The (Dis)Comfort of Conformism

Post-War nationalism and Coping

with Powerlessness in Croatian Villages

STEF JANSEN

Village snapshots: failed rendez-vous after violent displacement

Depending upon one's perspective, this article refers to villages in 'Krajina' or villages in the 'Formerly Occupied Territories of the Republic of Croatia'. What is certain is that they are located in an area between a main Croatian transit road and the new border with Bosnia-Herzegovina. As an activist working with a dialogue project, I had access to people in a set of five such villages within one municipality of Croatia[1]. Walking into the villages in the late 1990s, visitors would first of all be struck by the contrast between Plavo, consisting entirely of newly built houses, and Bijelo and its surrounding villages, where the visible remains of material destruction were still shocking. In the latter inhabitants had only just begun to repair the ruins using the UNHCR plastic sheeting common to all post-war settings in the region. Not much economic activity was taking place apart from a timber mill and some subsistence agriculture, which was greatly impeded by several minefields. Further landmarks included a police station and a bar across the road from it mainly frequented by its numerous officers, some remnants of destroyed Partisan monuments and an enormous Croatian flag on the central crossroads.

The relatively few inhabitants of these villages in the late 1990s were on the whole elderly and female. One thing that could *not* strike the visitor upon arrival would be signs of the national composition of the population: differences in this domain were neither visible nor audible. Diametrically opposed narratives of the past claimed either a historical Serbian or Croatian majority; but attempting to avoid the terror of national mathematics, I would argue that the area had been nationally mixed for centuries, with smaller villages often including large majorities of one or the other nationality[2]. Unsurprisingly, the region's recent history was subject to an intense struggle of representation. During WWII, a key moment in all versions of local history, the region was the scene of horrific violence, which pitted Croatian fascist Ustaše against multi-ethnic (but in this area mainly Serbian) communist-led Partisans. Massacres and starvation left few, if any, families intact, an enormous demographic and political legacy that later determined a good part of the power balance in Yugoslavia. Of the villages in question, Bijelo had been the main centre with a mixed but majority-Serbian population. Reflecting participation in the Partisan army, there had been a high degree of Party membership, with a similar pattern as in the smaller and predominantly

Serbian-inhabited villages of Sivo, Zeleno and Crno. Plavo, mainly Croatian-inhabited, had been known as a hard-core 'Ustaša village' and was therefore relatively deprived of state privileges[3].

The villages in this study were at the heart of the post-Yugoslav conflict during the final decade of the twentieth century. In 1990, the Serbian nationalist revival ignited by Slobodan Milošević was countered in Croatia, where the first post-communist elections were won by the nationalist HDZ, led by Franjo Tudjman. Local and 'imported' Serbian hardliners engaged in provocations with the support of the locally based Yugoslav Army (JNA) division, and in previous 'black sheep' villages, such as Plavo, a wave of Croatian national euphoria gave way to a climate of revenge. The situation became extremely polarised and paramilitary groups carried out acts of violence against civilians on both sides. After the 1991 referendum, facing Milošević-supported Serbian rebellions against an alleged revival of Ustaša fascism, Croatia declared its independence. In response, 'Serbian Krajina' seceded from Croatia and almost all of its Croatian inhabitants were expelled in a collaborative operation by militant local Serbs, the JNA and volunteer militias from Serbia. Plavo was completely destroyed and the few elderly Croats who stayed put were killed. In the other villages, most Serbs remained in place during the four-year 'war republic' of Krajina and were joined by displaced Serbs from throughout the rest of Croatia. The *Oluja* offensive of August 1995 integrated the area into the Republic of Croatia—this time all Serbian inhabitants fled and their abandoned houses were looted and burned.

Hence, all villagers were displaced at some point during the 1990s. The scale of material destruction was enormous. A number of displaced Croats began returning in 1996, while a slow trickle of refugee-return commenced on the Serbian side in 1997, albeit consisting almost exclusively of elderly ladies, some-times accompanied by their sick or disabled husbands. Many pre-war inhabitants simply never returned. Thus, when the fieldwork for this article was carried out, the national composition had changed dramatically as a result of war, refuge, relocation and ethnic engineering. A 'Yugoslav' identity was no longer viable and the former predominantly Serbian-inhabited villages were now housing a mixture of Serbian returnees, Croatian refugees from Bosnia, relocated Croats from other areas, a few

'mixed' couples and some others. The destruction of Yugoslav landmarks, exclusive economic policies and state assistance, excessive symbolry and a strong, aggressive police presence left no doubt that this was now Croatian territory.

Living conditions were harsh, particularly for Serbian returnees since their houses had not been repaired; many lived off subsistence agriculture, sometimes complemented by humanitarian aid. Employment opportunities, which were scarce even for Croats, were non-existent for Serbs. After *Oluja*, most Croatian Plavo households, whose houses Serbian forces had destroyed in 1991 and who had been displaced to other parts of Croatia or abroad, were granted a newly built house by the Croatian state. Most of them had at least one member employed or on a state pension. Only one of the many Serbs that used to live in Plavo had returned—he was married to a Croatian woman.

After a war that could be seen as a process of programmed national unmixing (Duijzings 2000: 37-64), communication between people of different nationalities, most of whom had spent all their lives as neighbours[4], was sparse, particularly in public. Where contact did exist verbal harassment and abuse of Serbian returnees was common, particularly by the police, and there were a few cases of arson and rape. Those returnees, mostly elderly people, lived in fear and poverty and complained of isolation. Most of them emphatically distanced themselves from the militants who had proclaimed Krajina a separate Serbian republic in 1991. They saw their return as sufficient proof of their desire to coexist with Croats.

Most Croats refused to communicate with yesterday's enemies, and they were particularly angry about what they saw as the Serbian refusal to acknowledge what had happened. Pressure from the travelling catholic priest, from local authorities and the police, from the mass media and from neighbours rendered any dialogue undesirable. In the dominant nationalist discourse of the day, Croatia was the exclusive national homeland of Croats. All others, it was argued, should know their place—Serbs, in particular, should not make any claims. The pattern of non-communication was only rarely broken by a few Croats, who said they understood the universal human need to return to one's birth place. A small minority even transcended greeting formalities, by helping out Serbian returnees with practical matters

and sometimes socialising with them. For example, Nela, a young Croatian refugee from Bosnia with two small children, regularly had coffee with her Serbian neighbour in Bijelo, for which other Croats often criticised her. When I asked her about this she defensively snapped that as far as she was concerned it was the most normal thing in the world to have coffee with one's neighbours. She defiantly added that those who had a problem with that could 'go and fuck themselves'.

Another example was Davor, who had returned from Germany in 1991 to join the Croatian war effort. By some twist of fate, although he was from another part of Croatia, he ended up working in the Zeleno timber mill and found a friend in Nikola, an elderly Serb who lived nearby. It should be clear that communicating and certainly socialising with Serbs was the result of a conscious decision to break with the collectively sanctioned pattern of segregation. This may be one of the reasons why it was an easier step for relative outsiders to take[5]. Moreover, it was possibly less risky for Davor to socialise with Serbs because his war volunteer experience could counter suspicions of his being soft on Serbs and gave him the authority to be critical of the discourse of national liberation that he, after all, had embodied at the front.

Despite the presence of such exceptions, the picture arising from the above sketch is a bleak one, particularly in conjunction with the absolute political dominance of the nationalist HDZ in this region. Of course it should be noted that, in the early 1990s, this had been a solid and radical part of Serbian Krajina, cleansed violently of its Croatian inhabitants. For obvious reasons, during the research period in 1997-1998, Serbian returnees opted for a low profile and hard-liners either didn't return or kept their heads down. This explains this study's emphasis on nationalism amongst Croatian villagers—a pattern that I consider strictly temporal and circumstantial, *not* cultural.

Explaining post-Yugoslav nationalisms: WWII trauma and media?

More than a decade after the start of the 1991-5 post-Yugoslav wars, we are still in the process of attempting to understand the roots of that conflict, and, in particular, the appeal of the various nationalist discourses amongst broad segments of the population. For the sake of argument, I ignore the racist-cum-culturalist approaches which lay the blame for nationalism's success with atavistic Balkan hatreds widespread both as pseudo-explanations and as straw men for more critical analyses. Surely it is time to redirect our attention to a range of less essentialist explanations that have been put forward. Many of those tend to focus on suppressed traumas of WWII massacres, particularly when addressing the situation in the previously disputed areas of Croatia. My research on post-Yugoslav anti-nationalism[6] pointed out that local dissidents considered such abundant reference to WWII traumas highly problematic. Firstly, 'trauma-centred' explanations for the appeal of post-Yugoslav nationalisms were seen as unwelcome because they reproduce nationalist propaganda, since reformulations of these memories of terror also played a central role in the nationalist discourses that were instrumental in the build-up to the war and in its continuation. Secondly, such explanations prevent contextualisation of the actual importance of those memories with regard to the recent events (see Jansen 2002).

A set of alternative explanations for popular support of nationalism put forward by local and foreign critics favour what we might call a constructivist perspective. They tend to attribute more explanatory power to political propaganda and media manipulation. Memories of WWII suffering, it is argued here, were first and foremost instruments in the hands of nationalist politicians and, when assessing them, it is hard to draw the line between indoctrination and trauma. Many valuable analyses have combined those two perspectives, at times emphasising the role of WWII legacies (Bowman 1994; Denich 1994, 2000; Hayden 1994), while at other times highlighting the importance of media manipulation by the nationalist regimes (Glenny 1992; Silber & Little 1995; Thompson 1994).

Strikingly, most approaches, whether journalistic, political or academic, converge on seeking causes for ordinary people's adherence to nationalism in collective, structural factors. I aim to draw the attention to a major problem arising from such a rather one-dimensional emphasis on collective patterns of thinking and/or behaviour: the lack of attention to agency on the side of the people involved. Let me make clear straightaway that I do not wish to underestimate the importance of WWII traumas, based on the very real horrors of that time. Similarly, the   pernicious

role of the mass media in the preparation and perpetuation of the post-Yugoslav violence is beyond doubt. However, it seems all too easy to take their determining influence simply as a given. While we can't dispute the existence of collective traumas of WWII massacres, we have very little evidence of their *direct* impact on events half a century later, nor can we assume that this impact is uniform in nature (see Jansen 1999, 2002). A similar argument could be brought up with regard to media manipulation. Certainly, some nationalist propaganda was extremely successful in mobilising some people into committing violence—but *which* messages, and *which* people are we talking about here?

With regard to both WWII trauma and political propaganda, we should take care to avoid the pitfalls of determinism. Without accounting for the mechanisms with which individuals in the post-Yugoslav context related to the dominant nationalist discourses communicated to them, we run the risk of reducing them to helpless victims, toyed around with by structural factors and stripped of any form of agency. The empirical material in this article allows us to put these issues into critical perspective.

La vita *é* not so *bella*: agency and pessimism

But wait a minute. Of course we are dealing here with a situation in which many people *did* feel exactly that kind of powerlessness. For an outsider as well, at first sight, evidence of human agency certainly *did* seem rare. Therefore, overestimating either the role of WWII traumas or the importance of propaganda re-presented attractive options, given that they were re-flected in widespread local representations of all-powerful regimes (whether good or bad) and helpless ordinary people. However, I believe that, ethnogra-phically, such reductionist explanations, even though firmly entrenched in popular use, are only partially adequate at best. Moreover, ethically-politically, through their disregard for individual agency, they preclude questions of responsibility to an uncomforta-ble extent and further marginalise existing alternative narratives of past and present as well as dissident rou-tes of action, which had been silenced in recent times.

So far, so anthropological: am I cruising towards yet another conventional exercise in uncovering agency and resistance in a context of apparent homogeneity? I believe there is another twist to my

story. I would like to refrain from optimistically infusing 'resistance' into a situation that I myself considered depressing and hopeless, although I have much respect for others who have done this to great anthropological effect in other settings. The work of Scott, in particular, is characterised by this tendency to identify strains of oppositional behaviour in contexts where one wouldn't expect them (1985, 1990). Scott argues against Gramscian approaches and claims that, in fact, subalterns are capable of seeing through hegemonic projects. What's more, while they feign compliance, they rely on 'hidden transcripts', collective alternative worldviews, which underlie mundane acts of covert resistance.

I had gone into this research finding Scott's ideas very inspirational but, sadly, my activist work in these Croatian post-war villages did not increase my hopes for critical grassroots action. I found Scott's model simply too optimistic: while he might be right that people are not simply passive recipients of hegemonic nationalist discourses, this did not automatically exclude their continued, enthusiastic adherence to it. His followers could easily argue that I didn't look closely enough for examples of covert acts of resistance, but I believe that the overwhelming nationalist homogeneity in words and deeds was more important to people's lives, and more in need of analysis, than possible examples of hidden resistance to it. No thanks, then, no references to films like Robert Benigni's '*La vita é bella*', please. Rather than fuelling an interest in heterogeneity for heterogeneity's sake, the research sharpened my awareness of the ways in which individuals *actively* engaged with 'structures' on the everyday level. It made me wonder in which ways villagers coped with, digested, used and even embraced trauma and propaganda. Crucially, rather than searching for antinationalist 'hidden transcripts', I became interested in how they were involved in the (re)production of nationalist homogeneity.

A key question in this text is: can such a largely pessimistic conceptualisation of agency offer valuable material in order to bring to light individual coping strategies in a context of relative powerlessness? Particularly, I analyse the role of strategic essentialising in people's positionings in relation to dominant nationalist discourses (see Berdahl 1999:208; Herzfeld 1996). Compatibility, or at least minimisation of incompatibility, between personal and 'large' narratives then becomes an important

issue. If people are seen as at least partly capable of constructing everyday life formats which are not-all-too-incompatible with the discourses that are *de rigueur* at that moment, maybe this explains, to a certain extent, the impressions of internal homogeneity and consensus that await many students of post-Yugoslav nationalisms. People's narratives constructed around a set of catchwords and phrases can then be seen as mechanisms by which they position themselves, consciously and unconsciously, in relation to dominant discourses in confusing times.

In what follows, I focus on some patterns permeating the lives of the villagers. First I look at how they constructed and reproduced a virtually absolute dividing line between their everyday experiences and the 'politics' of the moment, protecting themselves against the dangers of the latter. Then, I analyse some recurrent coping patterns involving subsequent linkages of personal narratives with authoritative discourses.

Powerlessness, silence and self-protection

'Big politics' and 'small people'

Let us start from this observation: even though it was hard not to be shocked by the extreme character of national exclusivism in these war-affected villages, my strongest impression was not one of militant nationalist hatred. The situation, it seemed to me, was much more characterised by powerlessness, conformism and confusion. The experience of war, displacement and the political shifts on the state level had given rise to lives constructed around a defining break. The resulting confusion was reinforced by feelings of extreme powerlessness, since most villagers experienced configurations of state, war, nation and territory—in short: *politika* ['politics']—as largely objectified and out of individual control by ordinary people such as themselves. Let us admit immediately that this was a realistic attitude, both amongst 'winners' (here: Croats) and 'losers' (here: Serbs): in the past decade, many had lost their homes, their loved ones, their property, their jobs, and so on. No amount of academic insights into the dialectic relationship between agency and structure could change these people's experience that their lives had been eaten up by 'higher powers' beyond their control.

One of the most common interjections used in conversations in the villages, regardless of the nationality of the interlocutors, was an expression of resignation: '*e, šta češ…*' ['what can you do…' or 'well, what are you going to do about it…']. The large majority of villagers, many of whom had personally survived horrific experiences, settled for a rather phlegmatic approach. This testified to their perseverance in hard times, but it also reflected resignation. Experiences in the past served as an important counterpoint, as people took shelter in understatements such as 'it could have been a lot worse', often referring to memories of *that* war (WWII), which relativised the horrors of *this* war, because, 'back then, things were much harder than now'. Thus, resignation functioned as a coping pattern.

Amongst Croats, evoking the authoritative discourse of the blessing of simply having one's own state, was often enough to imply that no action was needed on the side of 'small people'. With regard to difficult living conditions and other problems, the standard attitude amongst Croatian villagers was one of widespread declared trust in the powers-that-be. 'The state will take care of all that,' they argued, 'but we can't expect results overnight'. This phrase, reproduced by many Croatian villagers, literally reflected regime statements[7]. The deafening silences that surrounded it on all sides reflected a cornerstone of the dominant nationalism: non-engagement. Resignation helped people to get a grip on the situation and enabled an avoidance of individual responsibility and action. Serbian villagers, of course, could not rely on an equivalent discourse of trust, but their scarce references to life during the previous Krajina period reflected a similar emphasis on the gap between 'ordinary people' and 'politics'. Hence, underlying the differences between Croatian and Serbian villagers, there was a sense of resignation to the absolute control of the powers-that-be, whether expressed through declared trust in the authorities (by Croats) or through the acceptance of powerlessness (by Serbs).

These feelings of powerlessness were coupled with a nearly complete absence of collective action. Despite dire living circumstances, there was no sign of protest and I witnessed no attempts to improve the village situation in any way, except on the private level. In fact, some Croatian villagers complained of the lack of mutual help, pointing out how people restricted their activities to their own family and refused to engage in collective efforts. In terms of communication between people of different

nationalities, there was virtually none. Hence, indifference was much more prevalent than militancy. Obviously, we have to contrast this passivity with the situation in the early 1990s when these villagers had been in the frontline of their respective national revivals. Then, people in his region had taken the initiative and engaged in different forms of, sometimes violent, collective action. Now, the perception that ruled amongst Croats was one of benevolent, all-powerful state authorities and atomised—but not conflictual—village families who were awaiting the fruits of their sacrifices in the war. Their houses had been rebuilt already and they waited in the certainty that the rest would follow. Serbian returnees expected nothing of the kind and simply survived in silence. This dichotomous picture, suggesting two monolithic national patterns, was only rarely undermined. For example, there was quite some resentment amongst Croatian villagers towards Croatian refugees from Bosnia, who were considered 'primitive' and said to engage in mafia-like practices. However, this did not express itself in any practical way and never led to any rapprochement between people of different nationalities.

Telling silences: the abdication of responsibility

In many ways, life in the villages was more striking with regard to what it systematically ignored than with regard to its actual content. The above-mentioned dominant refusal to communicate or otherwise engage with national Others was a case in point, as was the reluctance to take social or political action on any level. In narrative terms, telling silences were crucial in the villagers' stories. Elsewhere I have analysed how war stories, both of WWII and of 1991-5, usually concentrated on one period and one event only, without even mentioning the rest of the conflict (Jansen 2002). The key for attributing selective silences was almost always self-victimisation. In this discursive conflict, two versions of war history were mutually exclusive, whereas, sadly, there was plenty of evidence to support both of them. Such silence and the wider resistance against contextualisation were accompanied by a pervasive vagueness. Interestingly, people with dissident practices and views were much less vague, but almost everybody avoided going into details. It was virtually impossible to collect a concrete, chronological account of *any* event. Vagueness set the scene for sweeping accusations and served as an

instrument of self-protection, particularly in relation to more powerful people of one's own nationality. Throughout the post-Yugoslav states, the period after 1991 was often summarised as '*sve ovo*' ('all this') or '*ovo sranje*' ('this shit'). This had to do with simplification and abbreviation, but it also reflected a wider reluctance to specify.

These patterns of silence, vagueness and resignation allowed villagers to carve out a niche for themselves as part of an anonymous victimised mass, void of responsibility for their current predicament. Underlying the popular phrase, 'there are reasons for all this' ['*sve ima to svoje*'], which was never further explained, there was the idea that, 'we don't know the reasons and it is better not to ask'. In a dangerous context of confusion, loss and despair, digging deeper was considered a job for politicians and, by not going into these issues, people also avoided being entangled in them. Nevertheless, resignation to 'higher powers' was often mirrored by scepticism, initially less obvious to outsiders. Sarcasm about the lack of control over one's own fate was a popular theme in pitch-black humour in many parts of former Yugoslavia, and people liked telling anecdotes in which they themselves figured as *schlemiel*-like losers (Jansen 2000a, 2001).

Such sarcastic resignation supported ideas of self-victimisation and the almost ontological dividing line between everyday lives and 'politics' also allowed abdication of personal responsibility. As John Malkovich's character emphatically argued in the film *Dangerous Liaisons*: it was 'Beyond Their Control'. Hence, through postulating the existence of their everyday lives as at least theoretically independent from 'higher powers', many villagers also aimed to protect themselves against the overwhelming influence of the latter. It is this aspect that I turn to now.

Linking subjectivity to 'politics'

Evoking authoritative discourses

If most villagers considered 'politics' to be out of their control, and reinforced this perception in their everyday (in)action, did this mean they resigned to fatalism? Not completely, I would argue. My research material indicates that, if people wished to protect themselves against what they perceived as the danger of 'politics', they also felt that some of its aspects and some of its uses were not quite as undesirable. They evoked authoritative discourses

and created a picture whereby their everyday lives were perhaps not reflective of 'politics', but at least compatible or not-too-badly-out-of-tune with them. In that way, they deployed large, complex and powerful discursive practices in an attempt to assert control over the present. Hence, through a twist of strategy, it was precisely by postulating the separateness of their everyday lives from 'politics' that villagers opened up the possibility of linking their subjectivity to authoritative discourses of state and nation, *on their own initiative*. We have to look, then, at the ways in which people related to the dominant nationalisms and to alternative discourses and how they (re)structured their own practices for private and/or public use.

If we consider the villagers' attitudes as a set of coping patterns with violence, loss, poverty, a narrative break in the life story, powerlessness and confusion, we are dealing here with contested constructions of ontological security (Giddens 1991:35-69; see also Gillis 1994:3). Making sense of experience, they relied at least partly on pre-existing discursive material, often of the more powerful and authoritative kind (see Herzfeld 1985:21). Moreover, given the extreme context, they were continually expected to position themselves in relation to 'politics' through a process of ideological interpellation (Finlayson 1996). Usually they attempted to locate themselves favourably in relation to the dominant nationalist discourse—favourably, of course, in the eye of the beholder.

This does not mean that they were merely inscribing themselves into powerful discourses, although their choice was often extremely limited. Rather, I suggest, it was a question of practical sanity; if your everyday life was completely out of tune with *all* 'politics', you wouldn't be able to function in a public environment and you'd probably be considered mad or dangerous. Obviously, it is a question whether this drive for compatibility was only for public use, or whether there were benefits of incompatibility, but it should be clear that in the post-Yugoslav context the need to reposition oneself in relation to powerful discourses was acute. But how did these repositionings take place? How did people link their everyday lives to the 'politics' available? And how did they attempt to position themselves favourably in relation to powerful forces?

In a period of intense turmoil, narrative can become a common tool to comprehend processes

of change, or to try to keep them in check[8]. Moreover, we have to take into account that the stories of the villagers were to an extreme extent performative utterances. The discourses enforced by powerful institutions in the post-Yugoslav context were tied together by a nationalist prism, but, importantly, they were polysemic. Given this context, narrating events, or choosing not to, particularly in terms of nationality, was one of the few political acts accessible to most people. In the villages at the heart of this study, certain phrases referring to, or better, evoking authoritative discourses, and sometimes literally taken from those discourses, were continually reproduced in everyday life. Particularly when confronted with outsiders, such as state officials, journalists, or NGO workers, many narratives resorted to such evocation (see McKenna 1996:231-232).

Following Hajer, I use the concept of 'story lines' to clarify one way in which people can connect their everyday life experience to the authoritative discourses of 'politics'. The term 'story lines' refers to a 'generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific […] phenomena' (1995:56). Crucially, story lines are characterised by a high degree of multi-interpretability. This, suggests Hajer, makes some sense of order in discursive praxis possible, because when an actor uses a certain story line, it is automatically expected that the addressee will respond within a similar framework. However, as a result of the multi-interpretability this does not mean consensus. Story lines, then, offer actors the opportunity to talk and think about a topic without having to grasp the whole problematic. By calling on a story line, complexity and conditionality are reduced and a certain implicit common ground is presupposed—in the process, the authoritative discourse and the different kinds of power that are associated with it are evoked, while a large degree of vagueness is retained.

'We have Croatia!'

Let us consider an example of a story line. A central axis of Croatian nationalism was the sanctity of the national state and this authoritative discourse was continually reinforced through symbolry, policies, propaganda, and so on. Nevertheless, the discourse of nationalism was never (and could never be) spelled out completely. Rather, it was condensed in phrases such as '*Imamo Hrvatsku!*' ['We have Croatia!'], that

were literally reproduced in many of the villagers' accounts. In this way, it could be argued that powerful discourses of 'politics' controlled local everyday lives. However, my study indicates that people also actively used those lines in order evoke the authority of large and complex 'politics' and thereby to assert control themselves. This could be in order to justify certain behaviour or situations, to avoid reflection about certain issues, to deny responsibility, or simply to survive and stay somehow practically sane (sanity in the eye of the beholder, again).

A very straightforward goal of evoking powerful discourses is to invest the speaker with authority. It also sets the rules for conversation on a supposedly 'generally accepted' level without having to specify. 'We have Croatia!' was one of the most widely used lines in this way. Sometimes, as in the case of thirty year old Robert, former officer in the Bosnian Croatian army, and now living in a Serbian-owned house in Bijelo, this was broadened to a more general alignment with the nationalist tenet of 'one nation, one state':

'Everything will fall in place now that the Croatian people have their own state and the Serbs have gone. The Serbs have their own country. And the Muslims should be off to Turkey.'

Again this provided justification for maintaining control over the house Robert occupied[9] and for a refusal to return to his native Bosnia. However, more frequently, the intrinsic superiority of having one's own state was expressed less specifically. The fact that we deal with a very old population plays an important role here. Many villagers were approaching death; they reflected on their lives, assessed their achievements and constructed evidence of continuity. For many in those post-war conditions, successful lives of their children or material achievements were inaccessible as symptoms of this, but nationalist discourses provided such evidence by using concepts of birth, life and eternity. Croatian nationalism, through the story line 'We have Croatia!', offered a morbidly enlarged version of everything the Croatian villagers lacked. Instead of saying 'we have nothing', it said 'we have Croatia' (which is everything we need and everything we always wanted). Instead of saying 'we'll die soon', it said 'Croatia will live' (and therefore we will too). And instead of saying 'we are lonely and abandoned', it said 'we are together at last' (with our own people).

National disambiguation

One of the most striking patterns in the evocations of authoritative discourses through the use of story lines was the way in which they rewrote the past as a straightforward preface to the current situation. Elsewhere, I have analysed this in detail (Jansen 2002) and some of the examples above illustrate this process of retrospective disambiguation. Here, I focus on a similar process of disambiguation of the present[10], on patterns framed by the nationalist idiom or in reaction to it, which were at the time particularly prevalent amongst Croatian villagers. National disambiguation was the key to the construction of a social reality consisting only of discrete national groups: *us* (all of us) and *them* (all of them).

Let us look at some examples. Related to the historical cause of national liberation, Croatian villagers often evoked the powerful discourse of the preferability and superiority of national homogeneity to explain their reluctance to engage with Serbian returnees. They argued that everybody '*hoće biti svoj na svome*', a common phrase that says that it is only normal that a nation 'wants to be free in its own land'[11]. This was accompanied by the idea that everybody always feels better amongst 'his/her people'. Nada and Jozo, an elderly couple from Bosnia who fled to Croatia during the war and resettled in a Serbian-owned house in Bijelo, stated:

'Here things are good. We always felt that nostalgia for our own state, for our own Croatia. We are glad to be amongst our own people. It is better to be with one's own.'

Note that Nada and Jozo had lived in a highly mixed area in Central Bosnia for the previous sixty years of their lives—they had never spent a considerable period of time in Croatia before. They dramatically reformulated their narrative of 'home' and brought it in tune with the dominant nationalism. Thus the terms 'them' and 'us' now referred to a whole new family, village and state history and this allowed justification of the fact that they refused to leave the house they occupied and return to Bosnia.

On many occasions, Croatian villagers discussed contemporary events in other places—but only those that confirmed their perspective on the local situation. For example, they referred to heavily media-ted incidents in a distant Bosnian town in order to evoke the idea that all Serbs create problems, and therefore to reassert the impossibility of

co-existence with local Serbs. Josip, a sixty-odd year old Croat in Plavo, explained his unwillingness to engage with his Serbian neighbours in these terms:

'Living together with them? Phooo, look what they are doing to us in Derventa!'

Again, in one narrative movement, the Serbs in far-away Derventa and the local Serbs were equated as an unambiguous 'them'—to be avoided at all cost.

More generally, there was a striking leaking of diplomatic language into the everyday discourses of many villagers, of whom the older ones were often only semi-literate. Peace treaties and political declarations provided useful story lines evoking the authoritative world of international geopolitics and people deployed them to retrospectively reclaim control over their everyday lives. In this way, a family from Gradić in Bosnia stated that they had moved to (a Serbian house in) Bijelo, because, 'we didn't want to be a minority'. In doing so, they invoked a reason of a diplomatic nature, rather than referring to the fear, uncertainty and lack of opportunity that probably lay at the root of their move (which took place *after* the war). Similarly, when justifying their reluctance to return to Bosnia, they argued:

'We don't want our children to go to school in Gradić, where they can't study in their own language.'

Both parents had always lived in Gradić, previously a mixed town in Bosnia, and they certainly had never had any communication problems with their Bosniac or Serb neighbours, who spoke the same local dialect. However, they retrospectively applied the current doctrine of discrete Bosniac, Serbian and Croatian languages on a previously ambiguous situation. Times changed more dramatically than language, and the evocation of the authoritative discourse of language rights allowed them to resist subjection to another, possibly threatening discourse, that of rights of property and return.

The persistence of ambiguity: coping patterns of the marginalised

Given the centrality of strategies of disambiguation, the coping patterns of villagers in ambiguous positions deserve particular attention. We have already seen some snippets of this, when I explained that a very small minority of villagers consciously broke with the collectively sanctioned pattern of segregation. Such dissident practices were legitimised in different ways, but, interestingly, they also often relied on evocations of authority. One case where one mighty discourse was introduced in order to avoid control by an alternative form of 'politics' was the introduction of an extra 'Other'. Some villagers, Serbs and Croats, did occasionally engage with national Others and thus resisted the dominant denunciation of the standard 'Others'. When explaining this, they then often introduced the presumed danger of fundamentalism amongst 'Muslims', 'Turks' or '*Mudžahedini*', as the real problematic 'Other'. In addition to this minor phenomenon, dissident practice was usually justified with reference to non-national logic. I shall quickly distinguish three such alternative approaches, often deployed in combination with each other.

First of all, outsiders often strongly emphasised individual responsibility and refused to make generalisations about groups of people. Zoran, a Bosnian Serb married to a local Croatian woman, insisted on seeing 'a person as a person': he systematically used the first person singular, rather than plural, and often employed his own name when recounting past events. Moreover, he almost always qualified national labels: 'some clever / crazy / stupid Croats', or 'some mad / open-minded / aggressive Serbs', thereby providing an explanation for his practice to engage with some persons while steering clear from others, regardless of nationality.

A second alternative was the idea that the stakes of the post-Yugoslav conflict were not national but civilisational: a struggle between civilisation and primitivism. This was one of the underlying tenets of a large part of the critique of nationalism in all post-Yugoslav states. Rada, a fifty-year-old Serb who, because of her political stance, was shunned by Croats and Serbs alike, bewailed her victimisation by what she saw as an essentially primitive reflex of other villagers.

'If they have something to tell me, if they want to discuss something with me, let them tell me! Let us sit down at a table and talk about it. I am always ready for that! But on the basis of arguments! Not on the basis of the fact that I belong to the Serbian nation! What kind of primitivism is that!'

This attachment to values of 'civilisation' was often related to a strongly developed belief in education.

When condemning violence and hatred, Rada, one of the few highly educated villagers, often referred to others as 'illiterates', and explained how educated people would never do such things. When I pointed out that many of the politicians who had brought the country to war were highly educated, she reformulated that as a sharp accusation: an educated person should know better, and therefore s/he should *act* better. An educated person has no excuses for not respecting the rules of civilisation, which 'primitives' may not recognise.

A third widespread form of doubt in national disambiguation was a more empirical one, related to the above-mentioned process of sceptic resignation. Many villagers (of those present, obviously more Serbs than Croats) foresaw that they would live together again. 'It is normal', people would say, 'After "that war" we also lived together again.' Others, like Zoran, evoked the more general discourse of multi-ethnicity as the rule, rather than as an exception.

'All that business about dividing people on national grounds is nonsense. There is no such thing as an ethnically clean village or town, and certainly not state. Multi-ethnicity is inevitable and completely normal.'

Zoran, as I have mentioned before, was married to a Croat and he was the only Serb to have returned to Plavo. After half a decade of displacement, which had forced his family in and out of different places in Croatia and Bosnia, he now eked out a living of subsistence agriculture. Throughout the 1970s-1980s Zoran had been the village teacher, a Party member who had perceived himself as a Yugoslav. After the war, even amongst the now dominant hard-line Croats he was still credited for his consistent fairness in nationality issues in Yugoslav times. This, however, had not prevented his family from being the first one to be expelled, nor did it lead to any social interaction or assistance upon his return, except from his wife's (Croatian) family.

Nationalism, structure and agency: making room for pessimism

Positioning and legitimising violence
Let us now return to the issues of WWII trauma and media manipulation. The material presented in this study on the role of nationalism in people's coping strategies encourages us to question certain central assumptions of prevalent approaches to the post-Yugoslav nationalisms. I have argued above that emphasising the role of individual agency in people's positionings in relation to dominant discourses allows for a less deterministic sketch of the situation in post-war Croatia than an approach which privileges WWII traumas or media manipulation as almost independent variables. In that sense, conformism, rather than determinism, becomes a central notion. And, to take this one step further: attributing some level of personal engagement to those who did conform—and they were a large majority—also allows us to begin to account for those who didn't (see Jansen 2000b).

In a brief text written during the post-Yugoslav wars, Beograd anthropologist Ivan Čolović addresses the issue of why war propaganda was so effective (1994:57-62). He suggests that the key lies in the authority of the media, derived from their assumed identity as the voice of the regime. And, in effect, in a conversation with a villager in Bijelo, this was illustrated literally, when the man pointed at the television set every time he mentioned 'the state', 'our leaders' or 'Tudjman'. In an unintended twist of irony, he didn't know that there was a colourful children's game show on. Čolović argues that many people, whenever asked for their opinions by someone from outside, tend to give the answer which they assume is the nearest to the line of the current centres of power of interest to them. People don't believe that these outsiders want to know their opinions at all—and usually they are probably right. Why would they be asked? 'This means', says Čolović,

that many people see television and other media not as a source of truthful information and convincing messages, but as a bulletin board on which daily orders are shown. Or as some kind of political traffic lights that tell you when you have to turn right or left, or if you should go straight on or simply wait until further notice. Otherwise, you are in danger […] of being punished, excluded from traffic, or simply run over. (1994:61).

Critics could argue that surely such an approach fails to take into account the existence of hidden transcripts, providing alternative visions of reality. While such resistant interpretations might have existed, and I hope they can play a significant role in the future, in my view they did not affect collective

life in the villages in any meaningful way during my stay. Not only were the dominant nationalist discourses communicated through the media reproduced widely, but sometimes media messages were actively incorporated into personal narratives in order to legitimise certain acts. An extreme example was provided by Jozo and Nada, the elderly Bosnian Croat couple in Bijelo, for whom the equivalence between the televised Serbs who destroyed Vukovar on the news and the local Serbs, had provided justification for ethnic cleansing.

'Back in Bosnia, in the very beginning, we watched television… You must have seen it as well, how the Serbs were destroying Vukovar[12]. My God, it was horrible. They were burning and looting and killing. So we arranged with the Muslims to chase out our Serbs. Later, the *Mudžahedini* turned against us. They wanted a fundamentalist state. And they drove us out.'

Note the curious synchronic equivalence through disambiguation: in 1991 all of them, including *our* Serbs, were criminals, so they had to be removed preventively. The effect of propaganda through the media, then, did not simply take the form of crude manipulation; sometimes it functioned as a 'traffic light' and sometimes it provided a legitimising background for acts of violence. This is how my analytical focus has shifted from structure-based determinism to agency-oriented conformism.

The (dis)comfort of conformism

Nationalism was omnipresent in the post-Yugoslav context, amongst intellectual and political elites, but also in the daily lives of most other people, certainly in the war-affected areas. Exclusivist acts were rife and often considered acceptable and normal. Still, I would argue that a lot of villagers had not really reflected on many of the issues addressed by nationalism. Why should they? For most of them, there were more immediate worries. However, when the matter arose in conversation, they tapped into the always-at-hand, polysemic, contradictory discourse of nationalism. It was the most authoritative discourse of the moment and it served as a perfect *passe-partout* without really taking issue with one's own biography. More generally, in contrast to its alternatives, nationalism provided strikingly straightforward stories, an attractive attribute in the post-war confusion. Most of the people I encountered in these post-war villages did not seem to be fanatical believers in the tenets of nationalism, but conformism with this dominant discourse provided them with comfort in uncomfortable times[13]. Often, the discomfort this caused for others was simply not taken into account[14].

Again, I hasten to add that the material for this text was collected in a specific period after the war, when Croatian villagers were the ones for whom nationalism *worked*. It does not allow generalisations about the outbreak of the conflict in the early 1990s, when Serbian villagers demonstrated a similar enthusiasm for *their* nationalism. The background and logic of that outburst should be analysed in a different contextual light. But by the end of the decade, it was not a consolation to me that the frequent discriminatory acts and talk amongst Croatian villagers seemed to rely more on indifference and conformism than on hatred. And it was frustrating to be confronted with the same blanket explanations for a variety of phenomena. They were tired, of course. After years of war, displacement and loss, they didn't want to reflect on events, on reasons or on guilt. Luckily for them, they didn't have to—in fact, they were encouraged not to—quoting some story lines was sufficient. So a question by an outsider became more often than not an occasion to throw in some story lines from the nationalist discourse. Why? Because that's what you did. And because you assumed that that's what others did. And they did.

Reconquering everyday life

So: conformism. But not only conformism, of course. The consequences of the nationalist outbursts, the violence, the loss and the poverty were real (see Povrzanović 1997). Even if the existence of a 'national question' was a matter of debate in 1989, it was certainly reality now (Buden 1996:171) and maybe it would be too painful to give up the enormous importance attached to nationality now, after all that had happened in the name of it. We should not forget that in the past decade many villagers had gone through experiences that had dramatically affected their everyday lives. This text attempts to take that into account by conceptualising their current practices as coping patterns, mainly consisting of 'favourable' repositionings in a compatible relation to the authoritative discourse of nationalism. McKenna's study of rank-and-file engagement with Muslim separatism in the Philippines puts forward a

similar argument (1996). He points out that 'ordinary people' do not blindly reproduce the dominant narratives, but that their support relies on practical compliance on the basis of their own collateral goals.

However, just as I would argue that acts and statements which strike us as radically nationalist do not necessarily mean that the villagers in question were simply militant national believers, I think it also doesn't necessarily mean that they were always just hoping to get the most out of nationalism by aligning themselves with it. Certainly, this factor played a role; by positioning themselves as near as possible to the heart of the dominant nationalism, they sided with the strong and picked the fruits of crushing the weak. This process was alternately accessible to Serbs and Croats during the 1990s.

However, at least after the war, for many of the villagers nationalism seemed to fulfil another function as well. Repositioning strategies were not just about getting near the heart of power. They were also about keeping a distance from those centres, about reconquering the everyday life experience, about fighting the colonisation of 'ordinary' lives by 'politics'. Non-engagement, non-communication, vagueness, simplification, selective amnesia, sceptic resignation and various story lines allowed people to construct their everyday experiences in tune with the authority of nationalism, without coming too near to its risks. Without demanding introspection, without posing nasty questions and without requiring an eye for complicated nuances. They evoked nationalism, without really going into its 'ins and outs', which meant that they didn't come too near the power associated with the discourse. It also meant that that power didn't come too near them. What else is resignation than leaving it all to 'higher powers'? What else is vagueness than keeping it all out of my house or my head?

World-wide activist experience in war areas teaches us that the most extreme crimes, the most radical forms of hate speech and the most violent attitudes are often not to be found amongst those people who have been victimised most by violence. Sociological research in Croatia confirmed this (Hodžić 1998). Maybe the idea of nationalism as a coping pattern which navigates between proximity and distance and which asserts non-responsibility *and* control

over everyday life can help us understand this. For some, the stakes are simply too high—they have to cling to a distance, they cannot afford to come that near to powerful discourses of hatred and violence. People whose stakes are not that high are in an easier position to align themselves freely with more dangerous 'politics'. In Bijelo, Serbian returnees experienced most provocations by the police, on- or off-duty. One officer informed me that the best solution would be 'to mine all Serbian houses' and prided himself that the area had always been a 'hard Ustaša region'. The man had never even been there before the war.

How does all this relate to the pessimistic conceptualisation of agency that I mentioned earlier? While acknowledging depressing levels of homogeneity around nationally exclusivist behaviour and positionings, this article undermines the argument of structural determination by WWII trauma or media manipulation—at least for the post-war period. Impressions of monolithic consensus, I would argue, do not necessarily rule out agency on the part of those expressing it (even if this sometimes takes place through non-action). I pointed out how virtually all villagers experienced a radical separation of their everyday lives from 'politics': they saw things as decided for them by powerful others. Through the same process, in a drive for self-protection, they postulated at least relative autonomy for their personal narratives. Villagers then attempted to exert control over their own lives by evoking authoritative discourses in their practice. Some life experiences were both retroactively and strategically brought in tune with exclusivist nationalism; in this way, paradoxically, they were reformulated as if they belonged to the individual's everyday life experience, rather than having been imposed by an uncontrollable force. These repositioning strategies allowed proximity *and* distance, innocence *and* merit, non-responsibility *and* control. They allowed one to materially and psychologically draw on 'politics', but simultaneously to keep the latter at a distance from one's personal everyday life. Crucially: compatibly at a distance. In this way these people exerted power in a situation of extreme powerlessness; it allowed them comfort in uncomfortable times, regardless of the discomfort it caused to others.

NOTES

[1] Research carried out in 1997-1998. All persons are referred to by pseudonyms, as well as the villages, which I have called Bijelo, Plavo, Crno, Sivo and Zeleno. The NGO who carried out the project was local, Zagreb-based, with me being the only non-Croatian citizen. Many thanks to colleague-activists, particularly to Sanda Malbaša for support and constructive criticism. Also thanks to Jody Barrett, Andy Dawson, Caroline Oliver, Ivana Spasić, Mark Johnson, Nerys Roberts and the participants of the *War and Society* Seminar at Aarhus University, 2001.

[2] It should be emphasised that there were no phenotypic, clothing or dietary differences between Serbs and Croats either. All villagers spoke an identical local variant of what was previously called Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian. Religion was relatively more important amongst Croats (Catholicism) than amongst Serbs, who were more likely to have a Partisan background. Still, in former Yugoslavia, these villages were different from a lot of other nationally mixed areas, and they presented a rather extreme situation. Unlike for instance in most larger places, the nationality of all inhabitants was known too all others.

[3] The story of a 'privileged' Serbian-dominated 'Communist' village next to a 'discriminated' Croatian-dominated 'Ustaša' village was a common one in this part of the Yugoslav Socialist Republic Croatia.

[4] In my view, the term 'neighbours' occupies a problematic position in debates about the post-Yugoslav conflict. Both in media and in academic coverage, it is often inappropriately and uncritically employed when referring to Yugoslav times, resulting in an unquestioned, idealised representation of that past as co-operative and harmonious. In this text I straightforwardly use the term (ex-)neighbours for people who live(d) in the same neighbourhood, regardless of the warmth of their co-existence. See Jansen 2002 for a discussion of contested local memories with regard to previous relations between Serbs and Croats; see Jansen *forthcoming* for a similar study in a Bosnian context.

[5] Davor and Nela had come from other regions. Note that, like many others, both of them occupied houses owned by pre-war Serbian inhabitants.

[6] 1996-1998 research for my PhD Dissertation in Zagreb and Beograd (Jansen 2000b).

[7] In many ways, this situation is only a reformulated continuation of prevalent patterns in Titoist Yugoslavia. Sociological research in the Former Yugoslavia always uncovered a strong adherence to authoritarian values (Golubović 1995; Biro 1994:13-38; Hodžić 1998).

[8] See Ricoeur 1990:167-193; 1991:32-33; Ganguly 1992:29-30; Rapport 1997; Jansen 1998, 2000b.

[9] Like many others, Robert kept a videotape he had made when first arriving here. It showed the heavily damaged house as he had found it. Since, he had made several investments and kept the tape as proof of this. This is a clear indication that, despite his refusal to acknowledge the issue of property rights on an explicit level, implicitly he was aware of the possibility that they would once apply to him.

[10] Duijzings employs the useful term 'ethnic unmixing' to refer to the more material aspects of this process (2000). Bauman convincingly argues how the extermination of ambiguity lies at the basis of nationalist discourse (1992).

[11] Literally this story line means that everyone 'wants to be his own on his own', in other words, 'wants to own himself in a place that is his'. This refers simultaneously to two levels: nations and individual members of these nations.

[12] They talk about 1991. It is not a coincidence that Nada and Jozo should mention Vukovar, a town that occupies a central position in Croatian nationalism as an icon of Serbian aggression and Croatian suffering and sacrifice. Note that Vukovar is situated in Croatia, about 200km away from their Bosnian village, which in 1991 was not involved in war.

[13] See Bolčić 1995:480-481.

[14] In fact, many seemed to have come to a point where they excluded reflexivity on the issue (see Iveković 1994:198).

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