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Radomir Konstantinović and *Provincial Philosophy*: Binaries as Borders

Abstract

This essay is a partial reconsideration of the complex and often-cited work *Filozofije palanke* (1969) by the Serbian novelist and essayist Radomir Konstantinović. The fiery condemnations of Serbia's stalled social and intellectual development and its accompanying predilection for barbaric violence are fiercely debated to this day, nearly six years after the death of the author and approaching fifty years since the book's first publication. One way that Konstantinović builds his argument is by establishing borders between Serbia, or other societies, and Europe or modernity; three main types of these borders can be expressed as binaries centered on values, time, and geography. The "spirit" or mindset of the *palanka*, or small Serbian town, can perhaps be rehabilitated by converting it into a historically contingent philosophy, which comes to term with the forces of time, evolution, and agency.

Keywords: Serbia, nationalism, Yugoslavia, Radomir Konstantinović, *Filozofija palanke*, Balkans, town, existentialism.

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Nobody knows anymore what is what, how
far politics goes and where habits and
customs begin, or where the boundary
between mentality and ideology runs.

Milovan Danojlić
(Danojlić, 1987, p. 131)

Introduction

The philosophical work by the Serbian philosopher and novelist Radomir Konstantinović, *Filosofija palanke*¹, written in 1969, has become a touchstone in historical and civil society circles and even a kind of “cult classic” in Balkan studies. There have been conferences and publications dedicated to this book, as well as a recently performed stage version and a never-ending stream of citations. The gist of the meandering, closely argued work is that Serbian society is shaped by a spirit of provincialism that manifests itself in a sense of being closed off from other societies, from the growth of individualism and civil society, and from evolving self-awareness.

Konstantinović (1928-2011) was born in the northern Serbian city of Subotica, also widely known by its Hungarian name Szabadka. This multi-ethnic city has played an important role in the history of southern Hungary and of the Serbian province known as Vojvodina. The city was also home to a surprising number of other important intellectual and cultural figures, such as the great Yugoslav writer Danilo Kiš (1935-1989), and the important Hungarian writers Dezső Kosztolányi (1885-1936) and Géza Csáth (1887-1918), as well as the Croatian priest and political figure Blaško Rajić, the Hungarian architect Ferenc Raichle, local historian István

¹ Konstantinović's title can be translated in many ways. The main key is the word *palanka*, which means roughly “town” but has no direct equivalent in English. Thus, while his magnum opus is usually translated as *The Philosophy of the [Small] Town*, other fruitful variations exist, such as, for instance: *Provincial Philosophy*, *The Province and Philosophy*, *The Provincial and the Philosophical*, or *The Philosophical and the Provincial*). The work, though frequently reprinted in Yugoslavia and Serbia, has not been translated into English, German, or French. Studies in those Western languages of non-literary aspects of Konstantinović's works are very rare, and even literary references are thin on the ground.

Iványi, the Austro-Czech cinematographer Aleksandar Lifka, aviation pioneer Ivan Sarić, the Yugoslav track-and-field star and Partisan hero Jovan Mikić-Spartak, and the Serbian actress Eva Ras. This enumeration is important because it hints at the rich fields of Serbian history that are seldom worked in the West. These names are even more important when we see in them a parallel, via Konstantinović, with another set of important figures from all over Yugoslavia of Serbs who constitute what specialists call “the other Serbia,” or an alternate Serbia. These are the numerous—but again, understudied—novelists, scholars, journalists, and others who reject, in various ways, Serbia’s patriarchal past, the construct of medieval territorial inviolability, and the equation of anti-communism with ethnic nationalism. There are far too many of these people to list, but some representative examples would be writers such as Kiš, Biljana Jovanović (1953-1996), Mirko Kovač (1938-2013), and László Végel (b. 1941), just to name a very few.

Over his long and fruitful career, Konstantinović wrote many novels and radio plays. As a critic and broadcaster on Radio Belgrade, his greatest engagement was with Serbian poetry; eight volumes of his thoughts on philosophy and literature were published. In addition, he wrote five novels, one of which has been translated into English²; and his name remains associated with the “existentialist literary techniques” (Jakovljević, 2016, p. 85) prevalent in the 1950s as Yugoslavia rejected Stalinism and moved away from socialist realism. He also published two books of philosophical essays and one of annotated letters, and he won a wide range of literary prizes. A few more of his shorter works have appeared posthumously in print. When Konstantinović died in 2011, there was an enormous outpouring of tributes and analytical articles in Serbia; the respected daily newspaper *Danas*, for instance, published a remarkable supplement devoted just to him. It was entitled “*Odlazak Radomira Konstantinovića*” (Eng. The Departure of Radomir Konstantinović) and appeared in the edition of November 5/6, 2011.³

Filozofija palanke is undoubtedly the best known of all of Konstantinović’s works. Since its first publication in 1969, it has gone through seven editions and, since the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, has received considerable scholarly attention in South Slavic philosophical and literary circles. Latinka Perović, a well known Serbian historian and political

² *Exitus*, translated by E. D. Goy (Konstantinović, 1965).

³ The entire supplement, in its original, densely configured format, can be found at: <http://pescanik.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Konstantinovic-Danas.pdf>. The internet news portal *Peščanik* is a first-rate source of information on many Serbian and ex-Yugoslav intellectuals.

figure, observed recently that the year of the book's genesis was far from accidental: by the late 1960s it was apparent that "state socialism based on a monopoly of politics and property was not capable of change and that, to defend itself, it would come to rely on nationalism." Konstantinović "anticipated this symbiosis" and foresaw that "it was going to result in a catastrophe." (Perović, 2015, p. 641).

The goals of this essay are to introduce anglophone readers to an important figure in Serbian intellectual history, to draw attention to his most significant work, especially as conceived in terms of borders and boundaries, and to spark discussion about a particular new reading of his ideas at a time when the institutional direction and social priorities of the countries of Eastern Europe (and beyond) are in confusion.

A Brief History of the Reception of *Filozofija palanke*

The great impact of Konstantinović's book derives from the fact that it has always been understood as a direct analysis of and confrontation with forces of ethnic nationalism. There is little doubt of the power of its formulations or its continued relevance as an object of serious discussion (and sometimes potent derision) in Serbia today. An entire book could be written on the reception history of *Filozofija palanke*, but for the sake of space here we just adduce two assessments. The historian Perović calls the work a "philosophical literary-historical study" that serves as "a book with the secret code to our fate" (Perović, 2015, pp. 636, 652), while an anthropologist has referred to it aptly as "arguably the ur-text of [a] whole genre of discourse" and "one of the most powerful statements, or rather indictments, of the national character and its half-bakedness," in which the town is "some sort of abysmal Purgatory-like twilight zone" where "Serbs as a whole seem to have gotten stuck for good." (Živković, 2011, p. 137) The Croatian philosopher Rada Iveković considers him "far and away the most important philosopher in the South Slavic lands" (Iveković in Daković, 2008, p. 179), while the Serbian philosopher Nenad Daković says that *Filozofije palanke*, in particular, is the most significant Serbian philosophical work of the twentieth century and, in addition, is "possibly the one authentic and absolutely autochthonous philosophical work from [the Serbian] space." (Daković, 2008, p. 5) The writer Dragan Velikić has even noted wryly that a copy of Konstantinović's book should in the future be placed in the drawer in every hotel room as an "obligatory piece of equipment for the maturation of every thinking being in these parts."

(Velikić in Daković, 2008, p. 130) On a more serious note, but one equally enthusiastic about the importance of *Filozofije palanke* beyond just the domain of philosophy, the Hungarian-Serbian writer László Végel has argued that Konstantinović's very worthy fiction is populated by isolated individuals moving through an absurd world (in a manner others call "existentialist), while his nonfiction, above all the work under examination here, "anticipate the 'reality' in which the protagonists of his novels are forced to live." (Vegel in Daković, 2008, p. 146)

Publications from around the world in the 1990s are replete with references to Konstantinović's condemnation of aggressive Serbian nationalism. Analysts focus, understandably, on images from the book such as a "tribe in agony," a world of harmony versus a world of fear, and the *tamni vilajet* (a mythical nether zone in Serbian folklore where temptation, damnation, and false choices bring doom to humans). The *palanka* is not only all-encompassing and potentially vicious, it also offers false friends. A delusional sense of individuality (being different from the outside world) is only part of the problem; the other, to paraphrase Milan Kundera, is that "time is elsewhere." When change is marked only externally, and when people feel that they live eternally through the veneration of their dead ancestors, they feel like time and death have no meaning for them.

Many recent citations and quotations from *Filozofija palanke* recycle a set of familiar, if very evocative phrases and images. These often come from the beginning and end of the closely argued text.⁴ The beginning of the book is rich in descriptions of the social, cultural, and intellectual characteristics of the Balkan *palanka* ("town," "small town," or "province"). The list is long, and it is continued throughout the book, and of course it is exciting, anti-nationalist, and very quotable. The descriptions stress characteristics such as uniformity, unity, dogma, infantilization, blood, banality, eternity, deception or deceit, the absence of tragedy, *pamfletizam* (polemic, satire, or propaganda as a substitute for political and religious argument), the nihilism of the status quo, the fetishization of common sense, the primacy of fact and of immediate "givens," laziness, naivete, the denial of both subjectivity and objectivity in several senses, the super-ego, and the triumph of the general, the average, the collective, the normal, the normed. Ultimately the provincial philosophy is both immortality and nothingness.

It is important to note that Konstantinović is not writing about a particular extant place or settlement or type of settlement; the *palanka* is

⁴ Indeed this is a very complex work. It is the modest hope of the present observer, who makes no claim to be a philosopher, that this essay might interest anglophone specialists in a variety of fields to discuss Konstantinović's work in the context of their work and against the backdrop of Konstantinović's other scholarly output.

a philosophical metaphor, not a designation for a physical locality. The author also makes it very clear that limiting, or delimiting, the *palanka* in terms of countries; it is not an essential part of his argument whether or not all of Serbia is a *palanka*, and he definitely rejects the idea that the provincial spirit could only apply to Serbia, or even the Balkans. The spirit of the province is not in the world, to paraphrase the author; it is in the mind, and it could be in minds anywhere, and in individuals or groups, large or small. The term *palanka*, itself a Turkicisms in the Serbian language, originally denoted “a small city or fortress surrounded by a moat.” (Belančić, 2003, p. 131) Today it can mean either a provincial town or a rural, backwards area in general. It has many connotations as well, and the richness of the word lends itself well to the complexities of Konstantinović’s argument.

Meanwhile, the end of the book is colored with poignant justifications for the importance of the topic. The provincial spirit can cause great chaos, despite its claim to represent a bulwark against just such chaos. Violence is, ultimately, the price-tag of the *palanka*. Konstantinović often couches violence in terms of “barbarism,” as when he writes that “[b]arbarism is the age-old impulse of the spirit for unity, that is, tribal unity.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 156) Another effect of the provincial spirit is a kind of compulsive humility, described as “chaste poverty, self-renunciation, and a life reduced to lethargic endurance” and self-disparagement. (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 159) Its spirit can lead to “an explosion of barbarism” as it

leads the “little man” towards an endless hunger for power, and a volcanic overflowing of repressed forces...[and] a craving that can become a poem or the flash of a knife-blade. (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 156)

We should not forget that this “is also the spirit that, with fire and sword, and in a prophet-like rage, drives out those whom it labels culpable for the fact that unity proves elusive.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 159)

Binaries as Borders

As a philosopher and literary historian, Konstantinović sets himself the task of drawing distinctions between types of societies and their attendant (or causal) ways of conceptualizing and processing the world. His specific references have to do with Serbia, and the border or boundaries between Serbia and the rest of Europe have to do with the evolutionary track of this Balkan society over time. “Between the village and the city, and as such

forgotten,” he writes, “the world of the *palanka* is neither village nor city.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 5) If the village is associated with the distant past dominated by the tribe, the city is connected with the external world, the passage of time, and civilization. The fact that the sociological taxonomy employs geographical terminology, perhaps for clarity’s sake, does not diminish its main power as metaphorical.

The site of most of Konstantinović’s philosophical work is thus not inside civilization, but inside the non-civilization (which he does indeed sometimes call barbarism) that is already inside Europe. He uses various metaphors or concepts to draw this cultural or civilizational border; he does not defend this border, he posits it and describes it. Perhaps the two things that are most unique about borders in Konstantinović are that they are at once powerful (containing) and transcendent (hard to contain, or *nad-graničan* as the author says), on the one hand, and that they can be expressed in unique binaries.

The book’s very first sentence is a bold one. “Our experience,” Konstantinović asserts, “is provincial.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 5) The author is thereby giving notice that the configuration and inner workings of the Balkan “town” or province will receive most of his attention in this work. The sentence also has the effect of grabbing one’s attention with a label to which many people are unaccustomed or which they may find uncomfortable. But Konstantinović plunges ahead fearlessly, writing that he knows it can be dangerous to tell people that “the town is our fate, our misfortune.” As a lens through which to view his analysis of this dangerous and ill-fated condition, we shall examine a number of the characteristics of the *palanka* noted in the previous section. These can be couched in binary terms. The binary nature of the building blocks of Konstantinović’s argument creates a strong sense of delimitation and borders. Several features of the author’s style of argumentation work together to create this sense. First is the (geographically expressed) idea that the *palanka* is situated, spiritually or intellectually, between the tribe and the city. Second is Konstantinović’s diction: the frequent use of opposites such as love and hate, presence and absence, etc. Third, Konstantinović very often attaches prefixes to nouns or adjectives to augment or otherwise retool their meaning. Most commonly, these prefixes are *van-*, *anti-*, *nad-*, and, especially, *ne-* (beyond-, anti-, super-, and not-/un-, respectively). The sense of borders is built up strongly by binary delimitations between such terms as *vreme* and *ne-vreme*, *naivnost* and *ne-naivnost*, *pomirenje* and *ne-pomirenje*, or time and not-time, naivety and un-naivety, and reconciliation and not-reconciliation.

The boundaries in Konstantinović’s book, it can be argued, manifest themselves in three unique ways of establishing the boundaries or borders

of the provincial.⁵ First, there are binaries of values, expressed in novel ways: the sober vs. the mercantile is one such pairing. This is Konstantinović's way of highlighting the distinctions between the tribal and the urban or civic and the *vašarski* (local world of the market or fair) vs. the *vaseljenski* (universal/ecumenical/cosmic). He also speaks repeatedly of dogma vs. the outside world's thought or opinion, with the latter also being referred to as the fetishization of "immediate and actual 'givens.'" (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 45) The town serves as a kind of supreme will or super-ego in what he calls a "religion of closedness." (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 7) Life in the *palanka* is seen as innocent, and, in the absence of a sense of tragedy, expression is limited to the sentimental and the sarcastic.

Second, there are temporal metaphors used to establish boundaries. These include images of Day vs. Night, juxtapositions of the counter-historical as opposed to the historical, and the condition of being forgotten by or removed from history or time ("excepted from history," as Konstantinović, 2013, p. 5, puts it), compared to living consciously within history. "The spirit of the *palanka*...is the work of historical oblivion (as the cessation of historical development)," he argues. (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 14) Movement away from the tribe, initially, and the province, more recently, towards an "urban and civic culture and civilization" reinforces a "strong 'sensation' of death," and this apparent loss of individual life and control deflects interest. History only needs to mean one thing in the *palanka*: "a cellar where temptations are locked away, a spirit of vacillation, and of uncertainty, and of one's own barbarism as an expression of the abiding desire for the unifying-tribal." (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 157)

Third, there are geographical or pseudo-geographical binaries: the *palanka* as a stalled or stranded socio-economic formation between the city on one hand and the village on the other, and the town as "here" and the world as "on the other side of the hill." If the village is an expression of the ideal-unified and the ideal-closed, and the tribal, and the city is the ideal-open, then the town or province, where Serbia has arrived cannot retreat into the tribal. Further development or evolution (which has happened in the rest of the world as a function of time) would be dangerous; as Konstantinović has it in one of his pithiest assertions, "Time is something on the other side of the mountain, over there where global chaos begins, the chaos that is the absolute-open world." (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 5)

⁵ Characteristics of the province or town are listed first in these sets; the second attributes are those of cities and individuals in the "chaos" of the outside world.

Breaching Borders?

Delineating borders alone is not Konstantinović's goal. Although his long, complex work is multi-layered and polyvalent, when not downright polyphonic, one can argue that it contains a prescription for overcoming the dangers of the mindset of the *palanka*. This is an important line of thinking to follow here, because as we study borders, distinctions, and divisions, we first posit them and then wish to test their durability. To put it another way, what good is a description without causes, and can causes be called effective or accurately designated if they cannot be short-circuited or otherwise "controlled" to produce different results? For historians, at least, what happened *and why* are both important, and an efficient way to check up on the *why* is to see how the result can be tamed, redirected, or overcome.

In a variety of places and forms, Konstantinović asserts that history has forgotten Serbia. This is one of the conditions producing the all-important experience, or experiencing, of the *palanka*, the assertion of which comprises the very first and most famous sentence of the book: "*Iskustvo nam je palanačko*" ("Our experience is provincial"). The reference to being skipped over by history does, in fact, open the possibility of a historical reading of this philosophical document; at least, one can pose a historian's questions: can history make up for lost time in the *palanka*? Can it return and resume its work? Can it be caused to return? These are not easy questions, and it should be noted that many scholars who comment on *Filozofija palanke* mix grim characterizations of the Balkans into their analyses. Two prominent commentators on the work open the door, if slightly, to what one might call the re-historicization of the *palanka*. Belančić, for instance, argues in his monograph that the spirit of the province is hostile to and leaves no room for real philosophy:

The philosophy of the *palanka* is, in fact, a philosophy of an impossible and, accordingly, unnecessary and superfluous philosophy. Simply put, in the *palanka*, philosophy is not needed by anyone, not as love, not as desire, and not as a directive. (Belančić, 2003, p. 155)

If philosophy is impossible in the province, it is because what prevails there is a kind of pre-philosophical wisdom. Real philosophy, perhaps, begins with dissonance and individual "philosophizing," with thought and judgment and drama and tragedy. (Belančić, 2003, p. 159)

Nenad Daković, in his essay "Jedna postfilozofija" (Eng: A Post-philosophy), contemplates the idea of subjectivity in the province. His analysis of Konstantinović and Hegel leads him to the conclusion that the

“spirit of the *palanka*” might be a post-philosophy. Ultimately, Dakovic is unconvinced there can be an end to the spirit, making it an example of *philosophia perennis*, but in making his argument he quotes Konstantinović to the effect that

If the spirit of the palanka truly had its own philosophy, it would only be a transitory spirit of history, caught in the historical forms of that philosophy. (Daković, 2008, p. 50)

If the barbarism that the spirit of the *palanka* can produce is held to be bad, as it surely is in Konstantinović’s ethics, then what, if anything, is to be done? Interlaced with Konstantinović’s literary case studies, most of which he uses to confirm his diagnosis, and with his far-ranging philosophical analyses, which he uses to explore the way the spirit of the *palanka* works, are clues to the battle that must be fought in order to save Serbia, and other societies, from latent barbarism. Evil, he writes, is a function of *nemoć* (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 204), a Serbian word that can be translated as weakness, impotence, or, most appropriately in this context, incapacity. The history and traditions of Serbia (which Konstantinović calls *nemanjički*, after the medieval princely family that held both political and ecclesiastical power in the Serbian lands) have produced a specific kind of incapacity based on *mistifikacija* (mystification). This is *mistička nemoć* (mystical incapacity) characterized as the “*ur*-mother of evil that manifests itself, in a great arc on the horizon of the history of the *palanka* mindset, as the evil of the mystification of the Middle Ages and, later, as the evil of the mystification of living human reality, in the name of those same mystified Middle Ages that are resistant not only to time but also to the very truth about the Middle Ages and to an authentic relationship to the *nemanjički* tradition.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 204) To put it more succinctly, mystification is “violence done to history and the spirit.”

If there were a way to sideline this mystification, society’s progress, its forward motion—which Konstantinović sees as stalled, not completely absent, since the advance has already been made from tribal society and the village to the small town—could be jump-started. He even asserts that forgetting history entirely is impossible; the spirit of the province “is ‘infected’ with history: its consciousness is a historical consciousness, which renders impossible a return [to the village], and for that reason it is a consciousness in rebellion against itself.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 14) Obviously the key is to lure or spur society away from the predilection for mystification, which has allowed Serbian society to steep in its unique past in conditions of partial modernization and thereby brew up the potent “spirit of the *palanka*.” But where to start?

In the view of this observer, the very phrase “spirit of the *palanka*” holds an important clue. Although the title of Konstantinović’s book contains the word “philosophy,” he in fact uses two related phrases for this phenomenon in his text, and they are not necessarily synonymous. One is the phrase from the title, “*filozofija palanke*,” and the other is “*duh palanke*,” which means “spirit or mind of the *palanka*.” While it is true that the author does sometimes use these two phrases as synonyms, at other times he draws a marked distinction between them. When he makes this distinction, as in the chapter “*Umesto zaključka: Nema kraja kraju*” (Eng. “In Place of a Conclusion: There Is No End to the Ends”), he creates space for the reader to consider if there might be a functional difference between a “philosophy” and a “spirit” of the *palanka*. In common parlance, philosophy implies rigorous inquiry based on systematic categories and articulate definitions, while “spirit” shades off into mindset, *weltanschauung*, tradition, and attitude.

Konstantinović’s basic argument is that to move *duh* (spirit) into *filozofija* exposes the thought and attitudes of the *palanka* to history, evolution, and questioning. This would be a good thing, because a philosophy is a more rigorous and responsible environment than a “spirit.” To distinguish between these two attitudes or mindsets, however, the author needs to supply the reader with specific characteristics of each, even if, in this sprawling work, they are inconsistently applied. In the chapter entitled “Traditionalism as the Bad Conscience of the Non-mythopoeic Mind,” (Konstantinović, 2013, pp. 141–150) Konstantinović specifies that a spirit is out-of-time, or extra-temporal. It focuses only on the past by engaging with either myth (a more profound kind of engagement) or traditionalism (a shallower form); history is described as linking a society not only to time, but also to the external world and to openness. This dynamic view of history is, to a historian, like balsam on the wounds inflicted by nationalists who view the historical profession, and its mode of inquiry, as either nothing but a *skansen* or a curiosity cabinet, or a traitorous penchant for revisionism.

One of the issues that must be bridged or resolved here is the idea of individuality, which in some ways is a “false friend” to both sides. Individualism in the outside world is excoriated in the *palanka* as rationalism and betrayal, yet the same people think of it as positive when European or other universal values are rejected in the name of fidelity to local differences and a mythologized past. Konstantinović maintains that the individuality of the *palanka* had been “on its way toward the free and open world of a worldly spirit, which is the spirit of infinite possibility, the spirit of stylistic polyphony...and a condition of creative subjectivity.”

(Konstantinović, 2013, p. 15) Conceivably it could be returned to this path.⁶ Nonetheless, even though the mechanism for pushing “spirit” into “philosophy” is not discussed in great detail in this book, it is significant that Konstantinović poses this dichotomy and this solution. The author seems to express considerable optimism in the following statement: “If the spirit of the *palanka* truly had *its own* philosophy, then it would be merely an ephemeral spirit of history, captured by the *historical forms* of that philosophy.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 159)

Conclusion

To continue to study Konstantinović’s work today is a contribution not only to the study of philosophy but also of ethnic nationalism and the evolution of democratic thought in Southeastern Europe. It has implications as well as for the discussion of civilization and borders in general. It is to be hoped that this engagement with his method of delineating borders or boundaries will draw attention to the complexity of competing civilizational modes within societies, either national or transnational, and to the historical, rather than merely political, origins of some of these differences. Konstantinović, who published fiction in the 1950s before he wrote philosophy in the 1960s and after, is sometimes categorized as an ontologist, a philosopher of language, and an existentialist; in addition to ontology, this work shows his importance as a political philosopher, and, furthermore, its freewheeling chapters give ample evidence of the importance of literary analysis to his approach to culture. In addition, because of the unavoidable historical component in the definition and operation of the “spirit of the *palanka*,” it has been possible for a historian to carry out this reading of *Filozofija palanke*. In conclusion, then, this observer would like to reiterate three points about Konstantinović’s seminal volume.

First of all, as argued above, the concept of boundaries or borders is a useful way to unpack Konstantinović’s arguments about Serbia’s stalled socio-political evolution.

⁶ Perović argues that in the final phase of his career, when he was writing little and making few public appearances, Konstantinović decided to return to social and political activities. First, in 1998, he published the memoirs of his father, an important politician and professor, from the era of World War II; second, he accepted the position of president of the Belgrade Circle in 1992, an intellectual project that aimed to promote resistance to nationalist authoritarianism and revive earlier connections between intellectuals in various Yugoslav cities, especially Sarajevo and Belgrade. This engagement can be seen as a voluntaristic contribution to returning society to its earlier path. See Perović (2015, pp. 636–639).

Second, the concerns raised by Konstantinović are applicable beyond the Serbian lands. Early in the work under study, Konstantinović writes that the “spirit of the *palanka* is above death, because it is above borders.” This condition of being *nad-graničan*, as the author puts it in his neologism, is part of its omnipresence and its timelessness. “Just as it must apply *everywhere* (just as it has to penetrate everywhere),” he writes, “it also has to be valid for all time.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 8) Likewise, at the end of his book, the author writes

Everywhere that there is existence, there is also a dream of harmony and a dream of dissension, a dream of the united Tribe and the fear of isolated Individuality. Thus the spirit of the *palanka* becomes, like this abiding possibility, and always possible spirit. (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 159)

Ultimately, Konstantinović maintains that the “*palanka* is not in the world, but it is in the spirit and it is everywhere possible.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 161)

These are strong indications that the stalled or stranded “here vs. there” world of the *palanka* need not occur just in Serbia. Certain (vaguely specified) regions within the former Yugoslavia comprise the case study that Konstantinović felt impelled to explore here, and, given the tragic history of the Western Balkans since the late 1980s, Serbian intellectual and cultural history already pass any test of relevance. But by widening the possible “transplantation zone” of the spirit of the *palanka*, we are presented with an even more compelling sense of importance, as well as the opportunity to do comparative work, in future studies, on the Serbian and other cases. Far more than representing merely a Serbian problem, the spirit of the *palanka* could also fit into a Balkan, European, or even a generic context.

Third, and lastly, this reading of *Filozofija palanka* has broached the possibility that the book describes an opening that might lead out of stalled intellectual development. Unfortunately Konstantinović’s main concern was not to analyze the causes of the “return” or enduring and metastasizing power of the spirit of the *palanka*; without a different kind of analysis of the origin of this condition, it is difficult to see how it could end or be overcome. Spirit can, arguably, become true philosophy (again) with a restoration of time (as opposed to eternity), subjectivity, and tragedy. History, the appreciation of history as the death or sidelining of myth, plays a key role here. History is *nesigurna* (both uncertain and unsafe), but when properly employed it prevents the mystification of the past. If the renunciation of history, or time, was itself a historical act, then reconciliation with history

or time could produce an end, or, as the author puts it, “a possible answer to existence.” (Konstantinović, 2013, p. 158.)

Who is to do this, and how? The following deceptively simple passage from an understudied but worthy Serbian novel about the lives of women and children in rural Serbia in the 1930s might offer a clue about the path away from mystification. “Taking to heart the lessons of the stories”—as the novelist puts it below—can happen because there is an incentive to do so. Selecting “European models” as the agents of these lessons might be less valuable than recasting local traditions and familial or intimate relationships. In this passage, children ask a family friend whether there is room for them in fairy tales:

As if we couldn't also go around in fancy short dresses---isn't that right, Čika Petar? Kaja said finally.

And so it is, “Petar agreed with a smile” To emphasize the point he pounded the palm of his hand on his knee. And when he told his stories, it felt like an intimate and trustworthy fairy-tale, because both of the girls and their little friends and schoolmates had roles in them---even the young schoolteacher was right in the middle of things, too. The girls listened to every word, and with great excitement; furthermore, they willingly took to heart the lessons from the stories, because they were themselves the subjects of them. They were the ones who suffered for the mistakes that were made, and they were the ones who got rewarded for the good deeds. (Žicina, 1946, p. 120)

This might be described as owning one's condition. While it is up to the people of Serbia to decide what the political message and legacy of Konstantinović's work should be, it has been the modest hope of this essay to add a novel element to our encounter with *Provincial Philosophy*. Konstantinović's unsurpassed analysis, or diagnosis, of historical and social problems contains elements of their possible resolution or a potential prescription for crisis resolution, at least in philosophical terms.

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Radomir Konstantinović i filozofia prowincjalna: Przeciwstawności jako granice

Esej jest częściowym spojrzeniem na złożoną i często cytowaną pracę *Filozofije palanke* (1969) napisaną przez serbskiego powieściopisarza i eseistę Radomira Konstantinowicia. Ostra krytyka opóźnionego rozwoju społecznego i intelektualnego Serbii oraz towarzyszącego mu upodobania do barbarzyńskiej przemocy także dziś – prawie sześć lat po śmierci autora, i prawie pięćdziesiąt lat od pierwszego wydania książki, stanowią temat dyskusji. Jednym ze sposobów, w jaki Konstantinović buduje swoją argumentację, jest ustanowienie granicy między Serbią, a innymi społeczeństwami, czy Europą i nowoczesnością. Trzy główne typy tych granic można wyrazić jako przeciwstawności skoncentrowane na wartościach, czasie i geografii. „Duch” lub sposób myślenia *palanki*, czyli serbskiego pipidówka, może zostać zrehabilitowany poprzez przekształcenie go w historycznie reprezentatywną filozofię, która mierzy się z siłami czasu, ewolucji i działań.

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Słowa kluczowe: Serbia, nacjonalizm, Jugosławia, Radomir Konstantinović, Filozofija palanke, Bałkany, miasto, egzystencjalizm.

Note

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