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Introduction: Balkan Precariat

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Introduction: Balkan Precariat

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This special issue of *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* highlights recent research in the social anthropology of three former Yugoslav countries, namely Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia.¹ It represents a shift away from previous studies of the former Yugoslav region, which has focused mostly on the dissolution of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and ensuing wars.² This issue points to the necessity of studying the Western Balkans from perspectives beyond the ‘war and nationalism’ paradigm. With its comparative approach, anthropology is probably the best of the social sciences for undertaking such an endeavour. Similarly to how Michael Herzfeld³ has shown that the geographically marginal position of Greece provided a platform from which to study European anxieties, the Western Balkans, as a European periphery whose ‘otherness’ is affirmed through its non-EU status, can serve as a laboratory for studying the workings of weak states with unregulated markets. Why go all the way to Africa, as the Comaroffs⁴ suggest, when the European periphery, exemplified in Bosnia, Macedonia and Serbia, represents a much nearer experimental playground for neoliberal capitalism? Not only do the Western Balkans offer an insight into post-socialist and post-war coping mechanisms, but they also serve as a mirror for the EU and its market policies in relation to non-EU countries. The effects of the financial crisis of 2008, argue the Comaroffs, were felt much more strongly in places

“in which there has been a relatively abrupt conversion to laissez-faire from tightly regulated material and moral economies; where evocative calls for entrepreneurialism confront the realities of marginalization in the distribution of resources; where totalizing ideologies have suddenly given

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¹ The articles in this issue were presented at the workshop ‘Balkan Precariat: Mediating the Global Economic Crisis in Southeast Europe’, organized by the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and held in Marija Bistrica, Croatia on 8-10 November 2013.

² Among the best ethnographies on the subject of war and nationalism in former Yugoslavia are Baker, Catherine. 2010. *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991*. Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate; Jansen, Stef. 2005. *Antinacionalizam: etnografija otpora u Zagrebu i Beogradu* (trans. A. Bajazetov). [Antinationalism: Ethnography of Resistance in Zagreb and Belgrade]. Beograd: XX Vek; Obradović-Wochnik, Jelena. 2013. *Ethnic Conflict and War Crimes in the Balkans: The Narratives of Denial in Post-Conflict Serbia*. London: IB Tauris and Živković, Marko. 2011. *Serbian Dreambook: National Imaginary in the Time of Milošević*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

³ Herzfeld, Michael. 1987. *Anthropology Through the Looking Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Comaroff, Jean and John L. Comaroff. 2012. *Theory from the South, or How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa*. Paradigm Publishers: Boulder & London.

way to a spirit of deregulation, with its taunting mix of desire and disappointment, liberation and limitation. Individual citizens, many of them marooned by a rudderless ship of state, attempt to clamber aboard the good ship Enterprise. In so doing, however, they find themselves battling the eccentric currents of the 'new' world order, which forge expansive connections between the local and the translocal, short-circuit established ways and means, disarticulate conventional relations of wealth and power, and render received borders within and between nation-states at once more and less porous.”⁵

The articles in this volume echo all of these issues – individuals struggling to survive under new and precarious circumstances, taking part in the ‘race to the bottom’ with the global South (Chiara Bonfiglioli); embracing entrepreneurship and battling with an unregulated market (Andre Thiemann); navigating the intricacies of a devolved healthcare system (Čarna Brković); and building one’s own social security system through personal networks of support in the wake of a collapsed social welfare state and economic crisis (Ivana Bajić-Hajduković). In recent years there have been a series of excellent ethnographic studies about post-socialist worlds, and more specifically Central and Eastern Europe.⁶ Following in the footsteps of Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery, who paved the way for Western anthropologists working ‘behind the Iron Curtain,’ the next generation of scholars turned their attention to analyses of everyday life in post-socialist societies. Daphne Berdahl, one of the ‘pioneers’ in the anthropology of post-socialist worlds, writes Michael Herzfeld,

“mounted an important challenge to ‘transitology’ dominated as it was until the late 1990s by political scientists and economists. Against their ‘linear’ and ‘teleological narration’ of the transition in terms of ‘capitalist triumphalism’, Daphne championed a view that emphasized ‘the contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities of postsocialism.’”⁷

Berdahl was one of the first anthropologists to put nostalgia for state socialism on the research agenda of post-socialist scholars. In her seminal work “(N)ostalgie’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things” (1999), Berdahl showed that nostalgia for socialist times was actually people’s attempt to make sense of their lives in a post-socialist context. ‘Nostalgia,’ according to Berdahl, was ‘about the production of a present rather than the reproduction of a past’.⁸ Post-socialist transformation brought tremendous

⁵ Comaroff, Jean and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, 159.

⁶ See, for example, Berdahl, Daphne. 2009. *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Caldwell, Melissa. 2004. *Not by Bread Alone: Social Support in the New Russia*. Berkeley/LA/London: University of California Press; Creed, Gerald W. 2010. *Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Fehervary, Krisztina. 2013. *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Humphrey, Caroline. 2002. *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press; Kideckel, David A. 2008. *Getting by in Postsocialist Romania*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Mandel, Ruth & Caroline Humphrey. (eds.). 2002. *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism*. Oxford: Berg; Patico, Jennifer. 2008. *Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press and Shevchenko, Olga. 2009. *Crisis and the Everyday in Post-Socialist Moscow*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

⁷ Berdahl, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism*, xiii.

⁸ Berdahl, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism*, 55.

changes in people's lives, and it was through remembering the past that people tried to come to terms with the profound changes in their daily existence. Notwithstanding differences between post-socialist countries, there are many parallels to be drawn between the example of '(N)Ostalgie' in East Germany (GDR) and memories about socialist past in other East and Southeast European countries. In fact, it would be hard to find a contrary case, that is, a post-socialist country where people do not talk about the past with a sense of nostalgia. This does not imply, however, that people long for the oppressive communist regime that was in place in those times. Rather, as Berdahl so brilliantly demonstrated in her work on consumption in re-unified Germany, they are 'longing for an alternative moral order'.⁹

This 'longing for an alternative moral order' while battling with precarious living and working conditions in post-socialism is one of recurring themes in this issue. In Chiara Bonfiglioli's article about textile workers in Macedonia, she shows how remembering one's life and working conditions during Yugoslav times is a way of coping with difficulties in the present. The differences in working conditions in the textile industry during socialism and post-socialism are, perhaps, more striking in Macedonia than anywhere else. In the socialist period textile factories provided workers not only with a workplace, which meant stable employment with fixed working hours and paid overtime, but also with access to a subsidized canteen, childcare, on-site medical and dental services, and the use of holiday apartments or hotels owned by the factory for its workers. The workplace, in other words, was the centre of one's sociality during Yugoslav socialist times, or 'one's social universe,' in Susan Woodward's words.¹⁰ Writing about the meaning of the workplace in an East German context, Berdahl noted that 'in the GDR the workplace was not only the centre of everyday sociality, it was also a symbolic space of community and national belonging'.¹¹ Bonfiglioli takes this observation further by analysing the impact of radically different post-socialist working conditions on Macedonian women in particular and the country in general. Unlike the former GDR, which became part of a unified Germany in the post-socialist period and followed a different model of capitalism, Macedonia embarked on a path of neoliberalism, only to become 'one of the most unequal countries in Europe'. This inequality directly reflects gender inequality, because 85 per cent of textile workers in Macedonia are women and their wages are around 'one third of wages in other industrial sectors'. In other words, while the Macedonian textile industry secures contracts with Western European clients by offering lower prices and a quicker and cheaper turnover than its competitors in East Asia, the highest price in this 'race to the bottom' is borne by women textile workers, who work and live in precarious conditions. Macedonian textile workers work for 4-5 euros per day, often also during night and weekends without taking breaks for fear they might lose their jobs. Thus, to remember one's life and work during socialist Yugoslav times provides an escape from the precariousness of today. This work of memory is particularly important to women who are double victims of neoliberal transition in Macedonia. Not only are they paid much less

⁹ Creed, *Masquerade and Postsocialism*, 47.

¹⁰ Woodward, Susan L. 2003. *The Political Economy of Ethno-nationalism in Yugoslavia*. *Socialist Register* 39, 73-92, 76.

¹¹ Berdahl, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism*, 49.

and have no employment security, things they had during socialism, but all the working benefits they had, such as subsidized childcare on work premises and factory canteens which relieved women from a large part of domestic work, no longer exist.

Andre Thiemann's article in this issue analyses the struggle for the production of social security among agriculturalists in Serbia. Although the setting is very different to the industrial world of textile workers in Macedonia discussed by Bonfiglioli, the 'longing for an alternative moral order'¹² and the personal struggle to create social security, which the state ceased to provide with the end of socialism, are themes that run through both cases. Thiemann's article shows how people navigate the system with what he terms 'moral appreciation.' That is the social revaluing of constant (objects and machines) and variable capital (people). These continuous adjustments to the ever-changing socio-economic circumstances, under which they work, put agriculturalists in post-socialist Serbia under tremendous strain. This is exemplified in their own terms as physical and mental 'breaking' (pucanje). The low prices at which agriculturalists have to sell their produce are associated with government policies that protect big businesses at the expense of small agricultural producers. Similar to the case of Macedonia and its textile industry, 'ineffective state regulation benefits monopoly formation, because it does not counter the expansion of inequality inbuilt into capitalism' (Thiemann).

Both Bonfiglioli's and Thiemann's case studies show that weak state regulation, in the region comprising the former Yugoslavia, or a lack thereof, leaves producers – in the first case, factory owners who claim to be the victims of the global race to the bottom along with their workers, and in the second case, small agricultural producers burdened with debts incurred from unfavourable terms of microfinance credit – in a vulnerable position, having to compete against big businesses, local and transnational. The results of this *laissez-faire* approach to new market capitalism, in post-socialist Serbia and Macedonia, are painfully palpable in the two articles presented here. In both cases, however, one of the major forces in coping with a lack of social security is the personal networks of support, or social networks. In Thiemann's article, the success of one's business operations, as well as of attempts to preserve one's mental and physical health, depends almost entirely on one's social network capital. Similarly, in Bonfiglioli's article, social support, which factory workers had access to during socialism, is nowadays co-opted with intergenerational support between family members.

Social networks also play a key role in two other articles in this issue. In Čarna Brković's article about humanitarian actions in Bosnia, one's survival is predicated on the size of one's social network and one's visibility within that network. According to the Dayton Peace Agreement from 1995, the Bosnian healthcare system was decentralized and split across thirteen healthcare systems, each with its own legislature and ministry of healthcare. People only had access to healthcare services within one of these ministries, that is in the area where they resided; if one's medical condition required additional services

¹² Berdahl, On the Social Life of Postsocialism.

that were offered in one of the other systems or abroad, one was more or less left at the mercy of a bureaucratic lottery and ‘humanitarian actions.’ The more one became visible in social networks the more likely it was that one could solicit help through ‘humanitarian actions.’ In other words, one’s chances of receiving life-saving medical treatment were dependent largely on arbitrariness and the need to continuously move within as large of a social network as possible. This combination of arbitrariness, and the need to move, is what Brković terms ‘moveopticon.’ She follows Nancy Fraser, who placed Foucault’s notion of the ‘panopticon’ in ‘a new landscape of social regulation, more privatized and dispersed than any envisioned by Foucault’.¹³ According to Fraser, while the Foucauldian concept of the ‘panopticon’ was based on exercising discipline within a Fordist welfare state, in today’s neoliberal state disciplinarian power is more dispersed and international. These changes, argues Brković, ‘are reflected in a new kind of regulatory structure which is flexible, multilayered, and selectively repressive – and whose contours have yet to be fully determined.’ The individuals described by Brković are left to his or her own devices to secure medical treatment and a ‘chance to life.’

The centrality of social networks to one’s survival, though in a different context than that of the Bosnian healthcare system, is a subject of analysis in Bajić-Hajduković’s article in this issue. This article examines the consequences of practices that enabled people’s survival during the UN embargo and hyperinflation in Serbia in the 1990s. Strategies for overcoming food scarcity included a return to pre-industrial ways of sourcing and preparing food, buying and selling on the black market, smuggling, and strengthening social networks. It was social networks, argues Bajić-Hajduković, which had the longest legacy, because of the nature of debt created within them. Debt created in social networks had no certain timeframe within which it had to be settled, and as such, the debtor could be called upon to ‘pay’ at any point. Similarly to the Bosnian case (Brković), where people helped others without expecting direct reciprocity, in Serbia during the crisis of the 1990s, solidarity was incredibly widespread. Bajić-Hajduković argues that this solidarity worked as a kind of ‘social network tax.’ In other words, by being part of a social network and helping out whomever possible, one created debt that remained part of that network, the so-called ‘social network tax.’ In the vacuum created by the crumbling of the welfare state in the early 1990s, social networks not only filled the gaps in the system, but also became a permanent tool for survival.

The phenomena presented and analysed in this issue’s articles all attest to the tremendous creative forces and adaptability to socio-economic challenges at work in the post-socialist space of the former Yugoslavia. In response to the grinding adversity from unrestrained neoliberal market forces paired with insufficient institutional social support, people have become increasingly reliant on their own social support networks, which are predicated on intergenerational solidarity (Bonfiglioli), or the assistance of neighbours, colleagues, friends and family (Thiemann, Brković, and Bajić-Hajduković). Social networks serve as a buffer against calamity, as a source of help when institutional support is lacking or insufficient; dynamic and enduring, they are

¹³ Fraser, Nancy. 2003. From Discipline to Flexibilization? Rereading Foucault in the Shadow of Globalization. *Constellations* 10(2), 160-71, 166.

probably one of the most powerful tools for overcoming the effects of short- and long-term economic crisis. Last but not least, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, social networks are a building block of new markets and their moralities in regions where the Fordist welfare state is a thing of the past and where omni-networked individuals constantly negotiate their and others' survival.

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