

Internet Nation

The Case of Cyber Yugoslavia (www.yuga.com)

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The founding law of Cyber Yugoslavia (CY) opens up a possibility of constant fluid transition to this imaginary state: "The Constitution of Cyber Yugoslavia is variable". The variability consists in the ability of 'anyone' to change it, to rewrite it through a 'public vote' (Article 1, CY). This virtual vision of utopian democracy relies on at least a partial extra-territoriality of its citizens: only 25.22% of its 13,150 citizens reside on the territory of the present day state-in-deconstruction of FRY (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), while the rest are scattered in thirty seven countries around the globe. The variability of the law that founds the basic tenets of the communal in the imagined community of post-Yugoslavs is the encounter defined away from the sacrificial logic of the nation state which resides in the order of One and Only (*ekhad*, Hebrew).

According to Aleida Assmann, our universalist conceptions of culture derive from this fixation on the figure of divine provenance that dictates the sense of an exclusive outcome regarding the conduct of life and the nature of reality. The Tower of Babel legend is symptomatic of this projected desire for oneness that underpins most monotheistic concepts of community: "In the original state, the whole earth was united in one language, and this language consisted of one (= invariable?) word; the Hebrew text here uses 'one' in the plural" (Assmann). This paradoxical positioning expressed by the one-in-the-plural encodes the violence of every project that reduces the open-ended nature of collective temporality to a single source of authority, power and meaning. When a community reduces its narratives of being and belonging in this manner, the logic of the sacrifice which underlies this desire to eradicate difference is exposed. Rene Girard reminds us that "there is a unity that underlies not only all mythologies and rituals but the whole of human culture, and this unity of unities depends on a single mechanism, continually functioning because perpetually misunderstood - the mechanism that assures the community's spontaneous and unanimous outburst of opposition to the surrogate victim." (*Violence and the Sacred*). It is not hard to imagine how this sacrificial logic informs the creation of communal identity: its pronounced opposition to the ethnic 'others' who serve as surrogate victims are crucial in the development of nationalist ideologies.

For me, a subject positioned in the constant identity translation between the United States and what used to be Yugoslavia, the psychic space promised by this Internet nation offered a valuable supplement to the mainstream representations of the war between the Western Empire of Human Rights and the Serb Vampire Republic of Milosević which the divine omniscience of our media projected until the October 2000 Belgrade Bulldozer Revolution. The tone of benevolent, post-Kafkaesque humour powers CY as a site where laughter can become a form of a valuable political cure. The parodic power of the site translates the magnitude of the trauma survived by its citizens into a promise of non-nationalism

and non-violence implied by the non-serious nature of the CY as a portable cultural project. According to Linda Hutcheon, parody has been transformed by the post-modern condition into "one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity", where the intentional performative insignificance of the political helps the subject to overcome the burden of past traumas. (*A Theory of Parody*) The CY website is at once a ridiculing imitation of the nation and a promise of overcoming the conflicted legacies of state-induced violence that lead to so many of the Yugoslav tragedies. The lethally overbearing reach of the political into the everyday during the last decade of the past millennium makes the promise of a cyber form of civil society particularly alluring.

Founded on the ninth day of the ninth month of nineteen ninety-nine, CY requires all its citizens to choose a ministry they will head upon application. Some choose to be in charge of cookies, others aspire to the more inventive ministries, like Clark sociology professor Eric Gordy, who is the Secretary for *kajmak*. By choosing one of the least translatable, yet most familiar words (*kajmak* is a deliciously greasy variety of raw cream cheese for post-Yugoslavs) Gordy foregrounds a specific locality of post-Yugoslavia that does not wither away with the state. The taste of *kajmak* can only be imagined by those CY citizens who join the site in solidarity with those who were in close proximity of war and violence. Those Chinese, Indians or Americans who engage in on-line communication with post-Yugoslavs who have been located in the state-in-deconstruction (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) since 1991 are moved by curiosity and sympathy that makes them the perfect citizens of CY.

One of the ways in which CY performs a parody of de-territorialisation is manifest in Article 16 of the Constitution. "When it was founded, CY had no territory. There were 152 founding citizens. When the number of citizens reaches five million, CY will request membership in the United Nations, and soon after CY will request a territory of 20 square meters, anywhere on the Globe, where it will place its server. This will be the official territory, where its DNS entry will be located: <http://www.juga.com>". The gesture towards re-territorialisation present in this image of server-territory is laughable since the server represents a perfect technological extension of the national imaginary as a meeting point of individuals that have a sense of mutual belonging. By projecting the proper name of the Yugoslav collectivity over such digital territory, the gesture evokes the longings of cyber idealists who wish

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for the extension of the technological utopia through a network of possible material relations. Since twenty square meters is a minuscule territorial requirement, this nation is both ridiculous and earnest, as the trappings of power are simultaneously laid bare and appropriated for an apparently innocuous cause. Although all prone to nationalistic outbursts, the cyber citizens of this imaginary state share the love of the non-serious as a potential channel of crossing for the simplest everyday practices: from the exchange of cooking recipes to the attempts at dating. The main 'political' preoccupation these days has been the debate about whether to file for U.N. recognition even before the initially imposed barrier of five million members is exceeded.

This particular version of post-Yugoslavism was imagined by Zoran Balić, who manages the site of this Internet nation, after switching from theatre to computers. Simultaneously cynical and serious about the question of the nation, he reserves the title of Secretary Webmaster for himself. "We are looking for active, committed citizens," he said in an interview, "People capable of founding a new kind of country, a new kind of nationality that had laid bare the trappings of the state and placed its future in the hands of humanity" (Iain S. Bruce, "Birth of a cyber nation", *Scotsman*, September 11, 1999). The proclamation of this non-nationalist nationalism may well be rooted in what Mark Poster sees as new form of messianic discourse incited by the more immediate media of communication, like the Internet. "To the extent that the mode of information restructures language and symbols generally into a configuration that is aptly termed 'virtual reality', the particular form of the messianic, of our hope for justice, must go through this technological circuit and must account for the difference between writing and e-mail, dissemination and the Internet, the parergon and the World Wide Web". (*Cyberspace Textuality*) In comparison to writing, the rate of digital exchange promises an accelerated form of virtuality that has the ability to create utopian effects and transform the very materiality of life by the potential to engage in movement and reach for an outside imagined in the digital domain.

Using the math-based reality of the digital to restructure the realm of human desire, this nationalist project exposes the phantoms of collective imagination for what they are: imaginary constructs utilized by the governments, states and armies to mobilize their citizens for war. This is especially true when governments engage in the tweaking of ethnic boundaries into the new national ones and set out to destroy the multi-ethnic communities, as in the case of the former Yugoslavia. The unveiling of a "particular form of the messianic" has been especially acute in the face of the variability of media representation of the Wars of Yugoslav Succession.

It is true, there were hideous crimes committed both by 'the serbs' and their ethnic rivals, but the historical narratives circulated by the so-called global (Western) media were almost exclusively preoccupied by 'the serbs' and their beastly need to cleanse ethnic others. The question of guilt and responsibility for all war crimes needs to be addressed by an ideal system of human rights and global justice, not by the partial tribunal in The Hague, which is the instrument of 'Western justice'. The narratives spun by the global media in the service of war were pointed at 'the serbs' and their last remaining state of FR Yugoslavia. This excessive representation of 'the serbs' may have backfired in the end. Paul Virilio concludes that the NATO intervention in Kosovo became such a fiasco due to the fact that "when you claim to prosecute a war in the name of 'human rights' - a humanitarian war - you deprive yourself of the possibility of negotiating a cessation of hostilities with your enemy. If the enemy is a torturer, the enemy of the human race, there is no alternative but the extremes of total war and unconditional surrender." (*Strategy of Deception*)

The spread of the gothic imaginary which invokes dismembered bodies, raped women and death camps had been circulated through the global media at the very mention of the word Yugoslavia to account for the distant and alien forms of violence that require strong intervention and peace-keeping. The tweaking of ethnic boundaries into the new national ones and the destruction of multi-ethnic communities has given rise to the rebirth of the

gothic imaginary that circulated around the very mention of the word Yugoslavia. The volatile media representation of 'the serbs' obliges an almost automatic violent intervention of the NATO to put an end to the barbaric acts of their state against its separatist Albanian population. This approach ultimately always excites more conflict and yields more violence between the ethnic communities, providing NATO with an excuse and alibi of military intervention and 'peace keeping'. The sacrificial logic utilized by each of particular form of ethnic chauvinism in the Balkans through the manufacture of 'surrogate victims' was ultimately topped by the NATO's sacrifice of the entire region through remote control bombing of 'the serbs' and the radioactive and chemical contamination of their environment in the coming decades.

The escape into the virtual by the CY citizens may be understood as a simultaneous movement away from this type of destructive politics that would ultimately lead to the complete de-legitimation of the earthly tyranny and a call for a new project of global identity based on what Yugoslavia used to be. Therefore, the posited variability of the CY concept is part of the struggle for control over the mediated representation and digital translation of the images of violence in the former Yugoslavia. CY represents a site that opens up a possibility of different than violent outcomes for those who have been labelled by the sign of the vampire within the global cultural economy. By appropriating Western discourses and technologies of virtuality and imagined community and turning them into a high-tech ruse, CY ends up as the ultimate computer game, a spoof of neo-nation building that could also act as a channel of inter-ethnic reconciliation and dealing with the issues of guilt and responsibility for those who have lost their loved ones.

The mixture of nostalgia for one own youth and the guilt of the survivor who watched the senseless destruction of Yugoslavia since 1991 haunts me as I contemplate entering the site. Laced with the utopian but almost secret hope for the better future of those who will inherit the conflicted and complex legacy of the subjects unwilling or unable to find their identities in the immediate ethnic subcategory after the neo-nationalist takeover during the late nineteen eighties, I resist spending my time on the World Wide Web. This particular imagined community of post-Yugoslavs finds one of its digital articulations in the chat rooms of Cyber Yugoslavia, where those who embrace variability are able to engage in discursive practices which reflect their everyday anguish with the narrow-minded and boring projects of nationalist exclusion.

The imaginary core of my true-real experience as a child growing up in Yugoslavia centres on a vision of Tito-ism, as a deviant form of repressive communism that had positioned its citizens as participants in an unprecedented experiment carried out in the history of mankind. This messianic dimension of revolutionary ideology was constantly compromised by the party policing of its revolutionary gains, and the personality cult of Tito himself. The pseudo-totalitarian iconography produced around him a benevolent, 'almost non-commie commie', paternal metaphor for the liberated masses of the Yugoslav workers and peasantry soon outgrew reality to such an extent that the citizens were forced to either bow to the new idol or subject to irony the excesses of coffee table books like *Tito and the Bees*.

Most of my generation coming of age in the urban cultures of Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Sarajevo and Skopje during the 1970s and 80s had been immersed in further

ironies of simultaneous cultural openness to the Western youth movements and constant political surveillance of the revolutionary vanguard at home. The revolutionary promise is certainly intoxicating to the youth bent on making a difference, but the creation and the continuing existence of the 'new class' of communist officials with almost aristocratic privileges put a significant damper on the enthusiasm. Rock culture and the new media of communication captured the imagination of post-war Yugoslav urban middle class generations as the expression of protest and passion against any form of authoritarian establishment, including the rapidly laughable discourse of Yugoslav political technocrats in the decade before and after Tito's death. The idea of CY seems fully compatible with the everyday living practices of these urban populations after the real-life tragedies of the entire decade of the nineteen nineties in the region.

The activist motivation and attitude radiating from Tim Jordan's *Cyberpower* is also present in the promise of virtual imaginary as a refuge for those whose identifications fit into a particular collective project: "The virtual imaginary always appears to be almost true, because the technology needed to realize a virtual utopia or dystopia always appears to be almost ready". The imaginary promise of fullness, perfection or totality is there to support wishing for an encounter with those who share the familiar bond of belonging to an imaginary collective. To form an identity that will be always 'almost true' through a communications network requires an imaginary leap of language into its transmissible form. The digital revolution enables these 'almost ready' realities to coalesce around speech acts sent via computer into the techno-semantic field of others who imagine the same virtual location.

One of the major nation-building problems of all the former Yugoslavias was the conflict between the Slavic race as a unifier (pan-Slavic sentiment) and multiple religious cultures (Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam) as dividers of the south Slavic and other non-Slavic peoples that inhabit western Balkans. The latest Yugoslav wars represent the triumph of culture as a factor of difference and separation utilized by the unscrupulous post-communists like Milosević, Tujman and others, who were willing to plunge socialist Yugoslavia into a war of territorial division. The portable nature of CY both recuperates culture as a possible unifier of citizens across ethnic lines and enables the realm of the shared everyday practices to figure into this open form of Yugoslav-ism.

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Those identities that did not fit into the ethnically 'cleansed' versions of particular national projects, as well as those whose nationalism was supplemented by the longing for a space of common personal and cultural exchange were de-territorialised after the Yugoslav break-up in 1991. This virtual promise of CY fits perfectly into my own refusal of easy identifications, especially with any form of exclusionary practice and discourse. But, the browsing habits I practice seems so rudimentary that my imagined communities often revolve around trans-cultural encounters with scholars committed to the same habit of cultural crossings and encounters. The Internet's online communities provide a version of the virtual imaginary whose operations

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However, the cyberscape inhabited by disappointingly sparse digital messaging seems to abrogate anything that may be close to the realm of ideology, probably anxious about the return of communist-turned-ethnic war machines that have generated acts of genocidal rage. As is often the case with the Internet, the promise of orgiastic communication between cyber-citizens turns out to be much better than the actual browsing. This digital domain is by definition devoted to the practice of everyday life, which makes it open to criticism regarding questions of those very acts of violence that it would rather escape and forget. Problems of Balkan ethnocides are at least partly rooted in the recurring narratives of communal suffering and revenge which are often misused to mobilize the masses for acts of 'just and righteous' violence. 'The serbs', who have been transformed into the ethnic glue of Yugoslav communality by the modernizing projects of Slavic unification inspired by the revolutionary ideals of the West in the course of the twentieth century, are today finding their last territorial refuge in the rapidly crumbling FR Yugoslavia and the Serbian entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Online communication extends the possibility of creating a new vision of ethnicity in the region, the one that will create openness despite the horror of the entire last decade of the old millennium. The outrages ought not be limited to the phantom of 'the serbs', but examine the legacy of ethnic authoritarianism by opening the channels for the work of mourning to take place. If the Balkans are to overcome its vampiric image and legacy in the global cultural marketplace, the digital domain could provide one of the valuable modes for storing testimonies of the victims and their loved ones, ensuring that the forgetting is not enforced as part of new state entities after the final dissolution is over. The kernel of trauma that informs the sacrificial logic of the One and Only needs to be defused through by the formation of some sort of truth and reconciliation process that will operate as a supplement to the work of international justice tribunals.

The role of culture in this process needs to be redefined away from discourses of exclusion as was the case in the debates of Yugoslav intellectuals since the middle of the nineteen eighties. If there is a legacy of common life during the times of socialist Yugoslavia, there is a need for imaginative recuperation of those everyday practices that distinguished this region during the Cold War period. The variability of the former Yugoslav notion of culture was rooted in practices of ethnic inclusion of difference.