

Women, Democracy & Nationalism

by Rada Ivekovic

En prenant l'ancienne Yougoslavie comme point de départ, l'auteure analyse la formation d'une identité "nationale" tout en examinant les différences entre hommes et femmes.

The gradually declining position of women within the former Yugoslavian society over the last few years of socialism was a premonition of the outbreak of nationalism and of the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Although the sexual element may appear as instrumental to the national one, it is also basic and structures the idea of national purity which ultimately is sexual. Sexuality and gender difference is older than the conception of the nation, which can only be traced back to the nineteenth century. Sexual/gender difference is inscribed in language itself, whereas national difference comes much after language and uses the examples ready at hand. The idea of national and ethnic purity is constructed along the model of male lineage. The "pure" line is the one well removed from contact with other ethnic group(s), as well as the one whose women are well "protected." Women are seen, in this context, as property, akin to territory and to borders which should, likewise, be "protected" (and, in that perspective) conquered. They are also seen as an instrument to achieve pure lineage ("our" women," says the nationalist rhetoric). The national hero, however, is a man.

The basic principle of nationalism as the exclusion of the Other means the negation of the origin in and with others. "Origin" means birth, and it is through a claim of "pure" origin or "birth of one's 'own' nation" that the nationalistic ideal is given shape. New foundation myths appear that have little to do with reality. These myths help national or ethnic homogenization through inducing fear of the Other. It is an assumption of the present paper that radical nationalisms are mechanisms of binary, dual oppositions, and that they invariably lead to war in the long run. A group builds its own national/ethnic identity by giving itself an "Other" (as an enemy). It constructs its own identity as much as the other's. The two are interrelated.

Women, as the symbolic Other from times immemorial, cannot guarantee a "pure" origin since they also represent "mixture." It is in women that mixture is always possible. And mixture is evil for nationalists for it violates the purity of the nation. Although women are and can be

nationalists, nationalism doesn't offer them quite the same possibility of homogenization as it does to men. Nationalistic homogenization is accomplished through building a national "brotherhood" ("all men are brothers") to encourage a sense of unity which it then projects for practical purposes onto a father figure: the Father of the Nation.

Induced fear (of the Other) precedes atrocities and guarantees them. The terminology of nationalist warmongers becomes overtly misogynist and it is over women that some of the worst atrocities are committed. The organized gang-rapes of women are intended to convey a message: the enemy (male) should be killed, his women should be raped, and "our" women should be protected. Women can't very well identify with the father-figure, and are left out of the libidinal economy of nationalism and war.

Nationalism in the former Yugoslavia has a long and multi-causal history. It is important not to underestimate the historic dimension and the multiple factors which led to war. Yet nationalism itself has a very powerful anti-historic attitude. It substitutes myth for history and then, strangely enough, manages to sever that myth from any historic and contextual reality, but nevertheless to make it fuel a major turn in history. The importance of the nationalist myth and rhetoric should not be underestimated, as it is tremendously powerful. When it comes to nationalism in Eastern Europe and, in particular, in the former Yugoslavia, the symbolic cannot be considered secondary any more. It seems that the more aggressive a nationalism is the more heroic and "masculine" is its new mythology.

Nationalism had been building up in the former Yugoslavia along with misogyny. It could be asserted, moreover, that the gradually declining position of women within the former Yugoslavian society over the last few years of socialism was a premonition of the outbreak of nationalism and of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. An accurate analysis of women's condition in the socialist period might have given a clue of what was to come. The existing feminist analysis, however modest, was not paid attention to.¹

After WW II, women in Yugoslavia had been "rewarded" for their contribution to the antifascist struggle by being conferred the right to vote and by the general commitment of the system to abstract gender and social equality. Legally, many efforts had been made, and the normative position of women was comparatively satisfactory within the general framework of abstract law which, at the time, nobody suspected of having a male bias. The theoretic instruments at the disposal of the critique could not offer that insight in those years. What was not understood then is that all known political systems have been constructed

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on the implicit or explicit exclusion of women.

Immediately after WW II, women achieved considerable visibility and presence in the public and political spheres. This was partly artificially enhanced by a quota system and due to a political egalitarian will. It wasn't, however, really followed or supported by a deep change in attitudes. Nevertheless, the cost of living demanded that all able members of a family work, and women worked, achieving some economic and psychological independence. The result was overworked women with a double working day. Women of the first after-war generation were relieved of their household "duties" to some extent by social services (and mainly in the cities only), but very rarely by men.

As the memory of WW II withered, women were again progressively evicted from public life and political representation. The new feminist movement appeared in the seventies and the difference from what it had been twenty years earlier was very conspicuous. This was also the time of the first post-war resurgence of male-dominated na-

tionalism. Nobody at the time paid attention to the connection. The feminist analysis of the system from within showed, at that time, that what had been thought of as a great Yugoslav achievement, the system of worker's control, was something that never took into account the specificities of women's work and conditions.

By the mid eighties, when the new wave of nationalism came, women were already being driven away from work by an economic crisis, and the nationalist rhetoric had been nurturing the myth of women as mothers of soldiers and as the custodians of national virtue. When the big nationalist campaigning started about 1987, and especially during the first 1990 "free" elections, the nationalists were the only ones to address women as the "target group." The resistance and opposition groups and parties, the anti-nationalists, didn't think it necessary to address women in particular. This has been the erroneous attitude of the left at all times, except at times of acute crises, revolution, or war.

However, as the advancement of women had been enhanced by an abstract political will during socialism (with no inkling of feminism), women had already achieved, during that period, particular rights relating to their bodies and to work. All those gains and benefits were immediately questioned by the nationalists and are seriously threatened by the new nationalist governments. There is a clear endeavour to limit or forbid abortion, as well as a general tendency not to encourage women to work, thereby reducing them to the role of childbearers. But it also must be said, that this tendency had already become visible during the last years of socialism. It was the precursor of all that was to follow.

As the nationalists came to power, they established anti-abortion programs. In Serbia, a Resolution for the Renovation of the Population was proposed as a bill. In Croatia, a Concept for the Demographic Renewal of the Population² was an official document, written by a conservative priest as a guideline for government. Feminist lobbies resisted in both cases, and in Slovenia women and feminists managed to stop the passing of a bill forbidding abortion.

Another phenomenon is interesting and quite peculiar. The national press and media (television, in particular, is the most powerful), in the hands of the nationalists, have understood freedom of the press as the liberty to slander, to conduct witch-hunts, and to proceed with ideological and intellectual cleansing. Female intellectuals and artists in particular have been targeted. Women are socially easy targets. Of course, this is where the nationalists' misogyny and the misogyny of the intellectuals in general (including the "progressive" ones) met happily. Male anti-nationalist



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intellectuals slandered by the media were and are regularly defended by the opposition, but women are never defended. A huge rift currently exists between the male-dominated anti-nationalist opposition and the anti-nationalist feminist movements who, by the way, represent the majority in the pacifist and humanitarian organizations.

The pacifist movements and local humanitarian groups are organized mainly by women (partly because men who are deserters are thus unable to appear in public as activists; if caught they would be sent back to the front) in those

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places where pacifism makes some sense (Serbia first of all, and Croatia also). Those who are obliged to defend themselves and who are being bombed (Bosnia-Herzegovina), do not have the leisure to propagate pacifism: they must fight for their lives.

Far from being problematic, the status of women in some East European "socialist" countries (not Romania, obviously, but the gdr or the former Yugoslavia, for example) was for the most part (considering the legal system) better than in the West, especially regarding women's reproductive rights, collective rights, and social services supplementing women's work in the family. I am not suggesting that the actual status of women was actually better in everyday life, but their legal status, comparatively, was. Although no comparison is adequate between the former socialist system and western countries regarding the status of women, there was a general egalitarian drive in Eastern countries—not at all particularly feminist in its intentions—from which women benefited. Women have wanted, paradoxically, both the end of socialism and the maintenance of the rights granted under socialism. The paradox is a result of their hesitation, as women, in locating their group identity, their "subject" position.

The situation of the contemporary feminist movements in some of the former East European countries is similar to the post WW I suffragist movement in Great Britain. In both cases a movement that was fighting for specific human rights of women lost its drive because of more "urgent" political goals. East-European feminism became overpowered by a primary anti-communist push. Some became involved (for much the same reason) with overt nationalistic movements, some remained linked to "socialist" ideals which are not necessarily progressive since they can also be aggressively nationalistic. But, on the other hand, a significant part of the organized feminist

movements, as well as a new feminist awareness, merged with or actually organized the new pacifist movements where nationalistic civil wars and wars of territorial conquest are threatening or are already being fought. In both Great Britain then, and in some former socialist countries now, the feminist movements became divided and in need of reorganization. A great deal is at stake—not only for women but, through women, for democracy as such—especially in those ex-East-European countries where women are losing one after another of their "human" rights formally acquired during socialism.

Women are less anguished than men about inner boundaries and bodily limits. This has some relation to their more relaxed attitude to outer (political) borders, all of which has to do with identity and the way a political subject is constructed. Women are both biologically and socially more accustomed to accept the "other" within themselves (i.e., as in intercourse and childbearing). They are socially used to giving up their family names (or having no family names), and they also have genealogies different from the ones men have in the sense that—by being born of a woman—a man is born of the other sex while a woman is of the same sex.

Civil war, *guerre fratricide*, *Bruderkrieg*, *bratoubilacki rat*, are wars that in some languages evoke in their very name a gender division and possibly a family structure: it is "brothers" who are waging war. Indeed, what do the "sisters" do in the meantime (besides knitting socks for the beloved soldiers or nursing the wounded, as the stereotype goes)? Within revolutionary battles, women also try and to some extent stand a moderate chance, among other groups, to get a piece of the cake.

Women represent symbolically, more than men, a space of mixture and meeting, *métissage*, *brassage*. It is this *métissage*, which women accept, create, and represent, rather than necessarily women themselves that is actually being attacked by those who want to purify their origins, "liberating" them from the Other and denying the Other. Mixture is something which is not merely destroyed by the aggressor but it is also appropriated by him as a power of creation. Creation both in the cultural as well as in the biological sense occurs in mixture and hence emerges the wish to appropriate it and the necessity to control women as its symbol and embodiment. It is for this reason, as a matter of logic and not by chance, that the aggressor in the Yugoslav wars destroys cities. Cities are the birthplaces of culture and culture is necessarily mixture in that culture always presupposes culture and can never originate from a *tabula rasa*. Yet the radical nationalist, paradoxically and suicidally, claims culture as a *tabula rasa*.

The Yugoslav aggressor in this senseless and eventually self-destructive war constructs a national "we" with emphatic male sexist and racist characteristics—male to the exclusion of anything/anyone else. Hence emerges the figure of the Rambo-like warrior in a ruthless, sexually powerful, and racist brotherhood and the racist war songs sung not only against the enemy-nation but also against

the non-European members (called "monkeys") of the UN peace-keeping forces. The city is not the birthplace of this new "hero" who, at best, comes from the grim socialist suburb whereby he shall never be integrated in the city's sophisticated, feminized life. Symbolically, life in the city is seen by the rural person as that of an emasculated individual because it is supposed to be an easy and comfortable life compared to life in the country. The new hero hates it because he envies it. He has been brought up with the traditional epic saying, "Don't be a woman," i.e., "Don't be a coward." He wants to destroy this place he

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doesn't understand and which never accepted him by confirming his own origin in himself in his autistic dream.

For all these reasons, these wars are symbolically anti-feminine. But none of this should induce us to believe women are the only victims; the whole population is the victim, regardless of sex, regardless of nation.

Of course, war and nationalism is also practically anti-feminine in many respects. As real and not only symbolic victims (and they are most often real victims), women are "entitled," once again to specific types of suffering, atrocities, rape, etc. Rape is a reappropriation by the rapist of mixture-as-power from the woman.

The splitting of the father-figure means that the leader of the other ethnic group will be the "bad father" and our leader will be the "good one." These groups give themselves a "higher" authority much the way religion does and the identification with that authority legitimizes the violence of those who accept that office. Every individual sacrifices his or her personal identity to it as if governed by a powerful superego. The groups so constituted soon call themselves nationalities and lean towards a nation-state to give themselves, externally, the skeleton they lack internally. In fact, they rely on violence toward others for their identity. Women embody this contradiction both physically and socially. It is through the interest (or at the cost of the interest) of an individual (woman) that the interest of the human species as a whole is achieved, through the fact that it is women who bear children.

Nationalists also need foundation myths and these myths make claims about the "birth of the nation" and of "our" culture being the oldest and the best, "Manly" and "heroic." The reappropriation of the origin for the male nationalist is necessarily a claim both at the "national" as well as at the "sexual" symbolic levels. "Origin" means birth, and it is through a claim of a "pure" origin or "birth

of the nation" that the nationalist ideal is given shape. Women and an origin in women cannot guarantee a "pure" origin for the male nationalists since women symbolically represent mixture. Women as representing evil and women as representing mixture is in no way a contradiction since mixture is considered to be evil. This myth of origins then accounts for the resulting exclusion of the Other in culture and tradition.

It is the sexual element that permits and structures representation, that very important figure of thinking and of political domination and one of the mechanisms in the symbolic realm whereby the dominant group exercises its power. God-the-Father, the Father-of-the-Nation or the political Leader, is represented by the Son, by Man who is his true envoy and image. The figure of political representation in parliament and in public life is appropriated by that group which is in accord with, and the basis for, this norm—the man, white and powerful. All those who differ from it are misrepresented, badly represented, or nonrepresentable and they appear, if at all, as exceptions confirming the rule. At the same time this misrepresentation is not openly recognized. It is men (the norm) who in the representational system stand for both men (the "Same") and women (the "Other").

The new nationalist regimes in the former Eastern block and in Yugoslavia, sometimes called the "new democracies," are really not democracies for women. On the contrary, it is by looking at the way they treat women, as well as at how minorities are treated, that these regimes demonstrate their shortcomings and their limited understanding of democracy. Women's rights, as well as status in the society, are threatened by the general misogynous atmosphere. The nationalist backlash has flung women backwards by at least half a century.

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¹A number of feminist authors have produced interesting and telling work on the status of women in the former Yugoslavia. A rewarding analysis was done by Blazenska Despot in one of her last publications during the old regime, *Zensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje (The Women's Question and the Socialist Workers' Control)*, Zagreb: Cekade, 1987.

²*Koncept demografske i moralne obnove Hrvatske*, by Ante Bakovic, according to "Novi Vjesnik," Zagreb 17.2.1992.