

Identifying Yugonostalgia – Revisited: The Limitations of an Application of Nation-Building Theory

A critique to Pal Kolstø, 2014 ‘Identifying with the old or the new state: nation-building vs. Yugonostalgia in the Yugoslav successor states’, *Nations and Nationalism* 20 (4), 760–781

Kolstø explores the disruptive aspect of Yugonostalgia for identity consolidation, namely, how and to what extent old identities have been preserved or disrupted and whether their disruption is indeed a prerequisite for successful nation building in the newly created states.

We question whether it is possible to study the phenomenon of Yugonostalgia without reference to socialism as an important underpinning of the identity of both the citizens of former Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav countries. Is it well founded, and does this approach encompass the most relevant factors of Yugonostalgia, considering the fact that it is ignoring non-ethnic and non-political factors such as memories of the achievements of socialist modernization?

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Questions of the relationship between ethnic phenomena and other social phenomena are the most complex issue in the field of ethnic relations research. In view of the science’s logical structure, this is less visible at the level of general theoretical orientations (e.g. interactionism or ethnosymbolism) than on the level of middle-range theory (in this case, the nation-building theory) (Merton 1967). The overemphasis on non-ethnic broader social aspects of ethnic phenomena results in a narrowing

down of perspective in their explanation; disregarding the former means that the explanation for the latter is incomplete. The choice entails gaining something but also losing something.

In his paper, Pål Kolstø considers the examples of the Soviet Union and Titoist Yugoslavia in order to examine “to what degree attachment to a former multinational state which breaks up may complicate national consolidation in new states, as was the case in the Soviet Union and Titoist Yugoslavia”. In the case of the latter, he looks at the phenomenon of “Yugonostalgia”, noting that “various opinions have been expressed about its strength and possible political consequences today.”

Kolstø, citing Boym, gives a promising definition of (Yugo)nostalgia, observing, namely, that “Such hankering for the old order under stable Communist regimes, remembered as a time of law and order and steady incomes, can be felt in the former territories of the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, and Czechoslovakia, and not least in the former Yugoslavia (Boym 2001). In the latter case it has acquired a special name: Yugonostalgia.” Including as it does the non-ethnic substance of nostalgia, this definition is epistemologically more inclusive than those provided by middle-range theories. As we have already remarked, something is thus gained while something is lost.

We believe, however, that it would have been better if the author had used all the possibilities offered by this explanation of the term. Had he done so, his analysis would have been more complete in terms of content. Kolstø himself cited Deutsch, saying: “Often the answers to these questions have focused on the ability of state leaders to provide the population with goods, services and security. Nation-building is seen as intimately linked to state-building, that is, the establishment

of institutions, infrastructure, means of communications and so on” (see, e.g. Deutsch 1966). Deutsch is right in this. It is precisely what newly established states cannot provide for their citizens (with the possible exception of Slovenia; and Croatia which is about halfway there). The state can compensate for impoverishment with certain symbolic goods for a while, but not indefinitely, especially if it is also failing on the symbolic plane. The mass emigration from Kosovo is but a recent example¹.

We believe it is necessary to dwell on the analysis of what Kolstø refers to as “attachment to the larger state”. For Kolstø, this is an issue of political identity which may potentially complicate the creation of new political identities. We think that an analysis of what this “attachment” actually implies would be more productive.

People can be attached to certain aspects of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) legacy which have come to represent for them the reference point of “normal life” (Spasić), without declaring themselves Yugo-nostalgists or Yugoslavs. They could have been adherents of nationalist options that brought about the disintegration of Yugoslavia, expecting the newly-formed states to provide them with more than they had in the SFRY. Yet the reality of the restoration of capitalism in the emergent peripheral statelets has shattered such illusions. “Attachment to the former multinational state”, therefore, can also be measured in terms of “attachment” to certain features of the former state: the permitted range of income (Despot, Ilić), the type of work organization and decision-making in the workplace (Kamiso), the organization

of the healthcare and education systems, etc.; and it is to be expected that in the context of threadbare chauvinistic rhetoric and unabashed exploitation as well as continual regression along all parameters of modernization, people should see the SFRY as the only familiar alternative to the current system. It is in the actual modernization which, for the broad masses of the people in the SFRY, is linked solely to the period of socialist Yugoslavia, that the potential for subversion in the recently established national states lies; states which, as a humorous saying goes, “are incapable of even putting a coat of paint on what was built in socialist times”.

Kolstø observes that researchers’ interest in Yugo-nostalgia has tended to focus on its cultural aspects, whereas he himself is primarily interested in its political aspect, which might provide the answer to the key question posed in his paper: “in what measure and under what conditions does the attachment to a larger state that has ceased to exist hinder the consolidation of a common political identity among the populations of successor states”. He seeks to explore the disruptive aspect of Yugo-nostalgia for identity consolidation, which has so far been disregarded, namely, how and to what extent old identities have been preserved or disrupted and whether their disruption is indeed a prerequisite for successful nation building in the newly created states. Specifically, is there any basis for the belief that political nostalgists tend to be less loyal than other citizens?

Kolstø explores the way that Yugo-identity hinders the construction of new national identities. The crux of the matter is this: Yugo-identity is subversive because the states that have emerged across the territory of the former Yugoslavia are capitalist, and its subversive potential lies in the fact that Yugoslavia was socialist.

¹ <http://www.euronews.com/2015/03/27/fleeing-kosovo-over-the-border-and-back-again/> visited 23/06/2015.

In other words, is it possible to study the phenomenon of Yugonostalgia without reference to socialism as an important underpinning of the identity of both the former Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav countries? Is it well founded, and does this approach encompass the most relevant factors of Yugonostalgia? The identity of Yugoslavs and post-Yugoslavs as (former) Yugoslavs, and today, at the very least, as Yugonostalgists, was also determined by non-ethnic and non-political considerations.

Kolstø, citing Jansen, believes that even “anti-Communists in the successor states may be convinced that the common but federated state ought to have been preserved, seeing the large former state as preferable to the state they now live in, which they dismiss as ‘petty’ or ‘nationalistic’ (Jansen 2009).” Without questioning this, we feel that it is a mistake to study Yugonostalgia without taking into account nostalgia for socialism.

Let us consider the evidence used by Kolstø. The main source of evidence for his study of Yugonostalgia in Serbia is a survey conducted by the IPSOS Strategic Marketing polling bureau in September 2011.

The evidence consists of answers to three questions. The first is, “Do you regret the dissolution of the SFRY?” Kolstø explains that “those who responded ‘yes’ were asked to state their reasons and were given five response options (in addition to ‘other’): ‘Better economic situation’; ‘Better social programme’; ‘Brotherhood and unity’; ‘There was less nationalism at that time’; ‘Tito was a good leader’.”²

² Kolstø applies the concrete nation-building theory, not the general orientation. Such theories are usually verified through quantitative methodology, that is, by means of closed-ended questions in survey research. Closed-ended questions, like the ones in the research used by Kolstø, are as a rule a good test of

The question is valid: it does indeed measure Yugonostalgia. However, the author does not provide a frequency distribution. We therefore do not know whether the observed Yugonostalgia has national roots, whether it involves other elements of politics, or whether it expresses a nostalgia for socialist times.³

The author seeks to identify the Yugoslav heritage which is subversive for the nation building of new states created on former Yugoslav territory. By limiting himself to (self-identified) Yugoslavs/Yugonostalgists, the author overlooks those who do not self-identify thus, yet, in terms of their attitudes, belong to the section of the population that carries this subversive potential. Memories of the achievements of socialist modernization, well-being

previously established hypotheses, but they tend to narrow down vision (Ragin 1989). Had a general orientation been utilized instead of concrete theory, more would have been gained from five response options such as “better economic situation” or “better social program”. The limitations to obtaining new knowledge posed by closed-ended questions also apply to statistical data sources. The most recent census in Croatia offered a closed list of ethnicities, resulting in only 76 people self-identifying as Yugoslavs. The latest census in Serbia used an open-ended question, so that over 20,000 people declared themselves Yugoslavs. Of course, anti-Yugoslav feeling is undeniably much more widespread in Croatia than in Serbia and the differences in the census results cannot be attributed solely to the form of the questions.

³ The second question in the evidence, “Have you ever felt you were a Yugoslav?” does indeed measure the national aspect of Yugonostalgia. The third question, “What is your opinion about renaming streets that have Yugoslav names?”, is less valid for measuring the national element of Yugonostalgia. On the other hand, other aspects of Yugonostalgia cannot be investigated with such a closed-ended question.

and security are not limited to Yugoslavs/ Yugonostalgists (especially if we bear in mind the government-backed campaign against “Yugoslavness” in Croatia for example). The author’s chosen approach deprives his analysis of possibly fruitful heuristic potential. On page 773, the author himself speaks of “tastes and habits” surviving from the former Yugoslavia, but not identified as being Yugoslav.

The national unquestionably has its autonomous social impact (cf. Marcuse 2007), but it cannot last forever since people cannot survive on symbolic substitutes for actual goods. Kolstø himself observes: “That Kosovo with its low standard of living should come out on top was not expected and shows that support for nation-building is not necessarily related to the ability of the state to deliver material goods (Kolstø and Jelovica 2014).”

The only survey question from among those that measure loyalty that allows respondents to voice their dissatisfaction with socio-economic factors is the following: “If you were given a chance, would you migrate to another country? For what reasons?” The pollsters also ask a fantasy question: “If the material conditions were good, would you like to live here for the rest of your life?” which calls for a socially acceptable answer. Such operationalization determines the responses, and Kolstø uses the loyalty score obtained in this manner as realistic. This year’s dramatic spike in emigration from Kosovo shows that it is not.

Scholarly research should be subversive rather than socially acceptable.

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