DELEGITIMIZING MULTICULTURALISM:
The Role of Cultural Elites in Ethnic Conflict[1]

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During the wars of Yugoslav succession, nationalists on all sides maintained that it was impossible for different national groups to live together in harmony in a democratic society. They spoke of "age-old hatreds," pointing to an historical landscape littered with international conflicts, civil wars, rebellions, or individual acts of violence between the region's national and ethnic groups. Moreover, after a decade of continuous confrontation between former Yugoslavia's constituent nationalities, an increasing number of foreign observers are inclined to agree. After all, the "democratization" process has been attended by the abrupt, acrimonious, and sometimes violent dissolution of multiethnic societies throughout the formerly Communist eastern half of Europe. Thus, one of the first consequences of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the USSR was the secession of the three Baltic states, a step followed by all of the once vaunted Soviet empire's constituent republics. The "democratic process" certainly played a role in these events. As a rule, populist politicians quickly exploited the post-Communist world's first "free elections" to marshal the power of those national groups which constituted a majority of their countries' voters. In central Europe, the seemingly inevitable result was Czechoslovakia's velvet divorce and Yugoslavia's bloody dissolution. To the dismay of the international community, postwar "free" elections in Bosnia-Hercegovina and Kosovo

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have reaffirmed and formalized the process of ethnic disaggregation. If they remain discrete political entities, it is only because the creation of hastily constructed, but officially sanctified, international protectorates. Even in ostensibly sovereign countries like Bulgaria, Romania, and especially Macedonia, national political leaders are quietly induced to adopt multicultural policies by being given access to foreign loans and the promise of integration into NATO and the EU. Needless to say, these realities have emboldened the fatalism of those nationalist scholars and politicians who argue that multicultural societies can only survive within an authoritarian political system.

In reality, democratic, multiethnic states can be made viable, but only if their political and cultural elites learn from the reasonably successful experiences of those past and contemporary societies – including their own – that have proven the efficacy of multiethnic coexistence. This can, however, only be achieved by applying more balanced and sophisticated understanding both of their own history and of democracy itself. Indeed, only by incorporating the nuances in their nation's historical narrative and adopting a more multifaceted blueprint for democratization can the peoples of the former Yugoslavia prevent the negativism of nationalist elites from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Admittedly, such optimism is justified less from the study of the contemporary Balkans than from the rather different perspective of an historian, particularly one familiar with the multiethnic societies of the Habsburg monarchy. By analyzing the dynamics of the interethnic relations within the monarchy (and a select number of today's democracies) we can ascertain both a "positive history" that justifies our confidence at the same time as it warns us of the potential for intensifying conflict that attends the democratization process in mutliethnic polities.

To a great extent, any judgment of the viability of multiethnic democracies hinges on a series of definitions that need to be clearly understood.

1. Above all, we need to recognize that evaluating the *success* or *failure* of any government is a highly subjective process. Since all human institutions sustain at least some degree of injustice, it is possible to condemn any regime by focusing solely on its shortcomings, while minimizing or overlooking its achievements altogether. Hence the need to adopt a strictly utilitarian approach that judges "success" or "failure" only after weighing and comparing the sum total of positive and negative consequences of multiethnic coexistence within a particular democratic system.

2. Whether the scales tip in one direction or another also depends on how we define *oppression*, a term that has served as a catch-all for describing the suffering of those ethnic minorities whose lot it has been to coexist with other, dominant groups. This is no easy task. There are different degrees of oppression that can range from cultural insensitivity and the mere perception of discrimination or "second-class" status, to blatantly unequal access to education, jobs, public services, voting, and the protection of law. Nor is "oppression" merely something tangible, like a regime of policies and statutes, but can also be a state of mind governed by perceptions and paranoia that are simply beyond precise calculation. Despite such impon-

derables, it is useful to articulate the level and approximate the weight of "oppression" so that it can be compared against the positive attributes of multiethnic coexistence.

3. Indeed, the very term *multiethnicity* demands more precise definition, since the prospects for successful, democratic coexistence vary according to the actual mix between different ethnic groups. In this vein, I would posit three discrete demographic models:[2] (a) culturally homogenous societies, which are ostensibly free of ethnic conflict, but whose lack of exposure to diversity renders them much less tolerant either toward the small minorities in their midst or toward new immigrants who subsequently enter it; thus the challenges that faced ethnically homogenous Serbia, Greece and Romania upon their dramatic expansion (1912-1919), or contemporary western Europe and Japan, (b) multicultural societies in which at least one ethnic group is perceived to exercise or aspire to hegemony over the others; the experiences of modern-day Canada, Northern Ireland, Switzerland and the USA demonstrate that such a fundamentally unstable ensemble can be sustained only if the dominant national group continuously demonstrates a willingness to accommodate minority aspirations, and (c) multicultural societies, in which no single group enjoys political, economic, or cultural preponderance, thereby creating a balance of power that defuses the paranoia of ethnic minorities by compelling all groups to forge a multilateral consensus (Habsburg Cisleithania,[3] Tito's Yugoslavia,[4] and modern India) that can survive the intense competition of democratic politics.

4. But what exactly is *democracy*? In most of the world – and certainly within the newly "democratic" states of central and eastern Europe – it implies popular sovereignty, as expressed by free elections and, perhaps, a free press. Indeed, this prescription also enjoys currency among those western officials who have seen it as a panacea for the newly independent countries of the post-Communist world. Alas, such a simple definition has repeatedly paved the way for the tyranny of the majority and a chain reaction of revolt and secession by ever smaller groups of "threatened" minorities in Slovenia and Croatia, followed by the *Krajina* (1991); in Bosnia and Macedonia, followed by *Republika Srpska* (1992), *Herceg-Bosna* (1993) and western Macedonia (2001); and in Kosovo, followed by the Mitrovica (1999) and Preševo--Bujanovac-Biljača (2000) pockets.

If many modern multiethnic democracies have been spared from this process of disaggregation, it is because they have embraced and internalized "democratic" values that go far beyond the simple definition of the term to embody a full complement of Enlightenment values. Perhaps the most important attribute is the

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[2] Charles Ingrao, "Understanding Ethnic Conflict in Central Europe: an Historical Perspective," Nationalities Papers, 27:2 (June, 1999), 291-318, 331-32. Expanded Serbo-Croatian edition: "Deset nenaučenih lekcija o Srednjoj Evropi – pogled istoričara," in Charles Ingrao and Lazar Vrkatić, Nenaučena Lekcija: srednjoeuropska ideja I srpski nacionalni program (International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights – Belgrade, 2001), 7-36.

[3] "Cisleithania" refers to the Austrian half of the Habsburg dual monarchy (1867-1918).

[4] For Tito's achievement in institutionalizing such a balance of power within Yugoslavia, see Pedro Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia*, 1963, 1983 (Bloomington, In.: Indiana, 1984)

rule of law – applied with equity by a government staffed by professional administrative and judicial officials – because it eliminates the element of fear that has driven so many rebellious and secessionist ethnic minorities. To be sure, the rule of law is hardly a monopoly of democratic regimes, enjoying as it does a pedigree that can be traced back to pre-modern monarchs like Hammurabi, Justinian, and Suleiman the Magnificent; indeed, more immediate influences are evident in the contractualism of the feudal system of Latin Christendom, out of which western constitutionalism took shape. Equity is also a common commodity among non-democratic governments, especially those like Habsburg Cisleithania and Tito's Yugoslavia, both of which maintained stability by balancing the interests of competing national groups. A second key attribute is a shared national identity that justifies and protects all citizens equally, regardless of coexisting cultural or sectional markers. And this common identity is fostered by a shared historical narrative that celebrates the contribution of all groups, not just that of a single, "state-forming" nation. A third, requisite value is tolerance for the rights of the individual, to the exclusion of negative group stereotypes and discrimination (or preferences). Such forbearance is especially crucial for those citizens who belong to a majority group, which must accept as the price of its electoral preeminence the need to accommodate the "personal autonomy" of the minorities in its midst. Thus the lot of Cisleithania in its difficult partnership with Hungary partner, and of Anglo-Canada, which patiently endures the continuous stream of French demands that *Quebecois* leader Rene Levesque has characterized as "the never-sending trip to the dentist" – because the alternative is immediate secession and the specter of civil war. Such stoicism also implies the recognition that a certain degree of interethnic tension will always exist within a diverse society, but that it can be kept below the surface of everyday life because the protection afforded by the rule of law eliminates fear of the ethnic "other". Hence, the paradox of striving to maintain what Austrian Prime Minister Eduard Taaffe termed "well-tempered discontent" among competing ethnic groups, all of which readily bear their own grievances in the knowledge that theirs are not out of proportion either to the burdens borne by other groups or to the greater overall advantages derived from coexisting in a single commonwealth.

5. Exactly how these corporate groups form demands one last definition, that of *national identity* itself. After a century of discourse about inbred, primordial markers that somehow predetermine an individual's identity, social scientists have belatedly come to understand national identity as a contingent, cultural construct that can be molded to exclude/include people of different ethnicities. Such adaptability manifests itself not only in "immigrant societies" like the United States and Canada, but even within the pantheon of central European nationalist leaders, many of whom have forsaken their ancestral roots to lead the peoples of their adopted country.[5] Moreover, individual identity is not only a malleable commodity, but a multifaceted construct

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[5] Such as the ethnic Slovak Lajos Kossuth, Croat Vojislav Šešelj, Montenegrins Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić, and numerous descendants of German colonists like Vitus Landsbergis, Vaclav Klaus, and Franjo Tudjman.

capable of housing multiple, mutually compatible "identities" based not just on linguistic, but confessional, regional, ideological, professional, and other cultural attributes. Rather than accepting the inevitability of group conflict, it would appear both more logical and socially constructive to recognize that societies can freely choose between nurturing a single "imagined community" that accommodates all citizens, or one that segregates them into two or more mutually hostile camps.[6]

This is the choice that has rested in the hands of regional cultural elites that have so thoroughly dominated the all-important "public sphere"over the past two centuries. Whether scholars, theologians, poets, political leaders, or merely the journalists who mediated their discourse, these elites have set the definitions, established the parameters for judging a societya's or government's viability, judged its "success" or "failure" and, ultimately, written— or rewritten – the history books to justify and legitimize their verdict. And it is their highly subjective assessments, both in the past and the present, that have undermined the stability of the central European world by dismissing regimes and societies as dysfunctional when, in fact, it was the elites' conceptual framework that was incompatible with reality.

Surely the leaders of central Europe's multinational states could have done more to promote the very real advantages that they offered their ethnically diverse polities. They failed above all to establish a broadly inclusive national identity, largely because the perception of inequality sustained competing ethnic identities. Such a synthesis was totally alien to the state ideology of the Ottoman empire, which counted among its many disabilities its commitment to the hegemony of Ottoman despotism and Muslim theocracy, together with the special station that its Turkish subjects held within them. It was also beyond the comprehension of a string of stubbornly conservative Habsburg emperors who equated mass politics and popular sovereignty with Jacobin anarchy. Even when Francis Joseph felt compelled to introduce "a little parliamentarism" in the 1860s, he fashioned legislative majorities by pandering to the special interests of corporate groups, rather than by articulating a broad agenda that could forge a consensus that cut across ethnic, religious or class affinities; thus his initial reliance on Austria's German liberals (1861-1879), then on their Catholic and Slav adversaries (1879-1893), while never abandoning his support for the tyranny of Hungary's Magyar majority.[7] Nor did the multiethnic successor states of the twentieth century fully comprehend that a common identity could only be achieved by persuading all citizens that they were equally justified regardless of their diverse cultural attributes. Thus Thomas Masaryk's sublime vision of equal justification for all citizens was fatally undermined by a choice of nomenclature that placed Czechs and Slovaks ahead of his country's significant German, Magyar, Ruthene and Polish minorities, much as the Czechs' demographic dominance created a systemic imbalance that always troubled the supposedly co-equal Slovaks; the

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[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Naitonalism* (2nd ed: London & New York, 1991)
[7] Steven Beller, *Francis Joseph* (London & New York, 1996) 80-84, 97-107.

incremental departure of Czechoslovakia's German, Magyar, Polish and Ruthene minorities only intensified Slovak insecurities until they too seceded. The interwar kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes recognized only three constituent nations, then invested the country's ethnic Serb plurality with an outright majority in all branches of government, including military commands. Even the rigorously supranational ideology of the Soviet Union failed to wholly eliminate the *perception* of all national groups that the Great Russians stood at the top of a pecking order dominated by its Europeans and Orthodox Christians. Although Tito's Yugoslavia came the closest to creating a common identity, Serbia's cultural elites resented and ultimately defeated the requisite strategy of "strong Yugoslavia, weak Serbia" because they could not accept the burden of accommodating the aspirations or assuaging the anxieties of the federation's smaller national groups.

The supranational regimes' failure to establish a single, overriding national identity created an opportunity for cultural and political leaders to propound a competing synthesis that stressed ethnic identity and the uncritical adoption of the western, nation-state model. But most had "succeeded" nonetheless in building a generally functional political, economic and social system that compared favorably to the available alternatives. Austria-Hungary, both Czechoslovakias, and the first Yugoslavia offered substantially better national security and economic benefits than the countries that replaced them, as did the Soviet Union and second Yugoslavia right up until the moment that their successor states introduced meaningful free market reforms.[8] They also succeeded in limiting interethnic conflict to levels that encouraged compromise, while preventing the kind of violence that would follow their demise. At worst, Habsburg Austria was afflicted by chronic parliamentary paralysis, occasional economic boycotts, and a lot of angry rhetoric; Czechoslovakia by long--standing Slovak resentment over inequities that had much more to do with historic macroeconomic differences than with conscious government policy; second Yugoslavia primarily by Slovene and Croat unwillingness to sacrifice their greater wealth and early entry into the European Community for the sake of the other republics. Yet this was enough to mobilize the forces of secession – and seize the imagination of cultural elites who readily placed at risk the tangible advantages of a reasonably tolerable status quo in order to pursue a charismatic, but unknown national destiny. Their enthusiasm for a separate existence simply overwhelmed the logical arguments of unionist forces, who could promise nothing more exhilarating than continued ethnic coexistence, economic integration, stability and, in the case of Yugoslavia, massive international financial aid. It was a victory of emotion over reason that was easily reaffirmed at the ballot box in the region's newly, though imperfectly formed, democracies. Like so many others before and around them, the Yugoslav peoples leapt without looking beyond the rhetoric of nationalist politicians, intellectuals and media who led them into the abyss.

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[8] Michael Palairet, *The Balkan Economies c. 1800-1914* (Cambridge, 1997) demonstrates that even the Ottoman economy outperformed those of the Balkan states that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Admittedly, not everyone followed their lead. Incumbent leaders ranging from Emperor Charles I and Prince Paul to Mikhail Gorbachev, Ante Marković and Vaclav Havel retained the support of *some* middle- and upper-level political and military officials. The survival of a multiethnic polity also inspired "stateless" minorities like the Habsburg Jews and Muslim Slavs who appreciated the opportunity to affect an all-inclusive state identity that preempted the employment of ethnic labels and racist stereotypes.[9] It is also plausible to assume that many ethnically mixed families opposed dissolution. In all these instances, however, the support was so passive that it cannot even be measured. Alas, the only active opposition to ethnic disaggregation came from those members of formerly dominant nations like the Croatian-, Bosnian- and Kosovar-Serbs, or Baltic-, Ukrainian- and Moldovan-Russians who feared becoming a minority in a newly formed successor state; although they may have advocated and fought to preserve a larger multiethnic union, they did so mainly because they were unwilling to exchange what they perceived as their special station for the lot of a defenseless minority.

Of course, the plight of "new" minorities such as "stateless" Jews and Muslims or the Russian and Serb diasporae reminds us that the proponents of ethnically homogenous nation-states have rarely achieved their objective without implementing massive population exchanges. More often, they have merely converted formerly demographically balanced societies that affected a certain level of equity and accommodation into putative "nation-states" with significant residual minorities that were now at the mercy of a single, previously aggrieved national group. Of course, this is not the way the successor states' cultural elites have been portrayed independence. Not unlike a physician who kills his patient, they have successfully buried the body beneath a formidable ensemble of self-serving public media, ranging from scholarly tomes and school textbooks to public holidays and memorials, that obliterate the positive legacy of multiethnic coexistence while stressing the state-forming nation's long, but just struggle against foreign oppression and competing national groups. Thus, Czechoslovakia began a lengthy process of obliterating its substantial German heritage a quarter-century prior to the mass expulsions of 1945 by removing figures from monuments and German-language inscriptions from public plaques, while eliminating any positive mention of their presence from history books. One of the few exceptions has been their misrepresentation of the Thirty Years' War as a struggle between Germans and Czechs, rather than between Catholic loyalists and Protestant rebels. Poles mourn the demise of their historic kingdom at the hands of German, Russian, Swedish, Ukrainian and Turkish enemies, without recognizing that it was a great confederation that accommodated many languages and religions. Modern Albanian and Slovak textbooks speak of oppression by Turkish and Hungarian overlords, without explaining why their forefathers fought in vain to prevent their "liberation" by Serb and Czech forces. Serbs extol their heroic struggles against the oppression of their Turkish, German, Hungarian and Croatian

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[9] Marsha Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: the Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I* (Oxford, 2001).

enemies, while ignoring centuries of peaceful coexistence with all of these groups in the Vojvodina, Slavonia, Sandžak and Bosnia. Thus the official history of Vojvodina extols the Serbian national awakening and the bloody 1848 revolt against Hungary, while glossing over the half-century of peaceful and, therefore, anonymous coexistence that attended its aftermath.[10] Nor is this heretofore successful exercise in collective amnesia likely to change at a time when none of the professional staff at Vojvodina's central archive can read German, Magyar, Romanian, Yiddish, or any of the northern Slavic languages. So complete is the blackout of alternative accounts that a recent translation of A.J.P. Taylor's classic *Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918* became the first book on the subject ever published by a Serbian press – albeit only after it was commissioned and paid for by the Soros Foundation.

Although the region's politicians, intelligentsia and media no longer promote what *Oslobodjenje's* wartime editor Gordana Knežević once characterized as an "industry of hate," the same consortium of cultural elites continue the discourse of disaggregation in the last state to succeed from the former Yugoslavia. Today's Montenegro seems destined to follow in the footsteps of the first Austrian republic, which readily abandoned its separate national identity in order to unite in an ethnically homogenous nation-state during the interwar period. Like Hitler's *Ostmark* during World War II, Montenegro fought in the wars of Yugoslav Succession without questioning its greater national identity until it faced the dual specters of military defeat and international condemnation for the commission of war crimes. Much as the Austrians rediscovered their nationhood on the retreat from Stalingrad,[11] the Montenegrins rediscovered their separate identity on the road back from Dubrovnik, as a means of escaping the consequences of defeat and the charge of complicity in the crimes committed across Croatia, Bosnia and, ultimately, Kosovo. In the process, they ignored the inconvenient fact that Serbian leaders Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić were of Montenegrin origin, much as Adolf Hitler himself was an Austrian.

Of course, Montenegro stands barely at the threshold of a transformation process that took a generation for the Austrians to complete. But the process of reconstructing the past to justify secessionist aspirations is a familiar one that has been traveled by central Europe's cultural elites for over a century. Perhaps it is time for the region's politicians and academics to reevaluate the trajectory of their national historical narrative. As they contemplate the utility of economic integration with the New Europe, they should consider that their counterparts within the European Union are traveling in the opposite direction by promoting shared universal values that define the complex dimensions of democracy that have enabled western Europeans and their overseas progeny to peacefully accommodate great cultural diversity, whether in the immigrant societies in the New World or in the mobile post-industrial workplace. Along the way, they might reexamine their history in order to represent more faithfully the long record of peaceful and constructive

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[10] Dimitrije Boarov, *Politička Istorija Vojvodine*, (Novi Sad, 2001).
[11] Peter Thaler, *The Ambivalence of Identity* (West Lafayette, 2000), vii.

coexistence. Intrinsic to such an endeavor is the accommodation of the historical documentation and narratives of the other national and ethnic groups with whom they have interacted and without whom there can be no accurate representation of their own heritage.