The Role of Identity in the Outbreak of the Yugoslavian Wars

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ABSTRACT:

The identity of a group can always be traced to the strategic manipulation of a typically very small circle of leadership. Whether based on ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, gender, common grievances, political allegiance or other background factors, identity is socially constructed based on cues given by a leadership in conscious pursuit of an ulterior purpose. The notion of inevitability of resulting conflicts is fictional. These identity-based conflicts are purposefully incited and strategically prepared by means of targeted mass communication. A prime example is the outbreak of the post-communist Yugoslavian wars: in the sunset days of the twentieth century they dissolved a comparatively prosperous and stable European country into barely viable entities. The nightmares of 1914 erupted in the same region as a result of the same suggestive incitement and similar instigation of a perception of grievances against nearby communities: in this region, “identity” serves as an enduring political tool for the ambitious usurpation of power and strategic resources.

The world was shocked by the violence of civil war in Yugoslavia, a relatively well-to-do European country, in 1991-2001. Much scholarly research on the topic was centered on the perceived inevitability of conflict between the region’s ethnic groups. Yet a closer look at the subject from the perspective of identity and its role in politics suggests a very different conclusion. While it is clear that every person maintains a certain individual identity, or rather many aspects of identity that build a multi-faceted personality, at certain times specific distinguishing qualities seem to become a defining aspect of the person, and subsequently they provoke political movements that agitate for, and often cause, major changes in the existing social order, or even lead to wars. An analysis of studies by Akeel Bilgrami, Wendy Doniger, Richard Rodriguez, Judith Gerson, Stephen Steinberg and Audrey Smedley helps trace the prominent aspects of political identity, such as gender, class, ethnicity, and race, and arrives at the conclusion that all the cited factors are to a smaller or larger extent entirely artificial constructs. Why, then, does the perception of political identity play such a prominent role in present-day culture? The answer can be found by looking at the leaders of major political and social movements. It is in the interest of those very leaders to engage people into sectarian groups in order to precipitate changes the leaders themselves deem necessary and useful. It is fair to conclude that political identity becomes just one critical tool of leverage in the pursuit of major goals, and that political leaders are the ones who purposely create and invoke political identity among the masses. From this vantage point, the outbreak of civil war in Yugoslavia in 1991, although predicted by many including Milovan Dijlas as early as the late 1970s, was by no means an inevitable historical development. It was rather an entirely avoidable consequence of individual political decisions made by influential leaders on all sides of the conflict.
The idea for the creation of a South-Slavic state had emerged only relatively recently in Southeast European history. In fact, there had been no concept of a common Slavic identity until the intense propagation of Russian-promoted Pan-Slavistic ideas towards the end of the eighteenth century. Early attempts at separating ethnic groups by means of a common Slavic identity from the surrounding Habsburg and Ottoman empires (“peoples’ prisons”) were much too feeble to overcome virulent regional differences including religious, military and historical animosities in order to respond, for example, to Napoléon’s manifestly self-serving call for the establishment of an “Illyrian” nation. It was not until the early years of the twentieth century that viable trends toward unification started to take shape as a result of the first and second Balkan Wars (1912-1913). Both had been instigated with the primary motive of providing Russia with access to the warm seas. The South-Slav concept gained traction in reality first in 1918 under the rule of the king of Serbia Peter I Kara?or?evi? as an implementation of the political vision of a Greater Serbia (Frankel 1955: 416-419). But this originally federalist concept soon degenerated into an exploitative and oppressive dictatorship as far as it related to the rights of its non-Serbian members. Despite this resurrection of the Greater Serbian dream after World War I, “[i]n the face of the German onslaught in April, 1941, Yugoslavia rapidly disintegrated” (Frankel 1955: 419).

The second serious attempt at creating a Yugoslavian (“Pan-South-Slavic”) nation started to take shape while German and Italian occupation of the Balkans was still in full force and effect. It, too, was loosely based on a nominally federalist model, this time no longer based on a monarchy but on the structure presented by the Soviet Union. Anti-fascist partisans and Communist party members under the leadership of Croatian Josip Broz Tito devised a union that emphasized the equal rights of all prospective member nations, as opposed to the unitarian dominion the Great Russians had installed and continued to exercise in the Soviet Union. “The proposed federation was thus based on the principle of nationality: the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Montenegrins were each given a separate Republic” (Frankel 1955: 420). Multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina was added as a sixth republic, and the Yugoslavian Constitution was proclaimed in 1946. Slightly later, the regions of Vojvodina and KOSMET (Kosovo and Metochia) obtained the status of autonomous territories within the new Yugoslavia. Advanced talks about securing membership of the remaining South-Slavic nations, such as Bulgaria and Albania (the latter not even being Slavic by either ethnicity or history, nor predominantly Christian), were thwarted by Soviet political intervention in 1948 (Frankel 1955: 420). Stalin feared the emergence of a nonaligned and uncontrollable mid-size regional power, and his heavy-handed approach led to a parting of ways with Tito that resulted in the very creation on a global scale of the non-aligned movement that the Soviets had desired to suppress as a regional matter in the first place. The initial policy of preserving the ethnic differences of the Yugoslav republics was replaced during the 1950s with the idea of a single overarching and unifying Yugoslav identity rooted in one nation maximizing the beneficial interest of all its members. This new attitude seemed to be embraced especially by the younger generation, city dwellers, and by the members of mixed families (Burg and Berbaum 1989: 535-549).

After the death in 1980 of Yugoslavia’s larger-than-life founding father, wartime communist partisan leader Tito, executive power was initially bequeathed to a multi-ethnic committee. But without the unifying authority of a strong leader, conflicts of interest between the individual republics with sometimes significantly dissimilar levels of economic development soon started to feed on nationalist sentiments foreseebly incited by political interests of local leaders. A decade later, following the example of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia’s erstwhile model, the resulting political unrest quickly escalated into a full-blown civil war. It shocked the world with grim atrocities of ethnic cleansing right out of Nazi and Stalinist playbooks during and after World War II. It was only convenient that the Croatian fascist movement Ustaša had created in Jasenovac the world’s sole known concentration camp where the fatal brutalities committed 1941-1945 against approximately 100,000 predominantly Serb prisoners had
been so egregious that they prompted unprecedented “humanitarian interventions” by allied German SS. In reality, Tito’s Marxist legacy had no bearing whatsoever on the later events that were triggered by centrifugal forces. After all, both Tito and Milošević had been hard-core communists, despite Tito’s choice of a road independent from the Soviet model and although Milošević, like his counterparts in all former East bloc nations, had assumed after 1989 the politically more expedient mantle of a “socialist” while his wife Mirjana Marković publicly maintained classical communist ideology within her faction. Pursuant more than a century of continuity of doctrine, and despite realities under Stalin in the Soviet Union, Marxism proper would not have lent itself to any emphasis on ethnicity. Marxists had always viewed ethnic classification as a bothersome relic fundamentally incompatible with their supranationalist and internationalist dogma and aspirations.

Social scientists, including Robert Hayden in his essay “Imagined Communities and Real Victims: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in Yugoslavia,” often concluded that multi-ethnic constructs such as Yugoslavia are inevitably destined to fail. The precept behind this line of reasoning is that dissimilar groups cannot be brought to cohabit peacefully absent authoritarian rule because of their intrinsic differences, and that, in the end, segregation and autonomy are the only way to ensure peace in such an environment. This conventional wisdom contains many fallacies. Perhaps the most important of them focuses on the notion that one identity of an individual is exclusive of all his or her other identities. In this line of argument, a person identifying as a Serb or Croat cannot at the same time identify as a Yugoslav, a Slav, a member of a residential community, or even as a member of an ethnically mixed family. The implied assumption is that there somehow exists a “real” identity, in this case an ethnic identity, and that all other labels merely serve to conceal or obfuscate this most fundamental distinction. That is indeed an overly simplistic approach to the question of identity. Such versions of collective identity are typically created and used intentionally for political purposes. In fact, recent world history shows compelling evidence that various concepts of identity used to define an individual in the social and political scheme are mostly invented constructs without serving common objectives other than the temporary benefit of certain leaderships or elites.

The “true” nature of identity has long been a subject of ongoing debate among social scientists. In recent years, generally accepted definitions of identity have been subdivided by Akeel Bilgrami in his “Notes toward the definition of ‘identity’” into two separate concepts of subjective and objective identity: “Your subjective identity is what you conceive yourself to be, whereas your objective identity is how you might be viewed independently of how you see yourself.” (Bilgrami 2006: 5) In the same vein, however, the same author admits that the two are not so different after all: “Of course, subjective identity and objective identity are often closely related” (Bilgrami 2006: 5). In this sense, theory of identity can turn into a source of disagreement among scientists who seek to discuss palpable consequences of identity for social interactions. Yet, the individual is not necessarily forced to choose because of the plurality of these perceptions of identity: “Since we do have multiple masks, personae, selves within us, how foolish we are to tell lies in order to preserve the one mask that we think is really us and/or should be perceived as.” (Doniger 2006: 69). It is only when private identity becomes a public matter by creating a distinct group consciousness that the concept of identity suddenly assumes a political role. Judith Gerson, a scholar of both gender and national identity, in her study “In between States: National Identity Practices among German Jewish Immigrants” explains the importance of the effects of collective identity on social interactions: “Although never entirely distinct from individual or self identity, the question of collective identity - that is, how people experience themselves as members of, marginal to, or excluded from various social groups - is at the core...” (Gerson 2001: 180). We should note that an important part of any group consciousness, and of political identity in particular, is inevitably the notion and perception of a divide between group members and non-members. “Of course, notions of group membership connote ideas about
non-membership, marginality, and hybridity as well as the mechanisms people deploy to differentiate or
distance themselves from a group or subgroup.” (Gerson 2001: 183). Hence it may be helpful to examine
how particular examples of political identity have applied these theories in practice. The four main sources
of political identity in the twentieth century are derived from the most conspicuous social subdivisions.
They are gender, class, race, and, most importantly for our subject matter, ethnicity.

When it comes to gender identity, many social scientists seem in agreement nowadays that it is for the
most part a social construct. In spite of the deterministic approach of scholars like Wendy Doniger in
“Many masks, many selves” who says that involuntary masks[i] are also imposed by race and gender,
gender roles have been defined by others as direct consequences of tradition and culture. For example,
Akeel Bilgrami interprets Michel Foucault: “[m]any oppose the purely biological ways of thinking of
various kinds of identity, such as racial and gender identities, claiming that these identities are ‘socially
constructed’ by the perceptions and attitudes of one’s fellows, by the zeitgeist of a particular period, by
the conceptual categories and social institutions at a given time” (Bilgrami 2006: 11). Judith Gerson takes
this idea even further in “In between States: National Identity Practices among German Jewish
Immigrants:” “In the case of gender roles, the diverse, complicated, and often inconsistent attitudes and
behaviors associated with various configurations of masculinity and femininity have been collapsed into
an overly simplistic, bifurcated definition of gender, which inappropriately situates women and men in
permanent opposition to one another and minimizes the importance of macro-level structures ... “ (Gerson
2001: 180). This means that identification with a political or activist group based on gender does not
address issues of the biological reality of its participants, but only a particular cause derived from social
roles that the members try to address as a common goal.

The next political identification to be considered here is class. The concept of class has been implanted in
Western consciousness by Karl Marx who claimed that “one’s identity is given by one’s role in a
particular economic formation in a given period of history” (Bilgrami 2006: 10), or, more specifically, by
“the objective fact of having a certain place and function in the relations of production during the modern
capitalist period of economic history” (Bilgrami 2006: 12). The most prominent example of a political
system that tried to introduce the Marxist concept of class as an ideological basis for organization of
society was that of the former Soviet Union. Unfortunately, neither Marx nor any of his successors,
including Lenin and Stalin, ever provided an even remotely clear definition and overview of their concept
of class – and probably for good reasons. Concerned mostly with the idea of class struggle, they also
neglected to outline definitively a healthy class composition of a model society. This failure resulted in
fluid definitions and inconsistent attempts at implementation of their envisioned “classless society.”

Even though Marx perfunctorily described three classes of an industrialized society, i.e. workers,
capitalists, and landowners, he focused mostly on the distinction between the propertied and property-less
classes (Kubat 1961: 4-5). His theoretical ideas were subsequently further evolved by Vladimir Illyich
Lenin, who admitted, “our Party rests upon two classes, and for that reason its instability is possible”
(Kubat 1961: 5). Under Lenin, Soviet society consisted of disenfranchised peasants and a minority of
industrial workers collectively entitled to a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. The Nineteenth Congress of
the Communist Party of the Soviet Union enumerated already three social classes: “members of the
working class, working peasants, and working intelligentsia” (Kubat 1961: 6), where everybody not
belonging to the first two classes was counted among the newly recognized intelligentsia class. This
Stalinist approach did not stay relevant for long either, because Soviet society further evolved into
peasantry, working class, and “a bureaucratic formation now more clearly partitioned into political and
administrative subclasses” (Mayer 2002: 762). The dissolution of the Soviet state and the abolition of its
communist regime in 1991 witnessed the re-emergence of traditional capitalist classes. That means that
the very same individual members of society were assigned different class labels at different times,
depending on the prevailing political atmosphere of the day. Additionally, the very social mobility that
could be observed within the strictures and confines of Soviet society, such as demographic trends from
farming to working class and from working class to the intelligentsia (but also in the opposite direction),
further undermined the validity of class as a defining aspect of a person or a group of people.
Contemporaneous large-scale socio-economic experiments elsewhere, such as those implemented in the
former Soviet bloc or in Pol Pot’s Cambodia, ultimately denied the validity of Marx’s claim and showed
that both upward and downward mobility of members of society prove that class can be at most a
momentary description of a current, often involuntary situation of an individual. It is insufficient to assign
him or her an ‘identity’ based on this weak criterion.

Race has been the most important source of group identification in America since the mid-seventeenth
century. The peculiarity of this concept comes from the fact that race as an idea did not really exist before
the 1700s. Strict duality of a black-and-white reality has never been noted in human history before the
emergence of conflicts between white Southern plantation owners and their multiethnic farm workers in
1676. “Colonial leaders subsequently decided it would be useful to establish a division among the masses
of poor to prevent their further collaboration against the governmental authorities” (Smedley 1998: 694).
“Calling upon the Chain of Being, and using natural differences in physical features, they created a new
form of social identity. ‘Race’ ...” (Smedley 1998: 694) thus became a convenient excuse for social
injustice and for the disenfranchisement of certain groups within society that now became an easy prey for
exploitation by the privileged elites. The paradox of this subdivision lies not only in the lack of any
biological basis for such a distinction – “There is a greater range of skin colors, hair textures, body sizes,
nose shapes, and other physical features among black Americans than almost any other people identified
as a distinct population.” (Smedley 1998: 697) – but also in its complete disregard for the question of
mixed parentage. Therefore, under the “one-drop” theory, a conspicuously white person would still be
classified as a person of color, in further consequence creating an absurdity that, in effect, undermines the
viability of the purely fictional basis for such ‘racial’ distinctions. As Richard Rodriguez puts it in
Brown: The Last Discovery of America: “I do not hesitate to say into a microphone what everyone knows,
what no one says. Most American blacks are not black” (Rodriguez 2002: 134). It becomes obvious, then,
that the entire construct of ‘racial’ criteria was designed mostly for economic purposes, as had been
certified by the fact that, once trapped in a ‘lower race’ designation, whole groups of people could not
escape it even by visibly denying the explicit biological requirement. Once classified as ‘colored,’ they
were destined forever to occupy the lower strata of society, and to be subjected to continuous economic
and political disenfranchisement that benefitted people whose only claim to superiority was a set of non-
exclusive physical characteristics.

Rodriguez proposes to supersede the concept of race with that of ethnicity: “Hispanicity is culture. Not
Human Identity” seems to promote ethnicity as one distinctive feature of an otherwise “‘universal’ human
being.” Smedley says that there are no meaningfully distinguishing characteristics between people other
than their perceived ethnicity. Thus, in her quest to abolish racial classifications, she proposes to introduce
ethnicity as the sole criterion for a subdivision of mankind into different groups: “The concept of
‘universal’ human beings may very well in time obviate racial categories (but not ethnic identities) and
may help to bring about the elimination of such designations.” (Smedley 1998: 700). And yet, ethnicity is
just a composite of the perceived cultural traditions of a group, of traditions that are themselves mutable
and permeable to other cultures, creating a mix whose origins are impossible to discern from outside
influences. In this way, what seems traditional and intrinsically linked to a specific regional and ethnic
group, reveals itself upon closer examination as a combination of foreign imports, dissolving the
attempted ‘identity’ into an indistinct mix of nothingness – or of universalism. As Kwame Anthony
Appiah claims in “The Case For Contamination,” “trying to find some primordially authentic culture can be like peeling an onion.” (Appiah 2006: 34) Specifically, among many examples, “the textiles most people think of as traditional West African clothes are known as Java prints; they arrived in the 19th century with the Javanese batiks sold, and often milled, by the Dutch.” (Appiah 2006: 34). The weak basis for cultural identification with ethnic groups is only one part of the picture. More important is the subjective sense of belonging to a certain ethnic group.

However, even here the limits are fluid. As late as 1989, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was still widely praised for its assimilation and integration of various ethnic groups that had come to live peacefully side by side and intermingled increasingly, to a point where up to 36% of the population declared a national ‘Yugoslav’ identity in place of any traditional ethnic denominations. As Steven L. Burg and Michael L. Berbaum recognize in “Community, Integration, and Stability in Multinational Yugoslavia,” “[g]iven the ethnic, social, demographic, and economic diversity of these counties, the declaration of Yugoslav identity by such proportions of their populations constituted a remarkable assertion of shared political identity, or ‘sense of community’” (Burg and Berbaum 1989: 535). Only three years later, world opinion was confronted with the bloody events of ethnic cleansing in Srebrenica and elsewhere in Bosnia in the newly ‘autonomous’ Republika Srpska, in the Croatian Krajina, and in Kosovo. The international community witnessed for years a horrifying multitude of atrocities committed against local minorities, but also an outright revisionist version of recorded history. Suddenly, starkly different and factually odd reports were published in the region: that intermarriage rates were actually negligible, that ethnic enmity had never really subsided, and that national identity had been a propagandist political fiction of the past (Botew 1994: 463 and Hayden 1996: 784). It begs the question what had happened to this troubled multi-ethnic area. It is all too easy to assume – and yet it is manifestly incorrect – that a unifying Yugoslav identity had indeed never existed, and that the whole country since its establishment had been an ethnic boiling pot, a pressure cooker waiting to explode. Explode it did, but it was certainly not waiting to happen. The manufactured conflict received a lot of help with building pressure, and the resulting instability served many powerful interests.

Analyses in literature of the causes of the long and tortured history of Yugoslav wars going back a half millennium do not really seem to take the status of identity as a sociopolitical construct much into consideration. Yet, the concept of ethnic identity that drove the Yugoslav nation into a bloody ten-year civil war despite (and purportedly because of) the wealth of these experiences was in many ways not very different from other constructs that have been used in the past to attain certain economic, social, and political goals of one leadership over those of another. After all, the very same ostensibly nationalist modus operandi had been the root cause that led up to the assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914 in the very same place. No matter déjà vu, it worked again, as it had worked in World War II and indeed throughout the twentieth century: the explosion of nationalist sentiments and the drive for “ethnic purity” that pushed a formerly thriving Balkan country into disintegration and destruction by armed conflict turned out to be but a cynical tool in the hands of those capable of destabilizing and exciting masses carefully rendered volatile. And once again, as ever before, the Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic clergies played their part with “God is on our nation’s side” – pawns in the hands of local powers that supported and rewarded them.

To view any of the conflicts leading up to the Yugoslav wars as inevitable is to accept a rather simplistic view of identity – a view that excludes multifarious aspects of individuals and indiscriminately reduces them to just a few bold-stroke common denominators. Such an approach also seems to relieve of their historical responsibility those politicians who propagate ideas that ultimately result in war or peace. The fact remains, though, that in Yugoslavia, distinct political forces directed impressionable crowds to “follow the course of history” as it was described to them by their leaders. Under Tito, a unifying national
identity was propagated and perhaps in part imposed. Under Milosevic, Karadzic and their aides and cohorts, there was to be ethnic pride and ethnic purity within each of the now separate former Yugoslavian republics. National and ethnic identity became freely invoked tools to change the course of history - not necessarily for the benefit of the citizenry but to implement a larger vision or agenda of the leadership. Therefore, when the next conflict dawns on the horizon, the proper question to be asked is not to assume some fatalistic destiny of history along a well-established rhetoric that compounds leading questions such as “is war inevitable?” but rather to devote more substantive analysis to a determination of “does war at this point benefit certain plans and ambitions of the political leadership or ruling elite?”

The concept of ‘inevitability’ of conflict has a long chain of precedent in the history of targeted aggression, with detailed analyses and reliable reports dating back to Julius Caesar and indeed the Graeco-Persian Wars. Adolf Hitler had been its most proficient practitioner in recent memory, as ‘Polish aggression’ at the Gleiwitz radio station promptly provided him with pretext for his long-prepared September 1, 1939 ethnic *casus belli* and with the appearance of justifiable outrage, as it had before in the Sudetenland crisis. His Marxist counterparts, on the other hand, had scarcely lacked mastery in the use of their flavor of predictions of the ‘scientifically inevitable.’ Nothing in the genesis of conflict is inevitable except for the pursuit of special interests wherever a given system or situation permits demonstrable differences of identity to be retooled to create or expand an “us versus them” divide. *Cui bono?* is the single worth-while question to be asked. Mass media with increasing reach need to be sensitive to their unprecedented ethical responsibility as instrumental pawns in this game where transparency and clarity paradoxically increase proportionally with the observer’s distance from the events on the ground.

**Bibliography**


[i] by the concept of “masks” Doniger approximates here different aspects of identity.

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