COMMENTARY

Transnational dialogue in times of war

The peace movement in ex-Yugoslavia

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Faced with the prospect of continuing war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the West is still fumbling for an adequate response. The choices on offer seem to be scant: withdrawal or more active intervention. It is scarcely surprising that Western pleas for peace encounter a problem of address – after all, which nationalist leader in ex-Yugoslavia would publicly admit to favouring war? But further external military intervention, even setting aside its imperialist implications, would do nothing to solve the political problems on the ground.

The pessimism this dilemma has generated is reinforced by the dominant image of the East European intellectual as someone who has converted to nationalism, and traded his or her dissidence for the new positions of power available after the collapse of socialism. In Eastern Europe this image is evoked by the towering figure of Václav Hável, and is underwritten by the claim recently made by the Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek that it is impossible to be a transnational intellectual. In the light of recent developments, some still dissident thinkers in ex-Yugoslavia have asked whether being an intellectual does not now virtually entail being a nationalist. Should we give up the idealized notion of the detached intellectual dispensing good advice and sharp non-conformist criticism? Should we perhaps go back to Gramsci and accept that, at present, East European intellectuals are organically linked to the emerging class coalition, and engaged in producing the sordid ideology of 'transition'?

As if to confirm the positive answer to these questions, Žižek is presently arguing in Slovenia that the 'Balkans' are a '*Deckerinnerung*', a screen-memory – that all the talk about a past of multicultural coexistence is just a retrospective phantasy. Of course, this is true. But it is just as true that 'Europe', that haven to which many Slovenes aspire, is a *Deckerinnerung* too. Why does Žižek not argue both at the same time? Or – to be fair to those who seek solace in the myth of a multicultural Balkan space – why not first destroy the imperialist myth of 'Europe'?

After all, there have been, and still are, a variety of counter-movements against nationalist fragmentation. In part, the 'myth' of a multicultural Balkan space is being realized through transnational dialogue – a crucial feature of current ex-Yugoslav peace initiatives. One example of such dialogue would be LUR (Leteca Radionica Ucionica – 'Flying Workshop'), which annually brings together individuals from the various republics who are campaigning for peace, and on human-rights and refugee issues. Although LUR has been promoting dialogue for the past three years, it has not sought to find a grand political solution to the war. Rather, its objectives are to ensure transnational exchange and co-operation, and to help forge international anti-fascist solidarity. The Slovene philosopher and activist Rastko Močnik sees LUR as taking on a more actively coordinating role in the future. Instead of bringing together different strategies, LUR may start forging common ones which could thus be more effective. But as far as politics is concerned, he insists, 'any sustainable solution will have to come from inside the war region.'

Transnational dialogue is a way of breaking out of the nationalist/ethnic paradigm currently dominant in ex-Yugoslavia. But this will ultimately have to entail the moral disarmament of the 'soft nationalists'. It is easy to dismiss the ethnic violence against Albanians in Macedonia, or the curtailment of human rights in Slovenia and Croatia, as insignificant in comparison to the suffering and human-rights abuses in Bosnia-Herzegovina. But such a dismissal would mean the endorsement of one nationalism against another, and would be founded on a rhetoric of sacrifice which discounts the suffering of the few in view of the overall 'healthy' picture of – for instance – Slovene democracy.

More importantly, the endorsement of soft nationalism paralyses initiatives on the ground. It is significant that one of the ways in which the Slovene government denounced members of the Helsinki Monitor in Slovenia recently, when it highlighted human-rights abuses there, was to call them 'Yugo-nostalgics'. But the abuses – against both Slovenes and citizens of other ex-Yugoslav republics – were the result of the break-up of Yugoslavia, and can be decisively resolved only through a comprehensive all-Yugoslav settlement, an acceptance of a once-common past, and the rejection of the definition of the political body through ethnicity. Political denunciations which deride 'Yugo-nostalgia' represent what Močnik calls 'Balkanism' (a variant on Said's 'Orientalism'). He points out that the current alternatives to Yugo-nostalgia are either an anti-Balkan racism or a fetishization of Europe. In his view, both are dimensions of a colonized mind and form the ideological supports of the present mode of domination, as well as being alibis for the introduction of a peripheral form of capitalism.

Proposals for all-Yugoslav settlements have been put forward in various internal peace initiatives for the good reason that only such settlements can escape the bond of nationalist particularism, and guarantee the rights and aspirations of those who will lose twice: the first time in the war, the second in an ethnically tainted peace. The founding document of the now largely defunct trans-Yugoslav Civilni Pokret Otpora (Civil Resistance Movement) consisted of a policy addressed to the heads of all the states emerging within Yugoslavia, as well as to peace mediators, which tried to tackle the needs of these double losers. Recognizing that the nation-state could neither satisfy the needs nor guarantee the rights of those who came from nationally mixed families, who had regional instead of national identities, who were members of various minorities, or who did not declare their nationality or equate it with *raison d'état*, the document argued that all these people should be guaranteed simultaneous citizenship of all the nation-states founded on the ashes of former Yugoslavia. They should also be exempted from military service and compulsory labour.

Dilemmas of civil society

One of the dilemmas of the Civil Resistance Movement concerned the degree to which it should address itself to various nationalist heads of state. Would such an address not involve their legitimization, and thus an admission (given the relative weakness of non-nationalist discourse in ex-Yugoslavia) that asymmetrical dialogue can ultimately only benefit those in power? This problem, one of positioning, faces all groups opposed to the war in ex-Yugoslavia. The suspicion of asymmetrical dialogue reflects the experience of the collapse of socialism, which paradoxically led to the disintegration of the very movements of 'civil society' which played a central role in challenging socialism in the first place. When political democracy was established as a side-effect of the struggles of civil society, the new pattern of class domination was constructed by political means. Nationalist mobilization first achieved the exclusion of civil society from political relevance, but then also used it as an instrument in the battle for the 'dividing of the cake'. This partition was both 'structural' (a still on-going battle among fractions of the incipient capitalist class) and – in certain parts of Yugoslavia – geographical. But geographical partition, of course, means war.

The fragile efforts to reconstruct civil society cannot afford to be hijacked by the institutions of power again. The prevalent mood in most ex-Yugoslav peace initiatives is one of constructing an independent public sphere, a counter-culture with hegemonic aspirations similar to the civil society which burgeoned under socialism. Certainly this is the case with the pacifist and non-nationalist media. For the Croatian publication *Arkzine* this attitude is

crystallized in its principled anarchist stance, while for the Croatian oppositional and satirical magazine *Feral Tribune* it is expressed through figures of carnivalesque subversion. Radio Zid from Sarajevo refuses unconditional support for the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina; and the Serbian radio station B-92 aims to build a cosmopolitan youth culture in sharp contrast to that of Milosević's young Serbian socialists, and to the 'para-militarization' of youth and the 'folklorization' of Serbian urban culture (as the Serb anthropologist and peace campaigner Ivan Colović describes it).

The refusal to legitimize in dialogue those engaged in the discourse and practice of war has marginalized peace initiatives, but it also means that these initiatives – despite their numerical weakness – do not suffer the blind spots characteristic of Western attitudes to the war. (How can one expect to bring the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadzić, before a war crimes tribunal while legitimizing him as the one who must be brought to the negotiating table?) At the same time, a purist refusal of contact with the powerful risks becoming a dead end.

In the spring of this year two Serbian philosophers, Miladin Životić and Obrad Savić (members of the Belgrade circle, an oppositional grouping which serves as a non-nationalist counterweight to the sinister Serbian Academy of the Sciences and Arts, which first revived plans for a greater Serbia) formed part of a delegation to the president of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović, in Sarajevo. This meeting (the second of its kind) suggests that asymmetrical dialogue may be desirable when it transcends nationalist rivalries and breaks the myth of an ethnically defined frontline. But the choices are not easy. For it is equally arguable that only a strict principle of 'equal distance' from all parties engaged in the war can prevent an insidious quantification of suffering, and an acceptance of the rhetoric of sacrifice. Hopefully what is happening is a subtle process whereby those nominally regarded as confronting each other regroup to face a different 'other' together.

Post-Praxis philosophers

Miladin Životić could be described as a 'post-Praxis' philosopher. In general philosophers have played, and continue to play, a significant role in the peace movement. But this commitment does not derive from any common theoretical orientation. Rastko Močnik (Slovenia), Mario Kopić (Croatia), Obrad Savić (Serbia), Miladin Životić (Serbia, Nenad Miscević (Croatia), Zagorka Golubović (Serbia) – to name but a few – constitute as improbable a philosophical grouping as one could imagine, ranging from analytical philosophers to deconstructionists and Marxists. But all have spoken out against their own national governments and denounced the war, regardless of which side the bullets are flying from.

Unfortunately, the fate of the celebrated Praxis school, the Yugoslav version of 'Western Marxism', is deeply equivocal in this regard. Some leading figures, such as Mihaljo Marković, have fully endorsed Serbian nationalism. Others such as Miladin Životić and Zagorka Golubović share a peace platform with members of the younger philosophical generation. The reason for their rejection of nationalism resides not solely in their 'moral integrity', but in the fact that they remained within the left tradition and open to post-Praxis – for example, 'post-structuralist' – theoretical developments. It is worth remembering that in the early 1970s the Praxis group staunchly opposed and brilliantly analysed the first stirrings of nationalism in ex-Yugoslavia (see *Praxis* nos 3 and 4, 1971), which were fostered and incorporated by the Communist regime. Indeed, many members were marginalized or lost their positions as a result of this.

Marginalized and demoralized, the peace initiatives in ex-Yugoslavia have nothing but example, appeal and demand on offer. But their moral strength and political weakness counterbalance the opposite strengths and weaknesses in the position of the West. If the will were there, the West has resources to demarginalize the peace initiatives. It could, for example, provide full support for non-nationalist media in ex-Yugoslavia; highlight the plight of deserters; endorse – or at least give consideration to – the policy proposals made by non-nationalist politicians, intellectuals and citizens' groups; facilitate international dialogue and cultural exchange. Between withdrawal and intervention there is a third way: active support for the peace movements in ex-Yugoslavia.