THE MANIPULATION OF THE CONCEPT OF ETHNICITY: ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

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ABSTRACT

The main argument of this essay is that ethnic conflicts cannot be explained exclusively referring to ethnic identities because of the relational, relative character of the latter. In fact, a sort of ideological justification of ethnic conflicts can be obtained only by means of the manipulation of the idea of ethnicity for political aims.

The base on which this essay has been originally written is represented by the attempt to answer the question: "If 'ethnicity' is invented why is there so much ethnic conflict?". Therefore, the starting point is represented by the consideration of the plastic, relational nature of ethnicity and the possibility to manipulate it. This aspect is subsequently corroborated in the essay by the case-study, dealing with ethnic conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the manoeuvring of the concept of ethnic identity before the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Key words: Ethnicity, ethnic identity, ethnic conflicts, ethnic manipulation, nationalism, Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims

LA MANIPOLAZIONE DEL CONCETTO DI ETNICITÀ: CONFLITTI ETNICI NELLA EX JUGOSLAVIA

SINTESI

L'argomento principale del presente articolo si riferisce al fatto che i conflitti etnici non possono essere spiegati esclusivamente in termini di identità etniche, visto il carattere relativo di queste ultime. Infatti, una giustificazione ideologica dei conflitti etnici si può ottenere solo attraverso la manipolazione per scopi politici dell'idea di etnicità.

La base su cui questo articolo è stato originariamente scritto è rappresentata dal tentativo di rispondere alla domanda "Se l'etnicità è un'invenzione, perché esistono così tanti conflitti etnici?". Pertanto, il punto di partenza è rappresentato dalla considerazione della natura plastica e relazionale dell'etnicità, e dalla possibilità di manipolarla. Questo aspetto viene successivamente avvalorato nel presente articolo mediante lo studio di un caso specifico, vale a dire quello sui conflitti etnici nella Bosnia-Erzegovina e la manipolazione del concetto di identità etnica alla base della disintegrazione della Jugoslavia.

Parole chiave: etnicità, identità etnica, conflitti etnici, manipolazione etnica, nazionalismo, Jugoslavia, Bosnia-Erzegovina, serbi, croati, bosniaci mussulmani

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic conflicts have been compared to "the crying, shouting and hitting" of children over toys. The comparison is also extended to conflicts in adult life, such as "between homeowners and burglars … or between separating spouses". And this kind of confrontation is explained by the "conflicting desires to own or use particular things" (Forbes, 1997, 13-14).

Is this kind of comparison possible, and fair? This metaphor is probably very helpful as it proposes the confrontation for the use of resources as a possible explanation of ethnic conflicts; nevertheless, one may argue there are other components at the base of such a bewildering phenomenon.

Ethnic identity reveals to be a very dynamic trait, and its influence on people's behaviour and convictions transforms and adapts to the changed surrounding conditions. Therefore, the different historic, social and economic circumstances affect the discourse concerning ethnic identity and ethnicity and give reason for the fluidity and flexibility of the latter. During the 1990s, especially in common sense and mass media language, ethnic identity has been proposed as the foundation on which the nature and cause of ethnic conflicts could be unravelled. Moreover, the tension between opposed trends, such as the one commonly known as globalisation, and the claim for local uniqueness diffused all over the world has been framed in this new context.

In this essay, something different will be argued. Particularly, it will be stressed upon the 'plastic' nature of ethnicity and on the possibility that the latter could be consequently manipulated for particularistic reasons. The intention of the essay is that of focusing on the ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and principally in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in order to demonstrate the possibility, and even the relative ease, with which such manipulation might take place for political aims. Therefore, the first part will have a more general and theoretical aspect. A misleading concept, ethnicity can be dealt with from various viewpoints, but cannot be treated as a self-explanatory notion, given its relational character. Consequently, there must be other causes at the base of the ethnic conflicts that have devastated various regions of the world in the last years. The reference to the empirical case of the ex-Yugoslavia, in the second and largest part, will try to practically demonstrate that such tragedies cannot be explained only by means of the belonging to different ethnic groups. The presence of very influential political aims has made possible the paradoxical actualisation of images and symbols belonging to a dark, troubled past. One of the central arguments of this essay is precisely that this kind of symbolism has rendered more feasible an instrumental manipulation of the idea of ethnicity. Therefore, ethnic identity is itself not considered a sufficient condition for the outburst of ethnic conflicts: precise political and social circumstances are required for it to become decisive.

ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND ETHNIC CONFLICTS

Can intelligence of the unintelligible be achieved? How is it possible finding a background on which the explanation of the unexplainable is feasible? Referring to Rwanda or Bosnia, many have called back in the context atavistic and primordial hatreds; the latter, for a reason or another, were cooled down for a while, to blow up later with reinvigorated momentum and violence. The Balkans in general, and ex-Yugoslavia in particular, have been defined as an immense cauldron that the fall of Communism has uncovered: the rest of the world has thus reminded that it was in this region that the First World War originated, as a proof of its franticness. On the other hand, such slaughters as the ones which took place between Hutu and Tutsi have been explained as the "eruption of ancient and irrational tribal antagonisms" (Turton, 1997, 7).

Are these interpretations acceptable? Are ethnic differences sufficient to explain the phenomenon? Actually, as Turton points out, when the protagonists of ethnic conflicts are asked to give a plausible justification of their actions, they refer to the "deep and ineradicable difference between 'them' and 'us'" (Turton, 1997, 3).

If ethnicity is undoubtedly useful to shed light on the phenomenon, it is certainly not possible referring to it as the unique cause, and not even as the most important one. Ethnicity may probably boost and politically justify the conflict in the actors' eyes, but other components must be taken into account, if it is true that ethnicity is "imagined and invented" (Ib.). Some authors, such as Pirjevec, seem to be closer to a historicist and primordialist approach referring to the conflict between Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia as "an internal affair" for "the conquest of a vital space" (Pirjevec, 1995, 5). "Fear of the future" is pointed out as the principal cause by others (Lake and Rothchild, 1998, 7); others refer to a lack of democratic institutions (Udovički, 1997, 6-7), whilst somewhere else explicit reference is made to the use that political leaders have done of the concept of ethnicity in order to mobilize masses for their political personal aims (Turton, 1997, 1).

One cannot probably say which one of these causes is the most significant one; all of them contemporarily exercise their influence and cannot be separated. Nevertheless, the role of political leaders seems to be a key one in this context, because it allows the combination of all of these components with tragic results on million of people's lives. As Troebst points out, this is true for all Eastern Europe, where leaders such as Milošević in Serbia, Kravchuk in Ukraine, Meciar in Slovakia, Kučan in Slovenia and Yeltsin himself in Russia have followed the same path: from the Central Committee of the Commu-

nist parties, not only have they survived at the epochal change after 1989, but they have also favourably exploited it, shifting to nationalist and ethnic rhetoric to mobilize as large portions of national societies as possible (Troebst, 1997, 79-80).[1]

This seems particularly clear in the case of Yugoslavia. Actually, the watershed in Yugoslavia can be traced in 1980 rather than in 1989, at Tito's death. After that date the most prominent figure in the federation was the gloomy and worrying one of Slobodan Milošević, defined by Pirjevec as a demagogue very able to galvanize the masses without allowing his own rhetoric to overwhelm him (Pirjevec, 1995, 65). The fragile Yugoslav multiethnic structure abundantly relied on Tito's charisma and ability. No wonder, therefore, that it fell down after the disappearance of the latter. Hence, the reference to the case of Yugoslavia may be symptomatic of the belief that ethnicity *per se* is not sufficient to burst out such conflicts.

What is ethnicity, after all? Is it possible answering this question with a clear definition, suitable for all cases and seasons? Or would it rather be better to refer to other concepts and variables? Is ethnicity really "imagined and invented"? Turton adds, immediately afterwards, that in spite of these features, it is not "imaginary". On the opposite, "it is real in at least two senses": as a potential means to mobilize communities and motivate their behaviour, both in peace and in war; because of the needs it has to be combined with particular historical conditions to express these potentialities, and be rendered 'real'" (Turton, 1997, 3-4).

Banks offers a list of possible definitions or explanations of the idea of ethnicity through the years. On the base of this list it can be argued how it is not possible to obtain a complete and satisfactory definition of ethnicity. (Banks, 1996, 4-5). Eriksen recognizes the term ethnicity with "dubious descriptive value" (Eriksen, 1993, 4). Banks himself states that he is not going to coin a definition of ethnicity, since for the latter to emerge, other stronger "partners" are needed, "such as 'race' or 'nationalism'" (Banks, 1996, 182).

As both Jenkins and Eriksen point out, the term ethnicity derives from the Greek *ethnos* (Jenkins, 1997, 9; Eriksen, 1993, 3-4). It seemed to refer since the beginning to situations of common living to afterwards assume the meaning of "people" or "nation.

However, ethnicity is not something susceptible of auto-explanation: it is a relational concept (Turton, 1997, 3). Sartori has stated that difference is the necessary complement of identity; groups distinguish themselves from the others because of these dissimilarities.

Every group *is* depending on what it is *not*. In the end an "us" which is not circumscribed by a "them" is not even able to constitute (Sartori, 2000, 44). "The first fact of ethnicity is the application of systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders; between Us and Them. If no such principle exists there can be no ethnicity" (Eriksen, 1993, 18).

Recognizing the relational dimension of the concept may lead to a better understanding of the latter, and allow a confrontation, otherwise impossible, of it with concepts apparently similar, such as those of race and nationalism. From this point of view, the topic is considered very attentively by Jenkins, who traces a valuable pattern starting from Weber up to Barth. In Weber's *Economy and Society*, the belief in common origins from part of the members of a group, and the sharing of common cultural traits are central. Nevertheless, the feeling of belonging together is considered as a consequence of the acting together. Not necessarily is race perceived as something fundamental, until it is not believed to be a common trait. The stress is therefore more shifted upon cultural common features, such as, first of all, language and rituals. Starting from these shared principal characteristics, acting together is possible. On the other hand, Weber points out how these features are indefinite and variable, so that the combinations of common action are also blurred (Jenkins, 1997).

Jenkins goes on pointing out how the idea of differentiation between the "ins" and the "outs" is more present in Hughes's *On Work, Race and the Sociological Imagination.* The author states that the difference between groups cannot be measured by means of objective criteria. Therefore, cultural differences do not cause ethnic distinctions, they only mark it. "Ethnic groups are what people believe or think them to be" (Hughes, 1997, 10-11).

Culture is probably recognized its central place with Barth; moreover, it is clearly pointed out that cultural differentiation is conceptually allowed through the maintenance of dividing lines between diverse groups. On one hand, there are people who share common cultural traits, and these similarities allow them to distinguish themselves from the others. "There are discrete groups of people, i.e. ethnic units, to correspond to each culture" (Barth, 1969, 9).

On the other hand, the relational dimension of ethnicity is unearthed when it is clearly considered how these cultural differentiations emerge by means of exchange of communications and contacts between different communities. The importance of boundaries is clear: they persist in spite of a flow of personnel and contact

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1   Franjo Tudjman is not part of this list. A former historian, he was in fact an opponent of the regime who took advantage of the sensational defeat of the ex-communists at the 1990 elections. Tudjman's party, the Croatian Democratic Alliance, gained the majority of the *sabor* with more than 40% of popular vote. A genuine nationalist, his main point of reference was "the national state of the Croatian nation". He elected ethnicity as the governing principle of the young state (Gallagher, 1997, 53; Pirjevec, 1995, 120).

across them, and dissimilar ethnic and cultural patterns are maintained beyond each side of the boundary.

While defining the concept of ethnic group, Barth offers some valuable insights. He considers it as a category "of ascription and identification by the actors themselves": it organizes interaction between people (Barth, 1969, 10). Common cultural traits do not constitute objective features: they matter if and when the members of the group regard them to be significant. "Ethnic categories provide an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural systems" (1969, 14). This is possible when boundaries are maintained, but it is across these boundaries that cultural differences, and therefore ethnic ones, reveal themselves.

Barth also gives a very important contribution clarifying some of the features at the base of the dynamic of groups' interdependence, when he refers to the "ecologic perspective".

In fact, competition for resources may differ according to the different niches every ethnic group occupies in the environment. Various solutions, in terms of competition, are possible; however, as there are usually some degrees of interdependence between different groups, competition may alternate with forms of co-operation. Therefore, violent confrontation is not the norm.[2]

When ethnicity is instead exclusively considered in auto-explanatory terms, only some aspects of the phenomenon are taken into account, whilst other are left largely unexplored. This is particularly apparent when the origin of ethnic conflict is examined.

Thus, the primordialists perceive ethnicity as a set of inherited physical characteristics or historical conditions. These features cannot be modified by the individuals who, therefore, are defined as belonging to this or that ethnic group.[3] On one hand this view does not see ethnicity necessarily as a turbulent concept; on the other, conflicts are seen as intimately linked to these sets of inherited characteristics and, consequently, automatically explained: conflict is rooted in the essence of ethnicity.

The instrumentalist approach assumes a different stance: the latter can be summarized by Rothchild's words, when he defines ethnic groups as mere utility maximizers (Rothchild, 1986, 66-67). In this perspective, ethnicity is nothing more than a means used by individuals or groups to obtain some political or economic ends. This is clearly a public choice approach, as Rothchild explicitly states. Neither in this case do ethnic conflicts need to be given a particular account, as their nature is not different from that of other conflicts. The ethnic component is part of the confrontation, but the latter is in any case pre-eminently determined by material reasons.

Probably with a more balanced standpoint, the constructivists view ethnicity as a social phenomenon rather than determined by a set of individual characteristics. The constructivist point of view probably bridges the way between the two previous approaches, as far as it considers ethnicity as something evolving and changeable. As a result, ethnic conflicts assume particular characteristics, as they seem to be caused by a pathological involution of the social system.[4]

In the light of the efforts made in order to define or clarify the concept of ethnicity and of the relational characteristics of the latter, it is therefore probably possible to consider ethnic conflicts as intimately caused by other issues than those exclusively linked with ethnicity itself. Especially if the topic of competition for the use of resources is considered, then it is clear that, according to the different historic and social conditions, this competition may also assume violent forms. Turton explicitly states that the competition to obtain political power and the material resources to which such power gives access could provide with a better explanation of the phenomena of ethnic conflicts (Turton, 1997, 3).

It seems that in this statement there are two different aspects: first of all, and precisely, the confrontation for the use and availability of resources. On the other hand, it can also be noted how the struggle for the attainment of political power represents another aspect. In other words, the concept of ethnicity is used for aims other than those merely deriving from the common ancestry or culture.

If competition between different ethnic groups most of the times takes the form of a pacific living together, nevertheless uncertainty about the future may allow a

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2 First of all, even though two or more different ethnic groups inhabit the same area, "they may occupy clearly distinct niches in the natural environment, and be in minimal competition for resources" (Barth, 1969, 19). On the other hand, if they live in different and complementary territories, they may enter in competition for resources; consequently, politics along the border is in this case very important. Then, they may also symbiotically provide each other with what they reciprocally need: the niches they occupy are distinct, but complementary. In this case, there is space for different solutions and kinds of interdependence, as situations of competition might alternate with situations of co-operation.

3 Isaacs goes so far as to argue that the identity of the individual within the group is decided by chance, at a given moment and given place (that is, when and where the individual is born), according to the attributes that are shared with the other components of the community (Isaacs, 1975, 38-39).

4 This evolutionary stance probably allows a better understanding of such changes as the ones which took place in Yugoslavia, where, within a very short time, entire peoples shifted from pacific and cosmopolitan cohabitation to a violent interpretation of their ethnic origins.

distorted use of ethnicity and diversity as if they represented real fractures within the society. Lake and Rothchild cite Pesić, one of the leaders in the political opposition to Milošević: ethnic conflicts are about "fear of the future, lived through the past" (Lake, Rothchild, 1998, 7).

If contact is indispensable in order to draw the borders between different ethnic groups, it is precisely by means of contact that reasons of friction between different groups are created. Actually, there is no contradiction if it is stated that, on one hand, contact tends to reduce differences between groups and that, on the other, it offers the ground on which everybody wants to preserve these differences. In fact, if dissimilarities are reduced by means of homogenisation and assimilation, there may be the premises in order to resist these processes and to preserve one's own way of life and singularity (Forbes, 1997, 142-149).

THE VIOLENT DEATH OF YUGOSLAVIA: THE FUTURE PROJECTED ONTO THE PAST

What does "fear of the future, lived through the past" mean? Probably, this question holds a very large part of the 'solution' of the problem. Various components play their part in this context, as the fear to be assimilated by a hegemonic ethnic group or state may turn into a violent confrontation if this accompanies with the feeling that the physical survival of the group is in danger. Moreover, as the events which have taken place after the fall of Communism have clearly demonstrated, the decline of the central authority often implies a worsening of these trends (Lake, Rothchild, 1998, 8). Nevertheless, instead of a simple removal of protection, this may lead to different political projects promoting ethnic tensions.

What does represent the past which lives in the future in the ex-Yugoslavia? What kinds of phantoms have been revived during the wars which have bloodstained this land? In few lines, in the foreword to his work *Serbi, croati, sloveni* (Serbs, Croats, Slovenes), Pirjevec recalls this past, and depicts the complex drawing of a region where different cultures, ethnic groups, languages, religions, foreign dominations have overlapped and intermingled with no solution of continuity for more than two thousand years.

What was Yugoslavia? This country disappeared in 1991, and immediately it was realized how that area of the Balkans was characterized by an apparent conceptual void, something very difficult to fill in. The circumstances themselves which led in January 1929 to the coin of this new word, Yugoslavia, to label that which had been since 1918 simply the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, were turbulent and characterized by violence with an ethnic background. In fact, in June 1928, three deputies of the Croatian Peasant Party were

shot in parliament by a radical Montenegrin deputy. The crisis which derived from that allowed the king Aleksandar Karadjordjević to suspend the constitution, outlaw political parties, dismiss the National Assembly, and rename the Kingdom as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This seemed to be an extreme attempt to deny the frictions between the three principal ethnicities of the country (Prpa-Jovanović, 1997, 55).

Pirjevec's opinion seems therefore very authoritative: how could such a fiction, as that of a *Yugoslav* country, represent in the collective imaginary something able to substitute thousand of years of history? The author suggests that probably this solution was adopted because it was comfortable, because it was the shortest way to classify that "grey zone" extending just beyond the gates of Western civilization: *hic sunt leones*.

Actually, between Trieste and Thessaloniki, between the Adriatic Sea and the Hungarian *puszta*, there extends a region divided for centuries by different frontiers, as few others in the world. The Western and the Eastern Roman Empires had here their borders; the catholic and the orthodox churches the clearest clash of interests; Islam its avant-garde; the Turks, the Hapsburgs and Venice confronted here for their very survival other than for their mere glory. Furthermore, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationalisms provided the different ethnic groups with the will and the strength to fight in up to five wars, of which two were the World Wars.

A crossover of cultures and worlds, where the Yugoslav ideal started to be cultivated as a utopia in the nineteenth century, but came into reality in 1918. However, it was immediately clear how, within the new state, the making of a new national identity was not able to pass through the guardianship of the dominant ethnic group, the Serbian one, with no consequences. The Serbs were in fact prevailing on the Croats and Slovenes because both of their numeric consistency, and political and military influence.

The new state was therefore stained by this contradiction since its birth, and barely could the contrast between a North marked by the Central European civilization, and a South marked by the Levantine culture be masked until 1991; Vienna on one side, with Ljubljana and Zagreb in its orbit; Istanbul on the other, with Belgrade in its sphere of attraction (Pirjevec, 1995, 3-5).

Yugoslavia was therefore the representation of the divide that involved all the Slavs on continental scale: the dualism between Renaissance and Byzantinism, between Latin Europe and the Greek-orthodox one, that expressed through the distinction between Poles, Bohemians, Slovenes and Croats on one side, and Russians, Bulgarians and Serbs on the other one (Caccamo, 1991, 86).

The legend tells that, on the eve of the battle of Kosovo Polje, in the summer of 1389, a grey falcon was flying from Jerusalem to the campsite of the prince

Lazar, leader of Serbian armies;[5] in its beak it was carrying a skylark. Actually, the falcon was Saint Elias, and the skylark was a message sent from the Virgin Mary. Lazar had to choose: either the victory and the kingdom on earth, or the defeat by hand of the Turks and the heavenly glory. He considered the transience of the material things and chose, by means of sacrificing his life, to witness the redemption of Christ. That event, mantled in the fogs of the myth, characterizes the story of the Serbian people, and works as a watershed. It represents the regret for the destiny in this existence, but also the conviction that the Serbs will receive, as a reward for their sacrifice, the two kingdoms with the glory of an only victory.

Exactly 600 years later, on 28 June 1989, in the same place, Slobodan Milošević was speaking in front of the audience that had gathered to commemorate that battle, promising to the Serbs that nobody would have been allowed to beat them, and that the Islam would not have stepped further against them and the Christianity. In 1989-90, all the vestiges of the autonomy of that region, by now inhabited by an Albanian majority, were completely dismantled, thus completing the job started one year before. The same treatment was reserved to Vojvodina, the other autonomous region in Serbian territory, with a strong portion of Hungarian population (Denitch, 1994; Gallagher, 1997).

This historic resource shows the way politics in Yugoslavia was played on the past; more precisely, in Gallagher's words, "history became politics projected onto the past" (1997, 54), a past which was always recalled in order to justify and claim 'historic rights' from part of the various nationalities which formed Yugoslavia, especially by the Serbs and the Croats.

However, it is exactly this stress on the past, this dig up again the past, that demonstrates that, in reality, if Yugoslavia was doomed, it "did not die a natural death – it was murdered" (Denitch, 1994, 69).

Who are the murderers? One would immediately think of people such as Milošević or Tudjman. Undoubtedly, these two personalities are in the list; however, the latter is much longer and larger than one may think. Tito himself is in this list.

Both Denitch and Gallagher speak of manipulated ethnicities or nationalisms in Yugoslavia. By means of the symbolism of which Serbian and Croatian cultures are pervaded, it did seem that the clock which stopped to tick with the advent of Communism started again, and that the history of these peoples was again on its natural pattern: that of hatred and vengeance for past faults, and of a primordial dynamics unknown to the civilized people of Central and Western Europe.

That is completely false; without the manipulation of these tendencies, there would have never been such disastrous results. Serbs and Croats had been living together for centuries, and a certain kind of Yugoslav identity was turning into reality from the 1950s onward. The events of the Second World War, when Croatian fascist Ustaše massacred Serbian communities, and Serbian Četniks did the same to Croats and Muslims, cannot delete at least four hundred years of living in common. It has to be kept in mind that the Nazis had occupied the country, and the different alliances which formed also influenced the confrontation between the various ethnic groups. But this does not mean that what happened in those years was the rule. Rather, the aspect that marks that period was surely the common struggle against the occupants: Yugoslav freed themselves from the Nazis without the help of the Red Army.

Furthermore, in the Croatian Krajina, Croats and Serbs had represented for at least three centuries the extreme Christian rampart against the Turks. Intermarriages between people belonging to different ethnic groups (and therefore to different religions) were increasing, and so was the number of people who defined themselves as "Yugoslavs" in census (Denitch, 1994, 62-63; Gallagher, 1997, 50; Pirjevec, 1995, 120).

Nevertheless, this "Yugoslavism" seemed to be a void concept if compared to the Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, or Montenegrin identities. This trend in progress was brutally stopped by the outburst of the civil war in 1992, in the same regions where centuries of common living had made of cities such as Sarajevo an example of multiethnicity and the crossroads between Europe and Byzantium. How was this possible? Where did this sudden hatred derive from? Who created and fed it?

Was the Yugoslav nation really a void concept? Was this experiment of cohabitation actually doomed to failure? In fact, the collapse of Yugoslavia seems to suggest that the ethnic wars of the 1990s were rooted in precise historical reasons. Nevertheless, as Watchel (1998) indicates, this may be considered true for practically any nation. What happened in Yugoslavia after its breaking up should not be considered inevitable in the sense that represented something different from what took place in other "civilized" nations.

Even the predominance of the Serbian element inside the federation, in the end, could have developed according to another kind of dynamic: Serbia could have represented for Yugoslavia what the Parisian region represents for France, Prussia for Germany, Piedmont for Italy.

Watchel explicitly recalls D'Azeglio's words ("We have made Italy, now we must make Italians"), and the

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5   Of course, during the Middle Ages, most of the peoples who inhabited the Balkans had certainly no notion of their belonging to a nation rather than another. Terms as Serb, Croat, Slovene, Bosnian and so on are therefore used anachronistically (Watchel, 1998, 11).

differences and cleavages between the various Italian regions during the 1870s, as deep as those present in Yugoslavia a century later, to point out how that the process of nation building in Yugoslavia failed certainly not because the Yugoslavs were different from other people (Watchel, 1998, 16, 228).

Bringa quotes a phrase she often heard from her interviewees in the Bosnian village she visited in January 1993, Muslims and Croats alike: "We always lived together and got along well; what is happening now has been created by something stronger than us" (Bringa, 1995, 4).

The republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina was a Yugoslavia in miniature, with the most evident cases of intermingling of different people. Nevertheless, it also incarnated the biases on which ethnic manipulation reproduced and spread.

Considered as an artificial Tito's creation in order to solve the dispute between Croats and Serbs about the region, in reality this pattern of common living was best mirrored in Bosnian cities and towns, first of all Sarajevo, even defined by Karahasan "the centre of the world", a city carrying with itself whatever can be found west of India (1993).

If in the countryside the various communities did not experience as a rule intermarriages, nevertheless, people from different ethnic backgrounds lived door to door and also had close traditions of friendship. National origins played a second role respect to socio-economic considerations (Bringa, 1995, 4).

Ethnic manipulation reached its apex in the case of the Muslims of Bosnia, given the ambiguity the term "Muslim" could be used with. Not only did it designate a religious community, it also referred to a national entity, or *narod*. Therefore, the historical aspiration of both Croats and Serbs to parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina justified on this ambiguity, and relied on the negation of historical continuity to the Bosnian Muslim community.

Nationalist discourse in Bosnia made several effort to demonstrate, from the Croatian standpoint, that Bosnian Muslims were no other than former Catholic subsequently converted to Islam; on the other hand, the same was argued by Serbian observers, whereas the conversion was from the orthodox faith. Such a conversion was not considered as historically "authentic", as it interested those nobles who wanted to preserve their privileges after the Turkish conquest, or was forced following to the latter. To reinforce this argument it was also argued that all the converted were before members of the bogomil heretic sect, persecuted both by the orthodox

and the catholic churches, though especially by the latter.

The belief in this historical discontinuity of the Muslim *narod* offered the theorists of socialist Yugoslavia the hope that the new Yugoslav national identity would have decisively spread amongst the Muslims of Bosnia. Actually, if the number of Bosnians who declared themselves as Yugoslavs at the 1961 census was about 270,000 people on a population of more than 22 million, this number fell harshly at more then 40,000 at the 1971 census when the Muslims were recognized as a nation. Conversely, the number of those who declared themselves as Muslims increased sharply.[6]

Of course, the ultimate aim of the reliance on this kind of discourse was the denial of the Bosnian nationhood. Bosnia-Herzegovina was in fact an odd out in a federal system where all the republics were based on national elements. These features were identified by means of natural elements such as the common ancestry and a common history. There was therefore no place for a community whose supposed nationhood had to be justified on the base of ambiguous psychological identification, such as a shared environment or common cultures and feelings (Bringa, 1995).

According to Denitch "Tito must also share in the responsibility for the death of Yugoslavia" (Denitch, 1994, 63). Tepavac, on the other hand, is also convinced that the Yugoslav leader made some mistakes, but, according to him, "it was not Tito who murdered Yugoslavia. The murderers are among us" (Tepavac, 1997, 77).

Marshall Tito sincerely believed in a federal Yugoslavia. His Croatian and Slovenian origins did not prevent him from building a real federal structure, unknown during the 'first' Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, he was aware of the difficulties that this enterprise carried with it. He was especially aware of the different weight that, in the new unity, the Serbian or Croatian element could have compared to, say, the Slovenian or the Macedonian one (Tepavac, 1997, 65).

The homage paid to the Serbs by Tito can be represented also by the fact it was Belgrade, the Serbian capital, to be designated as Yugoslav capital instead of Sarajevo, the multicultural city by definition, perhaps provided with a federal district. Moreover, besides constituting more than one third of the Yugoslav population,[7] Serbs represented the pillar of the federation, and their role was similar to the one exercised by the Russians within the Soviet Union. Not only had they led the uprising against the Nazi invader, they also constituted the majority of the managerial class inside the army

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6 From 200,000 to more almost 850,000 in 1961 to almost 1,500,000 in 1971. Those declaring themselves as Yugoslavs were 1,200,000 million (5.4% of total population) at the 1981 census.

7 In 1981, the population of Yugoslavia was composed by: 36.3% of Serbs, 19.8% of Croats, 8.9% of Muslims (that is, Slavs who were Muslims and spoke Serbo-Croatian), 7.8% of Slovenes, 7.7% of Albanians, 6% of Macedonians, 5.4% of "Yugoslavs", 2.6% of Mo n-tenegrins, 1.9% of Hungarians (Denitch, 1996, 29).

(though the latter was multiethnic at its base), and the main element of the secret services and propaganda (Pirjevec, 1995, 57-58).

Most of the authors (among them Denitch and Tepavac), blame Tito for having ruled much too long, without equipping the federal state with a mechanism capable of facing the void of power that there would have been at the retirement of the Marshall from public life. In fact, in the early 1970s, a modification to the constitution stated that Josip Broz Tito would be President-for-life of Yugoslavia (Tepavac, 1997, 73). It was precisely during the early 1970s that new mistakes were added to previous ones.

Firstly, in Yugoslavia it happened what took place in other socialist countries as well, where the administrative and federal subdivision of the country followed the ethnic divides. This feature, added to the absence of a real pluralist and democratic representative system, emphasized the confrontation based on nationalities, so that national communist parties were considered as the genuine interpreters of the exigencies of the local populations. This also affected the confrontation for public resources, more and more conducted on the criteria of local and ethnical differentiations against the federal centre.

The prestige gained at an international level by Tito's Third World-oriented and non-aligned politics did not match with this lack of internal democracy. As a consequence, the sense of belonging to one's ethnic group acquired an ever-increasing role. The absence of voluntary organizations and movements confirmed the complete lack of any other sense of individual identification. The failure of the Yugoslav idea itself can be considered within this frame (Denitch, 1996).

The second mistake made by Tito was the clearing of the Croatian reformist movement in 1972. The crystallization of the Marshall's personal rule deprived the country of a generation of reformists who would have represented a serious and reliable alternative for the years to come. It might be seen in this 'purge' the beginning of the end for the federation, the prelude to the poor wreck of which it would have been victim only ten years after Tito's death (Denitch, 1994; Pirjevec, 1995).

Yugoslavia's last years were characterized by a crescendo of nationalist tension which inserted upon an already flawed structure. Yugoslavia, also because of its non-alignment and the consequent financial contributions from Western countries, especially the United States, experienced the highest standard of living among the socialist countries. Nevertheless, the distribution of wealth was very uneven, and the country was split between an advanced North and a South whose standard of living could be compared to Third World countries'. The average per capita national income in 1988 was 2,101 Yugoslav dinars. Slovenia displayed a value which was more than twice as much as the national

one, and more than eight times as much as Kosovo's. The same can be said concerning the illiteracy rate: in face of a federal mean value of 13.7%, the extreme values were again Slovenia's, with 1.4%, comparable to the most advanced Western countries' situations, and Kosovo's, with a huge 25.7% (Flere, 1992, 263).

The policy of economic development disadvantaged the Southern agricultural and raw material producing regions, whilst almost the entire modern industrial structure was allocated in the North. Furthermore, the products of the Southern regions were less priced on the market. The result was a gap between a developed North and an underdeveloped South, with Slovenia, Croatia and Vojvodina that more and more reluctantly transferred resources to Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Macedonia.

The process which led to the disastrous dismantling of Yugoslavia was injected by a series of causes. Of course, the local communist leaders, after Tito's disappearance, had no more material constraints. The unbalances had to be solved in the way that fitted the best with the national needs.

The situation started to fall to pieces precisely with Milošević's visit to Kosovo in 1987, and then again in 1989. Albanian's protests and northern republics' intolerances originated in Serbia an irrational fear of being encircled. Mass media, especially television, supported this process. Again, gloomy symbols and slogans from the past ("Serbia is wherever Serbian graves are"- Pirjevec, 1995, 119) united with the legend of the sacrifice of the Serbian people in order to witness of the celestial redemption. The myth of an ancestral Serbia was re-boosted by the publication of a book, *The Book of Milutin*, by Danko Popović, in 1985, which symbolized the story of Serbia in the life of a peasant from Šumadija. In the outburst of revolutions, wars and abuses, this peasant resisted, animated by his dignity and love for his land. In the same way, Serbia was decided to resist. After the celestial kingdom with Lazar's sacrifice, Serbia had now to conquer at any cost the terrestrial one. The struggle for its survival, once that the federal solution had disappeared, only went through the building of the Great Serbia; and, according to this theory, and in Milošević's aims, Serbia was wherever Serbs were dead. Krajina and Bosnia-Herzegovina were therefore Serbian territories, whilst Slovenia could also be considered not important from this point of view; in fact, in 1991, as soon as they had the chance, the Slovenes did not hesitate to leave the federation, after a symbolic attempt of the Yugoslav army to suffocate the initiative (Pirjevec, 1995, 119).

The destiny of Bosnia-Herzegovina was doomed also because of the similar sinister dynamic that the revival of the Croatian identity undergone after 1980. Furthermore, many intellectuals revived the theory according to which Bosnia-Herzegovina, the republic where the Yugoslav experiment was the most successful, was

nothing else than a Tito's invention in order to subtract that region from the Serbo-Croatian confrontation.

However, even the appearance of the Virgin Mary in 1981 in Medjugorije, a secluded village of Herzegovina, was interpreted as a divine sign of national catholic resurrection, both against the orthodox Serbian neighbour, and against the expanding Bosnian Islam.

The Croats were not able to reply with modern and effective methods to the Serbian "cemetery culture" (Pirjevec, 1995, 119) if the Serbs were digging up the past accusing the Croats of the slaughters committed by the Ustaše during the Second World War, the Croats started talking of 'historical rights'. The suitable spokesperson of this Croatian attitude was Franjo Tudjman, leader of the Democratic Alliance, which had a landslide victory on the communists in 1990 elections.

The problem of the Serbian minority in Krajina was not faced: what was worse, Tudjman also considered Croatian-inhabited areas in Bosnia-Herzegovina an integral part of Croatia. The project of a Great Serbia had been therefore faced by the project of a Great Croatia. If Milošević and Tudjman were harsh enemies about Krajina's destiny, they were aiming of dividing Bosnia-Herzegovina between them.

CONCLUSION

The case of Yugoslavia is symptomatic in order to prove the relativity and plasticity of the idea of ethnic identity. Such features are particularly marked in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where different conceptions of ethnicity and nation clashed one against the other with reference to Bosnian Muslims. In that case, the Croatian and Serbian standpoint opted for a historicist and, probably, primordialist solution. From that point of view, such a stance was the only one able to provide the nationalist discourse and the idea of ethnic identity with an objective value. On the other hand, the mouldable character of ethnicity and nation was more apparent in Muslim reasoning: the psychological element is here a crucial one, fundamentally involving the sense of identification of each single individual with a community. This aspect is very well represented by the fluctuations in the number of those declaring themselves as either Yugoslavs or Muslims in censuses during the years.

In this context, the pursuing of particular political interests was central. No wonder therefore if this relative character of ethnic affiliation has been exploited precisely by those who apparently were supporting a more objective idea of it. Manipulation of the concept of ethnicity by means of a gloomy and funereal use of a symbolism belonging to the past was therefore central in the feeding of ethnic hatred in Yugoslavia. The essay has tried to stress as much as possible on this feature, here considered as a central one for a correct explanation of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, it is evident how the role of different political personalities dramatically affected the lives of million of people; ethnicity on its own was not sufficient to stimulate and justify such atrocities and massacres; people of different habits, origins and religions had lived under the same roof for centuries. Something different had to intervene to turn themselves into merciless ethnic cleansers.

MANIPULACIJA S KONCEPTOM ETNIJE: ETNIČNI KONFLIKTI V NEKDANJI JUGOSLAVIJI

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POVZETEK

Pojem etnične identite ne more veljati kot zadosten za pojasnitev etničnih konfliktov. To je še en element, ki osvetljuje sorodstveni, relativni značaj etnije in potrebo po preučevanju drugih vidikov, če hočemo, da ga razumemo. Obravnavanje etničnih konfliktov v nekdanji Jugoslaviji v našem primeru razkriva, kako "raztegljiv" je pravzaprav koncept etnične identitete in hkrati "dovzeten" za manipulacijo v politične namene.

Prispevek se začenja s kratkim pregledom splošno sprejetih tolmačenj etničnih konfliktov, njihovo zavrnitvijo in poskusom, da se identificirajo druge ocene. Drugi del članka bo zatorej osredotočen na zavajajoči koncept etnije, ki ga je mogoče obravnavati z različnih gledišč, a ga ob upoštevanju njegovega sorodstvenega značaja ne moremo obravnavati kot pojem, ki je razumljiv sam po sebi. Razlogi za požar, ki je izbrisal Jugoslavijo, so zatorej obravnavani z zgodovinskega stališča, s posebnim poudarkom na obdobju po drugi svetovni vojni, in sicer v poskusu ugotoviti, zakaj takšne tragedije ni mogoče pojasniti zgolj s pripadnostjo ljudi različnim etničnim skupinam. Za slednje so potrebne natančne politične in družbene razmere, da postanejo tako pomembne.

Ključne besede: etnija, etnična identiteta, etnični konflikti, etnična manipulacija, nacionalizem, Jugoslavija, Bosna in Hercegovina, Srbi, Hrvati, Bošnjaki

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