

From Producers of “Cognizant Publics” to Apolitical Experts? Analysing the Media Engagements of Scientists in Post-Socialist Serbia

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This article explores ethnographically the various media engagements of astrophysics researchers in Belgrade, Serbia. At one extreme, I explore engagements whose primary objectives include engaging with and enlisting a “public” and a new generation of scientists. At the other extreme, I explore engagements which took the form of polemical discussions concerning complex social and political issues. I interpret these as connected as much with power struggles within existing groupings of academics as in trying to enlist a public. I finally bring these different strands together through Verdery’s concept of “cognizant publics” and the idea of a “scientific expert”.

Key words:

ethnography, science, post-socialism, Serbia, media

INTRODUCTION

There already exists a substantial literature concerning the categories of “intellectual and cultural elites”, including the status and roles of those who identified as such during the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

(hereafter SFRY) and after.¹ Much of this literature however, focuses on the arts and humanities, with a warranted focus on the lives and politicking of advocates of nationalisms and antinationalisms. Whilst important work has been done analysing the political roles of disciplines which are marginally scientific – such as linguistics (cf. Kordić 2010) – the work and roles of “hard” scientists have been somewhat less considered in the historical and anthropological literature, perhaps due to the conventional wisdom that science is above and outside of political processes; a view which has been thoroughly critiqued by anthropologists and sociologists of science.² Nevertheless, as a category of worker with a certain amount of cultural authority – several scientists were centrally implicated in political decision-making during the recent wars – an exploration of the ways in which scientists negotiated cultural authority, symbolic power and public status during and after the dissolution of the SFRY warrants review. This paper provides a perspective on these issues in a specific, ethnographic way, through charting the various media engagements of a group of scientists – chiefly astrophysicists – alongside whom I worked at the Belgrade Astronomical Observatory (hereafter “the observatory”).³ In the first section I discuss the methodology and researcher self-positioning, before moving to cover the ethnographic material.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCHER SELF-POSITIONING

I completed a year of ethnographic fieldwork at the observatory in 2008–2009. The fieldwork had a scattered dynamic, reflected in the following ethnographic observations, as I was unable to spend a large amount of time with scientists, due to their busy and unpredictable schedules as research professionals. This is a challenge which sometimes presents itself when “studying up” (Nader 1972). At the start, the semi-structured interviews I conducted took up a portion of time, yet I was able to socialise with them relatively little outside of the interview context. As it wasn’t always possible to spend large amounts of time with such researchers, I focused on linguistic and “cultural” immersion, learning a great deal through discussions with

¹ For example, see Dević 1998; Dragović-Soso 2002; Kaplan 2003; Miller 2007.

² See for example Barnes et al. 1996; Bloor 1991; Haraway 1988; Jasanoff et al. 2002; Martin 1998.

³ At <http://www.aob.rs/old/index.html> (accessed 3 January 2013).

colleagues and science students, and attending anthropology seminars at the University of Belgrade. My approach to the ethnographic description is therefore to complement the limited material concerning time spent with scientists with a deeper understanding of the broader socio-political context gained through "immersion".

My status and certain aspects of my history also shaped my approach to fieldwork. I am a male, queer identified researcher who has grown up in a middle class, predominantly white suburban background in the UK (a state which makes liberal democratic claims), who was single when commencing fieldwork. I have a history of UK institutional academic involvement, with an undergraduate background in mathematics and postgraduate background in the history and anthropology of science. I also have a history of leftist political activist involvement in Manchester, which has an infamously large left-wing activist scene, often working on campaigns with queer activists, revolutionary socialists, anarchists and social democrats. Through the ethnography, where appropriate, I discuss the implications of my positioning, for as May argued:

To be reflexive in the final twist entails an assault upon studies of the social world through seeking to expose the partiality of accounts in terms of their restriction not only to time and place, but also the biography of authors. (1999: 2.18)

Such a discussion will thus help to better highlight the limitations of this study and contextualise its social relations of production, so as not to appear to be, as Haraway (1988) described, a "view from nowhere".

A further point of relevance concerning the media engagements is my status as an academic "guest" amongst scientists, many of whom held positions of great authority; some had publishing contracts with and an academic history of studying at world famous universities such as Oxford University and Harvard. As Forsythe commented regarding studying up in anthropological studies of techno-science:

Much concern has been devoted to the privilege accorded the anthropological voice and the difficulty of letting informants' voices be heard. Anthropologists who critique powerful people tend to encounter the opposite problem. Our informants have voices, and generally have no difficulty being heard. This is of course especially true of scientists and doctors. (1999: 8)

My “informants” often had strong opinions and views, not only concerning their disciplinary interests. This is precisely the reason why I found their media engagements to be of anthropological interest, in exposing particular power relations relating to changing ideologies of the sciences, which I will now explore in more depth through the ethnography.

ENLISTING AND ENGAGING PUBLIC(S)

One cold January morning, a television crew arrived at the observatory. They had come to film a short documentary about the observatory, as the International Year of Astronomy⁴ had just begun. When they arrived, a female presenter and two or three cameramen visited the library before exploring the building and venturing outside. A handful of us ventured out with the crew in the snow, including a professor who often presented school students with a history of the observatory when class visits from nearby schools took place. The professor talked a little bit about the importance of the International Year of Astronomy which had just commenced at that point. We then moved inside the vast cylindrical buildings to view and film the older telescopes. The air was cold and moist; damp was visible on some of the walls, yet it was also slightly magical to be in a cold building with steep white walls whilst it was cold and snowing outside. The crew filmed inside the buildings of two large telescopes – each housed in a separate building on the observatory site – before chatting with the professors. We then moved back to the library. At this point Professor Marić, who lives on site, came and gave a presentation for the camera, in which she spoke in a scripted way about the individual qualities and achievements of the various “founding fathers” of the observatory. Finally, I was asked to talk in brief about my research, which took me by surprise as I had only recently arrived and therefore didn’t feel I had much to contribute. The team were warm and friendly and we had a coffee afterwards before they set on their way. The main output of the visit was a short piece for national television in Serbia, informing the public about the International Year of Astronomy and “showcasing” the history of the observatory. The television format did not involve active public engagement, unlike several other events which I attended – school visits, open days and *Festival nauke* (The Festival of

⁴ At <http://www.astronomy2009.org/> (accessed 16 October 2012).

Science), which I will now discuss briefly.

School visits to the observatory occurred on a fairly regular basis. One professor would show the children and teachers round the observatory, talk about the founders of and history of the observatory, asking the students questions to test their knowledge. Despite regularly receiving phone calls from interested members of the public who wished to visit, the observatory ran no open days to my knowledge at that time and was generally (officially) closed to the public, although in principle there was nothing to stop people from walking up and entering the observatory building.⁵ However, open days *did* take place at the amateur observatory mentioned in the introduction – *Narodna opservatorija* (People’s Observatory) – located in Kalemegdan fortress in the centre of Belgrade by the river.⁶

The school visits and People’s Observatory contrasted somewhat with the final active public engagement I will discuss in this category – the science festival, *Festival nauke*. This festival is a relatively new initiative, having first taken place in Belgrade in December 2007. The festival is supported by a wide range of scientific institutions including the observatory. Additionally, a quick glance at the *Festival nauke* website under the section *prijatelji* (friends) includes a long list of corporate sponsors, a fact which was also visible in the displays of various stands I encountered at the festival. A quick search on the internet also revealed similar events taking place in Zagreb (*Festival znanosti*) and in other locations all over Europe. I attended the second festival which took place in December 2008, on the invitation of Professor Aleksić. It was held in an exhibition space in Tito’s former palace in Dedinje, a short bus ride from city centre Belgrade. I met Professor Aleksić outside and we walked past some large statues from the socialist era, which he described as “monuments to a dead religion”. We then walked towards the building located on a hill. The festival was a bright buzz from outside, caught amongst large queues of people and lots of brightly coloured logos and adverts, with copies of a local newspaper *24 sata* being distributed alongside helium balloons. The crowd struck me as smartly dressed, and there were fewer children present than I expected in the queues. From the hill where the entrance lay, the shimmering haze of the city was available for all to enjoy. As we walked inside, we passed security guards on one side. All around I saw volunteers wearing white labcoats. The first association I made when I entered was with physics as we passed a papier maché

⁵ This has now changed with the opening of a museum section installed on site.

⁶ At <http://adrb.org/index.php?lang=sl&page=observatory> (accessed 3 January 2013).

display of an Einstein-like figure. A volunteer was handing out special editions of *Time* magazine, all in Serbian, dedicated to the festival, on the left-hand side as we entered. Opposite lay an advertising stand offering free snacks alongside another display about the importance of recycling. Ahead lay stairs which led up to the various exhibits. Inside the exhibit space, there were several rooms, each composed of a space with boards on which information was written about various topics of interest. Almost all the text was in Serbian, and used the Latin script. Some boards consisted of images, for example of technological gadgetry. In front of several of the boards, which were themed around particular disciplines (for example, there was an astronomy section) there were "hands on" tasks with which the attendees could engage. Overseeing these tasks were volunteers. From what I gathered through chatting with them, these were people who work at institutes which collaborate with the festival, or simply people who have a strong interest in science. These volunteers talked to visitors and guided them, where necessary, through the interactive tasks. Several of the exhibits related to themes of particular local importance. For instance, there was an exhibit surrounding Tito's role in NASA and the USA, and there was a genetic map of Europe, where the migration routes of different "ethnic" groups over time was mapped out. Many of the university faculties, such as Agriculture, also had sections. Some areas, however, were not connected with a university faculty or institutions. One display which struck me as particularly strange consisted simply of loud house music being played with equations flashing in different colours on the wall. Towards the end of my visit to the festival, I found the astronomy space, which was concealed in a chamber with stars projected on the ceilings and walls, information available about them. In the astronomy section I recognised a colleague, Marina, who I knew through a friend from university who suggested I go for a coffee with her upon my mentioning that I was focused on astronomy and astrophysics. Marina guided me through the exhibit and we chatted a little about the festival, before I found Professor Aleksić again and left to have a coffee before returning home.

ENROLLING PUBLICS

The television show and school visits principally concerned transmitting both ideas and information about the history of the observatory and a regional tradition in astronomy and astrophysics to a wider audience principally in Serbia. In so doing, they provided a “public” with information about a universal-scientific order of things on the basis of knowledge gleaned through global networks of knowledge as well as the observatory’s own research activities. At the same time, they helped to constitute an audience as a “public” in a particular kind of way. Whilst I do not always consider the phrase “the Public” an example of “flagging the homeland daily” in the sense of a national grouping (Billig 1995: 93), it very often does take the boundaries of “the people” (*narod*) understood in the political sense as the body politic over which a particular state rules. In an important sense then, the concept of “the Public” is a reflection of the organising principles which attempt to maintain a modernist, political status quo. Besides the role of enlisting publics, several other interesting questions emerged. Why was I asked to give an interview? From where did *Festival nauke* receive funding and how were the natural sciences promoted differently there? What was the political context to the anti-communist comments Aleksić made and repeated on several occasions in my presence? Let me now consider these questions in turn.

As regards the interview, I contend that my academic capital was a key factor defining me as “of interest” in certain media engagements. Indeed, the significant media presence of many scientists in Belgrade relates to a particular role assigned to intellectuals as “humanist figures” who, due to their extensive education and disciplining, have a social authority through which they speak about topics of wider “public” interest. The Belgrade-based anthropologist Miloš Milenković described a post-socialist process associated with a decrease in authority of such figures in strong words:

An even more baneful trend has been initiated in the name of democratic consolidation – the removal of humanist intellectuals from the public eye, replaced by political analysts and economic experts. (Milenković 2009: 39)

Despite the decrease in authority which Milenković reported, I contend that such a role still existed when I was conducting fieldwork and conjecture that it relates to the socialist legacy with its enlightenment claims and emphasis placed on education and learning. Besides my academic capital,

I suggest that I was asked to present my project on radio and television as it was relatively unusual at that time for an "outsider" to conduct an anthropological study amongst an elite group in Belgrade, to have learnt the language and so forth in a context in which there was still considerable international isolation due to the recent sanctions.

From where did *Festival nauke* receive funding and how were the natural sciences promoted differently there? At the festival there were very few background/historical details concerning the observatory offered in the displays, which were more hands on and practical and used very bright colours. Volunteers were on hand to play an expert role. In contrast, the television show was much more heavily focused on showcasing the observatory and spreading details concerning its history and contribution. This was also the case for the school visits, although there was also a strong element of enlisting a new generation and satisfying public interest on these visits. These differences related to regional and international policy making trends – for instance the International Year of Astronomy was coordinated on an international level by UNESCO and the International Astronomical Union (IAU).⁷

Festival nauke was the most heavily influenced by these policy "innovations". To give one example, the science fair encouraged active user participation, echoing recent trends in Western Europe concerning desired relationships between scientists and science advocates and the public. As Davies observed, there has been a move away from what is termed a "deficit model" prominent in the UK and Western Europe to a "participation model" (Bell, Davies and Mellor 2008: 15–37). The deficit model, at its height from the mid-eighties till the end of the nineties, argued that the Public were deficient in their knowledge of science and thus needed to be educated. The participation model, following the UK House of Lords' (2000) recommendations,⁸ focused on getting the public more actively interested and involved in scientific policy and debate. This is connected with the need to justify large amounts of state spending in science, in a context where transparency has come to be promoted as desirable as a result of what Strathern (2000) refers to as "audit cultures". On the transparency model, tacit public approval is necessary to make expenditure accountable, and

⁷ At <http://www.astronomy2009.org/general/> (accessed 6 January 2013).

⁸ At <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199900/ldselect/ldsctech/38/3808.htm> (accessed on 12 March 2012).

so positive images of science and public participation have been heavily promoted.

The policy drives for public participation and the liberal cosmopolitan imagery associated with *Festival nauke* were not visible in the other public engagements described, however. I never once throughout my fieldwork heard the phrases “measuring impact” or “need for public participation” mentioned in relation to media engagements – only once did I hear the term “impact” mentioned with reference to an increased emphasis on the ranking of journals. It was rather in 2010 that a centre – the *Centre for the Promotion of Science* – was opened in Belgrade with an explicit focus on popularising science amongst the public.⁹ To my knowledge, at that point there were no technologies in place for measuring and promoting media impact and popular writing about science. Some professors had topics that were intrinsically more media-friendly – such as one professor’s cosmological work investigating conditions of planets that might be suitable for extra-terrestrial life.¹⁰ Lectures on such topics were therefore fairly regularly organised, both at institutes in the city centre, such as the Serbian Academy of Sciences, and at planetariums such as that in Kalemegdan. The view that public participation drives tended to promote was one of scientists playing a public role as being an expert who describes the background to the particular topics they work on. Differences in opinion are often brushed under the carpet, only discussed when scientists meet for panel discussions with other individuals, such as politicians and environmental activists, who have other concerns. As Edkins commented,

[...] in Anglo-American culture at least the intellectual is often synonymous with the “expert”: someone who has technical expertise and whose expert knowledge can be called upon to replace a political decision. Often if “experts” can be said to agree, political debate is closed down or even pre-empted. (2005: 65)

This “expert” role resonated more closely with the format of the science fair, where exhibits were divided into sections on the basis of discipline, and students and researchers were on hand to answer specialist questions and discuss concepts being exhibited in the displays and experiments. On

⁹ At <http://www.cpn.rs/o-centru/?lang=en> (accessed 6 January 2013).

¹⁰ I have not used the pseudonym here as it would reveal his identity.

this view, scientists are understood as isolated individuals having opinions only about their subject matter. This was not the case with the scientists alongside whom I worked, however.

Nevertheless, despite the model promoted at *Festival nauke*, the economic context in post-socialist Serbia differed from the context in Western Europe where such policy "innovations" were designed. The dominant "public" discourse I came across was that public expenditure on scientific research was not and should not be a priority. Investment in science was sometimes depicted as a "luxury" or even as a decadent waste of money imposed on Serbia by the West, primarily to the benefit of the "West", according to more extreme commentators utilising "dependency theory" arguments.¹¹ Indeed, in comparison to states in other regions of Europe, funding was small as a percentage of GDP and this created some resentment amongst scientists.¹² However, from the scientists' perspective, I found that they wanted to make such investment an increased priority. Many scientists would often draw comparisons with the resources available in other states, particularly in Western Europe and the USA and on the basis of that, lobby the government to increase investment in the natural sciences. From the perspective of many social scientists however, I often found that they felt the natural sciences were already incredibly privileged compared to the funding they received and that the natural sciences were often supported for ideological reasons. This was particularly acute as some of the astrophysicists with whom I worked associated the social sciences with Marxism and the SFRY and were keen to dismiss or ridicule them as not worth investing in. This leads us on to the final question, concerning the political context to the anti-communist comments Aleksić made and repeated on several occasions in my presence. In order to answer this question more fully, I first turn to consider more politicised media encounters.

¹¹ For a discussion of the connections between anti-science rhetoric and disappointment with modernity, see Perović 2000.

¹² The latest figures for Serbia (2010) show a tailing off of science expenditure as a percentage of GDP to 0.3%, accompanied with an optimistic announcement that Research and Development (R & D) will now be prioritised with the goal of reaching 2% within a decade. To put those figures in context at present Japan invests over 3%, the USA around 2.5%, while the EU average is less than 2%. At <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/GB.XPD.RSDV.GD.Z> (accessed 8 November 2011).

MORE POLITICISED ENGAGEMENTS

It became clear to me that several of the researchers discussed topics that went far beyond their disciplinary expertise, sometimes engaging in polemics with other scientists.¹³ For example, shortly after arriving in Belgrade, Professor Aleksić also invited me to participate with him on a radio show which he regularly hosts, on which he relates his work and other astronomy related themes to the general public. The radio studio was in Vračar, an upmarket area of Belgrade, where some of the former Communist elite used to live. The studio was small and inconspicuous. We arrived a little earlier, and had a coffee with the owners who came across as hippies. I was a little nervous as I sat and waited to begin, having had little experience of speaking live to a public at that point. The discussion we had on air was very informal and was focused partly around my project and partly around an issue in science and technology studies known as the science wars. Professor Aleksić used the opportunity to have a discussion about the science wars, in which he wished to make clear his anti-postmodernist viewpoint, with which I broadly agreed.¹⁴ Throughout the discussion, I felt as if I was being encouraged to engage in a friendly polemic, and that some of the central concerns of Anglo-American humanities were being simplified and ridiculed from a liberal humanist position. In any case, the tone of the radio show was pleasant, and I felt as if I had been treated as an academic guest from Western Europe who was treated as a colleague and worthy of a “gentlemanly” academic “duel” (*dvoboj*). The show ended with a light-hearted comment I was often asked several times each day both in Belgrade and Zagreb given I identified as from Manchester – “so do you support (Manchester) United or City?”¹⁵

Besides such public duelling on the radio and television between scientists and academics, polemical forms often emerged in online discussions, such as blog debates. Shortly before arriving in Belgrade, a close academic colleague of mine directed me to a blog which one professor had on the media website B92. This professor, and a number of others, had regular blogs on this media site and others such as Peščanik,¹⁶ which were

¹³ An example in Croatia is the Vinković-Paar dispute (“Pogledajte veliku debatu...” 2010).

¹⁴ For an overview of the science wars see Jardine and Frasca-Spada 1997.

¹⁵ A colleague from Manchester was so used to this question, he would introduce himself as “I’m from Manchester, and I don’t like football”.

¹⁶ At <http://www.b92.rs/> and <http://pescanik.net/> (accessed 31 October 2011).

crucial outlets for the Milošević opposition during the nineties.

One particular blog discussion of interest concerned the arrest in late July 2008 of a famous fugitive politician, Radovan Karadžić, who was charged with genocide at the International Tribunal for Crimes in the Former Yugoslavia.¹⁷ To many people's surprise, he had been living for several years in Belgrade, the capital of the former Yugoslavia and present day Serbia. Furthermore, he had been making a living for himself in hiding as an alternative medicine practitioner under the alias *Dr Dragan Dabić*. He claimed to use a technique harnessing the power of what he termed "human quantum energy" – a suspicious claim to anyone with a basic training in the natural sciences: "We are energetic beings", the Serbian-language site begins. "Numerous energetic processes in us, on which all the functions of our body are dependent, are caused by the energy of the higher source (cosmic energy, prana, mana, organic energy, quantum energy, the Holy Spirit). They flow in us and around us and they are our highest good and the source of health and our wellbeing" (Walker and Hecimovic 2008). It was this set of events that provoked the following polemical blog response:

Not denying the ancient local saying that "there is a grain of truth in every pit of lies", and that quasi-scientists sometimes do come across serious yet previously incomprehensible "boundary phenomena", it seems absolutely clear that one ought not dare to give up the fight against these anti-enlightenment and anti-rationalist phenomena which prey on the ill and trouble naïve and inadequately educated people. Furthermore, education is absolutely our biggest problem. The most likely doctored statistics published at the end of last year in the very servile service of [prime minister] Vojislav Koštunica demonstrated that the situation is alarming with more than 15% of citizens illiterate and more than 40% not having finished primary school. It isn't surprising that Dr Dabić has his hands full with work. (translated by A. H.)¹⁸

Karadžić's imprecise use of the term "quantum" is likely to have enflamed the professor's response, in his denunciation of people whom he described as "quasi-scientists". Furthermore, Dr Dabić used the prefix "Dr", which implied he had an academic qualification and a claim to both status and

¹⁷ Radovan Karadžić, president of the Bosnian Serb SDS (Srpska Demokratska Stranka), whose party's troops were responsible for the facilitation of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia.

¹⁸ This text is available online, but I have not given the reference to protect anonymity.

expert knowledge.¹⁹ His use of the prefix “doctor” took on a particular salience as academic qualifications commanded an immense respect, and scientific literacy in the post-Yugoslav states was low at the time of fieldwork, and is still so today, according to some other scientists with whom I spoke. On their view, politicians were at least partly culpable for this lack and for the growth in popularity of what they termed “pseudoscientific” goods, knowledge and remedies. Consequently, some scientists, including the above, had little empathy with many politicians and particularly those with strong religious views and connections to the Church.²⁰ Karadžić’s role as both a politician with strong religious views and a life in hiding as a peddler of New Age cures thus expressed the problem of the existence of fraudulent political and religious elites, at least partly in power due to the lack of education, including scientific illiteracy.

The blog and the radio show served other purposes although they typically helped to construct an audience and public as well, as earlier mentioned. The radio show consisted of a more in-depth discussion concerning issues in the sociology and philosophy of science, but rather than being concerned with the simple transmission of knowledge, it took on a duel-like component in places designed to challenge the listeners, albeit in a fairly controlled manner. The choice of topic spoke to academic issues in Anglo-American culture; it was an academic topic choice that neither engaged with questions of the social production of knowledge nor the local context. This, I suggest, related to the political positioning and US-based training of the astrophysicist with whom I featured on the radio show – other professors at the observatory quizzed me about the ethical implications of the project and contested the interest of a university in the UK funding such a project.

What was even more interesting about the blog was that besides having a polemic streak, it concerned a topic completely out of the orbit of astronomy and astrophysics – although it was still concerned with processes that influenced scientists’ work, such as education. This suggested that scientific commentators had a certain amount of licence to discuss political and cultural topics about which they had likely had no formal academic training, yet as we have seen, strong opinions. Despite the earlier mentioned

¹⁹ Karadžić was a graduate student of psychiatry. However his alias certainly did not have a qualification in “human quantum energy”.

²⁰ In Serbia, the Church refers to the Serbian Orthodox Church, whilst for Croatia, the Catholic Church.

grumbling on the part of many scientists that the natural sciences were undervalued and chronically underfunded in Serbia and Croatia, in my experience, science had a large amount of intellectual authority in the region when compared to the humanities, in a trend indicative of cultural hierarchies between disciplines in the Anglo-American academic world.

The involvement of several professors in political programs and institutions, including members of Milošević's cabinet and the intellectual opposition, meant that public outlets such as blogs and news columns drew extensive criticism and counter-polemics, particularly during the crisis period when there was so much at stake. I found that debates over general social themes amongst intellectual elites, which for the purposes of this analysis referred to employed academics, were commonplace. This resonated with Dragović-Soso's observations in her study of intellectual elites and political opposition in Serbia. She noted that:

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the absence of a large educated class in Serbia ensured that political authorities often recruited intellectuals for a variety of duties, sometimes as state bureaucrats and administrators, sometimes as the ideological vanguard (or at least as the providers of an authoritative endorsement) of state policy. Along with this tradition of reliance on and cooperation with the state, there was another tradition: that of intellectuals acting as critics of the political powers and their actions. The first half of the twentieth century in particular saw the rise of a fledgling class of – perhaps not "free-floating" – but certainly independent minded intellectuals as a separate voice on the public scene. (Dragović-Soso 2002: 170)²¹

Professor Aleksić's comments, and the invitation to public debate surrounding complex academic topics on the radio show can thus be seen as part of a long-standing tradition in the region concerning the actions of intellectuals, and during the nineties, of the existence of opposition to Milošević's government. As Dević commented:

The fact that many younger social scientists, philosophers and writers participated in the antiwar protest movements in 1991–1992 illuminates the differences in the cultural, professional and political ethos between the established and the 'free-floating' intellectuals. The generational explanation of differences between attitudes toward the post-communist future of

²¹ See also Dragović-Soso 2002: 186.

Yugoslavia can shed some light on the diversity of cultures that existed in the now deceased Yugoslavia. Some of them produced the rival and ruthless political elites; the producers of parochial academic knowledge and literature were their closest neighbours. The all-Yugoslav communication space, inhabited by a growing army of highly educated, semi-employed and free-lance intellectuals who benefited from the egalitarianism of the Yugoslav economic and political system but did not have a stake in defending its elites, developed alongside. (1998: 402)

PRODUCING “COGNIZANT PUBLICS”

One of the key aims of engagements such as the blog is the formation, not simply of publics, but of what Verdery has referred to as “cognizant publics” (1995: 144). In her research analysing the politics of the national idea under socialism in Romania, Verdery offered an analysis of intellectual elites and their relationships with one another, the Party and publics in the vein of Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1986), which she argues isn’t appropriate to (purported) socialist contexts, where the concepts of cultural *capital* and symbolic *markets* are not appropriate (Verdery 1995: 5). She argues that the central issue rather concerns promoting and defending particular regimes of value, which govern access to cultural authority and power, which take place in an ideologised context influenced by the privilege of those close to the communist party. She argues that:

To make a successful claim to status as a bearer of cultural authority requires that this authority be acknowledged by others (Bourdieu 1986: 730–731), who recognize both that it is of value and that they themselves have less of it. Therefore, part of forming and reproducing elite groups is the formation of a unified field, which includes persons of “low” culture who will recognize the superior claims of those possessing “high” culture. (ibid.: 143)

She then argues that such elites maintain their status through engaging with a public that “is sufficiently literate both to value this dimension and to acknowledge its own deficiency thereon”. She names such publics “cognizant publics”:

A major means of forming a cognizant public is the “civilizing” mission some elites launch with their inner “primitives”, whom they seek to illuminate with

learning that will dispel the mists of darkness. Civilizing missions have been brought to colonial peoples by agents of imperial powers – the rhetoric of English imperialism is a fine example – and also by would-be national elites, civilizing the “backward” peasants of their own territories [...] some people appropriated Marxist terms of a different sort. They claimed, for example, to uphold “rationalism”, a quality of the enlightened thought of which Marxism is the apogee, and to oppose “irrationalism and mysticism”, cardinal sins in the official Marxist analysis of fascism and rightist currents in earlier times. (ibid.: 144)

Whilst the SFRY self-management system differed significantly from the Soviet model implemented in Romania, the existence of a party elite and a highly politicised public sphere meant that certain similarities existed, and the description above suggests that when I conducted fieldwork, this sphere remained highly politicised. This would further suggest that certain figures such as Professor Aleksić wielded a degree of politicised cultural authority and public voice on wider social topics and furthermore, that whilst the Communist Party as an ideological body was now defunct, many of those who held positions of power in it continued to wield power over access to resources; there was no “free market” in scientific ideas. The frequent political comments I came across in other contexts, such as Professor Aleksić’s description of the statues outside Tito’s palace as “monuments to a dead religion” and the time the secretary at the People’s Observatory took to discuss the political engagements of various professors is also testament to this. In a politicised public domain in which resources were relatively scarce, polemics such as the blog helped scientists to identify political allies, and to reinforce boundaries with identified enemies, activities crucial in the competitive struggle for resources. When I was conducting fieldwork such resources depended largely on government funds, and therefore on party affiliation and membership; a situation which has now somewhat changed due to the increased availability of FP7 project funds. The relatively small amounts of government expenditure on science suggest that the politicking which Verdery described, and in the framework of which we can interpret interventions such as the blog, has continued relevance and importance.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have discussed several media engagements in which scientists from the observatory engaged, detailing their different purposes and intentions. When conducting fieldwork, in 2008–2009, I did not come across a sense of directed forward movement characteristic of capitalist and/or socialist modernity. I suggest, on the basis of the arguments made here, that this is due to the mixing of various political models and organising principles. The media engagements of scientists could not be easily positioned inside the frameworks posed by analysts of socialist or capitalist societies and that such feelings of a lack of “progress” were further exacerbated by the nascent context of the growing European financial crisis. Whilst the consequences of this lack of political consensus were not all positive, they perhaps helped to create a feeling of increased possibilities – certainly in political activist circles – of different future directions in which social processes might unfold, which made polemics and encounters between advocates of different possible directions all the more passionate.

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