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Postwar Serbian Nationalism and the Limits of Invention

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Serbs have rarely drawn the attention of theorists of nationalism. Nonetheless, even if they have not been christened this or that sort of nationalist by theorists, they have emerged from the 1990s with two sets of descriptors attached to them by journalists, scholars and politicians, and those descriptors conform to the general outlines of current theoretical discourse. Serbs are either the captives of 'ancient hatreds' or the manipulated victims of modern state-builders. By now most of us no doubt laugh at the notion that ancient hatreds were the catalyst of the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and nod approvingly at the suggestion that nationalism was merely a piece of Slobodan Milošević's strategy in his consolidation of power in Serbia during the 1980s. Thus for most of us the Serbian nationalist movement of the 1980s and 1990s confirms the position of the 'modernists' among nationalism theorists, who argue that nationalism and national identity are functions of the actions of modern states.[1] Using a case study drawn from my research, I shall argue in this article that we should neither uncritically accept modernist conclusions regarding Serbian nationalism nor dismiss out of hand variations on the disreputable 'ancient hatreds' (or in theoretical terms, primordialist) approach. Instead, I shall argue, modern Serbian nationalism cannot be explained by or contained within a single theoretical model.

The subject of my current research offers an opportunity to put theories of nationalism to the test. That subject is formed by three members of a loosely knit circle of Serbian intellectuals who became Serbian nationalists from the late 1960s through to the end of Yugoslavia. In presenting my case, I shall on occasion summarise what I have argued more exhaustively in other places.[2] These men first came to public notice as a group in 1974, when Dobrica Ćosić, one of Serbia's best-known postwar

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[1] Commonly cited examples of the modernist approach include Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991). Regarding eastern Europe, add Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Miroslav Hroch, *Social Conditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[2] My articles on the subject include Nicholas J. Miller, 'Mihiz in the Sixties: Politics and Drama between Nationalism and Authoritarianism', *Nationalities Papers*, 30, 4 (2002), 603–21; Nick Miller, 'The Children of Cain: Dobrica Ćosić's Serbia', *East European Politics and Societies*, 14, 2 (2000), 268–87; and Nicholas J. Miller, 'The Nonconformists: Dobrica Ćosić and Mića Popović Envision Serbia', *Slavic Review*, 58, 3 (1999) 515–36.

novelists, wrote the catalogue notes for an exhibition of paintings by Mića Popović.[3] Ćosić described a group of young men who had gathered in the aftermath of the Second World War in a Belgrade apartment and debated the merits of the new order as well as their own uncertain futures. The apartment's address was Simina ulica 9a (Sima Street 9a). Ćosić described men who sought to find their place in the society now under construction in Yugoslavia; he called them nonconformists. For Ćosić, Simina 9a was a proving ground for the challenging ideas of its inhabitants, a rich intellectual and cultural crucible in which competing and frankly unacceptable ideas were tested against one another, with himself as the conformist lightning-rod.

By the 1980s, most of the group had become influential or even dominant in their chosen fields. Thanks to a variety of factors – Ćosić's endorsement, their active involvement in the upsurge of critical thought and eventually the Serbian nationalist movement in the 1980s, and Serbian society's need to find some sort of connection to and workable explanation for Titoism's failure in their milieu – by the late 1980s, 'Simina 9a' had become a not-uncommon reference in the popular press and in cultural/political discussions. The men of Simina 9a became in the Serbian public mind original freethinkers who had long before discerned the hostile intentions and corrupting influences of Tito's communism towards Serbs. They included Ćosić, Popović, Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, Žika Stojković, Vojislav Djurić, Dejan Medaković, Pavle Ivić, Mihailo Djurić and others, all of whom contributed to the creation of an anti-Titoist opposition in Serbia. Here my primary focus will be two of these men, Ćosić and Popović; I will include Mihiz where appropriate because of his influence on the development of the other two. The argument that the 'siminovci' were a coherent circle is founded on one, and only one, argument: that they were critical freethinkers at the beginning of the Tito era, and became critics of Titoism naturally because they never succumbed to the homogenising force of the regime's ideology.

They were otherwise a diverse lot. Each of my subjects evinced through the 1950s a radically different attitude toward 'Europe' and Serbia's place in it, which was closely linked to their view of the role of communism in Serbia and/or Yugoslavia. Ćosić wanted to make Serbia a part of Europe, which meant for him the modern world. For Ćosić, who came from central Serbia, communism was necessary to make Serbia European. He had almost impossible expectations of the new regime. He maintained that communism would lift Serbia out of patriarchal backwardness and make Serbs 'modern' in ways that he never clearly explained, although some of his fictional characters tried to. One of them, Uča (from *Daleko je Sunce* (Far Away is the Sun)), looks forward to radical change after the war:

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[3] Dobrica Ćosić, *Mića Popović, vreme, prijatelji* (Belgrade: Beogradski izdavačko-grafički zavod, 1988).

In all of our history we have had in all two occupations: farming and war. And other peoples have created culture, science, industry, cities, and other miracles. It's time for our people to abandon old occupations for good, and to take up these others. That for me is revolution.[4]

Ćosić once described his personal burden as a 'long-term battle with backwardness, inertia, passions, politicisation, bureaucratism, local and localistic preoccupations, personal ambition, district and regional [ambitions]'.[5] He could exhibit great hostility towards the peasantry – he noted in May 1953 that 'for the rural people of Serbia to be happy, the peasantry must be destroyed. That means brutally and bloodily. Any progress must be fed and paid for in blood.'[6] Ćosić was also convinced that the transformation he demanded would make national identity secondary to a new, Yugoslav, working-class identity. This is how he pondered the future before speaking with villagers in his district in 1955:

I will speak of people growing together and unifying in the commune, which will affirm all of the social and personal potential of the individual, so that violence and force will become superfluous, so that democracy will replace the state, so that together they will be like the air that we breathe, something that is understood, which is here and is not [just] a goal, so that through the commune Yugoslavism will grow and the borders of republics will be erased, so that someday people will write: I am a Yugoslav from such-and-such commune . . .[7]

For Ćosić, it was communism that would elevate Serbs 'civilisationally'. He did not view the Serbia that *was* as part of anything good in European civilisation; he wished Serbia to join that which was superior.

Popović seems to have wished to leave Serbia behind in order to *become* European; Serbia as such concerned him little. Popović had a benignly hopeful attitude towards communism, and his artistic views indicate that he was in essence a seeker open to all stimuli, whether Serbian, communist or European. He saw himself as a citizen of the world rather than a Serb adjusting to a new world. He described his own 'youthful' leftism as 'an impulse for justice, . . . a constant preparedness for rebellion, the readiness to make one's contribution, the subordination of one's personal ambition'.[8] But his words and actions through the 1950s were those of a man who wanted out of Yugoslavia. He records mostly incidental commentary on the situation in his home country, most of it ambivalent, as when he told an English cleric that Yugoslavia was not free, but that people there were more equal than in the West.[9] As an artist, he measured his work according to a European standard. After a momentous first exhibition in 1950, which served to signal the end of socialist realism in Yugoslav art, he left for Paris, where he lived and worked intermittently for the next decade. His one attempt to incorporate Serbian tradition, a cycle entitled 'The Village Nepričava', was a failure. Popović later wrote that his early years in Paris were a period of artistic

[4] Dobrica Ćosić, *Daleko je sunce* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1966), 79 (translations of all the quotations are by the author).

[5] Dobrica Ćosić, 'Komuna, stara i nova reč, in *Delo*, 1, 2 (1955), 189.

[6] Dobrica Ćosić, *Piščevi zapisi (1951–1968)* (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2000), 34.

[7] Ćosić, 'Komuna, stara i nova reč, 189.

[8] Milo Gligorijević, *Odgovor Miće Popovića* (Belgrade: Nezavisna izdanja, 1984), 17.

[9] Mića Popović, *Sudari i harmonije* (Novi Sad: Bratstvo i jedinstvo, 1954), 19–21.

discomfort, when he refused to open up to Parisian influences, did not find his own style, made no living and waited expectantly for his own professional arrival, in vain.[10]

It was not until 1956 that he lost his arrogant expectation of success and began to paint without concern for his reputation or affluence. He would adopt one of the varieties of abstract expressionism produced in the West, *art informel*, which responded to the sense of alienation felt by its adherents. For Popović, *informel* represented the destruction of existing artistic and social forms. It responded to his disgust not with Yugoslavia, not with Europe, not with communism in particular, but with all of that.

As a participant in the adventure of *informel*, I remember that there was some nausea, something unpleasant and unhealthy in the spiritual climate, some irresistible need to send it all to hell, to burn the bridges which linked us with tradition, to stick out our tongue at the stale story about the bright future. To a number of painters, out in the world and at home it was as if the end of the fifties truly foretold the flames of the future 1968![11]

For Popović, fulfilment meant finding an expression for his deep alienation; it meant 'sticking his tongue out' at *both* tradition *and* the better future that communism promised. How radically different that was in comparison with Ćosić, who in the late 1950s kept up his idealistic faith in the better future that Popović disdained. Popović's destructiveness:, though, was not provincial, it was a response to alienation on a grand scale. It left even more room for him to travel the same path that Ćosić travelled in the 1960s: the path back to Serbia.

A third member of the Simina 9a collective provides an interesting counter-example to Ćosić and Popović, both of whom sought great changes. Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz believed that to *be* Serbian was to *be* European. He attended the gymnasium in one of the cradles of Serbian culture, Sremski Karlovci, amid the memories and mythology of Serbian history: 'we learned the entire *Mountain Wreath* by heart', he later wrote. He saw communism as a divisive force, separating Serbia from its cultural inheritance. Thus, as a literary critic until the mid-1950s, he abhorred the so-called modernist/realist debate, which divided Yugoslav socialist writers into two camps, the modernists representing an attempt to establish an autonomous art and literature, the realists asserting that art primarily served the revolution.[12] Mihiz disparaged the very foundation on which that debate was conducted – that there was such a thing as a socialist literature, that such a measure could even be applied.[13] Good literature, Mihiz believed, linked 'our most contemporary modernity with the noble

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[10] Mića Popović and Heinz Klunker, *Mića Popović* (Belgrade: Jugoslovenska Revija, 1989), 42–50.

[11] Gligorijević, *Odgovor*, 78.

[12] On the modernist/realist controversy, see Ratko Peković, *Ni rat, ni mir: Panorama književnih polemika, 1945–1965* (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 1986).

[13] 'There is not, there does not exist, there never has existed, and there will never be a literary direction that is socialist in and of itself, and there is no formal literary method that is *a priori* antisocialist.' Borislav Mihajlović, 'Odronjeni bregovi', in Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, *Književni razgovori: Izabrane kritike*, ed. Ljubiša Jeremić (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1971), 33.

threads of our tradition',[14] which was a European tradition.[15] Thus, for example, Mihiz rejected out of hand the work of one highly placed communist (Marko Ristić), who prided himself on his ability to destroy all that came before communism in Serbian literature. Mihiz abhorred him: Ristić was 'openly biased... he viewed all [prewar] literature as disqualified'.[16] Where Ristić envisioned the destruction of pre-revolutionary literary models and a complete transformation of Serbian literature, Mihiz sought modern connections with older models. For Mihiz, Ristić represented the danger of socialism for Serbia. The name of the danger was destruction – of Serbia's cultural inheritance and continuity.

Return to Serbia

Ćosić's commitment to Titoism could be sustained until the mid-1960s, when it became clear to him that under Tito, Yugoslavia would become a federation of republic-nations and not a single nation of enlightened, modern workers. The fall of Aleksandar Ranković was probably the most important single event in a process that profoundly disillusioned Ćosić.[17] In May 1968, Ćosić would ostentatiously exit the League of Communists after publicly denouncing its policies towards the minority nations and autonomous provinces of Serbia, which signalled for Ćosić an end to Tito's commitment to the marginalisation of national identity.[18] Thereafter, Ćosić would turn his energies towards revitalising Serbia. Popović would do the same. Where Ćosić had been actively engaged in the construction of socialism, Popović was just an observer of Yugoslavian developments during the 1950s and much of the 1960s, concentrating instead on perfecting his own talents as a painter. Still, he took seriously the regime's promise to create social equality in the new Yugoslavia. His perception that the government had finally betrayed that obligation, a perception that crystallised for him following the student movement at Belgrade University in June 1968, drove him to create his 'Scenes Painting' after 1968.[19] Scenes brought him in from the cold – and home to Serbia. Ćosić, Popović and the other *siminovci* began to narrow their individual frames of reference after the mid-1960s. Thenceforward,

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[14] Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, 'Književni razgovori', in Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, *Od istog čitaoca* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1956) 165–6.

[15] At a special meeting of the Yugoslav Writers' Congress in November 1954, Mihiz challenged Miroslav Krleža's dismissal of Western literature and Western influences on Yugoslav literature. He discerned 'provincialism' in Yugoslavia's relationship to foreign art and literature – first in its idolisation of the West, but also in its (paradoxical) knee-jerk rejection of Western influences. Mihiz believed that Yugoslav literature enjoyed a natural relationship with foreign literature: 'I must say that I cannot imagine the greater part of our literature, from its beginnings to the present, [existing] without the influence of foreign literature.' Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, 'Reć u diskusiji na izvanrednom plenumu Saveza književnika Jugoslavije 1954. godine', in *idem, Književni razgovori*, 37.

[16] Mihiz, *Od istog ?itaoca*, 112. Vladislav Petković Dis was a turn-of-the-century Serbian poet.

[17] A more complete examination of this period can be found in Nicholas J. Miller, 'The Nonconformists'. Ranković was one of the four original leaders of Yugoslav communism. He was purged in june 1966.

[18] Dobrica Ćosić, 'Kritika vladajuće ideološke koncepcije u nacionalnoj politici', in *idem, Stvarno i moguće: Članci i ogledi* (Ljubljana and Zagreb: Cankarjeva zalozba, 1988).

[19] On *Scenes*, see Ćosić, *Mića Popović*, and Popović and Klunker, *Mića Popović*.

their commitment, however deep or shallow, to Yugoslavia, Titoism or both would diminish in the face of a new, refocused commitment to Serbia and the Serbian people.

From 1968 Ćosić's work followed two tracks, one metaphysical, the other more earthly: first, he created a literary image of Serbs as internally divided and divisive, and second, he tried to overcome that divisiveness institutionally. On the first of those tracks, Ćosić constructed an argument that Serbs are fratricidal (which Ćosić generously expanded to include patricide and inter-ethnic competition). For Ćosić, the method by which the Tito regime had corrupted Serbia was by manipulating the Serbs' fratricidal nature. He exploited an obvious biblical metaphor, by which Cain and Abel become exemplars for humanity, displaced to the twentieth century. The best example of this phenomenon at work can be found in his novels *Deobe* (Divisions, 1961) and *Vreme zla* (Time of Evil, 1985–1990), but it is also present in many of his public presentations and essays from the 1970s and 1980s. I have elucidated Ćosić's use of the metaphor elsewhere;[20] here I will only highlight my argument by focusing on one prominent example.

Vreme zla, Ćosić's long fictional examination of bolshevism in the Serbian milieu, uses one family (the Katićes, who are central to five of his novels) to stand in for Serbian society as a whole, divided and destroyed by toxic bolshevism. For Ćosić, faith in Stalin is akin to faith in Christ, which he makes clear from the repeated Cain/Abel metaphor and the invocation of Abraham as the first father who had to sacrifice his son to a faith.[21] Readers of *Vreme zla* are overwhelmed by constant references to 'fratricide' (loosely defined as homicidal antagonism between members of a family, between loyal friends, or between members of fraternal peoples). One character identifies fratricide as a deeper function of humanity:

Today with words, and tomorrow perhaps with bullets. As in the French revolution with the guillotines. The battle against one's own must be more merciless than the battle against others…What can be done here? It is something of a human law, good God! It is. Human history began with fratricide. Will we really…become Cains and murder our Abels?[22]

In fact, virtually all of the characters in *Vreme zla* speak of the eternal power of fratricide. While Ćosić concentrates on the period preceding the Second World War, *Vreme zla* served as the first fictional sally in Ćosić's indictment of Serbian communists who worked with Tito to destroy Serbian cultural and political unity. It was they, collaborators from within the nation, who represented the deepest manifestation of the fratricidal impulse. And he believed that they governed Serbia after the early 1970s as Tito's sycophants rather than as Serbia's protectors.

Institutionally, Ćosić began to concentrate his attention on Serbia as such; no more utopian dreaming about the end of nations. Ćosić's first foray into direct historical interpretation had actually come in a 1967 lecture at the Kolarac People's University entitled 'How We "Create Ourselves"'. Ćosić took as his theme Serbian

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[20] Miller, 'The Children of Cain'.

[21] Dobrica Ćosić, *Vernik* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1991), 68–9.

[22] *Ibid.*, 96.

culture and its lines of development before and under communism.[23] 'We have not established our national and territorial identity', Ćosić wrote. 'We are a nation and a land without its civilisational face. We become civilised in waves, and frighteningly slowly.'[24] Ćosić's talk reflected his belief that Serbian culture and the Serbian nation were tragically fragmented, but that such fragmentation could still be eliminated under a socialist regime in which local identities lost their central place. 'Perhaps the most unfortunate characteristic of Serbian national culture is its disunity in content, time, and space.' That disunity, historically determined in Ćosić's view, was nobody's fault; however, someone could and should be blamed for the failure of Yugoslav communists to overcome it. In the most surprising and aggressive passage in the lecture, he asserted that for the maintenance of Serbian disunity, 'an entire ideology has been created. Austro-Hungarian and Comintern conceptions of the Balkans and Yugoslavia contributed to this ideology.' The ideology itself was Titoism. Ćosić appended a warning: 'one day', the nature of the ideology would 'be understood with all of its consequences'.[25] This was a remarkable statement for a still-loyal communist to make in 1967.

He would now work on the project of returning to Serbs their cultural unity, threatened so profoundly, he believed, by the federalising reforms of the Tito regime. Three examples of his work on this personal project stand out: his service as president of the Srpska književna zadruga (SKZ–Serbian Literary Guild) from 1969 to 1972, his creation of a committee devoted to free expression in 1984, and his contribution (peripheral but critical) to the formulation of the so-called 'Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences'. In each case, Ćosić was instrumental in bringing together a cross-section of Serbian intellectuals who, he believed, could return to Serbia a purity that had been lost under the corrupting influence of communism.

As president of the SKZ, Ćosić lamented the loss of Serbia's connection with its past and ideals that, he believed, had fallen by the wayside as a result of Serbs' devotion to Tito and communism.[26] Serbia had been 'reduced to the borders of today's republic of Serbia', and anyone who questioned that situation was accused of 'Greater Serbianism'. Ćosić's solution was to focus Serbs on that which was most important to them – their own culture, which had been set aside in the interests of a higher goal, now corrupted: socialist Yugoslavism. The board that he recruited for the SKZ crossed political and cultural boundaries in Serbia, including men and women whom Ćosić believed represented an authentic Serbia.[27] Although Ćosić would be forced to resign from the SKZ in October 1972 (along with most of his board), he would continue to view the reintegration of Serbian culture as his primary

[23] Dobrica Ćosić, 'Kako da "stvaramo sebe",' in Ćosić, *Stvarno i moguće*, 11–12.

[24] *Ibid.*, 19.

[25] *Ibid.*, 6.

[26] Dobrica Ćosić, 'Porazi i ciljevi,' in Ćosić, *Stvarno i moguće*, 86.

[27] The board included Mića Popović, Vojislav Djurić, Pavle Ivić, Mihailo Djurić, Mihailo Marković, Radovan Samardžić, Kosta Mihajlović, Dimitrije Bogdanović, Slobodan Selenić, Meša Selimović, Milorad Pavić, Dušan Matić, Ivo Andrić, Erih Koš, Svetlana Velmar-Janković and Skender Kulenović.

task. A decade later, in November 1984, Ćosić was the catalyst of the formation of the Committee for the Defence of the Freedom of Thought and Expression (CDFTE). The eventual members, all Serbs and picked by Ćosić, included a cross-section of Belgrade's intelligentsia, none of whom could be expected to agree on all matters.[28] Ćosić envisioned this committee as a continuation of the board he composed for the SKZ in 1970: 'a pluralistic forum of the Serbian intelligentsia, composed of people of the most contrasting beliefs and opposed ideological views', which would 'unite the struggle for the integrity of Serbian culture in Tito's Yugoslavia'.[29] The committee would be in existence until 1989, but its influence was minimal.

In the meantime, powered by the anger of intellectuals at the status of Serbs in Kosovo, an anti-communist and nationalist movement was afoot in Serbia. Ćosić was at the head of it, thanks to his long period of dissidence and his publicly stated reservations regarding Titoist policy towards the region. The unintended centrepiece of this movement became the infamous 'Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences', which was leaked to the public in 1986. Ćosić was not on the committee that formulated the Memorandum, but his influence was by then pervasive, and the committee's composition made it a continuation of earlier models, those of the SKZ and the CDFTE. One passage is critical for us at this point. It is a call to national revival:

The establishment of the Serbian people's complete national and cultural integrity, regardless of which republic or province they might be living in, is their historical and democratic right ... In less than fifty years, for two successive generations, the Serbs were twice subjected to physical annihilation, forced assimilation, conversion to a different religion, cultural genocide, ideological indoctrination, denigration and compulsion to renounce their own traditions because of an imposed guilt complex ... If they want to have a future in the family of cultured and civilised nations of the world, the Serbian people must be allowed to find themselves again and become an historical personality in their own right, to regain a sense of their historical and spiritual being, to make a clear assessment of their economic and cultural interests, to devise a modern social and national programme which will inspire present generations and generations to come.[30]

Between 1986 and 1991, Ćosić would reiterate this message over and over. Limiting a discussion of the now-infamous Memorandum to one paragraph – and not even the most provocative paragraph by a long way – might seem myopic, but this paragraph is in fact the crux of the matter, the one thing that virtually the entire Serbian intelligentsia could agree on in the late 1980s. Serbia desperately needed a renaissance.

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[28] The committee comprised members of the Praxis group (Mihailo Marković, Ljubomir Tadić), historians (Radovan Samardić, Dimitrije Bogdanović), young but established critics (Kosta Čavoški, Ivan Janković), painters (Mića Popović, Mladen Srbinović), writers known to be hostile to the regime (Matija Bećković, Dragoslav Mihailović), veterans of the earlier Committee for the Protection of Artistic Freedom (Nikola Milošević, Predrag Palavestra, Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz), of course Ćosić, and five others of diverse backgrounds.

[29] Dobrica Ćosić, *Piščevi zapisi (1981–1991)* (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2002), 128.

[30] Kosta Mihailović and Vasilije Krestić, *The Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts: Answers to Criticisms* (Belgrade: Kultura, 1995), 137.

On a later occasion (1990), he drew on the words of Njegoš:

Our greatest evil is within ourselves, our greatest enemy is among us. Thus we cannot postpone the struggle with ourselves and with our own ... The future of the Serbian nation is decisively dependent on the conquering of the evil within it.

   Today, nothing meaningful and great can be done in this country if we do not experience a spiritual renaissance. And it begins with the selection of those national traditions which have the energy for a new era and the establishment of a hierarchy of lasting values in the individual and in society. Given that assumption, it is also reasonable to affirm in the ethos of our culture the courage to find the truth, above all about ourselves, and to push away with the spirit of tolerance ... the passion for division and conflict ...[31]

The Memorandum blamed others; here, Ćosić blames Serbs, demands that they re-examine their own inheritance.

   Popović contributed to the re-examination. In 1983, he lamented that he had wasted much time in Paris: 'in old age, our fear of lost time begins to torture us, we realise that only a few years are left to us, a few months. In Paris, I fear, I lost precisely those years which would be precious to me now.'[32] Popović returned to Serbia. As with Ćosić, events of the 1960s motivated that return. In Popović's case, though, it was not the spatial or spiritual fragmentation of Serbia that prompted it. Instead, it was the social conditions that gave birth to the student demonstrations at Belgrade University in June 1968 that produced his most fertile and effective painting, *Scenes Painting (Slikarstvo prizora)*. While Ćosić described in print his version of the degradation of the Serbian people under communism, Mića Popović provided visual accompaniment. In his early *Scenes*, the painter focused on the degradation of the guest worker that signalled for him the failure of communism to provide equality and food on the plate. These early paintings were not uniquely 'Serbian' in theme or execution. But Popović would later offer several testaments to the need for a particular Serbian revival. I examine three of these paintings here. *Serbs in the Waiting Room* (1978) and *The Last Supper Without a Saviour* (1983) were built on the argument that Serbs were divided and without guidance or leadership, spiritual or otherwise. Where *Serbs* conveys this rudderless and humiliated impression purely visually and depressingly, *Last Supper* does so by its choice of theme as well as its execution, with a humorous, even absurdist, panache. The third painting, *1 May, 1985*, stands apart from the other two – Popović probably saw it as his *The 3rd of May 1808* (Goya) or even his *Guernica* (Picasso). With these paintings and others like them, Popović became the artistic voice of Serbian renewal.

   Serbs in a Waiting Room appeared as Popović moved from universal to Serbian themes and thus parallels Ćosić's move from party activism to leadership of the SKZ. Only two things about this painting mark its subjects as Serbs: the copy of *Politika* which lies on the table, and the name that Popović chose for the painting. Otherwise, this painting simply portrays people: unhappy, bored, disgusted people, perhaps, but just people. His earlier *Scenes* were equally depressing, but none were explicitly

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[31] Dobrica Ćosić, 'Ne mačem – nego duhom', *Književne novine*, (1 Nov. 1990).
[32] Gligorijević, *Odgovor*, 75.

about Serbs as such. These bored people reflect Popović's vision of Serbianness in 1978: Serbs are tired and humiliated. Reviewers picked out *Serbs* for harsh criticism during Popović's 1979 exhibition, thanks to the desultory tone of the representation of Serbianness. Ćosić's own commentary drew Popović's work into collaboration with his own. He had this to say in 1988:

Mića's Serbs seem to be in some waiting room. Not for a train, not for a bus. Rather, a historical waiting room. Or anti-historical. But why are they still waiting? The train left them for the future, it seems to me, long ago . . . These Serbs of Mića's accept their fate patiently, reconciled, astonished, threateningly, but in the end, silently. For how long, and what then? Mića Popović does not say. Because not a single Serb knows that answer yet. If the answer is the traditional one – then there is no salvation for them.[33]

'For how long, and what then?' Ćosić asks, all but foretelling a reckoning with those who would keep his Serbs in history's waiting room. The 'traditional' answer, of course, would be that Serbs would place themselves at the mercy of the corrupt among them, or of outsiders. Ćosić's description conforms to his own characterisation of Serbs as drawn from his then-incomplete trilogy *Vreme zla*.

The Last Supper Without a Saviour is a painting of twelve men seated at a dinner table, with one central chair empty, reserved for the absent Saviour. The men are with one exception contemporary, and most are identifiably Serbian. The twelve pictured are mostly unserious; one shoots a slingshot; another gesticulates while drinking from a pitcher of wine; Gvozden (the single recurring character in Popović's *Scenes*) peeps over the shoulder of another man as he tries to listen in. The rest sit around, eating bread and chatting. One of the twelve looks annoyed at the rest, while a flag-waver's face is wrapped in a shroud of some sort, recognisable perhaps from Popović's earlier *Manipulation* (1979). *Last Supper* is a picture not only of a leaderless Serbia, but of Serbs who do not even recognise the seriousness of their predicament. Unlike those in the waiting room, who simply wait, however, these Serbs will dance and drink and talk about – but never act to stop – their collective demise. Ćosić, on *Last Supper*:

Why at this last supper is there no Saviour? . . . Did he betray his followers or did his followers betray him? Or is it that Serbs, because they are Serbs, neither have, nor will they find, their Saviour? . . . In Mića Popović's experience, Serbs represent disharmony, mutual misunderstanding, eternal estrangement, the absense of a spiritual centre, a shared goal and direction . . .[34]

But whereas *Serbs* was frightening and complex, *Last Supper* was for Ćosić 'illustrative but not deep. Somehow it is too obvious.'[35] If Ćosić could not deal with the frivolity of the scene and its characters, it was nonetheless easy for him to extend his fratricidal metaphor to a painting portraying the eve of Christianity's original act of betrayal.

What is a Last Supper without a Crucifixion? Popović complied with the logic of his own metaphor. The painting *1 May 1985*, depicting a crucifixion, memorialised an

[33] Ćosić, *Mića Popović*, 198.
[34] Ibid., 237.
[35] Ibid., 237.

attack with a bottle on a Serbian farmer in Kosovo.[36] White-capped (Albanian) men hoist a man on to the cross; a policeman (the regime) stands guard over the ceremony; a discarded bottle sits in the lower right-hand corner. Ćosić's evaluation was negative: he believed that the painting's mixing of metaphors degraded the event, which should have stood 'as a symbol of Albanian violence towards Serbs in the second half of the twentieth century, just as the gas chamber and crematorium became the symbol of Nazi German crimes against Jews and Slavs'. The key to the painting and the response is in the twentieth century, although the metaphorical language it used harked back to an older mythology, whether biblical or as an update of the Kosovo cycle. *1 May 1985* is Popović's final cry for Serbian unity in the face of oppression. Following the depressing *Serbs in a Waiting Room* and the silly *Last Supper Without a Saviour*, it is an over-serious, almost kitschily maudlin contribution to the cause.

Mihiz, certainly one of the siminovci, nonetheless provides a useful counterpoint to his two friends. Whereas Ćosić and Popović changed gear in the late 1960s – Ćosić monumentally, Popović less so – for Mihiz the period merely confirmed what he had long suspected: that Serbs should constantly beware of the destruction that Titoism betokened for Serbian culture and even the survival of Serbs as a nation.[37] The language debate of 1967 drew him out; until that point, he had been content to play the regime's game ('collaborate' is probably too strong a word), which had meant conforming at key points in the 1950s.[38] Mihiz could have been a much more vocal critic of the regime, but was not. However, when influential Croatian institutions and individuals issued the 'Declaration on the Name and Position of the Croatian Literary Language' in April 1967, Mihiz was moved to act. He was one of the authors of a Serbian response to the Declaration, which was entitled the 'Proposal for Consideration'. His authorship of the Proposal 'outed' him as a Serbian opponent of communism, and a nationalist.

As artist, Mihiz had moved from criticism into drama, which he chose to do because it suited his 'innate inclination to the spoken word, to the divine and difficult phenomenon of dialogue which no other style can replace'.[39] His work as a playwright was unremarkable, with one exception, *Banović Strahinja*, first performed in 1963. Mihiz said that 'the possibility of realising the human behaviour and powerful conflict of private (Strahinić Ban's) and public (Jug Bogdan's) humanism drew me personally'.[40] Also, the woman's role in the drama, and in all of Serbian epic poetry,

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[36] This painting is virtually identical to *The Martyrdom of St Bartholomew* (1630) by Jusepe de Ribera (Prado, Madrid). That painting is now believed to be of St Philip. The attack on the farmer Djordje Martinović became legendary in Serbia. He was found in his field with injuries resulting from the forced insertion of a water bottle in his anus. He was either attacked by Albanian youths (the Serbian story) or injured while masturbating (the Albanian story). To this day, no consensus has been reached.

[37] For a more extensive treatment of Mihiz's 1960s, see Miller, 'Mihiz in the Sixties'.

[38] His most important misstep/reminder coming in 1954 with the fall of Milovan Djilas, whom Mihiz immediately befriended. For that indiscretion, he lost his influential position as the literary critic for the weekly *NIN*.

[39] Feliks Pašić, 'Da ponovo ne budem imao šta da kažem', in Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, *Kazivanja i ukazivanja* (Belgrade: Beogradski izdavačko-grafički zavod, 1994) 60.

[40] Pašić, 'Da ponovo', 61.

seemed to him 'totally simplified, vulgar and fundamentally scornful'. Mihiz wished to 'transform a story about heroism into a drama of treason, forgiveness, sin, prejudice and the impossibility of judging'.[41] Ultimately, Mihiz successfully modernised the story by describing a heroism that no longer derived from Strahinić Ban's martial qualities and formulaic compassion, but from his recognition that individuals do not conform to set patriarchal patterns. The point for us here is that Mihiz did not romanticise his characters, did not propose that they provided models for modern behaviour. He modernised *Banović Strahinja* rather than allowing *Banović Strahinja* to turn modern Serbs into a didactically useful anachronism. This is a distinction that was lost on other intellectuals of the nationalist revival.[42]

Mihiz spent the 1970s out of the public eye. He was not a party member and never had been; he was not a socialist by conviction. Not until Tito died in 1980 and the Serbian public sphere was reinvigorated by attempts by critical intellectuals to 're-engage' in public life did a door open for his participation in events for which he was perfectly suited by temperament and belief. His first foray into the spotlight came with the creation of the Committee for the Protection of Artistic Freedom, which was formed on 19 May 1982[43] at a meeting of the Belgrade section of the Serbian Writers' Association. He was one of its members, along with Desanka Maksimović, Stevan Raičković, Predrag Palavestra, Milovan Danojlić, Raša Livada and Biljana Jovanović. His work on this committee, as well as Ćosić's Committee for the Defence of the Freedom of Thought and Expression, was pragmatic rather than mystical. He was a proponent of freedom of expression, an opponent of the real rather than imagined excesses of the Tito regime.

So Mihiz remained grounded. Unlike his friends, he never needed to apologise for his own solicitude towards or complicity with the communist movement in Yugoslavia; he had always been its enemy. Thus Mihiz never felt compelled to use or concoct myths; he had nothing to answer for on the temporal or any higher plane. His play *Banović Strahinja* demonstrates that he was not one to weave folklore and history into his work; it is impossible to imagine Mihiz arguing that (to use an invented example) any of his contemporaries was a 'modern Strahinić Ban'. He made Strahinic Ban modern, not the reverse.

Ćosić and Popović, however, could not resist the temptation of mystifying their roles as interpreters of a complicated reality for their Serbian brethren. Thus they felt compelled to present their own actions as revelation. Ćosić, because his faith in communism had from the outset been the result of revelation rather than reflection, needed above all to explain his own apostasy as a source of inspiration to others. His role was to express his own experience with betrayal, because he had betrayed. He exalted his role as novelist/seer. Ćosić modelled himself on Tolstoy:

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[41] *Ibid.*, 62.

[42] As was the case with a petition issued by a group of Serbian intellectuals in 1986 bemoaning the fate of the Serbs of Kosovo; one prominent victim of Albanian excesses was memorialised as the new mother of the Jugovićes, another as the new Deacon Avakum.

[43] 'Sastanak beogradskih pisaca', in *Književne novine* (Belgrade), 27 May 1982, 2.

At this point I cannot but remind you of the powerful force from Iasnaia Poliana, who, after Napoleon's wars, shouted out: 'Write the true, honest, history of this century. There is a goal for a lifetime!' This 'truthful history' of our century, I see in the novel.[44]

Popović more adamantly positioned himself as a seer, as in his 1986 speech on election to regular status in the Serbian Academy, standing before *1 May 1985*:

The way and conditions in which a work of art is created are not important, nor is the area of truth about which it speaks; the important thing is the *truth* as a driving force, as a manifold revelation. Repressive societies are allergic to any sort of truth, even when it concerns the possibilities of the development of form in the sphere of pure artistic abstraction.[45]

Both Ćosić and Popović thus reserved for themselves the right to interpret fate; their conviction gave them the confidence to embroider reality for a Serbian public desperate for an explanation for their condition.

Theory?

The two available interpretations of Serbian nationalism both suffer from overgeneralisation – not from being over-theorised, but from being under-examined. Thinking theoretically about the Serbian case, it seems to me, will contribute to a demystification of the phenomenon.

First a brief word on the schools of thought. 'Modernists' believe that nationalism is a modern ideology which creates nations that had not previously existed. Since modernists believe that nationalism creates national identity, the latter is clearly as modern as the former. Two modernist variations have exerted a magical influence on the study of nationalism: Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' and E. J. Hobsbawm's 'invented tradition'.[46] Alternatives to modernism begin with the discredited primordialist approach, but it is the perennialists, who believe that national identity (variously defined) has existed either continuously or on a recurring basis throughout history, who provide the real competition for modernism.[47] All of these general approaches can be found, implicitly, in the work of students of Serbian history.

There exist many treatments of Serbia and its recent nationalism with implied theoretical commitments. Anti-nationalist Serbian intellectuals support the modernist version. Nenad Dimitrijević, for instance, has argued that communist regimes 'turned towards the past' in order to 'compensate for [their] own inability to thematise reality'. 'Nationalism', for Dimitrijević, 'was the only form of ideological communication that

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[44] Ćosić, 'Književnost i istorija danas', in Ćosić, *Stvarno i moguće*, 34.

[45] Popović and Klunker, *Mića Popović*, 110.

[46] Advocates of this approach include Ernest Gellner, E. J. Hobsbawm, John Breuilly, Benedict Anderson, Rogers Brubaker, and many others. Rogers Brubaker has argued that national identity is 'contingent to other political phenomena: Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 7.

[47] Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 159–65. Perennialists include John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Anthony D. Smith in his many books and articles.

offered common ground for the regime and its subjects'.[48] Eric Gordy asserts that the Milošević regime exploited 'nationalist rhetoric' in order to attain and maintain power.[49] Bogdan Denitch blames the nationalist leaders of Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia for 'having unleashed and mobilised nationalist separatism and hatreds'.[50] There are many other examples. The general tendency of most observers of the Serbian situation in the 1980s and 1990s is to argue that the primary force at work was the state, from which we should infer that nationalism was a handy but artificial tool for politicians.

In other places we find an endorsement of the perennialist position. Sometimes they come dangerously close to a primordialist one. Perhaps the most popular book about Serbia to emerge from the collapse of Yugoslavia was the journalist Tim Judah's *The Serbs: History, Myth, and the Destruction of Yugoslavia.*[51] Judah's thesis is that history is alive for the Serbian people. Although Judah makes no theoretical claims, he does ultimately offer an antimodernist vision. While he endorses the modernists' claim that power in Serbia manipulated historical images to gain and maintain power, his book really discusses how and why those images resonate with Serbs. Although this would seem to make it a nice antidote to the modernist's love affair with the notion that all nationalist tradition is invented, in fact, he turns most of his evidence to a simplistic demonstration of how the ugliness of Serbia's present was well-nigh preordained by its past. A second book that emerged from the 1990s with some influence was Branimir Anzulović's *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide,*[52] which offers a litany of historical examples of the Serbs' slide into genocidal mania. Anzulović, like Judah, has the opportunity to show how the simplistic modernist paradigm fails before the evidence, but he misses it thanks to his inability to resist the propagandist's urge to reduce all and sundry to the theme of the Serbs' genocidal nature. If primordialists believe that national character is constant and unwavering, then Judah and Anzulović, their protests notwithstanding, are primordialists. And so are the dozens of politicians and journalists who have put forth similar arguments in order to justify policy choices or to simplify a complicated situation.

Does my case study tell us anything useful, theoretically speaking? The picture that emerges is confused – probably too confused to be confined by a single theoretical approach, which is, actually, one of my points. I can hardly use my subjects to define 'Serbian nationalism' in the 1980s–90s. They were one loosely knit circle of intellectuals who collectively accomplished one limited but critical task: they provided a set of images that informed a Serbian self-definition as a degraded

[48] Nenad Dimitrijević, 'Words and Death: Serbian Nationalist Intellectuals', in Andras Bozoki, ed., *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999), 123.

[49] Eric Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1999), 11.

[50] Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 150.

[51] New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. For more extensive comment, see Nick Miller, 'Beyond Journalism,' *East European Politics and Societies*, 13, 3 (1999), 609.

[52] New York: New York University Press, 1999. I reviewed this book for H-Net in 1999 (http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=1923926098751).

people, humiliated, divided, in need of cultural and political renewal. As such, they were, I suppose, part of a broader nationalist event, along with the political force who eventually co-opted their ideas and influence, Slobodan Milošević. 'Serbian nationalism' was a multifaceted work in progress throughout the 1980s and 1990s, more like a process than a singular phenomenon.

As one component of a nationalist movement, the work of the siminovci was limited to (i) creating – in words and pictures – a portrait of a divisive (fratricidal) Serbian people; (ii) arguing that 'bolshevism' had degraded the Serbian nation by exploiting Serbs' essential divisiveness (iii) preparing Serbs for the appearance of a leader who could overcome their recent heritage, both mundane and exalted, of degradation. It seems to me that this is something we can work with. Perhaps the first step would be to clarify exactly what this simple outline excludes, which is the possibility that the modern Serbian nationalist movement was the creation/manipulation of Slobodan Milošević (which would be a crude modernist position). In fact, the movement preceded its embrace by the politician. It may be true that the movement would have gone nowhere, it may be true that the politician thereafter manipulated it, but the movement existed, independently. Thus the most extreme modernist variations are irrelevant in this case.

The fact that the movement existed independently does not make it possible to eliminate the more general theoretical approaches – for instance, it does not render Ernest Gellner's global, or Hobsbawm's dismissive, modernism inapplicable. But it does force us to consider narrower aspects of the modernist approach more carefully, and it may well demonstrate the implicit weakness of the more general modernist case. Because the movement led in part by the siminovci (and obviously others) fuelled the politics of Slobodan Milošević, it is important in its own right. The most critical aspect of the movement becomes its authenticity – as opposed to its invented, its imaginary or its contingent quality. When Eric Gordy argued that Milošević used nationalist rhetoric to maintain power, he provided us with our entrée. Was it rhetoric? The key is to determine how invented or imagined these traditions were/are. If they are more real than imagined, we must work with that destabilising fact.

In this context, I would argue as follows. First, the negative responses of my subjects to developments in Yugoslavia were originally rational (as opposed to hysterical, unreasonable or fantastic). Up to 1968, their criticisms were directed at particular and real abuses by the Tito regime. In other words, for those Serbs like Ćosić who counted on Tito to render nationalism irrelevant in Yugoslavia, the constitutional amendments passed between 1971 and 1974 and the Constitution of 1974 were a surrender of historic proportions. And Popović was right that the regime had failed miserably to provide for Yugoslavs, and the existence of guest workers really did indicate that failure. Mihiz, as always, stands apart in this sense, since he was never really disillusioned by a regime he never liked. But the responses of Ćosić and Popović to the Tito regime appear lucid and only potentially nationalistic. The alternative would be to describe them as either thoroughly deluded (which they were not) or manipulated from the beginning (which is an occasional accusation: a Serbian

novelist named Svetislav Basara has written a novel entitled *Looney Tunes*, in which a character known as the Great Dissident [Ćosić] gets his orders in secret from a faction within the party[53]). But the original logic of their opposition to Titoism renders the argument that these men, and others like them, were either irrational or incited by others with ulterior motives (politicians vying for power) untenable.

Second, their focus was culture, and they were above all creative; there is no evidence that they sought power, although one could be forgiven for suspecting that Ćosić would not have minded leading his people at some point, in some way. In this sense I would argue that, regardless of the outcome of their work, their intent was to force Serbs to look inward in search of their own shared historical cultural traditions for continuity with their past. Their goal was to inspire cultural regeneration; their belief was that this regeneration would revitalise and strengthen their community. The results of their engagement were certainly to contribute to a violent series of reckonings throughout former Yugoslavia, but the purpose of this article is not to assign blame, it is to examine the nature of a nationalist event. This one focused on cultural continuity rather than political empowerment or the simple desire for personal power on the part of its movers.

Third (relatedly), their work was introspective rather than aggressive. While it is part and parcel of all examinations of national movements to note that nations define themselves against the 'other', and the Serbian movement of the 1980s certainly involved the 'essentialisation' of Albanians, Croats and Muslims, it seems to me that the primary concern of Ćosić, Popović, Mihiz and many other participants in the Serbian movement was to essentialise Serbs – as degraded, requiring a revival, as having been moved backwards on the civilisational scale by evil bolshevism. Once thus essentialised, or possessing an understanding of their role in their own degradation, Serbs could move on to the more essential task of rebirth. For Ćosić, the goal remained becoming modern; for Popović it became to regain lost dignity; for Mihiz, it was to maintain Serbia's pre-existing ties to modernity.

Fourth, we must recognise that Ćosić, Popović and Mihiz not only argued for continuity with a Serbian past (nationalists always make this argument), but also that their work cannot be understood without the presence of that past. They did so in different ways, but never really as manipulators or propagandists (yes, they had their propagandistic moments – one thinks of *1 May 1985*, or Ćosić's showy self-deprecation, but those moments do not define their project). Their work is best understood as reflecting the creative integration of older (even 'ancient') images peculiar to Serbian culture with Serbian modernity, as part of a process of addressing entirely modern problems faced by that nation. The resonance of Ćosić's fratricidal metaphor with a broad audience of intellectuals and ordinary people in Serbia must be attributed largely to the similarity of his imagery to that of the Kosovo cycle, where internecine struggle, individual sacrifice, mendacious betrayals, and collective punishments and suffering first entered the Serbian cultural canon, never

[53] Svetislav Basara, *Looney Tunes: Manično-paranoična istorija srpske knjievnosti u periodu od 1979–1990. godine* (Beograd: Dereta, 1997).

to leave it. Whether consciously or not – and I suspect it was unconscious, since Ćosić never explicitly endorsed or exploited the medieval Kosovo imagery in his work – the influence of a thoroughly premodern cultural corpus is obvious and is frankly impossible to imagine as an invention. Popović's *Scenes*, which initially avoided romanticising (nationalising) their subjects, became ever more national as the painter embraced the same imagery of division and betrayal as that adopted by Ćosić. To address the question from a different perspective, when Mihiz explicitly chose to update *Banović Strahinja*, he did so to modernise a piece of poetry that was beloved by Serbs, but he did not do so as a way of 'nationalising' moderns in the usual romantic way. He chose instead to impose a modern and universal understanding on that which was ancient. The combination of unimagined grievances, integrated ancient/modern imagery and cultural focus seems to me to indicate that these men reflect deep continuities in a nationally Serbian historical experience.

The point in nationalism theory where my case contributes is the point at which modernism has become most seductive: in the notion that nations are 'invented' or 'imagined'. My case study cannot be explained by Hobsbawm's 'invented tradition', which serves as the basis for his argument that modern states piece together national identities in order to homogenise their diverse societies. There is too much continuity – which even Hobsbawm has conceded – in Serbian identity over centuries to satisfy his belief that almost anything will succeed in the process of homogenisation if it has the force of the modern state behind it.[54] Brubaker's dismissive argument that nations are an unsuitable category of historical analysis fails in the Serbian case for the same reason.[55] Anderson's more positive formulation, that nations are 'imagined communities', is quite different from those of Hobsbawm and, obviously, Brubaker. Anderson argues that all communities 'larger than primordial villages' are imagined because their members will never know each other personally; thus, their connections are imagined.[56] He describes the historical process by which older (but also imagined) communities gave way to the modern national variety: the decline of religious community and the dynastic realm, coupled with the emergence of a popular press, made the imagined community of the nation possible. The success of Anderson's appealing image has led to the simplistic application of his idea, often as virtually interchangeable with Hobsbawm's. In fact, while Anderson sees nations as modern, he never argues that an imagined community has no continuity with previous ones, nor does he argue that imagination is a necessarily just a tool in the hands of modern state builders. Unlike Hobsbawm, Anderson allows for the possibility that nations follow logically, without explicit human agency, from earlier types of identity.

In his study of twentieth-century Yugoslavism, Andrew Wachtel offered that he views 'the nation not as a political entity but as a state of mind, an "imagined

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[54] Hobsbawm once allowed that Serbia was an exception to the modernist rule. See Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 75–6.

[55] '. . . to focus on nationness not as substance but as institutionalized form; not as collectivity but as practical category; not as entity but as contingent event'. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 16.

[56] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

community"' à la Benedict Anderson, which means for him that national identity is always 'up for grabs'.[57] Wachtel agrees, though, that the identity must resonate with the population: 'elites cannot merely impose national consciousness; rather, they propose a national definition, basing it on existing and invented traditions, and the chosen population accepts, modifies, or rejects the definition'.[58] This would seem to be consistent with Anderson's formulation, and the end result for the subject of Wachtel's inquiry, Yugoslavia, bears out that the Yugoslav definition did not resonate with Serbs in the end. But there is one insurmountable problem with Anderson's definition, and that is his argument regarding the place of the nation in historical development: in the Serbian case, the community/tradition in question preceded the death of monarchy and the advent of print culture.

The one existing theoretical perspective that can successfully work with the Serbian case is, unsurprisingly, the result of mediation between the current extremes in nationalism theory. Anthony D. Smith has proposed what he calls an 'ethnosymbolic' approach to the study of national identity and nationalism. 'Modern nations are not created *ex nihilo*', Smith explains, 'they have premodern antecedents that require investigation in order to establish the basis on which they were formed'.[59] The ethnosymbolist agrees that some nations are modern and that nationalism is a modern ideology, but rejects the blanket argument that there is no relationship between pre-existing ethnic identities and modern national ones. Instead, in Smith's formulation, 'recurrence, continuity, [and] appropriation . . . are the ways in which the past is related to the present, and it may be an ancient and self-remembered past that must be recovered and authenticated'.[60] Smith emphasises the legitimacy rather than the inventedness of myths, memories and symbols; an identity cannot be invented out of whole cloth provided by the state, it must instead be founded on a structure that will support the weight of continuous or intermittent historical traditions within a given group.

Ethnosymbolism helps us to explain Serbia's 1980s without resort to emotionally satisfying but also reductionist and horrifying interpretations that argue that Serbs are captives of their history; it also enables us to avoid the unconstructive argument that nationalism in Serbia was somehow illegitimate, the product of state manipulation. As neither an absolute nor a fiction, nationalism in Serbia in the 1980s becomes a legitimate – if ugly – part of Serbia's long history, but one which can be explained rather than essentialised.

The *siminovci* were not the only nationalists in Serbia in the 1980s. But, as cultural revivalists who were uninterested in political power, they provide an opportunity to extract something positive from the general Serbian experience of extremism and horror (to which they unquestionably contributed). Their existence assures us,

[57] Andrew Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 2.

[58] *Ibid.*, 3.

[59] Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover, NH: The University Press of New England, 2000), 63.

[60] *Ibid.*, 64.

perhaps paradoxically, that there is a potential better future out there for their people. Serbs are neither modernist putty in the hands of powerful elites nor primordially genocidal. If the traditions that were put to use by Ćosić, Popović and their colleagues produced horrors, the project for the Serbian future is to find traditions, myths and/or symbols that will allow for a different outcome: a new revival, built on a different but equally legitimate understanding of the Serbian past.