11 2007

Against Opportunistic Criticism

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In Bosnia and Herzegovina, any day in the last week of September 2007 could be taken as typical of the tendencies of the dominant: the High Representative scorns the ethno-nationalist elites for not signing an agreement on police reform – a refusal on their part that runs the risk of taking the country and its citizens into further international isolation; farmers have "short-stepped" themselves in their protests, and rather than step into the Parliamentary building, have decided to install prefabricated houses in front of the steps of the Parliament. This means they are likely to spend hundreds of days there, becoming even more invisible as they blend into the landscape; the steel workers' trade union in Zenica has lost its battle against the new owners of the company; Cardinal Puljić is in a meeting with Milorad Dodik, a central political figure in the Republika Srpska, to discuss the prospects of a "third entity" for Bosnian Croats; local public liberals and civil society academics, the hitherto ardent opponents of ethno-nationalism, now accept it as "inevitable", and behave as if guided by the mantra that "there is no alternative" to the ethnic division of the country, a prospect that is now to be "delivered" in the new and pseudo-academically verified "package" of a so-called "consociational" model of democracy.

But, surely, you may say, the last point is not typical. What is driving such a sudden turn in the positions of these liberals, one might ask? The answer is: nothing, because, again in a Thatcherite fashion, "these gentlemen are not for turning" – the lavish façade of their anti-nationalism and civic liberalism covers the structural bricks of their revisionism, which is anti-socialist/anti-communist, and anti-Yugoslavian. Theirs is not even the trajectory of a U-turn, but rather the closed circle of a merry-go-round, whose motor has been the conflation of, to paraphrase one of these liberals, the two worst evils in the 20th century–nationalism and communism – and the repression of communist solidarity as the "darkest historical illusion".[1] So, in terms of their anti-nationalist critique, rather than looking for discontinuity or evidence of a U-turn, one should look instead for the continuity of revisionism.

I propose to start an investigation of this kind historically in 2003, when a text, written by Sinan Gudžević and published in a regional journal *Sarajevske Sveske*, disturbed the liberal, anti-nationalist, phantasmic coordinates by identifying with the external elements – Yugoslavia and socialism – that had to be disavowed and excluded from these coordinates. Gudžević's text is important on many counts. Firstly, its intervention was the first significant cut in the chimera of a unified anti-nationalist critique, offering an opportunity to many to reveal, in their full revisionist glory, their own identifications. Secondly, it called attention to how the de facto dominant anti-nationalist critique rests on censorship and the banning of any properly *political* critique. Thirdly, it enabled the dominant civil-society-anti-nationalist-multi-culturalist camp to place itself where it rightly belongs on the political spectrum – in the centre – located, to paraphrase one of its members Ivan Lovrenović, between the punches of the left and the right. Positioned in the centre as it is, this *false alternative* cannot be a

place from which to contemplate emancipatory practices. Resting on a depoliticising revisionism, it is in effect pure *opportunism* that far too easily acquiesces to pragmatic and manageable reforms. Now, in 2007, this translates into an open, pseudo-academic advocacy of the further ethnic division of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Gudžević's excellent polemic crystallised around a brief, unsigned defamatory "in memoriam"[2] on the occasion of the death of Izet Sarajlić, a famous internationalist and anti-fascist Bosnian poet, whose author, in Gudžević's analysis, was revealed to be Mile Stojić, a poet and columnist of the BH Magazine *Dani*.

Stojić's text about Sarajlić is a historical revision, which rather clumsily attempts to re-cast Sarajlić's work in terms of the "Russian pattern"', whatever this may be, a "celebration of the Great Idea, in the shadow of which Stalin alone was to kill over ten million innocent people". Sarajlić himself is cast as someone, who, after Tito's break with Stalin, "continued marching in the rhythm of Mayakovski: left, left, left", and "remaining *Jugosloven-ekavac* even in times when it was clear that Yugoslavhood imagined along such lines will get to his people". Particularly significant is Stojić's perfidious insistence on Sarajlić dedicating his verses to Rajko Petrov Nogo, Radovan Karadžić, Nikola Koljević and Slavko Leovac, "not even imagining that towards the end of his life these adored subjects were to repay his love with mortars and bullets". Furthermore, not satisfied with the revision of Sarajlić's pre-1990 opus, Stojić recasts his war poetry as expressing "a deep disappointment with the religion he believed in fanatically throughout his life".

The ideological distortion of Stojić's text is glaringly obvious: from a patronising position, Stojić handpicks bits and pieces from Sarajlić's biography, arranging them in such a way so as to produce

a lie about Sarajlić's life, a lie which makes a case for Sarajlić's contribution to ethno-nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina and his disappointment with communism. Thus the signifiers Stojić uses always allude to Sarajlić as "Jugosloven-ekavac"; disappointed in "the religion he believed in fanatically throughout his life"; as a "favourite among Serbian nationalist writers". These suggestions invite the reader to collude in Stojić's malign attempt to construct Sarajlić in a two-fold way: 1) as a long-anachronistic figure whose "verses remain as a testament to revolution and love, a testament to the times of collective euphoria when it seemed that these two terms are not mutually exclusive", and whose death not only erases the memory of anti-fascist solidarity and communism, but enables Stojić to pronounce them as obsolete and dead; 2) as a figure, whose disappointment with communism – Sarajlić's "religion" as Stojić calls it – was caused by communism's historical failure and its subsequent deterioration into ethno-nationalism, a piece of representational trickery through which Stojić far too easily establishes a continuity between the two.

If the memory of the past anti-fascist solidarity and communism died along with Sarajlić, Stojić now all too eagerly performs an execution in order to kill not only this solidarity but also the memory of communism, lest it should bear productively on the future. Having killed it, Stojić can now both combine it with ethno-nationalism and continue to parasitise the processes of criticism from a safe, omniscient distance.

However, as Rastko Močnik and Boris Buden have written, such a revisionist practice is symptomatic for the political and intellectual classes belonging to "East 'liberalism'" that are managing the arrival of capitalism. The practice and the notion of anti-fascist solidarity are precisely what they fail to grasp, because it is that solidarity that exposes their lie – the lie that people are selfish individuals, who

are bound to hate each other.[3] Therefore, as a "fault line" in their project – a symptom par excellence – this needs to be constantly reworked and negotiated and, if possible, actively forgotten by the dominant anti-nationalist camp in Bosnia.

To give an example: Mile Stojić, in his column "Riječ u fokusu" in the edition of *Dani* from 28 November 2003, takes ZAVNOBIH[4], and writes about it in a positive and almost sublime manner.[5] ZAVNOBIH "chinks like a gold coin in the dark rooms of memory"; it is a "beacon of light at the end of the tunnel." Even in his critique aimed against "Bosnian and Herzegovinean Serbs and Croats who do not mark the anniversary of ZAVNOBIH", indications exist signalling where Stojić's patriotism would end up – that is, in the defence of ethno-nationalist logic – because Stojić cannot see beyond the ethno-nationalist
principle contained in the argument that Bosnia is "Serb *as well as* Croat *as well as* Muslim" and thinks he can oppose the ethno-nationalist elites merely by insisting on an additive method.

Thus, it comes as no surprise when, in the same column, three and a half years later, on 16 March 2007, Stojić calls "the fluid of brotherhood and unity [...] the darkest historical illusion".[6] Politically, what other logical end point is there for one who proclaims ZAVNOBIH as a "coin with limited use-value today, as a formula that only held within a country of brotherhood and unity"? Stojić's critical economy is ridden with devaluation. In three and a half years, the wager of the critique of ethno-nationalist elites – the anti-fascist struggle – the investment of the "gold coin" of ZAVNOBIH is now a mere coin with limited-value that Stojić stashes even deeper in the corners of the "dark rooms of memory". Stojić replaces the gold standard with a revisionist standard, but it is the same coin that will keep coming up to haunt

him. To his depoliticising instruction that "those who glorify the charms of ZAVNOBIH universality should, therefore, seek more modern responses to the question of how the quarrelling peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina can live in peace and prosperity without the fluid of brotherhood and unity, which was shown as the darkest historical illusion", one should reply: No, thanks! Not interested in your more modern investments!

In his close reading and analysis of Stojić's "in memoriam" and other texts published in *Dani* and *Feral*, Sinan Gudžević not only revealed Stojić as a fake, a falsifier of facts and a liar – in a word a petty, destructive scribbler who colonises public space with the hogwash of his writing – but he also ripped apart the machinery which supports, commissions, and publishes Stojić's texts, revealing it as a sewer, where censorship, conformity, and complacency rule.

In Stojić, Gudžević rightly recognises not "an exception", but "a representative of a type". This is the type that actively revises history, trying to prove its validity by re-inventing itself as already having been a dissident current during socialism, while in fact, this is the type that gave up on "the political" in the 1980s. This was the time when ethno-nationalist elites actively seized the political, setting up new coordinates of political possibility. This is the type that replaced politics with culture, and insisted on a beyond-ideology position for culture, a position from which they continued to bemoan their predicament. And it is precisely from this position that people like Stojić can devalue and attack socialist Yugoslavia and the "Great Idea" of international solidarity espoused by communism and socialist revolution wholesale, equating it with the Serbian ethno-nationalist project. Gudžević quite picturesquely pinpoints the anti-communist nature of such revisionist equalisation. He says "the mother of the saying *Each Yugoslavia is a*

Serboslavia is a widow, her name is Señora Emigración, her husband has died, but keeps sending her his greetings."

Rather symptomatically, this is precisely the point which disturbed Ivan Lovrenović, serving as a call for him to react to Gudžević's text. Published in *Dani* on 3 October 2003, Lovrenović's text entitled "Idoli i Ideologija", attempting to defend Stojić, attacks Gudžević's polemic for being – political. Or as Lovrenović says: "[...] one couldn't have this without politics, without the miserable political – or more correctly ethnic allusions. At the point of writing these lines [...], tying around Stojić's neck a slimy insinuation about emigration (no doubt the Ustasha one) as the mother of the saying *Each Yugoslavia is a Serboslavia*, Gudžević is revealed as a complete conceptual prisoner of the skilful ethnic stereotypes made fashionable by *Nin* magazine [...]."We could have predicted that Lovrenović would strive to somehow conduct this discussion on a completely apolitical plane, since he has eschewed politics in the sphere of cultural production from the late 1980s. In effect, however, he now condemns Gudžević for *not* casting his polemic in the dominant current critique in Bosnia – that is, a full and explicit branding along ethnic lines. Therefore, it is Lovrenović who recasts this discussion within the ethno-nationalist framework, showing that he not only accepts, but even ardently defend such a framework as the only one possible. One cannot be revealed, in a close reading, as being a fake, a liar, and a falsifier of facts without first being branded a Bosniak, a Croat or a Serb.

This operation of Lovrenović's "mental ecology", as he calls it, as a perspective from which he dictates the standards of purity for criticism, is a proper depoliticising gesture and recruits as its ally the language of multiculturalism, so dear to Bosnian anti-nationalists. Lovrenović brands Gudžević's polemic as a "hate speech", further confirming how the ethno-nationalist framework

goes hand in hand with the multiculturalist love of particularities. As Nebojša Jovanović, the first critic in Bosnia and Herzegovina to openly demystify this aspect of the Bosnian anti-nationalist camp, cogently pointed out, "would-be [c]ritics of ethno-nationalism like Lovrenović build a BH version of 'political correctness' on the grounds of tripartite ethnic rule".[7]

Just as a reminder: all of this is happening in a context in which, under the guise of "political correctness" and "tolerance", segregation is promoted in schools, school textbooks are censored, and the country's assets are divided among ethno-nationalist elites. What remains in a context like this, is the mere management of different ethnic (cultural) groups. Not a word of politics. It is useful to recall Wendy Brown on the insidiousness of this post-political "management": Through naturalisation, personalisation and culturalisation, so-called "tolerance" de-politicises social conflict and marginalisation. It does so in such a way that it "reduces conflict to an inherent friction among identities and makes religious, ethnic and cultural difference itself an inherent site of conflict, one that calls for and is attenuated by the practice of tolerance."[8] In this way multicultural tolerance manages the demands and conflicts of these identities, thus precluding proper politicisation.

Fortunately, Lovrenović's formula "Bosnian anti-nationalist 'mental ecology' + branding using multiculturalist 'hate speech' = magazine evangelist preacher of liberal revisionism" did not manage to depoliticise and put an end to critique in Bosnia.[9] In his second article published in *Dani* of 31 October 2003, entitled "Bije lijeva, bije desna", Lovrenović exposes the core of his unassailable position, which is now under attack, as he argues, both from the left and the right. Lovrenović's second text is a further support for Stojić and a confirmation of his own revisionist stance, dressed up

now as a “clearly critical position”. This time he brings into the picture the first Yugoslavia in order to homogenise the political field all the way from the historical distance of 1929, constructing it as a linear ethno-nationalist project. This second equating then conflates both Yugoslavias with the Greater Serbia project – ineptly attempting to deny the unbearable historical fact that is the heterogeneous element in his story – the historical existence of anti-fascist solidarity.

If there is any clarity in Lovrenović’s text, it can be gleaned from his precise political positioning of the liberal revisionist club – that is, in the centrist ground of politics. In building this “in-betweenness” as the pure space for all his fellow beautiful souls beaten both by the left and the right, Lovrenović in his concrete material practice as a multi-culturalist prosecutor of “hate speech”, who prepares his accusations from the all-too-comfortable ethno-nationalist bench, shows that the centre actually holds quite comfortably – punching, as it does, a little from the left and a little from the right.

Stojić’s political devaluation of the “gold coin” of anti-fascist internationalism and solidarity, and Lovrenović’s placement of anti-fascism and ethno-nationalism on the same continuum are only indicative of the wider trend set by them and their fellow opportunistic revisionist market speculators. Other protagonists would include Ugo Vlaisavljević, who has ended up detecting “communism in nationalism”, or Enver Kazaz who gullibly swallowed the bait of the “hate speech” argument without considering the fact that the dominant anti-nationalist critique is itself carried out within the parameters of what ethno-nationalism posits as possible.

It is in this respect that Drinka Gojković's cogent and well argued reaction to Lovrenović's texts must be amended in a small but significant way.[10] Together with Zija Dizdarević's and Nebojša Jovanović's, her text is one of the few critiques of Lovrenović. She rightly detects that Lovrenović attempts to prohibit any polemic by using the "hate speech" argument. To support her claim, it is worth noting how, in their reaction to Gudžević's text, Lovrenović, Kazaz and the former editor of *Dani,* Senad Pećanin, evince a certain disgust when they use the term "polemic". Gojković brands Lovrenović's and Stojić's anti-Yugoslavism as "empty" and this is the point where the correction needs to be made. Rather than not knowing what they are doing, they know very well what they are doing, but they keep on doing it. This is not empty anti-Yugoslavism, but the opportunism of the politics of centrism.

Operative in the revisionist economy of the opportunistic centre is an elementary censorship – it is this excess of talking about "communism in nationalism", of rendering anti-fascist struggle obsolete which aims to cover up what dictates this ideological levelling, this equation of communism with nationalism, this devaluation of antifascist struggle – it is capitalism, or more precisely the umbilical-cord-like connection between capitalism and ethno-nationalism.

This is why their new golden investment in social critique, contributing nothing whatsoever to transformative politics, is ultimately fool's gold. They have long ago spent all their capital, and as such are spent people. They solely provide use-value for the politics of the discredited centre. This provides all the more reason to insist on the continuing stand of anti-fascist solidarity and internationalism against revisionism, to clink the ZAVNOBIH golden coin ever louder to the point where it deafens all the opportunistic revisionists.

[1] Mile Stojić, “Riječ u fokusu”, *BH Dani*, no. 509, 16 March 2007.

[2] Mile Stojić, “Riječ u fokusu”, *BH Dani*, no. 256, 10 May 2002.

[3] Rastko Močnik, *Koliko fašizma?* (Zagreb: Arkzin 1998/99). pp. 72-74. See also Boris Buden, “Na Trgu mrtvih velikana”, Barikade 2 (Zagreb: Arkzin 1996/97), pp. 231-35.

[4] Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Bosne i Hercegovine (The State Antifascist Council of People's Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) is a political body of people's liberation (NOB) in BiH formed between 25-26 November 1943 and a constitutive political act of establishing BiH as a federal unit within the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia.

[5] Stojić, Mile, “Riječ u fokusu”, BH Dani, no. 337, 28 November 2003. (all BH Dani articles accessed through the BH Dani archive on www.bhdani.ba).

[6] Stojić, Mile, “Riječ u fokusu”, *BH Dani*, no. 509, 16 March 2007.

[7] Nebojša Jovanović, ‘ “Buđenje” Ivana Lovrenovića”, Forum, 20.10. 2003.

[8] Wendy Brown, Regulation Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 15.

[9] Both Zija Dizdarević in *Oslobodjenje* and Nebojša Jovanović in *Slobodna Dalmacija* reacted to Lovrenović’s first text. *Dani* refused

to print Jovanović's reaction to Lovrenović's "Bije lijeva, bije desna".

[10] I am referring to her very well argued response, the only of the kind printed in Sarajevske Sveske. See Drinka Gojković, "Zveckanje govorom mrznje", Sarajevske Sveske, number 4, 2003, pp. 469-73.