# Berichte und Kommentare

## Balkan Ghosts Revisited

Racism – Serbian Style

Aleksandar Bošković

### Introduction: Where to Find "Race" in the "Nation"

The issues of race and ethnicity are frequently interconnected in the former communist countries of Europe, and countries of the former Yugoslavia are no exception. In this article, I focus on the issues of racism and xenophobia in Serbia, present throughout its history and especially in the aftermath of the "Balkan wars" between 1991 and 1999, some of which have become surprisingly visible in recent years.

Of course, the problem of racism has been present in anthropology for a very long time, from the early work of Franz Boas, who denounced evolutionary models in unambiguous terms, in the early twentieth century, to his students like Benedict (1942), who provided a very good overview of what racism meant in the late 1930s. More recently, Zack (2001) pointed to important inconsistencies in the "Statement on Race" of the world's largest professional anthropological association, the AAA. One of the veterans of writing about racism, Paul Gilroy (1998), a few years ago contributed to an important discussion of the uneasy relationship between "race" and "nation" – a topic also covered by Loveman (1999), Cowlishaw (2000), and Ballinger (2004) in more specific contexts. Pamela Ballinger in particular noted the use of racist epithets and terminology when dealing with what one would normally regard as "ethnic" differences (2004: 36), as well as that the use of these terms in the areas around the Mediterranean and the former Yugoslavia have escaped the attention of anthropologists (I could add: social scientists as well) dealing with issues of race and racism.

In the Serbian (and former Yugoslav) context, sociologist Božidar Jakšić organised several conferences related to these issues in the late 1990s, and one of them specifically dealt with *racism and xenophobia*, with a number of contributions dealing with the events and incidents in Serbia (see the multilingual volume from this conference, Jakšić 1998). Therefore, I believe that using the term "racism" to deal with issues of extreme discrimination in the present context is justified, despite some possible objections by the "purists." In relatively recent anthropological literature, Eriksen (2002: 5–7) provides some important general observations about the difficulties of distinguishing between "ethnicity," "race," and "nation." For the possible junctures and divergences between the French *ethnie* and "race," see de Heusch (2000).

### The Myth of the Shared Humanity

One of the important issues that remain open is the (lack of) distinction between "race" and "racism" – so that there are, for example, numerous "Statements on Race," but no "Statements on Racism." Another one is related to what actually is meant by "race" – is it a concept, a heuristic device, or a methodological tool? (I should note that similar confusion reigns in the anthropological studies of ethnicity and nationalism.) Is it something that cannot be studied, something that should be studied, or something that we must avoid at all cost?

For the purposes of this discussion, I will limit myself to the materials from Serbia. In doing so, I take as an important point of reference Kuzmanić's (2002) comparative discussion of postsocialism and racism. Kuzmanić emphasized the cultural component, i.e., the fact that after the dramatic political changes in Europe in 1989 (the fall of communism), a particular matrix of thinking reemerged, something that he called "free-floating, cultural racism" (Kuzmanić 2002: 21). He continued:

Racism is free floating in the sense that it is almost completely impossible to anchor it. It is quite impossible to make any kind of coherent connection between its ... appearance and its substance. It is rather something being "based" ... on an endless and – here is the main point – a priori open chain of signs, signatures, and significance (Kuzmanić 2002: 21–22).

These "signs, signatures, and significance" form an integral part of the self-understanding, and the crucial point for auto-referencing for the ethnic groups or nations of former Yugoslavia. Since there are no (nor were) obvious physical differences that could serve to practically distinguish between "us" and "them," specific cultural differences had to be invented instead and positioned in the realm of the powerful symbols. Therefore, the newly emerged racism in these countries also forms an important part of the "nation-building" process. While we (social scientists, teachers, researchers, public figures, or just observers) like to use general (and generalising) notions such as "humanity" both in our research and in our everyday language, and to perceive and treat other human beings as "just humans," important issues of both the *possibility* and the *viability* of such views remain wide open.[1] As recently put by a prominent social scientist, although in a slightly different context:

And yet, if all the United Nations members were satisfied to be "just humans," if the UNESCO lingua franca was enough to define all inhabitants of the planet, peace would already reign. Since there is no peace, there must be something wrong with this humanistic definition of an emancipated human as the only acceptable member of the Club (Latour 2004: 457).

But let me turn my attention to a specific example of how racism is constructed (and expressed) in Serbia. For the purposes of this brief discussion, I will expound on the notion of "cultural differences" and the ways in which it is constructed in order to justify and adhere to the current political climate in Serbia. Just like in the cases of racism directed against people with different skin pigmentation, racism in this part of the world can be quite vicious, as it is also predicated on the imagined ideal of the "clean" *living space* (*Lebensraum*), with no place for people who might threaten the imagined unity of the nation.

## Serbia: The Fear of the Other

On 22 March 2005 citizens of Belgrade, capital of Serbia and Montenegro, awoke to find the public spaces in the centre of the city covered with posters denouncing Jews, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, and the most important and most influential independent media (radio, television, and internet) outlet, B92. The denouncements were done in explicitly racist epithets and slurs. These were posters and pamphlets put up during the night, some in the very centre of the city, so it is slightly unbelievable that no one from the public or from the police noticed, saw, or heard anything. Several political parties (including some from the current Serbian government coalition, like the SPO and the G17 Plus) condemned these incidents, and police eventually came up with several young men as suspects.

However, this was only one in the series of serious incidents with potentially racist connotations that mark the political scene (and colour political discourse) in Serbia in recent years. On previous occasions, targets were members of ethnic minorities (especially Hungarians in the province of Vojvodina), Romas,[2] and Jews.

In perhaps the most serious series of incidents for years, on 17 March 2004, using as the excuse the violence in the Province of Kosovo, rioting mobs of mostly young people burned the mosques in Belgrade and Niš (Serbia's second largest city). In Belgrade, the then chief of police, General Milan Obradović, was given direct orders by the Minister of the Interior Dragan Jočić, *not to intervene* as the rioting went on. (The transcript of their telephone conversation was made public and published in Belgrade in May 2005.) The apparent care of the minister of the interior for the well-being of protesters seems a bit out of place, since, when the mob turned against the US Embassy in Belgrade, special police forces were dispatched immediately, and managed to disperse the mob in just five minutes.

In Niš, in the south of Serbia, the 18th-century mosque (also listed as the national monument!) was burned to the ground, and when the perpetrators were finally brought to justice, they were given light sentences of one month in prison, only charged for the "disturbing of public peace"! The

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1 Several years ago, a friend and colleague from Slovenia, Professor Rajko Muršič, kindly sent me his paper dealing with the destruction of Yugoslavia (Muršič 2000). This line of thinking is inspired by some of the arguments that he used, especially when criticising the notion of the "abstract humanity."

2 Unfortunately, the attacks against the Romas are almost commonplace throughout Serbia – so much, that police sometimes even refuse to react, almost considering them as "normal" or "expected." On the other hand, to my knowledge, no Serbian town has (yet?) tried to erect physical barriers to keep them out, as happened in the Czech Republic.

fact that they destroyed the national monument and an important religious symbol for over one quarter of Serbia's population was never mentioned. To make matters worse, the perpetrators actually chanted and sang "Death to Muslims!" at the end of the trial, in the court, after being sentenced. (This was recorded and played by the media, especially the B92.) Their triumph seems understandable; after all, the prosecutor did not lay the charges that could bring much stiffer sentencing (for example, for the instigation of the religious or ethnic hatred, the minimum prison term is five years), so they felt like heroes and winners.

While Muslims form a significant part of the Serbian society (over 20 per cent, with the clear majority in the Sandžak region, and two representatives in the 250-member National Assembly), there are very few Jews in Serbia (having been all but wiped out during the Second World War) – but they are nevertheless considered as representatives of the dangerous and potentially threatening "other."[3] Of course, as already noted by Žižek (1990: 52–54), minorities need not really be *physically present* – the very fact that *they can be imagined* is threatening enough for the nationalists. The fact that they are (or at least they can be) associated with cultural values very different from the mainstream Serbian society, just adds to this need to objectify them as threatening.

### The Romas and the Problem of an Empty Screen

The incidents against the Romas are the most common, as members of this ethnic minority are seen as both culturally and racially different. They are believed to be inferior in every possible aspect to the majority population, and most likely to lead the life of criminals.[4] Having said that, it is inter-esting that in most of the countries of the former Yugoslavia (Serbia included – as well as in most of the countries of the former Eastern Europe) the exact number of the Roma population is unknown – although this number is generally believed to be much higher than expressed in the "official" census figures.[5]

On the other hand, anthropologists with field-work experience in Serbia, like van de Port (1998), have noted the ambiguous relations between the ethnic Serbs and the Romas (he calls them *Gypsies* – a term that in recent years Romas regard as inappropriate). The Romas seem to epitomise the music, passion and fun, ability to enjoy life at its fullest, something that Serbs also see as their own important characteristics. There can be no real good night out without them, as demonstrated in songs celebrating their spirit. The Romas are presented in the popular discourses as the ones "who really know how to have fun." The real good places to go out for a dinner are usually restaurants "where the Gypsies are playing," etc. However, this image of people who form an important part of the local culture blurs when it comes to everyday behaviour of some Serbian citizens.

Recent incidents included protests by the citizens of a part of Belgrade during the summer of 2005, in order to block the intended relocation of several hundred Romas from their unhygienic slums under one of Belgrade's bridges into their neighbourhood. Even though that no one was able to prove that this relocation would hurt the ethnically Serbian ("white") citizens in any way, even though several human rights organisations vigorously protested against clearly racially motivated objections of the citizens, and even though the intended area for relocation was owned by the city, the city authorities eventually backed down – fearing the possible impact on the future local and state elections.[6] In another and much more ominous incident, almost the whole Roma population of the

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3 On 12 December 2005, a Serb American university professor, Dušan Bjelić, presented in the National Library of Serbia in Belgrade an anti-Semitic diatribe denouncing Jews, Freud, and psychoanalysis (with the collaboration of the Bolsheviks, of course) for many evils of the twentieth century, including the Holocaust, as well as the massacre in Srebrenica. The Jewish community in Belgrade declined to react, though, believing that their eventual reaction would only make this scandalous event more popular.

4 This has actually turned out to be factually wrong, as in the late 1990s the sociologist Božidar Jakšić from the Belgrade Institute of Philosophy and Social Theory conducted an extensive study of the Roma population in Serbia and Montenegro. All the available official police statistics point to the fact that there is no significant difference in percentage between Roma and ethnic Serbian population who commit crimes. However, the media never reports this fact, so the stereotypes persist.

5 With the possible exception of the Republic of Macedonia, where the Romas are well-organized politically, and participate in government on different levels. In Serbia, the latest (as of 2002) "official" number is 108,193 or 1.44 per cent of the population (Biserko 2005).

6 It is quite telling that in the attempts to negotiate this crisis with the angry citizens who took to the streets, the Belgrade city authorities only sent relatively low-ranking politicians (like Mrs. Radmila Hrustanović) or people with no political influence (like the Belgrade's Chief Architect Djordje Bobić). It is also worth pointing out that the city of Belgrade is run by the main opposition party, the Democratic Party (DS) – the party of the late Prime Minister Djindjić, and also the party that first instituted democratic reforms in Serbia in 2001.

town of Sivac in Vojvodina had to flee their homes after they have been threatened by local (Serbian) population. This was a reaction to a murder committed by a young Roma man – but the fact that he was in police custody did not help, as the majority still wanted all the Romas out. Some have claimed that these attacks had the direct support of the ultra-nationalist SRS party, which heads the local administration (*Anonymous* 2005).[7]

It is important to note that in all of the instances mentioned above, the perpetrators felt that they were "speaking" (or acting) for (and in the name of) the majority of the people of Serbia. The behaviour of politicians (especially members of the ruling DSS party – but note the events even in the opposition-governed Belgrade!) usually serves only to strengthen their convictions. The incidents in which minority members (including women, NGO representatives, etc.) are attacked and verbally abused are quite common in the Serbian National Assembly, and as these sessions are broadcasted live on the state TV, people throughout Serbia can "enjoy" the obscenities, escapades, and really bad jokes of their chosen representatives. Several important things should be noted here. (For the role of media in instigating the hatred of and for the other, see Marić 1995 and Biserko 2005: 419–530.)

First of all, on the level of symbolic behaviour, governing politicians frequently say in public that they support an open, free, and democratic society. If they would have tried to say something like "Muslims [or Hungarians, Albanians, Croats, etc.] do not deserve to live" during their political campaigns, it is very possible that the public would have decided that they were not worthy to be voted into office, and that that would be considered as just going too far in a political struggle. However, they did not have to say this: they left it to the members of the public (usually the young). Actually, they created and then conveniently left an equivalent of an empty screen,[8] allowing "the public" to "fill in" the blank space, the unsaid. However, the unsaid is more than obviously implied in the actual actions and behaviour of the ruling politicians, and it includes promoting the extreme nationalist forces of the Serbian society, especially individuals and parties (like the SPS, or the SRS) who were prominent

in leading the Serbs on the path of wars, destruction, and self-isolation during the 1990s.

So, while the actual perpetrators of these incidents are usually very young and very few in numbers, the total political climate points to a real problem: the inspiration that they get from the "official" political world and the climate that is reflected in the media.[9] Using the terminology employed by Kuzmanić, I could say that here "signs" stand for the actual acts of senseless racist violence, "signatures" for the tacit approval of these actions by the most prominent political parties and their leaders, and "significance" for their wider meaning as expression of fear and hatred of everything different, other, foreign, or "non-Serbian." Given the complex (and essentially hybrid) nature of the Serbian society, this "significance" could also be understood as an extreme act of self-loathing and the desperate urge to self-destruct.

## Defeating Racism: The Problem of Ethnocentrism

I consciously do not want to speak about the more "popular" forms of racist behaviour (like insults in the sport stadiums directed against the players of African origin from the leading Western European football clubs, while at the same time the leading scorer of the Serbia and Montenegro's last year's champion, Partizan FC, in 2004 was Pierre Boya, from Cameroon!), because I believe that the problems encountered by this particular form of "cultural racism" are much greater and potentially more damaging.

In a case like Serbia, these also threaten relations with the country's neighbours (who are invariably inhabited by some potentially "dangerous" minorities), but also the social fabric of the society itself (as there are no really "pure" Serbs, just as there are no "pure" nations anywhere else). The real scope of the problem is potentially much wider, and it concerns the very concept of difference and what we do with it.

As famously stressed by Lévi-Strauss when the UNESCO was debating its current statement on racism, for many people (himself included) there was not much wrong with the notion of ethnocentrism as such. The famous lecture, "Race and Culture," was delivered at the UNESCO in 1971, and reprinted as the first chapter in "The View

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7 The SRS representatives have denied these allegations (*Anonymous* 2005).

8 The idea of the "empty screen" has been pointed out to me several years ago, in a slightly different context, when using the examples discussed by the great French linguist Oswald Ducrot, by a friend of mine from Belgrade, Mr. Branimir Stojanović.

9 Particularly good and detailed studies of the role of the media in promoting racist and xenophobic attitudes have been done in Slovenia – see, for example, a very informative outline by Žagar (2002).

from Afar" (Lévi-Strauss 1992). Lévi-Strauss already expressed some of the more interesting observations in the "Preface" to this book, for example: "Cultures are not unaware of one another, they even borrow from one another on occasion; but, in order not to perish, they must, in other connections, remain somewhat impermeable toward one another" (1992: xiv–xv). However, Lévi-Strauss also claimed that the shift in the position (and his growing scepticism) from an earlier publication he did for the same institution, "Race et histoire" (Lévi-Strauss 1952), was primarily upsetting for the people working there, because they were, in his words:

… dismayed that I challenged a catechism that was for them all the more an article of faith because their acceptance of it – achieved at the price of laudable efforts that flew in the face of their local traditions and social milieus – had allowed them to move from modest jobs in developing countries to sanctified positions as executives in an international institution (1992: xiii).

Some very important issues related to ethnocentrism and to Lévi-Strauss' own position were opened by his article, especially when it comes to the limits of cultural relativism, or the limits of our possibilities for making comparisons. While I believe that it is important to understand this point of view, I do not think that it could be extended to all cultures and all situations. Furthermore, taken to its extreme, this position can actually be seen as something that could justify a notion such as the "separate development" – as seen in South Africa between 1949 and 1990, for example.

However, where does the apparently "innocent" ethnocentrism end ("we are all different"), and racism and xenophobia begin ("as we are different, we need to stay apart")? How to draw the line? Who will draw the line? And, most importantly, is it possibly to draw one?

Just as we have some obligations to combat racism as practitioners, public figures, teachers and researchers, the problems are sometimes in the realm that we do not have too much influence in, namely, politics. For example, the changes in the political climate in Serbia after the assassination of the then Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić, on 12 March 2003, led to the rise of the DSS-led government (with Mr. Vojislav Koštunica as the prime minister), from March 2004. Mr. Koštunica's policies of appeasing nationalists could not go unnoticed, and they naturally saw in him a clear and natural ally (after all, he is one of the very few Serbian politicians who *never* condemned the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina), and a possibility to pursue their

policies (for a list of recent examples, see especially Biserko 2005: 533–636). It is impossible to really combat racist or xenophobic incidents if their perpetrators enjoy (or they believe they enjoy!) full and wide-ranging support for their actions.

Some scholars who actively study interethnic relations in Serbia (like Professor Vladimir Ilić from Belgrade's Department of Sociology of the Faculty of Philosophy) claim that these and other similar "incidents" in Serbia actually represent acts of impotence and desperation of the extremists, who know that their days are numbered, given Serbia's official "pro-European" political inclinations and geographical surrounding. In his interpretation, these and similar actions are primarily acts of the desperate and marginal few, trying to draw attention to what they consider important. Although this does not diminish the gravity of the crimes committed, Ilić believes that they are sometimes put out of proportion.

In the situation where an increased globalisation and cultural hybridisation of all parts of Europe takes place, it is easy to see how certain extremist groups feel extremely marginalised in this part of the Balkans, and to see them trying to divert as much attention to themselves as possible. On the other hand, these and similar situations could never arise in a political climate which clearly determines acts of racism and xenophobia as politically, socially, culturally, and legally unacceptable (an excellent example of the extremely lenient sentencing of the mob members who burnt the Niš mosque, charged only for "disturbing the peace"!).

Having said all that, I can only conclude that the issue of racism and how to combat it is primarily (if not only) a political one – it will always depend on the particular political forces at play, as well as on the presence or absence of the political will to stop it. As long as there is no such will, racism will continue unchecked and unchallenged.

## Abbreviations

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| DS | Demokratska stranka | Democratic Party |
| DSS | Demokratska stranka Srbije | Democratic Party of Serbia |
| G17 Plus | G17 Plus | G17 Plus |
| SPO | Srpski pokret ob-nove | Serbian Renewal Movement |
| SPS | Socijalistička partija Srbije | Socialist Party of Serbia |
| SRS | Srpska radikalna stranka | Serbian Radical Party |

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# Power vs. Consent in Tribal Political Systems in Iran:
# Salzman on the Basseri Khan

## Comments on an Extreme View

Burkhard Ganzer

In the spectrum of Near Eastern tribal political systems and types of leadership, Iran stands out in that forms of undoubted centralised authority and effective exertion of power developed there. Nevertheless, even in the most distinct cases, such as those of the Qashqa'i and Bakhtyari, a strong segmentary counterweight represented by the leaders of component subgroups, and hence an element of dependence and transactionality, has remained. It is this element or aspect that has received most attention in the modern theoretical treatment of these systems (see, e.g., Loeffler 1978). Not surprisingly, it has also often been overemphasized and exaggerated in accordance with the individualist, antiessentialist, and symbolist tendencies of modern theoriz-