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## What Will You Do Here? Dignified Work and the Politics of Mobility in Serbia

Dana N. Johnson

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**WHAT WILL YOU DO HERE? DIGNIFIED WORK AND THE POLITICS  
OF MOBILITY IN SERBIA**

A Dissertation Presented

by

DANA N. JOHNSON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2019

Anthropology

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OF MOBILITY IN SERBIA**

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DANA N. JOHNSON

Approved as to style and content by:

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Julie Hemment, Chair

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Elizabeth L. Krause, Member

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Krista Harper, Member

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Sangeeta Kamat, Member

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Julie Hemment, Acting Chair  
Department of Anthropology

# **DEDICATION**

For Aca

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is daunting to write on a topic that so many people find to be so very important. My hope for this dissertation is that it *rings true* to my interlocutors even as they uncover its faults; that they find in these pages stories that resonate with their own and with the experiences of those whom they hold dear. To all of them: I am honored by the time you gave to this endeavor, the trust you showed in my efforts, and the experiences, dreams, disappointments, and astute analyses you shared. Thank you.

This project would not be what it is without Tamara Belenzada, whose influence is imprinted on each page. Focus group moderator, interview transcriber, sounding board, dear friend, and my anchor in Belgrade, Tamara embraced my work with unmatched enthusiasm. To her: thank you—I continue to be humbled by the generosity of your spirit and the sharpness of your analytical mind. Other members of my Belgrade family provided a warm welcome, warm food, and warm company, especially Orli Fridman, Snežana Škundrić, and Ivana and Marko Marinković. I'm so glad to have them to return to again and again.

The delightful complication of ethnography is how the line between interlocutor and friend so readily blurs. I thank Niko, Bojana, and Vukašin in particular for their friendship as well as insights. Radmila was the ideal landlord (even if our apartment was plagued by failing appliances).

Some may advise against adopting a dog during fieldwork but I respectfully disagree. Lusi opened up a novel ethnographic sphere, from the

series of field notes I collected under the theme of “tales from the dog park,” to navigating the strange world of Serbian veterinary care, to committing a minor act of fraud in the course of the bureaucratic adventure of bringing her home. But most of all, I am grateful for those she brought into our Belgrade life. I hope that Zoja and Danijela are finally convinced of our fitness as dog parents. And I know that the legend of Lusi lives on among her many four-legged friends and human fans in Vračar.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WHAT WILL YOU DO HERE? DIGNIFIED WORK AND THE POLITICS OF MOBILITY IN SERBIA**

MAY 2019

DANA N. JOHNSON, B.A., DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Julie Hemment

Serbia is said to have one of the highest rates of brain drain in the world. For the generation glossed as the “children of the 1990s,” stances toward mobility and migration have shifted along with geopolitics. Following nearly two decades of wartime entrapment, in 2009 the conditions of possibility for mobility fundamentally changed for Serbian citizens. Of both symbolic and material consequence, the country’s return to respectable geopolitical standing also marked a shift toward more nuanced stancetaking in relation to mobility and migration. Namely, by the time of my research, the expectations of youth—not only of “normal mobility” but of “normalcy” more generally—had become more and more often calibrated against personal experiences of real-life travel.

Based on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Belgrade, Serbia from October 2014–December 2015, this dissertation tracks some of the consequences of this shift for young potential migrants in Serbia. I explore how the problem of skilled migration is constituted, the discourses produced, and the practices prompted. I analyze the mobility narratives of young potential migrants

as proxies for commentary on a host of other socioeconomic issues. My focus is on the real and symbolic geographies invoked in talk of leaving and staying in Serbia; on how young potential migrants narrate their everyday navigations in the “here and now” and give moral weight to migratory aspirations for, and experiences of, lives lived in the “then and there.” I argue that the foundational motif of these varied imaginaries is a deep investment in meritocracy, a value-laden register called upon to articulate aspiration as well as critique.

Engaging the politics of mobility holistically, I also excavate what it means to stay in a context so many others leave. I explore the growth of social entrepreneurship and the digital economy as recent efforts to coax dignified work from an inhospitable climate of precarity (and as key to governmental “solutions” to brain drain). I untangle how entrepreneurialism is promoted as a project of reforming values while also serving as a realm of authenticity and “apolitical activism” for some. Turning attention on work in the digital economy I illuminate how economic subjectivities are cultivated in complex relation to place and belonging in ways that muddy the dichotomy between staying and leaving. Finally, I show how both promoters of entrepreneurship and Serbia’s digital transformation harness the dominant discourse on brain drain to cast themselves as certain social types and legitimize their agendas. This dissertation demonstrates how contemporary stances toward mobility and migration articulate aspirations to dignify the conditions of life and work, are implicated in a reconfiguration of middle-classness, and reveal how postsocialist subjects understand themselves and construct life projects in the context of ongoing political and socioeconomic change.

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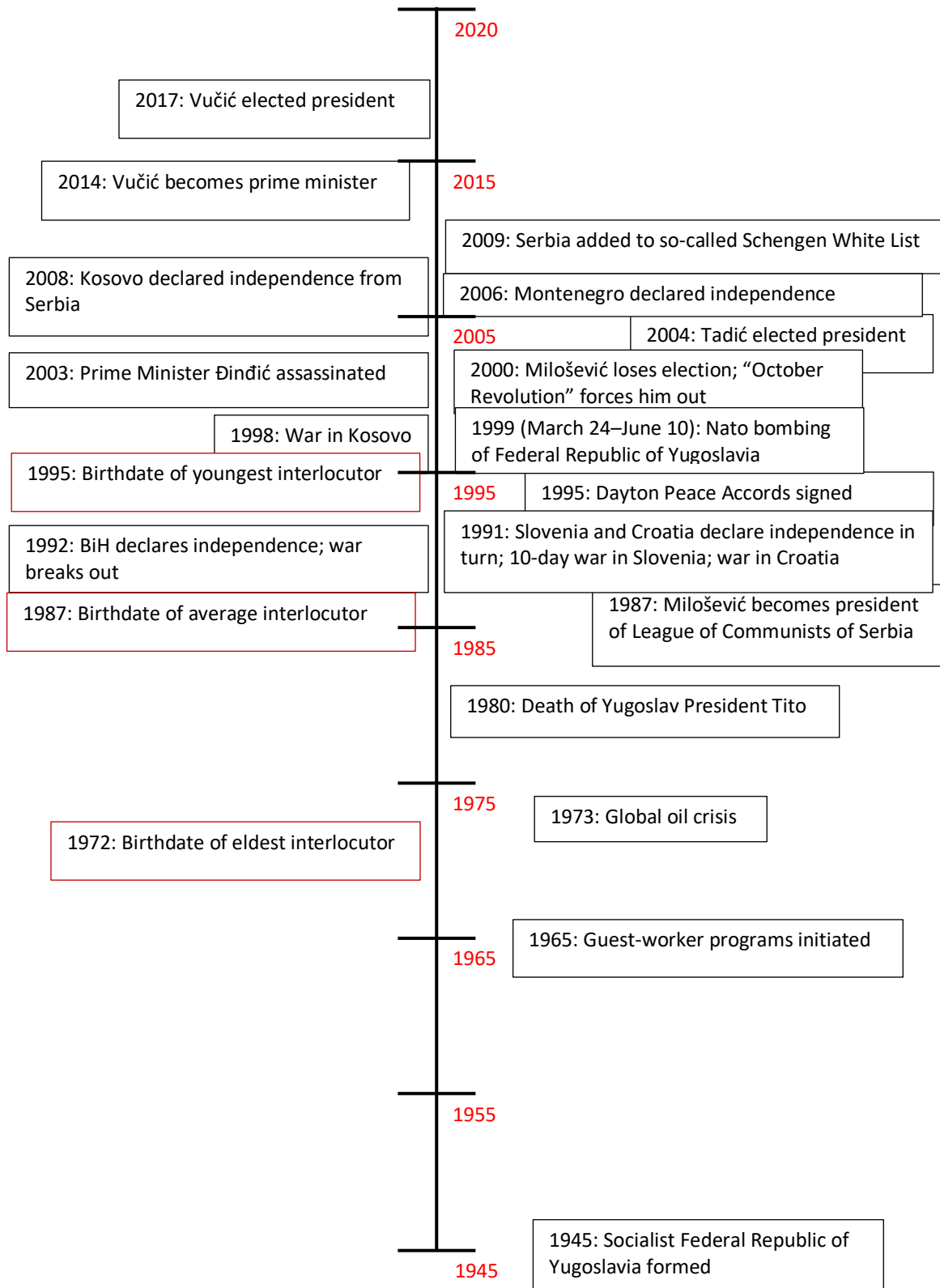
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**Figure 1: Map of region**





**Figure 2: Timeline of key events**

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE “PROBLEM” OF BRAIN DRAIN FROM SERBIA

Serbian society is saturated with talk of leaving. According to predictably regular media accounts, Serbia’s young and educated are fleeing the country in one of the highest rates of brain drain in the world. The tone of such coverage is invariably grim, with one recent headline declaring, “Brain drain will stop as soon as everybody leaves” (*B92* 2011). Such reports lamenting the loss of Serbia’s future to the forces of migration often cite a startling number of annual migrants for this country of around seven million. Estimates abound that anywhere from 150,000 to 600,000 “young and educated” Serbs have permanently left the country in the past twenty-five years. A recent report by a Belgrade migration policy NGO confirmed that claims at the upper end of this range are simply impossible, given the number of university degrees awarded over the past two decades (Group 484 2010, 7; see also Bolčić 2002, 96).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, references to Serbia’s rate of brain drain persist and are persistently pessimistic, year after year placing the country in the global top five for this inauspicious ranking.

The young potential migrants I came to know in the course of my research on the politics of brain drain in Serbia read the same news articles as I did. In our interviews and casual conversations they frequently cited the same figures that I had encountered. For many, these reports confirmed an unfortunately reality.

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<sup>1</sup> About 12.4 percent of the Serbian population aged 25–54 has achieved tertiary education, according to the latest *Global Human Capital Report* of the World Economic Forum (WEF 2017, 161). For purposes of comparison, this same rate is 26.4 percent in Germany and 31.5 percent in the United States (WEF 2017, 98, 182).

Others read the news of mass exodus with a skeptical eye, recognizing its potential as a self-fulfilling prophecy. As one young interlocutor who I call Anja said, “For some time now there has been that strong narrative in the media and such...even to the extreme that anyone worth anything (*svako ko valja*) has left the country, that the smart ones leave. And somehow in fact, that has an effect on those who maybe wouldn’t leave, that narrative that says, ‘go, go, you are so smart, you will go.’”<sup>2</sup>

In this dissertation, I trace the contours of talk about leaving and staying as it appeared in the media, policies, public and private discussions, and the narratives of young potential migrants. I turn attention to how the problem of skilled migration is constituted, the discourses produced, and the practices prompted. Tracking how Serbian youth narrate their life chances and imagine a better future “over there” or seek to materialize opportunities at home, I ask: How are different stances on mobility constructed and inhabited? What value frameworks undergird the socioeconomic aspirations and practices of Serbia’s young potential migrants? And how do the mobility narratives of Serbian youth manifest expectations of work and life at once informed by yet removed from the vision of the good life of their parents’ generation? Premised on the notion that talk about staying and leaving can be analyzed as a proxy for commentary on a host of other issues (cf. Dick 2018), this dissertation demonstrates how contemporary stances toward mobility and migration articulate aspirations to dignify the conditions of life and work, are implicated in a reconfiguration of

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the names in this dissertation are pseudonyms. First and last names are given for public officials and others speaking in a professional capacity.

middle-classness, and reveal how postsocialist subjects understand themselves and construct life projects in the context of ongoing political and socioeconomic change.

### **The Making of a Migration Problem**

The annual reports of the World Economic Forum (WEF) are consistently cited as the source of figures relayed in media accounts of Serbia's "migration problem." According to WEF's annual human capital report, in 2013 Serbia was ranked second to last of the countries included in terms of its "capacity to retain talent," one of two elements of the "brain drain indicator."<sup>3</sup> Yet the report also notes that in the Serbian case there is no emigration rate available for those with tertiary education (WEF 2013, 448–449). I wondered—if no one is counting the departures of the well-educated, how is such a dismal ranking achieved?

Scrutinizing the report's introduction, I was surprised to find that the brain drain indicator—a given country's capacity to retain talent—is based not on border crossings but on data collected through something called the Executive Opinion Survey. This survey, part of WEF's global competitiveness report, is administered annually to business leaders around the world via national partner institutions. The survey aims to gather "the opinions of business leaders...on a broad range of topics for which data sources are scarce, or frequently, nonexistent on a global scale" (Browne et al. 2015, 75). As part of this survey, one

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<sup>3</sup> As noted in *The Global Competitiveness Report 2013–14: Full Data Edition*, what used to be known as the brain drain indicator in the Executive Opinion Survey was revised in 2013 into the two indicators of "country capacity to retain talent" and "country capacity to attract talent" (Schwab 2013, 98).

hundred Serbian business leaders are asked to rank the country's capacity to retain talent on a scale of one through seven. In 2013, the aggregate perception of these one hundred business leaders earned the country a brain drain ranking of 146 out of 148 countries. By 2016 this ranking had disappeared from the country profiles in the human capital report, which had been revised to focus more specifically on "a life-course approach to human capital, evaluating the levels of education, skills and employment available to people in five distinct age groups" (Schwab 2016, v). But it is still collected through the Executive Opinion Survey and used in tabulating each country's global competitiveness ranking. In 2017–2018 Serbia's capacity to retain talent remained essentially unchanged—the country ranked 134 of 137 countries (Schwab 2017, 257).<sup>4</sup>

The apparent significance of such international rankings becomes amplified by the dearth of reliable migration statistics on the national level. As elsewhere, the Serbian national census is the authoritative source for all population measures, and, as the first since 2002, the 2011 census was met with great anticipation. For decades the census has included a question about family members "living and working abroad," and the 2011 census added a new question about family members studying abroad. The inclusion of these categories can be taken as an indication of the bureaucratic legibility of such populations and the government's interest in managing them (Kertzer and Arel 2002). While census data suggest an absolute drop in the number of Serbian citizens living abroad

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<sup>4</sup> Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States ranked one through three in the latest report; behind Serbia were Bosnia and Herzegovina, Haiti, and Venezuela. See [http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-index-2017-2018/competitiveness-rankings/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1552058967.7119450569152832031250#series=EOSQ399](http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-index-2017-2018/competitiveness-rankings/?doing_wp_cron=1552058967.7119450569152832031250#series=EOSQ399) for a sortable list of indicator rankings.

between 2002–2011, demographers recognize the unreliability of drawing even this general conclusion: “Reasons for the reduction are quite numerous—from the boycott of the census by members of the Albanian nationality, to the unusually high non-inclusion of residents working or living abroad, to changes in the method of enumerating that migratory contingent” (Penev 2017, 1). But, as with the WEF reports, the methodological problems grappled with by experts when interpreting census data are filtered out of its public presentation. Media reports based on analyses of the 2011 census data tended to repeat easily recognizable and digestible tropes of a country in the throes of demographic crisis—a theme I return to in my conclusion.<sup>5</sup>

I include this discussion not as a critique of the World Economic Forum, census, or the survey as method, but rather to highlight one important element of how discourses of brain drain are constructed and in turn, how they help to produce an empirical reality. As Sally Engle Merry (2009) argues, indicators such as human rights—or in this case, brain drain—rankings are technologies of global governance. They contribute to the country’s “competitiveness” rating, which in turn informs perceptions of Serbia’s fitness as a “safe” place to do business. The results of studies such as the Executive Opinion Survey of the World Economic Forum “appear as forms of knowledge, rather than as particular representations of a methodology and particular political decisions about what to measure and what to call it” (Merry 2009, 243; see also Davis, Kingsbury, and Merry 2012;

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<sup>5</sup> For examples of such coverage see: <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/Dru%C5%A1tvo/1755947/Demografski+alarm+%E2%80%93+Srba+sve+manje.html> and <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Drustvo/U-Beogradu-skoro-polovina-tridesetogodisnjakinja-nema-dete.lt.html>.

Shore and Wright 2015). Stripped of the original survey's footnotes and methodological caveats, the annually collected opinions of one hundred Serbian business leaders get translated as truth in the public sphere.

Regardless of their dubious ability to adequately capture the essence of human mobility, global brain drain rankings form an important part of how the migration of Serbia's talented youth is constituted as one of the greatest problems facing the nation-state. Such figures resonate both because of the scientism they encode (Kipnis 2008) and the fact that they validate the lived experience of so many—so many ordinary citizens who employ more pedestrian methods of quantifying departures, such as counting those in their high school cohort who have emigrated (Dzenovska 2013, 202–203). This point was illustrated by in conversation with Sofija, a thirty-year-old graduate of the faculty of dramatic arts who cobbles together work as a “cultural manager” among other roles on NGO projects. As with most of my interlocutors who were planning to leave Serbia, I asked Sofija if she could identify a turning point when she decided to try her luck elsewhere, in this case, London. She responded:

Well, for me personally, that is strongly connected with, well, the greater part of my closest circle of friends who have left....of course they didn't all leave at once, but I realized that I actually remain in the minority here and that's such a, you know, life message that comes to you. I mean, *what does that mean?* Because we were all somehow in the same position here, it's just a question of the fact that I haven't tried [to leave], nothing else.

Rejecting my framework of “turning point,” Sofija reminded me that everyday life in Belgrade is saturated with talk of leaving punctuated by actual departures. Among both those planning to leave and those planning to stay, many of my interlocutors referred to their friends, classmates, and acquaintances

who have left without return. Some spoke wistfully, others matter-of-factly, but for many, the vast number of peers abroad served as a sort of diagnostic tool that revealed a national social disease. This affliction is a globally resonant one.

### **Managing Brain Drain**

Brain drain has long preoccupied many a nation-state. As articulated in a 1968 volume on the “international brain market,” “the long-term economic and social prosperity of a country depends on the knowledge available to it. Progress is based on knowledge—and knowledge is used by brains and increased by brains” (Chorafas 1968, 13). Concern with the fate of the highly educated thus took on some of its contemporary dimensions with the rise of the post-World War II knowledge economy, peaking in the 1960s and spurring governmental interventions (see Friborg 1975).<sup>6</sup> As economic globalization has accelerated in more recent years, the understanding of brain drain as national threat has come to be complemented by a perspective that regards it as opportunity: given that emigration has become a human right (if not an equally distributed right), how can countries harness the human capital of their educated émigrés abroad? (see Bhagwati 2009; Saxenian 2007). The perspective of brain drain as opportunity is advanced by, among others, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and has come to dominate various national policies. Since the early 2000s,

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<sup>6</sup> Note that the term first referred to skilled workers from the United Kingdom who began to emigrate in large numbers (primarily to the United States). See Grubel and Scott 1977, 7–8 for discussion of the conditions in the US that attracted the highly educated from around the world. Now brain drain is generally invoked to describe skilled migration from so-called developing countries to the countries of the West.



governments in the broader Balkan region have likewise drafted “brain circulation” and “brain gain” policies that focus on engaging their significant diaspora populations in knowledge-transfer programs. But such regional efforts have largely remained aspirational, ad hoc, and weakly implemented.<sup>7</sup>

In Serbia, the perspective of brain drain as opportunity can be found scattered throughout its migration management and other national strategies and promoted in policy papers drafted by NGOs such as Grupa 484 (Group 484).<sup>8</sup> Such embrace of the reality of skilled migration and focus on the development of human capital are embedded in broader convictions about the global knowledge economy. As articulated in one strategy paper of the Serbian government, “Today the key indicator of national wealth is the ability to generate new knowledge, ideas, innovations, and technology, for which the creation and availability of human capital is a prerequisite” (Ministry of Religion and Diaspora 2011, 16).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> All countries of the region are considered emigration or “sending” countries with longstanding migratory patterns. I discuss the specifics of post-World War II shifts in these patterns in chapter 2, including in socialist Yugoslavia and postsocialist Serbia. But migratory dynamics have also played out differently in each national context. The wars that broke up Yugoslavia resulted in the significant displacement of citizens of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Cosic and Dzebo estimate that over half the population of BiH was displaced internationally during and in the immediate aftermath of the 1992–1995 war (2013, 57). The demands of postwar recovery have increased the urgency (but not efficacy) of coaxing the return of educated citizens. Another distinctive regional case is Albania, which experienced an extremely repressive version of state socialism that resulted in both an “old” (pre-1945) and “new” (post-1991) Albanian diaspora. With the support of the United Nations Development Programme, Albania is the only country in the Balkan region to have implemented a systematic “brain gain program” (Zeneli 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Group 484 was founded in 1995 to support (largely Serbian) refugees fleeing violence in Croatia. It since developed into one of the primary NGOs working in all areas of migration. In 2011 Group 484 established a research and policy branch, the Centre for Migration (CEMI), that has published numerous reports on national and regional brain drain. Due in part to the shifting priorities of donor organizations, CEMI has not published on this topic since 2013. See: <http://grupaa484.org.rs/cemi/>.

<sup>9</sup> Most, if not all, recent governmental policies can be found online in English as well as the original Serbian. The quality of these translations varies. In this work I generally cite the Serbian version of official policies, with quotes in my own translation.

Underpinning this view is a pervasive concern with national competitiveness, mirrored at the European level in the latest overall strategy of the European Union, *Europe 2020*. This strategy reinforces a longer-term concern with the employability of young Europeans that preceded the 2008 economic meltdown (Hirtt 2009, 215). But the latest global economic crisis has brought the concerns of competitiveness, innovation, the cultivation of talent, and indeed, brain drain, to the fore, especially in relation to the issue of unemployment. As rates of youth unemployment skyrocket across Europe, the Portuguese prime minister infamously suggested that teachers “just emigrate” (Queiroz 2011), Spain’s best-educated cohort has been dubbed a “lost generation” (Sills 2012), and Greece has been characterized as “bleeding in human capital” (Katsaros 2013).

The pragmatism of “brain circulation” informs a normalizing discourse on mobility that coexists in awkward tension with the more pervasive discourse of brain drain as threat to the nation-state. Both bubbled up in the perspectives of my interlocutors. Regular media reports on the brain drain problem, governmental efforts to manage—and at times normalize—the problem, and the lived experience of many combined to congeal a kind of Gramscian “common sense”—a common sense about the meaning(s) of migration and mobility that “refers not merely to practical know-how but also to conceptions of the world that contradict one another and hence form an incoherent whole” (Krause 2018, 183).

It is important to note that in the context of contemporary Serbia, “brain drain” is conceptualized expansively (which informed how I defined the target demographic of my research, discussed below). That is, when the problem appears in the media, in the speeches of politicians, and in everyday

conversations, it is discussed as the departure of the “young and talented” or “young and educated” in ways almost never meant to refer only to Serbia’s most promising or accomplished scientists, engineers, and doctors. The imprecise extension of these categories to all university graduates, or even to all those presumed youthful and ambitious—but not to *all* potential migrants—points to how brain drain is contoured as both a general concern with competitiveness in a global marketplace as well as a more specific anxiety about who will make the future of the nation.

Expressed in terms of the fate of talent, it is the classed rather than ethno-national characteristics of who makes the future that become amplified. This anxiety was often voiced humorously when I shared my research topic, in the response that “only those without brains have stayed in Serbia.” The implication of this cliché is twofold: those who are smart “leave in time” but also—the country is full of morons. This self-deprecating joke (relayed to me by Belgradians, who were, at least for the time being, staying) expresses some of the cultural and historical specificity of the phenomenon that is the focus of this dissertation. It taps into a deep urban–rural divide that took on political dimensions during the 1990s. It also points to the bounds of brain drain sketched in relation to a deeper past, as those who have left in the past twenty-five years are characterized as young, educated, and talented, in contrast with the guest workers of socialist Yugoslavia, a migratory cohort popularly understood to be wholly uneducated, unskilled, and from whom my interlocutors generally distanced themselves. It is features such as these—that I explore in chapter 2 and address throughout this dissertation—that demonstrate the importance that mobility has garnered as a

barometer of the (ab)normality of life in Serbia. While the phenomenon of brain drain is hardly unique to Serbia, movement is not everywhere inflected with such meaning. In the next section, I situate my research in relation to the literature on migration and mobility before outlining some of the generational experience that crucially informs how mobility became politicized in the particular context of postsocialist Serbia.

### **Migration and Mobility in the Literature**

This dissertation responds to Douglas Rogers' call for the anthropology of postsocialism to become "postsocialisms unbound," that is, for scholars to take the region of postsocialist Europe "less as a base assumption and more as part of the research question" (2010, 4). For example, how do the history of socialist Yugoslavia, the memory of its violent demise, and lived experiences of international mobility intersect to produce particular expectations and aspirations among urban, educated youth in Serbia? Following Rogers, this question becomes one to be investigated empirically. In posing such questions I take up the strategy identified by Rogers as attending to more complex circulations of people, ideas, and things than were generally the focus of early postsocialist ethnographies positioned against troubling the assumptions of "transition." This strategy is particularly relevant given the unique market socialism of Yugoslavia and the movements of people, ideas, and things facilitated by the geopolitical status of this former country, as well as the foreclosure of such circulation during the international isolation of the 1990s and early 2000s. I detail this historical context in chapter 2 and trace its ongoing

influence as well as the importance of postsocialist mobilities throughout this dissertation.

Attention to complex circulations also helps avoid the trap of methodological nationalism, a charge that has caused consternation among migration scholars (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Particularly in places like the former Yugoslavia, where there has been an overreliance on the explanatory potential of ethnonational belonging in the wake of violent conflict, a danger lurks in giving too much uncritical weight to the national frame—of assuming a “necessary, essential link between territory and identity” (Jansen and Löfving 2009, 5). Yet there is also a danger, in studying mobilities of the relatively privileged, of overemphasizing the possibility for “deterritorialized” or cosmopolitan identities (Appadurai 1996; Nowicka 2006; see also Khandekar and Murphy 2012). I forge a path through this terrain by approaching the role of the nation-state, placemaking, and the constitution of classed subjectivities as components of the politics of mobility to be investigated empirically (Jansen and Löfving 2009).

In the stances they took and the narratives they told about staying and leaving, my interlocutors expressed a range of positions from “weak nationalism” (Todorova 2015) to cosmopolitan global citizenship, pointing to the complexities of postsocialist, postwar senses of belonging. For example, twenty-five-year-old Nikola shared an epiphany he had experienced during an internship in Austria. “I am myself wherever I go...and then I understood, in fact, the concept of ‘global citizen.’ Then I understood that, you know, to return to Serbia, to stay in Austria, or wherever one goes, is becoming irrelevant. Because this is one earthly sphere

and why have borders?” As I explore in the pages to come, such a remarkable stance issues from both the crude pivots of Serbia’s geopolitical status as well as the fine-grained distinctions found in generational experiences of the decade that created independent republics out of socialist Yugoslavia.

While “unbounding postsocialisms” can help loosen the tight weave of methodological nationalism, the latter is a bias deeply embedded in migration research as well as public policy. The problem of methodological nationalism can also be seen as an outgrowth of modernist assumptions that inflected burgeoning disciplinary interest in migration as populations began to move in the context of post-World War II development projects (Brettell 2000, 97–98).<sup>10</sup> The assumption that rural–urban migration was unidirectional (Rhoades 1979) and the “sedentarist analytic bias” (Malkki 1995, 508) by which early anthropologists shied away from studying complex circulations meant that diverse patterns and experiences of mobility were slow to gain analytic purchase. Such premises led much early literature to approach migration as a continuation of urbanization and industrialization processes on a global scale, refracting broader discourses of modernization and progress still in play (see Brettell 2000, 102–103; Kearney 1986, 334–335). These notions inflect contemporary migration management policies as well as public perceptions of mobility. As Hilary Parsons Dick argues in the case of Mexico, migration discourses commonly map time onto space in a modernist chronotope, as “migrants depart from the trappings of their

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<sup>10</sup> Post-World War II anthropology was primarily concerned with defining typologies of migration (González 1961, 1989) and preoccupied with the massive population shifts prompted by urbanization (Halpern 1975; Simić 1973 for the Serbian case).

rurality...and move toward an urban future, with their backs turned on the past” (2010, 278). The movements of talented Serbian youth are similarly coded in the context of a differently ordered geopolitical hierarchy. While brain drain discourse often mobilizes modernist notions of both national and individual progress, it may also seek to normalize the movement of young Serbian citizens in obscuring the conditions by which they are constituted as not (yet) fully European. And, as I discuss in chapters 5 and 6, brain drain discourse can also be harnessed to bolster claims to the right to stay.

Whether movement or stasis is the norm of human life, and how to approach the relationship between these two conditions, is a related question that has vexed the field. Part of the impetus for the “mobilities turn” that began in the 1990s was the challenge meted out within the social sciences to the privileging of fixity.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the objections raised against methodological nationalism and the sedentarist bias noted above, in anthropology, this challenge was exemplified by the shift to multi-sited ethnography outlined by George Marcus (1995) as well as James Clifford’s corrective call to turn attention from the rootedness of culture to its “routes” (1997). There is thus a careful balance to be struck, as scholars have recently emphasized the importance of attending to the power dynamics of mobility by keeping immobility or fixity in the analytical

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<sup>11</sup> In the 1990s, work on globalization and transnationalism helped to spur a “mobilities turn” that coalesced the interdisciplinary field of mobilities studies. Mobilities research has brought together sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, historians, transport studies and communications scholars and others with an interest in spatial and social movement. In the past two decades, numerous research centers have been founded around the concept of mobility, with the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University and its journal *Mobilities* dominating the field (e.g. Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2000, 2007). For these scholars, the mobilities turn moved mobility from the margins to the center of inquiry, becoming “acknowledged as part of the energetic buzz of the everyday...and seen as a set of highly meaningful social practices that make up social, cultural and political life” (Adey et al. 2014, 3).

frame. As Jónsson notes, “very little research analyses how people experience and make sense of their existence as non-migrants, and how these aspects relate to a greater socio-cultural matrix of values and expectations informing (im)mobility” (2011, 4).

While brain drain has the specific inflections discussed above, not all of my interlocutors had permanent migration in mind when discussing their aspirations and plans. I thus also use the term *mobility* throughout this work to encompass the broad range of experiences and intentions around movement expressed by my interlocutors, and as a conceptual tool for accessing “how mobilities, as socio-cultural constructs, are experienced and imagined” (Salazar and Smart 2011, v). My research is premised on the idea that attending to the aspirations, strategies, and life projects of *nonmigrants* as well as those who are planning to leave and those who have returned from abroad is a crucial analytic dimension in contexts where mobility is politicized. I thus draw on scholarship that turns attention to the *imaginaries* of mobility and migration, divorced from actual movement (Harris and Rapport 2016; Salazar 2010; see also Simoni 2015) as well as Hilary Parsons Dick’s research among Mexican *nonmigrants* that elucidates “how migration reflects upon and orders social worlds long before, and even without, actual movement abroad” (2018, 7; see also 2011).

In centering aspirations as well as practices of mobility I also seek to build on the work of anthropologists such as Julie Chu, who argues for viewing the “illegal trajectories” of rural Chinese strategizing to leave the country not as resistance to state policies but as evidence of the desire to inhabit a more privileged subject position (2010, 93–94). A similar concern animates Jennifer



Patico's study of the international matchmaking industry, in which both American men and Russian women participate in order to "move into new contexts in which they might be differently valued, differently desirable, and differently competitive" (2010, 40). And as sociologist Michaela Benson (2009, 2011) demonstrates, mobility can crucially reveal conceptions of "quality of life," and the subjective qualities of middle-classness. I draw on these veins of research to approach mobility as a discursively constructed object of knowledge (Dick 2010, 2013) that is richly revelatory of broader frameworks of value.

In the next section, I shift focus to the demographic around which this dissertation is constructed, sketching the formative events of youth that congeal my interlocutors as a generational cohort (see Schuman and Rodgers 2004; Schuman and Scott 1989, 359–360). I first introduce a friend whose demographic profile, career ambitions, and ambiguous stance toward mobility exemplifies those of an absolutely average interlocutor.

### **The Children of the 1990s: Generation and Politics**

In January 2018 my friend Daca called on Skype from her new apartment in the hip Belgrade neighborhood of lower Dorćol. As she gave me a virtual tour she pointed to images of Madrid taped to the walls, saying, with a laugh that seemed to wink, that she had not yet given up on moving to the city of her dreams. Daca and I first met in late May 2015 when she sought out an English–Serbian language-exchange partner. We hit it off and quickly became more friends than language partners, though we would sometimes take care to return to this original intent. In time I also came to think of Daca as something of a

calibrating force for my research. Educated, ambitious, and twenty-six when we met, she was, in many respects, an exemplar of the “talented youth” whose departure from the country was much lamented in public discourse. But she hasn’t left—at least not yet.

Daca is from Niš, Serbia’s third-largest city. Her mother is a seamstress, her father a carpenter. She earned her bachelor’s degree in Spanish language and literature from the University of Niš. This language was her passion; a love stoked by a high-school visit to relatives in Barcelona and a brief internship in Madrid. While her younger brother followed a vocational path she was a born student, known in her hometown by a signature tote bag reliably slung over her shoulder, bulging with books. When she began teaching Spanish herself the tote bore textbooks; as she volunteered in various NGOs, pamphlets and reports.

Daca’s mother joined us for coffee one day in Belgrade. “We support Daca, we always have,” she told me. “Most families in our town, when they can afford to, they buy their kids a new car or a nice phone, but we always invested in Daca’s education. How to explain to her?” she continued, looking imploringly at her daughter. “We aren’t intellectuals, we are normal...”

Daca jumped in: “a working-class family.”

“Yes,” her mom agreed. “When I graduated thirty years ago, finishing high school was success. But Daca always really applied herself in school, and we supported her.”

The daughter’s specific goals related to work, mobility, and migration shifted many times during and after my fieldwork. But not capriciously so. She was, like many of the recent college graduates I came to know, struggling to

navigate the “school-to-work” transition in a way that would do justice to the effort she had put into her studies and set her on a path toward a fulfilling career. As her mother observed, the path to success was far from clear. Daca enjoyed teaching Spanish but had only found insecure contract work in this field. She yearned for a career that would enable her to advance her experience in Europe-oriented NGOs. And Madrid was the city of her dreams.

Daca and the other young Serbian citizens I met in the course of my research are, by and large, members of a generation loosely considered the “children of the 1990s.” They follow the “First Yugoslavs” who built socialist Yugoslavia and the “Last Yugoslavs” whose adult lives were ruptured by that country’s bloody demise but who also experienced something of its golden age (see Palmberger 2016, Volcic 2011; cf. Yurchak 2006 on the “last Soviet generation”). One young interlocutor—just a toddler when he fled with his family from Croatia to Serbia as war broke out—referred to his parents as belonging to a “lost generation.” But it is more often his generation that is regarded as lost. A recent compilation of texts published by the Austrian ERSTE Foundation dubbed those born in the 1980s and 1990s in the former Yugoslavia “generation in-between” (Gries, Asboth, and Krakovsky 2016). The contributions register a particularly Western European alarmism about whether these potential future citizens of the European Union are sufficiently European according to vague matrices of attitude and value orientation. In these pages, Daca and her peers are cast as ambivalent toward the West, crucially impacted by violence, and facing a bleak future “with no horizons of hope” (Gries 2016, 19).

It is not just Western observers who have expressed such anxieties. A host of Serbian publications in the late 1990s focused on the apparently concerning attitudes and values of youth born into the prolonged wartime crisis (see N. Petrović 2011, 145). My interlocutors themselves would sometimes grimly comment on their generation as defined by inertia or a kind of nihilistic inaction. As a twenty-nine-year-old graduate of information sciences told me, “We are rudderless (*nesnađeni*). We see that it is bad, but we don’t know what to do.”

To contextualize the contrast between the prevailing view of the “children of the 1990s” and the ambitions of those like Daca, I now turn to a brief sketch of the decade such youth grew up in and the political subjectivities it engendered. While in the next chapter I elaborate on how these events crucially impacted meanings of mobility and migration, here I seek to establish the political scaffolding necessary to apprehend the stories to come.

### **The Milošević Years**

Daca was born in 1989 as state socialism was crumbling across Eastern Europe. While the broader region began to experience the dizzying effects of post-1989 shock therapy and NGO-led transition projects, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was disintegrating into war.<sup>12</sup> The scholarly consensus holds that while the violent fracturing of socialist Yugoslavia into its constituent republics was not a product of nationalist ideologies, nationalism

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<sup>12</sup> The violent demise of socialist Yugoslavia is a complex topic that has received considerable scholarly attention. Some of the most rigorous analyses of the breakup of Yugoslavia include Ingrao and Emmert 2009; Lampe 2000; Ramet 2006, 2018.

greased the wheels of war in a federation in deep economic and political crisis (Popov 2000; Wachtel and Bennett 2009). In the run-up to war Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and Croatian President Franjo Tuđman performed a kind of symbiotic call-and-response that fostered a climate of fear and conjured a generalized sense that the country's days as a multiethnic federation were numbered. At the same time, older friends have mentioned how shocked they were when the first shots were fired. As one former Sarajevan grimly remembered, "no one expected that war would actually come. Except for the Jews. They knew what war looked like and they organized busses and left." While Tuđman and supporters had their own designs for an independent Croatian state, it is the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milošević that bears the greatest responsibility for the violence that unfolded in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and later in Kosovo.<sup>13</sup> That some of my interlocutors would balk at this statement is a point I return to below.

Slobodan Milošević began his rise to power within the League of Communists of Serbia during the 1980s. In 1987 he gained control of the party in what amounted to an intraparty coup and began purging political opponents. After forcing the resignation of his one-time political sponsor Ivan Stambolić he assumed the Serbian presidency. With Milošević at the helm, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) inherited the infrastructure and membership of the League of

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<sup>13</sup> When it declared independence in 1991 Slovenia endured a brief ten-day war with minimal casualties. The republic of Macedonia also declared independence in 1991 without bloodshed. (The latter was recognized internationally as the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" or FYROM until a dispute with Greece over its name was finally resolved in 2019. The country is now officially called the Republic of North Macedonia.) Conflict between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians brought this independent state to the brink of civil war in 2001. On this conflict see Neofotistos 2012.

Communists of Serbia. The first nominally multiparty elections in December 1990 affirmed Milošević as president of Serbia and gave SPS a huge majority of parliamentary seats although the party won only 46.1 percent of the popular vote (see Gordy 1999, 24–43; N. Vladislavljević 2008).

The level of popular support enjoyed by Milošević—and the motivations of his supporters—are still somewhat disputed among scholars. Eric Gordy characterized Milošević’s rise to power as “untainted by popular participation” (1999, 25) while Marko Živković claims that Milošević enjoyed enough votes, and on the basis of the narrative he offered about Serb victimization, to be kept “more or less legitimately in the saddle” for a decade (2011, 249). Robert Hayden, in turn, counters that “in 1990 he stole the elections that he probably would have won” (2014, 190), attributing this relative success to the promise of stability, rather than nationalism, Milošević peddled.

Part of the challenge was the presence on the political scene of others who made Milošević’s rhetoric and political program seem tame. On a comedy talk show in 1991, Vojislav Šešelj, leader of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) was asked if he really thought that Croats should be murdered. He responded, “yes, and even more—with a rusty spoon, to make [their suffering] last longer” (quoted in Pribićević 1999, 199). While Šešelj was known for incendiary rhetoric, this “rusty spoon” comment achieved a unique symbolic afterlife in the political cartoons of Predrag Koraksić (known as Corax), one of the country’s premier political commentators. I return to this afterlife below. But in the early 1990s, the political program promoted by SRS rested on the realization of a Greater Serbia, a goal which necessarily entailed the destruction of Croatia and Bosnia and

Herzegovina, and the assumption by Serbia of large portions of the territory of these neighboring republics (Bakić 2009, 197). In the December 1992 parliamentary elections SRS won 22.6 percent of the vote while Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia won 28.8 percent (see Gordy 1999, 47).

With Šešelj around, the wartime politics of Milošević may have seemed moderate at times but both relied on the resonance of a national narrative of heroic victimization (Bakić-Hayden 2004; Čolović 2002) with which all historical conflicts became wars of self-defense or liberation waged against forces seeking to destroy the Serbian nation (see Obradović-Wochnik 2009a; Yerkes 2004). Throughout the 1990s Milošević alternately denounced Šešelj and cooperated with him, depending on what was most politically expedient (Irvine 1995). Šešelj created paramilitary units to fight in Croatia and BiH and Milošević provided the arms (Pribićević 1999, 197). Šešelj's units augmented the Yugoslav People's Army weakened by purges of Croats, Slovenes, and Macedonians and desertions by Serbs and Montenegrins. SRS leaders regularly performed service in the volunteer units, imbuing them with a special legitimacy as war heroes (Irvine 1995, 161). Milošević's determination to remain in power led him to remake his image several times over, renouncing support for the Bosnian Serbs in 1993, recognizing the independence of Macedonia in 1994, and launching his 1998 ethnic cleansing campaign against Kosovar Albanians not as a nationalist project but as an "anti-terrorist" one (Markotich 1999, 277–284). (I discuss the NATO military campaign launched in response in the following chapter).

But the trouble with the question of popular support for Milošević is also rooted in the extent to which he excelled, in Eric Gordy's (1999) apt phrasing, at

“the destruction of alternatives” in the realms of politics, media, popular culture, and sociality. Politically, “the Serbian regime...survived by systematically destroying the crucial elements of a normal parliamentary system—autonomous and viable alternative centers of power—while ostensibly maintaining, and even claiming the credit for introducing, the formal aspects of a plural political system” (Gordy 1999, 1). Regime control of most media outlets combined with the isolating effects of international sanctions to foster a sense of resignation among the impoverished population of Serbia.

Despite these conditions, various forms of opposition to the Milošević regime remained active throughout the 1990s, especially in the capital city of Belgrade. Student-led anti-Milošević protests in 1991 and 1992 “established mass public protest as a counter-response to Milošević’s increasing consolidation of power through institutions of state, including state-controlled media, parliament, and the university” (Greenberg 2014, 1999n7). An opposition coalition formed under the banner *Zajedno* (Together) won significant victories in the 1996 municipal elections. The government’s annulment of these results sparked daily protests that continued for four months. The coalition would fall apart until uniting again in 2000 as the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS). DOS won the 2000 presidential election, spurred by the organizing of the student-led and USAID-funded movement *Otpor* (Resistance).<sup>14</sup> When Milošević refused to accept the election results people poured into the streets for several days of

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<sup>14</sup> *Otpor* was celebrated internationally as a model of peaceful revolution. After Milošević was deposed in 2000 the movement’s leaders found themselves in demand as consultants on “color revolutions” throughout the region and beyond (see Greenberg 2012).



protest that reach a zenith on October 5, 2000, with the authoritarian nationalist officially resigning two days later. This event became known as the “October Revolution”—a pivotal historical moment that has accrued layers of ambiguous significance in the ensuing years.

### **All that Chaos: Reflections on the Milošević Years**

My interlocutors did not directly discuss the history sketched above. The Milošević years mostly entered my research in the form of telling omissions, odd euphemisms, and imprecise conspiracy theories. More than once, the decade of the 1990s was hastily skimmed over in conversation as “all that chaos” (*sav onaj haos*). Daca and her peers were young children who, indeed, had little to no ability to influence the geopolitical events that would mar their childhoods and shape their future possibilities. As I discuss in the next chapter, this has generated a great deal of intergenerational tension between the children of the 1990s and their parents’ generation, with members of the latter regarded by the former as those more-or-less responsible for *all that chaos*.

But *I* first learned this history not through the sources cited above but as a volunteer activist with the feminist antimilitarist network Women in Black Belgrade (WiB) from 2003–2005.<sup>15</sup> Along with a handful of other groups, WiB became, during the 1990s, a safe haven for those who felt affinity with the “other Serbia” (*druga Srbija*)—a term that came to designate those marginalized

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<sup>15</sup> WiB activists ground their protest in theories of feminism that explicate the linkages between nationalism, militarism, and patriarchy.

citizens who stood firmly against the Milošević regime *and* its warmongering politics.<sup>16</sup> As Maple Razsa observed of antiwar groups across the former Yugoslavia, “those who resisted the overwhelmingly dominant logic of ethnic war...were a small minority swimming against a riptide of nationalist exclusion” (2015, 4). In 1991 WiB began to hold a weekly silent vigil on Republic Square, in the heart of Belgrade, in protest against the wars being waged in their name, the nationalism used to fuel the conflicts, and the complicity of an apparently indifferent population. They were screamed at by passersby, harassed by the regime, and branded as the nation’s greatest traitors. But they continued to hold space—literally occupying urban space—throughout the decade (and still today) for those opposed to militarism and insistent on acknowledging Serbia’s leading role in the wars of the 1990s.

My former affiliation with Women in Black and affinity for their antimilitarist stance aligned me with a segment of the Serbian population that “has no illusions about crimes committed by the Serbs, and believes that the nation has to confront them” (Obradović-Wochnik 2009b, 33). This is, by all estimates, a quite narrow segment. During my initial two years in the country the controversy over how the wars in the former Yugoslavia are to be remembered was percolating just below the surface and occasionally bursting into public life. Women in Black were still protesting in the early 2000s (among other reasons) because no collective reckoning with the past was taking place. In fact, the denial

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<sup>16</sup> Other key groups include: the Center for Antiwar Action, Belgrade Circle, Cinema and Cultural Center Rex, the Center for Cultural Decontamination, the Women’s Studies Center, the Humanitarian Law Center, the Lawyers’ Committee on Human Rights, and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia (see Fridman 2006, 96–105).

or relativization of war crimes committed in the name of the Serbian nation showed no sign of abating. While outright denial that certain war crimes occurred at all, such as the Srebrenica genocide, may have declined among the Serbian public, a broader “culture of denial” persists to this day (see Obradović-Wochnik 2009b; K. Ristić 2014; Subotić 2009).

During my dissertation fieldwork a decade later I was, therefore, attuned in a particular way to those telling omissions, odd euphemisms, and imprecise conspiracy theories about the Milošević years that emerged as I tried to work out the political subjectivities of my interlocutors. I was steeped in the distinction explicated by Orli Fridman (2006, 2011) between anti-*Milošević* and antiwar activists during the 1990s and the October Revolution. As Fridman discusses, by the end of the 1990s most everyone in Serbia wanted Milošević gone. Not only had his level of popular support been underwhelming to begin with, but even his supporters became disillusioned as the decade of poverty dragged on. Yet, “the reality was that it was not anti-war sentiment that brought out the masses to march in the streets for months....The wish to live in a normal country created an urgent need to get rid of the man who was seen as the one who brought this abnormal country upon his people” (Fridman 2011, 514). Picture the scene, then, as right-wing nationalists joined the same crowd as Women in Black and student activists on October 5, 2000, and together, forced Milošević to resign. Even the police, crucially, did not act against the protesters.

## First as Radicals, then as Progressives

The euphoria of the 2000 October Revolution was premised on the expectation that the end of the Milošević regime would engender rapid change and a return to the good graces of Europe and the wider world. These expectations were quickly frustrated. When reformist Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić was assassinated in 2003—in the middle of the day, in the center of Belgrade, at the hands of security forces with ties to Milošević—many interpreted the shocking event as a return to the darkness of the war years and as the key moment when the country began to “backslide.” In her analysis of popular representations of his assassination, Jessica Greenberg shows how Đinđić was portrayed as a family man of integrity as well as “a vanguard of democracy, a man with European sensibility and sense, who represented the future of Serbia as a respected, democratic state” (2006, 132). In hindsight the Đinđić assassination, as one interlocutor put it, cast the October Revolution as a “missed opportunity” (*promašili smo priliku*).

Besides the Đinđić years, there were other times in the first “post-revolutionary” decade when it seemed that democratic reforms would take stronger root, and some interlocutors implicitly linked these periods with a downturn in emigration. As Sofija explained:

There was one period, 2000 to 2005, 6, 7, when migration, including brain drain, was significantly reduced, because people stopped to see if something would actually happen....So it was a moment of calmness that everyone felt...when people, you know, [said] “ahh”—took a breath and waited as though underwater, just to see if we would swim. That simply didn’t happen...people can’t hold their breath forever...so they started to go again—in the past five years it’s really pronounced.

The first term of Boris Tadić's presidency (he served from 2004–2012) seemed promising to many. From the Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka) and pro-Western, expectations were high for Tadić. Yet his party was forced to form fragile coalition governments with political rivals—destabilizing his presidency through divisions on the issues of EU membership, cooperation with the ICTY, and the status of Kosovo (Subotić 2017, 170–171; see also Listhaug, Ramet, and Dulić 2011). These divisions softened with the passage of time, the substantial pressure of the international community, and the eventual convergence of public opinion that EU membership would probably be better than the alternative.

But in a recent survey by political science students at the University of Belgrade, eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds most often responded that—besides the internet—it is the coming to power of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) that has defined their lives. The same cohort named Aleksandar Vučić as the personality that has most defined the life of their generation (Milosavljević 2018). Who are Vučić and the SNS, and how did they come to hold such significance? This question requires a brief return to Vojislav Šešelj, wartime wielder of the rusty spoon.

While the hatemongering Šešelj was indicted for war crimes and surrendered to the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 2003, his far-right party remained the largest for some years, then led by Tomislav Nikolić.<sup>17</sup> In 2008, Nikolić and other SRS members broke with Šešelj to

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<sup>17</sup> The United Nations Security Council established the ICTY in 1993 with a mandate to prosecute violations of international humanitarian law on the territory of the former Yugoslavia during the

form a new party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). (Note that “progressive” here should not be read as having any of the connotations it does in Western political theory.)<sup>18</sup> After some years with the Democratic Party at the helm, Nikolić was elected president of Serbia in 2012, a post he occupied until 2017. Following Nikolić, in 2017 another SNS member was elected president: Aleksandar Vučić. Minister of Information under Milošević, Vučić was also a member of the Serbian Radical Party until he joined Nikolić in founding SNS. He became a powerful party figure and in 2014 was elected prime minister (generally regarded as the most powerful position in Serbia’s parliamentary system).

When I conducted my research the democratic opposition was fragmented and marginalized and the Radicals-turned-Progressives had a firm grip on power under a remade image. As Vučić gained power he established himself as a vigorous partner of EU diplomats and technocrats. For a domestic audience he has also been appropriately pro-Russia (for example, in 2014 authorizing a massively expensive military parade on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade in World War II that included a visit from Russian President Vladimir

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wars of the 1990s. It finally completed its work in 2017, transferring eight remaining cases to local courts. The work of the court was incredibly complex and its reception across the former Yugoslavia mixed. It was generally regarded in Serbia as biased against Serbs, and many of its rulings were also immensely disappointing to the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The trial against Milošević ended without verdict when he died in custody of a heart attack in 2006. And in a ruling that shocked many, in March 2016 the ICTY acquitted Vojislav Šešelj of all charges and he returned to Belgrade a free man. See: <http://www.icty.org/en>. On Šešelj’s trajectory see: <https://www.france24.com/en/20180411-vojislav-seselj-unrepentant-serb-ultranationalist>.

<sup>18</sup> In Serbian: Srpska Napredna Stranka. Jelena Subotić notes that while “Serbian Progressive Party” has become codified as the English translation of the name of this political party, a more faithful translation would be “Serbia Forward” (2017, 186n20). “Forward Serbia!” (Napred Srbijo!) was the name of the parliamentary group formed by prominent SRS members who would later join the SNS.

Putin). Vučić has the political astuteness to sound at once like the most committed European and “transitologist,” while simultaneously evoking tired yet effective nationalist tropes and engaging in decidedly undemocratic practices (see Greenberg and Spasić 2017). Besides the occasional reprimand for his systematic repression of the media, his increasingly authoritarian tendencies have not had a noticeably negative impact on the good relationship his government has enjoyed with Western powers.<sup>19</sup> Most significantly, since the creation of the Serbian Progressive Party in 2008 all major political parties in the country have endorsed membership in the European Union, which Serbia formally applied for in 2009. As anthropologist Tanja Petrović has argued, “this ideological unity across the Serbian political spectrum has resulted in the production of a standardized, performative discourse on Serbia’s accession to the EU that overpopulates the media space” (2015, 293). As I elaborate in chapter 3, the EU accession process, and the myopic focus maintained by the political elite on this process, has had a sweeping impact on the economic and other policies that structure the life chances and choices of my interlocutors.

Post-Đinđić politics are thus perhaps best characterized by the endurance of the metaphor of the rusty spoon. As Nikolić and Vučić gained power—first as Radicals, then as Progressives—a rusty spoon began to appear behind their caricatured ears in the scenes of political cartoonist Corax, serving as a reminder of the political genealogy of these and other politicians. In the cartoon

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the 2014 country progress report of the European Commission: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key\\_documents/2014/20140108-serbia-progress-report\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2014/20140108-serbia-progress-report_en.pdf) as well as subsequent reports.

reproduced in figure 3 Vučić attempts to sweep this pedigree, symbolized by a pile of rusty spoons, under an EU flag. As prominent anthropologist Ivan Čolović elegantly prefaced a new volume of Corax cartoons,

When we assess the extent of their [Vučić, Nikolić, and others] transformation, their peacefulness and Europeanness—even when we optimistically and in good faith believe that they have really changed—we must not forget that their careers began in the sign of the rusty spoon; that their first political lessons were sourced from Šešelj’s hand, from these, his spoons. (Čolović 2016, 6–7)



**Figure 3: Corax cartoon**

Aleksandar Vučić sweeps a pile of rusty spoons under the flag of the European Union. ©Predrag Koraksić. Published in *Danas*, December 15, 2015.<sup>20</sup>

### **Post-Milošević Political Subjectivities**

The unsavory political genealogies of key officials were widely known and conditioned the responses of perhaps a few of my interlocutors who topped the

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<sup>20</sup> See [https://www.danas.rs/corax/corax-2015-12-15-0902\\_ocp\\_w500\\_h343/](https://www.danas.rs/corax/corax-2015-12-15-0902_ocp_w500_h343/). A gallery of Corax cartoons published in the daily *Danas* since 2004 can be viewed here: <https://www.danas.rs/corax/>.



age range of my target demographic (and thus had more prominent personal memories of the 1990s). It is difficult to confirm the specific influence of the wartime past in the present on how my younger interlocutors viewed politics and evaluated individual politicians. There are two related reasons for this: First, because the country as a whole has not undertaken any collective process of coming to terms with Serbia's role in the breakup of Yugoslavia—which would include public recognition of the most egregious war crimes committed in the name of the Serbian people—this reckoning has had to take place on an individual level only (see Fridman 2011, 515–517; Fridman 2018). Second, electoral politics in the region are more broadly regarded as fundamentally dirty, corrupt, and immoral (see Greenberg 2014, 147–178; Helms 2007). Such an understanding of politics as a (dirty) game that one best stay out of was widespread. As one promoter of entrepreneurship put it, “that game, the political game, we don't know how to play, and they will certainly beat us. I mean, if we now began to play that game. But if we play our own game of ‘empowering the individual,’ or ‘new skills,’ then yes, maybe we can manage to do something.” While my interlocutors held a variety of specific political views, they sought agentive action outside of what they held to be a separate political realm (see Greenberg 2010).

While such distancing from politics resonates widely, in Serbia political cynicism flows more specifically from a revolution that was, as a former Otpor activist named Jovan put it, “all for nothing.” As Greenberg argues was the case for student activists in the early 2000s, navigating the lived reality of post-revolutionary democracy bred “a politics of disappointment” that helped the

reform-minded to manage expectations (2014, 39–44). This idea of disappointment captures how students were invested in idealized notions of Europe and normative visions of democracy but ultimately turned to decidedly pragmatic approaches to reform. Throughout her book—which this dissertation builds on—Greenberg illuminates the outcomes of disappointment as manifestations of “presentist” politics by which activists operated between cynicism and hope. Specifically, she lays bare the logics of how anti-Milošević student activists turned to promoting university reforms in line with the European Bologna Process. While Bologna was decidedly neoliberal, students championed the reform process as a tool for challenging entrenched university hierarchies and for producing themselves as intelligible European subjects.<sup>21</sup>

Conducting fieldwork a few years earlier than Greenberg and among radical anarchists in Croatia and Slovenia, Maple Razsa (2015) points to the relevance of temporal and geopolitical fault lines as well as family biographies in shaping political subjectivities. In 2001, it was mostly Croats and Slovenes on his train to the G8 protest in Genoa (Razsa 2015, 8). Serbian citizens would have just deposed Milošević and were still under a strict visa regime. Taken together, Greenberg and Razsa’s research demonstrates how the postsocialist era bred very different political subjectivities even among those within a few years age of each other. It also demonstrates how ideologically distinct forms of activism can sometimes look rather similar in practice. For example, much like Greenberg’s

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<sup>21</sup> The Bologna Process seeks to more closely align systems of higher education across Europe in order to facilitate, among other things, the mobility of labor. See: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/bologna-process-and-european-higher-education-area\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/bologna-process-and-european-higher-education-area_en).

student activist interlocutors, Razsa's anarchist collaborators also embraced presentist action. "They shifted away from an emphasis on a future utopia and toward a commitment to forms of practice, away from ends and toward means" (Razsa 2015, 11). In chapters 5 and 6 I probe this resemblance of form to consider how the promotion of entrepreneurship and the digital economy—among non-activists—may relate to political activism, as it draws on the vocabulary and spirit of social change if not its critical underpinnings.

Such scholarship prompts a reconsideration of the border between engagement and disengagement. In this context I will also show how the widespread disavowal of politics among my interlocutors both emerges from and comments upon postsocialist expectations of the state. As Jovan told me, "it's only important to people here that the state doesn't bother them." Yet he added: "It's only important that the state doesn't bother them—and that it creates the conditions for a better life." Even after the disappointments of a revolution that wasn't revolutionary, disgust with the corruption and cronyism of electoral politics, with the same people in power as were responsible for the wars, poverty, and isolation of the 1990s, even so: the state *desired* by my interlocutors was a moral, responsible, orderly one that takes care of its citizens.

Such expectations of the state resonate with those of Stef Jansen's interlocutors in a Bosnian apartment complex for whom "a projected 'normal state' was at the heart of their yearnings for 'normal lives'" (2015, 8–9). Jansen proposes the concept of "gridding" to capture this sense of how normality in everyday life was perceived as necessitating systemic state-level order. The absence of such gridded normality gives rise to the widespread sense of lives lived

“in the meantime.” While young potential migrants in Serbia shared the *expectation* of an ordered or orderly state (that nevertheless did not “bother” them too much), they did not share the condition of suspended action implied by Jansen’s phrase “in the meantime.” Rather, they lived their lives briskly, *despite* the perceived absence of a state that fulfilled their expectations. As we will see in the chapters to come, some sought an ordered state elsewhere while others sought to insulate themselves from the vagaries of the Serbian state via an entrepreneurial turn inward or forms of “virtual migration” enabled by the growing digital economy. While I build directly on the work of Greenberg, Razsa, Jansen, and others, my research also suggests ways in which geopolitics has come to enable unique mobility stances and expectations for dignified work that distinguish the range of life chances and choices experienced by my interlocutors from those of their peers in neighboring republics and just a decade their senior.

Finally, I must highlight the eclecticism that also features in Serbian political subjectivities. My interlocutors did not represent the full range of the political spectrum—I did not interview, to the best of my knowledge, any hardcore Šešelj fans. But the notion of a political spectrum in Serbia is almost nonsensical. Politicians themselves shift positions on key ideological issues (such as EU integration) self-servingly, make use of contradictory rhetorics simultaneously, and erase their political tracks instrumentally. There are a few past Serbian politicians whose significance has become relatively fixed for the urban middle classes, namely Đinđić and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Milošević. But beyond these two figures there is a remarkable eclecticism to political views in Serbia. As anthropologist Marko Živković humorously remarked on this

phenomenon, “no matter how contradictory a grouping of strange bedfellows claimed as one’s ‘allies’ (or favourite politicians) might appear to be, it will be, so my hypothesis goes, encountered in somebody, somewhere in Serbia” (2007, 602–603).

Živković suggests that such personal political eclecticism reflects a generally unsettled political sphere and the effort required of average citizens to meaningfully follow, let alone make sense of, daily political developments. I would add that this is also related to the absence of collective confrontation with the past—a process that would supply some clear moral coordinates for the population. For example, my first interviewee, an entrepreneurial returnee to Serbia, surprised me by framing her return as prompted by Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008: She said, “I think, uh, Kosovo is an issue I feel very strongly about and, this was around the time that Kosovo declared independence in February, and I left [the US] during that summer.” I stress that I am not casting this stance as inherently immoral, nationalistic, or anything else. Rather, I wish to highlight that this otherwise cosmopolitan, intellectual, and left-leaning entrepreneur here voices a position that is shared by those on the far right. Her commentary reveals an awareness of the dissonance of this stance within her overall subject position as the pace of her words accelerates to add: “Kosovo was lost long before that and I’m 100 percent aware of everything but I felt like, you know—*Serbia is falling apart.*”<sup>22</sup> Other interlocutors seemed to happily

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<sup>22</sup> Kosovo is considered the cultural heartland of Serbia and, for various reasons, is a symbol of national trauma generative of a version of the “patriotism of despair” that Sergei Oushakine (2009) described in the Russian context. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008 and Serbia will need to recognize the independent state in order to join the EU. EU-brokered

combine disparate positions without any sense of cognitive dissonance, though their default stance was an eschewal of the political.

In the chapters to come, the subtle difference that just a few years' age can make in fashioning political subjectivities will become apparent. In chapter 6 we hear more from Jovan, born in 1980 and active in Otpor as a young adult.

Another interlocutor who I call Dušan mentioned, when we first met, that he had scanned my LinkedIn profile, noticing that I had been an activist with Women in Black. He told me that he had once been to a gathering at the WiB office. We did not discuss this further, but as my field notes attest, "that's how I knew that he was politically ok." Perhaps giving it too much weight, this offhand remark not only colored my perception of Dušan's political proclivities but also piqued my interest in how promoters of entrepreneurship (as both Jovan and Dušan were) related their current activities to politics and activism.

More typical was the musing of a twenty-six-year-old law student I interviewed:

I remember that I- that there wasn't electricity, that we did our homework by candlelight in the '90s, and that afterward there was the bombing. Of course, I have to blame that government. That's natural, on the one hand. On the other hand, of course I blame the politics of the great powers. I didn't fall from Mars, I guess I know that one plus one equals two. Of course the great powers are, like I said, in favor of destroying the economy, to reduce it; Yugoslavia was a big country, all of a sudden it was carved up, now there are smaller little countries. Divide and conquer, you know how that saying goes, fight and command (*posvadaaj pa komanduj*).

Here, my interlocutor first shares the soft memory of an innocent child:

homework by candlelight. Only three years old in 1992 she could not possibly

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negotiations have taken place in fits and starts, and many consider Vučić to be deliberately stalling, as when a resolution is reached his party will likely be punished at the polls.

know that Sarajevo was under siege by Serb forces or that ethnic cleansing would be committed in the name of the Serbian nation. Now, as an adult who could know (but does she?), she distributes blame for *all that chaos* to the government of the time (the Milošević regime) as well as the “great powers” who were, indeed, intimately involved in the breakup of Yugoslavia, though doubtfully so in order to “divide and conquer” its republics.<sup>23</sup> This comment illustrates both the moral distance from the wartime past claimed by many Serbian “children of the 1990s” via invocations of their innocent status as children, and something of the prevailing orientation toward politics among such youth. Setting aside its conspiratorial overtones, this comment positions politics as an external realm, the domain where governments act. As Greenberg explained in relation to a similar interaction with Serbian youth about the NATO bombing, “If politics really were a site through which one could affect the country and its policies, we all would have been implicated in past violence” (Greenberg 2010, 44). Young potential migrants from Serbia, then, tended to regard themselves as apolitical actors in an abnormally political context. The tensions inherent in such a position will be traced through the chapters to come.

Finally, this comment suggests how, in Serbia, reflections on staying or leaving occur in relation to a complex imaginary of the West. On the one hand, during the 1990s the West came to represent normalcy and potential freedom from stifling impoverishment and isolation. On the other hand, the West became associated with duplicity, betrayal, and neocolonialism (Greenberg 2010; Volcic

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<sup>23</sup> See Ramet 2004, 732–734 for a summary of various theories of the nature and importance of “external factors” on the breakup of Yugoslavia and its dissolution in war.

2011, 53–59). As a representative of this West, I sometimes felt this double-sided projection, though these specific elements were much more muted than they had been when I lived in Serbia ten years prior. As I discuss in later chapters, new associations with the West had been grafted onto old and colored my research interactions. And—as I will show—my young interlocutors had real-life experiences of travel to the West to draw on in asserting their mobility stances.

### **The Methods of Mobility**

Throughout my fieldwork, I grappled with the issue of constructing the field. As James Clifford asked, “what specific kinds of travel and dwelling (where? how long?), and interaction (with whom? In what languages?) have made a certain range of experiences count as *fieldwork*?” (1992, 99). In one sense, my own response to these questions seemed clear. I had secured funding to conduct fifteen months of research, from October 2014 through December 2015. And because of my theoretical focus on the potential migration of young talent, it seemed self-evident that I would spend most of my time with the relatively young and educated. As for location, situating myself in Serbia’s capital city of Belgrade also made obvious sense. Nearly half of Serbia’s population is said to work in the capital and, as one interlocutor from a small town put it, “if you don’t come to Belgrade, you don’t have a ticket to go further.” Thus while in one sense I had a clearly defined field site, “constructing the field” nevertheless proved challenging, as my fieldwork was not characterized by daily engagement at one particular organization or with one group of interlocutors clearly bound by shared activity or demographic features.



Under such circumstances, “where is the field?” as numerous others have asked in recent years (e.g. Des Chene 1997; Hannerz 2010; Kurotani 2004). Most famously, George Marcus traced a disciplinary shift toward multi-sited fieldwork, characterizing work in this vein as ethnography both “in and of” the world system, where “the world system is not the theoretically constituted holistic frame that gives context to the contemporary study of peoples or local subjects closely observed by ethnographers, but it becomes, in a piecemeal way, integral to and embedded in discontinuous, multi-sited objects of study” (1995, 97). While the shift described by Marcus was of relevance for all anthropologists, the logistical and theoretical implications of conducting multi-sited fieldwork prompted a particularly robust conversation amongst scholars of mobility and migration (e.g. Hirvi and Snellman 2012). Unsurprisingly, Marcus’s (1995) technique of “follow the people” has been taken up and developed extensively in the fields of mobility and migration studies, but this most literal sense of multi-sited fieldwork is just one of several he described. The author also outlines the techniques of “follow the thing,” “follow the metaphor,” “follow the plot, story, or allegory,” “follow the life history,” and “follow the conflict.” Rather than calling for physical movement between geographic locations, each of these approaches suggests a way of accessing broad global processes via their local manifestations in order to nuance and extend the implications of ethnographic analysis.

The necessity of tracking global processes while remaining ethnographically situated has become “virtual orthodoxy” in the discipline since the mid-1990s (Starn 2015, 7). But *how* to actually do this remains a perplexing methodological puzzle that must be engaged in context. I did not encounter the

same fieldwork dilemmas as those with would-be interlocutors scattered across the globe—but I did meet the challenge of studying meanings of mobility and migration from a fixed geographic location. These circumstances led to the emergence of a constellation of “micro-sites” of participant observation out of which I constructed my field. Traversing these sites—sometimes along with the young potential migrants I met, sometimes as a lone ethnographer—I sought to harness the dynamic power of multi-sited ethnography and engage the inductive side of grounded theory (Bernard and Ryan 2010, 265–267).

### **Places**

What kinds of places were these micro-sites? One was the International Academic Center (IAC). A member of the network of educational information centers known as EducationUSA and funded by the United States Department of State, the Center’s mandate is to provide accurate information about higher education opportunities in the US. They also offer testing and advising services. In the course of my research I attended several group advising sessions, joining students interested in pursuing an American graduate degree. In cooperation with the Executive Director, I subsequently volunteered to conduct individual consultations with students preparing to apply to US graduate programs, helping them to identify their goals and strengths and sharing my own experiences. This

micro-site allowed me to meet a wider range of students than I might have otherwise and to better understand stances toward educational mobility.<sup>24</sup>

During my fieldwork I also attended as many policy panels and public events as possible on youth (un)employment. Such micro-sites consistently situated the migration of Serbia's talented youth as a consequence of high unemployment. They were thus rich locations for mining discursive framings of the issue as well as mapping the connections and fissures between relevant nongovernmental, governmental, and other actors. Examples of such events include a one-day conference on vocational schooling and youth employability, the promotional panel for a new publication of the statistical office on external migration, and several panels organized by the National Youth Council (KOMS) on youth unemployment as well as the new National Youth Strategy.

One of my early fieldwork observations was that the political discourse which frames brain drain as a problem offers entrepreneurship as its solution. Pursuing this direction I attended several panel discussions on (social) entrepreneurship put on by the student organization Network for Business Development (Mreža za poslovni razvoj) as part of their "School of Business Skills" (Škola poslovnih veština). (Despite the name of the initiative, the events I attended veered inspirational rather than practical.) I also entered the "ecosystem" of entrepreneurship via Impact Hub Belgrade (IHB), a newly founded coworking space and community for entrepreneurs and part of the

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<sup>24</sup> I conducted six such consultations at IAC. Of a different nature than my in-depth interviews, these took place in English and, though they were audio-recorded, I did not transcribe or include the sessions in my later coding.

global Impact Hub network. There I attended a workshop on “impact entrepreneurship,” a series of workshops under the auspices of the Social Impact Award aimed at introducing students to social entrepreneurship, and a regular discussion group for an online course called “u.lab” on “transforming society and self.” I draw heavily on these experiences in chapters 5 and 6.

My field was also constructed out of serendipitous encounters on busses and with neighbors, meals with friends both old and new, and the yellowing typewritten ephemera I paged through in the Archives of Yugoslavia. Engaging this constellation of micro-sites I made contact with many of the experts and a few of the young potential migrants I would later interview. And I sought to train an ethnographic lens on how fragments of the world system become embedded in the politics of mobility in Serbia.

## **People**

Woven through this dissertation are the mobility narratives—including plans, aspirations, and imaginaries as well as practices—of young, highly educated potential migrants from Serbia. As discussed above, my target demographic was “the children of the 1990s,” though several in-depth interviewees and focus group participants were older. Including in-depth interviews, focus groups, and IAC consultations (but not expert interviews), my participants ranged from twenty to forty-three, with a median age of twenty-eight.

## **In-depth Interviews**

I conducted thirty in-depth interviews with a total of thirty-two participants (I draw from one “double” interview with sisters Mina and Mirjana in chapter 3; the other was with a couple who planned to—and ultimately did—emigrate together to Canada). These interviews were equally distributed by gender. I conducted my first two in-depth interviews in English with near-native-level speakers of English while the remainder were conducted in Serbian. All were audio-recorded and transcribed.

My approach to identifying in-depth interviewees was guided by the cluster of concerns raised and strategies proposed by Mario Luis Small (2009) for ethnographers doing research in domains—such as mine—dominated by demographers and quantitative sociologists. Namely, I was concerned with “how to produce ethnographic work that keeps at bay the critiques expected from quantitative researchers while also addressing the thirst for in-depth studies that somehow or other ‘speak’ to *empirical* conditions in *other* cases (not observed)” (Small 2009, 10, original emphasis). Without overstating the concerns of representativeness and generalizability in ethnography, I was wary that relying on the common strategy of “snowball sampling” for interviews, especially if I began with my former feminist activist compatriots, would produce quite narrow results. Instead, I strove to deploy what Small describes as “case study logic” by which each interview builds on the last until “the very last case examined will provide very new or surprising information. The objective is saturation” (2009, 24–27, 25). As I discuss below, each interview was guided by a set of common concerns, yet my specific questions were refined in the field in response to

previous interviews. I frequently assessed the themes emergent from these conversations and sought to add an “inconvenience sample” (Duneier 2011)—someone with experiences or demographic features that might stretch the range of mobility stances I was encountering.

I thus met my in-depth interviewees in various ways. Four were friends or acquaintances from my previous experiences in the country. Seven were new acquaintances I met in the course of participant observation or daily life in Belgrade, and nine more were connections I made through these seven. Two came through my calls for focus group participants. And another ten were found via a public Facebook group called “Emigrating from Serbia” (Iseljavanje iz Srbije) with nearly 5,000 members.<sup>25</sup>

On a wall in my Belgrade apartment I had taped together several pieces of paper with a line drawn across the middle. One end was marked with “leaver,” the other “long-term returnee.” In between were categories such as “wants to leave,” “ambivalent,” and “returnee lite.” As I conducted in-depth interviews I plotted Post-it notes along this continuum, one for each interviewee with their name, age, and field of education. I had expected these artificial categories to collapse in the field. But attending to the ways in which each interlocutor fit or didn’t fit somewhere on this continuum helped to both ensure that my interviews captured a range of relevant experiences (Small 2009, 13) and revealed the nuances of the mobility stances articulated.

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<sup>25</sup> The group was pitched as an information-sharing forum for emigration opportunities, with a banner that read “old age will ask you where your passport was” (*pitaće te starost gde ti je bio pasoš*). As my interview sources waned in summer 2015 I posted a recruitment message in this online group, explaining my research and expressing interest in interviewing those who were actively planning to leave Serbia.

When I talk about “mobility narratives” in this dissertation I am almost always referring to these thirty in-depth interviews and the stories and stances relayed through them. My use of the phrase “mobility stances” is informed by a sociolinguistic understanding of stance as a “linguistically articulated form of social action whose meaning is to be construed within the broader scope of language, interaction, and sociocultural value” (Du Bois 2007, 139). In listening for the stances of my interlocutors, I paid particular attention to the words they used to describe leaving (for example, “to run away”/*pobeći* versus “to go out, leave”/*odlaziti*, or tropes like leaving “in time” or “at any cost”), and the evaluations they made of these terms. Given the saturation of Serbian society with talk of leaving, including the ubiquity of the dominant framing of the issue in media and political discourse, I was interested in how “prior texts and discourses are both resources for stancetaking as well as inevitable frameworks for their interpretation and meaning” (Jaffe 2009, 20). Such texts include my own carefully crafted project description, which I sent would-be interviewees and which they often specifically commented upon.

My in-depth interviews were guided by a set of common questions about my interlocutors’ educational and professional backgrounds; turning points in their plans or aspirations for mobility or migration and the influence of their families on the same; their understanding of the valuation of their field of work; and their vision for the future. In some interviews I asked specific questions that addressed each of the fields above in the given order; in others it seemed I hardly spoke, much less asked direct questions (yet I ensured that we covered comparable ground). Most interviews fell somewhere in between. The

pervasiveness of the topic of brain drain meant that just about everyone had something to say about it, and often quite a lot.

Pre-interview communication provided interesting clues to each interlocutor's personality and professional situation even if it did not necessarily predict how our conversation might unfold. For example, I conducted my final in-depth interview with a young tech entrepreneur preparing to accept a job offer overseas. Despite contacting her through the most tenuous of personal connections she responded to my email within ten minutes and was similarly efficient in person, treating our encounter over tea much like a business meeting. In line with Small's "case study logic" described above, I felt satisfied that this final interview was a nice chat that revealed little new information.

In contrast, one of my favorite interviews was with a lawyer who got in touch via the Facebook group described above. I called him from the street as I waited much too long for a bus that showed no sign of making an appearance. Did he want to reschedule? I knew that he needed to be at work shortly. He was nonplussed and when I finally arrived at our meeting spot I found him in grubby sweats, leaning against a wall with the newspaper. I noted in my field notes that "our interview unfolded as a monologue, which I thoroughly enjoyed listening to...the fact that he sustained a narrative for over an hour tells me that he was one of my interviewees with 'something to say.'" These interviews, then, ran a gamut of form, duration, and tenor. For at least some of my interlocutors, our interview served as an opportunity to puzzle out their own views on their life chances and choices with a sympathetic ear.



## **Focus Groups**

My in-depth interviews were complemented by four focus groups, three conducted in the first half of December 2014 and a fourth in September 2015 as my research wound down. Together, these group discussions brought an additional seventeen people into my research, recruited through various educational networks.<sup>26</sup> Focus groups have the benefit of producing insight through group interaction, including bringing forth the “natural vocabulary” used to discuss a topic (Morgan 1988, 18). In this, they may serve as a useful intermediary between participant observation and individual interviews.

My first focus group certainly fulfilled this function. It was structured around three broad questions about leaving and staying in Serbia plus an elicitation exercise on media quotes and images. The nine participants ranged in age from twenty-six to forty-two, all with advanced degrees in various fields: mechanical engineering, architecture, art history, and romance languages among others. Six of the nine had some experience living abroad, and all but two had responded to my initial questionnaire that they were actively planning to emigrate in the future. As became clear as the evening unfolded—and as the snacks I had assembled remained untouched—all had been prompted to participate in the evening by a genuine interest in the topic of brain drain.

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<sup>26</sup> Participants in my first focus group were involved in a social network of “repats” or were on the listserv of the International Academic Center. The other two focus groups I conducted at the beginning of my fieldwork gathered participants recruited through the A-SMYLE alumni network of American Councils for International Education, Erasmus alumni and scholarship networks, and the women’s studies listserv. A final focus group conducted at the end of my fieldwork reconvened one participant from the first group with students recruited through *Doktoranti Srbije*, an interdisciplinary network of Serbian doctoral students.

## **Expert Interviews**

Through sixteen “expert” interviews I gathered varying perspectives on the topics of youth (un)employment, entrepreneurship, and economic conditions writ large. These experts were largely people affiliated with youth- and education-focused NGOs or projects and technology and entrepreneurship hubs. I made contact with a few through personal connections. But I mostly cold-emailed each after reading a report from their organization, seeing them on a panel discussion, or otherwise encountering their work. This was an exceptionally professional group who efficiently replied to my emails and generously took time from busy days to consider my questions, sometimes for several hours. In hindsight, these expert interviews were also some of the most useful conversations I had. As something of mediators between official framings of brain drain and individual subjective experiences of it, such experts provided unique insight into the “institutional processes” that shape experience (Gubrium and Holstein 2002, 755). My expert interlocutors spoke passionately and candidly about Serbia’s socioeconomic problems and the solutions they deemed necessary. I draw heavily on these conversations in chapter 3.

## **Documents**

I also conducted research in the Archives of Yugoslavia, gathering data on the place of science, expertise, and international exchanges in socialist Yugoslavia in order to better contextualize the historical development of the brain drain phenomenon. My field note from my first trek out to the archives in April 2015 (located in a poorly connected neighborhood) attests to the learning curve I

experienced. I had never stepped foot in an archive before. The collections I was interested in from the period after 1945 were unevenly curated. But the staff was efficiently helpful and by the third day I had found my stride:

Yesterday I got my first folder (*fascikle*) at the archives. After signing something in a register book one of the staff members emerged from the back with a cardboard-bound mass like those I had seen others with. I returned with it to my desk and regarded its massiveness. I felt overwhelmed by the size but also excited and curious about what I would find. I tentatively untied the cloth ties and opened the casing to reveal the stacks of paper inside, all shades of white and neatly separated by folded half-sheets of computer paper. I was looking at F-5, a folder from one of the first sessions of the Federal Committee for Science and Culture (Savezni komitet za nauku i kulturu), and the first thing I regarded was the typewritten minutes from the session. As I carefully browsed the pages in front of me I felt lucky to have the opportunity to be present in the past in this way—to encounter margin notes scribbled by a secretary on minutes, memos about an agreement, and confidential documents that were never in the public eye. (Field notes April 8, 2015)

Not every day would be so satisfying; my field notes also testify to tedium. But after about five weeks of partial days in the archives I felt confident with the data I had collected from three *fonds* related to my research: the Federal Council for Education and Culture (Savezni savet za obrazovanje i kulturu) from 1967–1971, the Federal Committee for Science and Culture (Savezni komitet za nauku i kulturu) from 1971–1978, and select years between 1965 and 1984 of the Federal Employment Affairs Bureau (Savezni biro za poslove zapošljavanje).<sup>27</sup> Perusing the documents in these collections gave me (however limited) insight into the concerns of mobility, migration, and employment in socialist Yugoslavia. I use this data to flesh out the history discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>27</sup> The Archives of Yugoslavia follow the common “thirty-year rule” delaying release of state documents—meaning that at the time of my research in 2014 one could access documents up to 1984.

I also traced how brain drain was discussed in the media. During my fieldwork I collected fifty-seven news pieces published directly on the topic of brain drain and around 400 others on related concerns such as unemployment, talent, higher education, entrepreneurship, youth, and work. (I used “tags” to characterize and organize this media thematically.)

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing in the field. I kept a memo for each month of fieldwork that I organized into goals, progress and challenges, and musings. The “musings” section of these memos is where initial insights into the themes of my research emerged and suggested new fieldwork directions. I find it useful, following Ryan and Bernard (2003, 88), to consider themes as either inductive, (emergent from empirical data) or a priori (rooted in that combination of theory, experience, and expectation that a researcher brings to the field). The wide-ranging discussions that occurred in my initial three focus groups were key sources of inductively derived themes. The first was the richest. Subsequent focus groups were less revelatory, yet still provided meaningful perspectives on the politics of mobility in Serbia. While in the field I engaged in an iterative process of open coding (Bernard and Ryan 2010, 271–273) on the lengthy transcripts of these discussions, frequently revisiting them and engaging my co-moderator in analytic discussions of particular exchanges. In contrast, an important a priori theme that I had expected to encounter in mobility narratives—that of leaving Serbia expressed as a matter of *escape*—was noticeably absent from the empirical

data I collected. This absence alerted me to the importance of shifting mobility regimes and the broader geopolitical context of my research.

Upon returning home, data analysis and writing unfolded symbiotically. I would write up a key scene from my field notes, and, contemplating the personalities involved, turn to my interview data in one of two ways: I organized and coded my expert interviews in MAXQDA. But I found that a different approach produced sharper insights from my in-depth interviews. As my fieldwork became a more distant memory, I realized the need to “visit” with my in-depth interviewees by hearing their voices again. Depending on which section of text I was working on I would find myself thinking about particular conversations. For example, in writing about the phenomenon of “negative selection” that I discuss in chapter 4, I thought about Gordana. I might revisit my notes from our interview and any initial notes I had made on the transcript while in the field, and then listen to our interview again in whole, while doing the dishes or walking. I would pause the recording to mark a passage and continue. After revisiting an interview in this way I would often produce a memo that included a profile of the individual and emergent themes from their narrative.

Finally, a note on transcription: as discourse analysts have shown, a transcript is not an objective record of a conversation. Rather, transcription is a process involving both interpretive and representational decisions (Bucholtz 2000). The decision to outsource transcription of my interviews and focus groups involved tradeoffs, and yet it was an easy one to make. The transcriptionist I hired was a friend who was intimately familiar with my project and also served as co-moderator of my focus groups. She was thus the ideal alternative to

completing the transcriptions myself—we consulted on tricky phrases and her efficient delivery of accurate transcripts facilitated iterative analysis in the field.

### **Chapter Outline**

In this chapter I have outlined how brain drain is constructed as a problem to be managed and the local inflections of this “migration problem” in Serbia. I have reviewed the literature on migration and mobility that informs this dissertation. I have included an extensive discussion of the Milošević years in order to introduce the “generation of the 1990s” that is the subject of this work. Finally, I introduced the people, places, and documents that form the empirical basis of my analysis.

In chapter 2 I specify how mobility became a barometer of the (ab)normality of life in Serbia. I trace shifts in access to and exercise of mobility through three significant periods: the “golden years” of socialist Yugoslavia, the period of “entrapment” from 1991–2009 that generated desires for “escape,” and the post-2009 “normalization” of Serbian citizens’ ability to travel. I show how, for the majority of my interlocutors, this final phase has permitted international experiences that crucially shape their contemporary stances toward mobility and expectations of work.

With the goal of probing the relationship between emigration and unemployment, chapter 3 examines the approach to youth unemployment articulated in political discourse, codified in official strategies, and implemented through government-sponsored programs. In the second half of the chapter I turn to the lived reality of young, educated job-seekers, exploring how staying

and leaving enters their aspirations not as a dichotomy but as strands in a tangle of possible strategies for fulfilling their expectations for dignified work.

The next three chapters form the core of my dissertation. In chapter 4 I theorize the emic category of *perspektiva* to access how recent university graduates understand their prospects, what they expect from work, and how these expectations fit within broader visions of the future, at home or abroad. I focus on the most ardent potential migrants to show how meritocracy acts as a value-laden register for the articulation of youthful socioeconomic aspirations as well as critique.

While this chapter focuses on those who most want to leave Serbia, I also excavate what it means to stay in a context that so many others leave—interrupting the assumption that economic migration is reduceable to a simple cost-benefit calculation. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the growth of social and “tech” entrepreneurship as recent efforts to coax dignified work from an inhospitable climate of precarity (and as key to governmental “solutions” to brain drain). I untangle how entrepreneurialism is promoted as a project of reforming values while also serving as a realm of authenticity and self-cultivation for some. And, in chapter 6, I show how the nascent digital transformation of Serbia complicates the stark dichotomy posited between staying and leaving, giving rise to strategies of “virtual migration” and “apolitical activism.” My conclusion draws on a month of follow-up research conducted in August 2018 to update the political context, trajectories of key interlocutors, and to summarize my main arguments.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICIZING YOUTH MOBILITY

The low-budget production opened on a warm night in August 2015, in the once industrial and now hip Belgrade neighborhood of Savamala. Steel beams and black fabric framed the outdoor stage. The night sky supplied a darkened ceiling. Cutouts of bold yellow arrows crisscrossed the set. The space buzzed with quiet energy as the mostly youngish and smartly dressed crowd maneuvered into folding chairs crammed together in tight rows, while organizers hurried to accommodate those still clogging the entrance. I surveyed the scene in eager anticipation, my attention drawn to the two white banners stretched across either side of the seating area: “arrivals” and “departures.” Music bleeding from the neighboring bars supplied a discordant soundtrack.

The hum subsides and the music is overpowered as Željko, the MC, strides on stage with the air of a circus ringleader: “Good evening ladies and gentlemen!” he booms. “Welcome to *What the Fuck are We Doing Here!* You must be wondering why the fuck am I speaking in English? It’s easy—it’s because when we young people of Serbia speak our own language, well, nobody listens!”

The actor pauses for dramatic effect. “So, now we’re just trying to get the word out, and what we are also trying to do is: get ourselves out of here! Because 200,000 people under the age of thirty in Serbia are unemployed. Serbia is the second country in the world by the number of young and educated people leaving it without return. So we just don't want to be the ones left behind.”



Another pause. “Well we didn’t know what to do about it, so we decided to make a performance! And what do we need for a performance? First we needed a director! And with us tonight is our wonderful, beautiful, and talented director, Maja!” As Maja enters stage right Željko prompts: “an applause, please!” The audience obliges, clapping as he introduces each member of the cast and begins to set a playful tone.

WTF, as I’ll call this play, unfolds as something like a self-deprecating introspection about the predicament of youth in Serbia. As discussed in chapter 1, the unemployment and migration statistics cited by Željko—and their reverberations through public and private lives—were the impetus not only for this unconventional play but also for my own research on the phenomenon of brain drain from Serbia. WTF offers rich insight into the cultural significance of these figures and the ways in which the past informs the present circumstances of youth trying to “get out” of Serbia. But its gifts are wrapped in layers of biting social critique, sometimes uncomfortable references to the West, and not always accessible stylistic choices. Director Maja Maletković later characterized the genre as “ironic cabaret,” and indeed, the production is full of campy songs with smart lyrics.

This unusual genre shares certain attributes with the form of irony known in Russia as *stiob*; in particular, the ambiguity of identification embraced in this form (see Yurchak 2006, 249–254).<sup>28</sup> The “new *stiob*” that Natalia Roudakova

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<sup>28</sup> Yurchak describes *stiob* as a “form of irony that...required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two” (2006, 250). Its utility as a “portable analytic” (Boyer and Yurchak 2010, 180) notwithstanding, *stiob* emerged from the particular power dynamics of late socialism.

tracks in the postsocialist period is marked by cynicism and a drift toward satire (2017, 168–187). Similar forms of humor echo across the postsocialist region, often harnessed to critique the massive dislocations of the end of socialism. As Maya Nadkarni (2007) has shown in postsocialist Hungary, the play between authenticity and irony and the aesthetic of kitsch have been shaped by, and comment upon, dramatic political transformation and loss of a former or imagined “normality.” But while a cynical quality is discernable in some of WTF’s scenes, it is not a new-stiob-like “passionless mockery” (Roudakova 2017, 183). Instead, the affective register of WTF is more self-deprecating, more ambiguous. It is, unsurprisingly, reminiscent of a certain category of responses to the popular television show *Mile vs. Transition* that aired in Serbia in the early 2000s. Intended as parody, Marko Živković argues that *Mile* spawned, among other reactions, a kind of “indeterminant irony,” a “position of those who realize that any simple positioning is not adequate for the morally ambiguous Serbian situation” (2007, 600; see also T. Petrović 2015).

While Živković does not elaborate on the source of this moral ambiguity, it is suggested by the presence of the “Western gaze” (see Greenberg 2010). Intended as a pedagogy of persuasion (albeit a light-hearted one), *Mile* was partially sponsored by USAID and aired on the pro-European channel B92. Viewers’ gleeful celebration of the protagonist’s expressions of *inat*—an allegedly national characteristic akin to spiteful stubbornness—was a strong statement of the fraught relationship between Serbia and the West. Similarly, the messaging of the WTF production hinges on its dual target audience of both locals and

foreigners.<sup>29</sup> While Maja demurred from endorsing my suggestion that the play was a “conversation with the West” she did note that, aside from its performance in English, “if we hadn’t had in mind that we want a part of those who see the show to be foreigners, maybe we would have put it together differently.” In WTF, “the ‘knowing wink’ of shared recognition” (Nadkarni 2007, 616) that is the heart of postmodern irony becomes impossible to interpret. Who is winking at whom? But the dual audience also means that the play directly engages some of the shared cultural knowledge and generational experience that might have otherwise been left implicit for a wholly domestic audience, making it an ideal object of ethnographic attention.<sup>30</sup>

In this chapter I set in historical context the contemporary politics of brain drain in Serbia and the mobility aspirations of the country’s youth. I draw on scenes from WTF as windows onto historical episodes that impinge upon current debates around youth migration and mobility. Two such historical periods are of particular relevance: the era of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—SFRY (particularly the “golden years” of roughly 1963–1973) and the decade of war that followed that country’s demise (1991–2000). Given the relative

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<sup>29</sup> Belgrade had recently begun to appear on lists of European tourist hot spots, becoming, as noted wryly in WTF’s first musical number, “a cheap substitute for Berlin.” The city now has a well-established community of foreign-born residents as well as, especially during the summer months, a steady stream of tourists, particularly from Western Europe.

<sup>30</sup> The cast performs scenes and songs developed out of their own responses to questions formulated by Maja on broad topics like “what I think about Belgrade and Serbia,” “the relationship of foreigners to Serbs,” “the influence of war on our personal development,” “my relationship to time and money” and “reasons why I would leave the country or not.” Željko Maksimović is the only professional actor who performs in the play. For the other three, Director Maja Maletković, Dramaturg Katarina Janković, and visual identity guru Dunja Sabljčić, the acting role is secondary to production. Some of the low-budget flavor of the performance can be attributed to the fact that it indeed featured amateur actors. Fittingly, in the course of the play’s run Sabljčić moved to Germany and was replaced.

prosperity and peace of the first and the marked absence of either in the second, these two periods form a stark contrast. In this juxtaposition, mobility is an oft-evoked symbol of the lost Yugoslav Good Life that included material wellbeing for many and respectable geopolitical standing for all (Duda 2005; Greenberg 2011; Jansen 2012; Patterson 2010, 2011). Drawing on primary research I conducted in the Archives of Yugoslavia as well as secondary sources, in this chapter I detail shifts in the possibilities for mobility and migration in socialist Yugoslavia, the 1990s and 2000s, and finally, during the “white Schengen” period that began in 2009. Through scenes from the play, my field notes, and in-depth interviews, I also begin to consider how my interlocutors relate to this history. I map how the context of the lost Yugoslav Dream followed by an extended period of wartime entrapment shapes contemporary understandings of what it means to leave and stay. In other words, I probe how and to what extent this history informs the youthful question: “what the fuck are we doing here?”

### **Mobility, Migration, and the Good Life of Socialist Yugoslavia**

#### **The Yugoslav Good Life**

When the four WTF actors—all between the ages of twenty-five and thirty—turn to discuss the socialist Yugoslavia they are too young to have known, Maja introduces the scene: “One of the biggest stories we've been told in the past hundred years in this region is the story of the magnificent land of Yugoslavia!” The actors alternately recite the lines that follow, a series of contrasts between life in “the magnificent land of Yugoslavia” and *their* generational experience:

“They lived in unity, and we grew up in a country falling apart.”  
“They believed in equality, and we grew up in the rise of nationalism.”  
“They were a strong industrial force, and we live off loans.”  
“They could live off what they make, and we can barely cover basic expenses.”  
“They could travel anywhere, and we need a visa to go to the bathroom.”  
“They had one of the biggest film industries in the world, and our film’s kinda been dying lately.”

In unison they conclude, “and their children grew up safely.” These differences are ticked off matter-of-factly, in the voices of those who have heard it all before. The framing of the history of socialist Yugoslavia as a “story” of a “magnificent land” fits with the sardonic tone of the play as a whole. But it also hints at the unsettled status of this historical period.

The history of Yugoslavia has been rewritten in Serbian textbooks numerous times. According to historian Dubravka Stojanović (2017), the image of socialist Yugoslavia in post-2000 textbooks is overwhelmingly negative and serves primarily to attribute blame for the wars of the 1990s to the communist system rather than nationalist elites. While the Museum of Yugoslavia is the most popular in the country, it receives no funding from the state. As elsewhere across the region, Yugoslavia’s socialism has been delegitimized in the public sphere, leaving this history to be relayed through intergenerational kitchen-table conversations and commemorated by networks of “Yugonostalgics” across the former country (see Kurtović 2011; Palmberger 2008; T. Petrović 2007). And these family memories tend to highlight that which was best in the Yugoslav Good Life.

The Yugoslav way was one of the more unique experiences of socialism in the region. In the immediate postwar years “the country looked much like any

other communist state” (Patterson 2011, 19). Companies were nationalized and planning centralized. External migration was severely restricted. As the country began to industrialize and urbanize the early years of socialist Yugoslavia were characterized by large-scale internal migration. But after breaking with Stalin in 1948 beloved benevolent dictator Josip Broz Tito began to remodel Yugoslav socialism based on the principles of decentralization, worker self-management, social (rather than state) ownership of the means of production, and a more relaxed Marxist ideology than that found in the countries of the Eastern bloc. As one of the founding leaders of the non-aligned movement, Tito skillfully managed relations with both East and West, and Yugoslavia accrued great geopolitical significance for the promise held in this delicate Cold War position. Socialist Yugoslavia also gained unique access to Western capital. As part of an effort to encourage its distancing from the Soviet Union, in 1949 the United States provided the first of many loans to the country (see Bockman 2011; Ramet 2004).

During the 1960s and 1970s the country’s economy grew and the standard of living enjoyed by most ordinary Yugoslavs rose markedly. With disposable income in their pockets and consumer goods available to spend it on, a wide swath of the Yugoslav population became “caught up in the pursuit of what may fairly be called the Yugoslav Dream, an embrace of the pleasures and virtues of material abundance that sought at once to mirror and rival the American Dream of postwar prosperity” (Patterson 2011, xvi). With hindsight and in relation to its dramatic loss, it is often the modesty and “normalcy” of this dream that is emphasized. As my twenty-eight-year-old interlocutor Darko explained:

My parents were people from the village who came here [to a town near Belgrade] without anything, without anyone, without any kind of help. That is now unbelievable, but then you could...then you could be a regular worker and in five years build a house, buy an apartment, or I don't know, buy a car, go on vacation, and now that is nearly impossible or possible only with, I don't know, some kinds of stunts (*uz, ne znam, neke tako uratolomije životne*) like taking out unfavorable loans, selling some inheritance or something. But *then*, yeah, then you could really make something of yourself without anything.”

Such tales of upward social mobility mapping geographic mobility indeed echoed the promises of the postwar Keynesian economy of the US. Travel and leisure were key elements of the “experiential wealth” hitched to the material promises of the Yugoslav Dream (Patterson 2010, 367). By the 1960s Yugoslavs were enjoying regular ski trips to the Slovenian alps, summer vacations on the brilliant Adriatic, and weekends at lakeside cottages across the federation—destinations that had become favorites of foreign tourists as well (Grandits and Taylor 2010). But it was Yugoslavia’s famous red passport that came to be brandished by its holders with considerable pride—regardless of how often any one individual actually crossed an international border.

Yugoslav citizens were much less constrained than their East bloc peers, and for some time “really had topped the global hierarchy of mobility” (Jansen 2012). Enabled by numerous bilateral agreements signed by President Tito beginning in the mid-1960s, Yugoslavs could travel visa-free not only to their fellow non-aligned states, but through most of the Western and Eastern blocs.<sup>31</sup> International travel thus became a key marker of the country’s geopolitical

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<sup>31</sup> With the notable exception of travel to the USA, Albania, Greece, China, and Israel (Jansen 2012).

position between East and West, a means by which Yugoslavs satisfied their desire for Western consumer goods (Bracewell 2006; Mikula 2010), and an index of emergent middle-class subjectivity.

### **Yugoslav Migration**

While mobility in the form of cross-border shopping trips (Mikula 2010), educational exchanges with both East and West, and knowledge transfer with the rest of the non-aligned world (Bockman 2011, 81; Bondžić 2011) were all encouraged by the party leadership as highlighting the openness and advanced nature of the Yugoslav system, emigration was not.<sup>32</sup> As Darko's comment above suggests, I frequently heard that my interlocutors' parents didn't leave because they didn't have to—they had enjoyed the Yugoslav Good Life in all its imperfect glory. But it was also true that “in the communist era the notion of emigration was the condensation of evil and something to be carefully monitored, controlled, and regulated by all available means” (Kovačević and Krstić 2011, 974). Economic reforms in the 1960s led firms to shed jobs and unemployment to rise. As a temporary solution, Yugoslav leaders decided to liberalize the country's visa regime to allow a certain number of “unqualified” (unskilled) workers to accept temporary work abroad. While the highly skilled were not strictly prohibited from

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<sup>32</sup> As historian Dragomir Bondžić discusses, the exchange of Yugoslav professors with the Western world during the early years of the Cold War took place amid, and despite, a climate of ideological distrust. At the same time, “relations with the socialist block varied between rapprochement and cooperation and confrontation and cooling” (2011, 305). Student exchanges were less fraught and were facilitated by a range of organizations and private contacts (see Bondžić 2011, 165–222). Dispatches of experts to help develop the so-called Third World, and the training in Yugoslavia of experts from such countries was also robust, as “Yugoslavs saw their own economic system as different and as a potentially helpful model for other developing countries” (Bockman 2011, 81).



leaving, the policy suggested that such departures were to be exceptions and required additional approval from the authorities (Dobrivojević 2007, 93–94).

Spurred by the growing economies and labor deficits of Western Europe, SFRY signed agreements on worker recruitment with France, Austria, Sweden, and the Federal Republic of Germany between 1965 and 1968. Just two years later there were over 800,000 Yugoslavs working abroad in these countries and others, according to official estimates.<sup>33</sup> While the majority of Yugoslav workers remained in Europe, around 20 percent of those who went abroad through official channels crossed the ocean to such destinations as Australia, Canada, and the US (Dobrivojević 2007, 97). Of course, Yugoslavs also made their way abroad through the unofficial channels opened by kin networks, overstaying tourist visas, or crossing the border illegally. By some accounts, the number of Yugoslavs who became employed abroad through such “private initiative” was even greater than the number who did so through the bureau of employment (see Brunnbauer 2009, 32–34; Dobrivojević 2007, 95).

While the visa liberalization policy initially eased the effects of economic recession and rising unemployment, the increasing number of Yugoslavs seeking routes abroad had to be reconciled ideologically: if the Yugoslavia Dream was so accessible, why would emigration be attractive? Ideological reconciliation was accomplished by stressing the temporary nature of such migration, reflected in the official designation of such migrants as “workers temporarily employed abroad” (*radnici na privremenom radu u inostranstvu*) (see Bernard 2012, 3).

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<sup>33</sup> “Preko 800.000 Jugoslovena na Radu u Inostranstvu” (Over 800,000 Yugoslavs Working Abroad), Arhiv Jugoslavije, collection Savezni Savet za Obrazovanje i Kulturu, AJ-319-60-76.

However, as anthropologist Dragana Antonijević notes in her recent study on the cultural identity of Yugoslav guest workers, those recruited to Western Europe at this time muddied the conceptual distinction between temporary and permanent migrant (Antonijević 2013, 20). In the Yugoslav case, 43 percent of “workers temporarily employed abroad” through official channels remained abroad longer than five years, considered by the Yugoslav authorities as the critical tipping point beyond which the category of temporary worker blended into that of permanent migrant (Dobrivojević 2007, 97). As sociologist Vladimir Stanković put it, in particular in relation to overseas destinations, “it is clear that under the cloak of ‘temporary’ migration/stays abroad hides the phenomenon of our ‘new emigration’” (2014, 10).

Not only did Yugoslavia’s labor migrants fail to remain only temporarily abroad, but they were also not overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of the *unemployed*. The better-off regions of Slovenia and Croatia sent the most migrants, and according to official figures, in 1971 only 7.2 percent of workers abroad had been unemployed at home (Brunnbauer 2009, 31). This was not what officials had intended. The archives of the Federal Council for Education and Culture (Savezni savet za obrazovanje i kulturu) attest to growing concern with tracking and controlling migration. A 1969 Council document concedes that there was no realistic prospect of constricting migration in the near future, and,

bearing that reality in mind, our task is to suppress what is bad in migratory movements abroad, what is negative for our country and our society, and to secure ground in favor of that which is positive. In this it is a fact that waves of emigration are widening and taking on dimensions

which we don't know are fully in line with our aspirations in terms of foreign employment policy.<sup>34</sup>

This statement demonstrates remarkable continuity with the contemporary concerns of migration management—reflecting recognition of the limitations of the state's ability to effectively control the movement of people coupled with a pragmatic desire to “make the best” of these circumstances for the national good.

To this end, the Council began to emphasize the political dimensions of the “problem” of migration, call for the establishment of a federal body to ensure the interests of the country in relation to external migration, and warn of the need for better accounting of trends so that both the “quality and quantity” of external migration could be followed and brought into line with the overall needs and interests of the country.<sup>35</sup> As further testimony to mounting concern that the nature and scale of Yugoslav migration was spiraling out of federal control, the Council called for the implementation of a long-term policy in relation to Yugoslav workers abroad that would be based on a projection of the country's future economic needs and human resources.<sup>36</sup>

The feasibility of such a policy became negated by the geopolitical consequences of the first global oil crisis. The 1973 oil shock effectively halted recruitment of foreign workers by the West. At that time, at least 1.1 million

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<sup>34</sup> “O nekim aktuelnim i drugim pitanjima u vezi sa našim radnicima u inostranstvu” (On some current and other questions in relation to our workers abroad), p.1, Arhiv Jugoslavije, collection Savezni Savet za Obrazovanje i Kulturu, AJ-319-60-76.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pp.4–8.

<sup>36</sup> “Neka Pitanja i Problemi u Vezi sa Zapošljavanjem Jugoslovenskih Radnika u Inostranstvu” (Some Questions and Problems in Relation to the Employment of Yugoslav Workers Abroad), p.1, Arhiv Jugoslavije, collection Savezni Savet za Obrazovanje i Kulturu, AJ-319-60-76.

Yugoslavs, and likely many more, were living abroad (Dobrivojević 2007, 96).<sup>37</sup> Migration continued, but “deindustrialisation [in Yugoslavia] and restrictive entry policies in Western Europe favoured the flourishing of seasonal and informal recruitment of low-skilled migrants, mainly in the service sector, tourism, and construction” (Bernard 2019, 10). The unique circumstances that had permitted the flourishing of the guest-worker phenomenon meant that they “represent a specific, numerous, though heterogeneous group of people with an awareness of themselves and their status, and who others in their country of origin and work perceive as particular” (Antonijević 2013, 37–38). The Yugoslav guest worker had become a cultural as well as economic and political phenomenon. The Serbo-Croatian colloquialism *gastarbajteri*—from the German “gastarbeiter”—became synonymous with labor migrants and the rural sensibilities they were purported to possess. These connotations still resonate in popular culture and public consciousness across the former Yugoslavia. And, as I discuss below, *gastarbajteri* become drawn into the contemporary politics of brain drain as young potential migrants set their own plans and aspirations in opposition to this historical phenomenon.

### **The Cultural Connotations of *Gastarbajteri***

In the course of fieldwork, my husband and I enjoyed a one-week respite in Gothenburg, Sweden. Weary from a year of cultural adjustment, we had

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<sup>37</sup> On official attempts to prompt the return of these workers see Bernard 2012; Brunnbauer 2009; Dobrivojević 2007, 97–99.

chosen the Nordic destination for its imagined contrast with Belgrade—an orderly, polite, clean town where we could enjoy efficient public transportation and breathe in some clean sea air. Gothenburg proved to be all these things, though it is also a Serbian diasporic hotspot (which accounts for the existence of the discount air route we took). After a restful week, we awaited our return to the reality of fieldwork among a boisterous and mostly Serbian crowd at the Gothenburg airport. Impossible to miss was a broad-shouldered older man, dressed in black jeans and a black t-shirt but loudly proclaiming a Serbian national identity via his chosen accessories. Two large gold crosses hung around his neck; gilded proclamations of Orthodoxy that hit at mid-belly. Though the crosses were tacky and ostentatious, my gaze was drawn to his hat: a fez-style round with two long black cords hanging from the back, adorned with the Serbian coat of arms. (We would soon discover that he had at least two other hats in his carry-on luggage to be put into rotation during the flight, both also displaying the Serbian coat of arms.)

Already disruptive before boarding, the man proceeded, for the duration of our flight, to hold the middle section of the plane (at least those of us without earphones) hostage. His diatribe, performed in Serbian, began with an argument provoked with the older man in front of him, continued with him insistently addressing the child next to him until mother and child finally asked to be reseated, and crescendoed with the flight attendants begging him to be quiet as he more and more desperately searched for an audience to engage. I could discern no clear theme to his running commentary. The episode ended with the

police called to escort the man off the plane once we mercifully landed in Belgrade.

We were met at the airport by Snežana, owner of a “pet taxi” that we called when we needed to collect our adopted dog. Responding to her eager interest in our trip I said, “well, the way back was a bit difficult because of one moron on our flight.” “One of ours?” (*Jedan od naših?*) she demanded to know. “Yes, yes,” I confirmed. Though I hadn’t yet provided any specifics about the disruptive gentleman’s appearance, attire, or behavior, Snežana immediately responded: “Aha, those are our famous gastarbajteri. They are the ones,” she continued, “who literally left to go clean toilets. The lower class.” She then launched into a tale of “one such encounter” she had herself had with a woman on a return flight from Germany whose demanding behavior she assessed to be uncultured and presumptive.

The knee-jerk attribution of gastarbajter identity to anyone abroad presumed to be from the former Yugoslavia and exhibiting bad behavior, and the association of gastarbajteri with rural origins and peasant sensibilities, emerge from the empirical realities of this wave of migration combined with the cultural dynamics of the end of Yugoslavia. While they were not necessarily unemployed or the poorest of the poor, gastarbajteri *had* generally been agricultural workers. Nearly half had worked in farming, fishing, or forestry before leaving (Brunnbauer 2009, 29–30). They were also less educated than the average Yugoslav (Marković 2005, 149).<sup>38</sup> They became known for raucous holiday visits

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<sup>38</sup> For shifts in the dominant regions of origin of gastarbajteri and how such shifts mapped domestic economic policy see Bernard 2019.

to their villages and towns of origin and for building ostentatious houses that stood as empty reminders of their newfound earning power (see Bratić and Malešević 1982). The sociocultural effects of this wave of emigration were profound. Such effects were also profoundly commented on in the rich repertoire of Yugoslav films produced about the gastarbajter phenomenon as part of what was, as noted in the WTF play, a thriving film industry.<sup>39</sup>

Such films tended to narrowly typecast their gastarbajter protagonists. Historian Predrag Marković identifies two images of gastarbajteri that emerged in popular culture during socialism: “patronizing and pitiful,” and that of “comic hero.” In the first, Yugoslavia’s labor migrants were portrayed as “tragic victims of social and political development, doomed to wander between two worlds” (Marković 2005, 148). In the second trope, the gastarbajter lifestyle was added to the collection of characteristics of already existing comic heroes, layering nouveau riche attributes onto ethnic and peasant stereotypes (Marković 2005, 150). This “comic hero” was a country bumpkin who haplessly tries to navigate cosmopolitan settings and values, or even worse, dismissively refuses to try.

It is this latter association that colored Snežana’s commentary, which also signals the distance between a narrow employment-based notion of class and its postsocialist manifestations, with which class has become unhinged from its materialist base in significant ways (Fehérváry 2002, 2013; Patíco 2008; Rivkin-

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<sup>39</sup> Exemplars of this genre include *Halo München* (*Hello Munich*, 1968) directed by Krsto Papić, *Ludi Dani* (*Crazy Days*, 1977) directed by Nikola Babić, and *Rani Snijeg u Münchenu* (*Early Snow in Munich*, 1984) directed by Bogdan Žižić.

Fish 2009; Salmenniemi 2012). Though a cab driver, Snežana had also completed some higher education and was a business owner. She draws an implicit value-laden distinction between this work and that of those who “left to go clean toilets.” But the story she elaborated, and the details I provided of my own, rely on a notion of class as signaled more faithfully by appearance, manner, and proper behavior than by profession. Together we affirmed class as referring “not to a demographically locatable category of people but to a set of moral and material aspirations and orientations” (Patino 2008, 134). Such subtle alignments between the moral, material, and professional—and the role of mobility as a class-constituting process—will be highlighted in the chapters to come. But Snežana’s derision toward *gastarbajteri* demands further explanation, as it points to the significance of the phenomenon for current debates about migration.

### **The Politicized Urban-Rural Divide**

Contemporary attitudes toward the guest workers of socialist Yugoslavia index a loaded urban-rural divide. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, a postwar wave of internal migration swelled the population of Belgrade such that in 1971 less than 40 percent of the capital city’s population had been born there (Gordy 1999, 105–106). A growing cosmopolitan sensibility coexisted with that of “peasant urbanites” (Simić 1973) who lived in makeshift housing and remained closely tied to their villages of origin. Musical taste became a prime differentiator of “real” urbanites from peasant urbanites. Eric Gordy explains how the *gastarbajter* and peasant urbanite appellatives began to meld through music:



Neofolk music achieved huge popularity among Yugoslav workers in other countries, who brought a taste for the music back to the provincial towns from which they came. The private taxi companies and cafes that many returning *gastarbajteri* opened helped to diffuse the music, which with time came to define the tastes of “peasant urbanites” as well. Reaching an audience ranging from the domestic provinces and workers’ colonies in other countries to the peripheries of large cities in Yugoslavia, neofolk became the best-selling and most widely diffused genre.<sup>40</sup> (Gordy 1999, 107–108)

Neofolk stood in opposition to the rock music preferred by cosmopolitan urban youth. As the Yugoslav federation began to experience political and economic crisis in the 1980s and Slobodan Milošević rose through the ranks of the Communist Party, such markers of class became politicized. Neofolk became the “favorite genre” of the Milošević regime (Gordy 1999, 130) and quickly transmuted into the synthesized “turbofolk” that would be the soundtrack of the 1990s (see Živković 2012; cf. Archer 2012). “Belgrade *rokeri* saw the neofolk ascendancy not only as symbolizing a new equation of power and as narrowing the horizons of a younger generation. They saw it as affecting them directly, restricting the cultural space available to them” (Gordy 1999, 142). Music became a fault line in the contest over ownership of the city and the future of the country, clearly demarcating the “other Serbia” (*druga Srbija*) of anti-Milošević urban intellectuals from regime supporters (Fridman 2011; Omaljev 2013; Živković 2012). *Gastarbajteri* were implicated in the latter category.

As socialist Yugoslavia fragmented, the country’s temporary-turned-permanent labor migrants became members of the Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian,

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<sup>40</sup> Gordy describes neofolk as “a hybrid form marrying the conventions of traditional folk songs with contemporary themes and also increasingly with contemporary instrumentation” (1999, 107).

Bosniak, Macedonian, or Kosovar national diasporas (Marković 2005, 151). A good deal of attention has been trained on the role of national diasporas in materially and symbolically supporting nationalist movements in the former Yugoslav republics, Croatia in particular (though note that such diasporas also included the so-called “political migrants” who emigrated in the aftermath of World War II) (Skrbiš 1999; Winland 2002; see also Colic-Peisker 2009).<sup>41</sup> The Yugoslav *gastarbajter* was no more because Yugoslavia was no more, and the politics of migration shifted even as temporary work abroad from each of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia continued in various forms.

The history of mobility and migration during the “golden age” of Yugoslav socialism continues to inflect current debates in several ways. For one, it is telling that none of my interlocutors opted to set their own migratory aspirations in continuity with the *gastarbajter* phenomenon. The reasons are both geopolitical and otherwise: Firstly, Yugoslav migration was permitted by a specific set of geopolitical circumstances and state maneuvers, but it was also coded in the classed and politicized ways discussed above. Secondly, to the extent that potential migrants referenced the history of Yugoslav mobility at all, it was to affirm the normalcy of that key (classed) aspect of the Yugoslav Good Life: the ability to *travel* on par with citizens of the Western world but also the material and immaterial conditions to not want to *leave*.

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<sup>41</sup> In a recent article, historian Sara Bernard puts forth a compelling argument about how differential migration patterns from the various regions of Yugoslavia, and the dynamics of return migration following the 1973 and 1979 oil shocks in particular, “served to exacerbate pre-existing socio-economic regional disparities, which were themselves the reason for political divisions between the Yugoslav republics” (2019, 2).

## After Socialist Yugoslavia: Entrapment and Escape

As the scene about socialist Yugoslavia in *What the Fuck are We Doing Here?* concludes, the other actors leave Maja alone on stage for a musical number she later described to me as in the mold of Rage Against the Machine. She spits lyrics into the mic and onto the audience:

Why was everything better in the past?  
Why did you fuck up my present so fast?  
Why the hell are we paying for your wars?  
Why the hell are my neighbors my foes?

Where are my ideals?  
Where is my security?  
Where is my hope?  
Where is my identity?

The last four lines are repeated several times. Through her terse lyrics, Maja demands the apparently unattainable: a moral compass, material and existential security, hope for the future, and a rooted and untarnished identity. Coming after the scene about the fairytale of Yugoslavia, it's clear that this one is addressed to the last Yugoslavs, her parent's generation. The song simmers with contempt toward those who lost the Yugoslav Dream. It also holds the frustration of knowing that things weren't as perfect in the past as they appear in its retelling. For me, the number is also uncomfortable. It ends with several rounds of "fuck you" followed by a defeated "fuck me too." It's not until much later that I realize the song is cleverly titled "Fuck YU," as in, Yugoslavia. But it also feels aimed at me as a foreigner, an American. Given the disproportionately large number of foreigners in the audience and the heavy-handed involvement of the international community in the region, I think it's safe to say that the ambiguity

is intentional. This ambiguity reflects the broader ambivalent relationship of Serbia to the West, to the US in particular, and in particular relation to the 1999 NATO bombing.

In this section I trace some of the circumstances shaping these geopolitical relations in the recent past. My focus here is trained on those historical aspects that illuminate what anthropologist Stef Jansen (2009, 2012) glossed as the sense of “entrapment” that permeated life in Serbia during the 1990s, shaped aspirations and practices of mobility until 2009, and whose effects still ripple through contemporary talk of staying and leaving. This sense of entrapment was constructed in opposition to the relative ease of travel in socialist Yugoslavia; it was generated from the loss of this form of “normal” mobility. It was a product of the multiple wars that fractured Yugoslavia, the oppression of the warmongering regime of Slobodan Milošević, and the sanctions that severed ties between rump Yugoslavia and the international community. Below, I trace how these conditions developed while most of my interlocutors were young children. I explore how they impacted mobility and migration at the time, and how they continue to shape stances toward mobility and migration that run an affective gamut from the concoction of rage and resignation that infuses Maja’s lyrics above to a happy-go-lucky kind of youthful cosmopolitanism.

### **Entrapment: 1992–October 5, 2000**

The United Nations (UN) and the European Community (EC) were the main multilateral actors attempting to resolve what became known as the “Yugoslav crisis” as war broke out in Croatia and then in Bosnia and Herzegovina

(BiH). Intensive media coverage familiarized publics around the world with scenes from the conflicts: busloads of displaced families scrambling to escape the rapidly expanding war zones; images of emaciated bodies and reports of mass rape at concentration camps; and the frustrated efforts of Red Cross, EC, and UN representatives to take meaningful humanitarian and peacekeeping action (see Engelberg and Sudetic 1992; Gow, Paterson, and Preston 1996). The news-consuming global public was also familiarized with the term “ethnic cleansing,” the systematic, violent, forced removal of members of a specific ethnic group from a given territory (see Calic 2009, 115–151). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic cleansing was carried out by Serb forces against Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) and Croat residents. Croat forces targeted Serbian residents in certain areas of Croatia as well as Bosniaks in Mostar and central Bosnia. To a very limited extent, Bosniak forces compelled the expulsion of Serbs from particular villages in BiH (Calic 2009, 116–117).

In this frightful context economic and military sanctions were key tools of foreign policy wielded by the United States, the countries of Western Europe (and later the European Union), and the United Nations in their attempts to first prevent and later prompt an end to the wars that broke up the former Yugoslavia. In the complex diplomatic climate of the time, “sanctions became the tool of choice for Western policymakers who sought a low-cost, low-risk, punitive alternative to military force” (Stedman 1998, 181). In May 1992, the UN Security Council voted to impose sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

(FRY) for non-compliance with a ceasefire agreement in BiH.<sup>42</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 757 banned imports and exports from the country, halted financial transactions, grounded air traffic, prohibited athletes from FRY from participating in international sporting events, and “suspend[ed] scientific and technical cooperation and cultural exchanges and visits involving persons or groups officially sponsored by or representing the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)” (UN Security Council, Resolution 757, 15).

The European Community applied economic and diplomatic pressure of its own. In July 1991, the EC suspended trade with FRY in response to military aggression against Croatia and BiH. It also imposed an arms embargo, which was endorsed by the US. These sanctions stacked up with others and remained in place until the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed in November 1995, ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But the reprieve was short-lived. FRY faced a fresh round of sanctions in 1998 as President Milošević sought to shore up his power through aggression against the ethnic Albanian population in Kosovo (see Gow 2009). This time, the European Union took a leading role:

After years of equivocating half-steps, the European Union (E.U.) took measures against the Milošević government in mid-1998, banning investment in Serbia and flights by Yugoslav Airlines, and freezing Serbian and Yugoslav government funds abroad. In April 1999, after the commencement of NATO bombing, the E.U. significantly strengthened its sanctions and added an oil embargo against Yugoslavia and a visa ban on more than three hundred of Milošević’s political, military, and economic allies. (HRW 2000)

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<sup>42</sup> The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was comprised of Serbia and Montenegro after Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia all declared independence.

UN Security Council Resolution 1160 also reinstated the arms embargo and urged a political solution to the crisis. A political solution did come, but only after international military intervention. NATO launched a seventy-eight-day bombing campaign against FRY on March 24, 1999, controversial first and foremost because the organization did not wait for approval from the UN Security Council (which likely would have been blocked by Russia). The bombing targeted Serbia's "military command and control communications network" (Gow 2009, 320) as well as bridges and other public infrastructure—not entirely in compliance with international humanitarian law (HRW 2000). The Serbian government cites a death toll of 2,500 (including 631 members of the armed forces) but the exact number remains unknown (see HRW 2000; Nikolic 2016).

The NATO bombing was highly controversial at the time both nationally and internationally, and even among Serbian antiwar activists, who took a variety of positions on the morality of the intervention (Fridman 2006, 111–115). The event remains subject to drastically divergent memory narratives and practices within Serbia (see Fridman and Rácz 2016; Nikolic 2016). Miloš, who I introduce in chapter 4, was eleven years old at the time. In a recent conversation he remembered "feeling that the whole world has united to bomb you, your little country." I empathized that members of his generation were living the consequences of decisions that they weren't old enough to have any part in making. "Yeah," he said grimly, "we are collateral damage."

The NATO mission culminated in a military agreement by which FRY troops withdrew from Kosovo and NATO forces moved in with a peacekeeping mission. Milošević survived politically another year (some say bolstered by the

NATO campaign) before losing re-election and being forced out of office in the 2000 October Revolution. Relations between FRY and the rest of the world immediately began to “normalize,” at least in the formal diplomatic sense. On September 10, 2001 the United Nations voted to lift the arms embargo, the last remaining international sanction in place against the country.

### **The Everyday Life of Isolation**

For nearly a decade in Serbia and Montenegro, everyday reality was shaped by the climate of war, increasing isolation, and restrictions imposed by the international and multilateral sanctions described above. While sanctions are broadly remembered as a primary condition of the 1990s, the cumulative effect of this decade of sanctions is a matter of some debate. That Serbia’s population became impoverished during the 1990s is clear. For many, meeting daily needs became an ongoing struggle that contributed to a sense of resignation to the regime.<sup>43</sup> But it is impossible to disentangle the effects of the sanctions from those of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia writ large (and consequent loss of trade relations between the republics), coupled with the end of socialism in the country and the economic crisis that had already begun to destabilize SFRY in the 1980s. As has been well documented ethnographically, the end of socialism and waves of privatization that swept across the region resulted not only in increased income inequality but also dislodged familiar reference points of what it meant to be competent, cultured, and of respectable social standing (Patino 2008; Rivkin-

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<sup>43</sup> See Gordy 1999, 192–198 for a compelling argument about how sanctions enabled the Milošević regime to consolidate power.



Fish 2009; Shevchenko 2009). The “mass intelligentsia” in particular—teachers, doctors, engineers—experienced a disorienting upending of their vocational status (Patico 2008; Shlapentokh 1999).

Yet the conditions of war—including international sanctions and extreme hyperinflation—fundamentally shaped the Serbian experience of the end of socialism.<sup>44</sup> One primary effect of this context not relevant elsewhere in the region was isolation. As noted in a report for UNICEF, “While not part of the stated intentions of sanctions, cultural and intellectual isolation was one of its major impacts” (Garfield 2001, 13). Financial sanctions froze pension payments and household remittances from abroad. Serbia was cut off from the international mail system. And, outside urban areas, independent media was marginalized to the extent that state-run media became the only accessible source of information (see Gordy 1999, 61–101). Eastern European countries followed the example of the West in severing ties, the benefits of Council of Europe membership were rescinded (including recognition of Yugoslav diplomas), and educational access to the Serbian diaspora was impeded (Djokić 1993, 11–13).

In the meantime, the European Union was founded in 1993 (out of the European Economic Community) and the Schengen convention, guaranteeing free movement within its area, was expanded and incorporated into the framework of the EU. While Schengen opened up the internal borders of Europe,

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<sup>44</sup> See Lampe 2000, 399–404 for discussion of the interaction between international sanctions and hyperinflation.

the EU's external borders were fortified (see Andersson 2014). Because of this changing context as well as the evolving conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the visa policies of countries to which Serbs might be inclined to immigrate were in flux as well.<sup>45</sup> In 1995, only the neighboring countries of Italy and Hungary did not require visas of citizens of any of the republics of the former Yugoslavia. However, entry was effectively halted as in addition to flights, busses with Yugoslav plates or carrying Yugoslav passengers were banned from crossing into Europe.

As the country hunkered down for what would be nearly a decade of war, opportunities for mobility as well as migration dried up—while at the same time the increasing isolation compelled the young and educated to leave. This central contradiction is highlighted by FRY's ambassador to the United Nations, Dragomir Djokić, in a 1993 letter to that body:

Almost all specialization opportunities for our experts in foreign countries have been suspended (particularly the most important forms of specialization, postgraduate studies, etc.) since these forms of cooperation were mainly based on international agreements....At least over 500 Yugoslav scientists and young experts availed themselves of foreign specialization opportunities arising from various inter-state agreements and programmes....Such a situation induced a large number of young experts to decide to go abroad which, on the one hand, dealt a serious blow to many Yugoslav institutions (experts leaving their jobs) and, on the other, our plans for the future (emigration of students who have just graduated especially in industries very much needed by our economy).<sup>46</sup> (Djokić 1993, 16)

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<sup>45</sup> The Benelux countries introduced a visa requirement for all residents of the former Yugoslavia in 1992 (later lifted for Slovenian passport holders). Switzerland also introduced a similar visa requirement in 1992 that was soon relaxed for Bosnians with relatives in the country. As of 1995, Austria, Germany, Sweden, and Norway all required visas for citizens of FR Yugoslavia (Humanitarian Issues Working Group 1995).

<sup>46</sup> Special thanks to Tamara Belenzada for bringing this source to my attention.

How were “young experts” able to “avail themselves of foreign specialization opportunities” if “almost all” such opportunities had been suspended? Such departures were enabled by a patchwork of programs that remained accessible for the savvy and well connected. Though the UN sanctions appeared to clearly prohibit all “scientific, technical, and cultural” exchanges, “in practice each government and many organizations made their own interpretation of intellectual and communications policy regarding sanctions, making this isolation arbitrary and unpredictable” (Garfield 2001, 62).<sup>47</sup> In this context, leaving increasingly became seen as a privilege of those with access to the right connections and funds (see Fridman 2016, 449).

Perhaps even more significant were the illegal routes abroad, particularly for young men motivated by an all-too-real fear of being mobilized for war. At the time, a year-long military service was compulsory for every eighteen-year-old male. As war broke out in Croatia, BiH, and later in Kosovo, thousands of young men began living in fear of mobilization and either went into hiding or sought to avoid the fate of the battlefield by crossing the border into Hungary. Such movements occurred despite the fact that for the better part of 1992 as well as between February and July 1999 it was illegal for men of fighting age (eighteen to sixty) to leave the country.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> For example, while the German Humbolt and US Fulbright scholarship programs were suspended, Yugoslavs could still take advantage of opportunities to study abroad through the EU Socrates and Erasmus programs (Garfield 2001, 62).

<sup>48</sup> My gratitude goes to Bojan Aleksov for his input on this phenomenon, about which there is little scholarship. See Aleksov 2012 for an autoethnographic account of antiwar activism and military service on the eve of war.

If mobility and migration had not been politicized before they certainly were now. Emigration became a front line in the battle over what kind of country Serbia was and was becoming; between the Milošević regime and its political opposition; between mainstream society and the “other Serbia.” A *New York Times* article from May 1993, titled “Yugoslavia Losing the Highly Skilled,” ends with this quote from former Belgrade mayor Bogdan Bogdanović: “The emigrants, who are urban and sophisticated, are being replaced by narrow-minded hillbillies from Bosnia and from the countryside. They are imposing a new cultural model here, not just because they want to live in an ethnically pure country but because they have such a limited view of society and the world” (Kinzer 1993). There is a parallel to be found with contemporary Putin-era rhetoric in Russia that posits “talent as a form of cultural patrimony that has been cruelly snatched” (Hemment 2015, 119) through historical waves of emigration. But in Serbia the party responsible for the “snatching” of talented youth during the 1990s is imagined as a tangle of both internal and external forces. This recent past has left an indelible impression on contemporary debates about mobility and migration. Laminated onto the dual memory of “normal” and *gastarbajter* mobilities in SFRY, it marks the topic as fraught with classed concern over who is left to make the future of the country.

### **Still Isolated: 2001–2009**

Those who stayed in Serbia during the early 2000s experienced the vertigo induced by the country’s seemingly simultaneous backward and forward trajectories. As one decade stretched into the next, the sense that little had

changed since the Milošević years only became cemented in place among the urban middle classes. While sanctions had been lifted, restrictive visa regimes were still very much in place in the early 2000s. Those who set their sights on an immigrant visa made their way to the Western embassy in Belgrade where they deemed they had the best chance of success based on solid family connections abroad or language, technical, and other skills. But even scholars wanting to attend a conference across the border needed generous amounts of resources, luck, and fortitude to endure the process. Would-be travelers from Serbia—both those seeking temporary and permanent routes abroad—discovered that the weary task of waiting in line for a visa had not significantly eased. The perpetual lines of visa-seekers that formed outside Western embassies became a symbol of Serbia's incomplete break with the past and its uncertain European future. As Jansen argues, the visa queues produced a sense of “entrapment” and national humiliation that indexed the loss of the geopolitical status enjoyed by socialist Yugoslavia (Jansen 2009, 2012; see also Greenberg 2010). The desire to “escape” such entrapment continued to serve as the dominant idiom of mobility throughout the 2000s (Erdei 2010). These arguments resonated with my own experience as an activist in Serbia in 2003–2005, when the desire to “escape entrapment” in the country seemed a perfect way to describe the aspirations of those who felt at odds with the sociopolitical climate of the time.

Meanwhile, a campaign to abolish the wartime visa regimes was gathering steam in the mid-2000s. While NGOs and private citizens played an important role in this effort, the relaxing of Europe's restrictive visa regime was folded into

Serbia's long and ongoing path toward joining the European Union.<sup>49</sup> In order to join what became known as the “white Schengen list”—the list of countries whose nationals are not required to have a visa to enter the EU—Serbia's practices in relation to migration needed a total overhaul. In 2008 Serbia received a “roadmap” to visa liberalization from the EU that included forty-two criteria to be met over four categories of necessary reform: document security (passports needed to be converted to biometric), illegal migration, public order and security, and foreign relations in relation to the movement of people (Group 484 2009, 2). Given the political urgency of the issue and the diplomatic groundwork that had already been laid, Serbia quickly met the requirements.<sup>50</sup> On December 19, 2009 the first Serbian citizens since the breakup of the former Yugoslavia crossed the border with Hungary, now a European Union border, legally, without a visa. Widely narrated as a return to the “normal” mobility of socialist Yugoslavia, the lifting of EU travel restrictions also signaled restoration of the most fundamental conditions for the country's European future. Reflecting the severity of the pariah status Serbia had accrued, the headline in *der Spiegel* declared: “EU welcomes ‘Leper of Europe’ back into the Fold” (Mayr 2009). Three days later, Serbia officially applied for EU membership.

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<sup>49</sup> Serbia became part of the EU's “Stabilisation and Association Process” (SAP) established in 1999 (along with the other six states—Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo—that became known as the “Western Balkans”). The 2003 summit of the European Council in Thessaloniki confirmed that all SAP countries are potential candidates for EU membership. See: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en).

<sup>50</sup> In July 2009 the European Commission amended European Council Regulation 539 originally passed in 2001 to place Serbia (along with Montenegro and Macedonia) on the “positive” list of countries whose nationals do not need visas to cross into the EU. See: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32001R0539>.

## **The Normalization of Mobility**

The 2009 reinstatement of visa-free travel to Europe was of historic significance for Serbian citizens. After more than a decade of international isolation, the change symbolically placed the country “on the road to normal,” as Jessica Greenberg (2011) put it. No longer compelled to stand in endless lines and explain themselves to suspicious embassy personnel, Serbs were now free to tour Europe and elsewhere on *nearly* equal status with the Western world. While formidable barriers to *migration* remain for Serbian citizens, they can now travel visa-free to 115 countries (Henley & Partners 2016), compared with only eighteen countries in 2008.

International leisure travel is economically viable for only a narrow sliver of the population. But the restoration of “normal” mobility also allowed a host of international educational opportunities to expand that had been previously limited. While one has to be proactive and ambitious to take advantage of these opportunities, one need not be rich. To my surprise, in reviewing my data I realized that every single person with whom I conducted an in-depth interview or who joined a focus group (forty-nine in total) had traveled internationally (discounting travel to the ex-Yugoslav republics) regardless of their current plans to stay or leave Serbia. While I did not systematically collect this data point for all those I encountered during participant observation in coworking and entrepreneurial spaces, I nevertheless gained the impression that the young entrepreneurs and “returnees” of Belgrade were some of the most well-traveled folks one could meet.

Where had my interlocutors been and how had they gotten there? They had spent time in the US as high school students through the A-SMYLE program (now Flex) sponsored by the Department of State, or a few months in a variety of service positions through the Work and Travel scheme.<sup>51</sup> They had traveled across Europe through Erasmus student and volunteer exchanges, AIESEC volunteer and internship opportunities, and other professional development programs specific to their interests.<sup>52</sup> They had also visited relatives scattered across the globe, but the opportunities afforded by the student life featured most prominently. When I asked one architecture student named Filip where he had traveled through BEST, a pan-European network of technology students, he explained: “Well, since BEST is a European organization, only in Europe.” (He had also completed a seven-month internship in India through the European Voluntary Service.) He added, “I generally went to countries that are here somewhere close, since I personally didn’t have a lot of money to travel.” As was

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<sup>51</sup> A-SMYLE sponsors international students to complete a year in a US high school, and became active in Serbia and Montenegro (then one country) in 2005. 700 students have participated in the program over the past ten years. See: <http://www.americancouncils.org/programs/asmyle-program>. The Summer Work Travel (SWT) program allows full-time university students to spend a summer in the US working, with a month built in for travel. While the A-SMYLE program is fully funded by the US Department of State, SWT can entail significant up-front costs (agency and visa fees), but participants then earn generally minimum wage at their US-based positions. See: <http://j1visa.state.gov/programs/summer-work-travel#participants>.

<sup>52</sup> Serbia began participating in Tempus/Erasmus programming in 2000. Since 2007, Serbian students can participate in Erasmus Mundus programs and scholarships. These multiple programs became folded into the Erasmus+ framework in 2013, coordinated by Foundation Tempus. Erasmus+ also includes the European Voluntary Service, which provides support for youth to volunteer in organizations around the world for a period of two to twelve months. See: <http://erasmusplus.rs/erasmus-office-in-serbia/>. AIESEC is a postwar European network focused on student leadership development. It has been active in Serbia/Yugoslavia since 1952. In addition to local activities, the organization sponsors volunteer trips abroad of six to eight weeks and longer paid professional development trips. See: <http://aiesec.org.rs/>.



not unusual among my interlocutors, Filip's family could hardly be considered privileged: his mother was a baker, his father a craftsman, and money was always tight. But as he began to list the countries he had visited my face registered amazement:

I, I don't know, I went to these neighboring countries: Hungary, Bulgaria, I went to Lithuania, actually, Latvia, this year I went to Portugal, Greece, and that's that. I passed through some other countries but those don't count. Oh! And I've been to Poland...generally, that central Europe, but I didn't travel only through BEST but also through other organizations.

Filip explained that many student organizations such as BEST function similarly in that the organization covers room and board while the traveler pays for transportation. With the student discounts available for train and bus travel he was able to scrape together funds for these excursions. And his experience was not unusual. According to the 2014 survey of doctoral students conducted annually by *Doktoranti Srbije*, 68 percent of respondents had traveled abroad in connection to their doctoral work, with nearly half of these trips made possible by a scholarship from the government of the country to which they traveled. The remaining students reported that their travel had been supported by a scholarship from a domestic or foreign foundation, the Serbian Ministry of Education, the Erasmus program, a private company, or through their own funds. The doctoral students surveyed overwhelmingly considered such international opportunities important for their work (DS 2015, 22–23).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, despite the fact that such a large percentage of respondents had had the chance to travel internationally, an almost equal number considered their chances for participating in such study tours, exchanges, and conferences abroad to be “average or poor” as did “good.”

When I asked Slobodan Radičev, president of the network, about these responses he foregrounded the previous isolation that many of today's advanced students had felt so acutely:

Look, I think that for the great majority of youth in Serbia...that chance to go beyond the border is very important....today's doctoral students, those are people who are, let's say, between twenty-five or twenty-six and thirty-two or thirty-three years old, and they have spent half their lives in a country that was isolated from all sides. It was practically impossible to go further than 200 kilometers from Belgrade without needing a visa.

Slobodan continued to describe how, when he began his college education in 2001, he was compelled to amass an extraordinary number of documents, come up with something like 200 euros, and face the possibility of rejection, just for the chance to travel to a European conference. While Serbian students remained isolated during the first decade of the 2000s, emphasis on the free circulation of students—and eventually labor—began to grow throughout Western Europe (see Wright and Rabo 2010). As for Greenberg's interlocutors—students pushing for higher education reform in the early 2000s—the emergent emphasis placed on youth mobility by EU institutions meant that “older associations with travel in the socialist period” became linked to “very new meanings of mobility as essential to European identity” (2011, 97).<sup>54</sup>

### **Generation Isolation/Cosmopolitanism**

Generation is a notoriously ambiguous category. Its importance in relation to other categories like class, education, and gender, as well as relevance for

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<sup>54</sup> While academic mobility certainly acquired new meanings after the formation of the European Union, there is also a much longer history of Eastern European intellectuals studying in the centers of Europe (see Bieber and Heppner 2015; Bondžić 2011). As one friend casually reminded me, “all the important Serbian scientists studied abroad.”

understanding processes of social change, has been called into question (McCourt 2012). But by and large, the formative generational experience of the “children of the 1990s” in Serbia was the 1999 NATO bombing of their country. This is a marker with political and affective coding distinct from the experience of peers in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina whose lifetimes were “fractured into three time frames: before, during, and after the war” (Čengić 2017, 60).

These fine-grained geopolitical and generational distinctions became clearer as I talked to Maja from WTF about the significance of socialist Yugoslavia for her generation. She responded that it’s a complicated topic she could talk about for days. The actors had decided to include this theme in the play for several reasons, most notably to convey “the significance of that country for people who live here” to foreigners who would attend the performance. Maja continued, “and we thought that it was really important for them, as well as for our process of story development, to mention that relationship with Yugoslavia, that is of course somehow more now that general place to which people return when they talk about why things are the way they are in the country today.” As she mused:

it serves more as the real framework in which we grew up, because, we really grew up in that—I mean, in Belgrade we were protected, but people from Sarajevo or Republika Srpska or Bosnia, they literally grew up in war, and we simply could not disregard that part of our past that impacts our future....I was born in a country that ceased to exist by my fifth birthday. And then they later bombed that new country (*i onda su nam kasnije bombardovali tu zemlju koja je novonastala*). So, in essence, it was important as a kind of benchmark for our positioning in relation to the present.

At the end of this comment, I'm no longer clear what "it" is that serves as a benchmark for Maja. In querying the importance of socialist Yugoslavia, I had had in mind the country's "golden age," cast in the play as a fairytale. But in reviewing our transcript I realized that this is not the Yugoslavia Maja references in the quote above. Her generation grew up during the Milošević years, in wartime Yugoslavia, as the country fell apart and "rump Yugoslavia" emerged. And then they were bombed. The war years of sanctions, hyperinflation, isolation, and international condemnation—epitomized by the US-led NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999—was a much closer past for my interlocutors than the heyday of socialist Yugoslavia. So while Maja demurred from my immediate line of questioning, our conversation did in fact reveal some of the significance of socialist Yugoslavia for the "children of the 1990s."

What Maja diplomatically glossed as "and then they later bombed that new country," other interlocutors were more direct about. When I met with Darko I didn't realize that he was born and still lived in Pančevo, and had taken the train (about a thirty-minute ride) to Belgrade after work just to meet with me. When I apologized, saying that I would have been happy to make the trek to Pančevo, he responded, "Well, Serbs are polite, Americans aren't, you bombed us!" (*Pa Srbi su polite, Americanci nisu, vi ste nas bombardovali!*) We were at a street corner waiting for the light to change and I quickly looked over at him, startled by this response. I chuckled uneasily as he added, "sorry, I had to."

One final example illustrates how this formative experience is kept alive in generational memory and enters into conversations with American anthropologists: lingering over coffee one afternoon, a friend in her late twenties

described the NATO bombing with something close to nostalgia. “You wouldn’t believe it,” she said, “the bombings were great.” She described a sense of camaraderie and community—how there would be a crowd outside her apartment building “and we would have one pack of cigarettes and all share; one beer and pass it around.” She relished the humor that sustained Belgradians during that time—a dark spitefulness that compelled locals to sing as they crossed bridges on the bus. Laughing, she concluded, “we are like cockroaches, you can’t kill us.”<sup>55</sup>

My youngest interlocutors did not quite share these same associations. While they were also usually swept into the generational category of “children of the 1990s,” those in their *early* twenties at the time of my research had not been shaped by the experience of national isolation to the same extent as their older peers. Take, for example, two focus group participants: Boris and Milica, ages twenty and twenty-two. Boris was from a town in the south of Serbia and had just arrived in Belgrade to study Greek language and literature, which he had become fascinated by on a family vacation to Greece. Milica was an economics student, specializing in statistics, originally from a town in the eastern part of the country. Both had spent a year in the US as high school exchange students—an exceptional experience, for sure, enabled by the A-SMYLE program sponsored by the US Department of State.<sup>56</sup>

Both were cheerful, friendly, and eager to show off their English-language skills. When I broached the topic of how their parents see the question of them

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<sup>55</sup> Fridman’s 2016 analysis of memories of the NATO bombing catalogues a diversity of narratives that feature humor, camaraderie, and pride alongside fear and confusion.

<sup>56</sup> I had connected with them because of this experience, as the program is administered by American Councils, one of the funders of my fieldwork.

staying or leaving Serbia, Boris replied that he got the sense that many Serbian parents did encourage their kids to leave, his own included. Nevertheless, he said “what I would like to do is to live abroad, in multiple countries, and then come back to live here.” Milica agreed: “I’ll probably do the same thing that he said—I’ll leave for a few years just to experience things, to travel, to be able to work different things, to switch jobs until I figure out what I actually want to do, and then come back here and do it.” Laughing, she added, “Because, in my personal case, I really do love Serbia if we put aside all the bad things.”

Such a cosmopolitan stance toward mobility is as ordinary for the younger “children of the 1990s” as it would have been unfathomable for those of Slobodan’s cohort, just ten years senior. Note that there is no mention by Boris or Milica of the very real material barriers to mobility. Their aspirations are lofty and youthful. They were aware of “all the bad things” about their country, and the fact that many young people, with their parents’ blessing, plan a future elsewhere. And yet, for them, living elsewhere and returning to Serbia—if they like—seemed like realistic and realizable aspirations. They had already had remarkable experiences of international mobility and found no reason to *not* expect similar opportunities to be open to them in the future.

Writing primarily about conditions in the early 2000s, Greenberg argued that “in postsocialist Serbia, aspirations of normalcy...orient their subjects temporally toward socialist Yugoslavia” (2011, 89). At the time of my research, ten years later, the Yugoslav Good Life was not a spatiotemporal configuration about which my interlocutors spoke longingly. Though the loss of all that SFRY stood for was occasionally grieved in our conversations, it was just as common for

my interlocutors' eyes to glaze a bit at *my* mention of the socialist past. When I excitedly remarked on the interesting documents I was perusing in the Archives of Yugoslavia, the friend who spoke energetically about the NATO bombing turned away with a shrug, saying "Yugoslavia was my mother's country."

What I want to emphasize is that conditions in Serbia can no longer be described as ones of entrapment breeding desires for escape—nor as an "abnormal" situation informed primarily by memories of socialist Yugoslav "normalcy" that included relatively unfettered mobility. The 2009 shift in the conditions of possibility of travel *also* marked a shift away from the idiom of escape and toward more nuanced stancetaking in relation to leaving. My interlocutors had had experiences of travel that would have been impossible a decade earlier. While such adventures were still remarkable in many ways, they had become commonplace among the young and educated. By the time of my research, expectations—not only of "normal mobility" but of "normalcy" more generally—had become more and more often calibrated against personal experiences of real-life travel. In chapters 4, 5, and 6 I explore the consequences of this shift, drawing out the significance of prior experiences of mobility for the future plans and aspirations of young potential migrants in Serbia. But I first turn to the political economy that shapes the contemporary concern of brain drain.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BRAIN DRAIN: YOUTH**  
**(UN)EMPLOYMENT AND EXPECTATIONS OF DIGNIFIED WORK**

In late February 2015, Vanja Udovičić, the Serbian minister of youth and sport, began a series of visits to companies to launch a new youth employment initiative. In front of news cameras at Air Serbia, the recently privatized national airline, he explained the impetus for the nascent program: “Our wish is to find the right way to prevent youth from leaving the country; to prevent them after university from thinking to trade in their student IDs (*indeksi*) for passports and to seek happiness elsewhere, instead of staying in their hometowns and improving the economy of Serbia and their towns.” He elaborated that the purpose of such company visits was “to confirm which positions are sought after in Serbia, what the criteria are for employing youth, and how we can contribute to the creation of quality human resources (*kadrovi*) together” (Ministry of Youth and Sport 2015b). Aleksandar Vulin, minister for labor, employment, veteran, and social policy, added: “Our job is to keep young people here, to make Serbia for them a place of worthwhile effort and hope for staying (*da im Srbiju učinimo i mestom vrednom truda, nade ostanka*). That’s the job of the whole government and society, and we won’t succeed without companies like Air Serbia. That’s why we are here, so they can tell us what the state needs to do so that they can more easily hire young people” (*BizLife* 2015). In the press releases for eight such visits to national and multinational companies around Serbia, the purpose was always situated in relation to the goal of slowing the country’s brain drain.



The comments of Udovičić and Vulin position them—representatives of the state—as benevolent brokers between employers and their potential youthful workforce, ready to listen to the needs of the private sector and step up as partners in the effort to improve the quality of “human resources” available on the market. Such a framing establishes the main underlying cause of youth unemployment as a mismatch between the skills of youth and the needs of the market. The logical leap that Vulin makes is to suggest that were this alleged discrepancy resolved, Serbia would be transformed into “a place of worthwhile effort and hope for staying” and the migration of educated youth would be stemmed, as recent graduates find easy employment in the private sector—or better yet, start their own businesses—and contribute to the economic development of Serbian towns rather than foreign ones.

This chapter will interrogate these claims. The broader context is one of global anxiety over the fate of “talent”—the conditions by which the skilled worker will reach or waste his or her full potential. Concern over talent becomes contoured domestically via linkages to ideologies of state and nation. In China, Lisa Hoffman (2010) has shown how the cultivation of talent prompted the emergence of an urban professional subjectivity in China. There, specific “reform-era” practices of governance fuse a Maoist-era ethics of care and concern for the national future with neoliberal technologies. In Russia, Julie Hemment (2015) has unraveled the multiple logics of Putin-era youth projects, including a state-affiliated summer camp that urged youth to “commodify their talent” for the national good. As these examples also demonstrate, formidable state involvement does not predict the outcome or reception of such projects. In

Serbia, the official approach to youth unemployment, including efforts to cultivate talent and prevent brain drain, have been ad hoc at best and universally derided by my young interlocutors. The series of company visits by the Ministry of Youth and Sport, described above, is a case in point. The project was to include visits to twenty to thirty companies. It appears that only eight actually took place, without clear follow-up.<sup>57</sup>

The context is also one in which the intense international oversight of the past decades has been funneled, in recent years, toward the singular goal of EU membership, lending an outsized role to EU institutions, funding, and law.<sup>58</sup> As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued, “in the era of globalization state practices, functions, and effects increasingly obtain in sites other than the national but that never fully bypass the national order” (2003, 89). So while it is important to hold an analytical view of the state in a “transnational frame” (Sharma and Gupta 2006, 28), the context is such that it is simultaneously crucial to attend to how the state is both imagined and practiced, and thereby constructed, at the level of the everyday and through processes that are decidedly mundane (Mitchell 1999). The economic processes described below are directed from the multiple scales of governance that characterize postsocialist and postwar Serbia.

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<sup>57</sup> Press releases for just eight such visits were published on the website of the Ministry for Youth and Sport, and it’s not clear why further visits did not occur. The companies visited were: Air Serbia, Microsoft, Bambi (a snack food company), Neoplant (a meat processing company), IBM, Coca-Cola Hellenic, Sunoko (a sugar producer), and Holcim (producer of construction material).

<sup>58</sup> Since 2007, European Union funding to candidate and potential candidate countries has been channeled through “IPA,” the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, with the goal of bringing these countries in line with the “European standards” detailed in the *acquis communautaire*, or body of European Union law that must be adhered to by each member state.

In this chapter I outline the political economy of brain drain, homing in on the link posited between emigration and unemployment. I examine the approach to youth unemployment articulated in political discourse, codified in official strategies, and implemented through ministry-sponsored programs. How is the issue of unemployment conceptualized, where is the problem located, and how are interventions targeted? I tack back and forth between responses to this question as found in official strategies and public relations stunts like the Air Serbia visit, local scholarship that offers a critical perspective on Serbia's political economy, and discussions with employment experts.

In the first section below, I build on the historical context established in the previous chapter to more specifically sketch the economic trajectory of Serbia since the 1990s, including the effects of privatization. I next explore the country's overreliance on foreign direct investment (FDI), drawing on interviews with several economic experts in the field of youth unemployment in order to interpret the impacts of this practice. I show how the government's focus on the (un)employment rate and FDI—partially attributable to the overarching political goal of EU accession—feeds the long-standing condition of “jobless growth.” These circumstances, in turn, facilitate a policy focus on “the unemployed individual” that allows the government to eschew responsibility for the more complex concern of job creation while cloaking the underlying issues in moralizing discourses of work. Finally, via an in-depth interview with two young sisters, I turn to the lived reality of youth looking for work. This section picks up the theme of complex mobility stances to bring into relief the expectations for dignified work voiced by young potential migrants and how such expectations fit

within broader visions of the future, at home or abroad. Here, I follow Millar (2017) in outlining the specific conditions of work encountered by my interlocutors and how such conditions give rise to particular material and affective responses.

### **From Market Socialism to Neoliberal Capitalism**

The political economy of socialist Yugoslavia was a unique blend of socialist ideology, market mechanisms, and consumer culture—from its non-aligned status to worker self-management, it was distinctive from the rest of the Eastern bloc.<sup>59</sup> The nature of Yugoslavia’s “workers’ self-management,” the political and economic crises building in the country throughout the 1980s, the peculiar rise of Slobodan Milošević, and the context of war and international isolation precipitated by his rule, all set up the processes of deindustrialization and privatization familiar throughout the postsocialist world to play out somewhat differently in Serbia—even if the resulting worker disenfranchisement and impoverishment were similarly experienced. In the late 1980s, the Communist Party, under Milošević’s leadership, “brought the liberal economic impulses of worker self-management in line with the neoliberal spirit of the day” (Musić 2015, 16). Market mechanisms were allowed greater influence under the guise of expanding workers’ self-management.<sup>60</sup> The free-market restructuring to

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<sup>59</sup> Several recent volumes have reexamined the economic entanglements of market impulses with socialist ideology in SFRY and their postsocialist consequences (e.g. Bockman 2011; Jelača, Kolanović, and Lugarić 2017; Patterson 2011).

<sup>60</sup> “Workers’ self-management” was the central principle of Yugoslav socialism that set it apart from Soviet and Eastern European socialisms. At least in theory, self-management decentralized control of the economy, with elected workers’ councils overseeing the operation of firms. In

come under the banner of “transition” was thus rooted in the “inherently hybrid system” (Jelača, Kolanović, and Lugarić 2017, 3) of socialist Yugoslavia.

The international sanctions imposed against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the context of war would also shape the processes of privatization to come. While Serbia adopted its first law on privatization in 1991, modeled on federal Yugoslav legislation passed the year before, hyperinflation and generalized economic decline compelled Milošević to slow down privatization efforts and re-nationalize key industries (Z. Ristić 2004). State workers remained partially shielded from the worst effects of sanctions and hyperinflation by heavily subsidized bread and oil distributed through the state union, and discounts on medicine, electricity, and heat. Trade in the gray economy and self-provisioning for those with village connections filled in the gaps for many (Musić 2015, 21–22). As factories limped through the decade, the “Serbian working class succeeded in avoiding a direct hit from the ‘shock therapy’ that spread through Eastern Europe, but such that the alternative was a slow death by a thousand cuts” (Musić 2015, 23). As the socialist working and middle classes blurred together via practices of consumption and mobility (see Kojanić 2015), this observation is broadly applicable. With Milošević still at the helm and NATO bombing the country, by 1999 Serbia’s economy was half its 1989 size and hampered by an enormous debt burden (Upchurch and Marinković 2011, 232).

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practice, managers tended to maintain a great deal of authority, and centralized planning was never completely abandoned. Self-management was implemented tentatively, and although it opened the door for the introduction of market mechanisms it is important to note that “Yugoslav socialism was...not a blend of capitalism and socialism but rather a mixture of socialist-style economic management with elements of a market economy” (Patterson 2011, 30n18). For a comprehensive analysis of Yugoslav self-management and its consequences, see Woodward 1995.

## **The “Triple Transition”**

In the former Yugoslavia “transition” thus became not only an effort to exorcise the ghosts of the socialist past but also those of the ethnic wars of the 1990s. This has been referred to as the “triple transition” from conflict to peace, from socialism to democracy, and from a centralized to market economy (McMahon 2002, 18). The region became a prime site for the codification of democratization and nation-building practices implemented around the globe by multilateral agencies and NGOs (Brown 2006, 8; Coles 2007, 240–245).

An influx of humanitarian aid first arrived in the former Yugoslavia as the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina wound down (BCSDN 2012, 11). BiH, in particular, was an early site of the standardization of techniques of democracy promotion. Billions of dollars were pledged by the international community to help the postwar reconstruction effort, with more than \$100 billion spent in BiH during the 1990s (McMahon 2002, 19). Though much of these funds went to maintaining an international military presence, some were earmarked for developing the NGO sector as the humanitarian mission shifted to one of democracy promotion. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was mandated with coordinating efforts to develop Bosnian civil society, joined by USAID and other powerful organizations (McMahon 2002, 21). The priorities of this constellation of actors had profound effects on the political future of the country. Early US assistance, in particular, was conditioned on the holding of democratic elections. This prompted the hasty organization of elections in 1996 that ushered into power politicians who cemented divisive

national sentiments, a deadlocked arrangement that persists to this day (see Evans-Kent and Bleiker 2003, 107; Jansen, Brković, and Čelebičić 2017).

As Kimberley Coles (2007, 2008) has demonstrated, Western forms and norms of liberal democracy became instituted in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the technical practices of elections, managed by a constellation of IGOs and NGOs. Coles shows that taken together, the combination of electoral promises and practices in postconflict BiH reveals elections and democracy as a means through which certain notions of Europe, progress, choice, and agency were naturalized and codified. She argues that democracy promotion largely works through the *presence* of internationals on the ground, and that democracy itself has become much less about popular struggle and more about institutionalizing and depoliticizing representation and participation.

Despite Serbia's distinct role in the wars of the 1990s and tense relationship with the West, the underlying logics of democracy promotion outlined by Coles apply here as well. Namely, the US was primarily interested in regime change in Serbia and funneled funding to opposition activists with this goal in mind. After Milošević was ousted, and especially after Đinđić was assassinated, Western observers seemed unable to comprehend why a normative liberal model of democracy was failing to flourish in Serbia, and were certainly unable to appreciate how "apathy [could be] a productive aspect of how people experience and understand democracy" (Greenberg 2010, 46).

In the early 2000s the international presence in Serbia was a thickly moralizing one. Serbia came under intense international pressure to extradite suspected war criminals to the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia in

The Hague for prosecution, and the country's reluctant compliance was frequently coaxed by loan payments. As political scientist Jelena Subotić explains,

because cooperation with the ICTY was a measurable indicator—the number of suspects arrested and transferred to The Hague and the number of documents and testimonies sent could all be classified, systematized, and easily counted—it soon became the major, if not the only, EU measurement of how far along Serbia was in adopting the idea of addressing crimes from its recent past. This, in turn, then became shorthand for Serbia's readiness to Europeanize. (Subotić 2010, 600)

Despite these conditions—and despite evidence emerging from the wider region about the brutal socioeconomic effects of “transition” (Dunn 2004; Haney 2000; Wedel 1998)—optimism for an efficient return to economic and political stability ran high in the immediate aftermath of the 2000 October Revolution. With peace at least uneasily restored, Milošević finally gone, and sanctions lifted, the early 2000s is remembered—at least among urban intellectuals—as a time when “things were going in a good direction,” as one interlocutor in her late thirties put it. The government of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić initiated reforms broadly interpreted as setting the country on a path away from the nationalist past and toward a democratic, European future, which crucially included facilitating the arrest and ICTY transfer of Milošević.

But after Đinđić's assassination cooperation with the ICTY stalled, and thus did Serbia's trajectory toward EU membership. After some fragile years in which “accountability for human rights...became a trading currency between local elites and the EU” (Subotić 2010, 604) conditions had changed and Serbia's political elites estimated that it was more in their interest to support EU



membership than to oppose it. By the time of my research, the criteria to be met for EU membership had become the prime guide for Serbian national policy. As then-Prime Minister Vučić optimistically assessed in 2016, “Successful completion of economic reforms, higher growth rates and finalization of EU accession negotiations by the end of the decade will represent the final and formal certification of Serbia’s success in economic, social and political transition to a liberal, market-oriented European democracy” (Vučić 2016). From 2001 through 2016, the European Union has granted the country more funding—nearly 3 billion euros—than any other donor, and the European Investment Bank has also been the largest supplier of loans to Serbia (Ministry of European Integration, n.d.).

### **Neoliberalization**

As Stephen Collier has argued in rethinking neoliberal reforms in Russia, the policies of the 1990s—hinging on liberalization, marketization, and stabilization—were “the contingent products of specific historical circumstances” (2011, 136). While such policies can be associated with neoliberalism, they should not be reduced to it, as the complex relationship between state and market in the former Yugoslavia and postsocialist Serbia attests (see also Bockman 2011). Economic reforms instituted in Serbia at the beginning of the 2000s included new labor, employment, and privatization laws. Such legislation was to allow firms to be restructured, investments to be attracted, and “to provide incentives for [the] long-term growth of employment and to assist ‘losers’ from the labor market” (Matković, Mijatović, and Petrović 2010, 12). The number of labor

market “losers” continued to mount as privatization ramped up, now part of reforms carried out under the influence of the World Bank and other Washington institutions. As countless other “developing” countries, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) received structural adjustment loans from the World Bank, here doled out as part of a “Transitional Support Strategy.” (Though recall that the country was no stranger to such funding, as the economy of socialist Yugoslavia was bolstered by multilateral loans.) Loans amounted to about \$397 million by the end of 2003 in addition to another \$30 million in grants. As elsewhere, the objectives to be met as conditions for this money included cutting public spending in healthcare and education, privatizing or closing state-owned companies, and reforming the banking sector.<sup>61</sup> By 2004 over 1,100 firms had been sold (Upchurch and Marinković 2011, 241). US Steel, Philip Morris, Carlsberg, and Russia’s Gazprom came to hold majority stakes in the steel, tobacco, beer, and energy industries respectively; Microsoft, Coca Cola, and Siemens also arrived, multinational supermarket chains bought out local ones, and the financial sector became dominated by foreign banks.

The postwar context of the former Yugoslavia fundamentally nullified what was imagined to be “an orderly, apolitical and technocratic privatization process” (Donais 2002, 6). As Timothy Donais (2002) shows in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, the institutional vacuum created by war coupled with conviction on the part of international actors in the urgency of privatization for

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<sup>61</sup> As has been the case elsewhere as well, A. Vladislavjević and Zuckerman conclude that the World Bank’s SAL program in Serbia and Montenegro failed to anticipate or mitigate its negative social (and specifically gendered) impacts (2004, 9).

economic recovery (and thus sustained peace) led to the cheap purchase by local nationalist elites of state-owned companies and thus the consolidation of their power. While the privatization process in Serbia has taken place on a different timeline and without the same ethnic dynamics as in BiH, the entwinement of economic and political goals in the context of weak institutions has created similar effects. Referring to those who got rich in the many shady privatization deals that continue to plague the country, my interlocutor Miloš explained, “the thing is...they were ripping apart whole companies just so that they could get a piece of it for themselves.” As I discuss in the chapters to come, stories of such deals and the morally suspect “entrepreneurs” who benefited imbue contemporary expectations of work with uneven moral valences.

Major industries remain partially privatized, leading to conflicting accounts of the exact size of the public sector and dubious claims that Serbia’s public sector is disproportionately bloated in relation to its Western European counterparts (see Mikuš 2016, 216–217). The context has also birthed hybrid economic forms, such as a formerly socially owned firm that anthropologist Ivan Rajković argues has become a site of “mock-labor,” as the company was put on the state payroll but no longer produces anything (Rajković 2017). In the next section, I show how the practice of courting foreign investors coupled with the criteria for EU membership helped generate the conditions for “jobless growth” and individual-focused employment policy.

## **Invest in Serbia: Foreign Direct Investment and Jobless Growth**

In late 2014, a peculiar image caught my eye on Facebook. It was a still shot from a TV ad, with a male hand in a clean black glove pressing into a button on a gleaming machine. Though the background is blurred, this is enough to conjure the setting of a high-tech factory. A textbox in the corner confirms the broader context with the message—in English—“Invest in Serbia,” and across the disembodied arm: “high-skilled, low-cost workers.”

This image was clipped from a commercial that aired on CNN International and featured voice-over in a British accent. In the full spot, iconic Belgrade landmarks flash across the screen, interspersed with machines in motion guided by youthful workers one could imagine to be smart and tech savvy. The narrator boasts of Serbia’s favorable geographic position, a projected—and entirely unrealistic—2020 EU accession date, and new labor and investment laws. “Right now,” says the Brit, “this is your opportunity to invest...join 500 international companies who have already made Belgrade and Serbia their home in Southeast Europe.” The final frame includes a now-dead URL to [investinserbia.rs](http://investinserbia.rs) and the logo of Serbia’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The thirty-second montage ends with the message “invest in Serbia—invest in the future.”<sup>62</sup>

It’s not clear exactly where and when this commercial aired. The screenshot that first brought the campaign to the attention of the Serbian public

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<sup>62</sup> The full commercial has been uploaded by a YouTube user here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEpUrhGvBo0>. Accessed April 6, 2019.

was tweeted from the account of someone who is likely a Serb living abroad. The post was re-tweeted at least a few hundred times and wormed its way across Facebook. It was picked up by popular domestic news portals whose journalists demanded to know how much the government had paid for the campaign and why it was hawking the country's workforce as though Serbia were a "third world country" (M. Petrović 2014). A trade union association issued a statement condemning the commercial as "shameful" and a prominent economist scorned it as an "affront to national dignity" (quoted in *B92* 2014).

This minor outcry rehearsed familiar anxieties about Serbia's status in the post-post-Cold War geopolitical order and the fate of its "talent" in the global economy. Successive governments since 2001 have focused on encouraging foreign direct investment (FDI) through generous subsidies, as "[Western] economists continue to point to the country's strategic location, pool of skilled and inexpensive labor, and generous incentives for foreign investment as its attractions for business investment" (USAID [2013?], 13). While Serbia's GDP has increased steadily in recent years, such growth can largely be attributed to an influx of foreign capital rather than a real increase in salaries (see Matković, Mijatović, and Petrović 2010, 9). Working conditions in foreign-owned companies have not met initial expectations, and there has been a wave of recent strikes in foreign-owned companies across Serbia.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See: <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/balkan-labour-reforms/>. This pro-FDI stance does not bear the mark of any one government or political party. Postsocialist FDI in Serbia had important antecedents in socialist Yugoslavia, and has also been part of broader regional trends. A fresh 2002 law on foreign investments smoothed the entrance of foreign capital (see Radenković 2016).

These same concerns underpin the much more heated debate that occurred a few months prior over reform of the labor law. While the “Invest in Serbia” commercial plugs the country’s “new”—and presumably better—labor and investment laws, the major accomplishment of this particular round of legal reform was to make it easier for employers to fire their employees.<sup>64</sup> Pushback against such changes, a recent strike against working conditions in Fiat’s Serbian factory, and reaction to this commercial all highlight the public’s impatience with a national economic policy reliant on offering hefty subsidies to would-be foreign investors.

In large part because of the country’s reliance on FDI, the 2008 global financial crisis set Serbia on the edge of bankruptcy prevented only by further borrowing from the IMF. Unemployment rose, pensions were frozen, the dinar fell, and bank lending constricted. Consequently, households cut spending, used up savings, and perhaps worked more in the grey economy (Matković, Mijatović, and Petrović 2010, 7). This, notwithstanding the lived experience of many as one of existing in a continual state of crisis since the early 1990s (Jansen, Brković, and Čelebičić 2017, 15–16; see also Shevchenko 2009). An ancillary effect of the global crisis as well as floods that devastated the country in 2014 has been to provide the ruling Serbian Progressive Party with external circumstances on which to pin stagnating wages and persistent unemployment.<sup>65</sup> Anthropologist

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<sup>64</sup> For one analysis of the 2014 changes to the labor law see: <http://pescanik.net/da-nam-zivi-rad/>.

<sup>65</sup> Prime Minister Vučić—famous for hyperbole—declared the floods “the greatest catastrophe in memory in the history of Serbia.” See: <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/1070264-vucic-proglasava-vanrednu-situaciju-ovo-je-najveca-katastrofa-u-istoriji-srbije>.

Marek Mikuš also argues that the Progressives have successfully cast “their political enemies, a select handful of ‘tycoons’ facing showcase lawsuits, and the public-sector ‘parasites’” as responsible for the local effects of the global economic crisis (2016, 221).

“Invest in Serbia,” critics argue, has amounted to little more than “outsource to Serbia,” advancing the economic condition of “jobless growth” by which foreign direct investment inflates the country’s GDP without durably increasing employment. Banners reading “we don’t want to be a cheap labor force (*jeftina radna snaga*)” featured in the spring 2017 protests against consolidation of power by Prime Minister-turned-President Aleksandar Vučić, reinforcing the primacy of this issue for youth fed up with a political elite seemingly unable, unwilling, and uninterested in creating decent jobs.<sup>66</sup> In the next section, I detail the government’s approach to youth unemployment before turning to how young people themselves understand their life chances and choices for dignified work.

### **Locating the “Problem”: Youth as Targets of Employment Policy**

Just during the fifteen months of my fieldwork from October 2014–December 2015, a dizzying array of policies, strategies, and programs targeting the young and unemployed were being implemented. Programs directly sponsored by the Ministry of Youth and Sport included trainings titled: “Education to work,” “Knowledge to work,” “Knowledge to the goal,” and the new initiative for youth employment that set Ministers Udovičić and Vulin on

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<sup>66</sup> For more on the recent protests see Fridman and Hercigonja 2016.

company tours. Such programs were ostensibly guided by and funded within broader governmental strategies, most notably the National Employment Strategy for 2011–2020 (NES) and the National Youth Strategy for 2015–2025 (NYS), and these strategies’ respective “action plans.” Though national in scope, such strategies have been drafted in close consultation with representatives of international organizations and with the explicit goal of aligning with European Union policies and economic targets.<sup>67</sup>

Reducing the unemployment rate—and raising the employment rate—feature as prominent priorities in Serbia’s latest employment and youth strategies. Serbia has significantly lower rates of activity and employment than the EU average (see Bradaš 2017, 2). The official 2015 unemployment rate for those aged fifteen through twenty-nine was 33 percent, the inactivity rate 51 percent, and the employment rate a mere 32 percent. Of particular concern are those in the so-called NEET category (not in education, employment, or training), which in 2015 for Serbian youth was 24 percent (Marjanović 2016, 2).<sup>68</sup>

Such labor statistics are important and powerful indicators. As Sarita Bradaš (2017) argues in a recent NGO report, the quarterly publication of these

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<sup>67</sup> The National Youth Strategy for 2015–2025, for example, was developed with input from UN agencies, OSCE, the Council of Europe, USAID, and German (GIZ) and Swiss (SDC) development agencies. See Ministry of Youth and Sport 2015b, 6 for a list of European Union documents consulted in the preparation of the strategy. Further, as stated in the National Employment Strategy 2011–2020, “the Europe 2020 agenda does not impose additional criteria for EU membership, but the targets established will certainly define the EU policy toward candidate and accession countries” (Ministry of Economy and Regional Development 2011, 20).

<sup>68</sup> NEET has become a popular measure of youth exclusion that captures more than the unemployment rosters. NEETS “are more likely to have a low educational level, difficult family environment or immigration background, as well as having a status where they are not accumulating human capital through formal channels of education, training or employment” (Eurofound 2014, 5).



figures provokes heated debate as both experts and laypersons doubt the veracity of employment data. In the relevant national policies and programs there is a “noticeable focus—in analysis as well as planned measures—exclusively on two labor market indicators: the rate of employment and the rate of unemployment, whereby increasing the first and reducing the second are considered sole indicators of labor market performance” (Bradaš 2017, 1).<sup>69</sup> This myopic focus can be partially attributed to the goal of joining the European Union, as without improving the “employment-to-population ratio” Serbia will not meet the required Copenhagen criteria (Ministry of Economy and Regional Development 2011, 20).

There are several reasons why these figures are the subject of debate, however. For one, methodological changes were introduced with the 2008 Labor Force Survey in order to more closely align the methodology used to gather Serbian labor statistics with the Eurostat standards of the EU. These changes resulted in an apparent decrease in the unemployment rate, but only because a number of people who had been unemployed long-term were recategorized as “inactive” (see Matković, Mijatović, and Petrović 2010, 13). Such changes make comparison with pre-2008 figures difficult. Broader demographic trends affect the employment rate as well. The country’s working-age population is shrinking, while the number of those over the age of sixty-four is growing (a long-term trend of great national concern). If the number of employed persons were to hold

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<sup>69</sup> Bradaš is a researcher with the Center for Democracy Foundation: <http://www.centaronline.org/en/>. My translation from the Serbian; note that there is also an English version of this report.

steady at its 2016 level and the negative population trend continue at its current rate, by 2020 the employment rate of the working age population would increase by a remarkable 6.9 percent, to 62.1 percent (Bradaš 2017, 5). A policy focus on the employment rate is coupled with concern over the “quality” of the labor force. The next section describes how this latter concern manifests.

### **Human Capital and the University**

One of the ways in which the frenzy over (un)employment manifests is in calls to develop the human resources (or “human capital”) of the country. As stated in the NES, “Human capital development is at the core of the employment policy. Raising the quality of the labour force through education, training and the inclusion of socially excluded individuals and groups will contribute to economic and social development of the country” (Ministry of Economy and Regional Development 2011, 30). Improving the “employability and employment” of young Serbs is also the first of nine strategic goals outlined in the National Youth Strategy for 2015–2025, which was in a final round of public comments when I arrived in the field (and which I discuss further in chapter 5).

Concerns about the “quality” of Serbia’s human capital and the employability of its youth drive governmental and nongovernmental efforts to identify the skills needed by employers and educate future workers accordingly. The perception that there is a significant mismatch between the qualifications or “profiles” of youth entering the workforce on the one hand, and the needs of the labor market on the other, was voiced not only by Minister Udovičić in his company visits but on every panel about youth unemployment that I attended

during my fieldwork. Prestigious faculties like law and architecture are overenrolled, the argument goes, given the limited number of lawyers and architects that can be absorbed by the internal market. Meanwhile, as I discuss further in chapter 6, there are not enough spots in the IT track for all prospective students. One suggestion for steering youth to faculties with greater employability prospects—which I often heard from youth themselves—is actually a socialist-style quota system. The “mismatch” is also behind calls for more, and more effective, career guidance counseling, particularly at the high-school level and in vocational schools, as well as proposed implementation of a “dual” education system in which vocational students would spend as much time in hands-on workplace training as in the classroom.<sup>70</sup>

These seemingly mundane matters acquire a moral charge in the highly contested and politicized space of the university in Serbia. The university was a key ideological institution during Yugoslav socialism, especially during the waning of this system as Slobodan Milošević deliberately sought to repress academic freedom, requiring oaths of loyalty from faculty and stacking administrative positions with his supporters (see Greenberg 2014, 81–94; Popov 2000, 303–326). As Greenberg elucidates, after the October Revolution student activists saw university reform as a continuation of their struggle to depose Milošević: “reform was not merely a technical exercise, but a fundamental restructuring of power and decision-making authority at a highly politicized institution” (2014, 95). Popular skepticism of university reform abounds—

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<sup>70</sup> See, for example, the many publications of Belgrade Open School on this topic, available at <http://www.bos.rs/uz/publikacije>.

skepticism both about Serbia's participation in the Bologna Process meant to standardize educational qualifications across Europe, as well as about the patchy implementation of this process. My student interlocutors frequently complained about faculties that had been only "partially Bolognized"—meaning that their program requirements remained in a state of limbo between old and new systems—in addition to the perennial complaints of mediocre and disinterested professors, overcrowded classes, and subjects that were too general to be of any practical use.

In this fraught environment, university enrollment numbers, the nature of the skills gained by students, and the practical experience or lack thereof to be gleaned from higher education are complex issues that were matters of great concern in the course of my fieldwork. Many savvy young interlocutors recognized the systemic nature of the problem of "mismatch." The expectation still prevailed, they told me, that one would work in one's immediate field of training (*struka*). That is, rather than recognizing someone with a law degree as having critical thinking, public speaking, and writing skills, on the job market such a person would be evaluated only as a potential lawyer. Or, as one focus group participant put it, "it just seems like the state tries to tap us into these boxes."

Many of the interlocutors I introduce in chapters 5 and 6 were vocal advocates of shifting the educational system toward an emphasis on transferable, entrepreneurial skills. While this was a point of general consensus, it was frequently undercut by official proclamations of those professional profiles most needed in Serbia, a list limited to manual labor and service-sector jobs such as

welder, auto mechanic, baker, and those in the hospitality industry.<sup>71</sup> It was also undercut by the forceful governmental promotion of dual education. Bojan, a promoter of entrepreneurship education in high schools, articulated the contradiction between these two positions. “It’s not the point to teach someone how to make sausage,” he explained. “If we are talking about butchers, [it’s not about] how one needs to make sausage, rather, what will he do with it when he makes it? You know, if you send him to train (*na praksu*) in a butcher shop, he will learn to make sausage. But what he will do with that *practically*—that is very problematic.” The organization Bojan worked for advocated for entrepreneurial education, or as another interlocutor put it, “future-proof skills,” rather than a reshuffling of faculty slots and the funneling of more students into vocational schools. The touting of European-aligned educational discourses by the likes of Bojan may seem to cast him as performing an overdetermined ideal of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Yet such focus on entrepreneurial habits and competencies makes sense for youth trying to gain a foothold in an economy that would otherwise hold space for legible professional profiles like tilers, plumbers, and, most recently, computer programmers. It is also an assertion of agency and the right to develop, to reinvent oneself, and to have such efforts recognized and affirmed by society.

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<sup>71</sup> See, for example: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/biznis/3098155/djordjevic-upozorio-da-nam-nestaje-radna-snaga-srbija-bi-za-nekoliko-godina-mogla-da-ostane-bez-prodavaca-vozaca-pekara-ugostitelja>.

## The Unemployed Individual

Much of the public discussion on the development of human capital is animated by the assumption that interventions in the education system can and will positively affect the (youth) unemployment rate. But my expert interlocutors challenged this assumption, even as they nevertheless advocated for educational reforms. I was talking to Žarko, a researcher at an NGO involved in the issue of youth employment. His organization has a project focused on the transition from school to work.<sup>72</sup> When I asked him about the main challenges in this transition he responded bluntly, “There is no work in Serbia. So the fact that what is being taught in higher education does not meet the needs of the economy—because these needs do not actually exist—that’s the problem.” Žarko further identified three interrelated issues that are the focus of a great deal of the attention on youth unemployment: first, the educational system is outdated and does not adequately prepare students for work in the modern economy, second, university enrollment in specific faculties is not aligned with the needs of the domestic economy, and finally, these two points are essentially irrelevant because “there is no work in Serbia.”

While Žarko was exaggerating for comic effect (at least he had a job!) he highlighted a key paradox. Why is so much attention focused on the (lack of) skills or “mismatched” profiles of youth entering the workforce? I was talking to

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<sup>72</sup> The 2008 financial crisis collapsed the employment prospects for youth across Europe and beyond and prompted continent-wide policy initiatives. The European Commission’s 2012 “Youth Employment Package” brought the “school-to-work transition” of young people into policy focus as tightly linked to broader life course markers such as independent living and having children (Eurofound 2014, 2).

Irena, an economics expert, about the government's efforts to increase entrepreneurship. She explained:

One of the greatest policy failures in relation to support for entrepreneurship is that entrepreneurship is exclusively seen as *employment* and not as *job creation*. Because when you focus on employment in the policy sense, then you center the unemployed person and say: "Okay, let's see why this person is unemployed. And then we say, aha, maybe he or she doesn't have all the knowledge and skills. And then follows a set of policies toward gaining skills, knowledge, blah blah blah, that doesn't match the needs of the market.

Irena had sprinkled her response with English, and now switched languages permanently as she continued:

On the other hand, if you have job creation as a policy goal, then your focus is on those who are creating jobs. And then these are companies. And then you are thinking: "What do they need in order to create jobs?" Then you, if you think like that, then you would end up, aha, the environment is not functioning, access to finance is poor, the regulatory framework is not uh- procedures are complicated. Then your interventions are going towards- then you're asking yourself: "Why are companies not creating jobs? What is the obstacle?"

Irena is skeptical of the government's promotion of entrepreneurship, which I elaborate in later chapters. Because the government has not adequately addressed systemic issues like poor access to finance, the punitive consequences of bankruptcy, the burdensome tax structure, and overly complex regulatory procedures, would-be entrepreneurs are hampered and/or pushed into the gray economy, and those who do start small businesses which manage to stay afloat cannot expand (see Hutchinson et al. 2012, 12–19). Despite such views, and despite the fact that job creation is indeed drafted into the National Employment Strategy as a main priority, more effort—and public rhetoric—is consistently devoted to the issue of employability, thereby shifting the level of intervention

down to the individual. As Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić regularly chided the Serbian population for not working hard enough, positioning himself as “worker-in-chief” and urging citizens to follow his example. He held up the “difficult measures” passed by the Serbian government (at the behest of the IMF) as evidence that “Serbia has changed, and that through work the future and oneself can be changed” (quoted in Mastilović Jasnić 2015).<sup>73</sup>

Irena’s summation echoed Žarko’s perspective:

The problem is not in youth, the problem is that there are no jobs. If there are jobs, then the private sector *will* train people, it’s not a problem, if they need them. But if they *don’t* need them, you can train them as much as you want. If I cannot pay you, an employee, you can be the best person in the world...[but] if my business doesn’t grow I cannot employ. And this is what they’re not getting. I mean, all these active employment measures are important, but they’re not, they’re not solving the key problem in the economy, which is the jobless growth that we had for the past fifteen years.

My conversations with Irena and Žarko reveal how the government’s myopic focus on unemployment allows it to eschew responsibility for the more complex concerns of job creation. While improving the economic climate and creating conditions for “doing better business” are also strategic goals, progress in these areas has been markedly slow. This is not least because serious attention to this goal would require rooting out corruption and cronyism, which are embedded in the highest levels of government. A focus on (un)employment shifts attention to the individual, her (lack of) skills and qualifications, and rationalizes

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<sup>73</sup> For an example linking work and national pride/victimization, see: <http://www.dnevnik.rs/politika/vucic-srbiju-da-zgazite-necete-otpor-prema-rezoluciji-politicki-miran>. For an example that illustrates Vučić’s fetishization of work, see: <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Politika/1640948/Vu%C4%8Di%C4%87%3A+Nasu%C5%A1na+potreba+zemlje+da+se+promeni.html>.



a host of programs to tackle these ostensible problems. Following such logic, enterprising Serbian youth should ideally create their own jobs, and their failure to do so can be traced to skewed values and lack of initiative rather than a fundamentally dysfunctional economy. As we will see, the talented youth I spoke with have gone to extraordinary lengths to find work, but the work they have found has been unregulated, degrading, and not meeting their minimum expectations. In the final section below, I outline the expectations for dignified work of my young interlocutors, contours that will be fleshed out in the chapters to come.

### **“I Have to Start Something”: Expectations of Dignified Work**

Mirjana and Mina, ages twenty-four and twenty-five, were sisters from a town in the northern region of Vojvodina who had come to Belgrade to study. Mina was completing the final required practicum for her degree in special education. Mirjana had earned a degree in political science. As we talked outside at a bustling café in the city center, they outlined their joint struggle to jumpstart lives as independent adults. Despite volunteering in the nonprofit sector throughout her studies, Mirjana confronted grim employment prospects upon graduation. She decided to enroll for a Master’s degree from the Faculty of Organizational Sciences (Fakultet organizacionih nauka—FON), “known as the only one whose graduates find jobs.” But even this additional qualification did not give her the hoped-for advantage on the job market. Instead, Mirjana was in the midst of yet another in a series of short-term internships, this time in the human resources department of a major international hotel chain.

The sisters had peppered our conversation with references to “the way things are” in the West. After Mina left for another engagement I finally asked Mirjana how the pair had managed to travel so much. She replied: “most of the time we traveled as tourists. We have some cousins abroad, so we went to visit cousins, but my sister, she [also] went to a few volunteer camps and I spent a month in Berlin studying German...twice I won a scholarship to travel, one time to Germany for two weeks, one time to France and Switzerland.”

When I asked what her current plans were she responded bluntly: “My plans? I’m trying to find work.”

I was confused—weren’t we talking about staying and leaving? I was trying to figure out if the sisters planned to go abroad. “Aha. And you want to stay here, and...?”

She firmly steered my focus back to employment: “At the moment I’m trying to find any kind [of work]. The problem is just that, for example in the hotel where I work, there aren’t real entry-level positions.”

“Really?”

“Yes, because”—she paused to clarify—“there aren’t entry-level positions for *educated* people. I could, for example, get a job in the housekeeping department...to wash laundry, to make-up the rooms—except that they wouldn’t take me for that because I have a Master’s degree, I speak two foreign languages, and I would make 15,000 dinars a month [about 150 dollars].”

“Damn,” I responded lamely.

“But entry-level positions for educated people don’t exist anywhere, not in finance, not in marketing, not in HR—there’s nothing open.”

Mirjana had a theory about why this was the case. As she explained, there was a cohort of professionals who took positions in the private companies that opened after Milošević was ousted in 2000, prompting economic reform and a surge in foreign investment. While these workers are not yet old enough to retire, there is also a glut of college-educated youth in Belgrade. In addition to the nearly 15,000 annual graduates of Belgrade University, the capital absorbs newly minted graduates from Serbia's other university towns because, as Mirjana and many others assessed, "there are no jobs anywhere else but here."<sup>74</sup> Thus work in the private sector, which Mirjana was oriented toward, was hard to come by, at least in the form of "entry-level positions for educated people." Mirjana was living the reality of Serbia's long-term "jobless growth" described above, but the economic trends tapped into by her theory and personal predicament are also global ones; namely the expansion of the low-wage service sector, a global increase in the number of college graduates, and the eagerness of companies to squeeze as much productive labor as possible from interns without offering a realistic shot at long-term employment in return (Gershon 2017; Lane 2011).

Of course, I had been trying to tease out *where* the sisters wanted to work—whether they had concrete plans, or abstract dreams, or any intention of going abroad long-term. But "here" and "there" were hopelessly entangled in the sisters' narratives. Mirjana continued:

If you are an educated person who is a recent college graduate, you have no chance of finding work here....In principle, I'm looking at whatever. For example, I just saw that there is an open position at the reception desk of a

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<sup>74</sup> Over 50,000 terminal degrees were awarded in Serbia in 2016; 14,716 by the University of Belgrade. See: [http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/repository/documents/00/02/52/78/AS21\\_177-2016\\_srb.pdf](http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/repository/documents/00/02/52/78/AS21_177-2016_srb.pdf)

hotel in my chain in Dubai. So I'll probably send [an application] for that. So I'm literally looking for whatever, just to do something because time is passing—I have to start something.

Along with many others, the sisters also emphasized how corruption and “the connections you need to find any kind of job” hindered their ability to find work in Serbia. But as we continued talking, Mina—who had a degree in special education—related an experience that seemed to contradict many of points we had covered, namely the notion that there is no work to be found outside Belgrade, that there are no entry-level jobs, and that work comes only through strong political connections. Mina actually *had* secured an entry-level job in her field—in her small hometown, no less—in a child development center. (She later rather uncomfortably acknowledged that the position had come her way through a personal connection.) But from a promising start she only lasted two months, mainly because she was frequently asked to work double shifts that left her spent. Mirjana broke in to defend her sister's quitting: “Employers are very aware that people want to do anything, and they just don't want to follow regulations because they don't have to. People will work no matter what...” But Mina gently challenged this view, noting: “I think there is also another group of people, of students that just graduated, like me, for example. I don't want to work, to do *any* job, like, I don't want to work that way. I was totally exhausted, I wasn't productive at all, I wasn't motivated, plus the salary wasn't that good, so why would I?”

The desires voiced by Mina for reasonable work hours, a living wage, and a profession that would make use of her talents and skills might not strike as

remarkable, but they sit uneasily with the prevailing notion that Serbian youth suffer from inertia and incessant complaining. They also highlight the inadequacies associated with what were generally differentiated by my interlocutors as the three realms of possible employment: the public sector, the private sector, and self-employment/entrepreneurship. To the limited extent that one could choose to focus one's job-seeking efforts on one realm or the other, each involved compromises. Public-sector employment was invested with multiple meanings. Despite the stagnant size of the public sector (Mikuš 2016; cf. Kurtović 2017 on the burgeoning public sector in BiH), it held the promise of a minimum standard of living and a certain level of existential security and daily predictability. But it also became "identified as a mechanism of unfair redistribution" (Mikuš 2016, 220); considered morally compromised in ways I describe in the next chapter. The private sector was sometimes separated into foreign employers and Serbian ones, was sometimes seen as holding the potential for meritocratic employment practices, but was generally considered exploitative, subject to the creeping influence of clientelism, and ruled by personal relationships in any case. As I discuss in later chapters, multivalent value-laden meanings were also layered onto entrepreneurship—from association with the informal sector, to a risk-laden option of dubious likelihood for success in Serbia, to a realm of personal authenticity and independence.

I was still trying to pinpoint the sisters' stances toward mobility: "So, if you each found an ideal job in your field, like one that's not two shifts, and paid decently, would you want to stay here or would you still want to travel, or...?"

Mirjana's response surprised me: "Honestly, I would stay here to gain experience and then leave because, um, Serbia is a place where you are never safe, where you never know what will happen next. A company may be open for a day and then close another day. Nothing is for sure here."

I probed: "Would you mean, when you say that are you talking about the economy? Like it's...?" Mirjana responded,

Yes, economy, politics, everything. And, we have traveled a bit around Europe, to see that people are just happier in other places. They live normal lives, they have families, they have friends, they have school, job, whatever—they have time for everything. It's not like, people like to say here, "yeah, they have money in the West but they never hang out with their friends." That's just not true! And, I just like it better in the West, because I traveled, I saw how people live there, and, this culture is just, it's too small for me. So I would stay here to gain experience, but then I think I would start looking for opportunities abroad.

Mina elaborated that while the cliché prevails that the German work ethic precludes the rich social life enjoyed by Serbs, in reality *they* are working all the time too, "but it's just that you have a very bad salary and you know, you are demotivated, and then they're there, happy, they can live normal lives. I mean, I don't expect anything like, you know, a big house, gold and stuff—"

Mirjana broke in: "Fairytale and everything—"

"No, I just want a normal life. To work, to get a salary, to have money to go to the seaside in summer, to have friends—"

"Plus, I would like a country with a normal health system—"

"Yeah."

"With a normal education system. Serbia does not have that. So I don't want to have kids in Serbia."

"Yeah, for sure."

“I don't want to go to the doctor's one day in Serbia. I want to like, be *safe* in those terms, to pay my taxes and know what I get in return.”

This dialogue about security initially surprised me. It was one of a few instances in the course of my research when an interlocutor invoked “security” or “safety” in broad, oblique, or unexpected ways. Here, while my first association was with physical safety, it quickly became clear that Mirjana and Mina craved the security of having confidence in the future—of having a reasonable expectation that one’s life course will play out as one expects. Further, the sisters understood this security to be something that exists elsewhere, either temporally or spatially, or both. And these expectations were nested within a broader vision of a normal, good life.

Joining many others young potential migrants, the sisters’ tale exemplified not a willingness to accept any *kind* of work, but rather a willingness to go anywhere in the world for work that would feel like a step forward. Building on their experiences of travel to somewhat unexpected places like Ukraine and the US in addition to Western Europe, the sisters were more than willing to cast wide geographic nets while discovering the limits of what work, under what conditions, they were willing to accept. While I was initially surprised by talk of potential destinations such as Dubai, I soon heard of plans from other interlocutors to teach English in China and Abu Dhabi. What was more important than destination for these interlocutors was securing work that fulfilled their expectations for *dignified* work: labor for which they would be valued and challenged, and that held the promise of propelling their lives forward.

I hadn't asked this question directly often, but I now ventured: "I mean, do you guys feel disappointed, that, you don't feel like you can make a life here and...?"

Mirjana responded: "Yes. I do feel disappointed, honestly. That like, I feel like I did everything right. I went to school, I had good grades, I volunteered, I interned, I did everything what I was supposed to do—and *nothing*."

The disappointment comes through as she says this final word and her sister interjects, "exactly."

"If I hadn't done all that, then maybe I wouldn't feel so disappointed right now, but I feel like I deserve more than this, that's all."

Mina added: "Yeah, true. I agree."

This conversation highlights the wide gap between governmental assertions that youth do not have marketable skills, that they do not work hard enough, and that the employment rate is improving on one hand, and the lived experience of the young and educated on the other. It renders absurd the ministerial trek through companies to ferret out the needs of the private sector, as well as the endless series' of trainings that promise to bring participants a step closer to employment. In the narrative of Mirjana and Mina, such efforts to individualize the problem of (un)employment are exposed as misplaced. What the sisters center in their expectations for dignified work is a sense of existential security that they ultimately suggest is fundamentally unrealizable in Serbia. This, then, is a very different story about brain drain than the official framing which simplistically casts the migration of the young and educated as an outcome of unemployment.



At certain moments in our conversation the sisters adopted a framing of brain drain as opportunity, as when Mirjana noted, “If you have the opportunity to see other cultures, why not?” But this stance is modulated by an awareness that mobility is not quite the choice it ought to be. There is a sadness just below the surface of their words, as the young women reckon with the realities of securing meaningful work that might fulfill their expectations.

Members of the generation who have grown up with the post-2009 mobility regime have expectations of normalcy shaped from a bricolage of sources that include not only demands for existential and social security reminiscent of the expectations of their parents, but also aspects of life encountered during travel to foreign lands. Here, mobility is not the marker of a middle-class lifestyle and geopolitical normalcy that it was during socialist Yugoslavia, and it’s not necessarily the escape route that it was during the 1990s. Mobility here becomes a substitute for a normal life at home. A consolation prize sponsored by agencies and foreign governments concerned about the abnormality of life in Serbia and the limited life chances and choices for youth there. In the next chapter, I elaborate on these themes, exploring the aspirations of those who most wanted to leave Serbia forever.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**LEAVING SERBIA: HORIZONS OF POSSIBILITY AND THE PROMISE**  
**OF MIGRATION**

Jelena was a fiery blond brimming with enthusiasm. We had connected through a mutual acquaintance. From her online presence I thought she seemed approachable, the ideal first interviewee. As she had been a long-time resident of the US—a Serbian returnee, or “repat”—I guessed that our cultural divide would be narrow and that our meeting would serve as a gentle ethnographic induction. I was right. When we met on the street in the center of Belgrade she whisked me to one of her favorite nearby cafés, chomping on a bakery snack and peppering me with questions about my research.

As we settled in, Jelena sketched her path to the US and back. Hindsight and maturity had smoothed the edges of a jagged trajectory. She had woven her personal history into a coherent, compelling tale, situating her migratory narrative in the context of broader family and geopolitical dynamics. She was from an intellectual family, she told me, one with a long history of mobility. Encouraged by her well-traveled parents, Jelena left Serbia for the US in 1998 to experience her final year of high school as an exchange student. “To learn English, see how the US is—that kind of stuff,” she said.

Returning home after an unexpected eleven years in the US she found work in her field of public relations, first at an international agency then in the large state-owned bank. She took a deep breath as she launched into the tale of her six-month review at the bank:

So for the first couple of months I was, you know—I'm a very enthusiastic person. So every week I would do a new presentation: how we can improve this, how we can do this, how we can blah blah blah, you know, because I thought that this is why they want me here. So, after six months my boss tells me: "You know Jelena, I mean, you're pretty cool. I like that you're so enthusiastic, and you know, when you go through the hallway the whole building knows that you're going through the hallway...But you know, Jelena, you're never satisfied—everything for you can be better. Let's modernize this, let's improve this, this is not good enough, we can do this better...you always have some new idea about something."

Eyes fixed on me she delivers the punchline. "He was like: *you know Jelena, he who looks at the sky steps in shit.*" She leans back, laughing, waiting for her final words to register. I exhale a slow "wow" as she continues: "And I'm like, I look at him, and I'm like: *well, you know, Eleanor Roosevelt said 'always shoot for the stars—even if you miss you land on the moon.'* And he looks at me and says: *maybe in the US, but in Serbia you step in shit.*" I gasp as she laughs.

This story consolidates a cluster of oft-discussed themes in the Serbian capital: the tamping of ambition, non-recognition of hard work and initiative, devaluing of expertise, and the resultant "negative selection" said to be endemic to Serbian society by which the unqualified and morally suspect rise to the top. Challenging the simplistic model favored by government ministers that prioritizes the (un)employment rate—and in contradistinction to the moralizing discourses of work favored by Vučić—some combination of these elements frequently ground the migratory aspirations of the country's educated youth. But as Jelena's story attests, such forces are also decried by those who intend to stay and even those who have returned from abroad. In contrast, the young potential migrants I encountered imagined the countries of the West as manifesting the inverse of this state of affairs. Almost without exception and with only the

occasional qualification, the West was considered to be a collection of meritocracies where talent was recognized and hard work rewarded. Where not “everything works backwards” as it was said to in Serbia.

In this chapter, I explore the real and symbolic geographies invoked in talk of leaving and staying in Serbia. By centering the “imagined lives” of migration I read mobility narratives such as Jelena’s as proxies for commentary on a host of other socioeconomic issues (cf. Dick 2018). As discussed in chapter 2, access to and exercise of international mobility can become a barometer for the “normalcy” of the national order of things (Dzenovska 2013; Partridge 2009; Roseman 2013), and nowhere is this more true than Serbia (Greenberg 2011).

Those I profile here illustrate the range of short-term mobility experiences of my interlocutors as a whole. Jelena had lived and worked in the US for eleven years. Miloš and Gordana, who I later introduce, had spent a summer in Alaska as a work-study student and had traveled to Western and Eastern Europe as a doctoral student, respectively. Thus while Jelena’s story was in some ways exceptional, the experience of international travel she enjoyed no longer is. For members of a generation who experienced the trauma and tumult of the 1990s as children—coming of age at the close of the first decade of the new millennium—aspirations for mobility are no longer primarily expressed as desire to escape entrapment, nor are they anchored to lived memory of Yugoslav mobility. This chapter (and the ones to follow) elaborates how the 2009 shift in the conditions of possibility for travel also marked a shift away from the idiom of escape toward more nuanced stancetaking in relation to mobility. I argue that renewed access to travel has provided fresh material out of which youth in Serbia construct

authoritative, yet imaginary, “contrapuntal lives” lived elsewhere (Dick 2013, 2018). Below, I elucidate how these imaginaries both color how potential and return migrants narrate the forces of “suffocation” (*gušenje*) or “hampering/blocking” (*sputavanje*) experienced in their everyday navigations in the “here and now,” and give moral weight to migratory aspirations for, and experiences of, lives lived in the “then and there.”

### **Imaginaries, Horizons, and Meritocratic Aspirations**

Rooted in a variety of theoretical traditions, the concept of imaginaries as ‘representational assemblages that mediate the identifications with Self and Other’ (Salazar 2010, 6; see also Harris and Rapport 2016) has been fruitfully taken up in relation to tourism. Recent literature in this vein demonstrates how experiences of tourism shape cultural imaginaries of global peripheries (Herrero and Roseman 2015) and converge with mass-mediated images and geopolitical hierarchies (Mostafanezhad and Promburom 2018) to produce particular effects. These effects include the production of romantic notions of authenticity among tourists (Bryce, Murdy, and Alexander 2017) refracted by the tourism industry itself (Forsey and Low 2014; Simpson 2017). Such analyses resonate with now classic excavations of the “invention” in the Western imagination of the region of the Balkans (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992; Todorova 2009; Wolff 1994). This latter work foregrounds the role of Western journalists and policymakers, in addition to historians and travel writers, in constructing a discourse in which ‘the Balkans stand as Europe’s resident alien’ (Fleming 2000, 1229).

Linking these literatures together highlights the loaded geopolitical terrain on which Self–Other mediation occurs, as well as the salience of specific moments of encounter rich with “relational processes” (Simoni 2015, 5). This juxtaposition also draws attention to the expansiveness of “imaginaries” as concept and its resemblance to other anthropological mainstays such as cognitive schemas or even “culture” itself. As such, the concept has come under well-warranted critique (most notably by Damien Stankiewicz) as a “stuck-together assemblage” that has lost analytic utility; a concept that “tends to overgeneralize, to elide scale, and to gesture toward without pointing at” (Stankiewicz 2016, 797, 807) nuanced debates about agency, possibility, and aspiration.

Taking seriously such critique, in this chapter I privilege vernacular expressions of (the limits of) aspiration and possibility, nuancing anthropological understanding of these as not just conceptual categories but also ones of experience (cf. Murphy 2017 on “social destiny”). Beginning with the concept of *perspektiva*, akin to yet exceeding Crapanzano’s “imaginative horizon” (2004) or Appadurai’s culturally inflected “capacity to aspire” (2013, 179), I show how my interlocutors evoked aspirational imaginaries of a primarily symbolic (Western) “then and there” only secondarily projected onto or claimed representative of the specific site of their migratory aspirations or previous mobility. I argue that the foundational motif of these varied imaginaries is a deep investment in meritocracy, that “idea that whatever your social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for ‘talent’ to combine with ‘effort’ in order to ‘rise to the top’” (Littler 2018, 1).

In centering vernacular expressions of meritocracy and its absence, I join both classic ethnography of the region and more recent works (e.g. Rajković 2017) in foregrounding the moral frameworks through which postsocialist subjects make sense of the global economic transformations that have scrambled their lives and expectations of the future. This work also contributes to the rich literature on discourses of “the normal” across the postsocialist region (Fehérváry 2002, 2013; Greenberg 2011). To this end, I flesh out local inflections of a broader normative vision of the post-Fordist/postsocialist good life (Berlant 2011) and the role of mobility in animating convictions of how the “abnormality” of Serbia can be transcended, subverted, or left behind.

### **Perspektiva:**

#### **Tracing Possibility and Aspiration in the “Here and Now”**

I often heard the word *perspektiva* in the course of my research. An unremarkable term of Latin origin to my interlocutors, I was struck by the different contexts of its usage. One sense of *perspektiva* translates simply into the English word “perspective,” in the sense of “point of view.” In both languages the word has a spatio-temporal dimension, conjuring the sense of standing still and surveying what lies ahead. This quality suggests the term’s secondary meaning: it is something you can have or lack (*imati/nemati perspektivu*), something you can see (*videti perspektivu*), or something you can be in (*biti u toj perspektivi*). Here, *perspektiva* is more like “prospect(s).” In this sense it can be individual or collective.

Many evoked *perspektiva* in relation to particular fields of work, as in “the job prospects for architects”; or in terms of a certain cohort, as in “the prospects of youth.” At the end of my interview with Žarko, the youth employment expert introduced in the previous chapter, I asked if he was sympathetic to those who leave the country as a way out of the pessimistic predicament in which he had situated Serbia’s youth. He responded:

“Well, hmm. I mean, that’s an existential question.”

“Yes, it is,” I agreed.

“And everyone who can live better, to have better work, wherever, whenever, will accept it, right? And that’s that. Youth in Serbia—the problem is that they don’t have *perspektiva*.”

I murmured encouragingly.

“They don’t have- young people talk-”

I interrupted: “And how should I understand *perspektiva* in this sense?”

Žarko elaborated:

Well, that’s like...if you remember in high school, at the end of school there is a graduation ceremony. And then everyone is talking: “Oh, what will you do? What college will you go to?” And so on. And so people think about what they will do with themselves, what they want to be in life, what they want to do. And family has a bit of influence, society has a bit, college a bit, all that has impact, but young people don’t think about that.... Young people think a whole lot about what they want from themselves (*šta hoće od sebe*).

Here, Žarko situates *perspektiva* as a question arising within the life course of an average, educated person. A young person’s *perspektiva* initially appears to be molded in her own hands, out of personal desires, aspirations, and



ambitions, with some measure of (unrecognized) impact from his or her social circle. But as he continues the concept thickens:

And then someone thinks about family—will they be able to have a wife, husband, kids, to buy an apartment? What will they drive, where will they work, what will they study? And when you think about these things you see that the possibilities for all of that are small. There are no possibilities (*nema mogućnosti*). To study...more and more you have to pay. Plus, possibilities abroad are offered—scholarships, exchanges—that are very attractive. Study in Spain for six months? Wow, yes, I want to! In Barcelona? Wow, I want to! To buy an apartment? Not a chance. Buy a car? If mom and dad give it to you, because you probably don't have your own money. And to earn it yourself? How? I mean, there is no work.

With Žarko's inventory of markers of a "normal" life—the choice to form a marriage and have kids, to separate from one's parents and establish one's own household, to own that apartment along with a car—it becomes clear that *perspektiva* is about not only what youth want *from* themselves but also what they want *for* themselves, both materially and immaterially. My interlocutors consistently emphasized the modesty of their ambitions in outlining *perspektiva* and how it comes to be limited. As one said, "I don't have to have five houses, but I can go on summer vacation, right?"

The point I want to emphasize is that such modest material trappings of a middle-class lifestyle were imagined as flowing naturally from its *immaterial* features. To have *perspektiva* meant having options, in work and life more broadly; that the possibility of self-development (*razvijati se*) was not preemptively foreclosed, that fulfillment was a reasonable expectation, or more

profoundly, that “one’s existence means something” (*da tvoje postojanje nešto znači*).<sup>75</sup> Žarko ended his elaboration of *perspektiva* pessimistically:

Whatever you want to do with yourself is a “no-go” story. There are no possibilities. And then a young person realizes, “Uh, what kind of country is this? What is this? Wherever I want to do something, I can’t do anything.” And then of course, people say to each other: “You should get out of here, here’s Canada, here’s America, here’s Australia, here—wherever you don’t need a visa.” And that’s that. That’s how it goes. And that’s understandable, that’s normal.

In this final quote and the one above, mobility and migration enter into *perspektiva* in ambiguous ways. Žarko highlights newly available options for study abroad as well as the way in which youth urge one another to take advantage of visa-free international travel. But he also suggests that only permanent migration—to “wherever you don’t need a visa”—broadens one’s *perspektiva* to encompass the full range of life chances that include travel as a normal feature of life. In other words, I read Žarko’s commentary as suggesting that brief forays abroad on scholarship or excursion are experiences that are (now) attainable, but that serve to highlight the modesty of youthful expectations as well as the perceived abnormality of home that makes the fulfilment of middle-class aspirations—including both the material and immaterial features outlined above—*unattainable*. In the contemporary Serbian context, where in his words “there is no work” to propel youth through the life course, mobility takes on this peculiar character. My interlocutors who sought to leave Serbia forever had indeed had experiences of short-term mobility. For those to whose stories I now turn such experiences provided material out of which to construct imagined lives

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<sup>75</sup> Thanks to Nikica Strižak for providing a linguist’s perspective on this analysis.

of positive contrast with ones lived in Serbia, supplying a moral register through which to critique the national order of things. I focus on the stories of two twenty-somethings whose talent, persistence, and clarity of purpose left a lasting impression. Both were resolved to leave Serbia forever.

### **Hampered by the “Anti-System”: Miloš**

Miloš was someone who managed to sound simultaneously upbeat and deeply cynical. He entered my research just two months in, as a focus group participant.<sup>76</sup> The first in the group to speak, he announced with conviction that “perseverance and vision” (*istrajnost i vizija*) are the main attributes needed to realize one’s professional goals. As discussion became animated, Miloš asserted a view of Serbian society as guided by an “anti-system” with the majority of the population mired in a struggle to meet their basic needs.

When I interviewed him over tea we talked about the paradox that even though “most people in Serbia are poor,” as he put it, in Belgrade at least poverty is cloaked by “normal” dress and full cafés. But the cityscape serves as a façade on a deeply unequal society. In Miloš’s view, the poor majority are locked in relationships of serfdom with an elite cadre of corrupt businessmen and politicians. The unjust “anti-system,” ruled by these greedy and corrupt few, constrains what is possible for an individual to achieve in Serbia. As he explained:

You cannot do much more than your surroundings allow you to...obviously a society that does not produce, does not develop, does not innovate, is gonna always be holding you down. Because if you wanna innovate, you

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<sup>76</sup> Along with several other participants, Miloš learned of the focus group via a recruitment email sent on my behalf to those on the listserv of the International Academic Center, an organization (sponsored by the US Department of State) that assists those interested in pursuing higher education in the US.

know, you can't do that. If you wanna...change something, no, you can't do that. If you wanna improve, if you wanna grow, ok, you can grow up to a point, then after that, well, [you] gotta get out.

Miloš's assessment of the material conditions of life in Serbia is hardly controversial. As discussed in the previous chapters, a decade of international isolation and war compounded by waves of privatization in the early 1990s and 2000s left the Serbian people impoverished in multiple senses of the term, as many experienced such socioeconomic ruptures as “a personal humiliation and a loss of dignity” (Vetta 2011, 50). But these losses have not been equally distributed. The chaotic and unregulated environment of the war years allowed unscrupulous businessmen to amass fortunes as inequality swelled. While similar processes were experienced across the postsocialist region (Hann 2002; Ost 2015), Eurostat statistics confirm that Serbia has the inauspicious honor of harboring the most extreme income inequality in Europe (Eurostat 2019).

As I spent more time with Miloš—our interview spawned a sometimes puzzling friendship of sorts—I learned more about how his biography informed his dismal view of contemporary Serbian society. Like so many others, he had come from a small town to study at Belgrade University. Back home, his parents owned a hardware shop that he described as once solidly profitable but struggling since the 2008 crisis. In the city, he drank tea and beer and ate like a student, frequenting a fast-food stand that served nothing but variations on fried potatoes. When I walked with Miloš to this stand one day he grimly assessed its existence as indicative of the state of Serbian society. “We didn't have such places before the crisis,” he said. I had passed the potato purveyor regularly and without

inspecting the menu had imagined it as a Turkish-style baked potato bar—in other words, a shop signifying the appearance of a new, interesting, international street food in Belgrade. Miloš disabused me of this delusion. Rather, “potatoes are the cheapest food and people don’t have any money,” he explained. (It was, he noted, also tasty.)

When we met he had just finished his MA in architecture and was in a sensitive and uncertain phase of plotting his next move while hoping for the right opportunity to materialize. In the meanwhile he was underemployed, working part-time on a poorly paid three-month contract at a small architectural studio (a position for which he had been recommended by a professor) and as an unpaid teaching assistant (*saradnik u nastavi*) a few hours per week at the faculty. His parents paid his rent while his meager income kept him fed and funded the various application and exam fees required to set his migratory plans in motion. Though far from unusual, Miloš found this situation untenable. These conditions—and conviction that he was fundamentally unable to effect change in the “anti-system”—fueled his desire to emigrate. “I don’t want to sacrifice my whole life for the sake of a system that doesn’t appreciate me,” he said poignantly. “I really don’t see the point. That’s why I see...my next step outside of Serbia. And then after that maybe I’ll come back and start changing things, the way I can.”

This last statement is perhaps the most optimistic that I heard from Miloš, whose commitment to the dimmest of views of Serbian society was matched by an equally rosy view of his chances for success in the US—an imagined future with an expansive perspektiva. I return below to Miloš’s story, to how his views

on society informed his stance toward migration and how his preparations to leave Serbia played out. But I first introduce another would-be migrant, Gordana.

### **Meant for Something More: Gordana**

Connected through a mutual acquaintance, I got an email from Gordana, a second-year PhD student of Slavic languages, during the slow days of August 2015. My initial impression, pieced together from her rather formally worded email and her university profile, was of a serious and accomplished academic. Her message promised the perspective of someone who saw emigration as “the only possible option” to work in her field of choice. How could this be for someone specializing in Slavic languages in Serbia? My curiosity piqued, I took the bus out to her neighborhood of Zemun to hear more.

As we settled into the outdoor patio of a café in the center of Zemun, we compared notes about the systems of study and funding in our respective programs. When I shared that I “somehow just thought that things would work out” when I began my PhD program as an unfunded student, Gordana nodded in recognition. Disappointment colored her own story of adjusted expectations, but she spoke in the clipped voice of someone who had already processed the experiences she was sharing but for the residue of anger. She had long known that her work as a Slavist was at the center of her sense of self. As she explained, “I chose the profession that interests me the most, that I’m good at, that inspires me, in which there is nothing that I despise doing and for which I have the will and enthusiasm. I have experienced it not as work, but as a life calling.” Gordana was, quite simply, a spectacular student, winning awards in language

competitions, completing a degree in Russian alongside her chosen field of Ukrainian, and earning coveted scholarships that propelled her studies to the highest level. Her second degree in Russian was the outcome of a compromise with her mother, as Ukrainian is a field with fewer professional opportunities in Serbia. Like so many parents, Gordana's mom worried first and foremost about her daughter's existential security. But her daughter excelled in Ukrainian, as a Master's student earning the highest marks recorded since the department was formed in 2002. And she expected this hard work and dedication to pay off, saying, "I believed that if I am motivated, talented, and the best, something will be found."

The "something" Gordana desired was actually quite specific: a permanent teaching position in her small department. Her mentor had made a verbal promise that she was first in line for the next spot as *asistent*. But when a position opened it went to someone else. Her mentor defended the decision and denied her student's account of their understanding. Gordana, in turn, experienced this as an instance of the "negative selection" (*negativna selekcija*) that I heard about from many:

I always thought that the main criteria [for advancement] ought to be knowledge and dedication. In the course of my studies I tried to master the program, to master additional things, to go to conferences, to develop professionally, all sorts of things, and others did so as well. However, it turned out that those who were the best of their cohort (*generacija*) were not considered for staying with us [for departmental positions]. A kind of negative selection happens, in the sense that the goal is to put in place someone who is average and docile (*poslušan*)...someone who is not overly ambitious, as that is not considered a good quality.

The perception that negative selection was a widespread problem was, indeed, widespread among my interlocutors. The university was seen as the archetypical institution supporting this phenomenon that was also euphemistically glossed as “the wrong people in the wrong places.” Comments about the degradation of the university were multifaceted—indexing global frustration that higher education is not the guarantor of employment it once was, as well as local perceptions that the university as institution had become morally bankrupt to the extent of no longer being able to guarantee social status either. Nevertheless, my interlocutors remained invested in the value they thought a university education *ought* to hold—a prestige held all the more dear because of its beleaguered status. The proliferation of private universities in the country (plagued by widespread perception that diplomas are available for purchase) was coupled with a series of scandals in which high-ranking officials were exposed as having committed plagiarism (including Belgrade mayor Siniša Mali) or having lied about their educational qualifications (see *Peščanik* 2018). Such instances were linked in public discourse to examples of officials appointed without any apparent relevant qualifications other than political loyalty to support a narrative of endemic negative selection and society-wide corruption as well as the conviction that education, knowledge, and expertise had been fundamentally devalued. This was the substance of Miloš’s anti-system—a topsy-turvy world of inverted values.

It was also the world in which Gordana pursued her dream of becoming a professor. Her talent not just unappreciated, Gordana’s efforts at the university were met with mistreatment that she characterized as “mobbing,” “directed at



destroying one's self-confidence to the greatest extent possible." When I asked what such treatment looked like, she responded that "it's nothing reportable" (*nije nešto što ti možeš da prijaviš*) but that it involved a kind of regular, and at least in her case, often public humiliation. She described several instances in which her honest and diligent efforts were met with responses seemingly engineered to remind her of her lowly position in the academic hierarchy and that she ought to be grateful for any "crumb" thrown her way (like the opportunity to lecture for free, in the worst classroom, at the worst time, or to draft presentations on behalf of the department for which she was given less than twelve hours' notice). "It's like, nothing you do right is worth anything, nothing is recognized, every lapse, even the smallest oversight, even when it's not an oversight, is counted against you as a mistake and you get a public—meaning in the presence of others—you are subjected to public criticism that is not always founded."

Despite the fact that "mobbing" has not accrued the same explanatory potential in Serbia as elsewhere in Europe, Gordana's use of this term overlaps with Noelle Molé's analysis of mobbing as "a deeply resonant cultural concept" in Italy whose meaning as psychological trauma that can induce physical ills—in addition to being a "labor disorder"—was consolidated by occupational psychologists in the 1990s (2012, 3, 6). Molé positions mobbing as bound up with the neoliberal reforms that attacked Italy's famously strong labor protections and increased the spread of temporary short-term contracts. While the labor histories of Italy and Serbia are distinctive, valorization of the productive worker and of "intense labor as satisfying and rewarding" (Molé 2012, 101) grounded both

Eastern and Western visions of modernity before the end of the Cold War “shattered an entire conception of the world” (Buck-Morss 2000, x). In contexts such as both Italy and Serbia, where not only memories of past labor regimes but actual workplaces coveted for their relative stability and predictability remain, mobbing appears as “a form of abjection in that it is produced by labor’s rapid devaluation in proximity to lived safeguards and allows actors to name the injustices and human costs of neoliberal orders” (Molé 2012, 9).

The context of the former Yugoslavia, however, highlights the unpredictable effects of neoliberalization. It is thus significant that, in contrast to the private-sector mobbing investigated by Molé, the settings of such harassment—as well as related phenomena like the “tamping of ambition” conveyed in Jelena’s tale of watching where she steps—were public institutions, where positions are seen as doled out exclusively through nepotistic or clientelistic networks. This understanding was universally shared during my time in the field and corroborated the perception of a more generalized moral degradation of work and society. As Larisa Kurtović (2017) has convincingly shown in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, political patronage (the exchange of party membership and electoral support for a public-sector job) comes to make sense as employment strategy in the job-scarce postsocialist economy where privatization processes have consolidated elite power. Contemporary patronage and other forms of corruption are experienced as distinctive from the “legible and predictable” (Hromadžić 2015, 161) varieties remembered to have flourished in socialist Yugoslavia. The ambiguous postwar and postsocialist moral landscape demands continuous negotiation (see Brković 2017; Kurtović 2013), and, for a

young, ambitious, would-be civil servant, demands moral compromise. Linked as it is to the vernacular concept of negative selection, I would say that in Serbia, mobbing is popularly perceived as a product of the devaluation of a *certain kind of labor*—the labor produced through talent, hard work, and expertise. My interlocutors conveyed a collective sense of alienation from a system that worked according to a moral logic they did not and did not want to share. In such a context, emigration became an attractive prospect for those who saw it as a realistic option.

### **Leaving in Time: Gordana**

Until a certain moment, Gordana never had the inclination to leave Serbia, and she now expressed regret that she had passed up earlier paths to emigration. As she explained:

I didn't want to go abroad. I was born here, all of my relatives were born here.... Most Serbs have relatives [abroad], at least in the former Yugoslav republics, they have aunts in Germany, Austria, Canada—I don't have anything like that. We are really from Serbia, from central Serbia, and I saw myself here. I think that if someone had told me ten years ago that I would be thinking about, and that I would see leaving Serbia as the only option, that I would have told him or her that it's not true, that that can't happen. Because I wanted to work here.

I often asked those who wanted to leave if there had been a turning point when they made this decision. Many told me no, that they had come to the realization slowly; that the saturation of society with talk of leaving made it so that leaving was always a consideration of sorts. But not Gordana. She had been describing the mistreatment she experienced in her department when I asked, “Well, when was the turning point when you decided that emigration was an

option?” Without pause she responded: “January 15, 2014. At 3:30pm.” “Really?! What happened?” I laughingly inquired.

Gordana relayed yet another story of departmental mistreatment and disrespect. While not necessarily worse than what she has already experienced, it was the final straw. A particularly tense conversation with her mentor ensued and her resolve was steeled: “I left her office and wished to never return again.” Elaborating, she again invoked the theme of negative selection: “I don’t want to work in an environment in which obedience and sucking up are the only criteria for advancement. I don’t want to work in a place where every initiative is punishable.”

Gordana is someone who feels pushed out of Serbia. Meant for something more. She could earn a decent living as a translator but doesn’t want to. She could work in a Russian firm but doesn’t want to. She wants to be given the chance to pursue her singular dream of a professorial life. After carefully considering her options, she decided that the easiest way to fulfill her ambition would be to enroll in another doctoral program at an university—after completing her PhD in Serbia. Aghast at the commitment this represented, I sought to confirm that I had understood correctly. I had. As she explained:

I would start my doctorate again because I didn’t get the chance to learn anything intelligent here. I mean, the thing that gets to me the most is that I wasn’t given the chance to develop. Because there are so many of us [students in the department], because the subjects are too general, because I had very few opportunities to learn something that would be useful for me, because no one works with us, and because I feel that in 2018 I will obtain the title of “doctor of science” but I won’t obtain the knowledge.

Gordana had carefully researched programs of study abroad and—out of the usual amalgam of personal, professional, and practical reasons—had settled on Austria as her preferred destination. But as a student she had also had opportunities to travel within Europe that had helped to crystalize her decision. Through the student organization AIESEC she had twice traveled to Ukraine for several weeks at a time, teaching English while polishing her own Ukrainian and Russian-language skills. She had been to seminars in Germany as well—always at the expense of the organizing institution, she was careful to emphasize, as she would not have been able to afford to travel otherwise. Accustomed to always scrimping and saving, she said:

I was shocked when I saw a completely different relationship to money, a different relationship to education, a different classroom structure. I saw how much you in the West aren't aware how happy-go-lucky you are (*koliko imate bezbrižnost*). How much you, in your youth- to a certain extent this exists here as well, people who are more [materially] secure....But when I walked into a store as a child I never thought about what I want—I always had in mind the amount [of money] that I had, and then I looked to see what I could get. Not what you want, but what you can get (*ne šta želiš, nego šta možeš*). That's simply how you are raised. Not me—whole generations were raised like that. And then, all of a sudden you see people who do something just because they want to.

Gordana continued to describe how her peers from Western Europe would introduce themselves in seminars abroad as having come for the experience, to have fun, or because they simply felt like seeing something new, while she was there because she needed the professional development. The parallel she drew to her childhood memory of shopping with a set amount of money was lost on me until she spontaneously returned to it later. She was telling a rather funny story about an interaction with a professor at her faculty who, while Serbian, had

earned her doctorate and taught for several years in the US. When the professor encouraged Gordana to decide for herself which theoretical framework she wanted to apply in her work, Gordana tried, unsuccessfully, to discern the professor's own theoretical proclivities because she assumed there was a "correct" orientation. "Again, it's the situation from the shop," she explained. "Meaning, I don't choose what I want out of everything that is available, rather I see what I have and then choose within that what is possible" (*biram u okviru toga što može*). Guided by a clear and singular professional goal, Gordana's international travels had illuminated just how leaving Serbia could help her ambition break through and broaden her perspektiva.

### **Leaving at any Cost: Miloš**

While Gordana's ambitions were quite distinct, her trajectory overlapped with that of Miloš in the significant role played by prior experiences of mobility in informing future aspirations. Miloš directed his time and energy with laser-like focus toward making his way to the US, a destination made familiar through his experience as a summer kayak guide in Alaska. This had been a grueling experience, but also transformative. He called his Alaskan boss "the worst kind of capitalist" who worked the international staff hard, paid them little, and didn't care about the bedbugs in their cots. But he also got in the best shape of his life, experienced breathtaking nature, and met his current girlfriend on an excursion. Visiting her elite university he had marveled at the contrast with Serbian student life. As he explained,

I just turned twenty-six, and I don't want to spend the rest of my youth in austerity. I would like to live, you know, properly, even to go study again. Studying at a US college is amazing, it's unbelievable! You know you can go to the canteen and eat all you can eat—anything—and imagine me, coming from Alaska! Going there, to the student canteen, and there's 740 items in the salad bar. Ha! I mean, I would like to live that way for part of my life.

Like Gordana, Miloš also draws on his experience abroad to evoke a Western “then and there” featuring an expansive *perspektiva*—here colorfully represented by a seemingly endless salad bar that overrides the exploitative service work available to an international student. Miloš's aspiration for experiencing this version of American student life was not about acquiring an additional qualification *per se*, which he saw as superfluous. Rather, while he was keeping all options for legal emigration open he considered the “student route” to be the easiest one. At least initially—each time we talked it took some effort to trace the trajectory of his plans. What I expected to hear had become old news; in the meanwhile he had inevitably changed tactics, dismissing his previously carefully plotted objectives as mere whims. But his preoccupation with making it to the US held firm.

On a brilliant spring day in 2015, Miloš and I set off for a coffee before attending an event together. Over email he had mentioned that he was no longer working so that he could concentrate on pulling his portfolio together. This unfinished portfolio was a burden that weighed heavily. While he embodied the perseverance that he had asserted in our focus group as being of prime importance, Miloš was also prone to self-sabotage and feelings of inadequacy. He struck me as his own worst enemy, consumed by doubt that his portfolio had

been perfected enough and confiding that he had trouble establishing regular work habits—he needed the pressure of a looming deadline and the quiet focus of the wee hours of the morning to produce. Nevertheless, I suspected that there was more to the story of his quitting a three-month contract early.

As I scrambled to establish the pivots he had made since our last encounter he flippantly said, “I should also mention that I am moving.” He was leaving his apartment in Belgrade to move back in with his parents. “I don’t really need to be here all the time,” and “I decided to save that 150 euros a month [in rent],” he explained. Besides, “I will still be here [in Belgrade] like one day a week, I’ll just find someplace to sleep.” I had trouble accepting his framing of this development as a rational decision based on his own needs and was nagged by a sense that he was papering over a disappointing indicator of downward mobility. My heart also sank at the thought of losing a key interlocutor, as I very much doubted that he would come to Belgrade regularly.

Miloš offered yet another rationale for the change: his roommate was leaving town as well, having gotten a scholarship to a prestigious US university for a Master’s program in architecture. Rather than express jealousy at his friend’s fortune, Miloš was resolute and optimistic about his chances for pushing through his own Plan B. He was buoyant about an email he had received, a call for applications for several open positions at an architectural firm in New York City. He slid his phone across the table so that I could read the message, which had been forwarded by a friend of a friend who worked in the firm. The fact that the firm seemed to work on classic old homes rather than the modern architecture he was interested in didn’t concern him in the least—it would still be



a foot in the door. He reminded me that he only had until July to apply for a J-1 training visa and that he first needed a commitment from a company willing to sponsor him. As he described how the sponsoring company had to create a training plan (“though they don’t have to actually follow it,” he noted) and deal with some sort of inspection, I was skeptical that a firm would go to such trouble but mostly kept my doubts to myself. Miloš was matter-of-fact about the paperwork required, saying, “it’s good for them, because they can pay me less.”

As for securing the necessary visa, he was confident that he already knew the ropes and convinced me of this as well. During our interview Miloš had described a vision of the ideal future in which he returned to Serbia after establishing himself abroad to pursue his dream job of owning his own firm that designed innovative social housing. But this vision now seemed far removed from his current concern. He ticked through the main points to touch on in the anticipated visa interview, which culminated in saying that he would “bring something back to Serbia.” I laughingly said, “You know the script! But you really do seem like someone who wants to come back.” Miloš scrunched his face. “I have to fulfill...”—he searched for the right word before continuing— “...my ambitions. Right now I want to go work somewhere far away—someplace where there are things that need to be built and where it’s not about cheating on contracts.” I thought there was a good chance that this was an allusion to the job he had just left. But I responded with an allusion to the presumed fate of the government’s scandal-ridden waterfront reconstruction instead: “and where

construction projects remain unfinished.”<sup>77</sup> He nodded and added “and where the money disappears. Here, you can choose slavery or quitting.” Now laughing he quipped, “I chose both!”

As we approached the circle of smokers in front of the cultural center Rex, Miloš greeted a woman who he told me was one of the founding members of the Who Builds the City (Ko Gradi Grad–KGG) initiative. The presentation to come was part of KGG’s “Smarter Building” (Pametnija Zgrada) project with the aim to “develop a prototype for a low-impact collective housing that can serve as a model to address housing issues in their wider social and economic context” (KGG, n.d.). Miloš knew the group, had attended some of their previous events, and noted that the person he had greeted could be a good connection for him. As the presentation continued into a third hour I was impressed with the seriousness of this local effort to imagine collectively self-built housing in the country. But Miloš did not directly connect the event with his own aspirations. At least, he did not see it as any indication that his ambitions might be realizable in

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<sup>77</sup> The controversy around Belgrade Waterfront–BW (Beograd na Vodi) was ever-present during, though did not directly intersect, my research. In many ways this ongoing scandal aptly illustrates the opaque (dis)function of the “anti-system” described by Miloš, the relationship toward politics exhibited by my interlocutors, and some of the cultural fault lines discussed in this dissertation. In short, the urban “revitalization” project in question was first announced by the government in 2012 (Vučić was deputy prime minister at the time). BW was to turn the rather crumbling waterfront of the Sava river into a modern marina, luxury shopping mall, elite apartment buildings, and central “tower” with a yet-to-be-determined function; a playground for the super-rich. The \$3 billion project was shrouded in mystery and speculation from the start. It was backed by Abu Dhabi-based developer Eagle Hills (Belgrade Waterfront, n.d.) though it is unclear how much of this investment was actually secured. Of the many serious objections to BW raised by professional architects and ordinary citizens alike, the most fundamental is that the process was entirely unlawful, failing to take place in the context of a public competition (see AAS 2015). Robust street protests under the slogan “We won’t give up/drown Belgrade” (*Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd*) were organized but failed to achieve appreciable results (though see NDM, n.d. for current activities). The most recent victim of BW has been the central train station, a building of immense historic significance and from which the entire transportation infrastructure of the city unfolds (see Ilić 2018 for a summary of BW developments).

Serbia. This disconnect revealed his vision for the future as more like fantasy, realizable only in a world where Serbia is not like it is, not in the here and now. As we walked back to the transportation hub of Studentski Trg and prepared to part ways he showed me his phone again, this time open to Google Maps. “I looked up the location of the agency in New York,” he said. It was right in downtown Manhattan, near the Port Authority. “You can’t get more central than that,” I said. Miloš agreed, adding, “I probably won’t get it [the job]...” I murmured something reassuring, wished him good luck with the move, and wondered if I would see him again.

The mobility narratives of Miloš and Gordana draw value-laden distinctions between the way things work in Serbia and the way things were both imagined to be and experienced in the West. While Gordana had methodically researched her options for emigration and plotted a course of action, she had not yet had to operationalize her plan. For Miloš, the messy material world of emigration loomed large: his unfinished portfolio, the official internship description, the email from a possible employer, the location of the firm in Manhattan. In our conversations, his vision and aspirations for the future seemed specifically pinned to these markers, which featured not just as narrative moments but as the tangible materials that brought his goal into relief or pushed it farther away. His breezy optimism, tenacity, and flexibility in relation to the broadened perspektiva he imagined in the US contrasted with a stubborn refusal to consider that opportunities for professional fulfilment might exist in Serbia. In the final section below, I return to Jelena—the fiery former bank employee whose

story opened this chapter—to more specifically unpack how meritocracy features in narratives of mobility and potential migration from Serbia.

### **Meritocracy:**

#### **Tracing Possibility and Aspiration in the “Then and There”**

Life as an exchange student wasn't easy for Jelena. She was placed in a tiny southern town with a Pentecostal family who took seriously their mission to save her from eternal damnation. That final year of high school was “a disaster,” she told me, the worst year of her life. “So,” she said chuckling, “I never would have stayed had it not been for the bombing.” When the NATO bombing of Serbia began in the spring of 1999 returning home as planned no longer seemed like the smartest move. But her future in the US was far from certain—until she was approached at her high school graduation with the extraordinary news that the teachers had worked their contacts to secure her a scholarship to the local community college—though only for one semester.

She moved in with the parents of a kindly teacher. She found friends to drive her to class. She did well, the college continued to pay her way, and when she earned her associate's degree, the dean called around, saying, “we have an outstanding student, she has no money to go to school, what can you do for her?” A four-year university stepped up with a scholarship. Jelena finished her bachelor's degree without paying a dime and funded her master's in public relations by working in a residence hall.

Fundamentally unable to afford the American college experience, this unintentional migrant was propelled forward by a combination of hard work,

luck, and the sheer magnetism of a personality that coaxed others into believing in her. This is how Jelena narrates her story but it is also hard to *not* see it this way. Jelena's story, biography, and worldview weave together entrepreneurial and meritocratic values that share the terrain of conviction in the idea that "individuals are responsible for working hard to activate their talent" (Littler 2018, 8) and that this hard work and talent will—or ought to—result in just rewards. Though highly critical of the racialized and gendered inequality of opportunity obscured by the ideological discourse of meritocracy (see Bloodworth 2016; McNamee and Miller 2018), I had to begrudgingly admit that, given her experience, it made sense when Jelena said:

“What I like about the US and what I miss about the US is the fact that you know, in the US, if they see that you're working really hard, all the doors will be open for you.”

I mumble noncommittally as she continues.

“Because in the US, success is appreciated. And it's pushed. So if you see...somebody who's working really hard, and you can help them, you will help them.” She bolsters her point by drawing out the contrast with Serbia: “Here, if you see somebody like that you will be like, ohh, this person will grow to be better than me, no no, let me-” She breaks off, ending the sentence by slicing her hands through the air as though cutting an adversary down to size.

Drawing inspiration from Hilary Parsons Dick's analysis of the narratives of Mexican nonmigrants (2010), I argue that stories like Jelena's, which paint the contrast between meritocracy and its absence in bold, broad strokes, allow the speaker to align herself in a particular way, to cast herself as a certain social type.

In this case, Jelena represents herself—through the voice of her boss at the bank at the top of this article—as industrious, active, and entrepreneurial, always interested in learning and doing better. The kind of person who would reach for the stars if only to land on the moon. The antithesis of the persona of the boss himself. As in the story of Jelena’s six-month review, the figure of the public sector manager is frequently called upon to represent a kind of inertia, a thwarting of progress and innovation. He personifies society’s defective moral compass, a brokenness that renders the system unknowable and unnavigable to those without personal or political connections and the perverse system of values needed to activate such networks for personal advancement. In Serbia, these social types are locally recognizable ones that tap into deep societal divisions.

I further argue that the ways in which my interlocutors talked about staying and leaving Serbia did not directly express a desire for full-fledged European citizenship and the sense of respect and belonging assumed to come along with eventual EU membership. Rather, the geographies they invoked were primarily symbolic ones, constructed broadly to map different ways of being in the world, and about staking a claim of belonging to a world that was ordered and moral. The relevant moral aspirations are epitomized here by investment in meritocracy as an ideal of how things ought to be. As meritocracy remains “one of the most loved ideas in American life” (Garber 2017) it continues to nurture the promise for would-be migrants that social mobility will accompany physical relocation. Simultaneously invoked as a register of aspiration and critique, potential migrants like Gordana and Miloš marshalled the belief that opportunity is (more) evenly distributed elsewhere, and that through migration their

perspektiva might be stretched to match that of others. But I also found that those who returned or were resolved to stay drew on overlapping value frameworks to bolster the claim that successes achieved in Serbia were sweeter than American ones for the very reason of being harder to attain. It is to these stories that I now turn.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**STAYING IN SERBIA: MATERIALIZING OPPORTUNITY THROUGH**  
**SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

October 2014, my first month of fieldwork. I pause at the entrance to a prewar building in the center of Belgrade. The double wooden doors are impressive; my attempts to open them feeble. A man in white painters' clothes appears, summoned by the racket. In the inner courtyard my eyes scan for a clue to the "open house" I am seeking. Finding none, I appeal to the elderly construction worker. He has no idea what I am talking about, yet leads me through another set of doors into an expansive room where my host, Paola, sits alone, huddled over a laptop.

Though Paola was expecting me, *I* hadn't expected to be the only member of what I imagined as a bustling crowd, eager to discover what was on offer here. (Later noting that the "open house" was a daily event, I realized that I had projected some particularly American assumptions onto this encounter.) I was keen on forging new connections in town and a fellow Fulbrighter had sent me the contact information of an "Italian anthropologist" he knew in Belgrade. Perusing the website of what our mutual acquaintance described as Paola's "current project" I was enthralled by the high-class web design and the architecture of the space it depicted. But the promise of the organization is what fueled my eagerness to venture out to the open house. When the renovations were complete, this former recording studio would become Impact Hub Belgrade (IHB), part of a global network of coworking and mentoring spaces for social



entrepreneurs.<sup>78</sup> Paola, originally from Italy with a US degree in anthropology and long employed in the development industry, had founded Impact Hub Belgrade with her Serbian husband. She now sprang into action as my tour guide.

We strolled through the space, redolent with the smell of fresh paint and drywall and chilly without the heat of more than a few bodies. I was dazzled—as much by a sense that I had stepped into a fascinating new world as by the expansive whitewashed walls accented with dark wood. Though my host delivered her tour in English she utilized a lexicon clearly mundane in her world but not in mine. Repurposed terms rolled off her tongue as though I were in on the secret: members of Impact Hub became part of an “ecosystem,” the main floor would be equipped with modular furniture for “hot-desking,” and the hub would be more than just an “incubator.” I left the tour in a haze. Was this cutting-edge initiative what the fusty local career politicians meant when they opined that “stimulating entrepreneurial spirit” was a key focus of employment policy, and thus the linchpin to keeping talented youth home?<sup>79</sup>

The many lives of the building that now houses Impact Hub Belgrade—from headquarters of the state employee cooperative to recording studio to hub, flanked by a youth hostel—serve as an apt metaphor for broader national, regional, and global economic transformations. Central to these changes has been

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<sup>78</sup> As detailed online, the first Impact Hub was opened in London in 2005. All Hubs belong to the “Impact Hub Association” which collectively owns the Impact Hub IP, Brand, and Impact Hub Company, a “charitable company” headquartered in Vienna that fosters connections between the over one hundred Hubs worldwide (Impact Hub, n.d.).

<sup>79</sup> Examples of this official discourse can be found at: [http://www.nsz.gov.rs/live/info/vesti/preduzetni\\_ki\\_duh\\_i\\_socijalna\\_integracija.cid15982](http://www.nsz.gov.rs/live/info/vesti/preduzetni_ki_duh_i_socijalna_integracija.cid15982) and <http://www.mos.gov.rs/vest/krenuli-razgovori-s-privrednicima-o-zaposljavanju-mladih>.

the promotion and valorization of entrepreneurship, with the US economy held up as prime model to be emulated. As the very first report of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor asserted in 1999, “the buoyancy of the U.S. economy appears to be a function, at least in part, of the entrepreneurial vitality evident even to the most casual observer” (Reynolds, Hay, and Camp 1999, 7).<sup>80</sup> Since the 2008 financial crisis, global policymakers have doubled down on entrepreneurship as catalyst for economic recovery, citing a fetishized relationship between entrepreneurship and economic growth (e.g. Reynolds et al. 2001, 12–13). The EU’s “Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan” put it simply: “to bring Europe back to growth and higher levels of employment, Europe needs more entrepreneurs” (EC 2013, 3). The entrepreneur has emerged over the past four decades as “neoliberalism’s heroic actor” (Freeman 2014, 17), stripped of earlier associations with ideals such as self-sacrifice (Foster 2016, 91–92).

Though the details of its definition elide consensus, entrepreneurship is generally considered to be the creation of a new business by an individual or group. More specifically, the practice of entrepreneurship includes the “perception of economic opportunities, assembling the financial and material resources and inputs for economic innovation, recruiting personnel, and dealing with suppliers, purchases, and the government” (Bonnell and Gold 2002, xv). This understanding often overlaps—but is sometimes distinguished from—

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<sup>80</sup> The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor is an ongoing collaborative research project between scholars at Babson College and the London Business School. The initial aim of the project was to uncover the reasons for disparate national levels of entrepreneurial activity. GEM also bills itself as “an ever-growing community of believers in the transformative benefits of entrepreneurship.” See: <https://www.gemconsortium.org/about/gem>.

*entrepreneurialism*. While I discuss the local stakes of these definitions below, the general point to note here is that entrepreneurialism encompasses the cluster of personal characteristics, skills, and the very subject position necessary for each individual to “conceive and conduct him- or herself as an enterprise” (Dardot and Laval 2013, 3; see also Bröckling 2016)—but not necessarily open a business. Though the exact content of this cluster is variously apprehended, *flexibility*, as Carla Freeman notes (2014, 19–20), is the essence of entrepreneurialism.

The slow shift in employer–employee relations from what Ilana Gershon (2017), in her ethnography of the contemporary job search, describes metaphorically as the shift from “self-as-property” to “self-as-business,” has broken the link between being an entrepreneur and being entrepreneurial, with an entrepreneurial ethos diffused into all realms of life. This insight, attributed to Michel Foucault (2008), has been subsequently elaborated in further theorizations of Foucauldian notions of governmentality, subjectification, and the role of psychology in these processes (e.g. Binkley 2011; Rose 1989). Anthropologists have taken up and refined such interventions in the field, demonstrating how development became infused with entrepreneurial technologies like microlending (Elyachar 2002), intimate and family relations are transformed via entrepreneurial affects (Freeman 2014), and entrepreneurialism becomes blended with other value-laden logics to coax the development of “good” citizens (Hemment 2015; Irani 2015; Ouellette and Hay 2008).

The particular form of entrepreneurship glossed as “social” is most generally defined as business activity in service of creating some sort of social value (Abu-Saifan 2012). Its recent flourishing is indicative of the privatization of

previously public services (Mulligan 2014; Zhang and Ong 2008) as well as renewed interest in the injection of ethics into capitalism that has been a periodic strategy to assuage its various abuses. (A close cousin of social entrepreneurship is the collection of practices that have come to be known as “corporate social responsibility.”) Critics argue that efforts ranging from fair trade to social enterprises are “part and parcel of the same apparatus with which corporations have monopolized and deradicalized what were once seen as alternative economic models and political movements” (Dolan and Rajak 2016, 5; see also Shamir 2004).

In this chapter and the next, I discuss tech and social entrepreneurship as two realms that both illustrate the ambiguous status of this mode of economic activity and represent popular recent attempts to coax dignified work from the inhospitable climate of precarity on the European semi-periphery. Below, I interrogate two initiatives to promote entrepreneurship (and entrepreneurialism)—workshops of the Social Impact Award and the “u.lab” course—that unfolded on the muddy middle ground between state-sponsored and grassroots action. Both took place at Impact Hub Belgrade, in the first two years of its establishment. The ambiguity of the aims and effects of these events was heightened by the fact that Impact Hub and the initiatives it hosted focused on generating “impact” in addition to profit—an elusive criteria that tended to translate most clearly into support for social entrepreneurship (as in the case of the Social Impact Award) or more loosely as a broader orientation toward transforming self and society (as in the case of u.lab).

The infancy of Impact Hub Belgrade at the time of my fieldwork made it a compelling site of participant observation. Though much of the core team and a few of the initial members remain nearly four years after my fieldwork, the novelty of IHB in 2014–2015 meant that many bodies circulated through its doors and various events. Whereas the same handful of entrepreneurial “success stories” tended to be trotted out at the various institutionally sponsored events I attended, IHB attracted a much wider range of curious patrons with differing interests and levels of commitment to and experience with social entrepreneurship. It also “hosted” the gatherings of numerous initiatives whose missions it did not necessarily directly endorse. For my purposes this was mostly an advantage—but also means that my analysis should not be taken as applying specifically to Impact Hub Belgrade or the broader network of Impact Hubs.

As I spent more time in the world of Serbian entrepreneurship I wrestled with my personal alignment with the critical bent of anthropologies of contemporary forms of work and the broader social theory they mobilize. My skepticism was felt all the more acutely for how it appeared to run counter to the expectations of my interlocutors. As an American, I was sometimes assumed to intuit and endorse a Silicon Valley-inspired ethos of innovation and risk-taking. Especially in events hosted by Impact Hub Belgrade I was sometimes hailed as representative of the “then and there” of an imaginary (entrepreneurial) West.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> As I discuss in chapter 1, the “imaginary West” of my interlocutors was contoured differently than the “Imaginary West” of the late Soviet citizens studied by Alexei Yurchak. Both emerged from historically specific circumstances. Most importantly, while the discursive formation of Yurchak’s study was predicated on the inaccessibility of the actual West, as I explore throughout this dissertation, my interlocutors based their expectations and aspirations on real-life experiences of travel (cf. Yurchak 2006, 158–206).

In interviews with promoters of entrepreneurship, my questions were often taken as coming from a place of puzzlement over behavior unintelligible to me as an American assumed to have received a “proper” entrepreneurial induction. I failed to appropriately enact this role.

While I semi-consciously tried to be transparent about my critical lens, my participation in workshops and interviews on entrepreneurship, and indeed the very energy with which I felt pulled into its orbit, was animated by an authentic desire to understand how this world was experienced by its inhabitants. My observations were also guided by anthropologies of neoliberalism that highlight the instability and incoherence of economic processes, rather than assuming neoliberalization’s totalizing effects. This literature demands attention be trained on how specific elements are brought into specific configuration in specific locales (e.g. Collier 2011; Freeman 2014; Hemment 2012, 2015; Hoffman, DeHart, and Collier 2006; Ong 2006; Salmenniemi, Nurmi, and Jaakola, forthcoming; Yurchak 2002). My critical engagements with Serbian entrepreneurship were thus also opportunities to remember that there is nothing necessarily neoliberal or negative about self-employment as such or the attributes of flexibility, creativity, personal responsibility, proactivity, and self-actualization that are so frequently clustered together and glossed as entrepreneurial. Further, the landscape of entrepreneurial enterprises in Serbia is dominated by “microenterprises”—businesses with fewer than nine employees. This category comprises around 96 percent of the small and medium-sized business sector, which in turn accounts for 99.8 percent of total registered businesses in the country (Ministry of Economy 2015, 10). In so far as the profits generated by

many microenterprises are absorbed by individuals, families, or funneled toward social ends, they *could* be considered “alternative market” endeavors constituent of a diverse economy (Gibson-Graham 2006, 63), rather than taken as evidence of neoliberal capitalism’s decisive victory.

This is not (just) a matter of theoretical orientation. Rather, I argue that the expansive ambiguity of entrepreneurship—particularly in the spaces where it fails to overlap with entrepreneurialism—is fertile ground for sifting through the economic expectations and values of youth and re-specifying the nature of economic and political subject-formation in the postsocialist, post-2008 world. I thus approach this economic mode and way of being in the world as a “potent and double-edged drive, one both facilitating creative energies and their capitalist capture” (Littler 2018, 192). The aim of this chapter is thus to parse the promotion and appeal of social entrepreneurship for youth in Serbia. Given the general orientation toward social good of those attracted to IHB events, of central interest in this chapter (continued into the next) is also the vision of change discernable in this field. To what ends are the energies of these self-professed “active” citizens directed? Are entrepreneurs activists by another name, or are these the “ordinary capitalists” (Neveling and Salverda 2018) who grease the wheels of global capital accumulation under the radar and under the guise of “doing good?” My answer will be a bit of both. The central argument threaded throughout the sections to follow is that, despite a heightened orientation toward greater social good, the promotion of social entrepreneurship in Serbia remains fundamentally rooted in cultivation of the self. This, in turn, has multiple effects. Social entrepreneurship holds the potential of supplying dignified work “at

home” and, for some, may serve as a realm of authenticity. At the same time this focus on the self, as primary outcome or necessary precursor to social change, renders structural inequalities invisible or irrelevant, narrowing the parameters of and possibilities for solidarity.

In the first section below, I sketch how entrepreneurship and entrepreneurialism are made locally meaningful, tracing the nuances of these concepts through a dense field of actors and interests. Via an account of my participation in a series of workshops for would-be social entrepreneurs under the auspices of the Social Impact Award, I next consider the entangled pragmatic and subjective aspects of the promotion of entrepreneurship. I then turn to the perplexing object of analysis that is “u.lab” and the discussions prompted by this MOOC’s unique approach to transforming self and society. Finally, I consider the moral inflections of parables of mobility and dignified work. Throughout, I explore how sites and subjectivities aligned with entrepreneurship also articulate stances toward mobility and migration, and, at times, operationalize the discourse on brain drain to assert the value framework of entrepreneurialism. In this chapter as well as the next, the fundamental question I probe is: for educated, urban, entrepreneurial youth, what does it mean to *stay* in a context so many others leave?

### **Promoting Entrepreneurship, Coaxing Entrepreneurialism**

The promotion of entrepreneurship, especially among youth, women, and the long-term unemployed, has become a prominent feature of Serbian economic policy. As with the economic policies discussed in chapter 3, the influence of the



EU as well as bilateral donor organizations has crucially shaped this policy direction.<sup>82</sup> But the global entrepreneurship agenda has also been domesticated. It is neither a wholly top-down governmental initiative nor simply a “donor discourse” or norm of global capitalism being pushed by the West. A public discussion I attended in May 2015 illustrates some of the range of actors that I gloss as local “promoters” of entrepreneurship (some of whom were themselves members of the target constituency of youth). The panel was organized by KOMS, the quasi-governmental National Youth Council of Serbia, on the topic of youth unemployment. The young organizers brought together representatives of several relevant institutions—the Ministry of Youth and Sport, the Union of Employers, and the National Bureau of Employment—with those from the non-governmental sphere, in this case from Junior Achievement, a US-based global network promoting workplace readiness and entrepreneurship education in schools, and JobFair, an annual career fair organized by students from the technical faculties.

While each panelist spoke from a different set of concerns, leading to some testy exchanges (in particular around how the educational system ought to be reformed), all were supportive of entrepreneurship as catalyst for increasing employment. Such convergence around the entrepreneurial agenda is also evidenced by the “blended” status of several prominent organizations in the field. One such organization, Smart Kolektiv, works to specifically promote a “hybrid” model of operating that joins the profit motive of the business world with the

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<sup>82</sup> Key bilateral donors include USAID, GIZ (a German development agency that mostly implements governmental projects), and the Swiss Development Agency. Due in large part to the ongoing process of aligning Serbia’s body of law with the EU’s *acquis*, the country’s economic regulations are shot through with fewer apparent contradictions than elsewhere (see Julie Hemment’s 2012 analysis of the contradictory logics embedded in Russian social welfare law).

social mission of NGOs.<sup>83</sup> The blossoming of social entrepreneurship in Serbia has facilitated the blurring of distinctions between governmental, nonprofit, and private spheres, due in part to the multi-sector professional biographies of some of those involved as well as shifting donor priorities. Many who were attracted to social entrepreneurship and attended events at Impact Hub Belgrade also had experience in the NGO sector. In the workshop analyzed below, participants easily identified the main problems with NGOs: dependence on donor funds and the disjuncture between the interests of donors and those of the organization itself. Social entrepreneurship appears to circumvent these issues, offered up as a pragmatic employment option for youth who also want to “do good.”

As I arrived in the field the new National Youth Strategy (NYS)—intended to outline the strategic priorities of the Serbian government in relation to young people for the ten-year span of 2015–2025—was being finalized. Unsurprisingly, increasing the employability and employment of youth was the top strategic goal named in the document. A series of public hearings had been held, with interested parties invited to also submit written feedback on the working draft. In the draft document as well as the final version, “providing favorable conditions for the development of youth entrepreneurship” appears as the third of four specific strategies to address the top employment-related goal.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The extensive combined list of “donors and partners” on the Smart Kolektiv website attests to the commitment of the organization to not be apprehended as a traditional NGO, though they are legally registered as such. See: <https://smartkolektiv.org/o-nama/nasi-partneri-2/>.

<sup>84</sup> The other specific goals under youth employment and entrepreneurship relate to improving and increasing access to employment programs, aligning skills acquired through education with the needs of the labor market, and developing a better system for career counseling (Ministry of Youth and Sport 2015a, 9–14). The previous (and also first) youth strategy, passed in 2008, also included mention of entrepreneurship, as part of a strategic objective “to encourage and stimulate

Entrepreneurship thus secured an important place in the strategy, and many of the “expected results and key activities” named reflect areas of concern I often heard expressed by promoters of entrepreneurship. These include an inadequate legal framework and lack of financial incentives, lagging integration of relevant knowledge and skills in schools, and lack of governmental recognition of and support for social entrepreneurship.

Such systemic issues made their way into the NYS and were often articulated in NGO reports, at various panel discussions I attended, and in the expert interviews I conducted. But across these forums structural concerns tended to be presented as commensurate with a different kind of “problem”: the apparent fact that an awful lot of young people aspire to work for the state. According to various measures, this figure is anywhere from 40–70 percent.<sup>85</sup> One publication in particular had circulated widely: *Civil Service? No Thanks, I’m an Entrepreneur! (Državna služba? Ne, hvala, ja sam preduzetnik!)* Published in 2012 by the NGO Građanske Inicijative (Civic Initiatives—CI), the research presented is methodologically rigorous: findings were based on a survey of nearly 1,200 young people between the ages of fifteen and thirty in towns across Serbia. Survey results were supplemented by focus groups with young entrepreneurs and a “desk analysis” of the conditions for youth entrepreneurship.

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all forms of employment, self-employment, and youth entrepreneurship” (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2008, 6).

<sup>85</sup> For example, see: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/ekonomija/srpski-san-evo-zbog-cega-cela-srbija-zeli-drzavni-posao/731j1we>. Another report by economic consultants claims that “today, public sector employment is the preferred career choice for the majority of citizens (65%)” but without providing a source for this figure (Nikolin and A. Vladislavljević 2013, 7).

The survey posed nuanced questions about attitudes, experiences, and perceptions toward entrepreneurship in Serbia.

I read the report with interest but did not reach the same conclusion as the experts I interviewed. (One such promoter of entrepreneurship cited the CI report in saying that 70 percent of youth want to work in the public sector, yet this figure is not to be found in the report.) The executive summary includes the key findings that “40% of youth would choose work that is secure but with lower pay, 33% their own business, and 27% would choose better paid but less secure work.” Another finding is stated thusly: “Secure employment is regarded by youth as mostly in civil service, that is, the public sector: 57% of youth think that employment in the public sector is secure employment, and 44% think that work in state administration is the best professional experience” (CI 2012, 9).

What if public-sector employment was a stand-in for a certain kind of good life characterized by a sense of existential security like that evoked by Mirjana and Mina in chapter 3? What if the particular status of this loaded term compelled young survey respondents to half-jokingly select it from the given options, out of a kind of gleeful *inat*? These interpretations seemed both plausible and obvious to me, especially in light of the in-depth interviews I was conducting. But much as with brain drain rankings, all nuance was stripped from the central message that circulated. For promoters of entrepreneurship, these figures served as convincing evidence of the work to be done to reform the values of young people (presumably out of touch with the reality of the beleaguered public sector and the future of work), the need to inject entrepreneurship into the educational system (presumably unable to prepare youth to be drivers of an innovative

Serbian economy), as well as the unhelpful influence of parents as bearers of a socialist legacy whose main feature was an expectation of the right to work. What was most needed, in this view, was for youth to become more entrepreneurial. To adopt entrepreneurialism as a mentality, a set of skills and dispositions, or even a lifestyle. Regardless of whether or not they would ever open a business, properly entrepreneurial youth, this view implies, would never respond in a survey that they want to work for the state.<sup>86</sup> As with the active employment measures of the government, it is again the individual (here multiplied into the demographic category of youth) who again comes under scrutiny.

Members of Smart Kolektiv, champion of a synergistic relationship between the business and social sectors, promoted a broad understanding of entrepreneurialism. They had (unsuccessfully) advocated for the “development of entrepreneurial *culture* among youth” to be a separate strategic goal in the National Youth Strategy, rather than appearing as part of one of several strategies for increasing youth employment. As a representative of the organization explained,

When we talk about entrepreneurship, about the entrepreneurial spirit (*preduzetnički duh*), we are talking a little- we give that a little wider meaning. So, not just entrepreneurial spirit in the sense of starting a business and creating new value, profit, employment, introducing a new product, innovation in whichever sense of the word—rather, enterprising, we mean a type of *enterprising spirit* (*preduzimljivi duh*)...those are people who are prepared to accept responsibility for their own lives and who are proactive—they don’t wait, they don’t sit and wait for things to happen to them, rather they take the initiative and find ways to- to create the best path through life for themselves, and of course, along with social

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<sup>86</sup> For example, a report prepared for USAID states that “Entrepreneurial education allows youth to think in a way where they are developing personal competencies such as responsibility, risk-taking and problem-solving, which are important for a productive workforce, regardless of whether or not they decide [to] start a business in the future” (Hutchinson et al. 2012, 28).

responsibility, meaning, with feeling for the community and their environment.

The obvious implication of this intervention is that the state endorses a narrow understanding of entrepreneurship as *activity* while groups like Smart Kolektiv, Junior Achievers, and Impact Hub align with and advocate for an expansive understanding of entrepreneurialism as *value system*. While this is true to a certain extent—the main preoccupation of the state was with the employment rate and how employment could be boosted via entrepreneurship, and NGO actors did want to distance themselves from this official obsession—the reality was more complex. Government officials often invoked value-laden discourses of work in general and entrepreneurship in particular. NGOs wanted to help youth gain the concrete skills and support they needed to open actual businesses, in addition to coaxing the emergence of an “enterprising spirit.” And young people themselves wanted to find or create dignified work as much as they wanted to engage in projects of self-actualization. In the dense ecosystem of entrepreneurship—including coworking and mentoring spaces like Impact Hub, “blended” organizations like Smart Kolektiv, globally implemented projects like the Social Impact Award and u.lab, as well as government-sponsored trainings and various startup incubators—different actors appealed to different understandings of the term at different times and for different audiences.

But the twin projects of promoting entrepreneurship and coaxing entrepreneurialism were also ones of *rebranding* the practice of entrepreneurship. As one interlocutor explained, “the legacy of communism and the legacy of our parents is that a business owner (*privatnik*) is an enemy of the

state, meaning, you are doing something outside the system, you are somehow scamming” (*tu nešto muvaš*). More commonly, promoters of entrepreneurship referred to the socialist past as having instilled the lesson that pursuit of profit was at best a dubious and at worst an immoral motive. The negative associations that accrued to the identity of entrepreneur during the chaotic 1990s were even more problematic. In the unregulated climate of the time, “entrepreneur” became a euphemism for tycoon, and a tycoon was known to be a wealthy and powerful businessman whose fortune was gained in circumstances of dubious legality (see Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Wedel 1998 for analyses of similar dynamics elsewhere in the postsocialist sphere).

As a further complication, due to Serbia’s burdensome tax and regulatory structure, operating one’s own business often did mean, or was assumed to mean, some degree of complicity in Serbia’s resilient gray economy, via tax evasion or other forms of regulation-dodging. Such negative associations help account for the local appeal of what was regarded as a morally superior Western model of entrepreneurship and the subjectivity it was imagined to entail. In the next section, I describe a workshop that illustrates this point. The event ostensibly focused on introducing the practical business skills needed to found a social enterprise. While it did not explicitly position entrepreneurship as a value system, it nevertheless constituted a site of entrepreneurial subject-formation. Below, I sketch how I and other participants experienced the workshop.

## **Learning Entrepreneurship in “The Idea Factory”**

There was a fleeting moment in my fieldwork when I thought I might, reluctantly, become a caterer of traditional Serbian food. Through the Impact Hub Belgrade newsletter I learned of a series of workshops to be held under the auspices of the Social Impact Award (SIA). Founded in Vienna in 2009, SIA supports “early-stage social entrepreneurs in developing and implementing innovative business solutions to tackle the most important societal challenges of our times” (SIA, n.d.). A series of business development workshops support a competition for the best social enterprise ideas, with the winners receiving support in getting their endeavors off the ground. Active in more than twenty countries, SIA exemplifies the global diffusion of social entrepreneurship as “the new business model” (Fox 2016). But its arrival in Belgrade also illustrates the circulation of ideas and people permitted by the 2009 shift in mobility regime. In 2015, SIA in Belgrade was coordinated by Nenad, a youngish self-professed “jack of all trades” at Impact Hub (he would later move on) with a degree in banking, his own nascent NGO, and a side business printing t-shirts. Nenad told me that the program had come to Belgrade via a friend who now lives in Vienna. A group of friends, all active in the student organization AIESEC, wanted to implement a socially minded project that would have a more lasting effect than the one-off endeavors they had previously participated in. His friend—studying in Vienna at the time—encountered SIA and proposed to implement the project in Serbia. As Nenad told me, “SIA was a perfect match because it was really well established, we didn’t have to create the project from the beginning...there’s like a very good case practice for it, and they were searching for partners in the Balkans...so really



things clicked.” In bringing SIA to Belgrade the friends were, in other words, proactive youth exhibiting a now idealized entrepreneurialism.

The SIA “kick-off” came on a frigid day in early February 2015. It was a high-energy affair, featuring rapid-fire presentations by local social entrepreneurs and program sponsors. In front of an attentive audience Nenad also outlined how the SIA contest would unfold: a series of workshops would be held in Serbia’s three largest cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš) in preparation for the contest itself, which would take place simultaneously in countries where SIA is active. The competition would conclude with an awards ceremony at the end of May, with three local winners receiving an incubation and mentorship program to include three months of membership at Impact Hub and expert trainings. Though the audience for the kick-off was substantial, it was hard to get a sense of what had drawn others in, even as I chatted about Serbia’s social issues (*društveni problemi*) with the young women seated next to me as part of the final agenda item of “networking.”

A week later, I was the first to arrive at IHB for one of three scheduled “Idea Generation” workshops. I found Nenad and an assistant in the upstairs gallery ready for action: Nenad was perched on the edge of the stage, flanked by neatly arranged bottles of water and a projector screen. As we chatted he told me that the already-completed workshops in Novi Sad and Niš had been a success, with a total of around seventy participants in Novi Sad and eighty or so in Niš. Of course, Nenad added, some of the ideas generated in the workshop were better than others, and it’s a long way from idea to product. By the time our workshop

began, six women and four men had straggled into the room.<sup>87</sup> I didn't recognize anyone from the kick-off event. After a brief introduction to the concept of social entrepreneurship, we moved into the heart of the workshop, the "Idea Factory" (*Fabrika Ideja*). The Idea Factory comprised a series of brainstorming exercises for generating socially innovative products and services and introducing participants to the crucial questions needed to evaluate such ideas.<sup>88</sup>

Individually, we first considered the question: "Which social problems make you angry and that you really want to solve?" As at the kick-off event, the next step was to mingle with the aim of finding others concerned with similar problems, this time in order to form a working group for the remainder of the workshop. Feeling insufficiently creative, I had jotted down "the high cost of education" (in the US). Noticing others forming clusters, I approached two participants sitting behind me, prompting them to share what they had come up with.

Boban spoke at length about his concern: that young people in Serbia no longer learn traditional crafts (*stari zanati*). Sandra had generated a few ideas but was clearly passionate about one: the low rate of physical activity among youth. We were left to grapple with selecting one issue to work on for the rest of the workshop—three strangers who had been talking to each other for just a few minutes. It was already time to move on to the next phase. As we were directed to one of three small tables now equipped with flip-chart paper and markers we

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<sup>87</sup> When I later talked to Nenad about the disparity in attendance in the three cities he attributed it to the fact that there are fewer opportunities to attend "interesting things" outside the Serbian capital. While around 150 people had registered for the Belgrade workshops, far fewer showed up.

<sup>88</sup> Nenad confirmed that the content of the workshops was substantially the same in each country where SIA is active, with some minor variations according to the local context.

tried to circumvent the standoff by considering the next question: “What is the target group for which you want to create change?” Somehow—and my field notes offer no clues as to how—we decided our project would focus on “unemployed women.” With this arbitrary and uninformed decision, we were ready to begin the Idea Factory in earnest. Markers in hand, we moved through a series of four questions designed to help us home in on the distinctive traits and characteristics of our target group.

“How can you make the lives of those in your target group a living hell?” We chuckled, re-reading the question projected behind us to be sure we got it right. “Well, their lives cannot get worse...” Boban mused. Sandra suggested raising the price of public transportation, and with that we had our first real idea worth recording. After intense negotiations over who would be our official scribe Sandra took the first turn, selecting the red marker, as Boban jovially noted, to signify that this was “the bad stuff.” Boban in particular began to relish inventing ever more outlandish examples colored by dark humor. I contributed something like “make it so that the kids have to stay home with them all day” which got translated onto the flipchart as “cancel daycare” (*ukinuti vrtiče*). Finally, Sandra and Boban laughingly arrived at the all-inclusive “officially recognize patriarchy” (*zvanično priznati patrijarhat*).

As our joking threatened to derail the group process Nenad urged us to pick up the pace to consider the next questions: “How can you improve the lives of those in your target group? What are the special attributes and skills of your target group?” And: “What kinds of work can you create for your target group?” The “attributes and skills” we listed were limited to such things as cooking,

cleaning, caring for children, and sewing, and I began to feel uneasy with the stereotypical roles into which we were casting our imaginary unemployed women. Evidently reflecting the initial interest that brought him to the workshop, Boban kept adding obscure handicrafts to the list. Finally, with a triumphant laugh he announced that unemployed women can also follow numerous Turkish soap operas fluently! In the midst of this jovial brainstorming I tried to contribute “resourcefulness,” suggesting that most unemployed women had developed an incredible knack for making do with very little, but it didn’t make the list.

We quickly moved on to the final set of questions that we would discuss for the remaining twenty minutes of the workshop before ever-so-briefly presenting our ideas to the larger group. As Nenad explained, the task was now to outline a social enterprise based on the brainstorming we had done. My group refocused as I noted that “this was a bit more serious.” We recorded our responses to the five questions below on a fresh piece of flipchart paper.

1. What is the name of your organization?
2. What is the aim (*cilj*) of the organization and how will you meet it?
3. How will your target group be useful?
4. What will the market buy from you?
5. How will you earn your first 5,000 dinars [about fifty dollars]?

After some discussion, my fellow group members agreed that the key question was the fourth—until we decided what our “product” was it would be difficult to respond to the other questions. In other words, which “job” to give our unemployed women? We settled on cooking and slowly began to develop the idea of a catering service for traditional Serbian food. Our collective excitement grew

as we talked about what the enterprise would look like. But I voiced a concern about the “market”: weren’t we essentially creating a business out of a product that people already get for free? In other words, I wondered aloud, given that catering is a fairly novel concept in Serbia, where do people get food for their parties and weddings now? From the unpaid labor of the very women we are aiming to employ. So why would someone call our catering service when they can just call their female relatives? Though the others agreed that this was a serious question we essentially rationalized and shelved the issue: our market would be somewhat different (we decided to target business events and the like), and, after all, this was just a preliminary exercise—we couldn’t be expected to get all the potential kinks worked out. We spent the last of our group time brainstorming ideas for the name of our organization but didn’t manage to settle on anything before it was time to present results.

Boban and Sandra were both clearly enthused by the process of imagining a project that would both generate profit and benefit society. As we gathered our things to leave Boban asked me, “Are you a student?”

“Well yes, officially,” I replied. I meant that I was not a student in Serbia. Boban took my comment differently and launched into an explanation of how, while he was technically a doctoral student at the Faculty of Organizational Sciences, he was unlikely to complete the degree because it’s “pointless” to get a doctorate from FON. I belatedly realized that he was asking because the SIA contest is geared toward students, and half the members of each team that submits an idea to the competition must be students.

“Wait, were you really thinking of...?” I probed.

Boban still thought I was asking about his schooling, and went further into explanation of his status. I tried again: “No, I meant, were you really planning on submitting an idea to the competition?”

Both Boban and Sandra responded in kind: they hadn’t necessarily planned to initially but both really liked our catering idea, and were thrilled by the thought of developing it. Raising an eyebrow I confirmed that they were planning to attend the “business planning” workshop next week at the same time. They were. “Well...” I responded cautiously, “let’s see how it develops.”

### **Opportunity or Necessity? The Serbian Social Entrepreneur**

The giddiness of the encounter described above would fade. The following two workshops on business models and the business plan introduced participants to the very basics of mapping out the “unique value proposition,” product or service, resources, and so on of a feasible enterprise. By the end of the third and final workshop the message had been transmitted and received that opening a business was serious stuff.<sup>89</sup> The members of my small group parted ways, mercifully without further discussion of entering the SIA contest itself.

Boban and Sandra embodied characteristics typical of many young people I met in the course of my research. Boban was formally a doctoral student but doubted he would finish the degree; Sandra had just graduated and was looking at Master’s programs abroad while working part-time, tangentially in her field.

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<sup>89</sup> Actually, while the CI report cited above confirms the lingering misperception among youth that opening a business in Serbia is complicated and expensive, the country has had a streamlined “one-window” system for some years. Several entrepreneurs I interviewed highlighted the contrast between the ease of registering one’s new business and the complicated bureaucratic and other hurdles that later arise.

Both were still close to the student life and the protections it, however frugally, afforded. What drew them to the workshops? It struck me that, like other educated youth, opening “something of their own” was an option to hold in their minds, a future potentiality, and this workshop would give them a sense of what that might entail.

The workshops I attended offered little to no domestication of this globally implemented program in terms of the specific opportunities and challenges of opening a business in Serbia. Such tailoring would, presumably, come later, through the mentorship offered to contest winners. But SIA did address a frustration of some young people I met, namely that while they considered themselves to be proactive, creative, and eager to take action, there was a dearth of resources for helping them figure out where to start. In other words, as one young IHB-goer poignantly asked, “what is the thing that comes right after motivation?” On the one hand, the SIA workshops were a refreshingly practical departure from the ubiquitous and largely hollow incitements for Serbian youth to “be more entrepreneurial.” On the other hand, the program’s pace all but assured that our learning of the nuts and bolts of entrepreneurship would be superficial at best—and the juvenile bantering engaged in by my group members emerged, perhaps, from a nascent recognition of this absurdity.

While the workshops of the Social Impact Award focused on the most ostensibly pragmatic aspects of starting a business, they were also sites of subject-formation. In foregrounding the creative production of a viable entrepreneurial *idea*, I read the primary function of the workshops as inculcating

the “proper” form of entrepreneurship according to Western economic models, namely, “opportunity entrepreneurship.”

Though they acknowledged a blurred boundary, the conceptual distinction between “necessity” and “opportunity” entrepreneurship was frequently invoked by promoters of entrepreneurship in Belgrade. This difference is just as it sounds: opportunity entrepreneurs recognize a market opportunity while necessity entrepreneurs start a business because it is “the best option available” (GEM 2001, 4). Businesses associated with necessity entrepreneurship are those which are relatively cheap and easy to open (in Serbia, these include bakeries, gambling halls, hair salons, and cafes). The proliferation of such enterprises is not taken by economists as a sign of economic dynamism or ignition of the Serbian entrepreneurial spirit. Rather, as one local expert told the popular daily *Blic*, “The massive opening of bakeries and beauty salons is a sign of the continued destruction of the economy. In the small business sector we have less and less production, which is the pillar of all advancement” (Lakić and Leskovic 2015). Necessity entrepreneurship is characteristic of emerging economies, an interlocutor explained, and is facilitated by the Serbian government’s encouragement of entrepreneurship as solution to unemployment rather than focusing on the reforms necessary to facilitate job creation and giving more than lip service to the promotion of *entrepreneurialism*. Ill-prepared individuals thus enter the market for survival and are set up to fail, “because they objectively are not in the market because they recognized an opportunity, nor are [governmental] programs conceptualized in a way that okay...you are already in the market, but now let’s help you to do what can be done and give you a chance



to succeed.” My interlocutor added, “I understand how much that for you—considering that you come from America which is the most entrepreneurial country in the world, in the sense that entrepreneurship is highly valued (*se visoko vrednuje*)...everything here is contra.”

This highly valued form of entrepreneurship—opportunity entrepreneurship—privileges entrepreneurialism as value system. The opportunity entrepreneur is a generator of ideas, a creative problem-solver. In the iteration encouraged by SIA he or she is also more motivated by a desire to “do good” than a drive to accumulate wealth. Though SIA did not need to reform any “apathetic” youth who needed to be “activated”—participants self-selected as willing subjects—these attributes are crucially positioned as the products of reformed subjectivities. That the alleged Serbian ethno-national trait of resourcefulness (*snalažljivost*) would seem to fit neatly as a subjective quality of entrepreneurial success was a point that arose rarely in my research.

Indeed, in the efforts to promote entrepreneurialism that I investigated any link with the past was broken. Despite socialist Yugoslavia’s unique market socialism, despite ample ethnographic evidence of the entrepreneurial acumen of late socialist subjects (Yurchak 2002, 2003), despite the “skilful improvisation” exhibited by Serbian workers during the sanctions of the 1990s (Rajković 2015, 219), with few exceptions entrepreneurship was seen as having *no* local antecedents. I emphasize this point not to vindicate the project of “transition,” but to consider the work of social positioning taking place in these workshops and elsewhere. The most cringe-worthy events I attended were sponsored by the American Embassy, with titles like “Taste the Spirit of the American Dream!”

(For a panel discussion featuring an American culinary entrepreneur.) More commonly, slogans like “Silicon Valley is not a place but a state of mind” circulated among my entrepreneurial interlocutors. Alignment with a deterritorialized Silicon Valley and globally circulating programs like SIA was also alignment with a framework of values that foregrounds creativity, innovation, risk-taking, flexibility, and personal growth. Crucially, in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, success is assumed to blossom from these qualities.

In this, the intended beneficiaries of social enterprise become sidelined. An emphasis on meeting real social needs becomes displaced in service of “crafting the volunteer” (Hemment 2015, 148; see also Eliasoph 2011). The “common good” does not emerge from a thoughtful assessment of community needs but rather from the random generation of essentialized target groups: unemployed women, disabled people, “endangered” youth, etc. As in the workshop above, any moments that might shift the focus to more structural inequalities (such as my reference to women’s unpaid caretaking labor) were quickly muted—cast not as precursor but as obstacle to meaningful individual action. The contention of a clean break with the socialist past, insistence on the need to learn entrepreneurialism, and assertion of the correct form of entrepreneurial activity here merge synergistically into a narrowing of the possibilities for social change. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider how a somewhat different kind of pedagogy of change produces similarly ambivalent effects.

## **Interrogating u.lab**

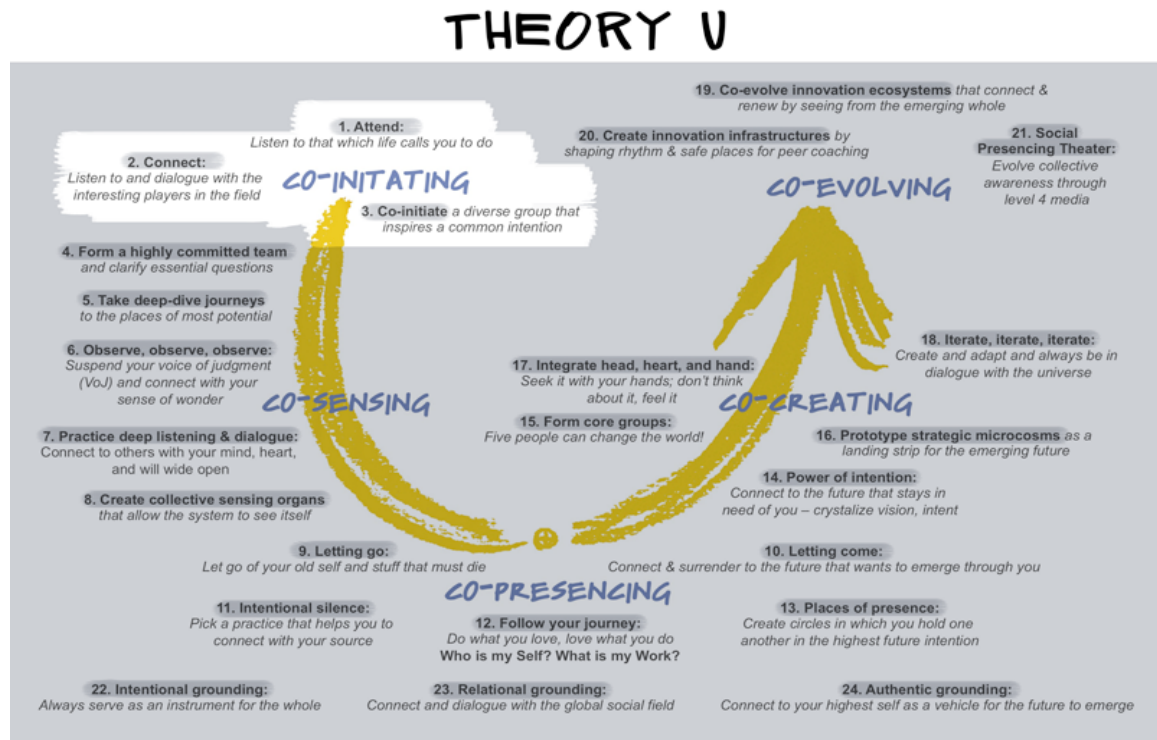
“Imagine a leap from our current self to our emerging future Self. We are facing that threshold, gap, chasm or abyss on all levels of scale: as individuals, groups, organizations, and as a global community. How can we activate our deeper levels of humanity in order to bridge and cross that divide? This is the organizing question and journey of Theory U”  
(Presencing Institute, n.d.-b).

A year after my initial tour of the space, I participated in an unusual event at the still-young Impact Hub Belgrade: a moderated broadcast of “u.lab” that took place over the course of ten weeks. U.lab was a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) that promised an introduction to “leading profound social, environmental and personal transformation” based on the Theory U method of change described in the quote above and depicted in figure 4 (edX, n.d.). U.lab is the brainchild of C. Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management and founder of the Presencing Institute, created in 2006 as an “action research platform at the intersection of science, consciousness, and profound social change” (Presencing Institute, n.d.-a). The ideas encountered in u.lab are elaborated in two books published by Scharmer as well as various other programs offered by the Institute.<sup>90</sup> These materials offer sweeping diagnoses of the “systemic divides” (ecological, social, and spiritual-cultural) that afflict our contemporary world and the “outdated mental models” of economic theory that underwrite these divides. The “change framework” of Theory U launches from the

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<sup>90</sup> The course is offered through MITx, a program launched in 2011 as part of MIT’s Office of Digital Learning to develop and deliver massive open online courses, and to research this and other forms of learning technologies. See: <https://openlearning.mit.edu/about>. Scharmer’s books include *Theory U* (2009 and 2016) and *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies* (2013, with Katrin Kaufer).

premise that we are living through a time of disruption that demands responses connected to the “emerging future” rather than reactions rooted in past (dysfunctional) behaviors (Scharmer and Kaufer 2013, 4–11).



**Figure 4: Theory U<sup>91</sup>**

The u.lab course and related books are pitched broadly, to “change-makers in all sectors, cultures, and systems, including business, government, civil society, media, academia, and local communities” (Scharmer and Kaufer 2013, 3).

Though not exclusively aimed at social entrepreneurs, they seem to particularly resonate with the communities that gather in Impact Hubs globally. After

<sup>91</sup> Attributed under Creative Commons License CC-BY-SA to Otto Scharmer. Accessed July 5, 2018 from [presencing.com/permissions](http://presencing.com/permissions). This site is no longer active, but similar depictions of the Theory U process can be found at <https://www.presencing.org/resource/images>.

meeting Scharmer at an international conference, the IHB team signed on as one of forty-two formal hubs—and many more self-organized groups—that would gather participants to collectively follow the u.lab course in the fall of 2015. The fact that dozens of Impact Hubs around the world hosted such gatherings attests to the fact that the course had broad appeal among social entrepreneurs in disparate contexts, including more and less developed “ecosystems.”

In Belgrade, Paola and her colleagues wanted to create an interactive learning experience while concretizing and localizing the course concepts, which they noted could be a bit “Western.” Intrigued but perplexed by the emails I had received about the course, I looked forward to the introductory session organized in early September. It turned out to be quite promising. Paola and two facilitators led those gathered through a fun and interactive exercise dubbed the “stock exchange of values” (*berza vrednosti*). We received three slips of paper, each with a kind of value typed on it (I got “growth,” “money,” and “time”). Participants circulated to trade values. The goal was to end up with a set most closely aligned with our personal value system. We jokingly haggled, trying to convince each other of the virtue of values we wanted to dump and visiting a facilitator acting as the “bank of last resort” when no one would take them off our hands. As we shared our resulting configurations the facilitators explained that the exercise was a fitting introduction to u.lab given that the series would focus on self-reflection (*preispitivanje*) in service of personal and professional development.

Participants in this localized u.lab course would be organized into two small groups (the first was organized to allow for the four “live” sessions to be watched in real time, while participants in the second group would watch

recordings of these sessions). Despite the sizeable crowd that gathered for the introduction—and despite incentivizing participation—I sensed that organizers were disappointed in the small number of regular participants.<sup>92</sup> Along with three others, I joined the core of the second group. Zoran was in his forties, the spouse of a social entrepreneur, a creative type with a day job teaching graphic design to high school students. He was deep into self-improvement and was, I later joked, an “idea generator,” bubbling over with incipient projects each time we met. Marina was also in her forties, with a stable job in a large company. She had nascent plans to open her own business but seemed to attend u.lab mostly out of interest in learning something new and for the social aspect. I consider both Zoran and Marina to be “promoters of entrepreneurship” in that they had the life experience and social status to be particularly invested in pedagogical projects aimed at a younger set. Two such younger participants, who I would later interview, rotated between the two u.lab gatherings. Milan, twenty-five at the time, had recently completed his IT degree and had seamlessly transitioned into full-time work as a software developer at the large Serbian company where he had interned. He was an avid consumer of TED Talks and listener of motivational podcasts, with a close circle of friends who shared his orientation toward exploring new ideas and ways of thinking. Filip was twenty-four, finishing his MA

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<sup>92</sup> In contrast with many of the one-off events hosted in the space, u.lab was only open to (paying) members of Impact Hub Belgrade. I had joined for the final three months of my fieldwork at the lowest level of membership offered, which cost something like sixteen euros per month. At the time, IHB had few such “member-only” offerings, and I got the sense that u.lab was, in part, an experiment in member recruitment. While the cost of membership represented a barrier to joining the course—Zoran (introduced below) and I were the only participants in the intro session who were already IHB members—there were also five subsidized spots offered for youth between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five.

in architecture and active in various student organizations. Other participants, generally students (most frequently from FON) or IHB hosts, would also join us on occasion. Paola facilitated our discussions.

The u.lab journey I embarked upon with these fellow travelers was as perplexing as it was ethnographically rich. From the soaring promises of the polished trailer video and the fun engagement of the intro session's "stock exchange of values," all air from the buoyant u.lab balloon seemed to seep out with the first meeting, at which we watched a recording of the live session. Though it integrated some high-tech production logistics (multiple cameras and thousands of people plugged in from across the globe) the first session began in plodding fashion, with Scharmer sitting behind a desk in front of a chalkboard. He explains the global network of participants and gestures to the core team members, who shimmy into the camera's frame for awkward introductions. The audio cuts out at crucial moments and the slides aren't visible. It's as boring as the first day of classes on any university campus, dominated by obligatory rounds of introduction and the distribution of syllabi. My field notes from the evening are soaked in the disappointment of an educator as well as ethnographer. The other participants gathered in Belgrade listened respectfully but also voiced discontent. A leap to "our emerging future Self" hardly seemed imminent. More significantly, I struggled to make sense of some of the phrases used without further elaboration, especially the contention that the u.lab community was meant to be an "awareness-based action-research community." The resonance with participatory anthropological methods was striking, but appeared without the discipline's critical foundations. (Another moment of acute discomfort came

later in the course when Scharmer embarked on a “sensing journey” to China that struck me as a caricature of the ethnographer’s craft.)

The trailer video for the course illustrates something of the perplexing amalgam of ethnographic and therapeutic methods that were being recast in the service of something entirely different. Like almost all of the various u.lab materials, the video opens with the contention that “we live in an age of profound disruption, where something is ending and dying, and something is wanting to be born.”<sup>93</sup> Against a background of tinkling piano keys, accelerated scenes of city traffic, and sweeping skylines, Scharmer soon appears with a serious yet earnest expression and urgent voice: “How can we build the capacity to sense and actualize a future that we feel is possible, that we *know* is possible, but that isn’t quite there yet?” The second half of the video roots “Theory U”—the method of change to be taught in u.lab—in the philosophy of Henry David Thoreau, the social movements led by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the massive changes of the twentieth century: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of apartheid, the rise of China as an economic power. But Scharmer believes that the greatest transformation—the transformation of capitalism—has yet to come. Prompting this change is the overarching goal of u.lab, to be accomplished by “empower[ing] change-makers to co-sense and co-shape the future” (Yukelson 2015).

The premise repeated throughout u.lab and Presencing Institute materials that “we live in an age of profound disruption, where something is ending and

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<sup>93</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gF8wV9OLUHc>. Accessed April 8, 2019.



dying, and something is wanting to be born” bears an unsettling resemblance to Antonio Gramsci’s description of the political crisis of his day.<sup>94</sup> Yet here, the different social justice movements mentioned appear in the video flattened. Gandhi and King Jr. turn up adjacent to the end of socialism and apartheid, all decontextualized and demoted into inspirational resources for “change-making.” An uneasy proximity to both ethnography, as a practice that “tolerates, indeed cultivates, open-endedness” (Fortun 2012, 451), and political activism is also discernable in the overarching frame of “leading from the emerging future.” This rhetoric curiously echoes shifts in practices of direct democracy from prefigurative politics (encapsulated in the slogan “be the change you want to see in the world”) to “the politics of becoming-other-than-one-now-is, toward forms of open-ended subject making that are embedded in and constitutive of collective struggle” (Razsa and Kurnick 2011, 240–241; see also Biehl and Locke 2010; Hardt and Negri 2009). The difference is that in u.lab the collective struggle appears entirely depoliticized and not entirely collective.

I noted above that social entrepreneurship is enjoying a moment of glory as one response to the shake in free-market confidence meted out by the 2008 financial crisis, even as such enterprises fill needs created by the privatization of the public good. This phenomenon implicitly affirms the classic anthropological contention that the economy is a social institution. U.lab takes up this insight and marries it to the “therapeutic culture” (Illouz 2008) that permeates the social

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<sup>94</sup> “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born, in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci, quoted in Bauman 2012, 49). This is one of Gramsci’s more famous observations, recorded while in prison and now found in various collections of what have come to be called “the prison notebooks.”

institutions of modern life. As Roger Foster argues, this permeation has had a broadly negative influence on the possibilities for collective action:

In the neoliberal era, the healing, self-reorienting power of therapy has been harnessed to the larger political project of transforming individuals from, broadly speaking, collective subjects, linked to other citizens in relationships of solidarity embodying social commitments and moral bonds, to self-governing individuals who must enterprise themselves by way of their own aptitudes and talents. (Foster 2016, 96)

In u.lab, the project of social change begins with the self. Phrases signaling the underlying “therapeutic ethos” of Theory U are scattered across the depiction in figure 4: deep listening, intentional silence, connect with your source.

My central critique of u.lab was with the fundamental contention that capitalism can be transformed, made kinder—and with the individualization and depoliticization of collective problems that the Theory U method facilitates, all while co-opting terms, methods, and figures of political activism. The u.lab materials viewed as a group included a model of the “systemic divides” afflicting our world, but this model was curiously devoid of any analysis of power. In print, the same issues are glossed as “systemic disconnects” with which “positive externalities tend to flow to the top, while negative externalities tend to flow to the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid” (Scharmer and Kaufer 2013, 8). This discussion is infused with power relations: the economic playing field is “tilted,” and special-interest groups enjoy an outsized role in governance. Yet the authors conclude that it is outdated “mental models,” characterized by an inability to walk in the shoes of another, that perpetuate broken structures (Scharmer and Kaufer 2013, 5–13).

Similarly, while u.lab attracted Belgradian youth who were “socially conscious,” it seemed that any structural critique they might voice quickly became sidelined. During discussion of a videoclip in which Scharmer explains his model of systemic divides, the following exchange unfolded (in English, for the benefit of an IHB guest visiting from Malaysia):

Young man: “I think the underlying issue is politics. From there comes economic problems, then education, then consciousness, then self-responsibility.”

Paola: “But when you put it like that, we can’t change anything.”

Young man: “Not as an individual, maybe, but as a group, yes...”

Zoran: “If we think we can’t do anything we are just being lazy.”

Young man, apparently accepting Zoran’s reframing: “And confirming that we can’t do anything.”

Zoran: “Are we changing, or just lazy and want to change?”

A Hub host who had been trying to jump in for some time now got her chance: “I think this is where it all comes back to the self. People today, kids, are so lacking in confidence....”

And just like that, discussion looped back to transforming the self. Barring a radical critique of power, I was nevertheless perplexed by what struck me as a refusal among promoters of entrepreneurship to recognize the “specific ways that socio-economic and political institutions distribute the conditions of life unequally” (Millar 2017, 4). Such refusal appeared all the more baffling among *social* entrepreneurs who were pursuing meaningful and “impactful” work and

who would seem to necessarily recognized the symptoms if not root causes of systemic inequality.

### **Who is My Self? Who is My Work?**

My interactions with Paola had mostly taken place in the context of u.lab discussions and other IHB workshops and events. She had shown interest in my project, helpfully connected me with others in her deep network, and welcomed my skeptical comments about the Theory U process. In short, I felt we had developed a good rapport by the time we met for a brief interview near the end of my research. We talked in English, and, knowing we would not have much time, I cut to the chase pretty quickly: “So, um, I mean I guess this is, this is kind of like the big question I wanted to ask you.” I chuckle a bit and take a deep breath:

I feel like the current system of neoliberal capitalism that rules this world has meant economic insecurity for a lot of people, and especially in this region, where you know, the ways in which privatization has been carried out has been completely non-transparent, has, you know, gotten a lot of people fired, you know, those companies haven't been replaced, um, with anything viable, and you know, a lot of people call this region a semi-periphery of Europe.

Paola: “Sure.”

D: “And a cheap, a source of cheap labor, essentially.”

P: “Sure!”

D: So, um, it's hard for me to not see like, entrepreneurship as part of that system of global capitalism that um, I mean I don't, I think that people...that I've met, who you know, who are entrepreneurs who start their own businesses, um...don't see themselves this way, but *I* see them as like little fish in this big pond, that is eventually going to kind of swallow them up...but clearly you don't see, you know, entrepreneurship as kind of contributing to that system...

P: “On the contrary.”

D: “Yeah, ok.”

P: “But I do see your point, definitely.”

D: “I guess it’s, it’s about like, can like capitalism be changed? You know what I mean?”

When I ask Paola directly if capitalism can be changed, her initial response is unexpected. Capitalism and socialism are two systems that are now coming together “but they’re the same thing” and so “they kill each other,” she says. I’m puzzled but intrigued. She continues in a seemingly different direction:

So I very much do appreciate in entrepreneurship exactly that attitude that you go out and do things. So, ok, then you can discuss the objective, but the approach and attitude to go out and do things is something that we all need, especially at this point in time in this world, where there’s no ready-made solutions anymore. You cannot follow any path or system because they are failing, and they’re demonstrating that they’re not realistic anymore, they’re not feasible, so you have to just sort of, try, and prototype, and go on.

With this interview I finally began to understand why so many of those I talked with in the course of my research understood entrepreneurship as a third realm of economic activity and potential employment, distinguished not only from the public sector but also the private. In my mind, entrepreneurship was the poster-child for capitalism. But Paola saw entrepreneurship as an *alternative* to the dogmas of capitalism and socialism, understood as monolithic systems offering “ready-made solutions.” It is just the failures of these systems in the region that have created the need to “try, prototype, and go on.”

In dialogue with Paola I also began to understand how attraction to a process like Theory U, rooted as it is in the self, in change emanating from within, might emerge from recognition (if not open acknowledgement) of the failures of

capitalism rather than an uncritical embrace of its ethos. This is not entirely unlike the argument made by Michele Rivkin-Fish, in the very different context of reproductive health activism in Russia, that “change directed at the self and interpersonal relations represented a realistic and desirable means of improving the physical and moral health of society” (2004, 283).

In the course of our first u.lab gathering, we watched a videoclip that posed the questions: “Who is my Self?” and “What is my work?” The linking of these two questions would continue as a central theme of the course, and when I later interviewed Paola it became clear that the merging of these two questions was also central to the way in which she understood the *raison d'être* of Impact Hub Belgrade. In my broader participant observation at IHB I had often heard that the mantra of the community was to “bring more life into work.” For Paola, it was of fundamental importance that, in contrast to her previous work lives, Impact Hub was a place where she could be her whole self, where her children could hang out. She wanted her work there, the actual enterprise itself and all the effort that went in to it, to serve as an example that she could be proud of. The merging of self and work demanded by entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial lifestyle was, for her, a realm of authenticity. “Bring more life into work” was an invitation to connect with one’s creative passion, one’s calling, and was also a branding of IHB as a friendly and inviting community. Similar notions were marshaled in the glossy self-brands of social media professionals profiled by Brooke Erin Duffy (2017). Yet, as Duffy shows, “the attributes of the enterprising subject are marred by work patterns that are less than idyllic” (2017, 212), including the expectation to be “always on.” In the next section, I explore how the

tensions inherent in the “Do What You Love” mantra were resolved in parables of mobility and work relayed by my interlocutors.

### **Do What You Love (Here): Parables of Mobility and Dignified Work**

As the weeks unfolded our small u.lab cluster followed the “u” of Theory U, arriving at the topic of “prototyping” toward the end of our collective journey. A camaraderie had developed within our group, even as we sometimes strained to understand each other’s perspectives. Participants in each session had varied, but Marina and Zoran joined me and a Hub host at our seventh gathering, with Paola moderating. The small group clustered around Paola’s computer to watch the course videoclips, occasionally breaking for commentary.

Through Paola’s computer screen Scharmer explained the sixth and final prototyping principle as a matter of integrating the intelligence of the “head, heart, and hands.” He elaborates: “This is what Sue Borschardt talked about in her videoclip about the interior castle: how to access the creative capacity of our heart. This is what Steve Jobs talked about in his Stanford commencement speech: that the only way to do our best work is to do what we love and love what we do.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Sue Borschardt was a u.lab participant who animated a reflective story on her experience in the (in-person) course. The Jobs commencement speech in question is from 2005. These videos were part of the course materials shared the previous week, which I had missed to attend an international workshop. Having not realized this at the time, I don’t know if our group in Belgrade watched these specific clips together or not. Even if they did not watch it in full, the Jobs speech received much publicity at the time and continued to be praised years later. It is quite likely that many of my main interlocutors in the entrepreneur community were familiar with it. The speech can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF8uR6Z6KLc>. The videoclip we watched on the sixth prototyping principle can be found at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAOqs9Dq\\_os](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAOqs9Dq_os).

I interject, “oh, how I hate that!” and Zoran and Marina glance at me, chuckling. We continue to listen as Scharmer drives home his point: “So essentially, the sixth principle is about bringing together two of the most powerful forces, which is the power of entrepreneurship, and the power of the awakening intelligence of the heart.” Paola turns to me as she pauses the clip on her computer. “Why did you say that you hate that?” she asks.

I was familiar with the “Do What You Love” (DWYL) directive and its association with, among others, Steve Jobs. It’s possible that I had viewed his popular speech a decade ago, and it’s probable that those in the room were familiar with it as well, as they were voracious consumers of motivational material. Jobs’ address is simple and inspirational, structured around three brief stories. The moral of the first and third can be summarized as “have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.” The second story also reiterates this theme while emphasizing another. Jobs recounts the low point of getting fired from Apple after a falling out with his cofounder. As he tells it, his professional recovery was facilitated by luck. That is, he was lucky enough to find what he loved to do early in life, and to realize that he still loved his work even after being fired.

This is when Jobs implores the audience, the graduating class of Stanford University, to discover their passion in life. “You’ve got to find what you love,” he says. “The only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking, and don’t settle.” As appropriate to the genre, the speech does not directly address “the thing that comes right after motivation”—*how* to do this.



Rather, it offers inspiration for tapping into your inner self and allowing the knowledge gained to guide you through the challenges of work and life.

Back in the small conference room in Belgrade I switch from Serbian to English to explain my objection to the DWYL mantra, drawing on an article that had recently circulated on social media (see Tokumitsu 2014). “Well, sorry, but I find that idea to be very problematic,” I explain. “It devalues other people’s work. We don’t all have the same opportunity to do what we love. In fact, probably like 99.9 percent of the world’s population doesn’t get that chance. Steve Jobs’ ability to do what he loves depends on the work of others working eighteen-hour shifts in a Chinese factory to make my eighty-eight dollar computer cord. And if I’m scrubbing toilets for a living....”

As I trail off Zoran jumps in: “Yes, but I know people who love that kind of work!”

“Well, ok.” I fumble as he launches into a series of examples to support this assertion.

“Listen,” he says, “I know this guy who was working as a doorman here in Belgrade. All day, just opening and closing doors for people. He was making 1,000 euros, which was a lot at the time.”

I am dubious—this is an excellent salary in present-day Belgrade, and hardly one earned by an average doorman. Zoran continues: “But after a while he quit; he was going crazy from boredom and just couldn’t do it anymore.” I anticipate vindication.

Zoran: “But you know, his replacement was this guy from a small town with a high school education, who was like, ‘ooh, I’m in the big city!’ And he loved it!”

As I appear unconvinced, Zoran tries again, this time with an example from a documentary he recently watched in which a resident of a South American trash dump apparently declares that he has no regrets in life and can die happy because he is “king of the dump.”

I try to clarify: “So, you think it’s about learning to love your job, no matter how shitty it is?”

Zoran: “No, no! It’s about having the courage to look inside and figure out what makes you happy.”

Marina’s response was more measured. “Well,” she said, “I think that when he [Jobs] said that he was trying to motivate students.”

Zoran and I agreed on one point: the pursuit of meaningful work is a laudable goal. Indeed, filling in the contours of this pursuit, for contemporary Serbian youth, is at the heart of this dissertation. But I could not endorse Zoran’s obstinate refusal to concede that not everyone has equal access to this quest. His version of DWYL struck me as myopically classist, especially in the implication that there is someone “suited” for even the most odious of occupations. My alignment with the critical social science scholarship remained unwavering on this point: “Do What You Love” is a way to mask the precarity of entrepreneurial life, to valorize it, to co-opt the post-Fordist temporality of the always-on gig economy and recast it as “lifestyle” of choice. Or, as Gershon put it, “not all passions have equal outcomes. If your passion is to figure out how to make

money on the stock market, following it will yield different social and structural consequences than if your passion is to build beautiful houses or to take care of other people's physical or psychological needs" (Gershon 2017, 220).

As our discussion crescendos Paola also attempts to intervene. Addressing Zoran she says: "I used that quote you shared the other day, and I think you should tell it to Dana too."

Zoran did not immediately grasp what she was referring to. Paola prompted him: "You do what you don't want..."

"Oh, yes!" Zoran jumps in, finishing the phrase that he had shared on Facebook: "Because you do what you don't want, you say what you don't think, you kiss who you don't love—that's why you are unhappy, not because you live in Serbia."

With this, Paola pulls the trope of leaving Serbia into a conversation about conditions and aspirations of work. The quote acts as a final authoritative stamp on Zoran's unlikely examples. While they were derisive of governmental efforts as well as narrow understandings of entrepreneurship as activity, my interlocutors here *also* relied on the key assertion of the political discourse of brain drain: that through entrepreneurship the young and talented can be persuaded to stay in Serbia, provided they provide for themselves. This is implicit in Paola's act of reframing the conversation as well as the first part of this quote: "because you do what you don't want to do." An entrepreneur is someone who innovates, forges their own path, or, as many a government minister has said, one who is ready to "take control of their own life." There is some subtle social positioning happening with Paola's invocation of this quote. It is a gentle affront to the caricatured youth

who complain, search for excuses, and blame external conditions for their personal predicament and inability to take meaningful action. In other words, there is an interesting convergence here, where the government's unloading of the responsibility for job creation onto individual shoulders is taken up by promoters of entrepreneurship as something of a value-laden challenge.

But what is added in the context of our u.lab discussions is an inward turn that defines the locus of meaningful action as the self. Whether or not the doorman was really so well paid and whether the dump dweller really thrived is beside the point.<sup>96</sup> For promoters of entrepreneurship like Paola and Zoran, the point is that work and self are necessarily entwined, and *must be* aligned in order to produce true happiness. Further, the pursuit of such alignment does not depend on external conditions and was thus possible anywhere, even in Serbia. The inertia so often attributed to Serbian youth was not, in this view, a physical condition of immobility, and it didn't correlate with staying in Serbia. While many of my interlocutors who most wanted to leave Serbia would disagree, for those like Paola and Zoran, forces often glossed as "suffocation" or "hampering" were not caused by the structural constraints faced by youth seeking dignified work. Rather, they amounted to an affliction of the self, an unwillingness to traverse the "u" of change, a refusal to conjure the courage to look inside and discover one's true calling in life.

Probably befuddled by my obtuseness, Zoran switched tactics, and also switched back to Serbian for one final parable.

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<sup>96</sup> And, as Kathleen Millar (2018) has shown in her ethnography of a Brazilian garbage dump, such work can be productive of dignity and autonomy.

“Ok, I’m going to tell this story slowly because I want you to understand,”  
he begins.

I smile as he launches into the tale at full speed.

Z: “I have a friend who graduated from the engineering faculty. There was  
this company that bought a bunch of medical machines.”

I picture CAT machines as he continues.

Z: But the company could only acquire them if they had someone on staff  
who was qualified to fix them. So they hired my friend. But the machines  
were new, so they never broke down. They just told him: “come in, drink  
coffee with the secretary, and that’s all you have to do.” Everyone tells him  
it’s a dream job—work little, get paid a lot. So he shows up and drinks  
coffee. And drinks coffee. And drinks coffee. But he had nothing to do. And  
one day he realizes that he wants to be a photographer.

Paola, listening intently, murmurs “great” (*sjajno*).

Z: “So he quits his job and moves to New York City.”

P: “Great.”

Z: But he had overestimated his English-language skills, and he wasn’t  
able to find a good job. So he worked on his English, and was eventually  
hired by a company to fix their medical machines. But there the machines  
were old, and he was really busy all the time. And he hated it. He didn’t  
come to the US to do what he did in Serbia, and what’s worse, to actually  
do the work! He came to New York to be a photographer. But since  
arriving, he had sent his CV to over 1,000 magazines, newspapers—every  
place he could think of that might hire a photographer.

P: “*Super*.”

Z: “And he didn’t hear back from a single one.”

Paola raises an eyebrow. “Not one? Hmm.”

Z: “He gave up on the idea, but started to get up at five a.m. every day and  
work from five to eight a.m., teaching himself how to be a web designer.”

At our expressions of puzzlement, Zoran clarifies, “At least it was something visual, so he figured he’d be happier doing that.” As we silently incorporate this plot twist he concludes: “And just in the course of practicing web design, he put some of his photographs up on a website. And you know what? People saw it and he started to get work. And now he’s photographed for Nike, had exhibitions all over the place—he’s a huge success.”

Paola appeared thrilled by this tale. I thought to myself that we had just heard a classic “American Dream” story and was itching to ask Zoran what the moral of this story was for him. Without prompting he summed up: “He should have given up but he really didn’t” (*Morao je da odustane, ali nije zaista*). We ended the session by looking at the photographer’s website together, as if such documentary evidence would change my mind—about what, exactly, I was no longer sure. The photographs were dark, aggressive, evocative. The site included work for numerous well-known companies beyond Nike. Zoran’s friend certainly appeared to be both talented and successful. His “About” page does not mention drinking endless coffees in a boring job or the obstacles he likely overcame in journeying to New York City in 1998. But why should it? These details are not relevant to his professional brand as a photographer, only to Zoran’s recasting of his biography into a parable whose moral is that success will surely follow when one pursues what they love with endless persistence.

In this final story, the protagonist’s move to New York City initially appears key to unlocking his potential—expanding his perspektiva—but is then rendered irrelevant. What facilitates his eventual success is the act of returning to his true self, of looking within. As he shifts his energies to web design his work

and self align in closer proximity, allowing serendipity to intervene. I had heard similar stories from others. My first interviewee shared a blog post that conveyed a story she strongly identified with. A parable about an entrepreneurial Bosnian, its message can be summed up as “believe in yourself, success takes time, and disregard the haters in your midst.” In this as well as Zoran’s story the protagonists embody the idealized traits of entrepreneurialism, most significantly: dedication and discipline, risk-taking, creativity and vision but also authenticity and remaining true to one’s self, talents, and calling.

The globally resonant value frameworks of entrepreneurialism and meritocracy are domesticated in these parables that figure, perhaps, as modern-day “stories Serbs tell themselves about themselves” (Živković 2011). The self-effacing “Serbian dream” of finding work that is well paid but not demanding is here derided. These are not subjectivities that can settle into drinking coffee all day with the secretary. But the glorification of doing work that you love, especially in the creative industries, obscures both the insecurity and mundane nature of much of the labor necessary to maintain creative pursuits (Duffy 2017, 185–215) as well as the systemic inequalities that underwrite DWYL as an aspiration more attainable for some than others. In the next chapter, I turn to an overlapping lifestyle and entrepreneurial subjectivity, but where the virtual nature of work in the digital economy complicates the politics of mobility for young potential migrants in Serbia.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **STAYING AND LEAVING: DIGITALIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF MOBILITY**

In October 2015 an unusual Kickstarter campaign was the talk of the Serbian startup scene. There were several compelling reasons for the attention: the scale—the goal was to raise \$100,000, and the medium—no one had successfully crowdsourced such a large initiative in Serbia before. The group behind the campaign was SEE ICT, an NGO formed in 2010 with a mission to “provide meaningful, deep support to [the] Serbian technology and startup scene in order to foster higher employment and economic growth” (SEE ICT, n.d.). The group had recently drawn on its experience running a small coworking space for startups and freelancers to begin construction on a much more ambitious project in Belgrade’s Savamala neighborhood. The aim of this new space, Startit Center, is ambitious: to provide free tech education for 100,000 people by 2020 in order to “create an army of people ready to create and take on the jobs of the future” (Kickstarter, n.d.). The small group of youthful twenty- to thirty-somethings behind SEE ICT/Startit (hereafter Startit) planned to use the funds raised through the campaign to finish renovations on Startit Center Belgrade, open three of a planned twelve such centers in Serbia’s smaller cities, and build a new platform for online tech education.

A few months prior I had run into Nenad from the Social Impact Award at a panel on youth unemployment. He oozed enthusiasm not for the event we were at but for one he had just attended at the cultural center *Dom Omladine*. There



had been something like 700–800 young people there, he told me, all excited about startup culture. The event was equal parts inspiration, celebration, and education. Part of Startit’s “We Know we Can” (Znamo da Možemo) initiative, it featured energetic pitches by teams who had completed Startup Academy, Startit’s comprehensive education program for would-be startup founders. Nenad was also enthused by the announcement at the event of a significant new regional investment fund focused on tech companies.<sup>97</sup>

In contrast, the panel we sat through together was dominated by institutional representatives—the union of employers, the employment bureau—interesting in its own right, but hardly a cauldron of youthful energy. As panelists entertained questions a young man in the audience spoke who had also come from Startit’s gathering. He reiterated the contrast between the two Saturday happenings: “I’m really sorry that you all weren’t at *Dom Omladine* two hours ago to see the other Serbia—to see a thousand young people who really believe in themselves, in their ideas, and who want to do something, to change something. So, those people do exist and we need to listen to them.”<sup>98</sup>

Such startup enthusiasm and the ambitious goals of the Kickstarter campaign belie the slow development of Serbia’s tech scene. To better understand this development—how it intersected the promotion of entrepreneurship more

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<sup>97</sup> See: <https://sc-ventures.com/>. The challenges of attracting investments—venture capital in particular—is an evolving concern in the Serbian startup and entrepreneurship scenes.

<sup>98</sup> In Serbian: “Žao mi je da niste bili u Domu Omladine pre dva sata da vidite drugu Srbiju....” Here, *druga Srbija* could also be translated as “another Serbia.” I don’t think that this young man intended, in using this phrase, to invoke all of the political connotations that *druga Srbija* accrued as it was used in the 1990s, even if the subject positions of anti-Milošević urban intellectuals and the youth he was referring to could be expected to substantially overlap, were they contemporaneous.

broadly and interacted with Serbia’s shifting mobility regimes—I sought out an interlocutor from Startit. I met Dušan, a lanky man in his early thirties, on a broiling summer day. As I gulped water he explained how the growth of the broader tech scene was closely linked to that of the organization he would come to found, with his own work history woven through.

During the chaotic 1990s, Dušan told me, some young programmers were able to find work with foreigners in a “classic form of outsourcing.” “In that way,” he continued, “they made enough [money] to survive and as soon as the sanctions were lifted, when some foreign capital came in, some companies were formed that were—foreign companies—that gathered a solid number of local people who had expertise in information technology.” As members of the tech community—working either remotely or locally but almost entirely for foreign/multinational companies—began to earn good salaries some became tech entrepreneurs, creating new digital applications and services. These were the first Serbian startups, before that term was even known in the country.<sup>99</sup> Dušan himself came to the field out of necessity (challenging the necessity/opportunity entrepreneurship binary discussed in the previous chapter). His parents worked for a firm that collapsed like so many others, and his family barely scraped by during his high school years. He had been interested in tech entrepreneurship and managed to attend some informal education in this realm. Upon graduating

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<sup>99</sup> Though the majority of computer programmers in Serbia work for traditional companies, tech entrepreneurship is dominated by those with at least some programming background. The gender imbalance is particularly pronounced in programming. In Startit’s 2017 survey of over 1,800 Serbian programmers only 12 percent were women. See: <https://startit.rs/rezultati-istrazivanja-domaci-programeri-zadovoljni-poslom-zaraduju-jos-vise-i-zele-da-uce-pajton/>.

high school in 2000 he found sporadic work as an IT consultant, building websites and such.

What Dušan describes is not actually a “classic form of outsourcing,” as no physical parts or components crossed national borders. Rather, this was trade in a new, virtual, component: data. The range of occupations represented in Serbia’s tech community are all part of the growing digital economy. In Nick Srnicek’s broad definition, the digital economy “refers to those businesses that increasingly rely upon information technology, data, and the internet for their business models” (2017, 2). The digital economy thus cuts across sectors but is united by reliance on some form of “platform.” If data is its heart, the platform serves as skeleton. Well-known platforms include Uber (ridesharing) and Airbnb (short-term home rental). But this category also include platforms—such as the globally dominant Upwork—for selling one’s labor as an English-language instructor, virtual personal assistant, photographer, or graphic designer. From Manuel Castells’ ([1996] 2010) concept of the “network society” in which interconnected nodes form a dynamic system for the flow of information, to titles like *Paradigm Shift: The New Promise of Information Technology* (Tapscott and Caston 1993), this recent focus on the “platform” joins several decades of attempts in both the social sciences and popular literature to work out the unifying factors, significance, and future implications of emergent forms of digital technologies and media.

In the field, I encountered the burgeoning digital economy via different avenues: in conversation with friends and acquaintances who found work through various platforms (often teaching English), at the intersection of “digital”

and “entrepreneurship” in spaces like Impact Hub Belgrade, in panel discussions on youth (un)employment, and via the widely circulating view that IT is the most promising (*najperspektivnije*) field of employment for youth in Serbia. This chapter is based on these encounters as well as expert interviews with promoters of digitalization, tech entrepreneurship, and IT education. Additionally, five of the in-depth interviews I conducted were with young software developers, programmers, and tech start-up employees. My analysis is limited by the fact that I did not conduct participant observation in IT incubators, technology hubs, or tech startups. I thus do not explore the culture of work in such places but rather seek to “provincialize and thus particularize the role that digital media play in the construction of sociocultural worlds, group identities and representations...and phenomenological experience” (Coleman 2010, 496–497) for youth seeking dignified work in or out of Serbia.

Given the diffusion of digitalization in modern life, I only began to appreciate the unique challenges and opportunities yoked to the digital economy in hindsight. In the field, I had understood interlocutors such as Dušan to be promoting a particular form of entrepreneurship, namely, tech entrepreneurship. While this was true, I discuss below how the digital economy is only partially convergent with entrepreneurial activity and subjectivity, encompassing various modes of employment and less reliant on an “inward turn.”

In this chapter I turn attention to less conspicuous facets of the politics of mobility in Serbia. I show how economic subjectivities are cultivated in complex relation to place, community, and senses of belonging such that the dichotomy between staying and leaving becomes muddied. Below, I describe how tech

advocates espouse some of the same entrepreneurial values as did the promoters of social entrepreneurship profiled in the previous chapter. These actors also harnessed the dominant discourse on brain drain to cast themselves as certain social types and lend legitimacy and urgency to their agenda. But their educative programs had a decidedly more pragmatic flavor than the likes of “u.lab,” and, rather paradoxically, it was promoters of the “digital transformation” of Serbia rather than social entrepreneurs who sought to advance a sweeping and ambitious vision of national development. Given the particular nature of post-Milošević political subjectivities outlined in the introduction, I read the development aims of tech promoters as examples of the “state practices, functions, and effects [that] increasingly obtain in sites other than the national but [that] never entirely bypass the national order” (Trouillot 2001, 131). Below, I explore how work in the digital economy enables forms of “virtual migration” along with “apolitical activism” while holding the promise of dignified work for some somewhere between the here and now and the then and there.

### **Building Virtual Community**

Jovan, like Dušan, was an ardent builder of the tech community. We first met at a busy sidewalk café. His movements and words were conservative, deliberate, just what is needed. He dressed in all black: jeans and a t-shirt, or if the occasion warranted it, a collared shirt and sweater. He told me that he had made the decision to simplify his wardrobe so that getting dressed didn’t suck energy from where he wanted to direct it the most: toward developing Serbia’s digital economy while growing his own branding and design firm.

“Before Christ and after Christ,” Jovan quipped, explaining the development of the IT scene in Serbia. “Before Christ and after Christ—that is, before social networks and after. Actually, *forums* were social networks before social networks.” Internet forums, he explained, were where programmers, designers, and others involved in the nascent Serbian tech scene in the early 2000s came together to exchange expertise and projects. But both Jovan and Dušan from Startit yearned for more facetime with others working in these fields. In 2007 Dušan and a friend built a website to promote IT events happening in the country. They were invited to a conference in Romania, where there was already a flourishing tech scene, and thought, “let’s get this going in Serbia,” as Dušan put it. Founding an NGO in order to attract sponsors, they soon put together the first startup event in Belgrade, a pitching forum called “How to Web” (a spin-off of an annual Romanian event). “We barely found any domestic startups, that is, people who had an idea, to pitch, to present their projects,” Dušan remembered.<sup>100</sup>

Several years later, it’s a different story—while Serbia’s largest cities of Belgrade and Novi Sad are not found on the lists of top European cities for “startup readiness” or “scale-up readiness” (neighboring capitals Sofia and Bucharest are), organizations like the Digital City Index that produce such assessments do not include countries outside the European Union.<sup>101</sup> Of course,

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<sup>100</sup> The Romanian iteration of How to Web is still a large annual conference: <https://www.howtoweb.co/>.

<sup>101</sup> Startups are generally considered to be young companies and individual entrepreneurs while “scaleups” are companies in a phase of rapid growth and with a number of, usually ten or more, employees. See: <https://digitalcityindex.eu/city/32>. Serbia has also not participated in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor since 2009. Serbian startups like Nordeus (mobile game developer) and Strawberry Energy (creator of the world’s first public solar charging device) have nevertheless garnered international acclaim.

challenges in the regulatory, administrative, and educational systems also hinder expansion of entrepreneurial activity in the digital economy. The greatest barrier is, perhaps, a high level of distrust in Serbian institutions writ large. At a discussion I attended in August 2018 featuring the founder of a digital startup, a telling moment occurred as he, in great detail, walked the audience through his process “from idea to investment,” as the event was billed. “Neither did I want to nor did it occur to the [American] investor that I would be registered in Serbia,” he said. Titters of laughter and the exchange of knowing smiles confirmed that no further elaboration was needed. The options for registering one’s business were London or Delaware.

Nevertheless, there is now general agreement that Information Technology is the healthiest sector of the Serbian economy, fueling interest in computer programming, online employment, and startup culture. But the educational system has not kept pace. The Faculty of Organizational Sciences (FON), and particularly its IT track, is considered the most popular in the University of Belgrade system and entrance is highly competitive. The situation is mirrored at the Faculty of Technical Sciences at the University of Novi Sad. The inability of the state university system to accommodate students interested in learning computer programming and related digital skills is situated within the heated debate on the “misalignment” between university and market discussed in chapter 3. Digital economy devotees tended to locate themselves in the camp favoring a market-oriented educational system. One of the harshest assessments I heard in this vein came from a promoter of technological entrepreneurship. He

characterized the educational system as “catastrophic,” pointing a finger directly at the university faculty and administration:

I really believe that there are people who really lecture and work at the faculties because they love it, and because they are interested, and because it is their life calling. But I simply think that the whole educational system is so degraded and encourages negative selection to such an extent that the current cadre at the faculties is terrible and don't have any connection to reality, to the economy, with what is needed; rather, they simply want to maintain their own system.

My interlocutor here echoes the perception, voiced by Gordana and widely shared, of the university as breeding ground for the phenomenon of negative selection. But he also makes transparent the view that the educational system ought to respond directly to market demands. How and to what extent the university system should be reformed to better prepare students for the job market is a complex issue (see Greenberg 2014, 102–111). But I think it is fair to say that *all* my interlocutors were advocates of some measure of reform in this direction. And yet, one day Zoran, usually a fan of all things digital and entrepreneurial, grumbled that if the IT craze continues, “we will be a country of computer geeks with no one to run it.” This comment expresses concern for the type of citizens fashioned out of students but also points to the incomplete overlap between the digital and the entrepreneurial. A computer geek may find a lifetime of work as a lowly coder in a large firm; only a select few will found a digital startup. A computer geek need not embrace the entrepreneurial values of innovation, creativity, flexibility, and self-work that Zoran held so dear in order to find dignified (or less than dignified) work.



The limited number of university seats available for potential IT students has facilitated the growth of informal education outlets, such as Startit's online academy and trainings offered by other tech hubs and startup incubators. The digital hype has also been facilitated by, and has spurred the growth of, a now-annual gathering in Vršac, a small town a few hours' drive east of Belgrade. The conference, with the tagline "live locally, work globally" (*živi lokalno – radi globalno*), is billed as an inspirational and networking event. It is also Jovan's greatest contribution to building Serbia's tech community. As he explains in a lecture honed over the past few years, the idea behind "live locally, work globally" is to tap into the global marketplace through various forms of online employment—possibilities that hold the promise of making relatively good money while living in relatively low-cost Serbian towns. He gives several examples of men who have mastered this trick through different forms of work in the digital economy: building video games that attracted the attention of a global distributor, selling photographs through online platforms, and offering design services to global clients. The annual conference showcases many more such stories, gathering speakers under the rubrics of "outsourcing," "startup," and "freelance" to share their own inspirational tales of making a living in the global marketplace without ever leaving home.

I was initially perplexed by the placement of "outsourcing" on par with what struck me as the rather different economic modes of "freelance" and "startup." Jovan was among those who bristled at the promotion of Serbia as an outsourcing destination. But his critique did not extend to the work itself (here he had in mind computer programming specifically, not the call-center drudgery

that has also come to Serbia). The way he sees it, insofar as programmers can exploit such positions as springboards to more creative, fulfilling ones at the head of their own companies or freelance operations, they can serve as useful training opportunities.

Indeed, in his lecture Jovan repeats a similar list of national attributes whose promotion in the “Invest in Serbia” commercial described in chapter 3 was derided as undignified: “Why do foreigners work with Serbs?” he asks rhetorically. “Because—they are pleasantly surprised when they hear how well we speak English, our price is essentially competitive on the foreign market, and our quality is quite good.” In the context of this talk promoting employment in the digital economy the appellative “low-cost, high-skilled” is pragmatically transformed from an insulting undersell into a comparative advantage to be leveraged in individual efforts to craft an entrepreneurial livelihood and lifestyle, or more modestly, to make do in Serbia’s deindustrialized towns. This leveraging is a primarily individual act, and the vision presented by Jovan is one of digital democratization. His lecture and conference feature success stories from those living outside of Serbia’s tech hubs of Belgrade and Novi Sad in order to highlight that success in the digital economy depends more on individual ambition and savvy than on geographic location. So far, this vision is remarkably analogous to the parable of Zoran’s photographer friend in its reliance on key values relayed through entrepreneurial and meritocratic registers. But here the activity is less inward-facing and more pragmatic; a therapeutic ethos is nowhere to be found. In the next section, I show how these economic subjectivities are coaxed forth out of the expansive frame provided by the discourse on brain drain.

## **Do What You Love (Here and There)**

Jovan's talk on "live locally, work globally" opens with several headlines lamenting Serbia's brain drain. Taking one figure given for the number of annual departures and dividing by 365, he lingers on the point that "at this moment, while you are sitting here, eighty people are packing to permanently leave Serbia." But his audience members are not among the day's eighty suitcase packers, and Jovan positions them as those with their suitcases open, ready to learn something new, interested in hearing the stories of the many "who haven't given up" (*koji se nisu predali*). The dominant discourse on brain drain also frames Startit's activities, if less conspicuously. In the run-up to its Kickstarter fundraiser, Startit created the brilliant campaign "I Know we Can" (Znam da Možemo). The announcement for an event held in the context of this campaign in May 2015 declared: "This is a story about those who stay in Serbia or return and achieve success; about those who have found their own way, about a team that works and doesn't complain about challenges."<sup>102</sup>

This message is elaborated in an inspirational three-minute video. Against the backdrop of subtle, uplifting music, the video features short clips of successful entrepreneurs who speak to the advantages of doing global business from Serbia, the flourishing of the startup scene, and the central quality needed by a would-be tech entrepreneur: "the determination to start today—no excuses, not tomorrow, but today." Startit cofounder Vladimir Trkulja appears, in sweatshirt and jeans,

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<sup>102</sup> See: <http://startit.rs/znamdamozemo/>. Accessed May 14, 2015. This webpage no longer includes the description quoted, having been updated with details of the most recent "I Know we Can" event.

sitting casually in a concrete jungle that suggests the hip Savamala neighborhood where the space is located. “We started as a group of young people who wanted to change something,” he says. Startit’s other founders add soundbites on the group’s development before another entrepreneur appears, a young woman who returned to Serbia after seven years in London. “I came back because I believe that it is also possible here to- actually, one lives much better here than there.” The camera cuts back to Vladimir who delivers a concise explanation of what, exactly, is intended by the slogan “I Know we Can.” Radiating calm resoluteness he says, “I *know* that we can change this country; to offer *perspektiva* to young people who want to create a new future, and who want to change the world from here.” The music soars as the faces of the other speakers flash by again, each voicing the words “I know we can” in front of a chalkboard wall with the same message. The clip ends with three figures: investments in teams who have participated in Startit projects (two million euros), startups begun through Startit projects (forty), and young people employed in these startups (one hundred).<sup>103</sup>

The “I Know we Can” campaign embraces the individualizing and self-responsibilizing elements of global discourses of entrepreneurialism, hitched to a promise of expanded horizons via the local idiom of *perspektiva*, and made relevant and urgent through the politics of brain drain. Jovan’s “live locally, work globally” lecture does similar work. Part of the message is shared with the parables I explored in the previous chapter, namely that it is possible to do what one loves in Serbia (provided that what one loves is marketable). The caricature

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<sup>103</sup> This video can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUTZudferI8>. Accessed April 7, 2019.

of “complaining” youth provides the backdrop for an assertion of key entrepreneurial attributes—here, proactivity is at the fore.

This was not a message relegated to glossy PR materials. When I returned to Belgrade in the summer of 2018 I met with Anja, also a member of the Startit team but a decade Dušan’s junior. In the first few moments of our interview she covered similar ground: “what we are really advocating for, believe in, is that technology and entrepreneurship are ‘future-proof’ skills.” Yet rather than naming the concrete hard and soft skills one might expect she continued, “because we don’t know how [work] will look in twenty years, but if we build up (*izgradimo*) people to be proactive, to think entrepreneurially, to seek out opportunities instead of complaining, then they will manage (*oni će se snaći*).” Here, as in the SIA workshops, it is the fashioning of a general kind of habit of being entrepreneurial, an opportunity-oriented subjectivity, that becomes key to navigating the future of work. At the same time, rather paradoxically, a collective vision of national development came through more strongly in the promotion of tech rather than social entrepreneurship. But the virtual nature of work in Serbia’s digital economy gives rise to two contradictory tendencies: the possibilities for “virtual migration” and “apolitical activism.” I elucidate these themes below.

### **Life in a Virtual Bubble**

“As practices of programming bring together and integrate many other forms of labor around the world, they not only integrate social life in real time; they also disintegrate it by alienating it from its own surroundings.

The phenomenon, historically unprecedented, questions the very foundations of social solidarity around the world.” (Aneesh 2006, 163)

The promising ability to “live locally, work globally” via online labor can be seen as a version of what sociologist A. Aneesh (2006) dubbed “virtual migration” more than a decade ago. Understanding the unique features of online labor as a form of migration, Aneesh argued, “enables us to see certain social aspects of the transnational integration of labor that remain invisible in the economic language of outsourcing and subcontracting” (2006, 3). Anticipating the present-day focus on platforms, Aneesh identifies programming languages as the lynchpin of this phenomenon. While he was mostly interested in some of its general features (such as spatial and temporal integration as well as the structure of work and its management), the implications of virtual migration are provocative. To what extent can we say that those who work in Serbia’s digital economy have “virtually migrated?” Is online labor alienated from its surroundings and eroding the bases of social solidarity, as Aneesh suggests in the epigraph to this section? Or, what does it mean to “live locally” as a citizen—a political subject—when one works globally?

As I spoke with Anja at Startit she reiterated the breakdown of employment options that I had heard from so many: to work in “that one big firm” that might exist in any given small town, for “one of those Serbian bosses of smaller companies that are much more exploitative,” or to seek employment in public administration. Here she lingered, emphasizing the common knowledge of needing to join the relevant political party in order to even have the possibility for work in the public sector. She continued:

What we really want, above all, is to empower the individual, and by empowering the individual we will actually empower society. What does that mean? If we empower individuals to begin to earn their own money

and that money does not come from within [Serbia] but rather comes from somewhere outside, we first of all increase that foreign trade balance of ours in our favor—because some foreign money enters the country—and second, that individual becomes much more independent.

The independence alluded to here is morally inflected: it's a freedom from the forces most despised by those like Miloš and Gordana, who aspired to leave Serbia for good. Programmers, developers, graphic designers, and others with livelihoods embedded in the digital economy and dependent on the global market are able, to a great extent, to circumvent the nepotism, clientelism, bureaucracy, and state-level instability that affects nearly every other worker in Serbia.

As Anja told me, “as for the question of ‘does politics affect everyday life?’ Well, yes, it does, it's just that I think it has much less impact on those who are independent. So, the effect on the IT sector is very small.” The prototypical Serbian “techie” works for foreigners remotely or registers his startup in the US to take advantage of a transparent and straightforward tax code. And they make good money. Startit's 2017 survey established that the average programmer salary ranges from 700-2,200 euros per month, depending on seniority (considered excellent in relation to the national average salary of less than 400 euros) (Kukić 2017). In this context, it seems reasonable to conclude that one might live in a self-made bubble, drawing a good salary, enjoying the finer side of Serbian life, and disengaging from the country's sociopolitical challenges. In other words, fulfilling a crude version of the mantra to “live locally, work globally.” As Dušan put it:

IT is currently a way to earn a very good salary and to build around yourself a kind of balloon, where the situation in the country does not affect you (*te ne tangira*), where you can afford a loan for an apartment, for a car, [where] you do not think much about living expenses. And the

trend is very noticeable that the salary of programmers in Serbia is currently beginning to approach the salary level of developers in Western Europe...not yet and not for everyone, but a good programmer in Serbia will cost you essentially similar to a good programmer in the Netherlands. And the cost of living is incomparably lower.

The attraction of protecting oneself within a “balloon” or bubble from the vicissitudes of national politics (or whatever else might be meant by “the situation in the country”) did not resonate only with digital economy workers. I finally had the chance to sit down with an acquaintance named Nina in July 2015. She was a thirty-three-year-old music composer, somewhat reluctant entrepreneur, and mother. We had met in the course of the Social Impact Award workshops, when she bounded in and briefly joined our group work before distributing pamphlets on a music project and taking her leave. I later learned that Nina had a PhD in music composition from a London university. Among other ways in which she cobbled together a livelihood since returning to Serbia, she had founded an association to promote experimental music. She also gave music lessons. While she had fully expected to want to stay in London, from a distance she began to see the advantages and opportunities of life in Belgrade. She entered the SIA contest with her already “prototyped” music lessons, and her face at the awards ceremony registered real disappointment at not being selected for funding.

While Nina did not think of herself as an entrepreneur she was, in other words, the very model of “brain circulation” and entrepreneurial acumen being so vigorously promoted as antidote to brain drain. But it was clear that her life projects were not rooted in any sense of responsibility to repatriate Serbia’s



human capital. Instead, she was guided by an ethos of self-reliance and resourcefulness, a sense of personal responsibility whose orbit did not extend much beyond her family and friends. All the same, I was surprised by the degree to which she eschewed even general knowledge of electoral politics:

Well, I know the name of the president but, you know, all that amounts to is that I absolutely don't care, I mean, it doesn't have anything to do with me nor will it ever have anything to do with me...I don't believe that we have some real influence on the government, and I also don't believe that they can destroy our lives that much. Somehow, if you deal with yourself and your own stuff, your own possibilities...I mean, it is what it is (*šta je, tu je*). How it is for everyone else it is for you too, so you just, well, pull out the best.

This comment supports the general post-Milošević orientation toward politics outlined in the introduction: a realm that one cannot influence and from which it is best to keep one's distance. That the government does not fulfill certain expected functions is regarded by Nina pragmatically—"deal with yourself and your own stuff," and "it is what it is." As our interview wound down Nina let out a big yawn, and by way of apology told me that she was three months pregnant with twins. Curious because of her nontraditional employment, I asked how maternity leave would work for her. She explained how she was essentially gaming the system, paying herself an outrageous salary through her association so that, when the maternity benefit is calculated, she would receive "a somewhat normal salary" for her two years of leave.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Until a recent change in the law (that I touch on in the conclusion), Serbian mothers were entitled to take up to a full year of maternity leave (two for twins) during which they received the equivalent of their regular salary (or average salary from the previous twelve months).

In other words, Nina's strategy demonstrates how the ability to insulate oneself often depends on the fragments of the social safety net still in place. This situation is somewhat analogous to the relationship between various forms of "gig" labor and full-time employment in the US, where Schor and Attwood-Charles argue that "the platform economy is free riding on other sectors and employers" (2017, 7). It also echoes the improvisational forms of making do and getting by that have been mainstay livelihood strategies in socialist (Verdery 1996), postsocialist (Humphrey 2002), and market (Mörtenböck and Mooshammer 2015; Procoli 2004) economies the world over.

Work in the digital economy is not equal to yet uniquely facilitates the possibility for a certain kind of selectively deterritorialized life via forms of "virtual migration." And yet those leading efforts to grow Serbia's digital potential like Jovan, Dušan, and Anja, endorsed a vision of national development that ran contra to this tendency. I turn to consider these "state effects" below.

### **State Effects and the Politics of Mobility**

Promoters of work in the digital economy often espoused a broader vision of national development via technology. Jovan's conception of raising the employment rate did not rest on the small-town unemployed finding technology jobs, for example. Rather, he thought that if youth had access to quality tech education, positions in the service sector would open up for the long-term unemployed. I wondered about the extent to which such a vision was shared by other enthusiasts of "digital transformation"—that process by which traditional business models are being "disrupted" by the digitization of information (Miller

2018). When I met with Anja in 2018 she told me about Startit's operations in smaller towns, now that eight new centers had been built. She explained that the same three-pronged program was being carried out as in Belgrade: tech education, "pushing" the startup story, and promoting new technologies (most recently, virtual reality and blockchain). But, she noted, those attracted to Startit's work in smaller towns don't have the same basic technological skills as those in towns with IT faculties and vocational schools.

Anja explained: "The way we see the ideal scenario for something to develop is, let's say, that Belgrade, Novi Sad, those larger cities that are already technologically strong, that they become predominantly 'product-oriented.' Meaning, that most people develop their own startups, their own products...[and] that these smaller towns, with their further technological development, begin to be outsourcing towns." Anja delivered this vision matter-of-factly, presenting it as a strategy to avoid internal competition as well as distribute "future-proof" IT skills more broadly. But listening, I was struck by what seemed to me to be a classist undercurrent.

"Well, ok," I probed. "It's clear that entrepreneurship isn't for everyone...but let's say that I'm someone in Indija [a small town between Belgrade and Novi Sad where a Startit Center had been established] who comes [to Startit] for a training in programming, and then I begin to do that work remotely."

Anja: "Mm. Yes, freelance."

I had been trying to allude to those programmers working as full-time outsourced labor for multinational corporations, but agreed, "or as a freelancer"

and continued, “do you think that the fear is realistic, that, I mean, that youth here are somehow transformed into a cheap labor force?”

Anja didn’t pause to think. “Yes, the fear is real,” she responded, “but we are already a cheap labor force. We are already a country of a cheap labor force, just that we are a country with an insufficiently employed cheap labor force. I mean, that’s the way I see it right now.”

Such pragmatism was not intended to condemn any one individual to a boring job as an entry-level coder just because they lived in the provinces. Here, as in Jovan’s scheme, the danger presented by outsourcing centers for funneling talent into boring, dead-end jobs becomes a fate to be circumvented through personal savvy. A talented and motivated individual could move from work in an outsourcing center to being a self-employed freelancer or even founding their own tech startup, given a hefty dose of entrepreneurial ambition.

But what Anja presents here is also a particular, pragmatic, vision of development that highlights how promoters of Serbia’s digital transformation are having “state effects”; engaging in practices and processes of governance (Trouillot 2001) while also promoting an ideological project of the state, that is, (an alternative) “state idea” (Abrams 1988). For example, Jovan’s blueprint for living locally while working globally is an individual one that encodes a certain do-it-yourself quality. But he also spoke of wanting to form a strong lobby to advocate for national-level changes. It seems that such an advocacy group has recently been formalized as Initiative Digital Serbia (Inicijativa Digitalna Srbija—

IDS).<sup>105</sup> Founded by the two telecom giants, Microsoft, Startit, several of the startups it has fostered, and other companies, IDS officially began work in May 2017 with a “Digital Manifesto” that outlines a clear and concise strategy for advancing the digital transformation of Serbia. The aims of the initiative are framed in terms of national progress:

Even though Serbia is a small country, we have given ourselves large goals for fast growth and progress. Our members are companies and organizations with high standards and big ambitions. We love technology, especially when it is used for smarter and better outcomes. The goal of Initiative Digital Serbia is for the programs that we support to lead to real changes and involve all sides....We are united by the desire to significantly contribute to the progress and better future of Serbia. (IDS 2017, 5)

This manifesto bears remarkable resemblance to the postwar modernist visions that ran parallel along the Cold War ideological divide. Both arguably shared an unwavering faith in the power of technology with which “technology was theorized as a sort of moral force that would operate by creating an ethics of innovation, yield, and result” (Escobar 2012, 36). While the nature of this force has shifted greatly with the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, faith in the integrity of technological progress has remained remarkably resilient over the years. In this iteration, the development project is driven by a somewhat unlikely cast of characters in which traditional state institutions play a subordinate role.

Because of their apparent commitment to staying in Serbia as well as such development designs, I wondered about the sense of national responsibility felt by digital economy acolytes. Were they motivated by a kind of “weak nationalism” (Todorova 2015)? Was this a kind of “patriotic professionalism,”

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<sup>105</sup> See: <https://www.dsi.rs/>.

with which educated urbanites blend the development of knowledge-economy skills with an “ethics of concern for the well-being of the nation” (Hoffman 2010, 7; see also Hemment 2015)? Not quite. My questions about national responsibility were met with scoffs. While both Jovan and Startit’s founders harness the dominant discourse of brain drain for publicly situating their work, their version is brutally stripped of any sense of responsibility to the nation-state. But it is not exactly vacant of *any* sense of responsibility, as they saw themselves as real agents of change. I began to understand more of this position in conversation with Jovan. In the final section below I return to his story to tease out how activism meets digital transformation in relation to the politics of mobility in Serbia.

### **An Apolitical Activism?**

Born in 1980, Jovan was twenty years old during the October Revolution of 2000. His personal website coyly suggests that he was quite active in spreading the network of “that organization” beyond Serbia’s largest cities. “That organization” was Otpor, the student-led network instrumental in finally ousting Milošević from power. At the beginning of our interview Jovan sketched out his biography, saying, “well, it’s not important now, but I was in Otpor, there was the revolution and everything else, and then at the end of 2000 I had two paths: politics or business. And I decided to go into business.” I encouraged him to elaborate, asking how he had decided between these two paths. But he brushed the question off with an annoyed “well, I don’t know...” and a vague response

about being young, humble, and wanting something more than that offered by a career in small-town politics.

A few days later we drove together to a panel Jovan was moderating in Novi Sad. On the car ride back to Belgrade I got the chance to ask a question I had been mulling over since our interview: “Is what you do political? Do you see it that way?”

“Yes, it absolutely is political. This is something bigger than myself,” he responded.

“Hmm.” I tried to formulate a follow-up question that would prompt him to make explicit how he saw his current work in relation to his former activism in Otpor and his decision to go into business rather than politics. But he continued unprompted:

Sixteen years ago someone from the Socialist Party [Milošević’s party] spit in my face. I was handing out flyers and he knew who I was and what it was about [organizing for Otpor]. Fifteen years later all the same people are in the government in Vršac who I helped take out then. So, it was all for nothing. I know that that guy remembers me in front of that column of 4,000 people. And fifteen years later I was sitting across from him at a friend’s birthday party. I started to talk to the person next to me about entrepreneurship. And that guy started to listen. I said, “each year, I bring 200 people to this town [for the annual conference]; next year it will be 400.” The guy, who is now deputy major, told me to call him so he can help facilitate things. He, and others, started to see how this is good for them.

“It’s pretty amazing that you can work with someone who spit in your face”

I ventured, watching for his reaction.

Jovan took a drag on his cigarette, carefully aiming the smoke out the cracked window. With his gaze fixed on the dark and rainy road ahead he replied tersely, “this is more important than my vanity.”

Jovan sprinkled our conversations with militaristic language: he talked of educating an “army” of junior programmers, called freelancer programmers “soldiers of fortune,” and envisioned uniting a “front” of promoters of entrepreneurship to lobby the government for systemic change. While I saw this language as a quirky part of his persona, it also conjured up his past “at the front of a column of protesters” against the Milošević regime. Then, the battle for a different world was waged in the streets against a state experienced as a “tangible and mortal enemy” (Razsa 2015, 60). But now the state was largely experienced by the young potential migrants I encountered as a hampering force: a nuisance to be circumvented, with weaknesses to be exploited whenever possible and electoral politics to be disdainfully avoided. As I shared in the introduction, Jovan said: “This population is absolutely uninterested in who runs the state. It doesn’t matter to them. They are not interested in politics or anything else. It’s only important that they are not bothered [by the state].” On the one hand, Jovan seemed disapproving of such “disinterest,” as exemplified by Nina’s professed ignorance of politics. On the other hand, his own stance toward politics revealed a poignant ambivalence. In his view, change would now come through education, a wave of programmers overwhelming the irrelevant and impotent state. And effecting that change was a political project.

Not all promoters of work in the digital economy and tech entrepreneurship shared Jovan’s activist past and certainly not all activists in Serbia have embraced the technology-driven vision of national development outlined here. But Jovan’s work seemed a logical navigation of the “politics of disappointment” (Greenberg 2014) that have characterized the aftermath of a



revolution that was “all for nothing,” as he put it. At the end of my interview with Anja I shared how it seemed to me that many of those who are now involved in entrepreneurship were anti-Milošević activists two decades prior. She seemed to find this proposition intriguing, but couldn’t confirm it—likely because she herself would have been too young at the time to have actively participated in the October Revolution. But she thoughtfully considered the second part of my question, which was whether or not entrepreneurship could be considered a “new form of activism.” “Well, maybe,” she mused:

I mean, we certainly experience it as something that-, our main mission is to improve the situation in which we live. I mean, impr- to enable people to live better and such, and that is definitely activism, it’s just that I somehow think that it is more of a pragmatic activism. It’s just that, or I think, a kind of *apolitical* activism that says, “whoever is in power, I don’t care” ....I would say that we are not trying to change the system from the inside. Rather, we are changing the environment (*okruženje*), and then we hope that at some point it [the system] will change itself.

This comment reveals politics as a tainted realm “out there,” or maybe “up there” in which one doesn’t have any say but that doesn’t really matter anyway. For such actors, this—entrepreneurship, IT education, digital transformation—was a form of “apolitical activism,” or at least an arena of meaningful, agentive, and perhaps unexpectedly, collective action. As Greenberg argues, “In Serbia, genres of apolitics were rhetorical techniques and ethical strategies for remaining socially engaged in contexts in which such engagement is deeply suspect. Increasingly, it is necessary to look in apolitical spaces to understand sites where postsocialist democratic activism is taking place” (2014, 149). There is resonance here with the longer regional genealogy of “antipolitics,” by which dissidents in socialist states advocated for a space of civil society that would foster truly

democratic action untainted by (immoral, obfuscating) state involvement (Greenberg 2014, 152–156; Harper 1999). But the role of the state has shifted, as has the nature of political engagement in Serbia. For at least some of my interlocutors like Anja, Jovan, and Dušan, spreading the digital transformation was about besting the geopolitics of the global economy; a strategy to be engaged for subverting the hierarchy of value that would lock Serbian youth into the peripheral status of a “cheap labor force” (cf. Mantz 2008). It was about claiming a right to stay in a context so many leave, and demonstrating that there was dignified work to be had at home—if one creates it oneself.

**CHAPTER 7**  
**CONCLUSION: IT'S BETTER THERE BUT NICER HERE**

**Trajectories: Political**

In March 2018, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić sounded the demographic alarm anew. But this time it was not about brain drain. A press conference was held at the Government of Serbia. An assistant introduced the president and the two officials who would stoically flank him for the duration of the event. President Vučić began quietly: “Respected journalists and adored citizens of Serbia, today’s address is very important. We will have concrete results that are very important for the future of Serbia.” But he first pauses to remember the Serbian victims of violence in Kosovo fourteen years prior, when a day of riots erupted following two apparently ethnically motivated attacks. Vučić begins with this, he says, because he has been trying, for the past five years, to achieve peace and a solution to what has come to be called the “Kosovo knot” (*Kosovski čvor*), that seemingly intractable problem of Kosovo’s geopolitical status and the status of its ethnic Serb minority.<sup>106</sup>

Vučić is proud of this effort, he says, as “you will see, according to the data that we will share today, that if we don’t arrive at a resolution...the future does not bode well for Serbs. Because of many objective criteria.” The president talks more about Kosovo, then of a general social apathy. He then says: “For the past

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<sup>106</sup> Quotes are my own translation from the full video of the press conference, which I viewed via *Kurir*’s video feed here: <https://www.facebook.com/kuririnfo/videos/1832882440108706/>. Aired March 17, 2018, last accessed April 4, 2019.

fourteen years, unemployment has, convincingly, been the biggest problem. Today unemployment is *not* the biggest problem, even by the reactions of citizens.” The biggest problem? That there are no children. Vučić recites national demographic statistics, peering over his glasses to clarify that these figures do not include the ethnic Albanian population of Kosovo.

He asks for attention: “I ask the citizens to hear this, so that you understand *why* the leader of the Republic of Serbia, in addition to all else, seeks a resolution to the problem of Kosovo. We conducted a comparison,” he says, “of parts of central Serbia and parts of Kosovo with Albanian populations.” He recites the population sizes and fertility rates of certain Serbian municipalities, adding that these locations were selected for this comparison as they are actually larger in size than their Kosovar counterparts.

Live births, natural deaths. The demographic indicators are rolled out methodically, hypnotically. And with each comparison, Kosovar Albanians emerge with a positive demographic prognosis against the endangered Serbian nation. “In 2060,” Vučić says,

Serbia will have between 3.9 and 5.5 million residents. We will certainly be small, and significantly smaller than today. And for that not America, not the European Union, not anyone else is to blame. For that we are ourselves deserving (*za to smo sami zaslužni*), no one else. In line with that, I want to tell you that it is possible, according to conservative scenarios, that out of 3.9 million residents we will have 1.7 million pensioners, which means that we are then finished. As a nation. People simply must understand that. We will no longer have any kind of economic potential, no kind of demographic potential, and no kind of political potential.

In short: Serbia is shrinking, we have only ourselves to blame, and this is why we need to resolve the “Kosovo knot.”

This press conference took place during a particularly tense month for negotiations between Belgrade and Priština. In this context, the presidential conjuration of a demographic arms race between ethnic Serbs and Kosovar Albanians *could* be read as a rather stark reassertion of the nationalism that Western journalists and political elites are on vigilant watch for in the Balkans (cf. Hromadžić 2015, 22). One could also claim that, with such talk, Vučić was pandering to his base and nothing more. What this could *not* logically be is a strategy to prompt women to give birth to more children. For it is so-called “hedonistic” urban women who have the lowest fertility rates. They are also the least likely to be won over with a give-birth-for-the-nation-type argument.

After I left Serbia in 2016, President Vučić assigned a minister responsibility for demography and population politics and established a council for this issue as well. The council soon recommended changes to the ten-year-old pronatalism strategy and the press conference discussed here was ostensibly prompted by the adoption of these changes.<sup>107</sup> But there was no obvious catalyst for such renewed attention on reproductive habits. National demographic trends are just that—long-term trends—and, crucially, it doesn’t seem that any new data had been released, rather, the figures referenced by President Vučić were drawn from projections based on data from the 2011 census.

If this pronatalist rhetoric—folded into a lament about Kosovo—were intended to distract from the rescinding of rights, it doesn’t seem to have been

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<sup>107</sup> See: <http://pink.rs/politika/37090/pocela-sednica-saveta-za-populacionu-politiku-predsedava-premierka-brnabic>; and <https://naslovi.net/2017-08-21/moj-novi-sad/beograd-populaciona-politika-prioritet-vlade-srbije/20360362>.

effective. In December 2017 a revision of the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children (Zakon o finansijskoj podršci porodici sa decom) was pushed through parliament. Lauded by the government as ensuring greater overall maternity benefits, it soon became clear that the devil was in the details. As the new law came into effect in July 2018, it was harshly criticized in the media—in particular, but not just, for the reduction in paid maternity leave that many women would experience. The way in which the purported pronatalist stance of the government was undermined by such legislation did not go unnoticed. As one journalist put it, “population policy is supposedly a priority of this government, one of those imaginary priorities that in reality do not exist and in relation to which, on the contrary, everything is so that—in favor of some ‘higher goals’—the situation additionally deteriorates to the detriment of citizens” (Reljanović 2018).

The cynicism apparent in how these changes have been assessed points to more than just a mistranslation between the levels of political discourse and policymaking, and I think it would be overly generous to label these the “unpredictable effects” of competing policy agendas. Rather, it seems to me that the rhetorical linking of demographic crisis to the status of Kosovo, the concurrent erosion of maternity rights and benefits, the insistence that the economy is improving in direct contrast with the lived experience of most, and finally, the very vacillation between brain drain and natality as key governmental priorities, all point to a kind of political incoherence. And this incoherence only reinforces the mobility strategies and stances outlined in this dissertation: migration to an imagined meritocratic “then and there,” an inward turn toward

the cultivation of an entrepreneurial self, virtual migration via digital work, and an apolitical activism that seeks social change at a level and of a kind that (mostly) bypasses the national.

### **Trajectories: Personal**

In 2015 Tašmajdan Park was under renovation. Now, basket swings large enough for several toddlers each, ample shade, and a rubber surface drew a steady crowd to the children's playground in this central Belgrade landmark. It's a hot August day in 2018, two and a half years since I completed the fieldwork on which this dissertation is based. My first return trip to Serbia. It's the season of migrant holidays and transnational family visits as well as research trips. I am at "Taš" every day with my own family, and I notice the many "mixed" families—in this context signaled by children with too-blond hair and curious codeswitching habits.

My son was taking a break from play to chomp on an apple when Igor, one of my oldest local friends, joined us on the bench. I was worried I might miss him and his wife Nevena. I had, ironically, been headed to a conference in Stockholm the exact week they returned from Uppsala to Belgrade to attend a friend's wedding. But we managed to align our calendars for a few quick visits. Their move to Sweden had come as a shock. Igor had been working as a consultant for a Swedish animation studio for some time and would occasionally fly to their headquarters for a few weeks of onsite work. But he didn't think the firm would ever offer him a permanent position, given that it seemed to make economic sense for them to just contract him as needed. These friends had only ever

discussed such a move (with me) in the most hypothetical of terms. The last time we had had coffee Nevena was adamant that she would never leave the language school she had founded, despite its struggling status and uncertain future.

While we now waited for our spouses to join I peppered Igor with questions. Had they really wanted to move? How long did it take to get a work visa? Were they happy? Igor liked his job but the novelty was beginning to wear off. Nevena felt isolated. She was working from home, teaching language lessons via Skype while she worked toward a career change. Despite being in Sweden for nearly eighteen months they had yet to make real friends. There were many things they liked about their new home, in particular the clean air and nature and food that they insisted was far healthier. (While I raved about the greenmarket produce in Belgrade they insisted that Serbia exports its best agricultural products, leaving only the subpar to be purchased locally.) But I found the fact that they did not plan to learn Swedish telling. It was a sign that they were not ready to commit to making Uppsala their home.

“I feel *bad* when I talk about Sweden, because there’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just...” Igor mused. It was a cliché, but I knew just what he meant. Sweden was the quintessential “orderly country” (*određena zemlja*) of the “then and there” imaginary West. The kind of place evoked in the local idiom “it’s better there but nicer here” (*bolje je tamo, a lepše je ovde*). As a visitor to Stockholm I had felt the contrast with Belgrade on my skin as well, to a much greater extent than I did when returning to the US. Maybe Igor and Nevena’s story is particularly marked by ambivalence because they had not been heavily invested in leaving. Leaving was, rather, something that just kind of happened to them.



The mobile trajectory of this pair was not the only one that surprised me—revealing, perhaps, the limits of my own imagination, or the depth of my skepticism about the logistical and other barriers to actually crossing an international border. Other migrations were less surprising: a highly talented tech entrepreneur who had accepted a job offer in Australia at the time of our interview was now in Berlin. A tennis coach-turned-software developer with a decade of experience in the US returned to the States after several years back in Serbia. A charming young interlocutor who imagined himself as a citizen of the world in addition to tech start-up employee had taken a job in Toronto. An ambitious Master’s student pinged me on Facebook to say hi and flippantly mentioned that she now lives in Canada as a result of marriage and her husband’s tech-industry job. These are not the only mobilities I tracked, but this cluster was propelled by the specificity of the digital economy and the highly marketable skills possessed by such digital economy workers.

Meanwhile, Impact Hub Belgrade, along with the broader entrepreneurship and tech scenes in Belgrade, seemed to be flourishing in summer 2018. When I visited IHB the vibe was lively and the long strand of pictures of “hublanders” (members) adorning the staircase was a testament to the community’s growth. I only managed to chat briefly with one of the team members whose tenure extended back to my fieldwork. IHB had recently rebranded as an “accelerator,” which this interlocutor explained to mean that they were now able to offer members the full “circle” of necessary services, “from space to mentorship to investments.” The investment options for Serbian start-ups ready to “scale up” is indeed an evolving concern beyond the scope of this

dissertation. Jovan's annual technology conference has continued to grow and the activities of Startit continue to expand.

As for a few of the others who so generously shared their stories: I did not stay in touch with sisters Mirjana and Mina but both maintain LinkedIn profiles, both of which suggest rather unexpected trajectories. Mirjana has gone from human resources intern to flight attendant for Emirates airline to writer for a financial news portal. Mina has stuck closer to her field of training as a special education teacher. I was heartened to read that she had found a position in a prestigious Belgrade school, then quite surprised to read that the current school listed was in small town in the US. Neither sister has held a position for longer than two years, yet I like to think that both have found elements of the dignified work they so eloquently expressed desires for and expectations of.

Miloš has realized at least part of his ambitious plan to emigrate to the United States. When we last connected he was in Boston. Right before my departure from Serbia in spring 2016 he had triumphantly secured a tourist visa to the US. He now faced the formidable task of figuring out a way to remain in the country legally. He had read a draft of my chapter that includes part of his story and, reflecting on that time, said that he had been driven by the sense of needing to be "on firm ground." Ironically, given his uncertain status and the tightening of US immigration regulations, he now felt that he had found firmer ground across the Atlantic.

Gordana was still in Belgrade, where we met for coffee in August 2018. She struck me as a more relaxed version of the person I had met nearly three years prior, without the same air of wanting to get something off her chest. She shared

a development that was far from expected at the time of our initial interview: she had left her department at the University of Belgrade and enrolled in a doctoral program for Russian studies at what in Serbia is known as a college (*visoka škola*). As more drama unfolded in her UB department she had seen a call for applications for *asistent* at this other college. Gordana deadpanned that “they had to hold a regular competition because no one had a relative who taught Russian and needed a job.” She would not lose any time toward her doctorate but she needed a new mentor and thesis topic, which she quickly identified. Gordana now had a supportive mentor, good working conditions, and decent pay. As she seemed to have found a satisfying sense of equilibrium, I was a bit surprised when she also mentioned that she had recently passed the C1-level (advanced) exam for German, indicating that her long-term plans still included departure from Serbia.

“But do you think you could be happy *here*?” I wondered, given her improved educational and employment status. “No, because of other things,” she replied. Like sisters Mirjana and Mina, she also named the dysfunctional healthcare system as indicative of a fundamentally disorderly and unpredictable state. But it was another comment that more directly exposed the sense of existential insecurity experienced by members of Gordana’s generation. On the one hand, leaving did not have the same urgent inflection it had before. On the other hand, Gordana mused, “my one fear is that there will be some shit over Kosovo that will close the borders—and I will have missed my chance to leave.”

I was quite struck by this statement. Nothing significant was happening with the “Kosovo question” at the time and the specter of closed borders seemed

far-fetched, especially coming from pragmatic, level-headed Gordana. Yet with further contemplation I could appreciate the sense this scenario made. The children of the 1990s in Serbia have, from a very young age, witnessed their life chances and choices fundamentally configured by events beyond their control. Now, as full-fledged adult citizens, what influence could they claim on whether or not their government recognized the independence of Kosovo and the reverberations such recognition or continued nonrecognition would have? I'm not sure.

### **Summary**

In this dissertation I have tried to render legible the meanings of migration and mobility for Serbia's children of the 1990s by approaching the politics of brain drain as a lens through which to bring broader socioeconomic issues into focus. We have seen how brain drain expresses a general concern with national competitiveness in a global marketplace (because the nation-state needs a young workforce) as well as a more specific anxiety about who will make the future of the nation. The dominant discourse on brain drain in Serbia simplistically positions the departure of the young and educated as a result of unemployment, suggesting that youth solve the problem themselves via entrepreneurship.

The driving force of the preceding pages is a desire to open up this dominant discourse for critical inspection. I do this by turning attention to how skilled migration is constituted as a problem and the practices prompted. I show how the government's policy goal of EU accession heightens focus on the (un)employment rate and attracting foreign direct investment. The resultant "jobless growth," in turn, facilitates focus on "the unemployed individual,"

allowing the government to eschew responsibility for the more complex concern of job creation while cloaking the underlying issues in moralizing discourses of work. My analysis centered the mobility narratives of young potential migrants in an effort to interrupt the assumptions underpinning governmental policies by tracking how Serbian youth actually narrate their life chances and choices at home or abroad.

Attention to the historical conditions of possibility for mobility reveals three significant periods in the country's history. Historical memory of both "normal" and "gastarbajter" mobility in socialist Yugoslavia, as well as the conditions of "entrapment" that followed, importantly inflect contemporary meanings of mobility and migration. But my research has demonstrated that conditions in Serbia can no longer be primarily described as ones of entrapment breeding desires for escape. A central goal of this dissertation has been to show how the 2009 shift in the conditions of possibility of travel *also* marked a shift toward more nuanced stancetaking in relation to leaving. Throughout these pages I have shown how, by the time of my research, the expectations for mobility and dignified work of the young and educated had become more and more often calibrated against personal experiences of real-life travel. In interrogating values and expectations of work as they relate to mobility, my research demonstrates how both meritocracy and entrepreneurialism act as value-laden registers through which youthful socioeconomic aspirations are articulated. Finally, I have illuminated how work in the digital economy economic muddies the dichotomy posited between staying and leaving.

In offering a nuanced account of socioeconomic aspiration and the imaginative possibilities invested in migration on the European semi-periphery, I hope this dissertation serves as an ethnographic intervention into a field of study long dominated by reductionist models of motivation and choice. This is also a policy intervention: I challenge the grim certainty of migration statistics deployed to serve a national narrative of ongoing demographic crisis, highlighting instead the creativity and persistence with which young potential migrants turn the increased geopolitical openness and nascent digital transformation of Serbia to their comparative advantage.

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