

MASS MEDIA AND COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

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Introduction

The discourse about the fall of Yugoslavia can be summarised in the following proverb: One death, a hundred prophets! This popular wisdom displays an intrinsic human need to “explain” events, in which we find ourselves inextricably and often unwittingly entangled, and to infuse them with meaning. For that reason, a flood of “theories” appears in the wake of troubled and confusing times. They can be classified into three groups: (1) mythological interpretations which attribute these events to “evil forces”; (2) scientific explanations based on accepted sociological theories, with the proviso that should those theories be lacking or be inadequate, a new theoretical direction may be suggested; (3) a rainbow of “plausible” theories between these two extremes, which may claim a scientific status although, in fact, they are merely common sense explanations supported by *ad hoc* arguments.

The task of this essay is not to provide an extensive examination of these theories. Nevertheless, various theories concerning international conspiracy belong to the first category. They are quite prominent in Serbia (uniting Freemasons, the Komintern and the Vatican as a composite agent against Serbhood), as well as in Croatia (an international anti-Croatian conspiracy). These conspiracy theories are modernised versions of “primitive,” tribal beliefs that the universe is being ruled by demons and evil magic. Similar beliefs can also be found in high-tech, western countries. We can still remember that the Soviet Union, for example, was bluntly called an “evil empire” by President Reagan and the western world.

Among the theories of the second group belongs the contemporary re-examination of the classical theory of modernisation, which proved to be incapable of predicting and making sense out of the Balkan hell, and which calls for an alternative explanation, taken from the theory of ethnic resource competition, and formulated beforehand in a somewhat different context (Hodson, Sekulić and Massey 1994).

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From the third and largest group I will single out one theory, which claims that violence was a direct product of the mass media “under control of nationalist leaders” (Thompson 1994). Although, at first glance, this theory corresponds to observed facts, it is, actually, deduced from another theory of a “higher order,” a “theory of equal guilt,” which is an “article of faith,” trying to pass for Kuhn’s paradigm of a “normal” science (Popović 1994).

How to approach these theories? The easiest way to deal with mythological interpretations is to ignore them. There is no sense in trying to prove whether they are right or wrong, just as there is no need to verify the Hopi Indian beliefs in the efficiency of the rain dance ritual. However, even if the belief in the rain dance is ridiculous from a meteorological point of view, it is not meaningless from a sociological standpoint. Robert K. Merton has drawn our attention to the fact that this ritual was important for strengthening the social cohesion of a given group. It was its “latent function” (Merton 1957). Along this line, mythological and mythomaniac theories should be examined primarily in view of their latent functions for the actors in the conflict.

As for scientific theories, let us leave them for sociologists to debate at conferences and in professional publications. For them it is “business as usual.”

But what about plausible and common-sense theories? Are we to verify them as if they were “real” scientific theories, or should we only consider their possible functions? What I suggest is a two-step procedure concerning the theory of media-induced violence: first, we should submit them to rigorous empirical verification; if they fail this test (which is very likely), we can apply functional analysis. This is how I intend to proceed in the following text.

Formulation and Testing of the Theory

To test this theory, we need to propose a more rigorous and precise definition. **Ipsa facto**, it is not a formal theory but an interpretative model of the “Balkan crisis,” defined as a system of two propositions and two implicit assumptions.

- Proposition 1: Media production and dissemination of negative contents concerning other national and ethnic groups will necessarily provoke a high level of intolerance and hatred towards these groups among the recipients of these messages.
- Proposition 2: High levels of intolerance and hatred will necessarily result in collective violence among these groups.
- The first implicit assumption: all media in the former Yugoslavia fabricated and disseminated, equally, messages of intolerance and hatred. Even today, the media of the newly independent states, involved in the conflict, continue this practice.
- The second implicit assumption: the recipients of these messages were subjected solely to the influence of their own national media.

Both of these implicit assumptions are inaccurate. However, what are their implications, omitting for a moment, questions of various degrees of “virulence” of individual national media and of counter-effects produced by one republic in the territory of another? Considering differences in intensity of propaganda and its counter-effects (even if we had available empirical data which we, unfortunately, do

not possess) would unnecessarily complicate the analysis without essentially modifying its results.

A test of the aforementioned propositions with the help of national tolerance indexes calculated on the basis of empirical data from a survey research conducted on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia between the end of 1989 and the beginning of 1990, produced the results presented in Table 1.

Table 1: National Tolerance in ex-Yugoslavia

Republic/Province	Index of tolerance*
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.88
Vojvodina	3.83
Croatia	3.63
Montenegro	3.45
Serbia	3.28
Slovenia	2.67
Macedonia	2.53
Kosovo	1.71
SFRY Average	3.28

* minimum value = 1.0; maximum value = 5.0

Source: R. Hodson, D. Sekulić and G. Massey 1994.

If we deduce (on the basis of the first proposition) that propaganda campaign by the media was the only factor producing national intolerance, the conclusion should be that, according to the data, the mass media succeeded in spreading intolerance only on the periphery of the former Yugoslav federation. At its core (site of the fiercest and still ongoing conflicts), the level of tolerance was above the statistical average, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina it was very high). In other words, contrary to the first proposition, the "critical mass" of intolerance leading to a frontal conflict had not yet been created.

The second problem with this proposition is (if we presume propaganda of equal intensity), how to explain important variations among republics and provinces? Thus, another factor, modifying these media effects and mentioned by the authors of the study is national (ethnic) and cultural diversity, or **multiculturalism**. The indexes of diversity are presented in Table 2.

These indexes of tolerance and diversity correlates positively: the higher the diversity, the stronger the sense of tolerance. We can rephrase this finding: the more homogeneous national settings are, the more susceptible they are than more heterogeneous settings to intolerant media messages. However, this correlation is invalid for Kosovo and Macedonia, because of other factors not targeted by the survey. Nevertheless, the first proposition is not acceptable in its totality and demands, at least, some fundamental revisions.

The second proposition is even more debatable. For example, if we had known the indexes of tolerance during the first half of 1990 (which was technically impossible), we could have ventured into following forecasts: (1) no violent armed conflict in

Table 2: National and Cultural Diversity in ex-Yugoslavia

Republic/Province	Index of diversity*
Bosnia and Herzegovina	.64
Vojvodina	.61
Croatia	.45
Montenegro	.45
Serbia	.27
Slovenia	.19
Macedonia	.41
Kosovo	.39

* minimum value = 1.0; maximum value = 5.0

Source: R. Hodson, D. Sekulić and G. Massey 1994.

immediate future of Yugoslavia; (2) if it should happen, it is likely to take place in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Slovenia, less likely in Croatia, and least likely in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The actual events, however, completely contradicted these conjectures: mass violence and war started in Croatia and culminated in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The second proposition is, therefore, not acceptable, because intolerance did not provoke violence, and higher tolerance did not prevent it.

To explain these paradoxical results, we are faced with two closely related questions: (1) If the causes of an open conflict are not intolerance and hatred, where should we look for them, and, (2) are the mass media truly innocent?

The Key to the Enigma: Authoritarian Value Orientation

In the above mentioned survey (1989-1990) respondents were offered a statement — **a nation without a leader is like a man without a head** — with which to agree or disagree. Interestingly, 61.5 per cent of all respondents (of a total Yugoslav sample) **strongly** agreed; by adding those who (simply) agreed, three quarters of all respondents agreed with this statement. Moreover, Serbs and Croats fall equally within the Yugoslav average (Lazić 1991). These results indicate a particular authoritarian value orientation, and actually, were to be expected, since the political culture in ex-Yugoslavia was authoritarian in spite of its “self-management” façade.

Authoritarian culture breeds and amplifies a fundamental popular need for a leader. “A leader knows what he’s doing” was a common saying in the Third Reich; “Comrade Tito, to you we swear never to deviate from your path” was a song in socialist Yugoslavia; and “Slobodan just say so and we’ll fly like bullets” was a tune (and probably still is) chanted in Serbia. To sum up, a leader should be obeyed, even when he demands the expulsion and death of people of another nationality and the destruction of private buildings and cultural monuments. Therefore, the average level of national tolerance was irrelevant for the outbreak of the armed conflict and related mass violence. Rather, the decisive element was the extent to which certain regions and territories were included by the leader into his general plan of conquest. Slovenia was

not included in the project of a Greater Serbia and, thus, remained outside the conflict (with the exception of the ten-day war, which Misha Glenny has called counterfeit). On the other hand, the conquest of Croatian territory (to the Virovitica-Karlovac-Karlobag line) was part and parcel of the project and, for that reason, brought about aggression and violence. Since all of Bosnia-Herzegovina was also included, the war assumed its horrible dimension.

The proponents of the mass media theory could, nevertheless, insist that, although the authoritarian political culture is the key to the enigma, the belligerent successor-states possess their own leaders. All three of them are authoritarian nationalist leaders and equally guilty. However, if equal responsibility of the leaders is not a "theoretical" (i.e., ideological) postulate, but a **questio facti**, a serious analysis should prove that: (1) their strategic aims were more or less the same on the eve of the war; (2) they used the same means to fulfil these aims; and (3) they disposed of the same, mostly military, resources. To my knowledge, there is no study proving that. However, it is sufficient to compare the available resources at the time to understand the situation. Milošević had full control over the Yugoslav National Army (considered the fourth largest in Europe), the **federal** government and foreign currency **reserves** (politically, the last Yugoslav prime minister Marković was only a "straw man"), and over the international political apparatus and the capital of the former state. What were Tuđman's resources after his party has won the Croatian parliamentary elections in 1990? The territorial defence units were disarmed, and he was unable to rely on the ordinary police contingent. The creation of police squads (within the SFRY legal system, the Corps of National Guard could be established only as a police squad) and volunteer units, equipped with some light infantry weapons, were scarcely effective defensively and could not have served to conquer other territories. And what were president Izetbegović's resources in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992?

Therefore, the explanatory model, based on an authoritarian national leader, can be applied exclusively to the project of Greater Serbia and its executor, Slobodan Milošević, **concerning the launching of a war of aggression and violence**. To draw any conclusions from the subsequent conduct and political regimes of other leaders — despite of eventual similarities — is a logical **non sequitur**.

The starting assumption of this model is that in an authoritarian culture people unquestioningly obey their leader. Since human beings are not robots and do not react automatically, a leader has to acquire their "consent" (he has to persuade them of his "grand", "historical", and "sacred" goals) and capture and engage their profound sentiments. Briefly, he has to mobilise them politically (Gellner 1983; Greenfeld 1992).

Political Mobilisation and the Media

In an industrial society, political mobilisation is hardly possible without primarily electronic mass media. In Nazi Germany political mobilisation by radio played a principal role, in Serbia it was mobilisation through television. What is the function of the media in political mobilisation?

The first function is to misinform its own population. Many ordinary people in Serbia, who had never spent their summer vacations on the Adriatic coast, were convinced by the media that Croats did not live there. Lies about "Serbian Dubrovnik," "Serbian Zadar" and other "Serbian" territories, however, were not invented by the

media, but by intellectuals (e.g., “scientists” and literati of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts), although they were disseminated by the media. In a similar manner, the media disseminated other historical, economic, political, and cultural forgeries, which took years to fabricate. True enough, misinformation does not create hatred, but it is the first step towards it.

Secondly, the media systematically sowed distrust towards people of different nationality. Surveys of that period indicate that a number of people thought that co-operation among different national and ethnic groups was possible, but they had not full confidence in them (Lazić 1991).

When the media featured the “endangered brothers in Serbian Dubrovnik and Zadar,” even personally tolerant individuals moved to help their “brothers in danger.” With this the process of political mobilisation was completed.

A closer look at the dramatisation of the “endangerment” scenario reveals that the feeling of endangerment was amplified and dramatised during mass meetings, transmitted by television. It generated high emotional tensions combined with a state of euphoria. The production of feelings of personal threat is only one side of the mass dramaturgy; the other side is the creation of feelings of strength and super-power, capable of destroying the enemies who threaten “Serbhood.” These two seemingly contradictory feelings of being threatened and being all-powerful, fused by a mythomaniac tradition and a sense of a “historical mission” of the nation (“celestial Serbia”), concocted a powerful narcotic potion. It assured an absolute and unconditional obedience of the masses and their readiness to commit any crime, ordered by the leader to reach his goals. It also relieved the individual of any moral responsibility in his conduct towards the “enemy.” In addition to brandishing a national solidarity ticket and relying on an infantile human need to feel all-powerful through identification with him, a leader also responds to a more down-to-earth material and economic motives. For instance, a lack of booty (since there is nothing left to be pillaged in Bosnia-Herzegovina) is a serious danger to the fighting spirit of the army of Bosnian Serbs.

There are three reasons, why the process of political mobilisation in Serbia was in the centre of my essay.

Firstly, the political mobilisation in Serbia preceded the war on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia. Let us not forget the spectacle at Gazimestan in Kosovo which openly announced armed battles. Political mobilisation in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina followed when the conflict had already started. Although the same scenario was followed, by comparison the performances were on a rather modest scale.

Secondly, the political mobilisation in Serbia is a textbook case of the **fin-de-siècle** populist mobilisation worthy of grand masters, such as Lenin, Mussolini and Goebbels (Goebbels 1948). It succeeded skilfully in solving an almost impossible psychological task, that is, to persuade people, whose houses were not attacked by missiles and who did not have to hide in their cellars, that they were “endangered” as well as all-powerful and invincible. Tuđman in Croatia and Izetbegović in Bosnia-Herzegovina had a much easier task. They did not have to persuade people that they were in danger, since they obviously were.

And thirdly, the dramaturgy of “*dogadanje naroda*,” “*antibirokratska revolucija*,” and subsequent “*balvan-revolucija*” was impossible without the electronic media.¹

When the conflict reached its active phase, the attackers and the attacked had rapidly changed their attitudes: tolerance turned into extreme intolerance and deadly hatred. What propagandist media had failed to do one decade, happened almost instantly when the violence began. **Grosso modo** we can say, that it was not hatred that provoked violence but that violence provoked hatred. Only in this phase, the efficiency of the media amplified. The campaign has no limits and its influence on the audience is stronger than ever. People who hate demand and look for content which not only glorifies but justifies acts of hatred. Once the armed conflict started, it followed its own dynamic of escalating in magnitude. The media are only one element in this infernal spiral, and any monocausal explanation is inapplicable. In this phase, of course, there are no innocents. For instance, the Croatian media played a crucial role in setting in motion the chain reaction of violence initiated by “ethnic cleansing” of Croatian populations throughout war-torn territories. The media (especially television) broadcast refugee tragedies and the redefinition of former neighbours as long-disguised enemies who finally showed their real face, into every Croatian home. The wild-fire engulfed an entire primary social structure of inter-ethnic relations, which no media campaigns had been able to destroy before (Županov 1995 forthcoming; Prpić et al. 1993). Such rapid chain reaction could not have been possible without the media. In a word, those who espouse a media theory of violence had forgotten Durkheim’s methodological rule that social facts have to be explained by social facts that preceded them.

A Discouraging Conclusion

It is a widely accepted belief that promoting tolerance in plural societies prevents collective violence. In view of our experience, we should qualify this connection: tolerance possesses prophylactic qualities under the conditions of a non-authoritarian political culture; if the political culture is authoritarian, tolerance neither harms nor helps. Once a conflict has started, appealing to the principle of tolerance may help bring it to a close in non-authoritarian societies; it will have no effect in authoritarian societies. As in medicine, there is a rule in human society: on the basis of a wrong diagnosis, no therapy can be successful. Similarly, the humanists who blame the media, without understanding the role played by authoritarian culture, tend to reason that the cause of the illness is the lack of true information. In order for people to be cured, in order to restore their sight, one should offer them true information, distributed by electronic media from abroad and beyond the control of nationalist leaders. This was the line of thinking of the “radio-ship,” installed in the Adriatic, that transmitted its programs under the slogan of “*droit de parole*”. But its programs were rarely listened to in Croatia or Serbia — there were some listeners only on the Dalmatian coast and in Bosnia-Herzegovina — and the whole operation was finally discontinued. This is not to say, of course, that there is no remedy to the “Balkan crisis,” it is just that aspirins do not cure cancer. We know very well how a similar illness was cured in Germany.

Note:

1. "Događanje naroda" ("Happening of the Nation") applied to supermass-meetings held in Serbia in support of the politics of Greater Serbia. When it was used to overthrow regional governments in Vojvodina and Montenegro, it was called "anti-bureaucratic revolution." "Balvan-revolucija" ("Timber-revolution") refers to blocking main roads and railways by insurgent Serbs in Croatia in 1990 and 1991. Such use of timber, heavy stones, and similar materials was the beginning of the rebellion.

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