically inherited ethnicities. It was from that place that someone could say "our peoples (*ethnicities*)", addressing the *principal actors* of the social reality of the Yugoslav state. And that someone would be a politician, primarily, because ethnic reappropriation takes place within a political discourse with a single ad-

dressee: the *people*. Listening to the public speeches of politicians, no one could ever be quite sure whom they were really addressing: the (political) people or the ethnicities, given that the same word, *narod*, was often used. The semantic drift between *demos* and *ethnos* was suggested only by the use of the singular or the plural: our people, or our peoples. “Our people” always implied “our peoples”, and “our peoples” were always “our (united and fraternal) people”.¹⁵

This interchangeability of the two formulae constantly and spontaneously contributed to the discursive product of a single subject derived from many, and vice versa. And thus politics was ethnicized, and ethnic identity politicized. As a result of the constant intervention of politics, ethnic pluralism dwindled, but this political reduction remained essentially political, because it was also a reduction to the Southern Slav proto-ethnos. The singular formula, “our people”, used merely as a substitute for the plural “our peoples”, created the illusion, thanks to this play of incessant permutations, that the socio-historical constitution of the Southern Slav ethnos was already complete. The proto-ethnic reduction could have been incorporated into an abstract political reduction, because the proto-ethnic component, that is the *shared ethnic heritage*, was very thin. It was, however, sufficient to transform the political instance into an ethnic instance and maintain politics within the constraints of ethnopolitics, so preventing the creation of its life-giving element, civism.

The reintegration of ethnicities requires an indelible distance on the part of political towards the ethnic – as is plain to see from the labeling of the singular/plural collective subject with the possessive pronoun: our. The locus of the reappropriation is excentric in relation to the “we” of each individual ethnos, and is in fact occupied by the political avant-garde (the only social force capable of genuinely distancing itself from the ethnic). Its “we the workers” is meant to cover the extension of each ethnic *we* together. However, the fragility of this avant-garde “we” was designated by its ethnic range, which by definition it should not have had: “we the workers” referentially coincided with “we South Slavs”. The distance created between the political “we” and the collective ethnic subjects remained inscribed in the domain of the ethnic, since it did not transcend the difference between ethnic genus and ethnic species. The conclusion is then that the political constitution of the modern reality, and above all of the subject of that reality, evolved at the more abstract level of *ethnic constitution*.

The ethnic was thus politicized from within. At all times, and whatever the subject of its activity, politics had ethnic points of reference. In fact, its basic motif was *ethnic differences*, so that in the final analysis it was a politics of interethnic co-existence, of the productive diminution and appeasement of those differences. It was politics that made this co-existence possible – a co-existence that was ethnic, not political in the true sense of the word. This was why the shared ethnic identity evaporated with the fall of communism. Southern Slav fraternity turned into

distant kinship or even into a fraudulent, imposed kinship.

The return of the ethnic under the new regime was not merely the return of the ethnic to the political domain, given that it had never abandoned it, despite the revolutionary introduction of the political into the *pre-modern social context*.¹⁶ It was in fact a return of the “subethnic”, which even under socialism had remained the *basic matrix of the ethnic*, despite politics’ being relocated to a higher ethnic level. The end of the regime was heralded by the discovery that all its political problems were in fact ethnic – which is wholly contrary to the conviction bestowed by communism, that every ethnic problem was in fact a political problem.

An eruption of interethnic conflicts accompanied every major convulsion of the regime and loss of the attractive force of its ideology. The growing inability to pacify ethnic clashes by political means also pointed to a loss of the common ethnic identity. This double retreat revealed that there was a certain *political construct* underlying the shared ethnic identity. The major contribution to the total collapse of this construct was the discovery of the collective awareness that ethnic identity was indeed a political construct, its realizing that the “ethnic proximity” of the different entities gathered together in a single state was in fact a fraud.

In the face of today’s virulent return of the ethnic, and of the incontestable sovereignty of ethnonationalism, the

emphasis should be on a complementary thesis which, unlike the first, is by no means popular: the basis of the federal political construct was a shared ethnic identity. Throughout the communist period, this identity remained secondary. To judge from its *locus*, it would have long continued to remain so, since its political purpose was to make the co-existence of ethnicities ethnic, or rather “supra-ethnic”. In contrast to ethnonationalism, its naturalism and its tendency to eternalize traditional culture, it should be pointed out that what underlies the post-communist, ostensibly authentic ethnic identity is also a political construct. A deconstructive undertaking of this kind entails insisting on the historicity of the ethnic, on its socio-historic fabrication: the post-communist collective identity truly is post-communist.

The politics of the past era should thus be analyzed, starting with the ethnic, and the ethnically small nation-states that emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia should be analyzed starting with the political. This approach is in effect a reversal of the customary view of both eras, and can acquire credibility only with a demonstration of the reversibility of the ethnic and the political.

To put the ethnic ahead of the political so as to highlight their complementarity and interdependence means, in this case, to propose a genealogical outline of Yugoslav communism, starting from the question: how was it that certain politics best satisfied the demands of *ethnic survival* for several ethnicities that, because of their small demographic and territorial size and geopolitical expo-

sure, had been constantly at risk of extermination in times of war and of assimilation during the fragile intervals of peace. The inexorable entry into the modern age confronted every political option with any aspirations to gaining power with another important set of demands: above all, those of industrialization and political institutionalization. Faced with the reality of the wartime defensive alliance of ethnicities, Tito's movement managed to provide a persuasive ethnic response to ethnic demands (all of which in turn had a post-colonial component) and a sufficiently persuasive political response to political demands (which came with the challenge of modernity). The two world wars led to the creation of this alliance: there can be no doubt that they determined the lines along which the ethnic constitution would come about in the modern age. This was a turbulent period, which saw the end of great empire rule in the Balkans, when the principal point of reference of ethnic constitution, the "significant Other" for the constitution of the collective Self, was a "total" stranger, a deadly enemy. (For the Slav peoples, the German was always the foreigner *par excellence*: someone who spoke not a word of "our language".¹⁷)

It would be hard to imagine South Slav *ethnic* rapprochement without the fall of the great empires and without the world wars. It is as if the two world wars, and the mass suffering they inflicted, were necessary for rapprochement to take on the nature of the constitution of a common ethnic identity. It seemed, too, as though a long period of European *détente*, and even the end of the division of the world into two great blocs, was needed for the *second turning point in the ethnic constitution* to take place.¹⁸ It was only when the threat from outside began to wane that

the enemy within could become the enemy without. The narrowing of ethnic identity was accompanied by an overvaluation of the imperial cultural heritage: where there had been largely enemies, friends emerged, whereas the authentic cultural wealth manifested itself in the place where all that had been seen were the products of coercive acculturation. It was only war, however, a markedly local and interethnic war, that could construct *constitutive ethnic difference* able to wipe out all interethnic proximity – or at least, all trace of politically productive ethnic proximity.

The difference between the two types of ethnic constitution coincides with the difference between two kinds of war: world war, and local war. Both ethnic constitutions are founded on a narrative elaboration of the experience of war, on the endless stock of war stories. The interpretation of the collective experience proper to each ethnos is in each case the interpretation of *the reality of the last war and of the collective identity of the enemy*. The ethnic supplement to politics was so important, even before ethnonationalism, that it could be said that Yugoslav politics survived for just so long as the accounts of the “war of national liberation” retained their mass appeal and the epic of the confrontation with the foreign occupying forces was able to endow politics with legitimacy. The complementary thesis, which underlines the political supplement of the ethnic, also holds good: the failure of the political working class appeared to be the failure of a certain ethnic conception, of the creation of a new collective identity. The collapse of the federal political construct brought to light deadly enmities, or infinite, irreconcilable ethnic differences. To make them last, of course, one needs political fabrications.

Notes

¹ According to Kymlicka, communist countries, although some of them were federations, were in principle not able to cultivate federal relationships. See Will Kymlicka and Magda Opalski, *Can Liberal Pluralism be Exported. Western Political Theory and Ethnic Relations in Eastern Europe*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 365 ff.

² For the logic of supplement, see Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1967, p. 17 passim, esp. Ch. 2.

³ Political modernity, like the age of revolution, is marked by events. Cf. Anne Amiel, *Hannah Arendt – Politique et événement*, PUF, Paris, 1996, p. 42 passim. As Claude Lefort observes, for Hannah Arendt, modern times are times of commencement and recommencement holding out against events. Cf. Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique XIXe-XXe siècles*, Les éditions de Seuil, Paris, 1986, pp. 59-61.

⁴ Because territorial liberation had all the elements of *ethnicism*, above all of ethnic revival. For the meaning of this term, see Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1986, pp. 50 – 68.

⁵ Dominique Schnapper, *Community of Citizens. On the Modern Idea of Nationality*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick (U.S.A) and London (U.K.), 1997, p. 23.

⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993.

⁷ On the community of citizens as a necessary condition for the constitution of the modern nation, see Dominique Schnapper, *op. cit.*

⁸ As C. Lefort observes, the democratic revolution has produced in the collective memory “le sentiment d’une rupture qui n’est pas dans le temps”, but “qui met en rapport avec le temps comme tel.” *Op. cit.*, p. 251.

⁹ Precisely in this way Jean-François Lyotard, making a similar distinction, opposes republicanism and totalitarianism as the two leading tendencies of our time. “The story of the universal history of the human race” is countered by myth and its narrative ritual; the “concept of the universal citizen” by that of the notion of the Volk; the singularity of a contingent community by that of the incarnation of universal sovereignty, both in the name of the people; legitimation by the Idea of liberty versus legitimation by myth; deliberation with its institutional organization versus pragmatic narrative; the national or ethnic name versus the unrepresentable Idea or the Ideal of practical reasons, and so on. In the so-called communist countries, these two tendencies can be seen as merging into a kind of socialist republicanism that to some extent saved them from being condemned to totalitarianism. See Jean-François Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Galilée, Paris, 1988, p. 59 *passim*. The same issues are elaborated in greater detail in: *Le Différend*, Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1983.

¹⁰ See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1991, p. 3 ff

¹¹ The liberation of the nations of Eastern Europe is still seen in the West as a process of *decolonialization*. See, e.g.: Pierre-André Taguieff, *L’impuissance du politique et l’effacement de l’avenir – mondialisation sauvage et réactions ethnonationalistes*, Parcours No 17/18, Toulouse, p. 349. In the view of

some analysts, the post-communist transition “far more closely resembles the experience of the post-colonial Third World than contemporary Latin America or Southern Europe.” Cf. Valerie Bunce, *The Yugoslav Experience in Comparative Perspective* in: Melissa K. Bokovoy, Jill A. Irvine and Carol s. Lilly, *State – Society Relations in Yugoslavia*, Macmillan Press LTD, 1997, p. 350. Balibar insists on the fact that “la trajectoire de la nation moderne est entièrement circonscrite par l’histoire de la colonisation et la décolonisation (dont nous sommes bien loin d’être complètement sortis).” See Etienne Balibar, *Nous, citoyens d’Europe? Les frontières, l’Etat, le peuple*, La découverte, Paris, 2001, p. 101.

¹² On the role of the process of individualization in dismantling the Russian communist order, see Pierre Clermont, *Le Communisme à contre-modernité*, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, Paris, 1993.

¹³ See Petar Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity. Liberty and Discipline*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, pp. 8 and 56. The leading idea of this historico-sociological view of modernity, the hypothesis of decollectivization and desubstantiation, is highly significant in our context. On the same lines, Claude Lefort speaks of the “perte de la substance de la société”, “la défaite du corps” social, the “désincorporation des individus”, etc. See his: *L’invention démocratique*, Les éditions de Fayard, Paris, 1981 and 1994 p. 172 passim.

¹⁴ Territorial and political identity, or the level of inclusion and mobilization – as to which Anthony D. Smith observes that it could as well be called nation or national affiliation as ethnic, as in the case of Croatian or Serbia – also, in our view, had an ethnic basis. See op. cit., p. 166.

¹⁵ Habermas sees in ethnonationalism a conception “that has obscured the traditional distinction between ‘demos’ and ‘ethnos’”. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*.

Studies in Political Theory (ed. by Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff), The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 129 passim.

¹⁶ It is thus almost impossible to judge, as John B. Allcock observes, whether the abrupt weakening of religious allegiance is the result of the “negative influence of communist rule on religion” or of “the wider influence of the process of modernization”. Cf. John B. Allcock, *Explaining Yugoslavia*, Hurst and Company, London, 2000, p. 372.

¹⁷ The word for German, *Njamac*, derives from *nijem*, meaning mute.

¹⁸ On the dynamic nature of ethnicity and its modern reconstitution, see, e.g, Philippe Poutignat and Jocelyne Streiff-Fenart, *Théories de l'ethnicité*, PUF, Paris, 1995, p. 135 et passim.
