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 Book Review
 

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## Marko Grdešić and Mislav Žitko Socialist Economics in Yugoslavia: A Critical History

Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2025, 196 pp.

Perhaps exhausted by the researching and writing of this book, the authors, in confessional mode, summarize what the book is about and what they tried to do, thus: “We tried in this book to provide the scientific backstory, the seemingly boring but often very important discussions that economists had on the topic of socialist self-management in Yugoslavia. With this book, we hope that we have managed, at least somewhat, to rescue this story from fading away forever” (p. 133).

The book is, indeed, important but not at all boring. The authors have written a forensic deep dive into the minutiae of debates within what, from its origins in the 1950s to its (and Yugoslav socialism’s) swansong in the 1980s, was an increasingly confident, assertive, relatively autonomous and extremely important branch of Yugoslav social science. The nitty gritty *is* the story here; economic debates are taken seriously in and of themselves, treated on their own terms, with nods, but only nods, to the extraordinarily turbulent political conjunctures in which they emerged and to which they contributed.

At the centre of the book is the argument that, after the rather hurried construction

of a new kind of socialism following the break with Stalin, based on a concept that was neither fully formed nor stable, “self-management”, politicians and economists struggled to join the dots and create a coherent lexicon and set of economic rules that would explain what the system should look like, how it would work, and devise a set of measures that would act as correctives when things went wrong. Crucially, and unsurprisingly, there was no consensus but, rather, opposing camps – be it between the authors of the White book and the Yellow book; between adherents of the “income school” versus “the profit school”; later between Marxists, Keynesians, and neo-classicists and, even later, between socialists, social democrats and liberals. The authors are surely correct when they state that these divisions have rarely been discussed and yet are of immense importance. At times, the book reaches the dizzy heights of Darko Suvin’s *Splendour, Misery and Possibilities (Samo jednom se ljubi* in its original edition) as an X-ray of Yugoslav economics, treated decade by decade.

For me, there are some really important messages contained in the book which, whilst certainly not leading to a radical revision of the story of the Yugoslav socialist experiment, passing from miracle, through success, to decline, stasis, crisis, and eventual disintegration, helps to nuance elements of it. Let me delineate a few. Firstly, the book shows, I think, the deep commitment to self-management as a third way between capitalism and socialism, between market and plan, between bureaucratization and capital accumulation, in which it was imperative to think outside of mainstream economic thought

and, indeed, orthodox readings of Marx. If self-management was, or could be made into, a mode of production, then this rendered it imperative for economists to be creative in terms of how to link supply and demand, needs and wants, how to conceive of prices, even money itself, as well as investment and debt. It is worth noting that whilst the most radical interpretations of self-management, requiring the withering away of the state, a truly classless society, and real workers' control, never came to fruition, this utopia was always being strived for even when the true ideologues clashed with the pragmatists and those content to muddle through.

Secondly, the book is a great corrective to rather lazy attempts to label the Yugoslav model as "market socialism" or to point to the wave of "consumerism" from the 1970s as turning Yugoslavia away from true socialism.

Thirdly, it challenges accounts of the 1974 Constitution that emphasize only the political, as Tito and the party's last gasp attempt to reconcile competing nationalisms and contain demands for autonomy from within the constituent Republics, which failed to keep the lid on either and, indeed, created suboptimal units competing against each other. Here, instead, the logic of decentralization is traced to economic arguments even if the intertwining of the fate of the 1974 Constitution and that of the income school was more ascribed than asserted. The irony, indeed, was that the linked reforms of the 1970s on worker's control, on decentralization, and on associated labour, which were all meant to curb the growing power of a new class of managerial technocrats, never really thought through the danger of redis-

tributing that power, not to workers on the factory floor, but to Republic elites, many of whom were to put the interests of their own Republic, and not unusually themselves and their own survival, before those of the broader Yugoslav socialist project.

Fourthly, I think the book demonstrates extremely well how the economics profession shared in the myth of Yugoslav exceptionalism, meaning that there were really no lessons from other real economies that could be applied, other than in the negative, and no point in undertaking any kind of comparative analysis, other than to compare Yugoslav growth rates with those in other countries.

Fifthly, the extension of this, a true paradox when looked at in the context of Yugoslavia's deep commitment to non-alignment, was a peculiar degree of insularity, combining a sense of uniqueness with a kind of methodological nationalism, incidentally not unknown in economic theories elsewhere, that treated the Yugoslav economy almost as a kind of bounded, hermetically sealed unit. I think the authors may have overstated the depth of the neglect of theories of foreign trade, of the balance of payments, and the like, but it is true that these were not as central in economic debates as they, arguably, should have been.

Finally, the book is extraordinarily insightful in terms of the sudden shift, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, from a radical optimism in self-managing socialism to a deep pessimism, from the need to tweak what was seen as a solid, Marxist, foundation, to a radical rejection of socialist economics *per se* or, at least, the need to complement it with theories derived from the West and, if not the whole-

sale abandonment of self-management, then a token recognition of self-management before basing policy on entirely different principles.

The book represents an extraordinary contribution to the history of ideas in Yugoslav intellectual life. It is extremely valuable, also, in terms of what it tells us about the role of institutions, the importance and limitations of legal and regulatory reforms, and about the nature of policy formulation, implementation, evaluation and revision. It complements in particular the work, which stops in the early 1960s, of course, of Vladimir Unkovski Korica. As an aside, I think the critiques the authors provide of what have become the go-to sources on Yugoslav economics, written by Johanna Bockman, Suzanne Woodward and Milica Uvalić, are extremely persuasive whilst also being an invitation to a dialogue with these authors in the future. I would have liked more extensive quotes from the economists interviewed, some of which are reproduced in the footnotes but serve more to frame the broader points being made than to drive the argument forward. Another strength of the book is that it provides a peopled intellectual history, going far beyond Kidrič, Kardelj and Horvat, who may be the most internationally well-known.

I also wonder whether, by focusing on the main debates in relation to self-management, the authors have missed or marginalized debates that derived from Yugoslavia's position in the Non-aligned Movement, especially with regard to trade. The New International Economic Order (NIEO) was a major topic of scientific conferences and economic research projects in Yugoslavia. The book does not address,

either, the role of Yugoslav economic experts in the Global South or within the UN and its agencies, particularly UNCTAD and UNIDO. Nor does it address the linkages between Yugoslav economists and the prescriptions of the World Bank and the IMF as "transnational expertised organisations" in reconfiguring Yugoslav economic theory and policies. I realize that including these things would have led to a very different book, but I do think they are important, not least in the translation of the Yugoslav economic model internationally and in the denouement of the crisis in the 1980s.

The book is rather silent, also, on the connections between modernization, agriculture and private property. Of course, Yugoslav socialism was built primarily on industrialization and associated urbanization and, indeed, its ideal subject was the male industrial worker. At the same time, agricultural reform was a key issue both for Yugoslavia and other NAM Member States. In Yugoslavia, at least, there was a dual system of agriculture, one searching for efficiencies through mechanization and economies of scale and the other largely small-scale, subsistence-oriented and female-led, which allowed for a more complex set of urban-rural linkages, in fact, as male workers left the factory at 3.30 pm and worked in the fields at home until dark. What focus, if any, within Yugoslav economics, was there on the agrarian question? This would seem to be relevant not least because, in looking for models of worker control, the system of collectives (*zadruga*) that pre-dates socialism, as well as the tolerance, even celebration of private ownership of land, could have been relevant unless, of course, industrializa-

tion-urbanization was so taken-for-granted that the agricultural-rural was seen as irrelevant.

None of these observations detract from the importance of the book. It is incredibly valuable for anyone trying to understand socialist Yugoslavia and its economic system. It is likely to stimulate comparative studies of economic thought exploring East-South connections rather than assuming the hegemony of Northern, Anglo-American, economic theory. Even more importantly, perhaps, it provides a prehistory for contemporary challenges to neoliberal thinking and new, more people-centred, economic models.

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Lidija Kos-Stanišić  
**Civilizacijska politika  
 u međunarodnim odnosima**

Fakultet političkih znanosti, Zagreb, 2025, 182 pp.

We live in a time in which nothing in the world and in international relations seems certain or set in stone, where people struggle with an insecure everyday life and attempt to explain to themselves why something is the way it is and what tomorrow brings. At the same time, people fear the possibility of the outbreak of wars and cri-

ses in the form of territorial, economic, ecological, ideological and religious conflicts. Insecurity and unrest are intensified by growing polarizations and conflicts both on the international level and within nation-states, whether caused by ideological, ethnic, cultural or religious factors, among others, which further deepen distrust and radicalize certain segments of society. The book *Civilizational Politics in International Relations* by Lidija Kos-Stanišić serves as a detailed overview of the teachings and research on the concept of civilization as well as the histories and characteristics of civilizations identified in the renowned work by Samuel Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations*). It also presents the role of civilizational identity in contemporary international relations and provides a framework that serves as one of many analytical lenses for interpreting and predicting developments in global and regional politics. With that in mind, the book is primarily intended for students, but also for any individual lost and confused in the turbulent chaos of the world in the year 2025.

The book is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter (Introduction), the author provides a definition and specifies the task of international relations as a branch of political science. She points out that the concept of civilization was an important component of international relations theory in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. With the two world wars and the Cold War that marked the previous century, the concept of civilization disappeared from the focus of international relations theory until the end of the century. Francis Fukuyama then proclaimed the end of history. Today we see that history is very much alive. For that reason precisely, after the end of the Cold