

Introduction

Ex-Yugoslav Masculinities under Female Gaze, or Why Men Skin Cats, Beat up Gays and Go to War

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The Serbian Orthodox Church publicly and officially tells Serbian mothers who lost their only sons in the wars not to weep bitterly, but to “blame themselves for not giving birth to more than one child, to be their consolation.” A Serbian volunteer veteran of recent wars proclaims women’s duty to be “to heal, to cure, and to lie down in bed so that the warrior can relax.” (Milicevic)

A former KLA fighter claims as common knowledge that Serbian men grew up with minuscule cocks due to testosterone deficiency, and that the Serbian women are whores. (Munn)

A young Albanian woman with a college degree from the University in Tetovo refuses to kiss her husband’s mother’s hand and divorces him. A climbing Albanian politician in Macedonia appreciates “more intellect and brains” in his Latvian mistress but if Albanian women were to abandon their traditional role, it would all be over—“Tutto Finito,” he says. (Dimova)

Two days after Milosevic’s extradition to The Hague, on 30 June 2001, the first Gay Pride Parade gets staged at the main Belgrade square. At least 14 people get seriously injured as the parade participants are physically attacked by hundreds of young men. (Greenberg)

A Bosnian policeman in Zenica jokingly demonstrates the old “custom” of “skinning the cat” (as a demonstration to a new wife of what awaits her if she doesn’t obey) in front of an American female anthropologist researching responses to gender-based violence. (Helms)

In this brief introduction I cannot hope to do justice to the complexity of arguments presented in these five papers. Instead, I will extract from them a few ingredients and try joining them together into a tentative outline of a model for understanding “Masculinities after Yugoslavia.”

The first ingredient is the fragility, instability and unreliability of the new ex-Yugoslav states. They are “weak” in various ways—their borders, constitutions, international status and even names are fluid, and this instability tends to be perceived by most of their citizens as *not normal*. The rule of law, or even the elementary guarantees of order, tends to be perceived as unreliable, fragmented and arbitrary. While not exactly “a state of nature,” or a Hobbesian war of all against all (although the memories of actual wars are fresh), this state of affairs appears so uncertain that it verges

upon resembling the “absence of effective state institutions” that, according to classical anthropological literature, constituted a precondition for the notorious Mediterranean honor/shame complex (Schneider, 1971, pp. 2–3).

Typically, these anthropological accounts describe small groups such as patricians in intense mutual competition where, as Denich suggests, “the stance of masculine aggressiveness is essentially a defensive one serving to ward off potential threats to a group’s fragile hold over its subsistence resources” (Denich, 1974, p. 250). It is the absence of overarching state authority with its legal means of settling disputes that makes these societies “resemble a Hobbesian state of nature” (Schneider, 1971, p. 6) where each group has to fend for itself.

Enter the second common ingredient of the ex-Yugoslav situation: ethnonationalist mobilization, and its gender regimes that at times seem like a return to the masculine posturings of bygone eras. Only, the “groups that have to fend for themselves” are hardly the classical “patricians” of old ethnographies, but rather the imagined ethnonational communities. These communities, moreover, tend to be imagined as victimized in the past and radically threatened in the present, and, as the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia has shown, such sense of victimhood tends to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

All the papers emphasize how central the gender idiom is to such ethnonational imaginings. One can perhaps talk of a mythical matrix that links heroes, soil, blood and wombs in a vision that owes both its incoherency and fascination (fascination due to incoherency?) to an underlying fantasy of the sexless reproduction of the nation through males only. I know of no better formulation of that matrix than Ivan Colovic’s notion of the “double bloodstream.”

The connection of Serbs with the body of their maternal soil and the mutual link of Serbian generations, what is usually called, “Serbdom,” endures thanks to the preservation of the same connective substance—Serbian blood. It flows in a double bloodstream. Through one it is transferred from generation to generation, through the other, with the sacrificial blood of fallen heroes, it nourishes the body of Serbia, the native soil . . . The mythic renewal of the ethnos is created through the fertilization of the native soil with native blood. This is a magic force, or rather, a sacrificial fertilization by means of blood spilt in a war for existential space, that is for the state territory understood ethnically . . . The soil which is made fruitful by the blood of those who fell for their fatherland has the role of an ethnic womb, while the wombs of individual biological mothers are reduced to transmitting and disseminating the fruits which come *ex terra*. (Colovic, 2002, pp. 8, 18).

In this matrix, women are involved in one out of two “bloodstreams,” but they are themselves *double* reproducers of the nation—as necessary wombs, but also as socializers, that is, conveyers of *culture* as tradition and *Volksgeist*. Since women are potential betrayers, yet indispensable (alas) for the biological as well as “cultural” reproduction, they have to be controlled by men—their wombs protected from the

racial other (so that the pure blood could flow through them as vessels), and their minds kept loyal to the nation so they can bring up new heroes to die for it.

Unfortunately, women also tend to be bearers of “civilization” among the relatively “uncivilized.” They tend to have this affinity with the civilized—they care more about hygiene and good manners, they don’t curse, they dislike all kinds of vulgarities, they seem to enjoy the accoutrements of civilized life and, what is worst, they tend to conspire with the More Civilized Enemy to civilize their own males (make him spit less, curse less, drink less, abstain from beating his wife or gays or from going to war). And this means that the woman might prefer the civilized man as partner as well, someone polished, gentle, tolerant and understanding. This predilection to recognize women’s civilizational superiority over men could be noted in the recursive pairing of men from lower and women from higher civilizational levels in Yugoslav movies and literature—something I call the “Reverse Pygmalion” (Zivkovic, 1998; 2001).¹ The Albanian men who keep Latvian mistresses, German lovers and Macedonian girlfriends in Rozita Dimova’s paper are an excellent example of this sort of “hypergamy.”

In a word, there is this (imagined) universe in which the male lineage is the backbone, and all that threatens this imagined transgenerational male bond is seen as the potentially treacherous female. Outside males, especially if they are dominant politically and perceived as civilizational superior, are seen as a threat to one’s own masculinity and, in a typical move, emasculated by “us” when we seduce their womenfolk—thus proving that civilized women fall for the primitive, thus more virile man. If their women fall for us, it must be because their men are testosterone deficient. God forbid, however, that our womenfolk be so civilized as to become promiscuous, since we know from the very fact that civilized women fall for us primitives that they are whores.

Another crucial ingredient in the situation is what some of the papers explicitly and some implicitly refer to as “economic emasculation” in post-Yugoslav societies. The road to the kind of masculinity that comes from the ability of the male to provide, to act confidently as a breadwinner, is now cut off for a sizeable portion of the population. This precipitates a “crisis of masculinity” that offers a fertile ground for nationalist re-traditionalizers advocating a return to “real manhood” and denouncing all the sissies, fags and other emasculated men. Most ominously, such an economic emasculation means that another traditional venue for regaining masculinity gains in appeal—going to war.

When the old order crumbles (in this case, that of Tito’s Yugoslavia), women in general seem to be the more resilient ones. Even popular culture has produced striking images of men, their familiar roles disrupted, becoming useless, depressed wrecks while the women adapt and survive.² Going to war to regain specifically masculine self-esteem is only one of the options. Even without resorting to such drastic means, the sense of disempowerment thus produced could be seen as one of the ingredients in the appeal of nationalist re-masculinization rhetoric, or in one of its corollaries—the violent homophobia Greenberg talks about.

The following scenario thus unfolds—economic emasculation, at least for certain segments of the population, “depresses” the male pole of the gender balance respective to some sort of stable socialist-era position of the “gender relationship gauge.” Ethnonationalist re-traditionalizing rhetoric of recovering some ideal, proper, traditional, *etc.* masculinity feeds off and exploits this “depression,” and, under situations of crumbling legal order, the resultant boost to certain kinds of masculinities could account for at least some of the appeal of war that both Munn and Milicevic deal with.

Re-traditionalizers like to invoke pre-socialist, and even pre-modern, gender regimes. It is perhaps worth noting that these regimes were described in the classical anthropological accounts of Mediterraneanist and Balkanist anthropology, and that, moreover, two broad types have been distinguished that are pertinent to the papers in this issue. Schematically, these could be identified as highland/pastoralist and lowland/agricultural patterns, the first epitomized by Montenegrins and Albanians, exhibiting typical features of the honor and shame, vigilance of virgins, blood feud complex congruent with the social structure of patrilines, and the other associated with *zadruga*-type corporate groups giving way to nuclear families with much more pronounced gender equality (Denich, 1974). In both patterns, moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the gender relationships crucially depend on age and generation—thus both are arguably characterized by what Simic (1983) called “cryptomatriarchy”—in short, the increasing power and eventual dominance of women as they pass through their life-cycle (the wife increasingly mothering her husband is an icon of this). While Simic’s examples come from the lowlander side, both Dimova and Munn furnish examples from the “highlander” side—of the power Albanian mothers exert over their sons whether in pushing them into armed conflict or keeping (unsuccessfully) their wives in line.

Now the final ingredient that runs through all the papers: the gaze of the international community. Whether in post-Dayton Bosnia, or in Macedonia, Kosovo or Serbia, the scrutiny of the so-called “international community” is felt strongly, if not by all, then by a significant number of constituencies, and, although the stakes vary in different regions and over time, they are arguably quite high throughout. And that international gaze is definitely gendered. Civilizational superiority is conceded to the international community, but the ex-Yugoslav male likes to imagine this civilizational superiority being compensated by a masculine deficiency of civilized males. The papers give ample illustrations of these moves to emasculate or feminize males from the groups perceived as civilizationally superior to one’s own at various levels of inclusion. Working class Serbia considers its intellectual elite as effeminate (Greenberg), and volunteers accuse draft-dodgers of hiding behind women’s skirts (Milicevic), Albanian men ridicule the size of Serbian cocks (Munn) or feminize their Macedonian counterparts (Dimova), and Bosnian policemen express their ambivalence over being scrutinized by the feminized international gaze by mockingly enacting the machismo stereotypically associated with Bosnian rural

backwardness, thus implying the superior masculinity of the “uncultured.” Feminizing the civilizationally superior males, however, is, I would argue, not as important as the other side of the Reverse Pygmalion pattern—the ambivalent relation to the civilizationally superior female, and the feminization of the international gaze.

The international gaze, as papers in this issue show, crucially focuses on gender relations as a gauge of modernity, democratization and all those qualities that count toward eligibility for inclusion into the (civilized) family of nations. As Dimova notes,

Since the Western Enlightenment, Westerners have commonly used the “status” of a group’s women to judge a group’s “modernity.” Ignorant, oppressed, and backward women are the hallmark of a “backward” group—at least according to commonly accepted Western stereotypes.

This poses an irresolvable dilemma for national re-traditionalizers which Dimova casts as

the dilemma experienced by men from ethnic minorities who must educate their women in order to be accepted as “modern,” but whose experiences in seducing the educated women of dominant groups, lead them to believe that educated women are likely to betray them . . . When “civilization” is defined in terms of women’s education and sexual emancipation, ethnic purity becomes impossible—and vice versa.

At all levels of inclusion, recursively, the more “civilized” side tends to be seen as effeminated, feminist and feminizing all at once. Its males are emasculated, its women dangerously emancipated and in charge, its scrutiny explicitly aimed at gender inequalities and critical of patriarchal, masculinist values. I am thus tempted to advance boldly that the civilized gaze may in certain situations assume the qualities of a female gaze. If the civilizationally superior males could be effeminized in fantasy, the civilizationally superior female might be fantasized as vulnerable to the superior virility of the uncivilized, but that only belies a very real sense of her power. That is to say, the international gaze, as well as its local refractions/representatives (i.e. Greenberg’s NGO elites in Serbia), seems to appear as a female gaze, penetrating, stern and demanding.

It seems that so much of the crucial dynamics in the ex-Yugoslav societies—rule of law, viability of states, international recognition, travails if not tragedies of transition, and so on—tend to be gauged by, and more significantly, mediated through gender idioms and practices. This is something I see as a point of convergence in all these papers—an ethnographically nuanced approach to micro-practices of masculinity as resources in negotiating social reality which people, as Greenberg puts it, “mobilize to produce a sense of continuity and agency in times of drastic social, political and economic change.”

In the end, I will engage in a little fantasy of my own and imagine these ex-Yugoslav states as a communal apartment building in the process of subdivision. Quarrels were

recent and violent, there's lots of broken furniture and walls, and deep resentment prevails. An Albanian in the Macedonian subdivision flirts with an educated Latvian girl; another tries to get his educated wife to kiss his mother's hand, whereupon she divorces him and moves out. In the Serbian compound, those who recently demolished various neighbors' apartments demand that those who refused to do so turn over their rooms and belonging to the "real men." Gay people in that part of the communal apartment decide to come out of closet and get beaten up badly, likely by the same guys who lay claim to the rooms of "sissies." In the Albanian sub-subdivision of the Serbian compound, a mother commits suicide ashamed because her son refused to fight those "real men" from the Serbian compound. Those who did fight them consider these Serbs who think themselves "real men" to be actually testosterone deficient. In the Bosnian subdivision beaten-up wives now command the attention of muscle-bound policemen while criminals thumb their noses at the latter.

Now, the whole disintegrating communal apartment building is under close scrutiny. The powerful outsiders are conditioning their help in the re-assignment of rooms and apartments, as well as the refurbishment and redecoration of damaged ones, on certain proprieties being observed that often strike the dwellers as strange, demeaning and, well . . . emasculating. Women are getting unruly, especially since the men lost their jobs, but beating them up, for instance, is a grave sin in the eyes of the powerful outsiders. The whole building is falling apart and is full of gaping holes from the recent settling of accounts (as well as general negligence). It is thus made semi-transparent so it is hard to keep your daughter from going to school, abuse your wife unobserved or beat the gay person next door unreprimed. It seems that in these unstable times, with the building crumbling, and with resentful, perhaps still vengeful neighbors all around, that muscle-bound, real masculinity is more in demand than ever, and yet the pesky foreigners insist precisely on emasculating proprieties, and so do their representatives in the building itself.

And so many of these foreigners or their representatives who come to scrutinize the dwellers are women. The male dwellers may try their macho charms on them (foreign women are supposed to be vulnerable to barbarian virility) but are also chaffing uneasily before their gaze, painfully aware of the power and legitimacy behind that scrutiny. After all, a lot of the masculinity in the building is a public performance for other men, while in the privacy of one's own little room it is often the mother or the wife who really rules. What to do in this crisis of masculinity? While the war lasted, one could escape the female gaze at home by volunteering and joining the boys. Or become "the knight of asphalt," live dangerously, buy the company of beautiful women and die young. One can beat up gays. Oh, and one can, of course, always joke when subjected to this female gaze—enacting the ambivalence between "the resistance to the aesthetics of the international state-building project and a desire to appear 'civilized' under the gaze of that very international project and its local adherents, embodied in this case by the female anthropologist" (Helms).

NOTES

1. The "Reverse Pygmalion" refers to a plot that pits a woman from a higher civilizational level with a man from a lower civilizational level in ambivalent romantic relationships that as a rule end tragically. I argue that it is always the upper class urban girls who cultivate untamed highlanders, and female Western journalists who fall for the highlander's urban equivalents, such as "noble criminals," and almost never the reverse scenarios. The cultivated, civilized males, at all levels of opposition, if they play any part in these narratives at all, are usually shown as effete, decadent or impotent. There seems to be no place for a virile Westerner who sweeps the Balkan woman off her feet in the Serbian imaginary, nor is there a trace of a supremely self-confident Serbian Higgins to raise a Serbian Eliza Doolittle from her low status. In Serbia, to put it simply, Harry Higgins tends to be a woman while Eliza Doolittle tends to be a man.
2. There is a scene in Tone Bringa's 1992 documentary *We Are All Neighbours* where a young Bosnian man who has lost his job embarrassingly accepts his wife's dishwashing instructions in front of a Western female anthropologist's camera gaze. A Serbian feature film that documented the travails of U.N. sanctions and hyperinflation, *Dnevnik uvreda '93 (A Diary of Insults)* is, among other things, a story of male fragility born of rigidity and female pragmatic flexibility. While he sinks into depression when his stable world crashes down, she starts knitting caps and selling them on the street (something he, as an intellectual, would never stoop to). Like Andersen's Matchbox girl, however, she dies of freezing (Sotra, 1994).

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