



## **Who's Afraid of White Socks? Towards a critical understanding of post-Yugoslav urban self-perceptions**

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**Who's Afraid of White Socks?  
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This article investigates some dimensions of the urban/rural interface in post-Yugoslav everyday experiences. When starting my 1996–8 research on antinationism, this was not a topic of primary interest to me, but, beaten into submission by its relentless reappearance, I came to appreciate the importance of the city/village opposition as a phenomenon to be explored. Of course, by the usual anthropological sleight-of-hand, rather than taking them at face value, I focused on how processes of self-positioning articulated discourses of urbanity and rurality. Here, I analyse the strategies of urban balkanist distinction that underlay post-Yugoslav citizenship in the Croatian and Serbian capitals in the mid- to late 1990s.

**Cities under barbarian occupation?**

In the spring of 1997, Boris, a student from a well-off Beograd family, took me on a walk through town, insisting he'd show me the real Belgrade. He almost exclusively led me around landmarks of Serbia's modern, European history, ignoring anything that could potentially contradict these desirable characteristics. Even so, the Belgrade he presented to me was a city both of Old and New European-ness, including churches and couturiers, grand cafes and techno clubs, stately libraries and flashy CD stores. Boris incessantly commented on passers-by. The current catastrophic situation in Serbia was unsurprising, he said, if one took into account the fact that most of its inhabitants were virtually illiterate. Belgrade's urban spirit had been lost and the city had been taken over by peasant newcomers. He actually pointed at people as we walked, arguing that they were obviously peasants, completely different from him and his social circle in terms of manners, appearance, speech, behaviour and style. Later, we spent the evening in his place, where, listening to the latest trendy tunes from Britain on his stereo, my host held forth on the (to my ears) not-so-trendy-subject of the Belgrade pedigree of all four of his grandparents.

I soon learned that the views espoused by Boris were not exceptional. The 1990s' arrival of people from rural areas, many seeking refuge from military

violence, was a source of resentment in Belgrade and Zagreb<sup>1</sup>. It was very common to hear people ridicule peasants [*seljaci*]; literally “villagers”) and their alleged primitivism and self-proclaimed urbanites often spoke of an invasion by “hordes from the hills”. Analytically, this depiction of recent arrivals from the rural periphery as an undesirable occupation force (note: of the same nationality) can be disentangled in two interrelated dimensions: a political-economic and a cultural one. I now briefly discuss both in turn.

Firstly, self-proclaimed urbanites complained indignantly that their lives were run by peasants who had been elected by peasants. Even before the first multi-party elections, rural Serbia served as the main reservoir of foot soldiers for Slobodan Milošević’s so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution. Likewise, many Zagrepčani recalled how the rise of Franjo Tuđman in Croatia had gained momentum through mass rallies with a predominantly rural character. Electorally, both leaders could count on the countryside vote, but a better indication of the rurality of the respective governments’ political gravity point was the fact that organised opposition was strongly concentrated in the cities, many of which had escaped control by the ruling parties during my research. More precisely, the ruling parties received votes everywhere, whereas, leaving out the specific regions of Istria and Vojvodina, the opposition was overwhelmingly urban-based. Non-nationalist parties were usually referred to as the “*gradanska*” opposition – this adjective is derived from “*grad*” [city], but, as in English, it has overtones of both a civil and a civic nature. Unfortunately, it was argued, this oppositional civic civility had turned out to be no match for the “hordes from the hills”, who invaded the city and occupied leading positions in politics and business. Elsewhere I have written about Belgrade examples (Jansen 2001, 2005a: 119 f.), so here I mention the resentment against the so-called “Herzegovinian lobby” in Zagreb. In 1998 20 of the 195 Croatian parliamentarians were born in Bosnia-Herzegovina (mostly in Western Herzegovina). Only the same number of MPs was born in the capital Zagreb, which by then housed more than a quarter of all Croats. In an article entitled “A Village Government”, the oppositional weekly *Tjednik* (2/1/1998: 27–29) deplored not only those numbers, but particularly the influence of the Herzegovinian lobby, whose hardliners occupied key positions in government (e. g. Gojko Šušak, Minister of Defence, and Ivić Pašalić, Presidential Advisor) and business (e. g. the tycoon Miroslav Kutle). Also, prominent Herzegovinian HDZ members were considered to be the primary beneficiaries of privatisation scams and other forms of high-level corruption. In combination with large subsidies for the para-state Herceg-Bosna, this led many Zagrepčani to portray the HDZ regime as being pro-Herzegovinian at the

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<sup>1</sup> Others have pointed out the importance of urban resentment in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo (Stefansson 2004, Maček 2000, Bajtarević 2004).

expense of Croats in Croatia – a claim that later became central to Stipe Mesić's successful campaign to succeed Tuđman as president.

The second dimension of the occupation discourse bemoaned the “peasantisation” of the city<sup>2</sup> due to the invaders' alleged unwillingness and inability to change their primitive village mentality and way of life. For example, in the winter of 1998, Davor, a young – born and bred! – Zagreb DJ, was seriously depressed about the state of his city. His hair dyed and usually dressed in trendy clubbing clothes, Davor complained that there was no subcultural scene to speak of: nothing going on whatsoever, he said, and any initiative fell apart because of petty rivalries. Zagrepčani were divided, he argued, as opposed to the masses of people coming in from the village, who stuck together. Zagreb had become a poisoned city. Unlike others, Davor didn't actually blame the newcomers much – he pitied them. They probably “had this big idea about being in Zagreb”, but in reality, he added, they brought their pitiful lives with them and clung together. In this way, many Zagrepčani and Beogradani thus claimed a right of civilisational property to the city, deterritorialising urbanity and denying urban qualities to certain city dwellers. At the heart of this discourse lies a pre-existing dichotomy between “autochthons” [*“starosjedioci”* or *“starosedeooci”*] and “newcomers” [*“došljaci”*], but actual residence and place of birth were not necessarily decisive criteria for legitimate belonging to either (cf. Williams 1973, Wirth 1938). Many, like Boris, went much further in their negative depictions: staple ingredients of these urban representations of peasant newcomers – also referred to as savages [*“divljaci”*], primitives [*“primitivci”*] or shepherds [*“ćobani”*] – included their inability to use modern toilets, their habit of keeping animals in their flats, and, somehow most prominently, their tendency to throw rubbish from their suburban high rise balconies.

At the crossroads of the politico-economic and the cultural dimensions of this representation of the city under barbaric occupation, we find a category of people who I tentatively call, for reasons explained below, “frontline peasants”. Considered to be disproportionate beneficiaries of both state measures and legal and illegal business (presumably controlled by “their” lobby), urban discourse also attributed frontline peasants a reputation for uncultured behaviour. This stereotype covered accent and style of speech, jewellery and dress, body lexis, eating manners, socialising habits, preferences with regard to food, cars, music, decoration, and so on. Style and manners were read straightforwardly as symptoms of underlying questions of culturedness (Buden 1996: 47–49) and the frontline peasant was made particularly recognisable through conspicuous consumption – mistaken attempts to be stylish. Yes, he drove a large Mercedes, wore expensive clothes

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<sup>2</sup> “*poseljachenje*”; alternatives included *barbarizacija*, *balkanizacija*, *provincijalizacija* and *Istanbulizacija*.

and frequented fancy restaurants. But his Armani suit was put into context by the white socks, her black leather Prada handbag by excessive make-up and silicone, their meals in expensive restaurants by the pig on a spit they ordered. The image was never complete without one more thing: they were, it was argued, always talking on their mobile phones – sorting out some business with “cousins”, i. e., other frontline peasants. In this way, in post-Yugoslav urban discourses, the seemingly insignificant clothing item of white socks came to signify a peculiar type of peasant newcomer.<sup>3</sup> The socks immediately indicate a gendered pattern: reflecting wider East European stereotypes about *nouveau riche* entrepreneurs, the frontline peasant was constructed as a male figure, a gold-clad, brash, loud, semiliterate macho with a preference for expensive cars and mobile phones. Women figured in this urban stereotype mainly as tastelessly overdressed, surgically enhanced and overly made up “trophies” – that is to say, in a derivative role, confirming the alleged backwardness of rural gender roles (see Helms n. d.). Importantly, urban mockery of white socks relied on the fact that they were considered incongruous with the rest of the man’s attire. As the urban image has it, this would probably be a suit (to push the stereotype: an Armani suit, obtained through a smuggling ring). Below we return to this incongruence and its meaning for urban self-perceptions.

Of course, not all self-identifying city people in Belgrade and Zagreb subscribed wholeheartedly to these representations, but the prevalence of stereotyping newcomers, and frontline peasants in particular, was striking in my research experience. It pervaded everyday life, formed a solid part of popular culture and inflected political debates. Attributing blame to rural sections of one’s own nation often existed alongside continued demonisation of national Others, depending on the audience and the context, but, as Keith Brown has argued (2001), the urban/rural format probably constitutes the most widely shared non-nationalist framework for understanding events in the region. Importantly, representations of a rural threat to urbanity were also given academic currency by a range of public intellectuals critical of the regimes.<sup>4</sup> In any case, it is not my intention here to evaluate whether this understanding holds water (see Bougarel 1999, Allcock 2002). Rather, I wish to look at the role of the frontline peasant as a product of and a counterpoint for urban self-definition. By painting a negative picture of the rural, a position was constructed of a self-conscious “*građanin/ka*”, an urban, educated, refined citizen of manners and civilisation (Buden 1996: 10, van de Port 1994) and a citizen, a political subject (Jansen 2005a: 261, 2001: 44). This text

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<sup>3</sup> Brown (2001), himself focussing on Macedonia, also mentions its use in Bulgaria and Turkey.

<sup>4</sup> Especially in Belgrade; see e. g. Bogdanović 1993, Pušić 1995, Velikić 1992; for a Zagreb example, see Kangrga 1997: 119–129, 228–251.

explores ways to understand this urban discourse in anthropological terms, suggesting some conceptual tools to do so. But first some contextualisation is needed.

### **Rurality and urbanity in the dominant post-Yugoslav nationalisms**

Who were these invaders, these wearers of white socks and bearers of primitivism? Populating the urban-made category of frontline peasants were, more often than not, Herzegovinians of various national backgrounds, Serb-identifying Montenegrins and, to some extent, Croats and Serbs from specific other rural parts of Bosnia and Croatia. In certain ethnological representations, unsurprisingly a smash hit in post-Yugoslav popular-academic discourse, most would be identified as belonging to the “Dinaric” type.<sup>5</sup> Note that I do not wish to disregard the variations within and between these populations, nor contested representations of them. This text is about urbanity, about how self-proclaimed urbanites discursively positioned themselves in contrast to the constructed subcategory of frontline peasants. However, we must understand that the category I call frontline peasants was not simply a construct of the urban oppositional imagination. In the former state, several of the above groups were situated rather centrally in geographical terms, but with the carving out of borders in the 1990s, they came to be represented (again) as frontier populations for their respective nations. Pivotal in WWII historiography, they figured prominently in the recent violence, both as victims and as perpetrators. The rural areas from which they hailed may have been considered peripheral from a city perspective, but they occupied a central place in nationalist discourses of blood and soil.

This reflected a wider nationalist preoccupation with rurality, well-known to anthropologists. The competing post-Yugoslav nationalist discourses articulated, amongst other things, notions of naturalness, purity, reality, sacrifice and the danger of contamination and ambiguity. This was reinforced by a religious revival, as clerical authority and religious traditions were considered to be more prominent in the countryside. A significant role was played here by what I would call national-realist writers, urban-based intellectuals aiming to revive epic traditions through literature, focusing on presumably timeless rural themes and thereby claiming to uncover the national essence from under socialist suppression. For example, the work of Dobrica Ćosić, Vuk Drašković and Matija Bećković represented peasant life as a pure expression of Serbdom (Popov 1994, Đorđević 1996). In the 1990s, these individuals became highly visible torchbearers of Serbian nationalism, alternating between support for and opposition to the Milošević

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<sup>5</sup> On (the politics of) such ethnology, see Bougarel 1999, Naumović 1999, Rihtman-Auguštin 2000: 54–61, Živković 1997.

government. The writer Ivan Aralica has been depicted as their Croatian counterpart (Buden 1996: 40–45), even though we have to take into account that, in Croatia, nationalist evocations of rural purity were permanently crosscut by modern, Central-European self-perceptions. Hence, parallels are complicated by the fact that Croatian nationalism also deployed rurality as a stigmatising label for the ultimate representatives of Balkan backwardness: Serbs (Jansen 2002a).

In any case, reflecting this wider articulation of national purity with rurality, frontline peasants moved into the spotlight again: living on the fringes of the presumed ethnic territory, they were glorified in nationalist representations as spearhead populations in potentially threatened territory (cf. Herzfeld 1985, Brunnbauer & Pichler 2002). They were often portrayed, and many of them portrayed themselves, as an ideal type of how their nation should really be, as unspoilt, pure or real Serbs or Croats. With their elected politicians describing themselves as such, cultural, historical and environmental factors were combined into a representation of frontline peasants as somehow “more national” than their brethren in the “mother” state. The case of Herzegovinians illustrates this perhaps most clearly: they were, it was argued in these nationalist discourses, mountain people engaged in a timeless struggle for survival against the elements, “men of stone” heroically making their stand in the face of a rough, rocky, dry and hostile natural environment. The womenfolk, it was argued, were respectful, fertile and obedient, unflinching in their staunch defence of national-religious tradition and, as such, crucial to the survival of the nation. Because, of course, it wasn’t just nature they were fighting: time and again frontline peasants had fought the nation’s enemies and made sacrifices on the altar of national freedom. Hence, post-Yugoslav nationalist representations played down, ignored, or denied specifically local aspects of their identity, unless they furthered the idea that it made them somehow *more* typical than those in the mother-state. In other words, no stone was left unturned to represent frontline peasants as super-peasants and super-nationals.

While such representations had existed before, a decade of nationalism and war elevated them to a point where the general pro-rural leanings of Serbian and Croatian nationalisms were sometimes overtaken by explicitly anti-urban attitudes. Some 1990s ultranationalist discourses depicted cities as promiscuous and degenerate melting-pots where traditions had been abandoned and once pure cultural communities contaminated. In extreme versions, they were seen as a sign of the *entartete* times, and, as others have documented, it was argued that only a return to rural purity could save the national essence (e.g. Čolović 1994). Frontline peasants, it was argued here, should pride themselves on being faithful to their national traditions and on the unpolluted character of their human and natural environments. This resulted in very ambiguous attitudes towards the mother-state, especially when the former was represented by the capital. On the one hand, frontline peasants were sacrificing their lives and livelihoods for the defence of

and their inclusion in the nationally homogenised mother-state. On the other hand, more often than not, that sacrifice seemed to be met with ingratitude in the capitals, seen as seats of intellectualism, armchair politics, arty farty promiscuity and indifference in the face of the suffering of the cream of the nation.

However, many citizens of the post-Yugoslav states did not see things that way. During my research, large layers of the Belgrade and Zagreb population depicted the rise of nationalism, the Tudman and Milošević governments, and the wars as a “victory of the countryside over the city” (Ramet 1996: 76). Picking up the above anti-urban sentiments amongst what they considered ultranationalist frontline peasants, they pointed to the military campaigns against cities such as Sarajevo, Dubrovnik, Banja Luka, Mostar and Vukovar. This phenomenon was sometimes referred to as *urbicide*, a neologism denoting the conscious physical destruction of urban environments and, perhaps more importantly, the onslaught on urban ways of life. Hence, nationalist representations of urban promiscuity versus rural purity were more or less maintained, but their moral evaluation was inverted: purity was reformulated into backwardness, narrow-mindedness and primitivism, whereas the mixed character of the city was re-articulated into cosmopolitanism, civilisation and tolerance. Rather than exemplary nationals, peasants were portrayed as violent, narrow-minded, primitive savages, bent on urbicide. Herzegovina, for example, was typically depicted as a rather exotic, chaotic, lawless place where nothing worked but everything was possible – as one of my Zagreb housemates put it, “the Wild West”. As a result, in contrast to the nationalist discourse of frontline heroism and purity, many people in Zagreb and Belgrade distanced themselves patently from their national brethren in those areas. This was increasingly the case as the war experience, already relatively remote for many in the city, moved further away into memory.<sup>6</sup>

### **Towards a critical understanding of white socks discourses**

It is here that the white socks of the invading hordes from the hills come back into play, for they were seen to constitute an iconic element of the urbicidal process in its more metaphorical sense. Dominant local and foreign understandings of the post-Yugoslav wars reflected a nationalist idiom: they spoke of a conflict between nations, cultural groups with a claim to a territory that was considered their homeland (Jansen 2005a/b). However, I found that many current and former inhabitants of the region did not, or at least not exclusively, subscribe to this view.

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<sup>6</sup> In Belgrade, the government itself actually failed to deliver on its rhetoric in a most blatant way in 1999, when Milošević had the roads to the capital blocked in order to prevent the influx of Kosovo refugees.



An additional and sometimes subversive explanation, particularly amongst self-proclaimed urbanites, stated that the violence was not (or not only) brought about by enemy nations, but (at least also) by their own governments. An important pattern in this reasoning involved portraying these governments as exponents of Balkan peasant primitivism. The carriers of this primitivism, it was argued, were rural folk who had occupied the city both politically-economically and culturally, and particularly the presence and alleged predominance of frontline peasants in the cities was resented: not content with polluting city life with their bad manners, the white socks wearers had imposed their corrupt political and business elite.

Of course, the phenomenon of urban resentment towards rural newcomers is neither new nor unique. The classic work of the Manchester school of anthropology highlighted similar patterns in African cities (for a discussion, see Hannerz 1980), and urban “sociocentrism” has been a prominent object of study in Mediterranean ethnography (Kertzer, Kerry 1983, Silverman 1975). In the Serbian context, the “patriarchal” nature of 19<sup>th</sup> century cities was noted (Cvijić 1966), as well as the “peasantisation of the city” in the 1960s (Kostić 1969). Andrei Simić (1973) presented an optimistic account of “peasant urbanites” as adaptive rational individuals, a particular social category embodying the Yugoslav road to modernisation. Radomir Konstantinović’s more pessimistic *Filozofija palanke* (1981) saw the newcomers as providing the social base of a market town [*“palanka”*] mentality, combining traditionalism and authoritarianism with a siege mentality and petit-bourgeoisification. In what follows I analyse the role of the stereotypical image of white socks in urban mockery and resentment in the context of 1990s Belgrade and Zagreb. My attempt to develop a critical understanding of these white socks discourses relies on three main conceptual tools: balkanism, distinction and modernisation.<sup>7</sup>

On the most obvious level, white socks discourses constitute a particular form of balkanism. This concept has been developed through a critical rethinking of Said’s notion of orientalism: a discourse that creates two essentialised subjectivities, a known, subordinated Other and a superior, knowing Self (Said 1978: 58 f.). Various authors have pointed out the relevance of a reworked version of Said’s conceptual framework for analysing both Western attitudes to South-East Europe (Fleming 2000, Todorova 1997) and relations between the various post-Yugoslav states (Bakić-Hayden 1995, Bakić-Hayden & Hayden 1992). Building on the notion of “nesting” or “recursive” inflections of balkanism identified by these authors, others have shown that, due to a chain of equivalences, the concept can also be used to explore oppositions within the various post-Yugoslav national

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<sup>7</sup> Given the limited space, the analysis here is generalising and, at times, elliptic. Some of the ideas developed here, as well as more extensive ethnographic evidence, are included in Jansen 2005a: Chapter 2.

contexts (Živković 2002, Đerić 2003, 2004, Helms n.d., Jansen 2002a). Elsewhere I have analysed these internal balkanisms with reference to the deterritorialised concept of culturedness [*“kultura”*] (Jansen 2005a: 116). Paraphrasing my argument there, I would say that the key relevance of white socks discourses lay with the urbanites who formulate them and thereby construct their own subjectivity as cultured urban citizens. In principle, of course, *kultura*, as the positive pole of this balkanist discourse, was accessible to all city-dwellers by default. However, as a result of the cultural geography of the region, the historical context, and the 1990s’ wars, there was often an uneasy coexistence of a self-assured claim to an undisputable culturedness on the one hand, and an anxiety that it was actually very much disputed on the other. *Kultura*, in other words, functioned not only as a claim to a self-evident property derived from one’s background but also as a stated aspiration. As illustrated by the vignettes featuring Davor and Boris, despite their presumed incompatibility, the lived realities of *kultura* and its opposite, *nekultura*, spilled over into each other in everyday life (cf. Herzfeld 1995: 220, 1996: 6). In response to the *nekultura* that was imposing itself as a “stranger within” (Kristeva 1988) *kultura* was then constructed at least partly outside oneself (see also Jansen 2002a, Simić 1973: 70). In order to integrate these internal tensions with sensitivity to social inequality, I suggest we fine-tune the balkanist framework with the help of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of distinction (1979).

The notion of distinction, developed as part of Bourdieu’s eponymous study of class and taste in 1960s France, refers to contested practices of social differentiation surrounding the embodiment of culture. As such it allows us to bring in social stratification. In a Belgrade study, Simić (1973) demonstrated that the main fault lines in cultural profile were not actually related to length of residence in the city (i. e., newcomers vs. autochthons), but to a combination of what Bourdieu would call economic and cultural capital. While I cannot rely on statistical data here, my ethnographic research suggested a similar pattern in the post-war 1990s, with a pronounced role for cultural capital. Bourdieu demonstrated that the French *haute bourgeoisie* understood its cultural practices as the expression of self-evident distinction: what was in fact learned behaviour, made possible by a social position of relative detachment from economic necessity, was naturalised as disinterested individual preference. The main advantage of using the concept of distinction, in my view, is that it implies struggle, a fact that is unfortunately often written out of English-language appropriations of Bourdieu’s work. Although he emphasises the reproductive tendency of various patterns of taste, Bourdieu points to a tension between a self-assured sense of distinction on the one hand and a certain anxiety in the desire for it on the other (1979: 278). In the case of post-Yugoslav white socks discourses, this tension was much sharper. Amplifying the dialectic of habitus (Bourdieu 1980: 88 f.), social background factors such as an urban pedigree provided some certainty, but *kultura* remained the object of aspiration and compe-

tion, despite claims of self-evident possession. In this context, white socks discourses allowed the construction of compatibilities between one's everyday life experiences and possible variations on a theme of balkanist distinction. There was a peculiar temporal factor at work here: when Zagrepcani and Beogradani deplored the loss of their city's *kultura* due to peasant invasions, this was often framed in a wider discourse of mourning for urban, European modernisation. Life, like their city, was not what it used to be. So their point was not simply that their city was under attack from rurality, but rather that a relapse had occurred. In contrast, self-representations of urbanites as self-evidently cultured demanded that *kultura* was considered a simple continuation of the normality of previous lives (Jansen 2005a: 163). But this assertion needs to be subjected to critical interrogation, embedding strategies of balkanist distinction in their peculiar domesticated modernisation paradigm.

The temporal element of white socks discourses points to the existence of a sense of nostalgia, but not the usual one for a *Gemeinschaft* based on "traditional" solidarity. Even though, as Zagreb DJ Davor pointed out, there was a sense that city folk were hopefully divided, sticking together was actually often denounced as a typical rural thing (cf. Brown 2001: 428). No, the peculiar nostalgia expressed here can be understood as nostalgia for modernisation. Particularly amongst middle-aged urbanites, but also amongst many others, as evidenced by Boris and Davor, this nostalgia was based on relative expectations and resentment at their non-fulfilment. Hence, white socks discourses must be charted against the background of rememberings of Yugoslav modernisation (whether individual or intergenerational) and of mourning for the loss of a place in the world. This place might be individual, but also included a collective sense of having been higher up in the global ranking of lifestyles, in contrast to the current deprivation and the heavily resented dependency of "being treated as a third world country" (Jansen 2005a: 236). But how is this related to the issue of urbanity? In order to discuss this, we need to make a brief detour to the former state.

### **Mud and asphalt: modernisation and urbanisation**

Considered within a European context, the territory that comprised Yugoslavia long retained a remarkably rural character. Serious urbanisation and industrialisation, with its corollary in a programme of education, occurred with the post-WWII Titoist regime. However, despite its project of socialist modernisation, it should be noted that the nature of the official Yugoslav attitude towards the city remains a matter of debate. There are those who argue that Yugoslav communism was a strongly urban-based ideology, aimed at eradicating what it saw as backward cultural patterns and replacing them with egalitarian and modern social

relations (see e. g. Ramet 1996: 72–76). Others argue that the Partisan victory in WWII and the Titoist regime that followed actually had a strongly rural character under a thin veneer of urbanity (see e. g. Vujović 1992: 61, Velikić 1992: 36 ff). In any case, what nobody denies is that post-war Yugoslav times were characterised by a wave of urbanisation, whether “genuine” or not: in the period 1948–1981, some 6.5 million Yugoslavs migrated from rural areas to cities (Vujović 1992: 61, Spangler 1983). Despite these population movements, everyday experiences in the 1990s still testified to the continuing relevance of a large contrast between city and village life. This was more than a mere statistical phenomenon or an item of exclusively academic debate. It featured prominently as a topic of conversation, with few, whether urbanites or villagers, disputing that the village and the city were and always had been worlds apart. Many of those who considered themselves true city folk only reluctantly visited the countryside (not counting the coast) and had a limited knowledge of rural areas. Others did move between the two locations, but this often reinforced the perception of a strong divide. The urban/rural gap in the former state certainly retained its relevance in relation to issues of nationality and co-existence. In the Yugoslav federation many cities had been nationally heterogeneous and contained relatively higher numbers of “mixed” marriages than villages (Petrović 1985, Smits, Ultee 1996). Needless to say, the recent wars produced a tendency towards national homogeneity in most areas, but still less so in cities.

The population movements from rural areas to the city that characterised the Titoist era underwent a dramatic increase during the post-Yugoslav wars. Both Zagreb and Belgrade experienced large influxes of people, many of whom were directly or indirectly seeking refuge from violence. In the process, contradictory dynamics seemed to both destabilise and reinforce the perceived contrast between the urban and the rural. Most of my informants in Zagreb and Belgrade treated this contrast as a simple self-evidence, locating, as we have seen, a large amount of the blame of the current situation in rural primitivism, especially that of frontline peasants. This was compatible with existing urban stereotypes of countryside populations and with the previous official discourse of socialist development. It also reflected the predominance, both in common parlance and in the academy, of an evolutionist model leading from rural traditional backwardness to urban civilised modernity (Perović 1996). In the post-Yugoslav version of such a domesticated modernisation paradigm (Ferguson 1999), a very important role was accorded to formal education – other forms of desirable cultural capital, such as manners and style, as well as value systems, were often seen as directly related to it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The question is to what extent survey data showing a link between low schooling levels and e. g. “nationalism”, “authoritarianism” (Golubović 1995: 447) should be seen as a measure of

In any case, from the predominant perspective of “modernisation as urbanisation”, the appearance of white socks on asphalt was met with an insistence on retaining cultural property of “the city” – for urbanity allowed one to relate one’s personal narrative to the larger story of European modernity (Jansen 2000, 2001). Let me very briefly highlight three dimensions of this insistence.

Firstly, white socks on asphalt exposed a city pedigree, presumably the basis for the distinction of the urbanite, as very unstable indeed, reawakening unease about the depth of urbanisation. Many of those employing white socks discourses were only first- or second-generation citizens themselves. While estimates of the Belgrade population in the 1990s hovered around one and a half million, the city had counted only 15 000 inhabitants in 1850 and 100 000 in 1914 (Ramet 1996: 74). In fact, in 1992, two-thirds of the Belgrade population consisted of people who had moved in from rural areas during their lifetime (Vujović 1992: 62). Perhaps this helps to explain the need to establish one’s urban credentials. The title of Slavenka Drakulić’ essay (1996: 196–202), *Still stuck in the mud*, is paradigmatic for the image that many urbanites had towards their more recent co-citizens but, precisely due to the very rapid pace of urbanisation in Yugoslavia, it may also reflect a lingering doubt as to the success of their own desired transition to modern city life. While there was a relative consensus on the backward character of the rural, this was not reflected in an agreement on where to place the dividing line between urbanity and rurality. It was precisely the absence of such a certainty that was constructed as a symptom of underdevelopment (Bogdanović 1993: 16 f.). Hence, following the logic of Bourdieu’s distinction, few people could safely assert their distance from village mud.

Secondly, the white socks did not appear on mud, but on asphalt. Asphalt, covering and conquering mud, had been a key metaphor of the Yugoslav modernisation ethos, as evidenced in road building programmes. Represented as heroic labour for Progress, road construction brought asphalt to the village, thus disclosing it and lifting it into modernity. A metaphor still frequently used in mundane contexts to evoke urban/rural differences (Spasić 2005, Kangrga 1997: 119–129), asphalt set modern life apart from backwardness: situated between the body and the underlying mud, it mediates the experience of the land, and thus of peasant origins. However, the recent wars had brought about a stronger economic interdependence between city and village. Due to falling living standards, many city dwellers increasingly came to rely on kin-based social networks in rural areas, thus strengthening pre-existing patterns (Simić 1973: 108–125). This was particularly striking in Belgrade, where the socio-economic situation was disastrous. The luggage compartments of buses arriving in the capital from all over the country

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conformism, which may partly be captured on these scales, but needs to be studied as a phenomenon in itself (Jansen 2002b, 2003, 2005c).

were always bursting with food parcels. They were usually unaccompanied, and, especially during weekends, Belgrade bus station buzzed with people waiting for food delivered to them (usually for a fee) by a co-operative bus driver. Again, the hard-earned boundaries of urban existence were put into question: to push the metaphor, rather than generously providing asphalt for the village, the city was hit by a mudslide, and forced to lay back and take it.

This brings us to a third tension in the white socks discourses. Clearly these garments are not “traditional” by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, to the self-proclaimed modern urbanite, who felt her/his modernisation threatened by war, deterioration and isolation, they represent an inauthentic form of modernisation. In fact, the frontline peasant constructed in the urban discourses of resentment had ample access to some of the trappings of modernity: for example, money, conspicuous consumer goods and transnational connections (perhaps evolved from earlier *Gastarbeiter* experiences, often equally derided). In classic structuralist anthropological terms, he (and, by extension only, she) constituted a dangerous, polluting category to the post-Yugoslav urban guardian of *kultura* (Douglas 1966). Self-proclaimed urbanites thus reassigned frontline peasants to a stage between the backward and the modern, signifying a vision of rurality in the city (cf. Ferguson 1999: 83 f.).

## Conclusion

This article is built around a simple argument: that the white socks worn by stereotyped frontline peasants came to serve as a focal point in post-Yugoslav discourses of balkanist distinction in a modernisation format. Deploring the pernicious influence of invading peasants on the city, the citizen could effectively bewail the loss of a much wider ideal of modernisation, retaining a sense of normality in the face of deterioration. Understood against the background of Yugoslav urbanisation, white socks may thus denote a balkanised Other within, threatening the basis of urban self-perception – a self-perception that must, following the logic of distinction, remain unquestioned through naturalisation. Therefore, rather than the image of a mudslide that I used earlier, the white socks invasion is probably better compared to the unsightly view of mud appearing through the cracks of city asphalt, when so much effort went into covering it up forever. Deploying the notions of balkanism, distinction and a domesticated modernisation paradigm allows us to develop a critical understanding of this process with two main advantages: firstly, this framework draws the attention to the dynamic and contested character of concepts such as modernity and urbanity, and particularly to the ways they are intertwined with social inequality; secondly, it prevents us from culturalising this process as a typically Balkan one, simply flowing from

specific traditional patterns. Instead, I believe we who work in the region would have much to learn from juxtaposing our work with explorations of similar urban discourses in other former-“modernising” states marked by a sudden deterioration of life for certain urban social categories. As I have attempted to show with the post-Yugoslav case, if we wish to understand them, they must also be placed against the background of particular political-economic trajectories.

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