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Global Economic Dimensions of Yugoslavia's Self-Destruction

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Executive Summary

This analysis relates Yugoslavia's political disintegration to economic phenomena that are simultaneously global, national, and local. The timing for Yugoslavia's disintegration is connected with two global historical "moments": 1) the 1970s flow of credit to developing countries, leading to the international "debt crisis" of the 1980s; and 2) the collapse of communism throughout eastern Europe in the fall of 1989. Taking these external parameters into account, the 1980s "legitimation crisis" of the Yugoslav state is explained in terms of internal dynamics that resurrected statehood ideologies of ethnic nationalism as an alternative to the failing Titoist system. The concept of "superfluity" is used to characterize an endemic condition of unemployment and underemployment within Yugoslavia's economy, as well as its relation to the global economy. When the Titoist economic system was perceived as approaching "superfluity" in relation to the global economy, the state became vulnerable to the radical redefinitions that were to tear it apart along ethnic lines. Policy implications involve understanding 1) the manner in which international financial policies were involved in Yugoslavia's disintegration, and 2) the linkage between economic and constitutional rights involved in the rapid rise of the nationalist movements that dissolved the Yugoslav federal state into inter-ethnic wars of secession.

From the global perspective, international banking policies coincided with changes in Yugoslavia's idiosyncratic "self-managing" socialism. The 1970s "generosity" of international banks providing development loans reinforced Titoist constitutional reforms that decentralized power from the federal government into the republics. The influx of capital resulted in an illusion of prosperity, seeming to validate the efficacy of Titoist "self-managing socialism." However, the 1980s debt crisis revealed that Yugoslavia's success in emulating
West European life styles could not be credited to its own productivity, but to
dependence on foreign credit. The lack of market criteria on the part of the
lending agencies for the viability of these investments meant that the resulting
development projects would never produce the income necessary to repay the
loans. IMF "stabilization plans" during the 1980s resulted in reduced living
standards as inflation spiraled into hyperinflation, while the economy remained
stagnant and unemployment rose, particularly among the young.

During the 1980s, an increasingly public critique exposed the systemic
obstacles to economic viability within the Titoist system, raising fundamental
questions about its inability to provide employment for its own population, as well
as its marginality to the unitary capitalist world economy that was emerging with
the decline of the Soviet economic bloc. Questions about Yugoslavia's economic
viability were transferred into the political sphere, as intellectuals and politicians
in different republics took opposing positions with regard to the causes and
solutions for the economic crisis.

Opposition along ethnic lines resulted from separate, incompatible images
communicated via mass media to the publics in different regions of the country
with regard to their economic situations within Yugoslavia. The print and
electronic media that had provided a common cultural frame during the Titoist era
were a key to dividing that space along lines of ethnic opposition that reoriented
populations toward the capitals of their "home" republics and against each other.
By the late the 1980s, the media were presenting debates between the elites of
different republics that questioned the basis upon which Yugoslavia was
constituted as a state, including whether it should cease to exist altogether.

The rise of nationalism as an alternate statehood ideology presented criteria
that would either privilege or marginalize people within new nation-states on the
basis of their ethnicity. The question of how the state would be reconstituted became an urgent concern for average citizens, as it would directly affect their rights, privileges, and access to the resources under state control. The lure of privilege and the threat of exclusion were the carrot and the stick that simultaneously induced the rush toward ethnic solidarity and inter-ethnic opposition.

The disbanding of Yugoslavia's Communist party in 1990 opened the way for militant nationalist parties to emerge and win elections in each republic. The nationalist parties offered a chance to overturn hierarchies, opening opportunity paths for those excluded under Titoism. These movements provided a political identity and rallying point for the same young people who had found themselves "superfluous" to the Titoist structure. Such young people revived the extreme programs and symbols of the World War II Serbian Chetniks and Croatian Ustashas, and filled the ranks of paramilitary and military forces which fought one another and attacked civilian populations in the ethnic wars within Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina that followed the secession of these republics from the Yugoslav state.
Introduction

Amidst the disasters of political disintegration marking the end of the Cold War, the violent demise of former Yugoslavia particularly shocked public opinion in Europe and North America. Massive brutality in the face of international media and "peacekeeping" organizations seemed impossible in the "heart of Europe." Yet, ironically, these horrors have been committed on behalf of theories of statehood that originated in Europe and are quintessentially European. Furthermore, the Yugoslavia that disintegrated into civil war was no longer the backward Balkan hinterland of the early 20th century. After several decades of post-World War II development, it was a substantially modernized country, with sizeable intellectual and professional classes. Neither had it been isolated from the West. The Yugoslav socialist regime was independent of the Soviet bloc, and (since the 1960s) was open to worldwide travel, trade, and media. Therefore, the violent disintegration of this state does not fit Third World stereotypes associated with many other regions where statehood has descended into violence. In contrast to the deficiency of statehood traditions associated with many formerly colonial countries, it may be said that Yugoslavia suffered from an excess of statehood theories, all of them originating in major traditions of European philosophy. Efforts to bring competing theories into practice over the past two centuries have led repeatedly to violence in the various forms of rebellion against foreign empires, of inter-ethnic war, and of Marxian revolution. Ethnic nationalism and Marxism have provided parallel avenues for successive generations. These finally converged during the 1980s, when onetime Marxist intellectuals revived the ethnic nationalisms of the past and were joined by current Communist leaders who shifted their units of identity from Yugoslavia to its component ethnic "nations," each of which was identified with a specific republic bearing its name.

At issue among the leaderships of Yugoslavia's six republics was the ultimate question of Yugoslavia's statehood: how it should be reconstituted, or whether it should continue at all. These questions had been actively discussed among intellectuals and political leaders for several years prior to the disintegration of the state. Only a small portion of the citizens of most countries, including Yugoslavia, are explicitly concerned with constitutional law, but it was the entry of the public into marches and rallies, then into voting booths, that placed power in the hands of leaders espousing nationalist ideologies and programs that divided the peoples of Yugoslavia against each other.
Yugoslavia's collapse occurred within the kind of brief time frame that political scientist David Apter (1987:304) has called a "disjunctive moment," when "[spectators, citizens, participants, are forced to take sides, to line up on one side or another...according to some social fault line. Events of confrontation take on metaphorical and metonymical significance...." Yugoslavia's fault lines were ethnic; the metaphors and metonyms appeared in the interpretations of ongoing political issues, according to the imageries of conflicting nationalist discourses. Thus, current events became the occasion for recalling the past, reinforcing linkages between history, myth, folklore, literature, language...all the distinguishing markers of national ideology. However, Apter (1987:320) comments that "Most people back away from disjunctive moments. They distrust its mytho-logics, fear randomness, disorder, and the erosion of authority. But especially among young people, the attractiveness of the antistate is there, under the surface."

To understand the disjunctive moment in which the Yugoslav state was dismantled, it is necessary to inquire about what is at stake in this milieu where statehood itself is vested with such paramount cultural meaning that it is repeatedly contested, over successive generations, despite the inevitable costs in human suffering. Movements leading to explosive violence are conventionally viewed in terms of the irrational phenomena that link masses to charismatic leaders. But such explanations overlook the practical interests at stake, when the objective is statehood itself. What definition of statehood can be used to explain the common ground shared by the leaders seeking political power, and the publics who are eager to follow them? Are there practical interests that link ideological leaders with the constituencies through whose support they gain power?

An ethnographer's perspective in a complex society is privileged by its access to numerous observation points, at various locations and social levels, and its lack of prior commitment to any single claim to truth. While fully aware of the macro-level history and politics that are dominated by elites, an ethnographer spends more time amidst the everyday flow of life among people who are not prominent or powerful, hearing about what concerns them, and listening to how they interpret their social and political surroundings. To understand how Yugoslavia's peoples were drawn into conflict over the state, it is necessary to inquire about what statehood means among the population at large, and how that meaning meshes with the elite formulations from the top.

Morton Fried (1967:230) defined statehood in terms of a special set of institutions that originally evolved with social stratification, to enforce "the differentiation of categories of population in terms of access to basic resources" (emphasis added). He explained that the "concept of basic resources refers to what might be considered capital rather than consumer
goods. Central are the things to which access must exist in order for life to be maintained for the individual." (Fried 1967:187) At the heart of this rudimentary definition is the concept of "access." While access is inequitable, which resources are allocated, and to whom, are of vital concern at all social levels. While seeming simplistic in application to a modern state, Fried's definition provides a formulation that approximates the prevalent folk model, or "bottom-up" view of statehood institutions that I observed during numerous visits in Yugoslavia, spanning 25 years. It serves as a basis for connecting abstractions about state and nation with vital concerns about personal access to the modern resources of that society. Paramount, for Yugoslavs at all social levels, was a concept of the state as the source of all significant power and large scale economic resources. While the Titoist system allowed a portion of the population to subsist on small family farms or private workshops, the major avenues for economic and social success were located in socialist industries and institutions. In its diversified and ubiquitous manifestations, the public sector was controlled by leaderships attached at various levels to the Communist party structure, which kept a monopoly over the state by controlling all the legal political and economic institutions. Party-run organizations allocated such basic necessities as employment and housing. This overt relationship meant that the state was far from an abstraction in the practical lives of most people, but was embodied in specific human beings in their workplaces, communities, and families. The fact that a revolution had overturned the social order within recent memory (during World War II) was a reminder that it was possible for an elite to lose control over the state, and for others to lose their previous channels of access. In that case, the reformulation of statehood would be of vital interest to those seeking to assert or to re-establish their claims to the rights, privileges, and other forms of access to the vital resources under the aegis of state control.

Marxism had reconstituted the Yugoslav state along putative class lines; nationalism would construct ethnic dividers. What circumstances induced people to abandon their normal skepticism toward the "mytho-logics" of ideologies and movements that they had previously ignored or even scorned? The younger generations, growing up after World War II, had known only the specific institutions of "self-managing socialism." What impelled them to massively join nationalist demonstrations and follow political leaders who advocated the radical changes that destroyed the Titoist state? A view that relates the meaning of statehood to everyday access to resources provides a link to the questions of privilege and survival that permeated to the grassroots level.

Apter warns of a "specter of superfluous man" that threatens the stability of modern states:
Marginalization...is a condition resulting from prolonged functional superfluousness. Marginals are people who not only do not contribute to the social product, they consume more than they produce....In turn, if deindustrialization produces endemic marginalization, then the state is set for violence, the search for disjunctive moments, for a world turned upside down. [Apter 1987:316]

"Superfluousness" (or its slightly less awkward variant, "superfluity") provides a conceptual bridge between the global political economy, national economies, and populations who are rendered economically marginal to either or both. This essay will explain the timing of "disjunction" in Yugoslavia by locating the basis of its instability in the marginalization of its economy, and thereby its workforce, amidst the realities of economic globalization. When the Titoist economic system was perceived as approaching "superfluity" in relation to the global economy, the state became vulnerable to the radical redefinitions that were to tear it apart along ethnic lines. The disjunction did not result directly from economic factors, however, but in how they were interpreted and presented to the public by nationalist elites, communicating through mass media. Gregory Bateson's (1972) concept of "schismogenesis" will elucidate how separate, incompatible images were communicated to the publics in different regions of the country with regard to their economic positions within Yugoslavia. While economic oppositions are but one dimension of the symbolic and emotional complexity involved with ethnic nationalism, that is the domain which most acutely links individual survival with the sense of collective destiny that depends on how statehood is defined.

Titoism in Crisis

Jurgen Habermas (1975) located the sources of "legitimation crisis" in the increasing gaps between citizens' expectations and the ability of governments to fulfill them. While Habermas developed his theory with reference to advanced capitalism, no states have promised more and delivered less than the "really-existing socialisms" (cf. Verdery 1991) of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But Yugoslavia's Titoist state went its own way after 1948, developing its own institutions, and allowing for the emergence of life styles that emulated those of the West. Unlike their Soviet bloc neighbors, Yugoslavs enjoyed Western-style personal freedoms in the non-political spheres of life, as well as abundant food and modern consumer products. Thus, Yugoslavia's unique "self-managing socialism" long seemed immune from the ills that affected its neighbors. Titoism seemed to have fulfilled its promise to provide a "better life" for one of pre-World War II Europe's poorest, least developed countries. Through the late 1980s, the Titoist state maintained the appearance of permanence and popular
legitimacy. Nevertheless, the startling collapse of Communism throughout Eastern Europe during the fall of 1989 was quickly followed, in January 1990, by the disbanding of Yugoslavia's ruling League of Communists. But the events elsewhere do not explain why the intellectual and political elites within Yugoslavia's component republics had already turned against each other, preparing the way for nationalist electoral victories during 1990. As Yugoslavia's brand of socialism developed endogenously, rather than being imposed from without, the sources for the vulnerability of the state must be sought within Yugoslavia's own institutions, in the nature of its own economic crisis that spanned the entire 1980s decade.

The Global Connection: Development and Debt

From the global perspective, it is striking to note the convergence between international trends and those of Yugoslavia's idiosyncratic "self-managing" socialism. The early 1970s were marked by the global "oil crisis," consisting of sudden fuel shortages followed by steep price increases. Subsequently, developing countries enjoyed rapid economic growth, financed by loans from commercial banks centered in industrial countries. The connection between these phenomena consisted in the glut of deposits from oil-producing countries, resulting in the sudden largesse of banks extending credit to Third World and East European countries. Yugoslavia's illusion of continuous economic expansion was exposed at the start of the 1980s, when it appeared on the long list of Third World and East European debtor countries, from whom repayment was demanded by international banking institutions.

In Yugoslavia, the oil crisis coincided serendipitously with major constitutional reforms that reconceptualized Yugoslav socialism along the lines of "self-management" institutions featuring a "consensual economy" ("dogovorna privreda"). The 1974 constitution also reconstituted the Yugoslav state, dispersing its major powers among six republics and two "autonomous provinces" (nominally located within Serbia). As citizens and as employees, people found themselves reorganized into an alphabet soup of acronyms, designating bureaucratic entities. Considering that the previous reformulations of Titoism had led to rising living standards and toward social liberalization, the citizenry adapted stoically to yet another set of reforms. As the 1970s proceeded into a boom of construction projects, with concomitant flows of income into local areas and personal incomes, the utopian-bureaucratic visions depicted in the 1974 constitution seemed validated. However, a closer look into the apparent prosperity of those years reveals that, by the late 1970s, 85 percent of investments depended on foreign credit (Ramet 1985:8).

The global money flow of the 1970s induced boom conditions in many developing countries, with accompanying social changes and rising expectations. However, the flood of
credit halted abruptly in 1979, when international banking institutions sharply curtailed available credit while steeply raising the interest rates on outstanding loans. By 1981, the widespread inability of debtor countries to make payments, the so-called "third world debt crisis," threatened the stability of the international financial system. To enable banks to recover their investments, the International Monetary Fund took the lead in arranging "stabilization plans" whereby individual countries agreed to refinance their loan payments by increasing their exports while reducing domestic spending. These policies translated into sharp reductions in the living standards within debtor countries.

The world debt crisis found Yugoslavia, owing approximately $20 billion, among the long list of debtor nations subjected to IMF-directed refinancing and austerity policies. Through the 1980s, the economic indicators showed an erosion of the basis for people's confidence in the system upon which they relied for their livelihoods and wellbeing. Austerity policies designed to increase exports concomitantly reduced domestic consumption, experienced in the form of declining living standards. By the end of 1984, average income had fallen to 70 percent of the officially defined minimum for a family of four (Woodward 1986:366). In 1989, the average disposable income per household was only 78.4% of what it had been in 1978 (Sekelj 1993:258).

In practice, the decline of purchasing power was intrinsically linked with inflation, which hovered around 40 percent between 1980 and 1983 (Ramet 1985:8), and then began an ascent that increased exponentially in the late 1980s, to peak at the hyperflationary annual rate of 10,000 percent by the end of 1989 (Sekelj 1993:257). At the outset of 1990, the inflation was successfully broken by the monetary reform policies of premier Ante Marković, but not before political polarizations had already undermined the future of Yugoslavia as a state.

For Yugoslavia, the rude awakening of the debt crisis had a double impact. The purely economic reversals are analogous to those experienced throughout the debtor countries. However, the Yugoslav system had legitimated itself as an innovative solution to problems of development, as a design for a society premised on socialist ideals, replacing the inequities of market competition with the higher principles of consensual self-management. As the government's repeated economic "stabilization" programs solved nothing, analyses of the "kriza" began to question the viability of the Titoist system itself, particularly as it was reconstituted in 1974. Economists and sociologists took the lead in explicating the patterns that had developed during the 1970s, and as the crisis deepened during the 1980s, criticism grew increasingly sweeping and public.

Intellectual critiques of the late 1980s unmasked the ideological pretensions of "self-managing socialism" to openly characterize the Communist Party leadership as an entrenched...
"politocracy," concerned only with protecting its access to positions of power and privilege while mismanaging the economy with investments that combined porkbarrel with patronage (cf. Goati 1989; Sekelj 1993). It was bad enough that the country was deeply in debt. Worse was the realization that much of the money had been misallocated by party leaders at the republic level, using the powers granted by the decentralized 1974 constitution to pour resources into their own regions, without regard for duplication of facilities or for any rational criteria of economic viability. The result was that large numbers of people in each republic had prospered while these projects were under construction, but were left afterward with "white elephants" ("promašene investicije") offering little or no lasting value. Many industries ran at a deficit, staying in business and supporting their employees at the expense of those industries that were viable and efficient.

In sum, the 1970s "generosity" of international banks toward Yugoslavia reinforced Titoist constitutional reforms that decentralized power from the federal government into the republics. Development loans placed money into the hands of republic leaders who declined to coordinate with each other, sponsoring projects without regard for what was going on elsewhere in Yugoslavia, or for their overall economic viability. In effect, these leaders were already acting as though the republics were independent countries. The evident lack of criteria on the part of the lending agencies for the viability of these investments meant that the resulting development projects would never produce the income necessary to repay the loans. Considering that international banks are capitalist institutions, presumably governed by market criteria, the lack of concern for the destination of money lent during the 1970s is an anomaly that had dire consequences for Yugoslavia.

Systemic Ills of Yugoslav Socialism

The Yugoslav state responded to the 1980s economic contraction in a "paternalistic" manner (cf. Verdery 1993) resembling that of its Soviet bloc neighbors, in that socialist enterprises avoided dismissing employees, attempting to keep their workforces intact despite declining production. Sharing the declining output turned employees into collaborators in inefficiency. One economist offered the following explanation for "peculiar stability of Yugoslav society...based on a coalition between the working class and the political bureaucracy":

The bureaucracy assures the working class to employment, a minimum existence, and broad social rights; in return, the working class gives the elite its historical legitimacy. The worker's part of the 'bargain' entails virtual ownership of the job and the de facto right to non-performance or poor work quality, which
typlifies the social atmosphere in our enterprises....In return, the elite gets 'carte blanche' to manage the economy and society as it wishes (Županov 1988:14, my translation).

At the local level, people knew how their own enterprises were run by the patronage appointees of Communist politicians. They also observed the prevalence of inefficiency, incompetence, and low productivity. Once they had boasted that "nowhere in the world can you live as well and work as little as in Yugoslavia," but that phrase rang hollow as real wages declined and inflation rates increased. In contrast, the smallscale private sector provided expansive opportunities for a vigorous "informal economy." As the 1980s crisis deepened, families ingeniously combined income sources from whatever skills and assets they had available. During Yugoslavia's decades of rapid development, peasants had massively urbanized to pursue the benefits of "moderni" life. Now that process was partially reversed, as the same families reactivated their claims to inherited land, where they could raise subsistence gardens and even cash crops to supplement their incomes.

At least, public sector employees could regard their jobs as a security base from which to cleverly add other forms of income. A more intractable problem consisted in the lack of workforce expansion, particularly the inability of the socialist economy to absorb the younger generation. Unemployment statistics climbed, while new graduates typically stayed at home, "waiting at the employment bureau" for indefinite periods that often stretched into years. While supported by their parents, growing numbers of young people were rendered "superfluous" to the socialist economy. Increasingly, they resorted to emigration, to small private enterprises, to activities of dubious legality or outright crime, and to combinations thereof. Private economic endeavors gained respectability under the new term biznes. As the young ceased to believe that the Titoist system would provide for them, they more and more actively sought alternatives.

As the state of crisis became endemic, people at all social levels engaged in critiques of their own local circumstances, connecting what they knew personally and by word of mouth. However, the "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990) of personal knowledge remained separate from the public world as communicated throughout Yugoslavia via the mass media, which were controlled by party leaderships in each republic. Public representations kept on reiterating the basic soundness of the Titoist system while explaining yet another round of adjustments and reforms. The duality between private and public knowledge enabled institutions at all levels to function in the face of a widening gap between the collaborative performances required for the "self-management" institutions and the realities that were common knowledge. Just as the stability of Yugoslavia's economic institutions depended upon "collaboration" between workers
and managers within individual industries, the stability of the political system relied on public images that maintained the division between private knowledge and public opinion.

From Private Knowledge to Public Scandal

The pretenses on all sides were abruptly breached in late August 1987, when television and print media revealed news of a financial scandal of proportions previously unimagined. A falling-out between political factions in Bosnia-Herzegovina led to the public exposure of the financial practices of the large, well-known Agrokomerc agricultural conglomerate in northwestern Bosnia. Under its director, Fikret Abdić, this enterprise had transformed the previously impoverished Bihać region into a food production and processing industrial center. Now the media revealed that Abdić had financed Agrokomerc's expansion through a tissue of unsecured promissary notes, implicating Yugoslavia's major banking institutions with debts amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars. As television news brought the same revelations throughout the country, the hidden "backstage" of Titoism was suddenly exposed. As people experienced a shock of recognition, they could no longer separate their knowledge about dubious local practices from knowledge that questioned the viability of the entire financial and industrial system.

Quickly, people began to speak of the scandal as Yugoslavia's "Agro-gate." In the United States, the shock of Watergate led to a reaffirmation of constitutional legitimacy, as the countervailing branches of government publicly enacted their constitutionally-defined roles. But "Agrogate" was to have the opposite effect, lifting the "taboos" from public criticism of the constitutional order. Rather than confining debate to the economic sphere, circles of intellectuals, journalists, and politicians in the capitals of the three dominant republics (Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia), already were covertly considering options in terms of differing regional and ethno-national perspectives. Thus, questions about Yugoslavia's economic viability were transferred into the political sphere, into an increasingly public debate about the basis upon which Yugoslavia had been and should be constituted as a state, even whether it should continue to exist.

In retrospect, August 1987 may be viewed as the final moment of calm, when the elements of approaching turmoil were becoming visible, yet did not appear threatening to the established order. A review of popular print media for that month includes the following featured items: a debate over proposed amendments to the constitution of Serbia; protest demonstrations by Serbian inhabitants of the Albanian-dominated Kosovo province; the publication of an open letter from a Slovenian intellectual that questioned the continuation of the "brotherhood and unity" upon which Titoist Yugoslavia had been founded; and the increase
of the inflation rate to 300% annually. Each of these reports reflected an aspect of the malaise that had become endemic, but without any sense that problems could not be solved by yet another round of adjustments by Party leaders maneuvering within the existing Titoist framework. However, the sensational revelations about the Agrokomerc scandal moved questions about the system to a different plane. The opposing views of Yugoslavia's future that had been germinating privately among intellectuals in the major capitals more and more openly entered the public arenas.

The 1980s debt crisis had already revealed that Yugoslavia's success in emulating West European life styles could not be credited to its own productivity, but to dependence on foreign debt. The Agrokomerc scandal demonstrated the extent to which the system was permeated with debt, raising doubts about the capability of the economy to meet increasingly stringent global standards. It is in this light that Apter's concept of "superfluity" may be extended to characterize an entire economy that existed in negative balance to the world economic institutions. Growing awareness of this relationship, among both elites and the public at large, constituted an imminent threat, drastically undermining attachment to the existing system. The moment of disjunction was timed by the realities of economic unviability; the form, however, was determined by those who chose the ideological basis for dismantling the state of Yugoslavia, in favor of ethnic nations "imagined" (cf. Anderson 1983) in terms of conflicting territorial claims. Those who saw themselves being rendered marginal, with whole industries on the verge of collapse, instead of upholding the social order, were growing ready to abandon it for the promise of a different kind of state, in which they would gain entitlements as members of favored ethnic nations.

Nationalism and Schismatic Communication

Within a month of the Agrokomerc revelations, Yugoslav politics entered a new phase of open intra-party conflict when Slobodan Milošević led an upstart faction to take control of the Communist League of Serbia. Considering that Milošević would quickly gain worldwide notoriety as the initiator of aggressive Serbian nationalism, is important to emphasize that Milošević presented himself as an economic and political reformer, as well as a defender of the Serbian inhabitants of the Kosovo province, dominated by ethnic Albanians. Milošević linked the grievances of the Kosovo Serbs with demands for constitutional reform, provoking open confrontations with the leaderships of the other republics, particularly those of Slovenia and Croatia. The following summer, nationalist leaders in both Slovenia and Serbia mobilized public participation in mass demonstrations. Within their own republics, Communist politicians amalgamated with nationalist intellectuals, eshewing the Titoist commitment to Yugoslavia for
the desire to retain their positions as republic "politocrats." According to sociologist Laslo Sekelj:

  The way national communist oligarchies transformed themselves to national political elites took different forms in Serbia and Slovenia, but with the same content and outcome: national homogenization through the replacement of Bolshevik collectivism by a nationalist one (sic). Under the new pattern, first Slovenian and then Serbian communist leaderships appealed to their own national public (sic) seeking support and participation in national politics, thus creating a politically active population for the first time in Yugoslavia's postwar history (Sekelj 1993:208-211).

  No longer confined to the sphere of discussion, opposing visions for Yugoslavia's future (or non-future) were expressed in an escalating spiral of public confrontations over a variety of issues. Concurrently, the inflation rate also spiraled upward, from the 300 percent annual rate reported in August 1987, toward the eventual peak of 10,000 percent in December 1990. The media vividly reported on extreme and dire circumstances faced by enterprises, local communities, and families. In the wake of the Agrokomerc scandal, the media also turned toward divulging previously unpublishable revelations about the inner workings of the Titoist system. Insofar as both the Serbian and Slovenian leaderships were counterposing themselves to the existing constitutional system, they had no interest in suppressing news that would discredit that system. On the contrary, both had an interest in actively undermining public confidence in the existing arrangements. However, they had contrary interpretations of the causes for Yugoslavia's ills, as well as for the desired outcomes. As people had to cope on a daily basis with the effects of the economic crisis, they were susceptible to explanations that emanated via mass media, from the political and intellectual leaders of their republics. What follows is a brief characterization of the separate, mutually exclusive perceptions that led rapidly to schism along regional and ethnic lines. In these confrontations, views emanating from the northwestern republics of Slovenia and Croatia, on one side, were counterposed to those from the eastern and southern republics of Serbia and Montenegro, on the other. (The remaining two republics--Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia--were relegated to the sidelines from that point until Yugoslavia broke apart, when those republics suffered the consequences of the schism which their leaders attempted to avert).

1) Slovenians and Croats aimed longstanding complaints against Titoist redistribution taxes upon the most developed republics to provide capital investment for the least developed regions, which were seen as constantly braking advances toward greater efficiency.26 Thereby, the federal and Serbian capital, Belgrade, was identified as the source of Communist
inefficiency, draining off the profits of the most prosperous regions to subsidize the low productivity of the least developed. Increasingly, the Slovenian and Croatian publics viewed the rest of the country as a drag on their prosperity.

2) In Serbia and Montenegro, the onus for Yugoslavian economic decline was placed upon the Titoist leadership structure, which entrenched so-called "chairwarmers" ("foteljaši") in all managerial positions through a tissue of patronage that rewarded loyalty ("podobnost"), while discouraging competence ("sposobnost"). Serbian politicians and media identified the leaders of the "northwestern republics" as responsible for this structure, to the detriment of the rest of Yugoslavia. Serbs and Montenegrins took up the slogan "anti-bureaucratic revolution," urging removal of the leadership as the remedy for economic failure.

Each interpretation defines a separate basis for opposition, in one case between regions, in the other, between the political "ins" and "outs" throughout Yugoslavia. Structural logic would permit two possible axes for schism within a system, defining divisions along either horizontal or vertical lines. The "anti-bureaucratic revolution" construed a vertical, hierarchical division between entrenched Communist political-managerial elites and the rest of society, while the secessionist visions of the northwest republics divided the country according to horizontal segments separating region from region. The lack of convergence between these separate images of societal division meant that there were no grounds for reciprocal argumentation, setting up a matrix for schismatic communication. The public communication of these formulations via party-controlled media in different regions of the country served as an opening wedge in the division of public opinion, particularly along the axis that counterposed a Slovenian-Croatian view against a Serbian-Montenegrin view.

In Slovenia and Croatia, the northwest/southeast opposition gave voice to a dense cultural and historical nexus of tradition and prejudice, fanning resentment of ties that bound the "western," "modern" and "European" sections to a country that was predominantly "eastern," "primitive," and "Balkan" (even "Byzantine") (cf. Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992). Longstanding attitudes gained a sudden urgency during the later 1980s in light of European integration, particularly as the date was set at 1992 for the drawing of European Community boundaries. The Slovenian slogan "Europe Now!" ("Evropa Zdaj!") poignantly revealed the sense that Slovenia and Yugoslavia were not already in Europe, and that being left outside of the Europe to be defined in 1992 was to be declared "superfluous" to the modern global economy.

In Serbia and Montenegro, the media put forth a different interpretation that likewise meshed with everyday experience, but pointed instead to the ubiquitous incompetence.
patronage, and petty corruption that permeated the self-management of workplaces and local
governments. The so-called “anti-bureaucratic revolution” presented Milošević as the leader of
a reform movement that would replace the old guard with a younger generation of technically
competent and uncorruptible managers. This view represented the political leaders in other
republics as the impediment to reforms intended to restore the Yugoslav economy and its
workforce to a place in the global economy.

Each of these representations had a corresponding refutation. In Serbia, media
presentations emphasized the quasi-colonial arrangements whereby Slovenia imported raw
materials from less-developed regions of Yugoslavia, which also served as the primary market
for Slovenian manufactured products, while closing its markets to manufactured goods from
Serbia. This argument was widely accepted in Serbia, but ignored in Slovenia. On the other
hand, from the Croatian and Slovenian perspective, Milošević appeared, not as a reformer, but
as an authoritarian who forbode a re-centralization of the same single-party political structure
that had failed. Both of these repudiations were valid, but neither was communicated to the
other side by media that were committed to presenting a one-sided picture. The result was
systematically skewed communication, blocking the possibility of corrective cross-
discussion. The public in each republic was presented, via tv and print media, with arguments
that presented only its own negative arguments, only the negative side of a ledger in a balance
sheet of inter-republic relations that actually had plusses and minuses on all sides.

The proffered explanations for Yugoslavia’s economic crisis found resonance with
previous impressions, traditions, and everyday experiences of the publics who were the
targeted audiences within their respective republics. From 1988 onward, open confrontations
interwove economic conflicts with contentious issues that evoked ethnic oppositions and
solidarities attached to history, culture, and symbols with highly emotional associations. In
the split images that led to schism in Yugoslavia, each side consistently presented itself as the
victim of the Other, according to separate, conflicting definitions of the situation. Thereby,
neither side responded to the Other’s concerns, but only to its own projections of the Other. In
a communication pattern corresponding to Bateson’s (1972) “schismogenesis” model, each
reacted to the Other as threat to its own interests, and in its reactions reinforced the behavior
that was perceived as threatening. In Bateson’s cybernetic terminology, mutually “positive
feedbacks” exponentially increased the split between opposing images, leading rapidly to
polarization, toward schism.
From Schismatic Perception to Civil War

Alternative nationalist ideologies could be resurrected from the past, both by those who had been excluded under Titoism, and those who opportunistically wished to retain elite positions. But the transformation of political conflict into civil war involved a vaster dimension of social reality, beyond the confines of those institutions regularly associated with states and their political realms. It is necessary to bring another dimension into this analysis, to explain the transformation from debates among political elites into the forms of mass revitalization movements and military violence. Bourdieu suggests a conceptual bridge across the great divide between elite political discourse and populations at large, from which mass movements and armies are mobilized in the name of particular causes.

The capacity...of making public...that which, not yet having attained objective and collective existence, remained in a state of individual or serial existence--people's disquiet, anxiety, expectation, worry--represents a formidable social power, that of bringing into existence groups by establishing...the explicit consensus of the whole group). [Bourdieu 1991:236, emphasis added]

Accordingly, as the economic crisis grew into a crisis of legitimacy for the state, the public communication of nationalist interpretations played upon the disquiet and anxiety that had become endemic among Yugoslavia’s disparate peoples.

Ethnic definitions of nationality among Yugoslavia’s peoples developed from 18th century Germanic philosophical roots, whereby the concept of Volk is literally translated into the Slavic equivalent narod, meaning both “people” and “nation.” To establish a nation-state on this basis is thereby to declare it the property of a particular “people,” or ethnic population. The formation of such a state leads to the question of how ethnic stratification will affect the allocation of those “basic resources that sustain life” (Fried 1967:186). If the inhabitants of the territory so constituted are not ethnically homogeneous, such a state actually formalizes ethnicity as a basis for inequality among its citizens. Provisions for “minority rights” only underscore the inferior status that is inherent in the very definition of “minority” within a state officially dominated by others. If the basis upon which critical resources are accessible to citizens was to be radically altered along ethnic lines, it behooved people to identify themselves with the ethnic programs from which they would gain advantages, or at least be defended against exclusion from access they hitherto enjoyed.

From 1988, rival nationalist platforms were increasingly open, but still argued within the confines of the Communist League, which retained its monopoly over all state institutions in all republics. That situation changed abruptly, following the general collapse of East European
communism in the fall of 1989. For the first time, non- and anti-communist organizations appeared publicly, and after the Communist League suddenly disbanded in January 1990, explicitly nationalist ethnic parties came to the fore with strength surprising to the Communists themselves. While the first post-Titoist election campaigns were held in Slovenia and Croatia during the spring of 1990, political identities underwent definitive transformation.

On all sides, it was assumed that those privileges previously under the control of Communist political machines would pass into the control of whichever party should win. It must be understood that all factions were emerging from the context of Titoism, whereby party leaders used their political power to control all major economic resources and decisions, including employment and investment policies. In this manner, decisions about how the state was to be constituted, in whose name, directly involved the economic concerns of every household for its survival and wellbeing. Rather than remaining within the confines of elite circles, the question of how the state would be constituted became an urgent concern for average citizens.

In both Slovenia and Croatia, the strongest new parties called openly for secession from Yugoslavia. The fate of Yugoslavia, from an ethnic perspective, was recast in terms of boundaries. Except for Slovenia, republic boundaries did not coincide with ethnic boundaries. The same ethnic statehood that would privilege the dominant groups would relegate the non-dominant groups into a secondary status. The ethnic populations most affected by the secession of republics would be the significant proportions of Serbs residing in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The breakup of Yugoslavia would redefine these Serbs as minorities, separated from their "home" republic by international boundaries. As militant nationalist parties dominated the election campaigns of 1990, those who had not previously questioned the survival of Yugoslavia began instead to align themselves ethnically, and to accept the arguments put forth by nationalists.

The new nationalist parties represented a continuum of viewpoints and leaders. While leaders of major parties presented themselves in the manner expected of politicians and intellectuals, another brand of leaders also appeared, imitating the World War II Croatian fascist Ustashas and the Serbian royalist Chetniks. Each of these provided a made-to-order "anti-hero" image into which disaffected young people could remake themselves by adopting a panoply of flags, songs, insignia, and uniforms that had been banned by the Titoist state. These symbols provided a political identity and rallying point for the same young people who had found themselves "superfluous" to the Titoist structure. The nationalist parties promised a chance to overturn hierarchies, opening opportunity paths for those who had been excluded. During 1990, nationalist extremism spread like a new fashion among the young, most visibly
among young men, who publicly flaunted the symbols and sang the songs. The first outbreaks of violence took the form of riots between the fan clubs of Belgrade and Zagreb football (soccer) teams. By then, the fan clubs were already a recruiting ground for nationalist parties. Soon after, the football fans were among those who joined the new paramilitary units organized by aspiring nationalist leaders and parties.  

By the end of 1990, nationalist governments had been elected in all of Yugoslavia’s republics. Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina understood the nationalist definitions of statehood in terms of their own exclusion from privileged access to the rights and benefits in states dominated by other ethnic nations. The secessions of Slovenia and Croatia, in June 1991, set the stage for civil war that pitted the interests of those ethnic populations in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina who voted to secede against the ethnic Serbs ready to fight to remain in Yugoslavia. The swift transition from the constrained forums of political argumentation to warfare took the form of young men in battle camouflages, attacking each other as well as civilian populations, and brutally removing populations of other ethnicities from territories claimed for their own national states.  

The outbreak of war has overshadowed the issues that underlie the ethnic conflicts at the base level from which the individual participants derive their motivation and outlook. Following the election of nationalist parties to government, to find oneself in a minority position led to immediate negative consequences. In both Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, an initial non-violent form of ethnic “cleansing” was committed when winning nationalist parties on all sides provided employment for their supporters in territory they controlled by dismissing workers of the wrong ethnicity from their jobs. Winning parties used their legislative majorities in the same manner that the Communists had used their monopoly, disregarding the opposition parties representing other ethnic populations. For example, one Serbian official in Bosnia explained that, after the Muslim party had won the local elections, "In the 1990-92 period, nothing proposed by Serbs could pass in the town council" (R. Cohen 1994:8).  

A former Bosnian Serb camp guard (who later testified about atrocities against Muslims) explained the outlook of the young men who joined the armed units that committed the horrors for which the new term "ethnic cleansing" was coined: "Economic stagnation fueled the rise of the nationalist parties so many people of 25 had never had a job. The Muslim nationalists and the Serbs offered these people 100 marks and could do what they liked with them. You could feel the war coming." The conflict also attracted young fighters from both Serbia and Croatia to the side of their co-ethnics in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The former camp guard described the influx of "gangsters and criminals from Serbia, and others who saw a chance to make
money. With a mass of unemployed people under 25, you can do what you like. These people were longing for action and a chance to loot Muslims" (R. Cohen 1994:8).

Concluding Comments

This essay has related Yugoslavia's political disintegration to economic phenomena that are simultaneously global, national, and local. At all points, the key actors are the manipulators of state policy and the contenders for power emerging from within the same economic and cultural context. The timing for Yugoslavia's "disjunction" may be linked with two global historical "moments": 1) the lending policies of international banks resulting from the cash surplus after the 1973 "oil crisis;" and 2) the collapse of communism throughout eastern Europe in the fall of 1989. Taking these external parameters into account, the "legitimation crisis" of the Yugoslav state must be understood in terms of internal dynamics that resurrected indigenous ideological traditions of ethnic nationhood as an alternative to the failing Titoist system. To fill in the equation, it is necessary to connect the formulations of intellectual and political elites with the economic frames of reference within which ordinary people perceive the larger institutions that shape their life chances. This interpretation has used the concept of "superfluity" to characterize an endemic condition of unemployment and underemployment within Yugoslavia's economy, as well as its relation to the global economy. The rise of nationalism as an alternate statehood ideology presented criteria that would either privilege or marginalize people within new nation-states on the basis of their ethnicity. The lure of privilege and the threat of marginalization were the carrot and the stick that simultaneously induced the rush toward ethnic solidarity and inter-ethnic opposition.

As Benedict Anderson (1983) has located the formation of nation-states within the context of "imaginings" that have specific social boundaries within particular time frames, it would follow that the endings of states may also be located in the same kinds of communicative spaces. In Yugoslavia, the print and electronic media that had provided a common cultural frame during the Titoist era were a key to dividing that space along lines of ethnic opposition that reoriented populations toward the capitals of their "home" republics and against each other. Because republic borders did not coincide with ethnic boundaries, to separate the country into its six constituent republics was analogous to separating conjoined sextuplets sharing vital organs. All could not survive without lethal damage. Nevertheless, elites in each republic pursued their separate nationalist goals, leading Yugoslavia's diverse peoples upon a course of violent confrontation and mutual destruction.
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2. There is copious literature on nationalism among the peoples of Yugoslavia. For comprehensive analyses from opposing viewpoints, see Banac 1984; Djilas 1991. Hobswam (1990) includes material on South Slavic (Yugoslav) nationalisms in his comprehensive view of European nationhood and nationalism.

3. The notable exception to this statement was Bosnia-Herzegovina, recognized as the republic of three component "nations": Muslims, Serbs, and Croats, none of which included a majority of the population. The other republics were (from West to East): Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. Each of these was named for its dominant ethnic "nation," but all except Slovenia included large portions of population not representing the dominant ethnicity. In addition to the six republics, the 1974 constitution granted equivalent status to the two "autonomous provinces" within Serbia (Vojvodina and Kosovo). The anomalies involved with the autonomous provinces became a major point of contention in the inter-republic conflicts that emerged in 1988.

4. For an interpretation of the conjunction between nationalist ideologies, historical memory, and the incitement of interethnic violence in Croatia, see Denich 1994a.

5. For ethnographic interpretations of inter-ethnic war in former Yugoslavia, from a range of viewpoints, see Kideckel and Halpern 1993.

6. In terms of contemporary sociological theory, this is the domain of Habermas's "life world" (cf. Pusey 1987:105-110) and Bourdieu's "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977:82-95).

7. Rubenstein invokes the term "superfluous" in a more demographically-oriented global view. It is noteworthy that Rubenstein traces the concept to Hegel, in his observations about the dialectical relationship between increasing productive efficiency and superfluous labor, and the destabilizing potential of the ensuing "rabble of paupers" (Rubenstein 1983:4).

8. See Denich 1993 for a discussion of schismogenesis in the re-emergence of ethnic identities in Yugoslavia.

9. The official name for the ruling party was the League of Communists, but it was familiarly referred to as the "party," as it will be through most of this essay.

To place the Yugoslav situation in the context of the fall of Communism throughout Eastern Europe, see Stokes 1993.

10. For an interpretation of the theoretical grounding for Yugoslavia's socialist self-management, see Comisso 1979.

11. According to economist Laura D'Andrea Tyson:

   After 1973-74, the oil-exporting countries began to provide substantial savings to be recycled by the commercial banks....Most of the newly industrializing countries (NICs) and most of the East European countries took advantage of the improved credit-market conditions by building up their international indebtedness (Tyson 1986:65).
...the adoption of the self-management system in Yugoslavia between 1971 and 1975 was nothing less than a cultural revolution, imposing a vast bureaucratic structure of self-management boards, interest communities and the like on Yugoslav society...[T]he republics were given broad powers in the 1974 constitution, laying the groundwork for today's regionally fragmented economy and administration."

13. For differing views of the Yugoslav political structure after the 1974 constitution, see Burg 1983; Golubović 1988; Ramet 1984; Rusinow 1988; Zimmerman 1987.

14. For this discussion, I have consulted Brand 1993; Korner 1984; Payer 1974; Wilfred 1985.

15. These policies comprised a "shock therapy" package of reforms, under IMF encouragement and the advice of Harvard economist Jeffrey Sacks, subsequently acclaimed as the chief architect of market innovations in Poland and Russia.


17. It is important to emphasize that Yugoslavia's private sector included most of its agriculture, as well as a substantial portion of crafts, restaurants, and guesthouses. The size of these enterprises was strictly curtailed by limits on hectares of land and number of employees. The nature of private enterprises was also limited to those in which proprietors were directly producing services or products. Over time, restrictions were gradually liberalized, but the basic public/private distinction remained throughout the end of Titoism.

18. For a comprehensive discussion of these practices throughout Eastern Europe, see Sampson 1986; Wedel (1986 and 1992) presents an analogous view of Poland during and after Communism. Milić (1991) analyzes family networks as the basis of informal relations in Serbia. For a journalistic account of "survival" under communism, including Yugoslavia among East European countries, see Drakulić 1991.

19. American anthropologists were particularly active in observing these processes, e.g. Denich 1974; Halpern and Halpern 1972; Hammel 1969; Simić 1972.

20. One indicator of defection from the political system is the decline of interest among young people in joining the Communist League. In 1974, 9 percent of those surveyed throughout Yugoslavia stated that they did not wish to join the League; by 1986, that figure had risen to 50 percent, where it still hovered (at 51 percent) 1989. Regional disparities were marked, with 92 percent of Slovenian young people rejecting Party member at one extreme, with Montenegro at the other end, with only 34% rejection (cited from Cohen 1993:48).


22. Abdić was tried in a show trial lasting over a year on charges of which he was eventually found not guilty. In the first post-Communist elections, he was elected to the the collective presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina, receiving the largest number of popular votes. During the civil war, although a Muslim, he broke from the Muslim-dominated government centered in Sarajevo, and declared autonomy for his small Muslim-inhabited region. Subsequently, his supporters formed their own army, which fought against the Bosnian government army.

23. The word "taboo" as in *tabu tema* (taboo themes) was used in Serbo-Croatian to denote the numerous topics that could not be publicly discussed under Titoism.

24. I reviewed the following weekly news magazines, collected during my visit during that time: *Danas* as from Zagreb; *NIN, Ilustrovana Politika* and *Duga* from Belgrade.
25. Sekelj notes that:
Slobodan Milošević and his patronage group...legitimized themselves as people of change and irreconcilable advocates of political and economic reform. At the notorious Eighth Session of the Serbian Communist League central committee (1987)…Milošević announced the program of economic reforms. Its substance was autonomy of enterprises, responsibility and independence of management, and therefore professional instead of political criteria in selecting it…(Sekelj 1993:164)

26. For an analysis of the federal aid to less developed regions, see Bombelles 1991.

27. While redistribution did result in considerable development in the poorer regions, their relative position actually declined in relation to the most developed regions during the post World War II decades (see Cohen 1993:34-35). Poorly conceived policies contributed to this effect, particularly the funneling of investment into capital-intensive and extractive industries, rather than labor-intensive ones that would alleviate unemployment (Ramet 1985:8). Development funds were typically squandered in industrial projects based on "political" rather than economic criteria. The lack of inter-republic coordination resulted in duplication of facilities, without regard for the eventual marketing of their products.

28. Such a pattern resembles what Habermas calls "systematically distorted communication," the opposite of "communicative rationality" in which parties strive to reach mutual understanding. For a succinct explication of Habermas's communication theory, see Pusey 1987:69-86.


31. For an excellent summary of military and paramilitary forces in Slovenia and Croatia, see Gow 1992. This article includes a table showing the relationship between specific Croatian and Serbian parties and leaders and the armed units that they controlled. Glenny (1992) presents vivid accounts of the activities of these various forces, in addition to those fighting in Bosnia-Hercegovina.


33. I have elsewhere analyzed the rush to war from a feminist perspective (see Denich 1994b).

34. Instances of ethnic job dismissals have been widely reported. A convenient source is Glenny 1992:77 (re: Croatia) and Glenny 1992:152 (re: Bosnia-Herzegovina).
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