

TOTALITARIAN STRUCTURES AND SOCIAL PRACTICE:
DEVIANCE IN YUGOSLAVIA BETWEEN 1941 AND 1951

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ABSTRACT

The article focusses on methodological tools for investigating social practice in totalitarian societies. It refers to the work of Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Imanuel Geiss, Reinhart Koselleck, Alf Lüdtke, and others. Its reflections are mostly illustrated by examples taken from the author's research on work relationships in Yugoslav mining industries during and after the Second World War. The concept of deviance refers to those parts of society that were excluded by national socialist and communist "social engineering" practices.

Key words: national socialism, communism, life worlds, comparison, deviance

STRUTTURE TOTALITARI E PRASSI SOCIALE:
DEVIANZA IN JUGOSLAVIA TRA 1941 E 1951

SINTESI

Il contributo si incentra sugli strumenti metodologici per l'investigazione della prassi sociale nelle società totalitari. Si riferisce ai lavori di Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Imanuel Geiss, Reinhart Koselleck, Alf Lüdtke ed altri. Le riflessioni sono in gran parte illustrate da esempi dalla ricerca dell'autrice sui rapporti di lavoro nella industria mineraria jugoslava durante e dopo la seconda guerra mondiale. Il concetto di devianza si riferisce a quelle parti della società che furono escluse dalle prassi nazionalsocialiste e comuniste di "social engineering".

Parole chiave: socialismo nazionale, comunismo, mondo della vita (Lebenswelt), storia comparata, devianza

What follows is an exemplary investigation into the behaviour of individuals confronted with a social structure which aimed at including only certain members, and excluding or eliminating others. In Yugoslavia, both the national socialist occupation and the communist take over designed societies in which large groups of people were criminalized because they did not fit the overall ideological requests. These groups were marginalized, deported, harassed, punished, put into prison, killed, and discriminated against in various ways.

The study is centered on illustrating methodological difficulties with comparing actions and their motivations in different totalitarian societies. It takes as one starting point the ongoing debate about the nature of totalitarian societies and about the gains and risks of comparing them, which mostly has been centered on the systemic comparison of national socialism and Stalinist communism.¹ More rarely, analyses have been conducted from an empirical viewpoint and investigated societies that experienced both systems.² At the center of attention stands a methodological angle that could be called socio-cultural rather than socio-political. The following reflections suggest the utility of combining the macro and micro levels of history, its structures and its actors, and unfolding life-worlds within socio-economic contexts, that is to say the "interchanging relations between structures and individual thought and action."³ Given that the inquiry concerns the specificity of a war situation, the investigation of the "conditioning structures underlying the construction of social consciousness has to distinguish between more general human endeavors and "functions exclusively conditioned by the war". Of particular relevance for the Second World War was, according to Reinhart Koselleck, the experience of forced labor and of being a partisan as a special form of loyalty (Koselleck, 2000, 270). The intersection of an analysis of structures revealed through the actions of the protagonists, is the search for an empirical typology of social practice beyond preliminary categorizations, plumbing the depths of possibilities for action within a society shaped by existential and radical parameters: resistance and collaboration, death and survival (Cf. Lüdtke, 1993).⁴

Among those synchronous factors bringing forth consciousness, potentially differentiating any alleged collectivity and thereby creating an "economically and so-

1 Cf. the plea for comparison by Geiss, 1999, as well as the general critical overview given by the very differing contributions in the same volume.

2 Cf. Weitz, 1997, who displays the history of communism in Germany within the varying political systems from 1890 to 1990.

3 Cf. the methodological outline by Haumann, 2003, quotation 106.

4 The applicability and possible refinements of Lüdtke's concept of *Eigen-Sinn* are part of newer research; yet the concept is certainly useful for questioning all black-and-white categories still pervading historiography (victim – perpetrator, resistance fighter – collaborator etc.). Cf. the remarks by Lindenberger, 1999, esp. 21–26, on "authority as social practice" and the methodological functions of the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*.

cially endowed network" we must include individually experienced events, which cluster into consciousness-creating structures of experience, the pre-war consciousness, which conditions and filters the coming to terms with the impact of the war, as well as linguistic, religious, and philosophical worldviews, ideological and political affiliations, age, gender, and the social setting (Koselleck, 2000, 266–272, quotation 269). The intra-Yugoslav conflict dominated the local variant of the war as much as did international events. Especially in the Balkans, the predominantly agrarian societies were characterized both by a weak social structure and a problem-stricken national structure "*unique* for Europe" (Sundhaussen, 1994, 355; emphasis in the original, S. R.). For Yugoslavia is particularly valid that "numerous primary experiences were [...] suppressed or enforced in the various spaces of consciousness, or they were put into new contexts, which could not easily be transferred back to the primary experience" (Koselleck, 2000, 275).

The challenge is obvious: How to find adequate interpretative categories to depict continuities and discontinuities in discourses and actions as part of a war-torn, radicalized and atomized society, characterized both by a polarization of ideologies and by a lowered barrier towards violence?⁵ The so called "debate on totalitarianism" from its beginnings during the cold war years has been characterized by a mixture of empirical-analytical thought and moralizing-normative value giving. After 1989, efforts to compare national socialism and communism increased, fuelling attempts to present Hitlerism and Stalinism as equals, as well as using newly-open archives and new systemic and mental dispositions as an occasion for more pragmatic historiographic inquiries.⁶ For Yugoslavia also, the debate about "who was worse" is often expressed in emotional and moralizing debates around the discursive substance of the concepts "resistance" and "collaboration", previously assigned respectively to the communists and the anti-communists.⁷

Forceful theoretical input is provided by Pierre Bourdieu, who points out that any discourse, any communication, any interaction is dependent on its social setting. This means that the very same words can have quite different meanings when articulated in different social contexts. Words and concepts transported from one social or ideo-

5 Arendt (1986, 517–524) mentions, among other things, the atomization of society as a prerequisite for any totalitarian movement.

6 Cf. the overview in Jesse, 1999.

7 A long-durée consequence of the communist imposition of mental parameters are in fact the difficulties, with which post-Yugoslav societies, and especially those who today, again, are post-war societies, struggle to establish a differentiated and de-emotionalized platform for discussion, rather than attempting at simply turning "good" into "bad" (the partisans) and "bad" into "good" (the Chetniks, Domobranci, in part also the Ustasha). As an example of the existing doubts and difficulties in re-assessing discursive substances may serve the printed discussion of the papers published in a special issue of the *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* (Contributions to Modern History) on the "Slovenes and the year 1941": *Razpravljanja*, 2001. Cf. the historiographic overviews in Marković et. al., 2004; Vodopivec, 2004.

logical setting into another adapt their meaning to the new setting. This observation raises questions about the prevailing discourse of a given time and space, and about the changes it undergoes when breaks in the circumstantial settings occur (Bourdieu, 2005).⁸ In this sense, the following remarks intend to suggest the possibility of a life-world-centered approach to societies under totalitarian rule, taking Yugoslavia, and in particular the realm of labor relationships, as an example. The largest potential advantage of such an approach, it would seem, is that it questions any categoric order or hierarchy of things and events, and takes the individuals' experiences seriously, permitting them to be analyzed flexibly, in response to what the sources reveal.

NATIONAL SOCIALISM

Among the groups that were stigmatized as criminals, deviants, or outlaws during national socialist occupation in Yugoslavia were the following: those chosen for deportation, those who were considered to be racially inferior, those who were forced to work for the occupying forces, including those of course who refused to do so, and, last but not least, those who were considered to be part of resistance movements. Each of these groups was far from homogeneous and characterized by varying labels, both social and ethnic.

The German-occupied territories of Slovenia, for example, were to become part of the German Reich. Ethnically conscious and politically inconvenient Slovenes were the target of deportation and imprisonment. In order to establish levels of deviance, five political and four racial categories were established, which then led to four more levels regarding the possibility of germanization. Deportations, especially on racial grounds, could hit virtually anybody. The language around the possibilities of becoming "German" and accordingly around the "inferiority" of the Slav race was a perverted language trying to include as many Slovenes as possible in "Germany", inviting them to the "higher culture" of Germanness (Rutar, 2005, 542ff.).⁹

When it came to interactions between the occupying forces and the population, the germanization measures were of prime importance, as can be illustrated by the social practices dominant in work relationships in one of the most important economic enterprises in lower Styria, the coal mines in Trbovlje. After the German occupiers had taken over the coal mines in the spring of 1941, they introduced surveys of "correct" political attitudes among the workforce. Among other things, the survey asked for ethnicity, current and former state affiliation. The varying answers given to these questions can be interpreted as more or less conscious attempts to escape any

8 French original: *Ce que parler veut dire. L'économie des échanges linguistiques*, Paris 2004/1982. The English version was translated in a somewhat abbreviated manner as 'Language and symbolic power', cf. the latest edition by J. B. Thompson, Cambridge, 2003.

9 In detail on the policy of germanization Ferenc, 1968.

sort of possible criminalization or "cleansing" process on racial grounds. Whereas ethnic Germans seem to have accepted their new German state affiliation easily, writing "Yugoslav" as their former affiliation, most Slovenes named "Yugoslav" as the present, and "Austro-Hungarian" as their former state affiliation, as if they had not noticed the most recent change of state. However, in indicating their ethnicity, the Slovenes tended to compromise, for example by regionalizing their ethnic identity. One individual, for example, wrote that he was "Slovene, Lower Styrian, German-friendly" (ARS, 1, Ing. Franz Stefe, without date).¹⁰ Members of mixed families tried to emphasize the German part of their heritage. A worker who was born in Tuzla in Bosnia in 1909 indicated his ethnicity as Slovene, but put a question mark after it and added "German" in parentheses. He emphasized that his mother was German, and while his father was Slovene, he had pursued a thoroughly Austrian career as a civil servant. He tried to make himself as little Slovene as possible. We can see that the threat of being stigmatized as deviant on racial grounds led to attempts at adaptation in order to protect oneself and one's family (ARS, 1, Karl Kobler, without date; Cf. Rutar, *Volkstumspolitik*, 556ff.).

In Serbia, on the other hand, the mentality of German "superiority", although omnipresent, was shaped by quite different prerogatives. Serbia was not to be germanized, after all. One of the more prominent German historians of fascism, Lutz Klinkhammer, has pointed out the differences in mechanisms of radicalization that can be observed in the occupations of Western and Eastern countries. Yugoslavia's quick change from friend to foe, Klinkhammer argues, can be referred back to a national socialist world setting in which the Balkans were considered "deviant", in terms of being excluded from European civilization. A collaborationist policy, as it was introduced in western countries, was out of the question for the Balkans. In Serbia several layers of resentment existed: old conceptions of enmity from Habsburg times and the First World War mixed with the new classification which saw Yugoslavia as belonging to the East. There ensued a brutal policy which did not count – as in France or Italy – on a minimum consensus within the population, but rather on the radicalization of the battle of all against all (Klinkhammer, 1998, 185–206). In fact, especially in Serbia, the Germans employed many Austrians, calculating that their "old" hatred towards the Serbs would trigger pointed anti-Serb behavior. One of the most brutal occupational regimes developed. In addition, the Serbian government under Milan Nedić also employed a strongly anti-semitic and anti-communist rhetoric, and supported the occupying forces in criminalizing parts of society (Ristović, 2001, 639ff.). In Serbia, segregation, criminalization, and punishment of groups defined as "deviant" included wide use of violence and of forced labor in a much more blatant sense than was the case in Slovenia where the facade of a "civilizing mission" was

¹⁰ Stefe also stated, however, that he was a member of the nationally oriented sports association 'Sokol' (falcon).

part of the rhetoric, in spite of the brutal "social engineering" practiced by means of deportation. All this in the name of making these lands "German" (Ferenc, 1968, 210–225).

National socialist language entered settings in which one would hardly expect to find it. Silviya Kavčič in her study on Slovene internees in the female concentration camp in Ravensbrück cites a conversation between a Russian and a Polish woman in 1944. In this conversation, the Polish woman referred to a Slovene co-inmate as a "bandit": "If she is not able to work, she should bloody well die! How many Polish women already had to die here! No harm done if also this bandit kicks the bucket" (Kavčič, 2007, 69).¹¹ Many life stories of prison and camp inmates confronted with existential threats are reported or remembered as containing elements of the national socialist rhetoric of deviance. In this case it refers to the pejorative denomination for communist partisans: bandit, although others refer to racist categories about life "worth of living" and life "unworthy of living".

COMMUNISM

With the establishment of the communist regime in Yugoslavia a new set of criminalizing measures and a new rhetoric of deviance rooted in the war developed very quickly. Now those groups were to be eliminated that had "belonged", in one way or other, to the previous occupational regime: in addition to the occupying forces these were the Croatian Ustasha, Serbian Chetniks, Slovene Domobranci, Albanian fascists, the ethnic Germans, plus, and here it becomes arbitrary, all those said to have been sympathizers, that is to say generally members of the clergy, industrialists, larger farmers and who else was considered an "enemy of the people".¹² After 1948, deviance was then also applied to those considered Stalinist, and they, too, were largely eliminated from Yugoslav society. This testifies to a frightening continuity of "engineering" practices between the two totalitarian social systems, under totally changed premises.¹³

After the war of liberation, which was accompanied by civil war between communist and anti-communist groups, came the violent defense of the newly established power.¹⁴ Yugoslav society was a society of winners in which the losers of the war were to be eliminated or, at least, silenced. The official discourse was dominated by a mythification of the partisan war, with the intent of legitimizing the foundation of the

11 The page indication refers to the manuscript, and many thanks go to Silviya Kavčič for the copy she gave me.

12 For Slovenia Dornik Šubelj, 1999, on the secret service OZNA (Oddelek za zaščito naroda), which was responsible for the mass shootings of the first post-war times.

13 Cf. similar general reflections in Arendt, 1986, 681–684; and Geiss, 1999, 163–165.

14 Again, a monographic study is available for Slovenia: Vodušek-Starič, 1992.

socialist state. Good and heroic partisans were compared to occupiers and collaborators. In a society exhausted by war, radicalized and atomized in both its ethnic and its social dimensions it was rather easy to create a new consciousness and orientation along such reductive black-and-white parameters (Sundhaussen, 2003, 357–360; cf. Arendt, 1986, 517–524). Just how much social and national mental parameters were intertwined, however, can be illustrated with the example of a Muslim peasant from Montenegro sentenced for having committed murder during the war. The victim had been a member of the Chetnik movement. Milovan Djilas met this peasant in prison and describes his hesitation between categories of deviance in the following way:

"Halil did not have any knowledge about his rights, nor did he know how to defend himself. And now, under the communist regime, hardly anybody would admit that anybody from his family had been against the communists. Hence, the testimonies depicted the victim as a supporter of the communists – as if he had never worn the full beard of the Chetniks. During the war, Halil of course had distinguished between the communists and the Chetniks, but for him all were primarily Serbs, and he was against all of them. Seen from his perspective, the difference between communists and Chetniks was indeed not very important – he avenged the murder of a member of his family, without much considering whether he killed a supporter of this or that "Serbian" battle group. Consequently, he had not understood how much more advantageous it would have been for him if he had proven to the court that he had not killed a partisan but a Chetnik" (Djilas, 1984, 136).

Between 1945 and 1951, which is the year in which the first five year plan ended and Western financial aid started, four different forms of juridically defined unfree work existed in Yugoslavia: forced labor without detention, forced labor with detention, work as a corrective measure and work considered socially useful (Mikola, 2002, 7).¹⁵ Especially the last category is interesting in terms of criminalization and deviance, since it was not employed only as a corrective measure. Socially useful work indeed was the basis of economic reconstruction and involved large parts of the population. The rhetoric defined it as voluntary work. Yet how much deviance was attributed to individuals who refused to or were unable to be part of these voluntary work brigades? A measure of the degree of coercion and free will can be found in the disabled former combattants of the liberation movement, who were strongly included in this form of economic reconstruction. Even allowing a good bit of propagandistic exaggeration, the rhetoric is impressive: "In the times of innovation and reconstruction of the country, the war-disabled were everywhere, full of energy and self-sacrifice. They are exemplary at their work places, in the factories and mines, in the bodies of the national government and in the units of the Yugoslav People's Army.

15 Forced labour without detention and work as a corrective measure in 1948 were combined into a single juridical category. In 1948, according to Mikola, only in Slovenia 534 intellectuals, 3.986 peasants, 4.053 workers und 2.054 qualified workers served detention with forced labor.

[...] In large numbers the war-disabled worked on many large and small construction sites in the whole country. They were conscious of doing great and meaningful work that would change the face of the country and provide it with a socialist substance [...]. Immediately after the liberation the war-disabled in masses have taken up their work in voluntary initiatives for innovating the country. Thousands of war-disabled in special brigades as well as in the mass activities of the national liberation front have given hundreds of thousands of voluntary working hours for the reconstruction of the railways, mining industries, factories, and cities destroyed in the war" (Brajović, 1961, 38). Other sources indicate that, in fact, only those war victims who were able to deliver the requested work were granted recognition: "The reconstruction of the country and the organization of socialist life required the help of all. Yet, former concentration camp inmates often were physically and psychologically much too exhausted to cope with so much physical labor. Often they encountered great difficulties in finding adequate work. Yet without a workplace they were excluded from any insurance and governmental financial help." (Kavčič, 2007, 221).¹⁶

Post-communist research goes so far as to see this imposed competition for ever higher performance as equivalent to forced labor. Mikola cites the memories of a war-disabled former combattant in the liberation war: "Vladislav Cegnar from Ljubljana, for example, one of many who the communist government sent to do socially useful work, has served this punishment in the "camp" Litostroj [a water turbines factory in Ljubljana, S. R.], how he himself puts it, saying that 'even though I was in poor health and an invalid of the liberation war, I had to work ten hours per day with insufficient nutrition'" (Mikola, 2002, 9ff., quotation 11).

On the political level, mental parameters defining who was considered "evil" and who "good" were forcefully introduced and carefully surveyed by a narrow network of commissions engaged in finding war criminals and their supporters. In addition to a state commission and subcommissions on the republican and provincial level, 364 district commissions and 1210 municipal commissions conducted a thorough search for all those not fitting the new social design (Žečević, Popović, 1996, 9–14). Some of the testimonies of those who had worked as forced laborers in the copper mines in Bor may serve as an example. Only those were asked to testify in front of the commission who qualified as members or sympathizers of the liberation movement. In their stories, it becomes obvious that it was more important to inform against alleged Serbian collaborators than against members of the occupying forces. Accordingly, in the documentation, testimonies are quoted that asserted that the Serbs in service of the Germans were "no better than the Germans" or "even worse than the Germans themselves", and the sources report tales of treason and mistreatment (ASCG, 1, 6. 6. 1945, testimony of Rastislav Ognjanović; ASCG, 1, 6. 6. 1945, testimony of Milan

¹⁶ Referring to interviews conducted with former camp inmates.

Bučan).¹⁷ Although everything said may be true, it becomes obvious how much the rhetorical design of these accounts is conditioned by the new social and ideological requirements.

On the other hand, in post-communist times former Slovene partisans testify that forced labor was part of partisan punishment, used for example in punishing deserters (Lešnik, Tomc, 1995, 74f). Their testimonies are part of a yet again changed discursive setting: in post-communist times those parts of the story can be told that formerly fell prey to the hero and myth-making historiographic paradigms. Disobedience was punished as part of a general military ethic. Yet, the use of forced labor as punishment opens a new set of questions with regard to historiographic inquiries into social practices. Forced labor had been part of the Soviet, and in particular the Stalinist, system almost from the beginning. Was the Slovene partisan movement's adoption of forced labor as part of its policy an imitation of stalinist practice, or was there something originally Yugoslav to it? Should it, on the other hand, be seen in a broader picture of unfree work as part of the general mentality of totalitarian social design?¹⁸ How is forced labor to be defined? And, finally, how are we to compare such social practices?¹⁹

Bourdieu's theoretical reflections on the interdependence of discourse, social setting and value sets are once again in play. Labor as punishment for deviant behavior was part of the prevailing social structure of both totalitarian settings, even though deviance was defined in very different terms. Further research into the social history of totalitarian societies will have to establish the continuities and discontinuities involved, for example between the labor relationships of the first Yugoslavia, those during the occupation and, finally, those in Titoist Yugoslavia. Inquiring into the behavior of people within their life-worlds should lead to a clearer assessment of social structures, beyond any pre-set categorization.²⁰

17 Cf. ASCG, 1, 6. 6. 1945, testimony of Milan Tatalović, who said that an interpreter had informed against him as a saboteur, which ensued his transportation into a punishment camp; as well as ASCG, 1, 18. 6. 1945, testimony of Spiro Djordjo Mitrićević, who testified that a "sergeant in the former Yugoslavia" had mistreated him.

18 Arendt (1986, 682ff.) rejects the notion that those camps coined 'forced labour camps' by Soviet bureaucracy were indeed such, given that "forced labor is the normal living condition of the whole Russian proletariat, whose freedom of movement is lifted and which in any case can be mobilized to any place at any time" (Arendt, 1986, 648).

19 On the historiographic and political handling of forced labor in the pre- and post-war Stalinist Soviet Union as well as during the war cf. Penter, 2005. Geiss, 1999, 163ff., concludes that many characteristics of both totalitarian systems "were similar or even identical, and even testify reciprocal learning and copying" (Geiss, 1999, 165). Whether this refers also to the practice and nature of forced labor and labor relationships in general, still awaits empirical underpinning.

20 This is, among other things, the aim of my research project on labor relationships in Serbian and Slovenian mining industries during the Second World War.

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TOTALITARNE STRUKTURE IN DRUŽBENA PRAKSA:
DEVIANTNOST V JUGOSLAVIJI MED LETOMA 1941 IN 1951

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POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava metodološka orodja pri raziskavah socialne prakse v totalitarnih družbah. Razdeljen je na tri dele. V prvem delu so razčlenjeni teoretični in konceptualni vidiki raziskovanja socialne prakse v totalitarnih družbah, pri čemer je poudarek na pristopu z vidika življenjskega sveta (life-world, Lebenswelt). Obravnavane so tudi prednosti in pasti primerjave totalitarnih družb. V drugem delu so ta razmišljanja podkrepljena s primeri iz obdobja nacionalsocialistične okupacije Jugoslavije, v tretjem delu pa so navedeni analogni primeri iz komunistične Jugoslavije. Viri za oba empirična dela prispevka so izbrani predvsem iz področja delovnih razmerij. Koncept deviantnosti se nanaša na tiste dele družbe, ki so jih tako nacionalsocialisti kot komunisti izključevali iz svojih praks "družbenega inženirinja". Raziskava ponazarja, kako so definicije deviantnega vplivale na retoriko in ravnanje posameznikov.

Ključne besede: nacionalsocializem, komunizem, življenjski svet (life-world), primerjava, deviantnost

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