Post-Socialist Wars and the Masculinist Backlash

di

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<u>Abstract:</u> The war in Ukraine may be redrawing the contours of our world after the exhaustion not only of the Cold War, but also of the post-Cold War period (not cold anymore, if it ever was). Putin accuses Ukrainians of being Nazis, while he supports and welcomes worldwide neo-fascists and far-right politicians. In the light of recent events and considering the growth of nuclear weapons' role in defense strategy, the author analyses the links between remilitarisations, authoritarianism, retrieving of democracy, and the backlash of antifeminism and misogyny. We need to prevent wars in anticipation, writes the author, but they cannot be stopped with the same logic and excessive of violence because they are part of a masculinist militarist "culture" that needs to be deconstructed and prevented.

> "The worst thing about communism … is what comes after".
> Adam Michnik

The war in Ukraine may be redrawing the contours of our world, after the exhaustion not only of the Cold War, but also of the post-Cold War period (not cold anymore if it ever was) from 1989 till now. Putin's onslaught on the former Soviet republic that once had, like Belarus, a seat in the UN during the socialist period, is motivated by nationalism and is expansionist, denying among other things the rule of law and international law – like any "illiberal democracy". Putin accuses

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Ukrainians of being nazis, while he supports and welcomes worldwide neo-fascists and far-right politicians, from Le Pen to Orbán, from Trump to Salvini to Zemmour. Who is nazi or fascist here? And what to do about this upside-down language where words acquire opposite meanings? In preparing the Ukrainian crisis from the Maidan revolution and separatist formations in the Donbass in 2014, Putin has developed an upturned version of the history of Russia and Ukraine that tends to deflate the latter country as a nation-state. His is a Russian-centric discourse, asserting that since the fall of the USSR, Russians have been victims of a genocide by others, in this case Ukrainians. In a straight reference to Stalin, Putin wears a historian's garb, and has been minimalizing at length the nationhood of Ukraine. In Putin's history then, Ukrainians would actually be Russians. There is a comparable but *bonzai* example in Montenegro, where parts of the population consider themselves Montenegrians, while another part of the same consider themselves as Serbs, and are supported in this by Serbia and the Serbian orthodox church. The church is split as much as the population.

This state of affairs, as the Ukrainian war now threatens to last for a longer time, only adds to our epoch's epistemological confusion, which must be added to the desperate attempts to restore patriarchy as it once was. During socialism, namely, women had a decent level of women's human rights, and they lost a lot with the capitalist turn. There is an obvious active *coincidence* between re-masculinisation, resorting to ever harder authoritarianism and the retrieving of democracy (or its reduction to mere voting, to formalism, and the exhaustion of representation), remilitarisation, the backlash of antifeminism and misogyny, of different kinds of violence on women, and the worldwide assault, unsupported by research, on gender and feminist studies, all within the *epochal right neoliberal turn* of the whole political scene since at least thirty years ago, or since the end of the Cold War.

This backlash has to do with a nostalgia that has in common the quest for infinite resources – for a time when fossil fuels could be extracted from the earth without having to worry about mass extinction (because of the ecological or climate blind spots), and work could be extracted from women without having to worry about their protest. But times have changed.

Today, as patriarchy has readapted again and a backlash against women has been triggered, there is also a backlash against *the conditions of knowing* women's condition. As Joan W. Scott writes,

> This backlash [against gender and women's studies] is cause for concern, but it also testifies to the fact that the work of denaturalizing gender norms carried out by these studies is perceived as a real threat by the enemies of social change. [...] France, where the Macron government, seeking to undermine the growing electoral power of the right, condemned studies on discrimination, gender and intersectionality as foreign imports and considered them in contradiction with the universalist political principles of the Republic. In the United States, wherever Republicans control state legislatures, laws now prohibit teaching related to 'social justice', namely the history of slavery and the analysis of contemporary racial politics, but also studies on the evolution of norms in terms of gender and sexuality. In all these cases, a hysterical indictment was

launched against the word 'gender', a notion considered satanic, degenerate, contrary to the very foundations of the State and of human society[1].

Yugoslavia and Ukraine

Although Yugoslavs have a specific experience of the socialist period between WWII and the fall of the Berlin wall, news of a war/civil war in a former USSR state resonates with anxiety for them and brings back tormented memories. Yugoslavia did not belong to the Warsaw Pact, but to the Movement of Nonaligned countries, although this piece of information seems to have become "useless history" today. Ukraine's conflict looks familiar. During the series of wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, i wrote a paper "*Une guerre de fondation en Europe?*"[2], in which i said that Europe (and the EU) was being (re)constructed through foundational wars at its eastern periphery. Not only where these wars founding for the new separate post-Yugoslav national states being established in the Balkans, they were foundational for a Europe in the making too. Europe was then at a stage needing a further push in the integration of the EU.

It had not managed to give itself a European people, citizenship, and agency or a sense of unity, and it had no political dimension but at most an economical (market) one. So that defining oneself by an *outer constitutive other* seemed then to be the right recipe, by which the new emerging countries were set into a pre-ordained "transition" that was expected to follow the western blueprint, since they were supposed to be "lagging behind". At the same time, the new "independent" national states in the making (that *had* also *been* national states within the Yugoslav federation) were striving for sovereignty but were paradoxically also hoping to join the EU (thus submitting the same sovereignty) in order to move away from the previous Yugoslav construction[3]. This was presented as independence and liberation from the Yugoslav yoke. What struck me at the time was the element of *war involved in the redefinition and construction of the EU*. It was a scary prospect. The multiple partition of Yugoslavia ended tragically for its population throwing it several decades backwards, killing at least 250.000 people in Bosnia alone[4], dispersing deported or fleeing populations and destroying the economy, while the inter-

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[1] See *Gender Backlash*, in "Analyse Opinion Critique", March 8, 2022. My translation of the French version of Scott's paper originally published in "Analyse Opinion Critique".

[2] *Une guerre de fondation en Europe?*, in Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp, Axel Clevenot, Maria Pia Tschopp (eds.), *Asile - Violence - Exclusion en Europe*, Groupe de Genève et Cahiers de la Section des Sciences de l'Education de l'Université de Genève, 1994, pp. 5-10. New edition : *Une guerre de fondation en Europe ?*, in "(Re)Penser l'exil ", Revue en ligne, n. 3, www.exil-ciph.com, 11 september 2013, pp. 387-395; see online: http://issuu.com/exil.ciph/docs/repenserlexil_no3_part1.

[3] So far (2022) two former Yugoslav republics, Slovenia, and Croatia, have joined the EU, while the others have filed a demand to join.

[4] The number of dead in the 1990-decade in Yugoslavia is in dispute, because numbers are part of the nationalist stances of each party in conflict. Or, as Vanessa Pupavac writes: "It is no surprise that the ethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia has included disputes over the number of victims of each group." *Disputes over war casualties in former Yugoslavia*, in "Radical Statistics", https://www.radstats.org.uk/no069/article3.htm.

nationally and juridically illegal intervention of the "international community"[5] and NATO after ten years of predominantly local civil wars produced an explosive *neither-peace-nor-war* situation which lasts to this day in the Balkans without having solved any problems[6]. But it is different with the Ukrainian war, not the least because Russia is a nuclear power. The Yugoslav wars, remaining of a limited regional outreach in spite of the unfortunate NATO intervention in 1999, did not look as a threat to the rest of Europe or the world. In this sense, they cannot be compared to the threatening and explosive expanse of the Ukrainian war in 2022. But in many of their structural and functional features, they look much alike, especially to the local populations. They both immediately produced nation-building (a quick overnight process), violence at all levels, reciprocal nationalisms (nationalisms are only happy together), identitarianisms, militarisation, and masculinisation. In that respect they are comparable, except for the scale.

In considering the Yugoslav 1990s wars as well as the one in Ukraine nowadays (and the series preceding it), traditional political science would have it that contemporary and today well recognised national states had been formed in the 19th century out of empires (Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian), and that this is the origin of understandable nationalisms which could be equated with patriotism. During WWII nationalism had in principle been profoundly discredited because of nazism, a moral-political disposition that lasted on the basis of antifascism during the whole Cold War. Thereafter, with the exception of India and Pakistan that appeared as nation states after WWII, most postcolonial independences over the course of the 1960s were driven and consolidated by nationalisms of a new kind that appeared as positive and liberatory. But along the same line of thinking, *today's nationalisms*, for example those at the beginning of the Arab Spring, were seen from the west as belated and ill placed. With the end of the Cold War (1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin wall) and with 1991 (the establishment of Russia and satellites on the ruins of the USSR) *divisive non-inclusionary nationalisms* reappeared as a result of conflicts or were provoked, this time in Yugoslavia and its successor countries as well as in post-soviet states. At that time in the 1990s, one might have hoped that, after the bloody episode of the Yugoslav wars, the inclusion into the EU would calm down local ethnicisms and nationalisms under the umbrella of a higher office (the EU). But this is not what happened. On the contrary, as

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[5] "International community" regularly denotes the west + Japan and Australia. Meanings are never questioned in the language of the latter, a hegemonic language.

[6] While the Warsaw Pact was dissolved after the fall of the Berlin wall, NATO was not, much against any peace-loving logic. It supported the triumphalism of the west and of capitalism regarding the "east" and to socialism, and it remained expansionist, which was felt as a provocation by Russia, also because some former Warsaw pact countries joined NATO. Russia demanded that the expansion to the east stopped. Most wars are accompanied by a civil war, recognized or not. In Yugoslavia coming apart, the term "civil war" was proscribed in official discourse, because those wars were *constitutive and foundational of the new nations* in becoming. There is a parallel in official Pakistan rejecting the at first mainly Indian term "partition," because that civil war (a term equally rejected) was constitutive of the new nation as well. But we know today that the partition of 1946-48 was a civil war in India. The euphemism for Yugoslavia is now "western Balkans." No Yugoslav country claims the name anymore, therefore I think we are allowed to call "Yugoslavia" again that past country, but not the successor countries.

nationalisms continued running wild in former European socialist and eastern countries of various origins, and as they became associated with far-right politics, they also spread to the west, to the EU. This was also a systemic worldwide feature and tendency, as nationalisms, or putting one's country "first", spread to India, Brazil, the USA, China, etc. This process of fragmentation was and is parallel to globalisation in the guise of the accomplishment of the *universalisation of the national state* as territory-based domination, or it is its flipside. It includes all aspects of integration, synergy and sharing of activities technological, financial, market, cultural, etc., and produces a kind of global political temper that is locally translated by identitarianisms on the basis of different features (religion, language, belonging, etc.)[7].

So, there is the "specificity" of the *acceleration machine that wars represent*. Wars have enhanced these processes, which run at different paces in different countries. The theory about the belatedness of (post)socialist countries in nation-building is *flawed*. It produced the concept of *transition* demanded of postcolonial and post-socialist countries alike (with the test by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the "international community's" policing). But there is no specific difference with western countries and their history, considering the brutality and violence *at any time* in the process of introducing capitalism and then its new form, neo-liberalism.

The years following 1989, a knowledge-regime converter through the prism of gender

The 1990's signed the end of the Cold War and were particularly significant years in Europe, while a similar struggle continues in Asia. Some political thinkers and theoreticians at that time predicted the end of the nation state. This is however not what happened. The nation state adapted some of its features and paid allegiance to the corporate international market. The *national* state *is being reinvented* every time that a new unit appears on the world stage, and there are more and more candidates under these new circumstances. Ukraine too, like the Yugoslav republics and autonomous regions, had been the member of a federation. But the higher office – the federation – having disintegrated by the end of the previous epoch of "Cold War," left no other option for the populations stranded within a massive economic crisis overnight, than to resort to and identify with the next possible "umbrella" – the nation. The only one that was offered. It suddenly received a much heavier and identitarian "blood", "soil", etc., definition than in the finishing period[8]. This has been the birthplace of the *new post-socialist nations*, generally

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[7] See Jean-François Bayart, La guerre d'Ukraine, passage tragique de l'empire à l'État-nation, "Analyse Opinion Critique", March 15, 2022.

[8] Socialist Yugoslavia did not propose or encourage the concept of a "Yugoslav nation" at all. Yugoslavia was to be a paradoxical federation of nations and/or republics, but it was supposed to represent only an "administrative" "secular" loyalty or patriotism that would keep safe national identifications. The latter were given nominal republics and official expression in folklore or through the arts, except for Bosnia-Herzegovina that was "pluri-ethnic," and was therefore literally torn to pieces by the Dayton agreement.

thought to be belated according to the western 19th century pattern, as the norm to be caught-up with. While the nation generally takes its gendered vocabulary from obstetrics, the post-socialist nations took in addition their whole lexicon from older *engaged liberating nationalisms that had been masculinist, but had also been anti-colonial and anti-imperial*. They did not reproduce all the latter's features, to the extent that some of them were right wing but claimed being liberatory. The gendered "obstetrics" language hammered down birth, origin, blood and soil, hierarchy, "priority", and gender inequality. "Na*rod*", people and nation, in Slavic languages, comes from "*rod*iti," to give birth ("rod", Lat. *genus*), much like "nation" from the Latin verb *nascere*, to be born. *Nationalism*, which now comes in a package with *militarisation*, also purposely reinforces patriarchy.

On the occasion of the Russian war on Ukraine, Fabienne Brugère and Guillaume Le Blanc write:

> Perhaps, in order to analyse wars, is it necessary to understand them both as high-intensity wars declared by nations headed by men against other nations according to a principle of violation of sovereignty with such obvious masculinist overtones that this is not even worth recalling. But wars are also of low intensity against women, of enemy and one's own territory, if we judge by all these historical examples (Korean women for the Japanese, German women for the Russians). Women had become the vulnerable body of the population to be invaded and conquered as much as the element of comfort enlisted in the service of men who can, in the garb of soldiers, often rape with impunity…Russia is waging war on Ukraine and this invasion of a close, independent, and sovereign country, where the Ukrainian and Russian languages are mixed, has something unrepresentable as we are on the edge of the human. But precisely, this unrepresentable, this brink of the human, is male sovereignty performing it by exhibiting itself in its purest attribute - war. The war against a country, by throwing the civilian populations into the subways, unfortunately makes the nation rhyme with the *hardest* patriarchy[9].

As Belgrade historian Dubravka Stojanović explains:

> [Patriarchy and nationalism] are inseparable. Nationalism sees the nation as an extended family, as a blood relationship of its members in which there must be intelligible roles. And above all, it must be clear who the patriarch and leader is, because only he can achieve his goals and provide for his family. That is why any nationalism must be misogynous, because the very appearance of women, let alone a demand for equality, would destroy that authoritarian pyramidal creation in which the hierarchy is not questioned but obeyed. I am ready to go so far as to say that *nationalism was invented as a means of maintaining patriarchy*, as well as a means of gaining power, strengthening it, preserving it… That is, nationalism is used as a way to immobilise society, for development never to come, to stifle all modernity… [M]aintaining the patriarchal order was one of the strong motives for the disintegration of Yugoslavia, because within closed national constructions this social order is far easier to maintain than in a complex multi-ethnic, multi-confessional community. In essence, it poses a constant challenge to a closed society and a patriarchal matrix[10].

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[9] Fabienne Brugère, Guillaume Le Blanc, *Un peuple des femmes s'unit contre la guerre*, in "Analyse Opinion Critique", March 9, 2022.

[10] Darko Vujica, *Intervju sa Dubravkom Stojanović: Ništa nije večno, pa tako ni nacije* (*An interview with Dubravka Stojanović: Nothing is everlasting, and neither are the nations*), in "Prometej", 31-1-

The many thresholds in history

As opposed to earlier anticolonial and defensive nationalisms in the 1960s, these new post-Cold War nationalisms are regressive, and often tend to be expansive. They are never inclusive. They are also confusing, because they use a vocabulary established during the previous period (that of the Cold War and the "30 glorious years"), while inverting political meanings. They tend wanting to make the most of two different or indeed incompatible worldviews, without signalling the *epistemological shift* that is taking place.

I used to try, in my work, to identify *significant historic thresholds of shifting epochs*, those in which big historic changes of paradigm happen to last through the next period: alterations in the organisation of production relationships, of epistemological standards and patterns, etc. Epochs will be remembered and named by such *thresholds* that are better seen *a posteriori*:

- *One such threshold, that of the Cold War,* was inaugurated after WWII, and a binary divide of the world was installed to last for over forty years worldwide, until the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, with its corresponding black-and-white epistemological regime, values, and vocabulary. What was black for the ones was white for the others, and those exclusive "truths" (of capitalism vs. socialism, or "west" vs. "east") were held as reciprocally incompatible but actually complementary in their mechanisms. That epistemological regime crumbled with the wall. At that time, a third party between the two blocks was the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) and various Bandung and similar options, but one could identify several other "middle ways" too, that i shall skip (for example, women as a *destituting force*, or peasants etc. – as alternative subjectivities). This aspect is complicated by the fact that *two distinct thresholds* dovetail at this point: the 1989 "end" of the post WWII Cold War *and* of the socialist period in central and east-European countries (regardless here of any substantial difference between the two) meets the belated, boiling down effect, of the (first) end of historic colonialism in the 1960s. The important formal decolonisation of third world countries mainly in the 1960s, which was the ground of the Nonaligned movement, did not substantially dawn upon the minds in the west/north, *until this present time*, so that these two historic segments become contemporaneous without ever having been historically simultaneous. The threshold of western modernity and that of 1989 were squeezed together[11]. Since the end of the Cold War, Europe has sought to rebuild itself, first through wars on its outer edges. Since then, nationalisms have returned (starting with Europe), exacerbated, fragmented, in the proliferation of identity movements. Europe was not really built taking into account its colonial past that was excluded from collective memory. And it made the same mistakes in relation to eastern Europe too, after 1989: the latter was integrated as if it had come from another time and not from a

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2022,   http://www.prometej.ba/clanak/intervju/intervju-sa-dubravkom-stojanovic-nista-nije-vecno-pa-tako-ni-nacije-5153.

[11] My paper *The Gendered Politics of Memory. The Women's Court in Sarajevo 2015*, at the Memory studies association conference in Seoul, postponed because of the covid pandemic.

parallel modernity, that of socialism. So, the "real feel" about these two is very much that they come together, much as (western) modernity pervaded colonies with all the brutality and violence of colonisation. This will influence also the post-1989 period, in the sense that the experience of formerly socialist countries will become more and more comparable to that of the colonies. The two processes mature together. Just as there were two twin modern projects, there were these two – *the post-socialist and postcolonial situation* - pressed a posteriori into one real-feel formatted memory. The EU was not able to avail itself of a social and political project with regard to them or to assume a collective self-representation. The unity of the people or the nation, which intervenes in all collective self-understanding, ignores the "others", be they included or excluded.

- *But since 1989 we have had a completely new situation* and epistemological construction for some thirty years at least, a situation lasting until the Ukrainian war of 2022. It is still to be seen whether we shall have a reconfiguration or a new epoch identified from here on, but we might. The *epistemological regime* is changing right now. After 1989, we also embarked on generalised *confusionism* in political language[12]. This is not limited to post-socialist countries, but extended to all. Over the past thirty years, a rapid and radical desemanticisation of the simplistic black and white political vocabulary pertaining to the Cold War worldwide from left to right, a loss of meaningful landmarks, was followed by the attribution of new meanings. Since collective memories were erased and replaced, these were now "opposite" meanings out of context. General amnesia of selective memories was introduced.

Loss of cognitive landmarks and the epistemological turn

The *loss of cognitive landmarks* struck everyone like a gnoseological curse after 1989, both in the spaces of former socialism as well as in "former capitalism", now disproportionately triumphant. But it was and is particular and probably distinct in the (post)socialist world that "restored" capitalism as a "homecoming", while having *not much factual memory* or connection to any real capitalist past[13]. The countries of socialist revolutions in Europe, both USSR and Yugoslavia, imagined having reconnected with their due history, now ridden of the socialist narrative, now painted as a deviation. The post-socialist "memory" of a former but undocumented capitalism, now thought to have been restored, was the repository of a wild post-socialist imagination open to additions, fantasies, conspiracy theories, and escapist dreams. Words could now be made to mean the exact opposite of what they signified in the "epistemologically secure" Cold War era.

Other combinations of meanings were possible too in a world where, essentially, the relation between the political left and right had been disturbed. This anomic

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[12] Rada Iveković, *Migration, New Nationalisms and Populism. An epistemological perspective on the closure of rich countries*, Birkbeck Law Press, Routledge, London 2022.

[13] Czechoslovakia had been an industrialized country even before WWII, but Yugoslavia or Russia and Soviet countries, mainly rural, were not. "Memories" of a happy past capitalism were inbuilt into new national narratives after 1989.

and ectoplasmic epistemological transformation, which did not respond to one algorithm alone, pervaded not only popular culture, but also scholarly texts, and could also stem from individuals who would then feature as "influencers" or *maîtres à penser*. They would all proffer their own "truths", which would govern their own world. As Pavle Rak shows, at more than thirty years of distance between the Yugoslav and the Russian-Ukrainian war, there is a common pattern and a parallelism between the Russian and Serbian constructions of "our" political truth[14]. Both Milošević's Serbia in the 1990s and Putin's Russia now denied wars and crimes they committed. It is always the others that are guilty, and true, other players in the same nationalist games in both countries committed similar crimes too. So, Putin, like Milošević at that time, accuses the others of being nazis or ustashas, and proceeds with besieging and destroying cities (Mariupol or Kyiv; Sarajevo), supposedly "preventing" the genocide of Russians or of Serbs. Putin had declared he would never invade Ukraine, but when he did, he prohibited the word "invasion". It was not war, but a "special operation".

Twin ideologies of a "Serbian world" (of a greater Serbia) and of a "Russian world" are knitting a common net of "all Serbs in one country" and "all Russians, including Ukrainians and Belarusians within one state in the making", against the menacing rest of the western world[15]. WWII was never considered concluded by its warlords because waging a war keeps a nationalist leader in power, so Putin's Russians "continued" the Great Patriotic War, and Milošević's Serbia continued fighting WWII enemies – the ustashas fifty years later. Reciprocally, Croats too fought a past war, against the chetniks. And since, under such misuse of history and memory, the past war was never over, a present or future war too would have to continue forever. Of course, Putin "worked" on the history of the Ukrainian war also from "within" and since at least 2014, when the bordering territories of Donetsk and Lugansk were singled out. He produced a written mythic narrative and a historical theory about Russia's heritage all the way into its present reconquering wars, shown as the recuperation of old national fame and national territory, all the way into Ukraine as the cradle of Russia. Likewise, Kosovo was painted by Milošević and Serbian nationalists as the cradle of Serbia. And the "nazi character" of Ukraine since WWII was hammered down, forgetting to explain that, after Stalin's famine imposed on the country in 1932-33 (following the earlier famine from 1922-23) when millions of people starved to death in several federal units but in Ukraine in particular, Hitler's invasion there had been experienced as liberation.

Rewriting history and memory

The purposeful distortion of history, with Putin, goes all the way down to changing the meanings of words. "Fascist" and "nazi" has now come to denote, in his vocabulary, "the west". As Pavle Rak says, "Truth is here a metaphysical, not a

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[14] Pavle Rak, *O nacizmu, neonacizmu, nacionalnom jedinstvu i istinozborcima*, https://pescanik.net/o-nacizmu-neonacizmu-nacionalnom-jedinstvu-i-istinozborcima/

[15] Sonja Biserko, *Serbia between two worlds*, "Helsinki Bulletin", n. 161, March 2022,
 http://www.helsinki.org.rs

gnoseological category". And Putin's army is now to "liberate" Ukraine of the neo-nazis and junkies, through the "special operation". The same narrative thrives in Serbia, and in Croatia (though with opposite signs) and elsewhere. Regardless the fact that there have actually been neo-nazis (though not as a majority) in these countries during WWII, the "others" are always essentialized as such. Categories and stereotypes are never questioned. Such cognitive insecurity wakes up nationalisms. The philosopher Radomir Konstantinović calls it the *palanka*[16]*,* a peculiar spectral condition of the either-or, of the misty ideal that remains unfulfilled and imaginary, a reality pined for but inaccessible. We have been at such a threshold since the brutal impediment of the *Compromesso storico* in Italy[17]. The post-socialist and the postcolonial condition meet the on-going process of the collapse of industrial capitalism and of bourgeois society in the west. This start morphing into more spectral forms, such as financial capitalism and the fragmentation of a negative kind of *post-tourism cosmopolitanism* of social disorientation marked by selfish individualism. Identifying such processes in his country, Radomir Konstantinović, equating nationalism and nazism in the sixties, wrote critically about Serbian nazism (which he analyses, in spite of being a Serb himself). *Nationalism or nazism are possible with any nation* according to him. Having mainly in mind populism in the Balkans and especially Milošević's nationalist populism during the war-decade through the 1990s, he pinpointed this situation.

Fascisms

Konstantinović's work is of epochal significance for the constitution of a necessary new *post-1989 (post-socialist) and postcolonial epistemology*, which is only now in painstaking construction. There is a term (*palanka*) by which the author names such a situation in which we are not completely citizens nor subjects, but we could be. "Parochialism" exists only as the *spirit* of the *palanka,* as it is unattainable. *Either* the subject can give itself a political dimension, be anchored in citizenship and act towards emerging from the crisis; *or*, on the contrary it [the would-be subject] can plunge into war and violence overnight. This is what happened. It is also a matter of translation or understanding: "Here, the expression (language) is not a function of creating, it is a function of possessing. The problem with possessing is the highest problem of that spirit which, indeed – always in contradiction with its leanings – doesn't want what it wishes and rejects what it calls; … language can only be a function of possessing, or else it cannot be"[18]. *Palanka* (provincialism) is about a crisis in modernity that eludes definitions, cannot be materialised, a state which is paradoxically the possibility of all possibilities and which is

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[16] Radmonir Konstantinović, *Filosofija palanke,* NOLIT, Beograd 1981; English version: *The Philosophy of Parochialism*, edited and with an Introduction by Branislav Jakovljevic, Translation by Ljiljana Nikolic and Branislav Jakovljevic, Michigan University Press 2021.

[17] "The historic compromise", in the 1970s, was the agreement between the Communist Party of Italy and the Christian Democrat Party to overcome the division of the country. The Christian Democrat leader Aldo Moro was killed to prevent this agreement.

[18] *Filosofija palanke*, op. cit., Serbian edition p. 105, my translation.

therefore potentially violent. One of the possible results of the spirit of *palanka* can be some kind of (post-)fascism or nazism. There are some similarities but *not identity* between historic fascism and post-fascisms today. And it comes in degrees. According to Rastko Močnik[19], Umberto Eco[20], or Leonardo Boff[21], fascism is present as a *permanent possibility* that will materialise under adequate conditions. Authors like Radomir Konstantinović and Klaus Theweleit share this opinion[22]. Močnik writes that such suitable conditions, in the case of weak and dependent former socialist states (as post-Yugoslav countries), are particularly receptive to fascism – *ideologically,* because they have inbuilt fascist elements (such as racism, nationalism, national collectivism, the cult of power, hate, anti-intellectualism, etc.) in their basis; and *economically and politically*, because they were eager to join as subordinate within the "world order" in the making. Liberalism unable to resolve its contradictions, as was the case at the partition of Yugoslavia, is prone to embark on fascism under conditions of general confusionism. The new political class in the making since the fall of socialism is opposed to any antifascist tradition because the latter is now attributed to much hated "communism", while that political class goes *primarily for anticommunism* undisturbed by the banner of fascism, which is not always ideologically recognisable to them. The same is true of what others have called populism. When they explicitly condemn fascism to produce more confusionism, they do so for a European audience because they sense that it is expected, whereby they equate socialism-communism-stalinism *and* fascism. *Any* antifascist position is therefore characterised as communism, says Močnik[23].

Series of wars and civil wars[24], displacing knowledge, and useless history

On the eve of WWI, two kinds of imperialisms had come to hand. But it appears also that the *new* unforeseen formation of a series of (new) nations today, which materialized at the fragmentation of federations (Yugoslavia; USSR), popped up after 1989, and not in the 19th century. In the third world's (today "global south's") second wave of postcolonial sovereign states emerging, such dismantled (post)colonial formations were of a different kind than those of the 1960s[25]. By that

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[19] Rastko Močnik, *Extravagantia II, Koliko fašizma?* ("*How Much Fascism?*"), Studia Humanitatis Minora, Ljubljana 1995.

[20] Umberto Eco, *Ur-Fascism*, "The New-York Review of Books", June 22, 1995, https://www .pegc .us /archive /Articles /eco_ur -fascism.pdf; *Il fascismo eterno*, La Nave di Teseo, Milano 2017.

[21] Leonardo Boff, *Neo-Fascism: A Worldwide Wave*, "Germ" (2018), http://www.mondialisations .org /php /public /art .php ?id =41907 &lan =EN.

[22] Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, 1-2, Basel-Frankfurt-a/M, Roter Stern Verlag 1977-1978.

[23] Močnik, *Extravagantia*, op. cit.

[24] According to Claudio Pavone's study of the Italian case, a war and a civil war come together. I extend this to most if not all countries. Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1991. According to him, the Italian WWII was threefold: one of "national liberation" or "patriotic" against the German invaders, a "civil" war between Italian fascists and antifascists, and a "class war" between revolutionary components and bourgeois classes.

[25] India was an early bird (1946-48) of the 1960s first wave.

time (the end of the 1980s), some theoreticians had announced the end of the nation or national state, which proved wrong (J. Habermas, N. Fraser, etc.), but the error became visible somewhat later. After the fall of the Berlin wall, according to Slavoj Žižek, we had a conflict between "fascist tendencies" on one side and "regular representative bourgeois democracies" on the other[26]. This became best visible in some east European countries among others. It is true however that the nation now mutated within this new wave of nation-candidates because the understanding, the functionality and perimeter of *sovereignty* had changed and moved out of Europe, basically to Asia. Wars and civil wars in Africa had not receded although new attempts had been made, brutally prevented, to overcome the colonial constellation. While nation states in Asia suddenly fostered modern sovereignty, which may not have been their first direct local heritage, making the centre(s) of the now polycentric world shift to that continent economically. It seems that Europe is today more at risk than Asia or Africa or even Latin America, though probably not more than the USA, from the confrontation of new fascisms and a more traditional bourgeois right, in a non-radical front.

The epistemological question

The question that then arises is: "What and how to learn from the past that we haven't learned so far?" This worry puts again, and necessarily, epistemology at the centre of our inquiry. Not only because we are "lost in translation" and have misplaced any secure gnoseologic guidance, but also because the knowledge question is political: who and how is to deduct solutions that can benefit us all, now that we know *that our knowledges are reciprocally incomplete*[27], and thus in many ways misleading? What is more, this happens while the question arises of the durability of life on our planet, and the urgency to repair what is possible for the benefit *of all species and of life as such*. We now know that we can't put ourselves at the centre of doing any more. The knowledge question becomes more complex as we are aware that we won't learn from schools and *national* universities any longer as we once did. We must now make responsible choices *together*, knowing that it will be painful and that our path will be ridden with mistakes.

What about those neglected knowledges, "useless" history? Useless history is a systematic oblivion of that past history that didn't lead to the present state of affairs, that didn't lead to Rome. What is usually meant by *useful* history, a deliberate "political forgetting" or erasure, is an unquestionable *conversion to neoliberal capitalism* and *capitalist globalisation*. According to the mainstream discourse, the

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[26] According to Žižek, this is what, in the new international configuration, worryingly resembles 1939, without being identical to it. Slavoj Žižek, Quelle idéologie Vladimir Poutine a-t-il derrière la tête?, France culture, entretien par Olivia Gesbert, in "La Grande table," 9-3-2022, https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/la-grande-table-idees/quelle-ideologie-vladimir-poutine-a-t-il-derriere-la-tete?msclkid=23c983dfa61711ecb504e7de5825d445.

[27] Boaventura De Sousa Santos spots "two 'nonrelationships' of western modernity with non-western cultures: destruction and assimilation. They are 'nonrelationships' in that both refuse to consider non-western cultures as relevant cultural alternatives". *Epistemologies of the South. Justice Against Epistemicide*, Paradigm Publisher, Boulder-London 2014; p. 212 of the Kindle edition.

general transition to mainstream "normality" means the catching-up by "backward" countries, including within Europe, and filling the historic gap. That is a regular western injunction valid especially for countries of the global south and post-socialist states. There are several intersections of the two. Alternative options and attempts are erased and forgotten as *useless history.* So are whole chunks of the history of existing people. It so happens that the histories of peoples in eastern, central Europe in the 20th century and the Balkans up to 1989 are now considered as *useless history*, because they have not contributed to the building of triumphant capitalism, or of its extreme form of neoliberalism, supposed to be reached through transition and submission.

The once Nonaligned Movement, now useless history but a very powerful concept and effective in international politics and in the UN, UNCTAD, etc., in the 1960-70, was *at that time* a complex common political, social, and cultural *transnational* project that included the idea of international equality between states, of a new and just world order. It hailed anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism as well as the cancelling of poor countries' debt, etc. We now see that Putin's Russia today acts in the same way in Ukraine as the USA did in Iraq and Afghanistan, or Europe and NATO in Libya, etc., in wanting to impose their order, topple and appoint governments, and decree a value-system. "Useless history" can also be the reverse of factual history and misinterpret the past.

So, the divide is not exactly left and right anymore, and not even eastern Europe vs. west. If you have a perspective from an external, say, abstractly Asian position, the divide in Yugoslavia, where there are practically no left leaning political parties any more (except some modest ones as those at the local level), looks as follows: both eastern and western Europe (Russia and the EU) are structured by constitutive racism and xenophobia and predatory "free market ideologies" as well as brutal anti-migrant policies (unless the migrants are white and "look like us", as do the Ukrainians fleeing to western Europe) towards other countries and continents, with comparable methods.

NATO: The elephant in the sitting-room and post-socialist wars

Indeed, constantly provoked by an eastwards would-be expanding NATO and by the west, Russia did foster pro-Russian politics all over its territory and towards "frontier" areas. This has been contributing at the speed of light to the construction of EU's defence; by annexing Crimea[28] in 2014 (formally recognised in 2018 by Russia), by leading to the de facto secessions in Luhansk and Donetsk (2014), and by nibbling territories all over the once Soviet space, now the "Russian world".

A "Minsk protocol" was signed in 2014 to freeze peace. Buffer territories are split by Ukrainian borders east and west. "With [reclaiming from Ukraine] these three localities (Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk) which are the closest to Russia, the latter is more or less reassured to have a strip of territory separating it from Ukraine

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[28] The attribution of Crimea to Russia or Ukraine is, however, historically debatable, with arguments on both sides. But it *was* annexed in 2014.

and therefore from NATO, if Ukraine were to be admitted to NATO"[29]. And further: "Thus, the objective according to the Russian authorities is not to attack a sovereign state (Ukraine) but to destroy the weapons and military bases that would threaten two independent states (ibid. (...) So this war is officially to protect Russia's 'friendly states'".

Three southern Soviet Republics with Muslim minorities and enclaves, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, had declared independence after the dismantlement of the Soviet State. Indeed, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Moldavia, Uzbekistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine created the CIS (Community of Independent States) in 1991, joined by Georgia in 1993. Belarus and Kazakhstan failed to recognise two separatist territories within Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, that were recognised by Russia much as other nibbled boundaries. Russian troops invaded the independentist Republic of Chechnya – two wars followed (1994-96 and 1999-2000). Chechnya ended up under Russia's domination after the latter levelled and destroyed Grozny, and invaded it in 1999, with the excuse of a rebellion in neighbouring Dagestan. Several Chechen rebel groups continued to harass the Russians in Dagestan and nearby areas.

In the 1990, the three Baltic states left the USSR after the latter's collapse, but didn't join the CIS. Important Russian minorities remain in many of the independent republics, including these, which is an incitement to intervention for Russia, and the source of protracted political trouble. Some territories in eastern Europe remained fragile, squeezed between NATO in the west and Russia to the east. Such is the case of Moldova, which is neither in NATO nor in the EU (although wanting to join them), and on whose eastern border towards Ukraine there is a new breakaway republic Transnistria supported by Russian troops, not far from Odessa. Within Moldova, there is also a splinter, mainly though not exclusively Turkic (but orthodox), autonomous region of Gagauzia, supported by the Russians. The USSR had waged a bloody war in Afghanistan from 1979-89, which it lost[30]. Later, having always had interests in the middle east too, Russia waged a war within Syria's civil war on the side of Bashar al-Assad (since 2011), and treated Aleppo – destroying it completely (2012-2016) – the way it had treated Grozny. There is no principled difference between Russian or USA/western wars and proxy wars in the middle east. The EU has been unduly promising the fulfilment of a rapprochement, but not membership with Europe and NATO to Ukraine. From then on, having no control, Russia will provoke secessions in some of those countries; conflicts in Abkhazia, Transnistria, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh (between Azerbaijan and Armenia), etc., some pro-Russian moves in Kirghizstan (repression of the Tulip revolution), in Kazakhstan more recently, etc. In the past as we know, the USSR in-

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[29] Chronologie pour comprendre la crise en Ukraine (Entre Histoire et Géographie),

http://abidjantv.net/monde/chronologie-pour-comprendre-la-crise-en-ukraine-entre-histoire-et-geographie/. We follow (in a shorter term) the same chronology from the same sources in this section.

[30] Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*, Norton, 1st ed. 1992. See also the author's other books of oral history: *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, Random House Paperbacks, New York 2018 (reprint); *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, Random House Paperbacks, New York 2017; *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, Dalkey Archive Press 2005.

tervened in Hungary (1956), in Czechoslovakia (1968), and we already mentioned Afghanistan and Syria. Russia is felt as a threat to neighbouring countries even as it considers them a threat through the close presence of NATO on her outer borders without a buffer zone. One could see today's war on Ukraine as Russia's attempt to create buffer zones between itself and NATO. The anxiousness comes from the fact that, while the Warsaw Pact had been abolished at the time of the fall of the Berlin wall, NATO was not, and seems to be expanding. On neither side is there a readiness to dialogue and negotiate, and none of them are prepared to work out the common language (the translation) that is needed for it. While Putin's Russia is directly *guilty* of the assault on Ukraine, the west shares with Russia a *responsibility* in this tragedy[31].

East-west, what's the difference? What can we conclude?

Since the political parting of ways between Tito and Stalin in 1948 and Yugoslavia's engagement with the Nonaligned Movement, the country was not a part of the "eastern bloc", although this has now largely been forgotten as useless history, so that nowadays you get the opposite assertion in much of the historiography of the present, all over the Internet or on maps that are circulating, and which include Yugoslavia behind the "iron curtain".

Most of the wars that have taken place under east and central-European post-socialism have been to a great extent, if not mostly, *civil wars*, although they do have elements of wars *tout court* because the countries involved had at the same time become "independent", partitioned countries. That doesn't make them different from other wars. Most of these conflicts have also been *territorial wars* of conquest or imposition of primacy and domination. That doesn't make them different either. That they be wars of two centuries belated nationalisms is regularly heard as an explanation, but is irrelevant as an argument. There is no glory or advantage in constructing and privileging one's nation before others, contrary to what we were taught. Latin-American nations have been established through (post)colonial secession by the comprador bourgeois Creoles of the Americas before even some European nations and national states. All of these were actually constructing hierarchical patriarchal vertical states and (early) forms of capitalism that could include "older" modes of production, such as slavery, or of repression, such as "witch-hunt" and the extermination of females or of subordinate colonial populations, for example.

Nothing can be concluded in the sense of comparison to the advantage of current socialist wars, which are as bad as any. But, even though without guarantee, *something may* be concluded *someday* in the comparison with some future socialism. For that, we shall need some re-reading of alternative options that have not been tried out.

There is no need to repeat lessons about the *insufficiency of binary patterns* of knowledge that our post WWII and post-Cold-War generations have critiqued. One

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[31] Guilt and responsibility are to be strictly distinguished. Thanks to Goran Fejić for elaborating this idea and sharing it with me.

such binary was the Cold War itself, including in epistemology. Upstream, the inadequacy of any binary model, be it gender or cold-war politics, is based on the absurdity of wanting to see two irreconcilable modernities, that of capitalism and that of socialism[32]. They have been twins, *before* any differences are even seen. However: this doesn't mean at all that it is indifferent which of them one is considering. Although related, they don't invalidate discernment, and no "post-truth" attitude can be deduced or recommended. Rather, it will take the construction of a multipolar and plural, non-binary world with a new, alternative civilisational choice. We shall have to examine and take into consideration all alternative histories, instead of repressing them. There is no good binary, no good war, no either-or solution.

Today we know that the Berlin wall came down on *both* sides, east and west, socialist and capitalist. While each still insists on being governed by its own exclusive "truth" and thus by closure to the others, it is on the contrary openness and cooperation that show the way, but then *nothing can be pre-set*. No "truth establishing war," no regime imposing aggression is acceptable, be it in the name of a political order, of a gender or race, national preference, or of a predetermined pattern.

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[32] The reader will have understood by now that i never use the term "communism" to denote socialist countries and their regimes. In the post-socialist period, "communism" is an ideological anti-socialist allegation thrust on countries that have attempted the socialist way. "Communism" has never been anything, but a utopia placed in the future. It never had any substance. This is not contradicted by the existence of communist parties, which is another story.