

Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism. Radical Politics after Yugoslavia

Horvat, Srećko and Igor Štiks, (Eds.) (2015): *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism. Radical Politics after Yugoslavia* London: Verso Books.

A democratic society and economic prosperity are the acclaimed results of the transition from a socialist order to a liberal democracy and social market economy. However, these promises – advocated by the financial institutions, the EU and neo-liberal scholars – have not been fulfilled in ex-Yugoslavia. More than 25 years after the beginning of the transition, interrupted by years of war, many people feel deprived of their democratic rights and do not trust the political elites. Many have lost their jobs or pensions, as well as their access to free education or healthcare. It is evident in the growing number of protests across ex-Yugoslav countries that more people are becoming aware of the devastating consequences of neo-liberal reforms and privatisation.

Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks have published an edited anthology, joining the positions of the new social movements and classical Marxists on these developments and critically engaging in the discussion on the post-socialist transition in former Yugoslavia.

The anthology is divided into four parts and is logically composed, taking into account different perspectives in analysing European dominance of ex-Yugoslav countries. In part one, the socio-economic development of the self-management system, as well as the consequences of neo-liberal politics, are discussed. Part two resumes the debates about the mapping of the Balkans in European discourses. After a presentation of the two different experiences of transition in less-discussed successor countries, Montenegro and Kosovo, the last section of the book focuses on the new social movements, which Horvat and Štiks see as:

A return of radical, left and progressive politics in the Balkans (p 260)

Starting with an analysis of the Yugoslavian self-management system, Unkovski-Korica provides us with a clear thesis about ‘The rise and fall of the Yugoslav experiment.’ He argues that the market mechanism undermined the system, eventually leading to its decline and rupture. Furthermore, he dismantles it as a project to ensure the national independence of Yugoslavia: the postulated goal of emancipating workers, to let them run ‘their’ factory, was never reached.

Andreja Živković extends the analysis with an overview of the economic crisis and the integration of the south-eastern Europe into the European market.

Marko Grdešić provides the inside on the less-discussed topic of trade unions in ex-Yugoslavia, emphasising the contradictory tendencies which unions face at the moment. More protests were visible during the time of transition – workers protesting against corrupt privatisations and the loss of their jobs – but the trade unions now

have a peripheral role. In terms of the reasons for this, Grdešić refers – and with the exceptions of Croatia and Slovenia – to the tight co-operation between governments and workers’ unions, which often led to harmful policies for their members. Additionally, he criticises the ‘Overall lack of organisational capacity and policy vision’ (p. 67) as well as the small amount of organised workers in new or smaller companies.

The second part of the book draws on prevailing discussions about the contextualisation of the Balkans in a European, or western, discourse. Marija Todorova refers in her article to her widely-discussed book *Imagining the Balkans*. She dismantles the discourse on Balkanism, describing it as a metaphor:

The Balkans began [during the modernization and nationalization processes, Anm KJ] to serve as a symbol for the aggressive, intolerant, barbarian, semi-developed, semi-civilised and semi-oriental. It is this use and its present utilization in the real world of politics (...) that shapes attitudes and actions toward the Balkans, (p. 90)

Tanja Petrović agrees in her analysis of the discourse on the EU and the western Balkans. She emphasises that Balkan countries are seen as ‘on their way’ to a ‘progressive’ EU, like children growing into the big family of EU countries. The western Balkans are seen as living in the past, struggling with nationalisms, with the only possibility being integration into the EU and becoming part of Europe. But this can only be done with hard work.

Boris Buden, in his article, also refers to a metaphor of the ‘children of post-communism’. Unlike Petrović, he points to the dogma of transitology in political science, which puts post-socialist societies under tutelage: on the one side, they have to learn how to be democratic; on the other, they are forbidden to reflect the communist past, not allowed to think on their own and are ‘Finally made into political fools.’ (p. 136).

Montenegro and Kosovo are the two case studies presented in the third part of the book. Andrej Nikolaidis relates the wars in ex-Yugoslavia with the current processes of transition in Montenegro. He discloses the strong connections between the political elites and war profiteers, which has led to corrupt privatisations. Even though Nikolaidis does not see the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the instigator of the wars, he does question the passive role of the troika in ‘Legitimising the wartime and the post-war plunder’ (p. 147). The transition is, he claims, just a continuance of the war and its crimes on the territory of former Yugoslavia.

Agon Hamza goes on to put the transition in Kosovo into the context of a neo-imperial project of the European Union, NATO and the World Bank and the IMF, following Serbian imperial rule. He claims that ‘The will for the people is a pure negation of the neo-imperial agenda’ (p. 169), although he does not refer to other empirical research which confirms his thesis.

Mitja Velikonja returns in his article to a topic to which Todorova has already referred: nostalgia. Todorova sees a positive reference to the past as a phenomena, articulating the disappointment with the current situation of the people and criticising the present ‘Using the past as a mirror and irony’ (p. 100), but Velikonja goes even further in his article on ‘Tito nostalgia’. He points out that glorifications of Tito, espe-

cially among younger generations, do not have a connection to Tito himself. The creation of a new Tito should be seen as the 'Rejection of the current political situation and leaders' (p. 189), with this creation of a utopia resembling an active critique.

The fourth and last part of the book gives an overview of mass social movements in ex-Yugoslav countries, concentrating on student protests, workers' strikes and women's struggles.

Kraft draws in his article on the example of Jugoremedija, a factory in Serbia which was occupied after a corrupt privatisation and managed by its workers before it went into bankruptcy in 2012. I would largely agree with Kraft's interpretations of the poor implementation of democratic decision-making processes in the factory and that:

The formal right to participate in decision-making was still based on (capital) ownership. (p. 210)

Nevertheless, the argument underlining his thesis is questionable. The conflict lines were not along 'The division between worker-shareholders and "ordinary" workers' (p. 208) since worker-shareholders were also partly against the management. The crucial moment is inherent in the adopted model of privatisation. Around 4 500 small shareholders held shares in the factory, amounting to 58% of the owners of the factory. However, only around 300 of the workers were, at the same time, both shareholders and workers. Conflicts within the factory started when salaries went unpaid and the threat of bankruptcy was present. Many small shareholders and workers then turned on the 'worker-managers', afraid of losing their jobs and capital.

Kraft also refers to the student and civic protests in Zagreb, Ljubljana and Belgrade, emphasising the radicalism of the protests, new forms of organisation and the potential to build new political subjectivities.

Student protests are also the topic of Jana Bačević's text, which gives a historical inside of student struggles from the 1990s to the present.

Ankica Čakaradić deals in her article with the women's movement in ex-Yugoslavia and identifies a blind spot: she criticises that, in the 1990s, women's struggles generally acted at civil-society level and failed to implement a feminist perspective on the political economy. Agreeing with her in general, but a critique of capitalism was only marginally-formulated and heard in the social struggles of the 1990s and 2000s. Only recently, in the last few years, has a further analysis of capitalist conditions been conducted, as seen in this present book. The struggles of women in this respect are, therefore, not one of a kind.

This collection from Horvat and Štiks delivers a fine inside perspective on current discussions within the new social movements and Marxist circles in and on the former Yugoslavia. It criticises the post-socialist transition and its consequences, and dismantles the European discourse as a powerful tool demonstrating dominance over the countries in transition. The focus of the book lies, therefore, on the external and macro factors of dominance, identifying western and EU policies as imperialist. In-

ternal factors and the influence of these developments on people are, unfortunately, less discussed.

Common to most anthologies, the quality of the articles in the collection does differ; for example, the use of terms like ‘fascism’ and ‘imperialism’ go without explanation and without being related to the research field. Additionally, half the essays and the Introduction have been either partially or fully published in different books or journals and the anthology provides, therefore, only a limited contribution to advancing the scientific discussion.

It seems, furthermore, unclear why Horvat and Štiks talk in their Introduction of the ‘*original radicalism*’ (p. 17) of Balkan societies. This can be read as an attempt to essentialise the societies in south-eastern Europe as ‘authentic’ and ‘natural’, a process which is criticised by Todorova. Furthermore, they talk about the exemplary character of protests,

From which any similar movement across the globe could learn a great deal, (p. 17)

forgetting about other protests around the world (like Blockupy or other protests against austerity measures) which also used democratic means of mounting a collective challenge to decision-making processes. Yes, the growing protests in ex-Yugoslavia are emancipatory struggles, questioning the post-socialist transition and privatisation but also nationalism and the political elites, as seen in the protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Macedonia. However, a broad new left which is building up its own structures still exists only on the margins. The presented book is certainly one of the many steps in confronting this *status quo*.

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