

Victims, Underdogs and Rebels

Discursive Practices of Resistance in Serbian Protest

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Abstract ■ Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article analyses the discursive practices of resistance deployed in two recent waves of dissent in Serbia: the 1996–97 demonstrations against the Milosevic regime, and the 1999 anti-NATO protest. I explore three identity motifs running through both protests ('victims', 'underdogs', and 'rebels'), and explain how they were differentially articulated into a discursive practice of defiance. In contemporary Serbia, they resonate with everyday mechanisms of coping and belonging, grounded in nationalist representations of what it means to be a Serb. By analysing the contradictory deployment and performance of these motifs in two very different outbursts of dissent, this article offers an understanding of the tactical polyvalence of discourses of resistance.

Keywords ■ discursive practice ■ national identity ■ protest ■ resistance ■ Serbia ■ Yugoslavia

Resistance and the tactical polyvalence of discourses

In contemporary anthropology it is almost taken for granted that the discipline has an innate capacity of subversion. Its ethnographic sensitivity to the existence of non-dominant patterns of meaning and practice, and its perceived ability to disclose and even empower the subaltern, feed this cherished self-image of anthropology's devotion to resistance. Far from arguing against the subversive potential of anthropology, in this article I address a number of issues that touch upon the core of such disciplinary concerns. Based on an ethnographic study of two recent periods of protest in Serbia, I offer a critical contribution to our understanding of 'resistance'.

Routledge has argued that resistance refers to 'any action, imbued with intent, that attempts to challenge, change, or retain particular circumstances relating to societal relations, processes, and/or institutions' (Routledge, 1996b: 415). This approach avoids monolithic reductionism and reflects an open and flexible concept of 'a plurality of resistances' (Foucault, 1990: 96), developed into a theoretical framework by writers like de Certeau (1984). In anthropology, Scott has contributed greatly to this

field by disclosing the 'weapons of the weak' and 'hidden transcripts' in omnipresent everyday strategies of dissent (1985, 1990). Similarly, the ethnographic study of youth subcultures, especially in Britain, has demonstrated the subversive capacities of seemingly banal issues such as style, speech and music (for example Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; Brake, 1980).

With respect to the political subjects of resistance, it is now widely accepted that subversive agency cannot be pinned down to one particular class; rather, it needs to be conceptualized as a dynamic of multiple articulations within fields of pervasive antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 85–8; Foucault, 1990: 94–5). Beyond that, in this article I demonstrate how similar or even identical discursive practices can be deployed by a variety of people in different contexts, serving different agendas – at times in entirely contradictory ways. This leads me to point out the risk of fetishizing resistance – the danger of privileging *any* form of resistance as a welcome challenge to 'the system' (see Abu-Lughod, 1989). The contradictory deployment of discursive practices of resistance in recent Serbian protests illustrates the ambiguous nature of the concept of 'resistance' and it demonstrates that actors can exploit the oppositional location of discourses in relation to a more influential discourse or institution in many different ways. Discursive strategies of resistance which may strike us at first sight as emancipatory, progressive or liberating, may then be appropriated to serve oppressive purposes. This may be the case as a result of conscious planning, but it can also form part of largely unintended everyday life coping strategies.

In this way, this article addresses the notion of the 'tactical polyvalence of discourses' (Foucault, 1990: 100–2). Foucault warned against monolithic views of power and resistance, and argued for a concept of discourse as a 'series of discontinuous elements whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable' (1990: 100), as a 'multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies' (1990: 100).

There is not, on the one side a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another opposing strategy. (Foucault, 1990: 101–2)

Following Foucault I now analyse the tactical productivity and the strategic integration of two sets of discursive practices of Serbian protest.

Two waves of protest in Serbia

The Serbian regime was the only post-Yugoslav government entering the new millennium after having faced large and sustained street protests by its own population. In the early 1990s, Beograd was the scene of anti-war and

anti-regime demonstrations, but brutal intervention by regime forces, including army tanks in 1992, crushed the protests and paved the way for an intensification of nationalist euphoria, war and socioeconomic catastrophe. For years, any kind of organized resistance against Milosevic's government was swamped in a climate of war-tiredness, disillusion with political initiative, outmigration by the young and educated, and preoccupation with everyday survival.

Citizens vs the Slobosaurus (1996–97)

The first post-Dayton municipal elections, on 17 November 1996, brought a victory for the opposition coalition *Zajedno* ('Together') in almost all urban centres of Serbia, but the results were immediately overruled by the Milosevic regime. The electoral fraud gave rise to an unexpected wave of overt dissent, which involved hundreds of thousands of people, and lasted for almost three months. The two main coordinating forces of the demonstrations were the victorious *Zajedno* coalition and student councils of Serbian universities. Their social base was relatively homogeneous, as the participants were predominantly young or middle-aged, well educated, urban and middle class (Babovic et al., 1997; Milic et al., 1997).

Politically, the Winter Protest temporarily united extremely diverse forces in an anti-regime coalition:¹ nationalists who blamed the *communist* Milosevic for Serbia's decay, and anti-nationalists who blamed the *nationalist* Milosevic for bringing war and poverty to the whole of former Yugoslavia.² Moreover, even within seemingly homogeneous oppositional discursive practices, conveyed by one and the same political subject, there were multiple strategies at work.³

Serbs vs the World (1999)

In 1999, the Kosovo⁴ crisis brought about yet another episode in Serbia's decade of post-Yugoslav decay. It was in Kosovo that Slobodan Milosevic launched his decisive claim to power in the mid 1980s (Silber and Little, 1995: 36–48), and here his destructive politics came home. 'The devil had come for his share', as a Serbian expression goes. Again, a wave of protest broke out, this time not against Milosevic, but against NATO, and against 'the West' in general; the Kosovo Albanians were portrayed merely as pawns in a Western power play. Not surprisingly, in the 1999 protest, aggressive and xenophobic nationalism was much more prominent, and different participants deployed the common cause of 'peace' in different ways. Although the anti-NATO protest certainly contained a non-nationalist, pacifist element, many who had been involved in the 1996–1997 demonstrations found themselves paralysed. Add to this the state of war, and it was easy for the regime to incorporate the different voices of protest into a choir singing out against NATO, and *therefore* in favour of Serbia, and, ultimately, *therefore* in favour of Milosevic. Nevertheless, many of the Serbian anti-NATO protests were not necessarily pro-regime; rather, they reflected the extreme

malleability of the meanings of discursive practices of resistance, by constructing NATO alternatively as a threat to Serbian national interests, or as a threat to peace *tout court*.

'How could they possibly?' From 'down with Slobo!' to 'Kosovo is Serbian!'

During the Kosovo crisis, I was frequently asked this question: how was it possible that 'the Serbs', who had only recently represented a democratic force against a dictatorship, now stood by their regime and ferociously clung to a nationalist vision of Kosovo?

Parts of the answer lie in the fact that the question is misguided. First of all, the 1999 protest was much smaller in scale and the protesters were not necessarily the same persons as in 1996–97. Indeed, the participation of large numbers of regime-supporters in the anti-NATO demonstrations indicates that many were not Winter Protest veterans, while there was also a clear pattern of continuity in attendance. Second, the context had changed: the 1996–97 demonstrations had not led to democratization, but had given way to further deterioration in living standards and even stronger feelings of disillusion and international isolation. Third, we have to understand that the Winter Protest was strictly anti-regime in nature: the opponent was the Milosevic regime, and not necessarily his nationalist policies, and certainly not his line on Kosovo. In this sense, the situation in 1999 provoked a response on issues different from those addressed two and a half years before.

But these precautions should not lead us away from the question: how could Serbia so quickly change from a scene of democratic dissent to a scene of support for an oppressive nationalist cause? Discourses of national identity were reinvigorated and the diversity within them decreased, for a number of reasons. However, importantly, the scope and the nature of this process went beyond a (legitimate) fear of regime suppression of dissent, as well as beyond a closing of ranks in the face of bombings and demonization.⁵ This was, of course, related to the meaning of Kosovo within Serbian national mythology.⁶ Refining insights into this well-known phenomenon, I would argue that, for Serbian nationalism, Kosovo is actually of little relevance as a physical place. Apart from the odd visit to its monasteries, most Serbs wouldn't have dreamt of visiting, let alone living in what they considered a poor, backward region run by competing mafias. Kosovo is a discursively constructed icon, a cherished traumatic knot where many lines of Serbian nationalism meet, and its loss hit a raw nerve in Serbian national mythology (Zirojevic, 1996). However, while the focus of the 1999 wave of national homogenization centred around 'Kosovo' as a traumatic knot in Serbian nationalism, not everything can be explained by referring to its mythical significance, a tendency present in much media reportage.

In what follows, I explore certain discursive practices of resistance central to the anti-NATO protest and I argue that the 1996–97 demonstrations relied at least partly on similar mechanisms of identification for

their discursive strategies. This results in a closer consideration of this pattern of paradoxical continuity, articulated through Serbian motifs of identity which are not confined to any particular protest.

Identity motifs and discursive practices of protest

At first sight, there is little or no link between the two waves of protest addressed in this article. The 1996–97 demonstrations conveyed a varied and largely unarticulated discourse of democratic dissent directed against the regime, whereas the 1999 protest targeted NATO along a variety of contradictory lines, including the Serbian national interest, pacifism and anti-Western feelings. However, with regard to the actual practices, there was a range of parallels between the Winter demonstrations and the anti-NATO protests, in the *forms* that the resistance took. This was the case with regard to locations, spatial tactics,⁷ and the use of the internet as an expansion of the ‘terrain of resistance’ (Routledge, 1996a). Equally central to both protests was an emphasis on the written, typed, sprayed, spoken or chanted word.

Moreover, in both cases, a central place was reserved for the acting out of solidarity-in-resistance, for the very performance of resistance. More than any underlying ideology, it was acts of defiance which fed into a common cause and created a partial sense of shared meanings. This centrality of the discursive *practices* of resistance, i.e. *doing* resistance, could also help to explain the self-consciously humorous and exuberant character of the protests, and the central place of experiential, performative forms of participation such as singing, dancing and joking.

Strategies of defiant humour

Let us look at some compelling illustrations of the centrality of practice and performance in the 1996–97 demonstrations. First, a student protest action, provoked by a statement of Mira Markovic, Milosevic’s wife and president of Yugoslav Left (JUL), the small partner party in the ruling coalition.⁸ She publicly stated that a lot of blood had been shed for the introduction of communism into Yugoslavia, and that it would never go without blood. In response to this open threat of violence, and in memory of the tanks that crushed earlier protests, the students set up a blood transfusion campaign. They presented the collected blood at the JUL headquarters, asking them, now that they had their blood, if they could please go? Another extremely popular, powerful expression of protest was the *Discotheque Blue Cordon*. This occurred when a stand-off between the demonstrators and the police ended in stalemate: a provisional sound system was moved in, and for 178 hours, rotating police cordons faced a party bringing together up to 30,000 people.

Both examples discursively articulated a similar set of motifs of identity,

which, for analytical reasons, I organize into the triad of victim, underdog and rebel. Clearly, the blood transfusion action evoked these themes of sacrificial victimhood, of underdog heroism and of anti-authoritarian rebellion. Similarly, in the Blue Cordon, a crowd of fraud victims risked police beatings and self-consciously braved extreme winter temperatures. They did so in their capacity of individual, non-violent citizens: underdogs in the face of heavily equipped riot police, representatives of an authoritarian state apparatus. Moreover, reports in the opposition press drew parallels with the Berlin Wall: an armed cordon protected what in the eyes of many was the last bastion of communism in Europe against relatively powerless but historically righteous protesters. Finally, of course, the whole event represented an outburst of rebellious defiance: a dancing crowd having great fun despite all the above conditions. All nightclubs in town which normally catered to a student audience suspended their activities, because they could not compete with the Discotheque. Moreover, young female protesters dared members of the police cordon to join in by handing them flowers, kissing them and flirting with them. At one point they even organized a beauty contest to elect *Mister Milicionar*.

In the 1999 anti-NATO protest, similar deployments of those motifs were articulated into discursive strategies of resistance. NATO propaganda explicitly stated that the air strikes did not target the Serbian people, with NATO leaflets even claiming to be on their side, and against the Milosevic regime. However, the violence was appropriated into a discourse built precisely around being the collective and individual targets of NATO air strikes, while simultaneously being denied the right to speak from that position through the imposed notion of 'collateral damage'.

However, many people reclaimed that discursive position, and the ubiquitous target-symbol (see Figure 1) quickly developed into a summary of their stance of self-conscious defiance. It resonated with victimhood (being targeted), being the underdog (facing NATO) and rebellion (defiantly wearing this symbol in public).

Jokes, puns and a whole new bombing vocabulary arose and circulated in everyday conversation in Serbia, and worldwide on the internet. On some occasions, rather than with the usual '*dobar dan*' (good day), I was greeted with '*bombardan*', and the name of the city Beograd was sometimes changed into 'Bombay'. Moreover, throughout Serbia, billboards were erected, tilted slightly upwards for easy viewing by NATO pilots, and defying them. One of them, in Zrenjanin, the last sizeable town not to have been bombed yet, read 'NATO why don't you bomb us? We haven't got a contagious disease!'

The blind leading the faked: lies, lies, lies

In both protests, the central role of defiance was illustrated by attitudes to the media. The mass media played a crucial role in creating the regime-led nationalist euphoria, and all oppositional demonstrations during the



Figure 1 The target symbol

Milosevic era have addressed media policies as a central problem. In 1996–97, this was reflected in the trajectory of the demonstrations, which would often take the form of the so-called *Media Walk*, passing by the buildings of regime-minded media. In many cases, the protesting crowds symbolically turned their backs on these icons of manipulation. Similarly, an extremely popular way of displaying dissent in the Winter Protest was called *Noise is all the rage* ('*Buka u modi*'): every day at 7:30, hundreds of thousands of people drowned out the main evening news report on state TV with an outburst of noise from their living rooms and balconies.⁹

Not surprisingly, in the 1999 anti-NATO protest, many Serbs turned their fury against foreign media, and especially against CNN and the BBC. There had been some accusations of foreign media coverage in 1996–97 as well, accusing them of misrepresenting the demonstrations as driven by nationalism. However, on the whole, the Winter Protest was seen as an opportunity for the world to get to know 'the real Serbia', rather than the Balkan primitives who had been represented in global media during the Bosnian war. This was illustrated in an interview with Granny Olga, who unexpectedly became the students' mascot, after taking on the daily habit of greeting the crowds from her balcony:

The Serbs are not what they were presented by the world to be. [...] The Serbs have souls! I am especially grateful to the students for succeeding in improving the impression about us. (*Boom!* 10 Feb. 1999)¹⁰

Needless to say, it was very different in 1999, when Western media were part

of the enemy. On an anti-NATO web page, it said 'CNN + BBC = Cartoon Network', and elsewhere I saw 'The Albanians wanted a republic, and all they got was the CNN-public.' However, it is crucial to understand that this did *not* mean a sudden upsurge in respect for the Serbian media. On the contrary, the above-mentioned representation of Serbian selves was reinforced through the widespread conviction that *all* the information about the Kosovo conflict consisted of lies and propaganda. The difference was, or so claimed many Serbs who were critical of their own regime, that after years of media manipulation, *they* had learned to see through it, whereas people in 'the West' hadn't. One of the many anonymous diaries on the internet read: 'I am a bit jealous of those divine natures who can believe the news they hear. I don't even believe the air raid alert anymore'.¹¹

A consequence of declaring that all news reporting consists of nothing but lies is that historical empathy is often elevated to a crucial source of understanding. Even during the 1996–97 demonstrations, a journalist explained foreign media reports about nationalism in the protests in these terms. The quality of these reports, he said, depended on the foreign journalist's 'knowledge of events in Serbia, its distant and near history'. He added that it was 'questionable how competent they could be in achieving this' if they were 'unfamiliar with the people they were reporting about'. This was followed by an attack on the situation of the local Serbian media.¹²

This privileging of historical empathy was intensified during the NATO air strikes, as was illustrated in my private correspondence at the time. When we were in disagreement about an issue, I was regularly told that it was normal that I couldn't really grasp things, because, after all, I was a foreigner, and I didn't know what it was like to be a Serb. Paradoxically, but understandably, those elements of my opinions that we agreed upon were explained with reference to my supposed intimate emotional understanding of 'the Serbian character'. The central place attributed to empathy resonates with classic debates of insiderhood/outsiderhood within anthropology, and it should be clear throughout this text that a love/hate relationship between the anthropologist and his/her 'field' can be the result.¹³

A triad of resistance and Serbian nationalist representations of self

Clearly, the triad victim-underdog-rebel is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, nor were these identity motifs invented in the 1990s. Milošević rode to power articulating and intensifying them in the so-called 'happenings of the people' and 'the anti-bureaucratic revolution' of the late 1980s (Silber and Little, 1995: 60–73). Moreover, this triad is not a Serbian invention but pervades a wide variety of resistance movements, and constitutes a global 'traveling strategy' (Said, quoted in Routledge, 1996a: 526). However, I argue that, in contemporary Serbia, these motifs resonate with everyday mechanisms of coping and belonging, grounded in nationalist representations of what it means to be a Serb.¹⁴

All nationalist narratives are discursively constructed around implicit and explicit notions of a mythical national identity, motifs of self which can be at once collective and individual. Often, in the collectivizing discourse of nationalisms, those who consider themselves members of a certain nation (and, more problematically, those who are considered so by others, but not by themselves) are to a certain extent seen as metonymical representatives of the collective (Herzfeld, 1985; Biro, 1994). This intimate link between the characterization of the nation and the individual becomes particularly clear in people's often indiscriminate use of 'I', 'we', 'a Serb', 'the Serbs' and 'our people'. In nationalist discourses this intersection of the collective and individual level is often deployed as a semi-strategic narrative mechanism, whereby, at different times, responsibility, guilt and merit are differentially distributed between the two levels¹⁵ (see Holy, 1996: 61–6, 72–91; Jansen, 1998).

In the remainder of this article, I demonstrate how these motifs of self, resonating with Serbian representations of self, were acted out in the discursive practices of resistance of the 1996–97 *and* of the 1999 protests. Clearly, the two waves of dissent applied them to different subjects of resistance: in the anti-Milosevic demonstrations, they took shape around the category of 'citizens' (Mimica, 1997: 11), whereas in the anti-NATO protest they were applied to the category of 'Serbs' (even though, as we shall see, sometimes represented as 'Yugoslavs').

If the 1996–97 demonstrations, while not structured in national terms, evoked these motifs in their performance, they were not necessarily primarily nationalist in their political objectives. Rather, in terms of discursive strategies of resistance, the protest resonated with a number of lines which are *also* prominent in Serbian nationalist discourses, and therefore reflected elements of the nationalist *doxa* in Serbian society (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1984: 255–9; Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1994: 266–72).

The NATO air strikes provided a fertile ground for yet another episode in the post-Yugoslav intensification and homogenization of Serbian national identities.¹⁶ Not only was nationalism a much more important ideological factor, but also the above motifs of identity were elevated to unprecedented heights. Performative patterns of the 1996–97 anti-regime demonstrations were elaborated upon and, paradoxically, reconceptualized as quintessentially Serbian. In this way, resistance *tout court* came to be represented as a typical Serbian way of being. One slogan in the anti-NATO protest summarized this leap: '*Beograd je svet, Kosovo je svetinje*' ('Beograd is the world, Kosovo is sacred'). The first half was one of the central and most visible slogans of the 1996–97 demonstrations, arguing for an end to Serbia's isolation from the democratic world. In the second half, added in 1999, Kosovo was proclaimed a Serbian sanctuary. In the resulting double slogan, through alliteration, the two assertions were linked up and placed on the same discursive level of resistance and righteousness.

Victims

Ramet has described Serbian nationalism as 'traumatic nationalism', a reference to its obsessive preoccupation with suffering and sacrifice of the Serbs *as a nation* (1995: 103–5). The defeat of Christian armies at the 1389 Battle of Kosovo was developed into the epitome of Serbian suffering and sacrifice, and the theme of the Serbs defending Christian Europe against Islamic expansionism has been picked up at several points throughout history – and again in Bosnia and Kosovo. Throughout my ethnographic work, in everyday conversations as well as in correspondence and publications, I came across endless references to Serbian suffering. After the 1389 battle, the tale of victimization continues with five centuries of oppression under 'the Turks', reaching its climax in the Second World War genocide at the hands of German and Croatian Fascists and their collaborators (Denich, 1994; Hayden, 1994; Bogosavljevic, 1996).

The victim theme was intensified in the 1980s, when Serbian public opinion went through a stage of moral panic about rape, expulsion and cultural genocide by Kosovo Albanians. The 1990s wars in Croatia and Bosnia were often represented through a similar prism: Serbian men defending themselves, their wives and children, the Serbian nation, Yugoslavia, Christianity or a combination of some of these. And, finally, even the international isolation since the beginning of the post-Yugoslav wars acquires its meaning in terms of victimization. Frequently, disbelief is expressed at the lack of understanding by the outside world, as illustrated by the fact that, during my fieldwork in 1996–97, a period of relative peace, I was repeatedly asked when 'we' ('the West') would finally stop harassing 'the Serbs'; a reference to economic sanctions.

Citizens as victims (1996–97)

In the 1996–97 anti-Milosevic demonstrations, the motif of the victim underlay many of the discursive strategies of resistance central to the events, as well as in sympathetic media representations of the protests (Maric, 1998: 234–6). Clearly, by inserting their bodies into heavily politicized space, the demonstrators were running the risk of being subjected to state violence; and indeed, on several occasions peaceful protesters were dispersed by violent interventions of the special police forces (see Human Rights Watch, 1997). A banner which read 'Those were good times under the Turks!', resonated with the theme of victimization, and framed life under Milosevic firmly within the historical mythology of Serbia. Furthermore, although the 1996–97 demonstrations conveyed a strongly pro-European discourse, many people expressed disillusion with what I would call 'real-existing' Europe. In their perception, this was one more proof that Europe was letting Serbia down: 'Where are they now that we need them?'

The victim motif also ran through symbolic actions on the streets, such as on one occasion, when tens of thousands of student demonstrators found

themselves in the main shopping street of Beograd, blocked on all sides by cordons of special police. The students quickly seized the opportunity to act out their status as captives in their own city by forming a prison circle and walking around with their hands on the back of their heads. Also, during the demonstrations, an improvised newspaper by one of the student committees published an updated Universal Declaration of Human Rights,¹⁷ subtitled 'The latest version for the Serbian-speaking and territorial area'. After ironically introducing the 'right to obedience', it illustrates the role of identification through victimhood as a central discursive strategy of resistance in the anti-regime protest:

Item 2: Every citizen has the right (and obligation to use that right at least once a year) to a jail sentence, clubbing, molestation, repression and all kinds of battery from the persons in charge of this and no citizen can be deprived of this guaranteed right [...]

The Universal Declaration proceeds to guarantee the right to death, captivity, social insecurity and lack of opinion or conscience; the right to be punished for no particular reason, to be innocent until forced to plead guilty, to be restricted in movement and residence within the boundaries of the country, to be uninformed or misinformed and so on. It ends with a warning that 'the violation of this declaration on any grounds will lead to most severe sanctions of every possible kind towards the violator'. It is clear, then, that the discourses of resistance in the anti-Milosevic demonstrations represented the citizens of Serbia as victimized by their regime. This sets their engagement with the Milosevic government apart from most foreign approaches, where the emphasis lies on the horrors it has brought upon other post-Yugoslavs, in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo. The discursive strategies of the 1996–97 wave of dissent were structured around the citizens of Serbia, and there was little mention of the wars that had raged in the other republics until only a year before the start of the demonstrations.

Serbs as victims (1999)

Almost all aspects of the 1999 anti-NATO protest resonated with the motif of victimhood, which was turned into one of its main discursive strategies of resistance. This was illustrated when unarmed (but often regime-initiated) groups of citizens carrying candles took turns occupying the city bridges in Beograd, thereby presumably protecting them against NATO air strikes with their bodies. The 1999 protest shows how the rather exclusive preoccupation with the victimization of innocent citizens of Serbia, mentioned above, reflects a wider phenomenon, crucial to Serbian nationalism. In the laments of Serbian suffering, the pain of others is often denied or, more frequently, ignored. By extension, in many literary and religious representations the Serbian *nation* is proclaimed essentially innocent throughout history.

How did these canonical discourses of national victimhood and

innocence relate to the everyday level in the context of the recent campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, and to the NATO bombing? In Serbia, as abroad, these events were only extremely selectively contextualized. Few reactions from Serbia acknowledged a direct link between the NATO attacks and Serbian atrocities in Kosovo, and even less so with those in Croatia and Bosnia. However, through Serbian nationalist mythology, a link is constructed between the two, albeit a different one from that of most 'Western' representations. The events could then be interpreted as an expression of a morbid continuity of Serbian victimization, and the NATO attacks were represented as yet more proof that 'the Serbs', while innocent, suffered the most unreasonable evils, this time even at the hands of the very allies for whom they had sacrificed themselves *en masse* in the Second World War. Serbian reactions to the NATO air strikes hummed with indignation about this blatant ingratitude on the part of the West, and especially of France and England.

Again, we must see this in the context of the post-Yugoslav wars and years of economic sanctions. Serbian nationalist perspectives – which are part of common sense for a large majority of the Serbian population – consider the last decade as a continuous intensification of the victimization of the Serbian people. First, they would argue, the Serbs were attacked by Croats and Bosniaks, and they lost Yugoslavia, which united all Serbian lands within its borders. Then, I was assured time and again, they were punished by the international community: by NATO attacks on their military positions in Bosnia, and by the absence of any intervention and even tacit support for Croatian forces when hundreds of thousands of Serbs were ethnically cleansed from Croatia in 1995. But as if that was not enough, I was often told, of all post-Yugoslav republics only *they* were subjected to economic sanctions by the international community, while at the same time taking care of more than 600,000 Serbian refugees from Croatia and Bosnia within their borders. Finally, it was claimed, in the late 1990s, 'the Serbs' were militarily attacked by separatist terrorists, the KLA, and had to defend their sovereign territory. Clearly, many Serbs, and certainly Winter Protest veterans, would add the Milosevic regime itself to this list. However, the point is the cumulative effect of these perceptions of victimization: the NATO attacks were not understood as a one-off attack, but they were framed in at least a decade of deterioration and injustice. First all that, and now *this*!

Does that mean that people in Serbia didn't know about the atrocities committed in their names on Kosovo Albanians? Not necessarily, I would argue, although the ability of people to close their minds to the obvious when it seems too difficult to deal with is not to be underestimated (Friedlander, 1993: 2). But even if Serbs had access to information about the fate of Kosovo Albanians, and a lot of them did; and even if they believed that this information was at least partly true, which far fewer of them did; and even if they disagreed with what was being done in their names by Serbian

forces, which even fewer of them did; then still the central issue was *their own* suffering; the suffering of the Serbs.

This is not to say that this suffering was not real. Only a relatively small group of Serbian men were actually involved in the violence in Kosovo, but most citizens of Serbia were strongly affected by the NATO air strikes in their own everyday lives. Therefore, the predominant feeling was *not* one of aggression and hatred towards Kosovo Albanians, but rather indifference, conformism and preoccupation with one's own suffering – as individuals, but also as Serbs. For example, one Beograd citizen, when asked whether he knew about the refugees, answered affirmatively, but added: 'At this moment I can't feel any compassion for them'. And even those who did feel compassion would still often frame it in relative terms, privileging the Serbian history of suffering. This was illustrated in the words of one person who assured me that this was the first time that the Albanians had to go through such terror, whereas for the Serbs it was yet another stage in their centuries-long calvary.

The deployment of historical lament as a rhetorical device resonated with attitudes towards the war in Bosnia and Croatia: accusations of misinformation by foreign media, fabrication of evidence of Serbian atrocities by the KLA and NATO, the 'real' geopolitical interests behind the bombing, etc. Still, the victim theme also gave rise to many humorous reactions. A story which circulated all over former Yugoslavia before the bombing told the tale of a man who'd planned to paint his flat in 1998 but postponed it time and again because of possible NATO air strikes. Just before the attacks he lost his patience and sprayed the following graffiti on a Beograd wall: 'Are you going to bomb us or can I start painting?'

The victim theme was sometimes underpinned by a claim to similarity with other national and territorial disputes. Reactions from Serbia often drew parallels on the global political stage, condemning the double standards of the 'international community', for example, by renaming the Canadian embassy as the 'Embassy of Quebec' with graffiti. But the most frequent parallel was the one with Northern Ireland: 'This is as if we bomb London after a British police action against the IRA in Belfast', said Jelica Novakovic, lecturer at Beograd University. Her statement was reflected in many messages which I received from Serbia; today I find it harder than ever to disprove the belief that the whole world is against 'the Serbs'.

Underdogs

A second important motif in Serbian national self-images is the idea that the Serbian nation, and its individual materializations in particular people, represent the eternal David, fighting a long historical series of different Goliaths. The Serbs, it is then argued, never shy away from struggling with stronger opponents in order to defend righteousness and dignity.

References abound: for instance, they took up the gloves against the Turks, against the Austro-Hungarian Empire and against the Nazis (as Partisans). On many occasions I was assured that the Serbs actually fought for the good of others (e.g. unselfishly liberating all Yugoslav peoples in 1918 and 1945, giving shelter to Albanians during the late 1940s). This resonates with the sacrifice motif which is central to so many nationalist discourses. According to Serbian nationalism, in the post-Yugoslav wars, they took on the threat of Muslim fundamentalism in Bosnia and of revived fascism in Croatia. By the mid-1990s, given the economic sanctions and negative PR abroad, many Serbs felt they were taking on almost the whole world (the so-called 'international community').

Citizens as underdogs (1996–97)

The 1996–97 anti-regime demonstrations were structured around self-conscious representations of the marchers as weak and relatively powerless in the face of massive state oppression. It was emphasized that the subjects of resistance were unarmed citizens, occupying positions of little or no political influence, whereas the opponent was portrayed as an overwhelmingly powerful and violent machine of domination. Deprived of what was, in theory, one of their actual means of achieving control, their votes, they took to the streets and turned representations of their powerlessness into an important element of their resistance. Simply by inserting their bodies into the public, and therefore regime-controlled, urban landscape, they turned their vulnerability and relative lack of power into a discursive strategy of resistance (see de Certeau, 1984).

After an initial period when the demonstrations were completely ignored by the government and its media, they were represented as minor and marginal, reducing the hundreds of thousands on the streets to 'an extremist minority'. The University Chancellor claimed on state TV that they constituted a 'handful of students and pupils', and the students replied by publishing a definition of 'a handful', in order to 'harmonize the above mentioned and similar statements with the facts':

So let us make the following definition:

- A 'handful' is a unit of measure for a quantity of living creatures of the same kind.
- One 'handful' is approximately equivalent to the quantity of some 20,000 of the above mentioned creatures.

Let us give some examples in order to ensure better understanding of the mentioned definition: the Red Star–Barcelona football match was attended by some 4 handfuls of spectators; Belgrade University has some 3 handfuls of students; there are as many as 50,000 handfuls of Chinese. (*Boom!* 13 Dec. 1996, issue 8)

Importantly, the non-violent strategies of the demonstrators self-consciously located them in a global discourse of democratic resistance, conveying the belief that, although they were weak in the face of overwhelming

oppression, history was on their side. The 1996–97 demonstrations against Milosevic relied heavily on a discourse of historical-moral righteousness as opposed to a shallow, and ultimately untenable, present. This was illustrated by a large rubber beast displayed on the New Year's Eve celebrations on Beograd's central square; it was called 'the last Slobosaurus', referring to Milosevic's first name Slobodan. Furthermore, the whole wave of dissent was represented as a struggle of civilization against barbarism, of democracy against tyranny, and of the future against the past. As one opposition politician put it to me: 'There are two groups of people in this country: those who look forward and those who look backward.' This moral-chronological framework provided a background of reference for most protest publications, as illustrated by this comment, which also includes the ever-present irony of the underdog motif:

This is a metaphysical struggle. Spirits are at war. Primitivism and friendliness, smiles and cynicism. We'll see who wins (but not on TV, that's for sure). (*Boom!* 19 Dec. 1996, issue 11)

If the demonstrators, although weak and vulnerable in relation to the regime, were morally and historically in the right, this implied that they were only claiming what was undeniably theirs. Given the blatantly obvious electoral fraud by the regime, it was not surprising that this provided a target for continuous satire in the demonstrations:

A problem: calculate the probability of victory [. . .] if there are 9 candidates running from one party and none from the other. Neglect the fact the Earth is a sphere, that you are a homo sapiens, that you have a brain, that democracy is really possible and assume that you do not own a TV set. (*Boom!* 5 Dec. 1996, issue 5)

Serbs as underdogs (1999)

In the 1999 anti-NATO protest, the discursive strategy structured around the motif of the underdog was equally important. Protest self-representations of the Serbs relied very strongly on discourses of moral-historical righteousness in the face of an over-powering enemy. In the light of the historical mythology of Serbian resistance mentioned above, the Kosovo crisis was represented as yet another case of a stand-off between the Serbian nation and a mighty threat. In the post-Cold War world, the USA, and therefore NATO, are often perceived as the only pretenders to the crown of Masters of the Universe. This overwhelming power imbalance in the Kosovo conflict only added to the belief in righteousness of the Serbian cause and the immoral evil ascribed to its enemies. In diplomatic rhetoric this was translated into Milosevic's speech just after the end of the bombing. He argued that his country had reasserted the primacy of the UN rather than NATO, and said:

This is our contribution to the efforts of the entire freedom-loving world. This is our contribution to tendencies to create a multilateral world, not to accept the creation of the world led by the dictate of force from one centre. I believe

that this will be an enormous contribution to history and that heroism of our nation in the resistance to the much more powerful and stronger enemy will mark the end of the twentieth century. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 10 June 1999)

The Serbian footballer Darko Anic, who played in the Belgium league during that season, condemned Western media information about his people as lies, and his statement resonated with Serbian nationalist rhetoric when he said:

I would give my life for the truth. Kosovo is an age-old part of Serbia and we will never give away the province. Never. I am proud to be a Serb. We are a poor but honest people. We don't put any claims on anything that is not ours. But if they want to take away something from us, we will fight for it, until the last Serb. (*De Standaard*, 16 April 1999: 18)

Sometimes, references were explicitly anti-imperialist, as in an anti-NATO web page self-consciously named after Che Guevara. But many Serbian reactions against the NATO air strikes resonated with a more cultural anti-American rhetoric as well. Although, as in other European countries, American popular culture dominates everyday life, style and consumption in Serbia to a large extent, this was sometimes inverted – thereby at least temporarily asserting Serbian superiority, even when facing cultural imperialism. Often, the English language was used, such as for instance in the ironic slogan 'We are drop dead gorgeous', displayed in a demonstration. Frequent reference was made to icons of American popular culture, but the 1999 anti-NATO protest articulated its own blend of anti-imperialist discourse, defending Serbian/Yugoslav visions of cultural diversity versus what they presented as the Western spectre of a bland, Disney-led New World Order. For instance, graffiti renamed one of Beograd's McDonald's outlets into 'Baghdad Cafe', whereas simultaneously, demonstrators carried a banner saying: 'No more Big Mac, no more Pizza, all we want is Gibanica [a typical local cheese pie]'.

Even if virulently anti-Western, the protest strongly relied on themes and forms which were, also in Serbia, considered icons of 'Western-ness', and located themselves ambiguously within *and* without the enemy's sphere of understanding. While evoking themes of otherness and non-compatibility with the 'West' on some occasions, they emphasized their intimate knowledge of that same 'West' on others. This was illustrated in a reference to the widely viewed American TV series *The X Files*, when one demonstrator carried the slogan 'Mulder, the truth is out *here!*' (rather than 'out *there*', as suggested in the TV series subtitle). Many new terms were developed during the air strikes, and one referred to a phenomenon which was visible all over Serbia: windows lined with brown tape as a protection against nearby explosions – they were called 'Windows 99'. Often, protesters tapped into existing critiques of consumerism, such as in the banner saying 'Stop Nato-Cola', mimicking the design of the soft drink multinational. In doing so they emphasized that the Serbian nation occupied the position of the underdog in economic as well as in military terms.

If anti-Americanism was one important theme in many Serbian reactions to the NATO air strikes, there was a further twist to the story: the bombing gave rise to a remarkable upsurge of Yugoslavism. Of course, dominant Serbian representations were embedded in Serbian nationalism, but at the same time, paradoxically, they referred abundantly to the present Federal Republic of Yugoslavia *and* to the Titoist Partisan tradition of the former Yugoslavia. This set them apart very strongly from the 1996–97 demonstrations, conveying a strongly anti-communist discourse.

The vehicle to make sense of this gap is through the polysemy of Yugoslav anti-fascism. Right from the start, the Serbian regime and its media referred to the Kosovo crisis and the bombing in terms of 'Yugoslav citizens', and it claimed to be defending Kosovo's multicultural communities against separatist terrorism by the KLA, and against air strikes by NATO. In his speech at the end of the bombing, Milosevic said:

We have defended a multinational community, the only surviving multinational community in the former Yugoslavia. I believe that this is also one of the great achievements of our defense.¹⁸

With NATO, and not the Albanians as the prime enemy, this theme pervaded a series of open letters from Beograd that I received during the NATO bombing campaign.¹⁹ Written by academics, and not in support of Milosevic, they condemned the irrational aggression by the West, its disregard for international laws of sovereignty and its unequivocal support for separatist terrorists. The letters called on values of urbanity, multiculturalism, non-violence, rationality and respect for the other. This led to extremely ambiguous discourses of protest, articulating at once the nationalist vision of a Serbian Kosovo, and the claim that Serbs in that region were defending values of multiculturalism.²⁰

Ironically, after more than a decade of pro-Milosevic mass rallies behind Serbian flags, the 1999 protest demonstrations against the NATO air strikes rediscovered older icons, including the red-starred Titoist Yugoslav flag. Starting on the first days of the NATO air strikes, Serbian state TV broadcast one of the most powerful expressions of former Yugoslav popular culture: Partisan films glorifying the Titoist resistance against the Nazis in the Second World War. This in turn reinforced one of the major motifs running through the political rhetoric of the Serbian regime, and *the* touchstone of Titoist legitimacy: anti-fascism. TV spots, press coverage, cartoons, graffiti and everyday talk were all soaked in a thick syrup of references to Second World War symbolism. NATO was referred to as a fascist organization, with its leaders regularly being depicted with Hitler-moustaches and swastikas, and its media being compared to Goebbels' work.²¹ The fact that the German army, whose predecessors ran a regime of terror in occupied Second World War Yugoslavia, took part in the NATO action, only added to the appeal of this argument.

I have already explained how Milosevic has built his power on strategic switching between Serbian nationalism and Yugoslav leftism. The

deployment of anti-fascist rhetoric has been the primary vehicle for this articulation, and one of the major reasons for confusion amongst Western observers. Milosevic is a former loyal communist apparatchik who has turned into a vampire: he killed (former) Yugoslavia, in an allied effort with his nationalist colleagues in neighbouring republics, and created a new state called Yugoslavia, drawing on the blood – the legitimizing discourses and symbols – of its victim. This is particularly painful for those citizens of Serbia who felt some kind of sense of belonging to the former Yugoslavia and continue to do so. In their eyes Milosevic has created a monster out of the destruction of their homeland and hijacked its name and its symbols. In this sense, one person from Beograd wrote me during the NATO air strikes how it made her angry to see how pro-Milosevic protesters were waving ‘the flag of that country, that former one, my country, the one *they* destroyed!’.

Rebels

In 1997, CNN broadcast a documentary containing strongly compromising material on the role of *mafioso*, paramilitary leader and alleged war criminal Arkan, in Croatia and Bosnia. In an interview on Serbian BK television, the young, admiring interviewer asked him whether he ever used violence in his paramilitary operations, and Arkan replied that he only remembered slapping somebody once. It was one of his own men, he added with a smile, and later he explained that this reflects how ‘It’s tough to pull a Serb into line.’

Of course, and thankfully, Arkan was not representative for all Serbs, but this reply, I believe, went right to the heart of a third crucial motif in Serbian nationalist self-identity: the anti-authoritarian and defiant rebel who is irrational, passionate, potentially dangerous, unruly and a little mad. However, again, this slightly derogatory self-depiction is often turned into a positive attribute: many Serbs like to portray themselves as unruly in a likeable way – they represent the national equivalent of the Paul Gascoignesque rebel identity in English football. On a more general level, Serbs (and again sometimes ‘Yugoslavs’, which then stands simply for that aspect of the Serbs that cherishes a remembered Partisan identity) are represented as having a mind of their own, who can’t simply be turned into lackeys of any larger order. This can be seen as a strategic inversion of patterns of orientalism prevalent in, for instance, Croatian and Western depictions of Serbs. The result is a self-conscious Balkan orientalist counter-discourse constructed around imposed and derogatory intended labels of unruliness.²² ‘The Serbs’, it is then argued, can’t be bought off by cheap promises, which, in Serbian nationalist lines of thought, sets them apart from last week’s brothers²³ and yesterday’s enemies such as the Croats and the Bosniaks.

Citizens as rebels (1996)

According to the self-representation of many protesters in both 1996–97 and 1999, the very existence of those demonstrations reflected the theme of moral self-sufficiency and critical independence. The 1996–97 demonstrations transformed Beograd into a scene for defiance, with the citizens permanently probing the limits of state power, which was strikingly reflected in the spatial strategies of the protest (Jansen, 1999).

The centrality of the defiant character of the demonstrations was illustrated by a slogan that was at first sight quite unlikely to convey a discourse of resistance, but that became central in 1996–97. The context was as follows: after about a month of massive street marches, the Milosevic regime organized its own counter-rally, strategically called 'For Serbia'. Thousands of people were bussed in from the south of the country, and the Serbian leader addressed the crowd in a speech emphasizing the need for unity and the danger posed by internal enemies. The pro-regime crowd proclaimed their love for Milosevic in chants that had become popular on the rallies which brought him to power in the late 1980s. In stark contrast to those earlier triumphant public appearances, the leader now created the impression of realizing the futility and the see-through character of the whole set-up. As a result, the reply of a tired, and obviously distracted Milosevic, 'I love you too,' was interpreted by his opponents as a condescending and irritated routine answer, as in 'Yeah, yeah, I love you too, but I haven't really got time for you.' The line was taken up by the anti-regime protest: it was used as a jingle on independent radio stations and became a central feature on badges and banners. Clearly, it was not the political content of these words which conveyed a discourse of resistance, but rather its inversion into a weapon of defiance.

This relates to a further characteristic of the 1996–97 demonstrations, also present in the anti-NATO protest: a unity through a common enemy, rather than through a common ideology. Defiance towards the regime was displayed in extremely witty slogans and symbolic actions, and it was reflected in a wider 'culture of protest' outside the actual demonstrations. Every day, I discovered new graffiti messages, and throughout the city, jokes and word games sprang up and circulated with amazing speed. Very often, these defiant and humorous expressions of resistance relied on sarcastic venom and, ultimately, on self-deprecating wit. The motif of the unruly 'rebel' was omnipresent in these representations of self.

However, this self-representation as resistant to discipline did not mean that the demonstrators subscribed whole-heartedly to all Balkan orientalist depictions of 'the Serbs'. Quite the contrary, the intellectual wit and the level of education prominent in the protest was explicitly developed into a strong argument against the regime. The citizens' intelligence and their culturally refined taste were counterposed to the stupidity and primitivism of the political power holders, often depicted as 'peasants' (see Ramet, 1996; Jansen 1999). This theme of urbanity was crucial to the

demonstrations, which were very strongly concentrated in cities, as were oppositional votes. Still, the rebellious theme prevailed because, in the discursive strategies of protest, this was tied in with a discourse of diversity, whereby assertive, daring urban multiculturalism was held up against the perceived conformist and backward blandness of village life.

Serbs as rebels (1999)

In the anti-NATO protest, defiance structured around the motif of the rebel became even more outspoken than in the previous demonstrations. Now, the very act of defying the world's most powerful military and political leaders took centre stage, illustrated by a banner at the anti-NATO concerts on Beograd's central square, saying: 'Sorry, we're singing!' But of course, with the subjects of resistance having shifted to 'the Serbs', the national aspect of the rebel-motif was played out to the full. For example, one graffiti said: 'They don't understand. We want to enter the NBA, not NATO', drawing on the fact that many Serbian players are successful in the American basketball league.

A further step in the strategies of defiance occurred when NATO, and the whole New World Order, was depicted as being led by 'weaklings' such as Blair and Clinton. Machismo played a large role here, and many Western leaders were the target of derogatory, often sexist jokes. For example, a popular joke explained why the Serbs were involved in this war. The reason, the joke stated, was because Madeleine Albright walked into the Rambouillet talks and said: 'Shall we make love or war?' However, the main target for crude jokes was Clinton, who was paradoxically often referred to as gay, and simultaneously mocked for his dealing with the Lewinsky affair. One of the many derisive slogans said: 'Monica, did you suck his brains as well?'

Again, the self-depiction of 'the Serbs' as rebels was often embedded in a wider discourse of moral righteousness. One graffiti said: 'What Clinton needs is a principle [in Serbian: '*princip*'], a reference to Gavrilo Princip, the man who started the First World War by killing the Habsburg crown prince. Sometimes, historical achievements were invoked to argue that the Serbs had already earned their legitimate place in history. This was illustrated by a graffiti referring to Nikola Tesla, a Serbian electrical scientist who moved to the USA: 'Ah, if only Tesla had known what they'd do to us.' Especially with regard to the USA, there was often an element of denying others historical legitimacy, let alone *grandeur*. An indirect message in the demonstrations did exactly that, saying 'Columbus, fuck your curiosity!' On a more general level, throughout my fieldwork experience, every Serbian child knew that the Serbs ate with knife and fork before the USA even existed. These arguments of historical legitimacy built on specifically Serbian nationalist aspects of historical mythology. They were also, again, related to the Yugoslav Second World War Partisan struggle, always presented as an indigenous struggle, led by the people, driving out the Nazis

on their own initiative. In this way, the discursive strategies of the anti-NATO protest simultaneously articulated motifs of Serbian and of Yugoslav selves.

Alongside and often articulated with this discourse of historical righteousness, there was yet another intensification of self-deprecating sarcasm. Paradoxically, these jokes often reasserted the ultimate superiority of the Serbs, through an incorporation of Balkan orientalist stereotypes and an inversion of their meaning. When a supposedly radar-invisible NATO plane was shot down, the reactions were predictably euphoric, but not without incorporating some self-deprecating element, as illustrated in this graffiti which emerged soon after: 'How would a Serb know what stealth technology is?' It is thus suggested that the Serbs didn't know the plane was supposed to be invisible. Intelligent warfare doesn't work on simple folk, and in this case, it was not high technology, money and power, that brought the Serbs this victory, but obstinate self-proclaimed backwardness and otherness (van de Port, 1999).

On a general level, the defiant humour was a coping strategy by which people made fun of themselves and their miserable fate during the last decade. A popular joke explained the cheapest and fastest way to get from Beograd to nearby Novi Sad, following the destruction of all Danube bridges. Take a bus to Aviano, it said, and then catch one of the direct express flights, every 10 minutes. Aviano is a major NATO airbase in Italy. Finally, from two people who have been thinking about emigrating for years, but who endured the last decade in Beograd, I received a truly self-denigrating joke which provides some food for thought.

Question: 'How does a clever Serb call a stupid Serb?'

Answer: 'From abroad!'

It is clear that the butt of these stories is the Serbs themselves. However, the very self-deprecating nature of these stories about themselves made them a weapon of coping and defiance. These discursive strategies of sarcastic resistance had been developed in a decade of war at the borders, deteriorating living standards, corruption and misgovernment, as well as increasing isolation from the rest of Europe. Its culmination came in the anti-Milosevic demonstrations of 1996–97, and in the 1999 anti-NATO campaign. And, on both occasions, the most frequent object of their jokes was the protesters themselves, in their capacity as victims, underdogs and rebels.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this decade of war and deterioration, defiant, sarcastic and self-deprecating humour has come to constitute a mundane strategy of survival for many Serbs. It simultaneously confirms the self-images of 'the Serb' as a victim of higher forces, an underdog and an unruly rebel, all of which were performatively central to recent waves of dissent. To foreign observers,

including anthropologists, who have a long tradition of uncovering the 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985), it comes across as witty and likeable. It is bound to strike a chord in the heart of Western pacifists and critics on the left, and a large part of the Serbian public is aware of that, as could be seen in the appeals that were circulated on the internet during both waves of dissent. On an unintended level, these discursive strategies of resistance resonated with everyday mechanisms of coping and belonging in the context of 1990s Serbia, evoking nationalist representations of what it means to be a Serb.

However, the contradictory deployment of discursive practices of resistance, and the humorous display of representations of self in recent Serbian protests, point to the risk of fetishizing resistance, i.e. of championing *all* resistance. They illustrate the tactical polyvalence of these discourses, which I have demonstrated through an analysis of its deployment against Milosevic in the 1996–97 protests, and its support for nationalist extremism in 1999. The Serbian triad of victim-underdog-rebel enjoyed considerable appeal amongst foreign critics of the NATO air strikes, who in their mistaken enthusiasm at having found a Balkan Vietcong, often glossed over the dramatic political implications on the ground, especially for Albanian civilians in Kosovo. In these reactions, it was 'the Serbs' who were portrayed, and portrayed themselves, as an indigenous bastion against the American-led New World Order.²⁴ This was an especially bitter experience for those citizens of Serbia,²⁵ and foreigners like myself, who felt that their critical stance towards, and rejection of, NATO bombing *and* of Serbian nationalism was being discredited by the representation of the Serbian *nation* as a defiant hero. It is the more painful an observation if we take into account the fact that every NATO missile falling on Serbian cities meant a giant setback for those citizens of Serbia who had proven that they were ready to break the apathy and the indifference.

Notes

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- 1 This diversity was partly explained by Milosevic's own habit of strategic switching between contradictory discourses. Throughout the post-Yugoslav wars, his regime alternated between exclusive Serbian nationalism and inclusive Yugoslavism, and always portrayed itself as the only defender of the Serbs *and* of Yugoslavia. For a theoretical elaboration of these discursive mechanisms, see Salecl (1994: 30–7, 64–5).
- 2 Although most participants, opponents and observers perceived the demonstrations as a direct challenge to Milosevic, the only explicitly articulated demand was respect for the electoral outcomes. Eventually, *Zajedno* was granted

its victory in the urban centres, but, due to internal power struggles, the alliance collapsed soon after. As a result, the 1996–97 Winter demonstrations are now generally considered a failed attempt at democratization. At the time of writing, Milosevic is still Serbia's strongman. For a discussion in English of the rise and fall of the *Zajedno* coalition, see Thomas, 1999: 263–318; for more political analysis of the demonstrations, see Bobovic et al. (1997), Radovic and Veljanovski (1997) and Spasic and Pavicevic (1997a, 1997b).

- 3 Research was carried out by local sociologists during the protests. See for instance Babovic et al. (1997); Radosavljevic (1997); *Buka u Modi* (1997); Spasic and Pavicevic (1997a, 1997b); Radovic and Veljanovski (1997). Later, an English language special issue of the Beograd journal *Sociologija* was devoted to the demonstrations (1997, 39:1). The proceedings of a local conference on the protests were published in Cupic (1998).
- 4 The Albanian majority population of the region calls it 'Kosova', whereas the Serbian name is 'Kosovo'. Until recently the latter was internationally accepted as standard, also in English. In this article, dealing with Serbia, I use the term Kosovo – without wanting to legitimize any territorial claim by either side. All translations from the original Serbian and Dutch are mine.
- 5 During the post-Yugoslav conflicts, Milosevic has repeatedly grabbed the opportunity of an outside threat in order to radically suppress any oppositional voice within Serbia's borders. A clampdown on academic freedoms and independent media, with, for example, the assassination of newspaper editor Slavko Curuvija on one of the first days of the air strikes, proved it was not different this time.
- 6 For a detailed and detached historical overview, see Vickers (1998). See also Malcolm (1998). For work on the importance of the Kosovo issue in Serbian nationalism, see, for example, Magas (1993: 49–73); Blagojevic (1996); Garde (1992: 232–5); Ramet (1991: 175–95); Detrez (1994).
- 7 Elsewhere, I have written extensively on the spatial strategies of the 1996–97 demonstrations, and on their reformulations in the 1999 anti-NATO protest (Jansen, 1999).
- 8 Even though JUL consists mainly of *mafiosi* and businessmen who rode on privatization scams, and her husband came to power on the nationalist bandwagon, Markovic continued to flirt with Yugoslav communism, and she relentlessly denounced the protests as an orchestrated campaign by drugged-out fifth column mercenaries.
- 9 A similar symbolic action took place in Lodz, Poland, after the declaration of martial law, when, during the evening state TV news broadcast, people placed their TV sets in the window, with the screens facing outwards.
- 10 *Boom!* was one of the many student publications that sprang up during the anti-regime demonstrations in 1996–97, and disappeared soon after. It was also published on the internet: <http://turing.mi.sanu.ac.yu/~prot/boom>
- 11 <http://helpb92.xs4all.nl/>
- 12 Petar Lukovic in *Boom!* 23 Dec. 1997.
- 13 During the NATO air strikes, displays of sympathy from the public in, for instance, Russia and Greece were explained only partly with reference to concrete aspects of history such as the Orthodox religious background they share with both these nations, and the Ottoman legacy that brought them together with Greece. These issues were of less importance than what many Serbs saw as signs of empathy from nations who somehow, as a collective, understand 'what it was like' for the Serbs. Beyond appreciation of general empathy, many Serbs looked sceptically and half-mockingly upon Russian support during

- the NATO bombing. This was illustrated in the graffito 'Russian Brothers, have no fear – the Serbs are with you', which again confirmed the idea that Serbs do not rely on the Russians, or anybody else.
- 14 During my fieldwork amongst dissidents both in Croatia and in Serbia, I was often reminded that similar public and creative waves of dissent were unimaginable in the Croatian capital.
 - 15 In this sense, this text resonates strongly with Herzfeld's study of the Cretan 'Glendiots', where he emphasizes the centrality of performative excellence: what counts is not so much being a good man but 'being good at being a man' (1985: 16). Similarly, in this study, I analyse how Serbian protests alternately constructed an image of 'being good at being a Serb/citizen'. For, as in Herzfeld's case, self-identity and self-regard are intimately tied up with recognizable evocations of social levels of self-perception.
 - 16 There was a parallel process of national radicalization amongst Kosovo Albanians, abandoning elected leaders who favoured moderate policies for the previously marginal extremists of the Kosova Liberation Army.
 - 17 *Boom!* 8 February 1997.
 - 18 See news.bbc.co.uk, 10 June 1999. See also the extensive CBS interview with Slobodan Milosevic on 25 April 1999 (www.serbia-info.com/news/1999-04/25/11279.html).
 - 19 Published as a special issue of *Sociologija* (41:3), in Beograd.
 - 20 Long before the air strikes, in the summer of 1998, state TV showed propaganda broadcasts juxtaposing two faces of Kosovo, subtitled in Serbian and Albanian. One showed the smoking ruins of a destroyed village, and said: 'This is how it is where the terrorists were'. The other broadcast, supposedly in an area under government control, depicted a number of people working on a field. Their clothing revealed their diverging ethnic backgrounds, and the decor was a beautiful, sunny landscape dotted with icons of the different cultural traditions of Kosovo. In a similar symbolic gesture, this time aimed at destabilizing international representations of the conflict in Kosovo, Milosevic's delegation to the Rambouillet talks was abundantly multi-ethnic, including persons with very little political power, whose main role it was not to rebuff any national claim on Kosovo, but rather to emphasize its diversity within a sovereign state.
 - 21 See, for instance, the official web site of the Serbian Ministry of Information (www.serbia-info.com), semi-official sites such as the protest pages of certain towns, and the numerous private home pages (accessible through e.g. www.inet.co.yu/rat/link/index.html).
 - 22 On Balkan orientalism, see Bakic-Hayden and Hayden (1992); Bakic-Hayden (1995). The counter-discursive potential of such 'Balkan' symbolism, and the tensions this brings about, have been analysed by van de Port (1994).
 - 23 The central motto of the Titoist Yugoslav federation was 'Brotherhood and Unity'.
 - 24 This approach was paramount in demonstrations by the traditional far left. It could also be detected in Linda Grant's article in *The Guardian Weekend*, 8 May 1999, and especially in Julie Burchill's columns in the same publication.
 - 25 See publications by Women in Black, Belgrade Circle, and others; for critical documents by Serbs, published in English during the NATO air strikes, see: thing.at/orfkunstradio/war/diary/index.html; www.yurope.com/zines/republika; www.dds.nl/~pressnow/extra/ngoappeal.html.

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