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Social change in the Balkans

As all post-communist countries, the Balkans have been going undergoing profound transformations in the past decade that affect not only their political outlook but their social structures as well. Rastko Mocnik tracks some of the changes that are currently changing the sociological landscapes of the Balkans and questions the prevalent assumption that such transitions are the inevitable by-product of what the West refers to as "modernisation".

How shall we describe the Balkans? As a region divided by the Fortress Europe's defence-walls? We have seen that before, and have seen the Balkans survive the empires that had contended over them: only that this time, it seems as if the dividing border were internal to the Empire¹, piece and part of its global construction. – As a region where, during the last hundred years, all the modern political forms have been tried out, from empire to revolutionary republic, from multi-national federation to nation state to protectorate, a series repeated in the last century's decade as in an abridged, though not more successful edition, skipping revolutionary republic, while adding self-imposed bantustan. That however would testify more to the crisis and the decline of the modern political invention than to any specificity of the Balkans. – As a region where internal conflict and external assistance have combined to bring down national economies and to enhance the informal sector, excelling in the traffic of arms, drugs and people? But this would hardly be an original feature in the contemporary world.

The features invoked certainly belong to the Balkans of today: and yet, in no way do they distinguish the Balkans either from its own past or from certain other parts of the world. These features, and one could add more, are not specific to the Balkans neither in the temporal nor in the spatial dimension. Rather, they point to long-term processes, evolving over larger spatial extensions: they invite us to insert the contemporary Balkans into a wider time-space perspective.²

Two parameters are stable across the data on the Balkan countries: poverty is increasing, inequality is increasing. Apologists of the current policies have been arguing that inequality propulses economic growth, or is at least its quasi-necessary side-effect. Economists will tell you that inequality actually depends upon a society's tolerance of inequality; and they will add that inequalities are, as a rule, small in economically successful and rich countries, and great in economically unsuccessful and poor countries. While inequality is increasing in the Balkan countries, their developmental chances are decreasing. But then, inequality is increasing not only in the Balkans: this is a common feature of all the post-socialist countries. And so is the increase of poverty.

In *all* post-socialist countries, gross domestic product (GDP) has sharply declined after 1991; in Central and Eastern Europe, GDP was falling until 1994 to reach the index 65 (1991 being 100); afterwards, the trend stabilized and reached the index slightly over 75 in 1997; in the Baltics, the fall was sharper (index 43 in 1994), and stabilization after 1994 was on a much lower level (slightly above 50 in 1997); in the former Soviet Union (Commonwealth of Independent States), the decline was still continuing in 1997 when the index was around 50.³ In 1997, only two post-socialist countries reached a positive index of GDP as compared to their GNP in 1990: Poland (125.2) and Slovenia (104.1).

The cost of this relative success was hard, though; but then, the cost of the failure of other post-socialist countries was even harder. Percentage of population in "income poverty" range from around one fifth to the extreme three fifths (in Azerbaijan), with the exception of the Baltics (less than one tenth). Shadow economy shares seem important everywhere, although the data are scarce and unreliable.⁴

Increase in inequality is a uniform feature in all post-socialist countries, and also in the Balkans. The *Gini coefficient* trends speak for themselves.⁵ Slovenia, a marginal case as to GDP, has been able to restrain the rise of inequality – and still, it overcame Denmark in 1994, and the increase it still on its way.⁶

Economic growth, at least in Slovenia, clearly seems to be achieved at the expense of those who work – and also at the expense of those who are deprived of the chance to work, the unemployed.⁷ But then, it would seem that post-socialist countries are only catching up with a process that has caught the "developed" core countries of the world a couple of decades earlier.⁸

This is usually referred to as "the cost of transition". Quite wrongly so, for if a country has changed its social structure, the new social structure is where the "transition" has led it. The "costs" of such a transition from less inequality and poverty to more of both are the deaths which would otherwise not have occurred, educational courses not pursued, childhoods spoiled by hunger... But then, one would rather speak of consequences.

Speaking of "costs" is an oversimplification since it misleadingly suggests that the unlucky consequences of "transition" are a sort of "investment" which will quasi-automatically "pay back" at some point in the future. A case in point is unemployment: it is produced by at least three processes of different nature. One process is a change in social domination: dominating classes are no more held under the obligation to secure total employment. The other process is the politics of neo-liberal globalization: "national economies" are forced, by different international arrangements and pressures, to "compete" on the world-market. The third process is the third "industrial revolution" which makes whole classes of population "redundant".⁹ The combined result is the present unemployment, steady in all post-socialist countries, drastic in some, including most Balkan ones, and such that important portions of the presently unemployed will never work again.¹⁰

Inequality cannot remain an isolated social phenomenon. It seems to be directly related to such complex social dimensions as social health and life-expectancy. Countries with lower rate of inequality typically have higher life expectancy.¹¹ Even more importantly, trends in relative poverty correlate with changes in life expectancy.¹²

An indicator of the human well-being of a society are population trends. They are negative in the Balkan countries: typically, though, it is not an increase in the death-rate, but a decrease in the birth-rate that makes for the negative population trends in the Balkans. The exceptions are Bulgaria and Romania, which combine an increase in the death-rate with an important decrease in the birth-rate.¹³

Consequently, population trends are negative in the Balkans – as they are in other post-socialist countries. Comparatively, the Balkans are doing relatively well in this respect.¹⁴

It would seem that, generally speaking, the Balkan countries have difficulties at securing the "social tie" or *social cohesion*. Less academically, their networks of social solidarity are faltering – not only the institutions of the Welfare State, but also other more long-term social mechanisms like those of the extended family, neighbourhood, different types of communities, from local to professional to age groups... The optimistic account speaks about dissolution of traditional structures and "modernisation".

"Pre-modern" networks have been taking care of those who have been temporarily or permanently excluded from the sphere of the "productive work": the ill, the unemployed etc... Now, not only are the "traditional structures" disappearing in the Balkans, but also the "productive work" has been sharply re-defined: productive is only the work that contributes to the accumulation of the capital. One should immediately add that, within present institutional arrangements, household work is not included in this definition.

In the "pre-modern" context, now withering away, these dimensions of social solidarity have been secured by what the classics called *the reciprocal exchange*.¹⁵ But in every society, there are two groups whose social contribution is either nil or very specific, certainly such as not to enter into the modern definition of "productive work": the very young and the (very) old. Traditionally, these two groups have been integrated by the means of transgenerational exchange or *the delayed exchange*¹⁶: what I have received from my parents in my infancy, I will render to my children; I support my parents in their old age and expect my children to support me, when old... With the disappearance of "pre-modern" social forms, this mechanism breaks down: the problem of the children is easily dealt with by not bringing them to the world – while old people are a tougher problem which necessitates that "pension reform" be solved.

And even with the young it does not seem to be easy: not only does the natality-rate generally decline – one should also pay attention to the accelerated integration of the adolescent age-groups into the ways of the adult society: educational systems are increasingly competitive and selective, and more and more functional to the reproduction of social classes.

Social solidarity in both its dimensions – the horizontal dimension of "reciprocal exchange" and the vertical dimension of "delayed" inter-generational exchange – is severely threatened in the Balkans, as it is in other post-socialist countries. *Common trends in "transitional countries"* have been listed as follows¹⁷:

- decline in economic activity;
- rise of unemployment;
- rise of youth unemployment (in connection with drop-out);

- decline in standard of living;
- increase of poverty;
- changes in the value system (rise of individualism);
- emergence of risk social groups: youth, unemployed, poor.

We have already noted unemployment and poverty, and touched upon the youth as a newly established "risk group".¹⁸ If nothing radically changes, the young people are likely to run even worse risks in the future. High percentage of secondary-school-age children not enrolled in school is not a promising indicator (cf. rather striking figures for Bulgaria 40 per cent and Croatia 34 per cent¹⁹).

Actually, the Balkans have the lowest basic enrolment ratios (age group 6/7 – 14/15) even among the post-socialist countries.²⁰ Proportion of GDP spent on public education, at least in some cases (Albania, Bulgaria) is low and is not rising.²¹

— In most general terms, then, we can say that the Balkan societies are failing in the dimensions of reciprocal exchange (ties of communal solidarity) and of delayed exchange (ties of inter-generational solidarity). This produces serious social *anomie*, whose most serious effects are the widening of social inequality and an increasing poverty on one side, and, on the other side, emergence of new "risk groups" on generational basis – the young and the old, and on the unemployment basis (long-term and permanently unemployed).

What remains as mechanism of social cohesion? The dominant modern form of exchange – the generalized *commodity exchange*. Five hundred years since the capitalist mode ascended to domination, one should not be surprised. Or should one?

Should we agree with those who claim that this is only a temporary and a basically benevolent shock, just a collateral effect of "modernity's" finally coming to the Balkans?²² But then we should also say that "modernity" is coming to where it historically began – to Western Europe. For the rich and developed countries of Western Europe are at present equally concerned with the faltering of the "social tie", the disappearance of mechanisms of solidarity, the commodification of vital aspects of human life. This concern is so keen that Pierre Bourdieu appealed to fight "against the destruction of a civilization".²³

It would seem then that the Balkans are caught, together with all the mankind, within contemporary global processes, in the form these processes take in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions of the world-system, of which the Balkans region is only one among the many. What seems specific of the Balkans, though, should be sought in the *particular ideological form* in which these processes are lived, and which predominantly determines the way how the region responds to them: this form is best condensed in the term of "*transition*".

Again, "transition" is a popular catchword in all post-socialist countries. Its basic effect is everywhere the same: it *normalizes* the processes which I have sketched. What is perceived, in Western Europe, as a *threat* to "civilization", is celebrated, in the "transition"-charmed countries, as an *ascension* towards civilization. Specifically in the Balkans, "transition" styles itself in *Orientalist* terms, in the terms of an imperative to "join Europe". While "in Europe, and elsewhere in the world, more and more people reject the false alternative:

liberalism or barbarism"²⁴, the Balkans people are being submitted to neo-liberal policies in the name of shedding off their Balkanic barbarism. The general "transition" ideology and its local Balkan-Orientalist elaboration have indeed been propagated by certain fractions of the native political classes, but they have only ascended to the present hegemonic position after having been "authenticated" by egregious speakers for the "international community", i.e., by representatives of West European and US high politics and transnational business.

In this respect, those who in Europe, disagree with Bourdieu and agree with the Balkan-Orientalist ideology, actually only honour a specific tradition of modern Europe. Not the discredited tradition of Orientalism, though – but the honourable tradition of the modern democratic constitution by social contract.

The problem, as posed by the "transition" ideology, is how to build democratic political and social institutions among peoples presumably without any political culture. Since democratic culture can only be achieved through centuries-long practice of democratic institutions, the enterprise is trapped in a vicious circle. The problem is not new in Europe, and has been developed, precisely as a question of civilisation and culture:

Pour qu'un peuple naissant pût goûter les saines maximes de la politique et suivre les règles fondamentales de la raison d'Etat, il faudrait que l'effet pût devenir la cause, que l'esprit social qui doit être l'ouvrage de l'institution presidât à l'institution même, et que les hommes fussent avant les lois ce qu'ils doivent devenir par elles. (Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Le contrat social*, 1762; livre II, ch. 7.)²⁵

For an emergent people to taste the healthy principles of the politics and to follow the basic rules of the reason of the state, it would be necessary that the effect could become the cause, that the social spirit which must be the work of institution would precede the institution itself, and that humans be before the laws what they must become by them. (Translation mine.)

The vicious circle has to be broken from the outside. Rousseau invented a supplementary function which sets the process of political institution-cultivation in motion by an external intervention. This function is performed by *le Legislatteur*, the Legislator.²⁶ The Legislator, goes Rousseau's myth of origin, writes the laws and presents them to the people, *le peuple*. The people examines the laws, and finds them good, and, in its capacity of the Sovereign, adopts them by its free will. It is in this process of examination, assessment and adoption of the law that the people cultivates itself, and becomes a political nation. As historical examples, Rousseau quotes Lycurgus, "modern Italian republics", and Geneve; as a counter-example, he evokes Rome. He could not have dreamed that he was in fact writing the story of *l'acquis communautaire*.²⁷

– "Transition" ideology, now materialized in local institutions and international arrangements, de-problematizes current historical processes and thus cripples social imagination, inhibits active intervention, and favours "spontaneous" developments as managed by the hegemonic forces of the world. If the "transition" ideology is combined, as it is in the Balkans, with local varieties of Orientalism, it infuses an additional overdose of illusion and naiveté into social mind.

Where do these processes lead us, if abandoned to their "spontaneity"? While analysts agree that the world system is in crisis, their interpretations diverge. Immanuel Wallerstein holds that this is the final crisis of capitalism.²⁸ André Gunder Frank thinks that only a bicentenary crisis of the Asian economy is coming to its end, and so is, as a consequence, the much mystified "rise of the West."²⁹ According to Pierre-Noël Giraud³⁰, only an exceptional peculiarity of the twentieth century is withering away: while, during the twentieth century, differences among world-regions were drastically growing, internal differences within the rich nations have been dramatically reduced. In the future, Giraud expects the countries with low wages and high technological capacity (India, China, South East Asia, Eastern Europe) increasingly to catch-up with the present rich, while internal differences in the rich countries will irresistibly start to grow again.

According to Giovanni Arrighi's theory³¹, the capitalist system oscillates in cycles where material expansion alternates with financial expansion. Every cycle is marked by the hegemony of the world-power which is capable of establishing an alliance between the state and the capital. The cycle which is presently approaching its end was dominated by the US hegemony. The United States still have political and military supremacy, whilst the available capital has moved to East Asia. If the state and the capital, although dislocated, establish their alliance again, a new capitalist cycle is likely to begin. If this does not happen, then capitalism will come to its end. The new system will either be an empire without market, or a market without an empire.

These are some possible scenarios if the dominating logic of the present extends into the future. At present, this logic is basically circular and still reproductive of the existing relations of domination. The World Bank has recently given a nut-shell example of this logic: it has voiced its stand that "tobacco presents a serious threat to global economy"³². The argument seems to be the following: "global economy" creates contexts inducing to substance use, and substance use, in turn, "threatens global economy". The response, from within the horizon of the presently dominating logic, comes fast: "You have to choose: either smoking or health. You can't have both."³³

The domain of "substance use" has long been the pioneering realm of this kind of alternatives³⁴ which push their addressee against the civilizational wall and into a no-choice position. Now that the whole world has been presented with the presumably "civilizational" alternative "either security or freedoms and liberties"³⁵, we can better see how this ideological trap supports the reproduction of the presently dominating "logic", including present "global economy". This type of alternative *legitimizes repression and forces the addressee to submit to technologies of "knowledge"*. It establishes an ideal synthesis of *savoir-pouvoir*, of power and knowledge. It deploys, as "natural, necessary, inevitable", the field of application of the two main, if not actually exclusive, modes of operation presently common to great political institutions from the state to international organizations to international para-institutions... It legalizes, albeit on a "proto-legal" level, the use of force which would otherwise remain unwarranted, it introduces an oppressive use of knowledge which otherwise could be exercised within emancipatory projects. As ideological *discourse* addressed to individuals, alternatives of the type "security or freedom", make them lose both. As ideologies *materialized* in contemporary institutions, though, they make the great institutions of today gain on both fronts: on the front of "sovereignty"³⁶ and repression, and on the front of "governmentality"³⁷ and social management.

We should therefore call for strategies that will break the horizon of the alienating alternatives and the corresponding alienating processes. Such endeavours and strategies have already been practised – we should not forget that they were practised in the Balkans of the eighties. The alternative practices and discourses of the eighties have opened fresh perspectives, initiated emancipatory practices over vast domains which, before that, had been occupied by technologies of control and discipline. To some extent, the alternative has challenged "total institutions" and initiated many enlightened, self-critical practices of de-institutionalization.³⁸ In the present moment, the peoples of the Balkans would do well to reflect upon the wider lessons we can draw from these past endeavours, insights and attitudes.

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- ¹ Cf. Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass. – London, Engl., 2000.
- ² Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science*, Polity Press – Blackwell, Cambridge – Oxford, 1991 (1995). For the world-system approach to the Balkans, see: Milan Popovic, *Balkanska postmoderna 1 – 3* [The Balkans Postmodernity]: *Zargon periferije* [The Jargon of Periphery], izdanje autora, Podgorica, 1994; *Posle hladnog rata* [After the Cold War], Kulturni centar, Bar, 1996; *Politicki aparthejd* [Political Apartheid], Monitor, Podgorica, 1997.
- ³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *The World Economy at the Beginning of 1998*; taken from: United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS 1999*.
- ⁴ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS 1999*.
- ⁵ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS 1999*.
- ⁶ Marta Gregorcic, Matjaz Hanzek, "Gospodarska rast ne izboljšuje clovekovega zivljenja" [Economic growth does not improve human life], *Revija Srp*, vol. 8, no. 37–38 (June 2000).
- ⁷ Idem.
- ⁸ E.g., as illustration, the widening of income differences in UK. From: Richard G. Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies. The Afflictions of Inequality*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997 (first published in 1996).
- ⁹ The first industrial revolution produced railways and destroyed much of the peasantry; the second industrial revolution gave automobile and aircraft and, with the great agrarian crisis of the end of the 19th century, completed the social effects of the first revolution. Our industrial revolution, the third one, is the "informational revolution" which gave us personal computer, virtual reality and "instant" global markets. Cf. Daniel Cohen, *Richesse du monde, pauvreté des nations*, Flammarion, Paris, 1997.
- ¹⁰ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS 1999*.
- ¹¹ Richard G. Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies. The Afflictions of Inequality*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997 (first published in 1996).
- ¹² Idem.
- ¹³ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS 1999*.
- ¹⁴ Idem.
- ¹⁵ Marcel Mauss, "L'Essai sur le don" (1924).
- ¹⁶ Marcel Mauss, op. cit.
- ¹⁷ Copernicus project "Global Approach to Drugs", Review of the Existing National Quantitative Studies. The Cases of Finland, Estonia, Czech Republic, Slovenia and Romania. – Faculty of Social Studies, Ljubljana, 2001.
- ¹⁸ Sociological terminology is somewhat cynical: we keep it to provoke reflection – both on the phenomenon and on the jargon of social sciences. What does it mean that everybody has to pass through the status of a "risk-group" already in her or his – tender youth!?
- ¹⁹ Cf. United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS 1999*.
- ²⁰ Idem.
- ²¹ Idem.

- 22 Even an otherwise perspicacious scholar of the Balkans seems to entertain the idea that the Balkans are to "wither away" with the "Europeanizing, modernizing" processes now under way: "/Contrary to the Orient, the Balkans have a concrete historical existence. ... Not only did part of southeastern Europe acquire a new name – Balkans – during the Ottoman period, it has been chiefly the Ottoman elements or the ones perceived as such that have mostly invoked the current stereotypes. ... it seems that the conclusion that the Balkans are the Ottoman legacy is not an overstatement. ... It may well be that what we are witnessing today, wrongly attributed to some Balkan essence, is the ultimate Europeanisation of the Balkans. If the Balkans are, as I think they are, tantamount to their Ottoman legacy, this is an advanced stage of the end of the Balkans." (Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford UP, New York – Oxford, 1997, pp. 12 – 13.) – See also our: "The Balkans as a *Grenzbegriff*", in: *Europa zwischen Krieg und Frieden*, Österreichisches Studienzentrum für Frieden und Konfliktlösung (Hrsg.), agenda Verlag, Muenster, 1999.
- 23 In his address to the workers on strike at the Gare de Lyon, december 1995: "Je suis ici pour dire notre soutien à tous ceux qui luttent ... contre la destruction d'une *civilisation*, associée à l'existence du service public, celle de l'égalité républicaine des droits, droits à l'éducation, à la santé, à la culture, à la recherche, à l'art, et, par dessus tout, au travail." (*Contre-feux*, Raisons d'agir, Paris, 1998, p. 30.)
- 24 Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 32.
- 25 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique*, Garnier, Paris, 1960, p. 262. – Circularity is stated three times: 1. for *un peuple naissant* (nowadays, the expression is "an emergent political nation") to raise to the healthy principles of a civilised constitution, its members should already be before the state of law what they can only become by it; 2. civilised social mind should produce the institutions, while it is only by these very institutions that civilised social mind can eventually come into being; 3. in short, for an emergent political nation to endow itself with political institutions, the effect should precede the cause, *il faudrait que l'effet put devenir la cause*.
- 26 Rousseau is precise and consistent: "Le législateur est à tous égards un homme *extraordinaire* dans l'Etat. S'il doit l'être par son génie, *il ne l'est pas moins par son emploi*. Ce n'est point magistrature, ce n'est point souveraineté. Cet emploi, *qui constitue* la république, *n'entre point dans sa constitution*; c'est une fonction particulière et supérieure qui n'a rien de commun avec l'empire humain; car si celui qui commande aux hommes /the executive/ ne doit pas commander aux lois /the legislative/, celui qui commande aux lois /the Legislator/ ne doit pas commander aux hommes." (Idem, p. 261; italics mine.)
- 27 Although *l'acquis communautaire* is a *Diktat*, the candidate countries for EU fake a genuine legislative procedure at fulfilling it.
- 28 Cf. *The Age of Transition. Trajectory of the World-System, 1945 – 2025*, coordinated by T.K. Hopkins and I. Wallerstein, Zed Books, London & New Jersey; Pluto Press Australia, 1996.
- 29 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient. Global Economy in the Asian Age*, University of California Press, Berkeley etc., 1998.
- 30 Pierre-Noël Giraud, *L'inégalité du monde. Economie du monde contemporain*, Gallimard, Paris, 1996.
- 31 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century. Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, Verso, London–New York, 1994 (1996).
- 32 Kenneth E. Warner, counsel to World Bank, at the ministerial conference "Europe without tobacco" (organized by WHO Regional Office for Europe, Warsaw, February 18–19, 2002), as reported in *Delo*, Ljubljana, 20. February 2002.
- 33 Report from the Warsaw conference, *ibidem*.
- 34 Their theoretical concept was presented by Jacques Lacan in: *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Séminaire XI, Seuil, Paris, 1973, ch. 16, where he proposes to term them "vel-alternatives".
- 35 If you choose "security", then you will have life without freedom; if you choose "freedom", you lose both.
- 36 In retrospect, we now see how contemporary political practices have replaced the revolutionary idea of the "sovereignty of the people" by the silent violence of practising sovereignty in the spirit of Carl Schmitt's trite definition: "sovereign is the one who decides about the exception". Accordingly, contemporary political apparatuses present themselves, in a large part, as machines to produce "emergencies" and "states of exception".
- 37 As defined by Michel Foucault: "the entire set of practices used to constitute, define, organize and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals, in their freedom, can have towards each other." (Michel Foucault, "L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté," interview with H. Becker, R. Forner–Betancourt, A. Gomez–Mueller, in: *Dits et*

ecrits, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, vol. IV, p. 728; also see "Governmentality", in: Graham Burchell et al., *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality*, Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1991.)

- ³⁸ For both – deconstruction of the "total institution", and reflexive questioning of de-institutionalization – see: Vito Flaker, *Odpiranje norosti. Vzpon in padec totalnih ustanov* [Opening madness. Rise and Fall of Total Institutions], Založba, Ljubljana, 1998.

Published 2003–03–20
Original in English
Contribution by Balcanis
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