

# TEXTUAL REPRESENTATION, CLASS EXPLOITATION AND THE POSTCOLONIAL: IS THE PROLETARIAT ALWAYS IN TWILIGHT?

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Rade Zinaić's critical reading of a body of work he terms 'Critical Balkanology' (CB) attempts an always difficult but sometimes necessary task in politically-engaged scholarship: to show that a theoretical position which takes an overtly critical stance is nevertheless structured by some of the very ideology it claims to be dismantling. In particular, Zinaić is disturbed by the professed radicalism and postcoloniality of the CB tradition, of which he takes Tomislav Longinović's *Vampire Nation* (2011) as the exemplar. There is a "hegemonic Euro-Atlantic liberal ideology", in Zinaić's reading, underneath this literature's critiques of the orientalisation of the Balkans and the othering of Serbs (Zinaić 2017: 1). By engaging in "struggles over textual representation rather than class exploitation", Zinaić suggests, Longinović's book and similar works view the culture, politics and history of south-east Europe in "identitarian" terms (Zinaić, 2017: 2), even if they might not have set out to. Here, we seem to be at ringside of another bout in one of critical theory's ongoing tournaments: whether class analysis and poststructuralism can ever be reconciled. And yet, by dividing Balkan studies into two camps - an ostensibly class-aware one and an ostensibly non-class-aware one - Zinaić's reading itself forecloses an emergent trajectory of Balkan socio-economic and cultural critique.

## LIBERAL EUROPE, POSTCOLONIAL EUROPE [Subtitle level 1]

Longinović's chief targets in *Vampire Nation* are, firstly, the mythologies of violence within Yugoslav, Bosnian, Serbian and Montenegrin cultural traditions, and, secondly, the neo-imperialism of the Euro-Atlantic order, which, in spreading a "Gothic imaginary" of barbaric Balkan violence, he argues, has created pretexts for further military interventions in the

Yugoslav region (Longinović, 2011: 182). This is far from the unproblematic identification with the “liberal cosmopolitan” vision of “a new European spirit” among intellectuals that Zinaić (2017: 7–8) discerns in the late 1990s writings of the Belgrade Circle, the milieu through which he reads Longinović’s work.<sup>1</sup> Whether its proponents would express as much untempered hope for a “different and distinct Europe” ushering in “a planetary conversation of peoples” (Zinaić, 2017: 7) in the time of Aleksandar Vučić as they did in the time of Slobodan Milošević, Zinaić does not say. Nevertheless, his account in any case dates the “intellectualist [...] middle class” stance of Belgrade’s poststructuralist theorists towards the proletariat as far back as 1981, when Longinović was involved with the poststructuralist journal *Vidici* (Zinaić, 2017: 33). *Vampire Nation*’s sympathies for the Cyber Yugoslavia online community and dismissal of the myths of violence within ethnic nationhood reflect, for Zinaić (2017: 6, 21), a “middle class weariness towards a populist and socialist Serbia” just as, he argues, intellectuals have let their role overshadow that of striking miners and electricians in their accounts of the overthrow of Milošević.

The Europe of *Vampire Nation* is not the Europe that liberals and democrats in South-East Europe looked towards in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, and even Zinaić would agree with this point. Longinović writes of “Europe’s collective genocidal past” (2011: 136) and – as Zinaić acknowledges – “deserves credit for reading the Balkans as part of what Derek Gregory rightly calls ‘the colonial present’” (Zinaić, 2017: 11) rather than as an exception within European traditions of civilisation and liberal peace. To prove that Critical Balkanology’s application of postcolonialism to the Balkans conceals an underlying liberalism, Zinaić’s argument must navigate the obstacle of liberal cosmopolitanism – with its progress narratives and its disavowal of the ongoing legacies of European colonialism and slavery – being a theoretical position for which postcolonial thought itself has little time. It is for the reader to judge how successfully this contradiction is resolved.

Zinaić rightly reminds scholars who have been excited by cyberspace re-creations of Yugoslavia about the “digital divide” that excludes many of the working class, the rural population and the old from participation in the radical, alternative spaces that researchers initially imagined the internet to be (Zinaić, 2017: 30–31). Indeed, these same groups were disproportionately less likely to participate in the everyday consumer culture that Yugoslav Communists fostered in socialist Yugoslavia itself (Patterson, 2012), which suggests that the

patterns of inequality that disproportionately excluded certain groups from the “Yugoslav idea” predate the internet. The temporalities of *who* believed *what* about Europe, class, progress, or nationalism *when* are, indeed, an ever more important context for the historiography of the post-Yugoslav region. We know now how tightly the democratic optimism that attended the end of the Cold War and then the fall of Milošević would be co-opted by neoliberal clientelistic governance, forcing activists in the 2000s and 2010s to cope with a “politics of disappointment” (Greenberg, 2014). However, greater hopes for reconstruction rather than stagnation were still a social fact in their own time.

### **RACE, CLASS AND REPRESENTATION: TOGETHER, NOT APART [Subtitle level 1]**

Against what the article defines as Critical Balkanology, Zinaić (2017: 27–28) juxtaposes the scholarship of Konstantin Kilibarda (2011) and Zala Volčič (2005). These works are seen as “meticulously researched” and “eye-opening” examples of a Balkan studies which acknowledges the structural violence of neoliberal capitalism in Serbia and reveals the exclusionary ideology with which Belgrade intellectuals distance themselves from the rural mentalities they project onto Serb refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. Kilibarda and Volčič are, indeed, two of the scholars to whom my own work on cultural politics and on the socio-economic inequalities of international intervention has been indebted. Volčič’s deconstruction of identity narratives among “the last Yugoslav generation” (Volčič, 2007) places identification and life histories at the centre of cultural politics, questioning how Yugoslav Communism sought to create bonds of identification with the common state and what became of the related experiences and memories after Yugoslavia was destroyed. Kilibarda’s research on the racialised identifications within Yugoslav Non-Alignment, meanwhile, integrates race and whiteness into the “imaginative geography” of state socialism and its aftermath more explicitly than almost anything else then published on the Yugoslav region (Kilibarda, 2010: 27). Its attention to the global politics of race anticipates, and has inspired, other scholars (including myself) who only made such a commitment more recently. And yet, Kilibarda, Volčič *and* Longinović all seem to me to be part of the same project of Critical Balkanology as I have understood it. For answering the questions that most trouble me in my own research, their work does not fall into two separate camps at all. Or, at least,

their work does not seem to fall into two separate camps when I view it from my own position as a white, British scholar with no heritage from the region who has sought to show that south-east Europe and my own society are embedded in the same transnational processes (within asymmetric global capitalist structures that centuries of my own country's colonial violence did much to shape). All three have used Balkan adaptations of Orientalism, at different scales, as a lens for contextualising the constructions of "self" and "other" that past and present intellectuals and cultural workers in the region have made. All three help me explain how everyday cultural artefacts and individuals' self-narratives reveal contestations over national identity and other collective identifications. Am I siphoning the politics out of all three scholars' approaches in placing them together in order to extend a conceptual framework I had started to form before I even set foot as an inexperienced postgraduate in a Croatian library? Trained in an academy where the purpose of studying global peripheries was originally to put 'area knowledge' at the service of empire, it is not for me to promise that I am not doing so; and it is for those more deeply embedded in post-Yugoslav political struggle than I am to judge whether or not I have done so.

The assumption on which Zinaić's article seems to rest, nevertheless, is that the analysis of textual representation and class exploitation are incompatible. Such a conclusion would have surprised Stuart Hall, the central figure of the British cultural studies tradition through whose work I learned about the politics of representation in a postcolonial context (Hall, ed. 1997) at the same time as learning that South-East European theorists were applying similar arguments to the Balkans. The very purpose of Hall and his collaborators in making Gramsci their foundation for contemporary cultural critique was to show that struggles over textual (and other forms of) representation exposed the dynamics of class exploitation in their full insidiousness and power. What Longinović can contribute to a critique of class exploitation in the Balkans is – and here his work and Kilibarda's operate in coalition, not apart – his overt critique of 'whiteness' in at least some identity-making projects in the region. Many authors, from Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden (1992) onwards, have viewed Slovenes' othering of Serbs in the late 1980s as an ethnicised form of Orientalism. *Vampire Nation* made the rare move, even rarer in its time, of explicitly reading Slovenian 'nesting orientalism' as a Slovenian identification with *whiteness* itself.

With this hinge, we can acknowledge the politics of European cultural racism at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, as Slovenia aspired to be recognised as *inside* the space already being materially and discursively constructed as ‘Fortress Europe’. The utopian cosmopolitan ‘Europe’ of Slovenian, Croatian and liberal Serbian identifications in the last years of Yugoslavia was also a fortified and securitised space: very soon, cosmopolitan ‘Europe’ would be trying to fortify itself against the export of instability from ‘the Balkans’ and ‘their’ wars as well. Such European and global formations of race help to explain class inequality in socialist and post-socialist Slovenia. It is no coincidence that Slovenia’s proletariat was disproportionately composed of semi-racialised internal migrants from the poorer south-east of Yugoslavia. Nor is it coincidental that Albanians, Bosnian Muslims and Roma were chief among the 28,000 inhabitants who, after Slovenian independence, found themselves ‘erased’ from residency registers and could not access citizenship on the Slovenian state’s ethnicised terms (Gržinić, 2005: 83–84). Thus excluded, their precarity in the informal economy was all the greater. At least until the global financial crisis, south-east European studies summoned an aspirational Europe far more than the dystopian ‘Europe’ that critical race theory and decolonial scholarship bring into view. Indeed, *Vampire Nation* itself could go much further in its problematisation of race, e.g. regarding Serbs’ own identifications with whiteness, or the colonial fantasies of ‘race’ and blackness that persist in Serbia even alongside solidarities with other oppressed subjects around the globe. Still, it can complement, rather than pulling away from, class analysis in explaining the structural inequalities of the Yugoslav region.

‘Race’, indeed, has long enabled the interests of capital to divide the working class. In US labour history, for instance, migrants from southern and eastern Europe arrived as ‘conditionally white’ but were offered assimilation if they hardened the boundaries between themselves and unambiguously racialised Others. In the course of the early 20th century, this promise of assimilation militated against most of this largely working-class diaspora finding a collective common cause with African-Americans, Chinese labourers, and others who were clearly racialised as non-white (Roediger, 2005). Does Hall’s yoking together of class and race analysis work as well in a Balkan context as it does for Britain? South-east European studies (beyond just substituting ‘ethnicity’ for ‘race’) has rarely even been able to pose that question; critical Balkanology, with a smaller or larger C, creates an articulation where it can and must be asked. As soon as one views class exploitation on a global level, the politics of ‘race’ are

inescapable. One cannot conceive of the struggles of the Serbian proletariat *without* that global level at a time when European, Chinese and Emirati capital are enclosing working-class Belgrade; when the politics of populism, xenophobia and protectionism within the EU are leaving Serbia among the border-guard states charged with turning back a new underclass of migrants and refugees from the Global South; and when the global political economy sets Serbian and other Balkan workers in competition for jobs against the working classes of other countries. Understanding class exploitation *beyond* the boundaries of nation-states requires a Balkanology capable of theorising race as well as nation in explaining the stratifications of class – and, here at least, the contributions of all three scholars Zinaić discusses work together, not apart.

## ENDNOTES [Subtitle level 1]

<sup>1</sup> The Belgrade Circle, indeed, published an earlier version of *Vampire Nation as Vampires Like US* in 2005, and was the driving force behind Dušan Bjelić and Obrad Savić's *Balkan as Metaphor* collection in 2002 (Bjelić & Savić, eds., 2002), a key text in the development of postcolonial and Saidian studies of the Balkans.

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