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On the Borders of the Croatian Welfare State: A Victim's Economy

Leading to Victimization

The dissolution of Yugoslavia was an immensely complex, difficult and violent turmoil, whose full implications, even after a decade and a half, are relatively well known and, at the same time, still in need of further explanation. Thus, when speaking of the collapse of communism, Alain Badiou's term „obscure disaster“ is pertinent as a designating term, a metaphor for the lack of meaning itself, for an absence further exacerbated by specific conditions in which socialism crumbled in former Yugoslavia. This obscurity is only reinvigorated by the latest set of problems with which the South-East European states are faced after the late-2000s global financial crisis. For our present needs it will be enough to state that Yugoslavia’s dissolution affected every aspect of social life; the unprecedented scope of this transformation, as well as its current inscription in ongoing „suspended“ histories of newly founded nation-states certainly adds something to this „obscurity“. Our aim in this paper is to provide a somewhat speculative account of post-socialist ideological constellation by focusing on a single discoursive aspect, which we identify as a certain distinctiveness of these spaces. Although only an aspect of a more wider conjuncture, it is our belief that this cluster is highly symptomatic, as it represents the crossroads between various discourses and processes that are fundamental for understanding the current “transitional” societies, or to be more precise, the places where these “transitional” societies fail to deliver on their promises. These range from the predominant depoliticized vision of the clash of the civilizations (Europe vs. Balkans, West vs. East etc.), the (still ongoing) dissolution of the welfare state, the complex changes in the institution of social and economic rights, profound metamorphosis of the public sphere, the rise of nationalist hegemonies, all to the neoliberal assault on the last remnants of the, by now, thoroughly „nationalized“ socialist heritage etc.

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In this paper we will focus on individual or group strategies inside the national public space that try to supplement the withering welfare state. Since these actions necessarily refer to the sphere of social citizenship,[1] and are themselves played out in a highly mediated public space overburdened with meaning, their explanation is impossible without at least a short inspection of the paths that led to the current ideological conjuncture. This is also why, although the scope of our analysis will be limited to the situation in Croatia, it is nonetheless possible that the provisional conclusions we will draw may be applied to the other states of ex-Yugoslavia. We will start by outlining three crucial transformations of the last few decades which, in our opinion, laid out the symbolic coordinates for the coming of „the victim“: rise of nationalism, „victim propaganda“ during the last Balkan war (MacDonald, 2002), and the dissolution of socialist ideological apparatus.

1. The nation-states new „ideological apparatuses“ as a central imaginary piece, whose role is to guarantee historical meaning by combining disjointed elements, positioned teleological narratives (or, as Northorp Frye called them „cyclical teleology's“, themselves made of the national mythical line of Golden Age, The Fall and Redemption). In this way, history is represented as an always-already ongoing struggle against the national „Other“, a series of never-ending ethnic antagonisms and mutual hatred culminating, of course, with our own present time. Starting in the 1970's, the rise of nationalism was a historical result of a particular way the heavy burden of the emerging economic crisis of the Yugoslavian state and the forthcoming restructuration of the world economy, and the growing inequality among the states themselves, was articulated by political elites of the national communist parties of particular states. This strategy was only reinforced during the coming war, as the imagery of destroyed cities, atrocities, countless refugees as well as the dead encirculated the globe. Since for Western powers – to whom at least some of the parties involved looked up to culturally, politically and economically – this turned out to be „a spectators sport,“ a few viable options were left for engaged parties: a complete ideological retreat into nationhood (a way out opted by Serbia under Milošević), or, for nations that suffered greater war casualties, a more open exchange with the international community. In any case, one of the few logical solutions during the Wars of Yugoslav succession was to portray one's nation as victim, thus appealing to a heightened sense of global responsibility and morality. For example, both sides of this conflict (Serbian and Croatian) shared a historic belief in their own victimization as nations, which was

further exacerbated in post-war years (during Milošević's and Tuđman's time), and made one of the central pillars of their national identities.[2]

2. The fall of real-existing socialism and the coming of the post-ideological era of parliamentary democracy fundamentally changed the global conjuncture and especially the political realm of Western democracies. In the midst of the de-legitimized grand political project of socialism, capitalism imposed itself as the only viable solution to the remedies of state dictatorship in the East. Partially it was because it presented itself as an economic order without any direct ideological legitimacy apparatus–characterized by an ideological plurality (with certain boundaries), and an effective way to amass long desired wealth and goods on a large scale. For the rise of humanitarian NGO's, the loss of any viable alternative political project was crucial; the substitution of humanitarian for political work on the left was influenced by the rise in the number of civil wars and peacekeeping missions. On the international level, resulting from earlier before mentioned processes, the institution of human rights became irreversibly intertwined with the right to (humanitarian) aid. Combining this against the backdrop of ongoing depoliticization and the lasting post-colonial divide between West and East (or North and South), the result was the rise of humanitarian groups as public arbitrars of international political action. In his own highly eclectic style, Jean Baudrillard commented that „(...) the whole movement of indifferent society ends in victimhood and hatred (...) humanitarianism seeks other just in the form of victims to aid (...) Deficit and misfortune, like the international debt, are traded and sold on in the speculative market" (131-132).

3. The dissolution of the socialist legitimacy apparatus had a profound impact on the very experiences and available political strategies of actors in everyday life. Here, we will not only treat it as a transformation of legitimacy which, in Yugoslavia, was at first class-founded, and later „welfare" based – it is precisely when the state was unable to act as a guarantor of certain level of the standard of living that its legitimacy was put in question. As Jacques Ranciere would have put it a transformation of „the order of police," or the way in which certain parts of society (social groups, classes etc.) are counted in or counted out (28-29). This transformation had a profound influence on what is (im)possible, (in)visible or even (un)imaginable (in the public sphere) since this system of coordinates draws boundary between existence and ex-sistence![3] It is crucial here, for our

purposes, to accentuate that Ranciere links politics with aesthetics to come up with an ethical regime of the image and visibility and its relationship with the ethos of community. As already stated, we are able to understand and think about the public sphere only if we fully take into account the tectonic shift that occurred in this ideological background – a transformation into the transitional horizon of nationalistic and neoliberal hegemony, from one teleological horizon to another one. This transformation changed the horizon of the possible and acceptable; among other things, it profoundly changed the way in which citizens claim their rights or openly address political issues. For instance, in the sphere of labor action there has been a reversal of the idea of strike towards its transformation into hunger strike, and therefore clearly a transformation of the vision of labor activity into passivity; the image of the worker is sometimes even retained, but only if via a „chain of equivalence“ inscribed in a much larger context of a national being.

Relying on Foucault's hallmark proposition that the enunciative modalities of discourse manifest themselves through and by dispersion (as a principle of unity) (Foucault 49; Laclau and Mouffe 105), we hold that a peculiar strategy of victimhood in post-Yugoslavian states can be identified, ranging all the way from institutional, through group and to individual actors. Not only this, but it seems that this figure is not only a valid one, but it itself represents a central part of the legitimate state apparatus, as well as the personal strategy of disaffiliated individuals in uncertain times, a „rational“ and sometimes the only way to cope with risks entailed by the transition. Our main proposition is that the discourse of victimization came to be a result of the dialectics between the providing state-official and the spectator, a need to create the marginal discourse of the “Other” just to be brought back to the “Center”. This can be performed only in the public sphere, a space for articulation of ones rights, but following the contemporary paradigm of gaining visibility.

The Ongoing Neoliberal Reformation of „National-Social“ Public Space

Subjects of Victimization and the State

With the dissolving of the class imaginarium and welfare institutions, what is the role of the imaginary of the victim, a person of undisputable moral right to a certain kind of reparation?[4] The legitimacy of the post-war Croatian state apparatus—although it would perhaps be arguable that

this holds for most Balkan states that were engaged in armed conflicts during the 1990s—is based on its ability to properly refer to its victims, its martyrs, and to properly provide for them (war casualties and their families, victim cities, victimized spaces etc.). These are given a mandate to be somehow exempted from this universal logic of forced self-responsibility, and can therefore be engaged only in a moral exchange; it is in this politically-mediated contact with them that society is reclaiming its own always-already lost moral fundaments, it is through giving to them that it attempts to escape to all-consuming capitalist exchange sphere. Since, in this view, commodification leads to the corrosion of the aura of authentic togetherness, this exchange between the suffering and the provider represents an attempt at reclaiming social authenticity by directly referring not to the cogito but to feelings of compassion and pity. It is therefore not a coincidence that in these situations humanism is evoked as a universal denominator beyond all political and social distinctions; it is an attempt to turn possible lines of political conflict (arising from the rapid growth of social inequalities, economical deficiency, inefficient and weak welfare state etc.) into a difference as such, representing an obvious move from politics to morality. This appeal to morality necessarily obliterates the whole background of social and political entitlements and conflicts, making them completely undistinguishable or unimportant while facing an atrocity, transforming this from a political into a biopolitical issue. The object of this study is two different "symptoms" that point to the inefficiency in the creation of transitional social policy. The first symptom is represented by institutionally endorsed humanitarian actions, whose unprecedented explosion in the last decade is only matched with the amount of national affects invested in this kind of social action. In media representations, all groups that are represented as beneficiaries of humanitarian work are articulated by a discourse of fragmentation: they are reduced to accidents which start to act as autonomous entities. Therefore, they are represented by a certain characteristic or a lack thereof: media accentuated organs or limbs which indicate a certain lack that is to be replaced, or bodies that behave in an unnatural way, as a kind of surplus represented as something which is to be disposed of. One representative example is the „Dajmo da čuju[5] , humanitarian campaign whose aim was collecting funds for purchasing/buying hearing implants for deaf children. In the TV advertisement for the said campaign there is more than one depiction of children's ears representing a certain lack. One of the endorsing parties of this action was the

Ministry of the Family, Veterans' Affairs and Intergenerational Solidarity, which clearly indicates the impossibility of political articulation of social rights in a direct way.

Relief is possible only via a state official who aids and a public that testifies to this act.



Picture 1 - One example of the campaign's visual identity (captions translate "He never answered the telephone")

The second group of symptoms are represented by specific individual or collective strategies of bodily (bio)politics (for example, a hunger strike), in which the subject-actor transforms the biopolitical principle of the sacredness of life as a token in economic exchange (or threat) itself, which literally reads: "Your aid or our life!". This threat would be unimaginable if the very actors in question were not aware (at least in the form of repressed knowledge) of the fact that the State's interest in preserving the life of its subjects is motivated by the (self)interest in preserving the very life of the Sovereign, the State itself. Therefore often the workers pushed to the absolute margin in which they exist only in the form of "bare" biological survival, are unable to act in a political way, from the sphere in which their rights would be acknowledged, in which they would be "counted in", but they act by discoursive self-reproduction of themselves as victims (offering themselves fully to

the mercy of the sovereign state), in return receiving individual, precarious and private privilege (in the form of various one-term financial aid, government guarantees, revision of certain contracts, loans etc., which are mostly outside the confines of social welfare law). Highly characteristic for the endless series of these situations and government action is the end of the workers strike in "Željezara Split",[6] where the very arrival of the high state official was a sign of an impossibility of the political articulation of workers' rights: it's very possibility is reduced to the minimum the same moment the hunger strike began. Nevertheless, a hunger strike may be interpreted as a political act, but a paradoxical one since it is from the very outset a private one, localized in the specific coordinates of the strikers body, and unable to horizontally spread in a political chain of grievances. The State then intervenes as a caretaker of this singular endangered body, but again only in a situation where it can be assured that a third party is there to witness the act.

The Economy of the Victim

By attaching the signifier „victim" to someone, this person hadn't received any help; we only released the signifier itself by giving him a concrete and material bodily existence, which through an image or sign is free to enter the global or the national circulation of the humanitarian market. This humanitarian market is what we term the economy of the victim (or victim's political economy of public space), which is more connected with the idea of giving, reaching out, then to the properly modern notion of exchange. We observe it as a peculiar attempt of escaping the dominant logic of market relations. In a commodity economy there is a strong distinction between objects and persons through the notion of private property. Objects as commodities are sold, meaning that the ownership rights are fully transferred to the new owner. The object has thereby become alienated from its original owner. In a gift economy, however, the objects that are given are inalienated from the givers; they are rather loaned than sold. It is the fact that the identity of the giver is invariably bound up with the object given that causes the gift to have a power which compels the recipient to reciprocate. Because gifts are inalienable they must be returned; the act of giving creates a gift-debt that has to be repaid. Gift exchange therefore leads to a mutual interdependence between giver and receiver, in this case between the State, its representative and the ailing, the victim. Thus, the encounter of state officials with those who demand is staged as an exchange of various

social entitlements (which, at that time may be unrealized) for (private) privileges. These have to be distinguished from rights, since by definition they are bound to certain persons and are to be enacted publicly; they are thus basically contingent upon the recipients reclaiming of their very status of the victim, upon their own self-(re)production of themselves as victims. Here a kind of permanent state of exception (or „humanitarian" exception) caused by the suffering of others, which calls for an immediate response, is progressively substituting the withering welfare state. After the externalization of the costs of social reproduction directly onto the citizens themselves, the social state itself is acting more and more as a humanitarian organization, aiding those who are able to „properly" represent themselves through victim-centered discourse, which is at the same time visual, linguistic, moral etc. In this situation the state officials themselves have to rise above the law (or bypass it) to condescend to the ailing. The difference between international and national humanitarian actions and public protests is that the certain number of the later do not only refer to the public at large, but paradoxically as their recipients they pose as the State itself, or better to say the Sovereign State, implying its lasting omnipotence. This is what is basically behind what could be called the fascination with the state figure; what is hiding behind this paradoxical relationship;[7] is the fact that, more than State itself, the citizens fear of its collapse.

Conclusion

In this paper we aimed to show the complex changes to which the social citizenship in post-Yugoslavia Croatia has undergone, and its rather intimate relationship with the dominant ideological matrix. This specific ideological context is defined globally by what Habermas termed the „refeudalization of the public sphere," its transformation from the space which enabled and promoted public critique and denunciation, towards the space of pure „cynical" demonstration of power and wealth, a space in which immediate presentation exceeds re-presentation. Furthermore, this context is supplemented by the strong assault on the last remnants of the social state on one side, and the growing spectacularization of the media reports on the other, against the backdrop of strong national input in the wake of the wars of Yugoslav succession. In this ideological conjuncture, gaining „the right to one's right" is only possible through the figure of the victim, a discursively constructed image whose acknowledgment requires immediate humanitarian

(re)action. These individual struggles for gaining rights are inextricably linked to the peculiar visibility – itself embedded in the above described ideological landscape – that is more and more determinant of one's ability to access one's social rights and entitlements. In this context of a withering welfare state, where „entrepreneurial“ morality has thoroughly pervaded social entitlements, one's rights depend on the possibility of reproducing oneself as a victim, of thoroughly inscribing into one's body a series of signs that connote lack (of bodily function, health, means of subsistence etc.) and inspire direct reaction. This immediate literal visibility – since (self)victimization as a representational practice has a point only insofar as it is visible – hides or obscures a fundamental invisibility which is basically a foundation of this whole edifice. We termed this background, which is represented in these staged situations only in a disguised form as an encounter between the ailing and the state officials, an economy of the victim. By this we do not refer so much to the growing humanitarian market, be it national or international, which, as Jean Baudrillard (ch. 19 and 20) so lucidly observed, has much in common with other markets from which it borrows its form, competition, laws, currencies, marketing infrastructure etc. Rather, what we have in mind is a fundamental imaginary – in the lacanian sense – relationship that reestablishes State sovereignty above and beyond divisions that society harbors on everyday basis. The reproduction of this structure is contingent upon the fact that it must represent itself as non-political (or, even better, as predating politics); this peculiar circular structure, caught between opposing movements of politics and morality, is that of exchange between the State and its subjects. To illustrate this exchange, we referred to the growing number of cases of hunger strikes, which from the point of view of its participants, usually represent an ultimate political act. However, these measures are radical only inwards, towards one's own body, and therefore, in some views (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe), do not represent a political act per se. Politics is here enclosed and by definition inextricably bound to these biological bodies of the strikers; its ultimate horizon is the possibility of one's death. This represents a crucial difference between strike and hunger strike, since the first one is spatially enclosed and therefore not universalizable. Hunger strikes are only possible since they at least implicitly acknowledge the State as a caretaker for the workers bodies, in return only strengthening its grasp upon society. Another example we referred to are various humanitarian actions aimed to “help those considered most vulnerable” in a society. What we have in both cases is the establishing of the fundamental imaginary of the economy of the victim; in both

cases the subject is dissolved, transformed into a collection of biological functions of its parts (being reduced either to bare survival of the children's extremities or organs). The subjects of victimization are thus reduced to their action or accidents qua political action only insofar as they serve as space for the articulation of the providing state-official – spectator relationship. That elusive X which constitutes the subjects is through this process directed towards the lack which makes them (the subjects) visible. This helps little to solve the aporias of receding social citizenship, because it necessarily constitutes subjects which are induced to articulate their social rights necessarily as victims, while the others remain only spectators, in this ongoing dialectic of the spectator and the state official.

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[1] We are referring here to the famous political concept only in broad terms, as a specific set of social rights (education, health etc.) relating to the „equality aspects of citizenship“ (Balibar 115).

[2] For example: „We have realized that the making of the independent, sovereign and democratic Croatian state was something that certain international forces could hardly stand, because their defense of the Versailles Treaty and the idea of the New World Order in this part of Europe and the World led them to other plans and in which the very idea, and especially the reality, of a sovereign and independent Croatian State could hardly fit” (Tuđman in Bekavac). This geopolitical victory, of course, had to be achieved with national hegemonization, an overcoming of „petty“ political differences, often introduced into an otherwise homogenous national body by outside agents, and by direct reference to a personal sacrifice demanded from the people as a whole. “The hard experience of the Croatian people throughout history and especially in the last years of the restoration of Croatian statehood teaches us that no high principle written in the UN and international law is not automatically attainable and even less guaranteed if the people don’t have the commitment to fulfill them…if the people aren’t ready for large sacrifices in attaining their own right to life and their liberty” (Tuđman in Bekavac).

[3] Existence can be understood as that which becomes recognizable through symbolization, whereas ex-sistence is something which resist symbolization; is excluded from the process of symbolization (see Žižek 136-137)

[4] This may be correctly understood if seen forming a part of a larger structure defined by what Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot termed affective regime („regime d' agape“), in which, using strong emotional input, actors try to impede political change/ action (362). For example, in the kind of staged events we are addressing here, the viewer is strongly influenced to act directly, since any kind of another response or possible delay would be consider immoral or non-conforming to the immediate necessity of humanitarian catastrophe presented by the fact of ongoing human suffering.

[5] A humanitarian action which was active in 2001 in Croatia and had a goal of securing a certain number of hearing aids (cochlear implant) for children. See: http://www.puznica.hr/en/index.html.

[6] “Iron mill Split“. See: http://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/tridesetak-radnika-zeljezare-split-zapocelo-jubilarni-peti-strajk-gladu-clanak-103001; http://www.jutarnji.hr/splitska-zeljezara--prekinut-strajk-gladu/618137/.

[7] Paradoxical because it is caught between the general feeling of sacredness of the State and the crisis its institutions or its „apparatus“ obviously face, consequently revealing its ultimate impotency.

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