

BACKLASH

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Commie Junk

Once a year the streets of Zagreb are filled with piles of junk, old stuff that the inhabitants of the town centre no longer need or want, cleaned out of attics, cellars, drawers and closets. It is carried out of front doors or thrown out of windows. And as the days proceed, the pavements and doorsteps become more and more difficult to pass through. Sometimes one gets a glimpse of previously well-known, but now long and often deliberately forgotten images. May 2004, an email dumped into the inbox, with three photos attached. It is a rather short, but precise, message: “Here you can find some pictures related to the huge junk on the Zagreb’s streets these days. Enjoy. P.S. some of those images are really HUGE junk :-).”

The first picture is a bright red conference paper decorated with the star, the sickle and the hammer and the acronyms SKJ (meaning Savez komunista Jugoslavije – the Association of the Communists of Yugoslavia), lying on some worn-out car tires. The second picture shows a book titled *Priče i legende* (Stories and Legends), by Maksim Gorki, a Russian author whose works on the social injustice, the sorrows and pride of workers and peasants, was an obligatory reading in Yugoslav schools during the communist period. The third picture is of an envelope with the seal saying “Republički odbor, Zagreb” (the Republic’s Committee, Zagreb) and a stamp of 1 jugoslavenski dinar, Yugoslavian dinar).

The reason the mail-sender considers these items HUGE junk is not because they are worn out, or just old and useless material. It is because they belong

to an era, a political system, a country and a society that no longer exists, and to a past that somehow seems to have vanished into thin air. It is so-called “commie junk.”

Rewriting History

It is almost surprising that such junk can still be seen in the streets of Zagreb, since there has been an effective cleaning process going on in the country for quite some time. Although such objects, once priceless and now worthless, have never been publicly thrown onto huge public bonfires, a radically new perspective on THE Croatian history emerged in many spheres of public life, influencing every pore of people’s everyday routine. This brand new, but still presented-as-absolute truth, was concretized in urban toponymy, in changing names of town streets and squares, and in the removal of monuments and memorial plates glorifying nameless WW II warriors and communist legends, and in memorials to the new heroes of the nation (Rihtman Auguštin 2000: 35–60).

The libraries were purged of anything “inadequate”, books written by Serbian authors, those in Cyrillic alphabet or containing “Yugoslav spirit”. The museum presentations of Croatian culture and history simply left out some “undesirable” historical chapters. The same void was created in education: “This past is too recent, and therefore too problematic and difficult for us to deal with”, as a professor of history put it, when explaining to his students why the communist area of the twentieth century is



still considered a tricky topic, and is therefore also left out of the curriculum (Birt, in print).

The Croatian War of Independence in the 1990s was not only waged against the aggressor, the once heroic Yugoslav People's Army, as celebrated in popular songs, and the Serbian troops in the trenches; it was echoed in each household, in every town street. All the material culture symbolizing the former political formation and its communist regime became the enemy of the newly established state. They simply had to be removed, out of sight and out of mind.

This removal was done with little fuss and noise; instead the objects have just sunk into dead silence and oblivion. There were rarely any official proclamations about which images should be ostracized and which ones should be reinvented and placed in the centre of the symbolic scene. Still, people knew what was considered to be *pro* and *con* in the Croatian nation-state. This silent ban was only felt when one happened to go against the tide.

Pure Croatian Air?

One of the first to speak out about this way of removing the "Yugoslav" and introducing the "Croatian" was the author Dubravka Ugrešić. In articles in *Die Zeit* (23 October, 1992) and *Independent on Sunday* (6 December, 1992), she argued that the tin cans on sale in Zagreb kiosks, decorated with the red and white Croatian coat of arms, bearing the message "Clean Croatian Air", are not just innocent souvenirs, but rather metaphors of the whole cleaning process taking place in the independent Croatia (Ugrešić 1999: 60).

Ugrešić gives a whole range of examples of whom, how and what "this magic spray-formula" is opposed to. She claims that in the new system of values, which is based on the polarity of clean-dirty, "Byzantine blood" is the most dangerous polluting substance. This is simply another, and more refined word for *Serb* and *Orthodox*. Other dirty enemies include insufficiently pure Croats, saboteurs, traitors, anti-Tuđman commandos, commies, Yugo-nostalgics, and like-thinkers (Ugrešić 1999: 61). After publishing this text, the author herself was more or less *cleaned* out of the country. In a postscript, in

the prize winning book *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*, she tells what happened:

Although the text was not published in the local press, everyone immediately knew what was in it and the author was suddenly cast into the role of isolated target of frenzied attacks by her compatriots: the new political elite, newspapers, television, radio, fellow writers, colleagues at the Arts Faculty in Zagreb, friends, anonymous writers of threatening letters, unnamed righteous telephone callers ... Her furious compatriots – proclaiming the author a liar, traitor, public enemy and a witch – fuelled a pyre and the author, consumed by fire in her own homeland, left to continue her life in exile. During a brief Christmas visit to Zagreb in 1996, the author was greeted by an anonymous message on her phone: *Rats, you've been hiding! So you're still here! You're still breathing under the wonderful Croatian sky? Get out of Croatia!!* (Ugrešić 1999: 63–64).

Kumrovec May 22nd 2004

It is early morning hours, but along Josipa Broza street people have been up and busy for a long time already. They are hammering the last nails into the stage and making sure the "Day of Youth" banner is hanging properly over the road, raising the blue, red and white Croatian flags, placing obstacles on the streets, marking the arena of the celebration and cutting it off from the rest of Kumrovec, which will try to continue its everyday, mundane routine. To put it in Johan Huizinga's terms (1992), the spatial frame of the play is being defined.

The museum stands are taken out of the barn and filled with souvenirs that are not usually found in the museum souvenir shop, and are ordered especially for this occasion: T-shirts claiming that Tito is "a man of peace", caps with Tito's signature, cups, decorative plates, and ashtrays with his image or a picture of the house where he was born. Along the road other stands, more diverse in shape, are about to emerge as well. One guy is decorating a tree by hanging Tito's framed portrait on its trunk, a picture once found in almost every classroom and office in

the former Yugoslavia, and others are putting old partisan uniforms, helmets, and military decorations on the lawn. A couple is spreading cassettes, books, and pictures of similar subjects all over a car, a display of goods for sale. The displays are enormously creative, and the quantity and variety of things on display almost unbelievable. In Kumrovec on this particular day, the market for old commie stuff is so large that you will even find new reproductions on sale. Truly, this is all small-scale craft production, but it is slowly growing into a major business (Jurković, in print).

It is the Day of Youth! In this little village where Marshall Tito was born, some five thousand people from all over the former Yugoslavia have gathered to celebrate, relive, pay respect to, and remember Tito's birthday. Or rather, the Day of Youth is celebrated three days before the actual date. As people are travelling long hours in order to attend, and May 25th is no longer a public holiday in any of the new nations in southeastern Europe, the only practical possibility was to move the celebration to the nearest weekend.

People are all moving towards the hot spot of Kumrovec: the birthplace of Josip Broz Tito, and his life-size statue in the front garden. Photos are being taken, greetings delivered, people are bowing to the statue, and bouquets and wreaths, mostly of red flowers, are being placed in front of Him. One woman came running into the garden and shouldered her way to the statue, obviously very excited. She stroked it several times, and at every stroke she would say, "This is for Radenković, this is for Majda... – and so on." Obviously she was fulfilling her commitment to her friends, as well as their joint commitment to the statue. This kind of behaviour makes one question whether people are approaching Tito's representation, or Tito himself (Belaj, in print).

One delegation after the other fills the street of Kumrovec, carrying neatly designed flower decorations and waving old Yugoslavian flags along with huge red flags with golden stars. Comrades are catching up with old acquaintances, hugging and greeting one another. Visitors are spontaneously breaking out in song, accompanied by accordions: "Comrade Tito, We Swear to You", "Over Forests and

Mountains", and "Comrade Tito, a White Violet". Tears are falling as people are singing at the top of their voices, not only because of hearing these long-forgotten songs, but because of the memories they awake (Petrović & Rubić, in print). People are also affected by seeing people dressed in the old uniforms of partisans and pioneers, proudly exhibiting badges with Tito's picture, both from this year's and previous celebrations, and holding huge posters of Him, and signs saying "Tito in Our Heart" and "Yesterday, Today, Always Tito" high in the air.

Are you "The Birds of the Feather"?

At the tables in front of the pub "By the Old Mate", a group of young people is preparing for the day. They separate themselves from the rest of the people attending the celebration of Tito's 112th birthday in Kumrovec, 24 years after his death. They approach individuals in this crowd, "armed" with recording equipment and questions about why and how visitors are marking this Day of Youth, but they are often met with counter questions: Are you one of us? Where do you come from? Oh, there were a lot of partisans from that island! Is that a Tito-friendly place? Are we "the birds of the feather"? Are you "believers"?

We are part of this group of young people: nineteen ethnologists from the University of Zagreb, and one Norwegian from the University of Bergen.¹ We have been preparing for this event for months, through lectures on phenomenologically-inspired cultural research, on multisited fieldwork, and, on a personal level, by facing and personally dealing with this particular past – which despite being recent seems so distant and long-gone.

The Croatian co-author of this paper explained to the Norwegian researcher that "We can't make this research project an obligatory course. Forcing students to go to Kumrovec on the Day of Youth would be like yet another assault. Participation in this project has to be a totally voluntary choice". For the majority of students the main attraction of the project was initially wanting to learn more about phenomenologically-inspired fieldwork. As preparations continued, however, the participants reported

increasingly about the reactions and interest they received from outside the classroom.

Several said that for the first time their university studies managed to engage their whole family back home, and that the project prompted lively discussion around dinner tables. Parents and grandparents told about their own experiences and memories of Tito, and about living in a communist society. "I thought that I was the only one in Croatia actually remembering Tito", a grandmother put it. Others said that for the first time in their lives they had thought about this part of their own past, much less discussed it in a public sphere.

All the participants had different approaches² to the Day of Youth celebrations in Kumrovec and the many mutual questions we were exploring. What happens when the past we are remembering turns infamous and the memories we cherished become stigmatised and tabooed? How do we remember then, and more importantly, how do we express this changed attitude? What happens to the places declared the central topos of socialist ideology in the new ideology, since it so strongly represents the cradle in which "the greatest son of our nations and nationalities" was rocked?

Being there, focusing on how the Day of Youth is experienced by those in the celebration, seems even more important because the whole event is still stigmatized in contemporary Croatia. It provides researchers with an alternative path towards understanding a society, and it enables them to explore cultural processes of change and continuity, and to see the effects of power relations that are often inaccessible.

Backlash or Voicing of "Other" Truths when One Least Expects Them

In many ways Kumrovec celebration may be viewed through the term "deviance": it is performed by people generally regarded as "marginal", at an "infamous" place that has disappeared from the nation's mental maps, on the date of the former national holiday of a dissolved country, including a ceremony commemorating the birthday of a person whose historical role is highly controversial. Still, it

does not deviate from the way memory of the recent past has been treated in contemporary Croatia. The celebration itself is an uncalled-for reaction to official silence, an expression of alternative truths not voiced in the mainstream public sphere, which can only happen in "forgotten" places and "forbidden" forms.

This kind of backlash can also be seen in the other diverse expressions of attitudes towards the common past in other countries which were part of the former Yugoslavia. So for instance, in his article on the so-called Balkan culture, the Slovene sociologist Mitja Velikonja discusses parallel patterns that emerged in Slovenia during the 1990s (Velikonja 2002: 189–207). One is "balkanophobia", a political and media discourse which tries to define cultural distance from the so-called "non-Slovenes", a popular term for members of the other ex-Yugoslav nations. The other is a rapidly growing "Balkan culture" which is inspired by old Yugoslav symbols, myths and stories. This "Balkan culture" is not based on the previous generations' Yugo nostalgia, but is instead a challenge to and subversion of dominant discourses. It is an innovation, a new kind of cultural reception and production, and mode of self-identification among young people – even teenagers who never actually lived in the times of Yugoslavia.

Thus, although the narratives generally cherished during the communist regime have been suppressed from all the visible strata of collective memory, recognizable topos, dates and figures still remain important in personal life histories, and the experience of individual remembrance. They are stubborn spots that deliberately resist or accidentally hide from the efficient spray of Mr. Clean that blanketed Croatia in the early 1990s. It is a kind of backlash: an attempt to erase a stigmatized imagery which leads to the unintended consequence of its reinvention. The failure to discuss things and give them a "proper" burial creates energy that preserves the very things that are supposed to vanish, giving them a new lease on life. There are always cracks in the seemingly impeccable surface of the dominant public narrative, through which alternative truths are ready to burst out into the open: the more pressure one applies to cover

them, the more eagerly they strive to come forward.

Backlash is a way of voicing alternative truths before there is a possibility of “refreezing” tabooed and difficult segments of the past. As Vesna Teršelić, a lecturer at the Peace Studies in Zagreb, puts it:

I believe that all can be processed, but it is an ongoing process of dialogue, additional research, it is ongoing process of cultural projects, more theatre performances, more books, and more films. (...) There have been so much talk about history textbooks in Croatia, increasingly they are getting better, and it is not such a horror as it was, although history curriculum is a problem. But then, you know, what will take us very many years is getting rid of this notion of one truth (in Škrbić Alempijević & Hjemdahl 2006).

It will probably also take some years before Balkan Culture, as seen in Slovenia, emerges in Croatia. There were at least not many signs of an “easy-going-pop-art”-relationship in the Day of Youth celebrations in Kumrovec 2004, neither for the participants or the researchers studying them. Even for the young ones, this past seems still too close.

Notes

- 1 Marijana Belaj, Danijela Birt, Toni Blagaić, Koraljka Bogdanović, Jasna Dasović, Kirsti Mathiesen Hjemdahl, Jasmina Jurković, Petra Kelemen, Iva Končurat, Nenad Kovačić, Anamarija Kučan, Marija Kulišić, Tihana Lovrić, Tihana Petrović Leš, Željka Petrović, Marijeta Rajković, Tihana Rubić, Robert Šešerko, Nevena Škrbić Alempijević, Tanja Štignjedec.
- 2 While some were focusing on the music, the design, the rhetoric, the dressing, the souvenirs, the guest book, the things taking place around the statue, at Villa Kumrovec and at The Political School, others were fol-

lowing in the footsteps of school classes, people dressed as pioneers, different age groups attending the celebration, participants from different regions within ex-Yugoslavian countries, and local ones from Kumrovec. Some also followed the celebration on a distance, focusing on the media coverage, film productions, and the national archives.

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