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POL 408

In 1991, many observers saw the destruction of the “iron curtain” as more than just the termination of an infamous ideology—communism, but also as the beginning of a “New World Order”, with free-market capitalism and liberal democracy becoming the norm, spreading across the globe¹. Some Western scholars expanded this notion and stated that it was “the end of history”². However, such observations soon proved to be fallacious, for ethnic strife quickly erupted in their own “backyard”—the former-Yugoslavia.

Indeed, the triumphant euphoria expressed by many was quickly replaced by sober realism: the cumulative statistics over the course of three “Balkans” wars has led to over 200,000 deaths, three million people displaced, and not to mention, has left the region’s economy devastated. All in all, the world has not witnessed such dislocation and ethnic cleansing of this magnitude since Hitler carried out his “Final Solution”. Accordingly, many Westerners are quick to view these wars as an expression of ancient “ethnic enmities”, which were “naturally” manifested after the “strong arm” of communism vanished. However, I argue this approach is false. This is because their causes were modern, and thus, had nothing to do with the region’s so-called “tribal past”. Furthermore, the other two approaches help explain why.

A second more amenable narrative on the Balkan conflicts is what social scientists call, a constructivist approach, which adheres to the belief that social realities happen because of human beings, who “invent”—or “construct”—ways to frame issues and events. Moreover, the ways they caricature these issues have a profound impact on

¹ This phrase was made by US President George H. W. Bush.

² Francis Fukayama

shaping the actions, views and relationships among people. In light of this, I agree with Gagnon's critique of the conflict as a result of Balkan leaders trying to cement their power in response to the rise of "political pluralism" and "popular mobilization" within their own territories. Furthermore, their goal was to construct their own "homogenous *political spaces*", which meant they had to "demobilize" (which often times meant to kill) the ethnic minorities within their territories (Gagnon, 2004:7). Moreover, I also analyze the conflicts through a different constructivist critique, one that focuses on the ways the "west" has viewed the violence in the area. In doing so, I argue that "western" history repeats itself; that is, the present critique articulated by many westerners is a modified version which views the Balkan inhabitants as a "variation" of the "the Orient"—the "other". By this, I mean to postulate that the west has historically "constructed" certain cultural myths and stereotypes about the Balkans as a means for separating themselves both *mentally* and *physically* from this area. In other words, it is used in a manner that allows them to visualize a "mental map" that determines who is and isn't European, both culturally and geographically.

My last approach studies to what degrees economic dislocation, caused by neo-liberal and free markets economics, affect the relationships between different groups within states, most namely, how they effect the political process and the actions of governing elites. Accordingly, I argue that Ost's caricature is correct: that the economic austerity prevalent throughout the former Yugoslavia caused many of their ethnic leaders to direct the blame for their constituency's "economic anger" onto their ethnic neighbors.

In short, I argue, first in foremost, that all of the causes of the violence in the former Yugoslavia happened because of "modern" reasons. In other words, they had

nothing to do with so-called “ancient-tribal hatreds”. Moreover, I argue that the combination of Gagnon and Ost’s arguments give the most plausible reasons for why the Balkans exploded into ethnic violence; that is, it was a direct response to both political and economic modernization that was beginning to gain root within the former Yugoslavia.

The first approach argues the wars are a result of a centuries-old animosity mutually felt between the ethnic groups in the Balkans. In other words, ethnic hatred is “the principle energizing force underlying these conflicts” (Simic, 2000: 104). Andrei Simic propagates this view through the conception of folk culture and myths. According to Simic, the “folk concept” represents “an overarching, multi-stranded ideology locating the individual within a historical, cultural and kindred context, thus answering one of life’s most basic questions—who am I?” (Simic, 2000: 108). Therefore, nationalism is an expression of folk culture, the rise of which in the Balkans was an inevitable historical adaptation “conceptually linking the family, clan, and tribe to the state” (Simic, 2000: 110). In this conception, then, the Southern Slavs have brought with them their “ethos of revenge”, a value that is traced back to their medieval roots of “clan solidarity”, to the national level (Simic, 2000:113). Said differently, their form of nationalism adheres to their “tribal belief” which views “feuding and warfare” as a “quasi-sacred” activity (Simic, 2000:113).

Perhaps a better way to understand this relationship, Simic argues, is through a series of “concentric circles”, the innermost of which “circumscribes the nuclear and extended family”, and the outermost the nation whose “circumferences defines the final limits of moral obligation” (Simic, 2000:113). Thus the symbolic space united by kinship,

and to a greater extent, the nation, can be articulated as resembling “a single moral field” , with the areas outside of it “an amoral sphere” (Simic, 2000:113). Accordingly, those inside the “concentric circle” are viewed as “good” and those outside are considered “evil”. In the end, this is the fundamental reason that triggered the violence and atrocities committed by the various ethnicities.

Other scholars have given similar caricatures of the Balkan crises, albeit they express their views in more blunt and often more simplistic methods. For instance, George Kennen describes in his 1993 report, *The Other Balkan Wars* that

The strongest motivating factor involved in the Balkan Wars was not religion but aggressive nationalism. But that nationalism, as it manifested itself on the field of battle, drew on deeper traits of character inherited, presumably, from a distant tribal past...And so it remains today...(quoted in Todorova, 1994: 459).

He further argues the “developments” that occurred during the times of “Turkish domination” imposed “into the southeastern reaches of the European continent a salient of non-European civilization which has continued to the present day to preserve many of its non-European characteristics” (quoted in Todorova, 1994: 459). Thus, similarly to Simic, Kennen is echoing the same theme: that in the context of the Balkans, the word “ethnicity” is naturally followed by the image of violence.

As a result, this approach believes that Balkan history follows a familiar pattern that naturally recycles itself: that is, regional stability is achieved with strong authoritarian states in power because this form of government is able to *physically* tamper-down the violent mentalities of the Balkan peoples³. Likewise, whenever the central “fist” implodes, the power vacuum that precipitates its destruction allows the

³ The Ottoman Empire, the Hapsburg Empire, Tito’s Yugoslavia, and more recently, NATO has effectively played this role.

region's ethnic groups to then act on their mutually shared animosities. The Balkan people are, in a way, "children", who, without the proper supervision of adults, are unable to control their irrational and violent instincts that they cannot help but direct onto their "neighbors". However, is this narrative correct?

The *Economist* argues that the region enjoyed ethnic stability during the Ottoman Empire because it acted as a "vast refrigerator", from which they succeeded in decreasing the area's nationalism to a "condition of torpor" (*Economist Online 1/22/98*). Likewise, the ethnic violence that broke out after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire is similarly blamed because the region lacked a sturdy hand, one that could keep the area's sub-groups from acting on their instinctive notion of "clan solidarity", which views ethnic feuds as "a moral obligation" (Simic, 2000: 112).

However, blaming this instance of ethnic strife in this manner glosses over crucial facts that point to a different reason, all of which can be considered modern at the time, most namely, the ethnic groups were trying to construct "political spaces" along European lines. In other words, similar to what Western European states were attempting to do at the same time, Balkan elites were trying to construct homogenous nations-states. However, unlike elsewhere in Europe, this proved to be very difficult and tumultuous because of the manner the Ottoman Turks governed over their Balkan territories. This is because of their "millet system", which was organized along religious and not ethnic or geographical lines. In light of this, after the dismemberment of such a system, Balkan "elites who wanted to establish a state on the very heterogeneous territory of the Ottoman Empire" were required (that is, if they wanted to be recognized by the Europeans as an independent state) to show and then prove that the geographic space they claimed as

theirs was inhabited by *their* people (Gagnon, 2004: 17). Therefore, “the violence...was in effect part of the reconstruction of political space, moving away from the complexities of the Ottoman polity in which identities were not spatialized, and toward the Western norm of spatial homogeneity” (Gagnon, 2004: 17). Therefore, the violence was not a result of “ancient-hatreds”, but rather, was because of reasons that, given the context of the period, were modern.

However, despite this, Simic et al. still perceive the regional violence that precipitated the crumbling of the Yugoslav kingdom as yet another example of their “venerable enmities”. This is because the “power vacuum” that arose during this period allowed the Nazi-backed Independent State of Croatia (NDH) to act on their “bottled up” hatred for their surrounding Jewish and Serbian neighbors and systematically kill them, the death toll of which is estimated to be between 800,000 to one million (Suppan, 2003: 129). In particular, 330,000 Serbs died by the hands of the Ustase, the Croatian death-squads (Suppan, 2003: 129). Moreover, of the 40,000 Jews that lived in the Independent State of Croatia’s territory, only 9,000 survived the war (Suppan, 2003: 129).

This caricature of the genocide, however, neglects to mention that the Ustase regime “was a marginal party imposed by the German and Italians *after* the highly popular Peasant Party refused to collaborate” (emphasis added) (Gagnon, 2004: 32). In fact, the NDH’s nefarious actions were not supported by the majority of the Croats (Gagnon, 2004: 32). Moreover, Simic similarly glosses over the fact that the ethnic violence—in this case, the Ustase-instigated genocide—was a recent development, in that the Croats and the Serbs, the two largest ethnicities in the Balkans, did not fight each other in a war until the early 20th century (Gagnon, 2004: 31). In light of this, it is

unlikely the ethnic groups in the Balkans possess animosities that are supposedly bequeathed to them by their “Medieval” ancestors, especially since the region’s two ethnic “heavy weights” only started fighting one hundred years ago.

Yet, this still does not stop Suppan to argue that the resentment caused from the genocide festered among the ethnic groups throughout the duration of the communist-controlled Yugoslavia, postulating: “Although suppressed in Tito’s Yugoslavia, the memories of the bitter internecine fighting were perpetuated in families and passed down from generation to generation” (Suppan, 2003: 136). Simic similarly promulgates that this instance of “ethnic violence” underscores the fact that “Yugoslavia was largely an artificial creation” (Simic, 2000: 105). But this claim is similarly problematic, for there is plenty of evidence that suggests the groups within Tito’s Yugoslavia were getting along fine.

Even though Botev claims that interethnic marriages constituted between only 12 to 13 percent of the entire Yugoslav population, this statistic is in many ways meaningless, for its sweeping critique fails to take into account the marriage patterns in many of the provinces that erupted in violence actually enjoyed relatively high levels of mixed marriages (Botev, 2000: 223). For instance, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a province that saw its share of violence throughout the 1990s and should thus be highlighted, 16.8 percent of all marriages were mixed (Gagnon, 2004: 41). In other words, given “the average household size in the republic, at least one half of the population of Bosnia-Herzegovina has interethnic family relations” (Srdan Bogosavljevic quoted in Gagnon, 2004: 42). Furthermore, there are other statistics that show the ethnic tensions to be rather low, and almost even harmonious. For instance, in a 1989 survey, 77 percent of the youth

disagreed with the statement that “one always needs to be cautious” towards others of different nationality (Gagnon, 2004: 40). Similarly, 75.1 percent agreed either fully or mostly with the assertion that “division into nations is harmful or pointless” (Gagnon, 2004: 40). Moreover, 81.6 percent of the youth agreed with the statement that “I am a Yugoslav and cannot give priority to feeling of some other belonging” (Gagnon, 2004: 41). Indeed, these sentiments were enjoyed by at least a majority of Balkan inhabitants in every republic (Gagnon, 2004: 41).

Thus, in conclusion, it is clear the violence that erupted in the Balkans was not because of centuries-old animosities held within the various ethnicities. Yet, if this is not the reason, what is? I will now turn to analyzing the constructivist critique, which I believe gives a more plausible explanation for why ethnic violence ensued after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In doing so, I will focus on two different, albeit similar constructivist approaches. The first approach is one given by V.P Gagnon Jr., which broadly focuses on how the indigenous elite framed the conflict through the context of ethnicity; that is, there were not ethnic tensions between the various groups until the ethnic political leaders specifically chose to frame it as so. The second perspective views this conflict through the lenses of east versus west; that is, it argues the west, in particular its intellectuals and political leaders, have historically “constructed” the image of the Balkans as the “Orient”, the primitive “other”, as a means for reaffirmed their own superiority and civility. Moreover, it also has geographical connotations, for they used the image of the “Orient” as a way for visually erecting a barrier between Europe and non-Europe, mostly because of (geo)political reasons.

Gagnon Jr. purports to approach the Balkan wars in a manner that “does justice to social realities” and that “recognizes the agency of human beings”, while also acknowledging the significance of bigger “structures of powers in constraining individual’s choices and perceptions of choice in shaping outcomes” (Gagnon, 2004: xv). In light of this, Gagnon Jr. believes that when indigenous and Western leaders call these conflicts ethnically instigated, it does not say anything about whether this diagnosis is correct; rather, it is simply that the perpetrators are constructing the violence “as ethnic at some level” (Gagnon, 2004:11). Why then, did the Balkan leaders choose to frame this conflict as such?

The answer is very modern, for the violence and the ethnic cleansing is a direct response chosen by indigenous elites to counter the rise of “political pluralism and popular mobilization”, which threatened their structures of power (Gagnon, 2004:7). In other words, after the dismemberment of communist-Yugoslavia, many of the Balkan leaders recognized that their hold on power was in jeopardy—the culprit: the rise of democracy and a pluralistic civil society. In light of their predicaments, they hoped that violence would “demobilize key parts of their population”, groups that threaten their own hegemony, while at the same time use violence as means for mobilizing their own supporters, which would allow them to artificially create “political homogeneity on heterogeneous social spaces” (Gagnon, 2004:7). In this conception, then, this is a way for them to cement their power. Gagnon promulgates:

The ultimate goal, however, is not so much the homogeneity as it is the construction of homogenous political space as a means to demobilize challengers...the homogeneity being sought is thus a political homogeneity, the means to such an end is the silencing, marginalizing and demobilization of those voices that were calling for

fundamental shifts in the structures of power (Gagnon, 2004:7).

One of the reasons why they chose violence as their strategy for “silencing” their dissenters is because of, as I have mentioned earlier, the relatively harmonious relations shared between the various groups throughout Tito’s Yugoslavia. This, in turn, forced the Balkan leaders to go to the extreme, for violence was the most persuasive means for convincing their own groups that it was in their interests to kill and demobilize ethnic “others”, many of which had only recently been considered amorous “neighbors”. Violence is, thus, an effective way for provoking emotions among their constituencies and then channeling them in ways that are in line with their group leader’s expansionist and “expulsionist” goals. For instance, Serbian nationalists organized mass rallies, where they decried the “atrocities” in Kosovo committed against their own ethnic Serbian “brothers” (Gagnon, 2004: 69). They did so because they hoped it would drive up Serbian support for “demobilizing” the growing Albanian population in the province, which, because they were against their political views, threatened their hold on power in the region (Woodward, 1995: 75)⁴.

Thus, in watching and hearing these accounts, it is only natural for ordinary people to start seeing their own “neighbors” more suspiciously, and if stressed enough, even allow—or participate in—their expulsion and even their termination. Furthermore, another reason why the Balkan leaders focused on violence is because of its “particular notion of groupness and solidarity” (Gagnon, 2004: 28). In this conception, then, by carrying out violence, those who “dissent” or who seek to advance different “forms of

⁴ Zimmerman offers a similar argument; see: Zimmerman, Warren. (1996) *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and Its Destroyers—America’s Last Ambassador Tells What Happened and Why*. New York: Random House Books.

community” are at best shunned from the “political discourse” and at worst killed (Gagnon, 2004: 28).

Overall, I believe that Gagnon’s argument is correct: that the violence occurred because of modern reasons and that it was a strategy chosen by elites in order to entrench their power. However, this only speaks to part of the story; the other more important perspective that I believe to be the clincher is that economic insecurities similarly drove the political elites to propagate ethnicity, hoping to channel the emotions caused by the economic hardships onto “others” as a means for escaping blame. In other words, it is the combination of these perspectives that I believe were the main forces driving the ethnic violence that erupted in the Balkans. However, before I expand on why economic forces played a salient role in causing the ethnic carnage, I must first analyze the other constructivist critique.

According to Larry Wolff, when Winston Churchill first spoke in 1946 about the “iron curtain” that had implanted itself “across” Europe”, he provided a “mental map” that divided Europe into two—Western and Eastern Europe (quoted in Wolff, 1994: 1). Europe was now divided between the “civilized” Western democracies and the Eastern European states under “totalitarian control” (quoted in Wolff, 1994: 1). His image of the Cold War was profound, framing the way the West conceptualized the struggle with the Soviet Union and its satellite states; that is, seeing it as a struggle between the rational and the “barbaric”. Yet, even after the dissolution of the “iron curtain” in 1989, and even though the “maps of the mind” have been “adjusted, adapted, [and] reconceived”, “their structures are deeply rooted and powerfully compelling” (Wolff, 1994: 3). Therefore, this image is still prevalent and living well today because its sentiment of western cultural

superiority traces its root back to an intellectual and cultural history that “invented the idea of Eastern Europe long before” (Wolff, 1994: 3).

Maria Todorova, among others, believes the same explanation is similarly applicable to how the “West” has historically constructed the image of the “Balkans”, a conception she believes is still popularly being used for explaining the recent conflicts in the region. By this, she means that Westerners are still viewing the Balkans “as a variation of the ‘Orient’” (Todorova, 1995: 455). According to Edward Said, “Orientalism” was advanced to denote “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, [and] ruling over it” (quoted in Todorova, 1995: 453). Moreover, the “Orient” has both cultural and geographical meaning. Culturally, it is used as a way for differentiating what is European and not; what is Christian and not; and lastly, what is civilized and not. Geographically-speaking, it is used as a “mental map” for determining what areas are inside “Europe” and which ones are not (Bakic-Hayden, 1995: 918). Thus, the latter reason constitutes as a way for Western Europeans to *physically* separate themselves from “others”, while also using this theme as a tool for constructing geopolitical fault lines in foreign policy (Todorova, 1995: 464).

However, the Balkans poses as a problem of sorts for this caricature. This is because its territory is in between what has historically been viewed as separating the west from the east. Moreover, it is also similarly problematic because its population is largely Christian, but not completely Christian, for this area also contains large pockets of Muslims. In light of this reason, among others, the western caricature of the Balkans has over the centuries constantly changed and been restructured, but the image of its

inhabitants of not only being “uncivilized”, but similarly “violent” still pervades among the mentalities of many Westerners. In a way, they are, analogously to their Eastern European brethren, a victim of “outsiders” placing onto them historical and cultural stereotypes. No more is this apparent than the way Westerners have viewed the recent wars that have erupted in the region. However, before I get to explaining this, I must first analyze the history of the Western view of the Balkan people as “unruly” and “tribal”, for only after I have done this in great detail will I be able to then relate it to today’s events.

During the 1700s, the intellectuals of the Enlightenment first coined the term Morlacchi as a way to geographically describe the “pastoral people who lived in the mountains” of Dalmatia, the region that is currently labeled the Balkans (Wolff, 2003: 37). Moreover, it was also used as a derogatory term directed at a group of people who they “perceived” to be “primitive Slavs”, living under Ottoman—meaning Islamic—rule (Wolff, 2003: 37). However, instead of “constructing” the Morlacchi as Christians, which most of them were, being oppressed by a brutal authoritarian Islamic government, the Western Europeans generally empathized and sided with their Muslim rulers, seeing them as the most effective way for controlling their unruly temperaments (Todorova, 1995: 469). For instance, Henry Blount wrote in his travel journal, “Voyage into the Levant” that the Morlacchi was “a race” that was “averse both in nature and institution”, and thereby needed the “firm hand” of the Turks to keep them in line (quoted in Todorova, 1995: 465). Thus, despite Europe’s Islamophobia, the European gentry found it “easier to identify with the Ottoman rulers” because they both shared the same attitude toward the peasantry, which was “to be protected and preserved” (Todorova, 1995: 469).

Similarly, Europeans looked favorably on the Ottoman Empire because of political reasons. This is because the Ottoman Empire played an important role in balancing the geopolitical power on the continent (Bakic-Hayden, 1995: 922). However, this does not mean the West considered the Ottoman Empire to be part of “Europe”—far from it; instead, their governments had relations with the Turks out of political necessity, still believing that the Balkan territory was outside of what they considered to be part of “Europe”.

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, however, the Balkan people all of a sudden became part of “Europe”, albeit “quasi-Europe”, because they were ruled by traditional European monarchs, the Hapsburg and then Austro-Hungarian Empires. But this did not change their image among the Europeans. In fact, it became worse; that is, they were now not only considered to be “uncivilized”, they similarly became viewed as inherently violent. This notion was further augmented by the development and widespread use of the derogatory phrase “balkanization”, which came into fruition during WWI (Todorova, 1995: 474). This had the harmful effect of “conclusively sealing a negative image for the area” (Todorova, 1995: 474). This is mostly because many ordinary Westerners (wrongly) blamed the Balkans for starting the Great War, despite the fact that their role was rather limited when compared to the “Great Powers” (Todorova, 1995: 474). Moreover, Europeans tended to view the assassination of the Arch Duke of Ferdinand of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as indicative of their “ancient tribal savagery”, choosing not to see it as an example of a nation (the Serbs) trying to create their own state, which was a very “modern” aspiration. But nonetheless, they still became what Bakic-Hayden aptly labels, “the powder keg of Europe” (Bakic-Hayden, 1995: 929).

Moreover, after WWII, some Western scholars have taken the image of the “Balkans as violent” to a much greater level. For instance, Robert Kaplan has even claimed that “Nazism...can claim Balkan origins”, for “among the flophouses of Vienna, a breeding ground of ethnic resentments close to the southern Slavic world” taught Hitler “how to hate so infectiously” (quoted in Todorova, 1995: 477). He does so despite what I have already stated earlier, that the ruling Ustase regime was a tiny minority, *imposed* by the fascist Italian and German governments, and did not enjoy popular support (Gagnon, 2004: 32). Yet, what is even more ironic is that the West’s image of this region brightened during the latter part of the Cold War.

The defeat of Nazi Germany gave birth to the communist-controlled Yugoslavia, thus rearranging the Western “construction” of the Balkans, from one that conceptualized them as being part of Europe, albeit its “powder-keg”, to becoming outside of the continent altogether, and moving itself within the ideology and territory of the “communist menace”—the Soviet Union⁵. However, many Western governments, including the United States, soon softened their image of the Yugoslavians. This is, above all, because of political reasons, whereas the West believed they were politically useful in their fight against communism. In fact, according to Woodward, Yugoslavia enjoyed a “special relationship” with the United States because of its “neutrality and military capability to deter Warsaw Pact forces from Western Europe” (Woodward, 1999: 216). Todorova is thus correct when she states that “if there is any lesson to be drawn from the Balkan past, it certainly concerns the domestic imperatives in great power foreign policy more than ‘ancient enmities” (Todorova, 1995: 469). Furthermore, another reason why

⁵ The West and East became divided along the lines of “western democracies’ and [the] ‘communist East” (Bakic-Hayden, 1995: 921)

the West viewed the country in a more favorable light, a view they seem to forget today, was because Yugoslavia during the latter part of Tito's rule opened up its markets in degrees that exceeded those of their fellow communist-European states (Todorova, 1995: 469). In fact, only a few years before the violence broke out in the Balkans, many Western governments were lauding Yugoslavia, even calling it "Eastern Europe's 'Shining Star'" (Gagnon, 2004: 5).

However, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia found that it no longer enjoyed its "special relationship" with the west, which, along with the eruption of violence in the region, caused Western Europe to quickly resort to its old ways of viewing the inhabitants of the area as their crazy and rambunctious "relatives". For instance, a headline for an article in the *Economist* aptly summarizes this view: "Europe's Roughest Neighbourhood" (*Economist Online* 1/22/98). Perhaps the most striking change of position is George F. Kennen, who during the Cold War was among the most vocal proponents that praised the policies of Yugoslavia. However, this changed in 1993, when he wrote that, although "these states of mind [animosities] are not peculiar" to this group, what separates them from the West is the "undue predominance among the Balkan peoples of these particular qualities" (quoted in Todorova, 1995: 460). What accounts for the West's change?

The main reason for this is because, with the breakup of the Soviet Empire, Yugoslavia now found itself part of Europe (again), thus forcing Europeans to reconceptualize and redefine what they believe to be European, both culturally and geographically. Thus, the question becomes whether or not states located in the former-Yugoslavia are "worthy" enough to become members of this elite and "civilized"

fraternity: the EU. What is so striking is that many of the Eastern European countries, many of which were considered to be behind Yugoslavia in both political and economic reforms only fifteen years before by many Western governments, have now been accepted into the EU. Furthermore, as a result of becoming part of the “European club”, many of these Eastern European governments are now sharing their Western European counterpart’s presumptuous attitudes towards the Balkans.

For instance, Vaclav Havel argues that while the Czech Republic, among other Eastern European states, “clearly belong to the western sphere of European civilization” because they espouse the “values” and “draw on the same traditions” (that is, “democracy and market economies”), the same cannot be said of “the traditionally agitated the Balkans”, which thus makes them ill-suited to join the rest of Europe and the EU (quoted in Todorova, 1995: 478)⁶. His statement points to many important recent European conceptions that have since been “invented” and placed onto the Balkans.

For instance, the Eastern Europeans no longer consider the Balkans (aside from Slovenia, which has been deemed European-worthy and has thus joined the EU) to be both geographically and culturally within their “league”, despite the discourse of western history saying otherwise. Also, geopolitically, it portrays how “core” Europe is using the Balkan conflicts (that is, “the traditionally agitated Balkans”) as an excuse for excluding them into the EU and not accepting them into “Europe”. A great analogy of this is to view the Balkans as having one step in the European “door”, with the Western Europeans trying to slam it shut. Therefore, by advancing the “Balkans equals violence” conception, they are using it as a way for reorganizing the mental and physical boundaries of what

⁶ Of course, his statement is particularly ironic because the Czech Republic itself was established only after a “tumultuous”, albeit bloodless, breakup with Slovakia (Orenstein, 2001: 85)

constitutes as Europe. In a way, the Western Europeans see the Balkans as a “burden”, one that they wish they can “wash” their hands with. Kennen articulates this view when he concludes that no country “wants , or should be expected to occupy the entire distracted Balkan region, to subdue its excited peoples, and to hold them in order until they calm down and begin to look at their problems in a more orderly way” (Todorova, 1995: 479). This mindset is very destructive, for it propagates the view that the violence in the region is inherent, and since it is inherent, there is thus nothing the west can do about it until the violence plays itself out. In a way, it is an excuse for not acting and engaging with the area, or as Woodward wrote in 1999: the Western European “label[ing]” of the ethnic violence in the Balkans as “barbaric” was meant to be an “act of dismissal”, which “justified inaction” (Woodard, 1999: 216).

Moreover, in watching the Balkan drama unfold, they are simultaneously seeing it as a chance to reaffirm their own image of representing democracy and free market capitalism—in short, “civilization”. For instance, the *Economist* hoped in 1998 that, with the NATO forces playing the role of “civilizers”, “perhaps, this time, democracy and economic development can prevent a mess” (*Economist Online 1/22/98*). Yet in doing so, the people at the *Economist* and westerners are repeating the same narrative their ancestors were articulating centuries before. Indeed, while the names may change from the “Morlacchi” to the “Balkans”, the historical narrative of this region has continuously repeated itself in a cyclical fashion. But most importantly, conceptualizing the Balkans as such does a lot of harm, for it makes it nearly impossible for Westerners to view the causations of the regional turmoil as anything other than “ancient tribal hatreds”. In fact, if they only look closer at the root causes of these conflicts, they would realize they are

quite modern, most namely, many of them happened as a response to wanting to “rejoin Europe”. This should have been explicitly apparent to Europe when the Croatian and Slovenian political parties were campaigning under the slogans: “Europe Now!” (*Economist Online* 1/22/85).

In fact, the ethnic Croats in both Croatia and Herzegovina portrayed the Muslims within their republics as “others” because they believed that it would be harder for them to join the EU and become part of Europe with large populations of Muslims (Hayden, 2000: 118)⁷. This is because they “constructed” Europe to be a Christian civilization (Hayden, 2000: 118). Thus, they chose to frame the “other” along religious—and not *ethnic* lines because they saw it as the most effective way to “justify partition” from their Muslims “neighbors”, which they hoped would then allow them to construct their own homogenous “political spaces” (to use Gagnon’s phrase) (Hayden, 2000: 118). Above all, they hoped this development would make their states more conducive to joining “Europe”, especially since most Western European states are relatively homogenous⁸.

Despalatovic similarly states that one of the main forces driving behind Croatia’s partition from Yugoslavia and the subsequent ethnic quarrels that resulted from this course of action was a direct result of their own “perception” that “they were being dragged down” by their southern neighbor’s “sloppiness and corruption” (Despalatovic, 2000: 92). Such sluggishness, they conceived, was keeping them away from “rejoin[ing] Europe”, to which they believed they rightly belonged, for they “strongly identified with Central Europe and the orderliness of the Hapsburg tradition” (Despalatovic, 2000: 92),

⁷ In many ways, they are vindicated in holding these beliefs—just look at the presumptuous and hostile attitudes the EU is holding during their negotiations with Turkey for joining the Union.

⁸ In hindsight, their view is, in a sense, partly vindicated, in that the one state in the “Balkans” that has been accepted into the EU is Slovenia, which is the most homogenous state in the Balkans (for a chart on the ethnic make ups in the respective republics, see: (Samary, 1994: 19)).

(Despalotovic, 2000: 92). The best way for them to do so, they believed, was to then sunder themselves from their southern “delinquents”, even though this led to violence between other ethnic groups.

Thus, in conclusion, I believe the constructivist critique is important for understanding the Balkan conflicts because it shows how the narratives of them were constructed by both indigenous and Western figures, and most importantly, that it recognizes how the actions of human beings—how they frame certain events—affect the way people see the world and each other. Furthermore, it also does justice to the Balkan people, in that this critique shows their own struggles were not a result of their “ancient enmities”, but rather, all of these reasons were actually quite “modern”, whether it was in response to leaders constructing their own “political spaces” in order to solidify their own grip on power, or in the hope of rejoining Europe. Moreover, the main reason why the conflict has not been studied in the west in such a manner is because of the propensity of westerners to use heinous old stereotypes for interpreting the events unfolding in the region.

And so, the image of the Balkans has been redefined and reconfigured over the centuries, but nonetheless, the stigma is still prevalent in western minds, or as Wolff so aptly states, “the shadow still pervades” (Wolfe, 1994: 3). After having said that, I now turn to analyzing the last approach.

The economic narrative reaffirms and further augments the constructivist critique; most notably, I argue that the combination of Gagnon and the economic caricature, given by Ost, is the most plausible explanation for making sense of the ethnic bloodshed in the Balkans. That is, it was a direct response to the economic and political modernization that

was beginning to establish itself in the region. Furthermore, while Ost's argument is specifically written in respect to Poland, I agree with his belief that his narrative is similarly applicable to the crisis that unfolded in the Balkans (Ost, 2005: 183).

Ost argues that when governments implement neo-liberal (i.e. free market) economic policies, the repercussions of their actions will naturally provoke what he calls "economic anger", which he defines as "the anger that is systematically generated in and by the workplace, from production to compensation" (Ost, 2005: 183). This "anger" or "emotion" manifests itself, among other areas, in high-unemployment rates, the restricting and cutting of social welfare benefits, and lastly, the drop in wages earned. These repercussions have frequently occurred in "developing" countries as direct responses to their economic austere measures. In light of this, the ruling elite who are responsible for implementing these policies find themselves facing a polity that is furious. How do they counter this "anger"?

According to Ost, instead of channeling these emotions alongside economic-lines, elites have typically directed this "economic anger" onto non-economic "others", the result of which is sure "to produce illiberal outcomes" (Ost, 2005: 26). In other words, elites have attempted to shape and frame their polity's economic insecurities as either because of non-economic "others", or by trying to preoccupy their minds away from focusing on their economic hardships and onto other socially divisive issues, for instance, abortion. Above all, they are acting this way because they are trying to escape blame⁹.

For instance, in Poland during the 1990s, its leaders focused the people's attention away from their economic deprivations and onto religious lines, by excoriating against

⁹ Though Ost does not specifically state so in his book, it is plausible to caricature his argument as "economic constructivist", in that it analyzes how leaders "construct" their citizen's economic hardships.

the atheism prevalent in society and the lack of devotion to (a Catholic) God (Ost, 2005: 87). Moreover, when they did address the economic dislocation within Poland, they either “framed” it either as “a moral problem”—that is, the economic hardships were because of a lack of religious morals, or that is was because of the “damn communists”, who, despite the government’s very best, are prevalent in all areas of the government (Ost, 2005: 71). Therefore, rest assured; after the “purge” is concluded, Poland will finally experience “real capitalism”, they argued (Ost, 2005: 183).

However, constructing Poland’s problems along non-economic lines produced “illiberal outcomes”, by polarizing and dividing Polish society. For instance, by stressing Poland’s Catholic heritage, the ruling elites sundered the society between the Catholics and religious “others”, whether Jewish or Protestant. Moreover, the effects of the “decommunization” campaign is reminiscent of what occurred during America’s own McCarthyism; that is, it silenced the intellectual debates, by causing many leftist to worry that their own politics would mistakenly be misconstrued as communist, that they were “closet Leninists” (Ost, 2005: 71).

This is also similarly applicable to the sundering of Czechoslovakia, which happened as a result of the Czech and Slovak elites directing their polity’s “economic anger” as a result of each other’s group (Orenstein, 2001: 85). Thus, even though the turmoil that resulted from Poland and Czechoslovakia were both bloodless, these instances still nonetheless speak to the dangers that arise from deflecting economic frustration onto non-economic “others”. Indeed, when this is carried out under different states, in different cultures, where there are a lot of targets to deflect blame, these types of

strategies can quickly turn bloody. Indeed, this is exactly what happened in the former Yugoslavia.

Susan Woodward argues the ethnic violence that precipitated the dismemberment of Yugoslavia was “the result of the politics of transforming a socialist society to a market economy” (Woodward, 1995: 15). In particular, she argues that the neo-liberal economic measures that were implemented throughout the 1980s by the Yugoslav government are a principle reason for causing ethnic tensions. I believe this argument is very persuasive, especially since Yugoslavia was among the first former-communist countries to open its markets.

Throughout the 1970s, Yugoslavia took out many large loans from Western creditors, hoping that the added capital would help them modernize their infrastructure. But they soon found out that it was not going according to the plan, for by 1980, Yugoslavia found itself with a gargantuan foreign debt. This caused their leaders to implement economic austere measures as an attempt to repay their loans. According to Woodward, the logic behind the reforms reinforced the belief that they “had to reorient to production of exports that were competitive in western markets and had to generate growth by improving efficiency at home in order to escape the trap of persistent trade deficits and debt “(Woodward, 2001:58). Accordingly, they were forced to abandon food subsidies (Woodward, 2001: 51). These measures, in turn, lowered living standards for ordinary Yugoslavians. For instance, prices for gasoline and food rose, unemployment was 23% or higher in most republics, and also, inflation rose by 50% a year and continued to rise (Woodward, 2001: 51). As a result of this, by the end of 1984, the average income was an astounding *70 percent* of the official minimum for a family of

four, and not to mention, the population living below the poverty line increased from 17 to 25 percent (Woodward, 2001: 15).

The result of these reforms drastically raised the level of “insecurity” shared among the various ethnicities, which invariably led “to social polarization” (Woodward, 2001: 55 & 73). Woodward argues “the reforms—by forcing people to resort to the older norms of reciprocity and mutuality—reinforced the localization of economic distribution and the social divisions within the labor force” (Woodward, 2001: 56). In doing so, it increased the use of “personalistic criteria” in access to jobs and goods, while also increasing the pressure on the entrepreneur to employ relatives (Woodward, 2001: 56). As a result, the market became increasingly fractured along ethnic lines, resulting in ethnic-business rivalries.

The economic austerity also led to the increase of using “scapegoats on the basis of social prejudice”, which increased the level of support for nationalist rightwing leaders, who channeled their group’s economic frustrations onto “ethnic others” (Woodward, 2001: 56). According to Despalatovic, “nationalism (i.e. ethnicity) become more and more appealing as a mobilizing force” for ethnic leaders because “it drew attention away from the failing economy”, and thus “replaced empty communist rhetoric with new crises and different enemies” (Despalatovic, 2000: 101). For instance, Gagnon writes that the massive Serbian rallies organized by the Serbian nationalist leader, Slobodan Milosevic “drew on social dissatisfaction caused by the increasingly poor economic situation, but refocused that dissatisfaction by shifting attention to the injustices and persecution of Serbs in Kosovo” (Gagnon, 2004: 69). Moreover, Croatian political officials used similar strategies that sought to escape the blame for their region’s economic dislocation. They

did this by exacerbating the historical frustration felt among ordinary Croats, who have historically had to finance the development of other republics because they, along with Slovenia, have been the most modern and economically productive areas within the Balkans (Despalatovic, 2000: 92). Accordingly, the Croatian elite channeled their “economic anger” by directing it towards the “greedy” hands of Serbian leaders, portraying the narrative that they were taking away large amounts of their revenue and lavishing themselves and their constituencies (Despalatovic, 2000: 101)¹⁰.

The aforementioned example speaks also to the rise of resentment against those with “political sinecures”—or what were assumed to be party-based privileges, which was informed by “old stereotypes” (Woodward, 1995: 56). For instance, the Croats and Slovenes were propagating the stereotype of Serbs dominating the central government in Belgrade, while the Serbs responded in kind with the stereotype that the latter two were dominating Yugoslavian state-owned businesses and concertedly choosing not to employ Serbs (Despalatovic, 2000: 92). What made these stereotypes so salient was that they were partly true, for the Serbians did have the largest proportion of members in the central government, along with the largest and most successful state-owned businesses in Yugoslavia being similarly dominated by Croats and Slovenes (Despalatovic, 2000: 92).

Moreover, economic hardships fostered the rise of nationalistic historical revisions, which galvanized popular support because it was an area that allowed individuals to channel their economic frustrations and feel proud of their history. For instance, Croatia’s “rehabilitation” of Archbishop Stepinac, who played a role in the Ustase-instigated genocide, was meant by the Croatian leaders to stress that Croatia was once (as opposed to the other republics during WWII) independent, while the Serbs used

¹⁰ While there is some truth to this belief, the Croatian leaders completely exaggerated its amount.

this as an example of the Croats being “closet fascists” (Woodward, 2001: 75)¹¹. Serbian nationalist intellectuals likewise glorified Serbia’s role in WWI as an expression of Serbian patriotism, while the other ethnic groups responded by portraying this as an example of Serbian recklessness and violence (Woodward, 2001: 75). Lastly, Bosnian Muslim intellectuals propagated “pan-Islamic visions” that glorified the accomplishments of the Ottoman Empire, while the other groups, particularly the Serbs, interpreted this revisionism as proof of Bosnian-Muslims being “Islamic fundamentalists” (Woodward, 2001: 76) (Hayden, 2000: 118).

Thus, the economic deterioration throughout the region caused many ordinary, desperate individuals to latch onto nationalistic historical narratives that not only explained their nation’s glorious history, but similarly showed their superiority to “others”. Nationalistic leaders, in turn, used the same themes to galvanize support and carryout “anti-politics” and “indignant political activity” (Woodward, 2001: 73). Moreover, at the same time, rival ethnic leaders used other group’s historical revisions to propagate ethnic stereotypes and to accentuate ethnic divisions, thereby making the region more conducive to ethnic violence and war.

However, perhaps the economic reform’s most devastating repercussion was that it affected the poorest communities the most, most namely, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, the two areas that saw the most ethnic violence and turbulence. According to Woodward, this is because the poorer communities happened to be where “job cuts were most severe”, which was further exacerbated because the local inhabitants no longer enjoying two important governmental services that were “critical to the local economy”: “federal government subsidies and employment” (Woodward, 2001: 56). The result of

¹¹ The Croats responded to this charge by stating the Serbs were “closet communists”.

this was profound, for “the employment requirement of proportionality and parity among national groups made ethnicity more salient rather than less” (Woodward, 2001: 56). Similarly, “suspicion of ethnic bias was as powerful as its reality, and such resentments particularly threatened poorer, ethnically mixed communities” (Woodward, 2001: 56). This, in turn, helps explain why ethnic violence erupted in the poorer, more ethnically mixed provinces of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Moreover, one reason which further exacerbated this is that the economic reforms devastated the middle class in both provinces (Woodward, 2001: 57). This meant the two republics were bereft of a group which could act from the political center and be used as a “moderate force” (Woodward, 2001: 57).

In light of all of these factors, I believe economic maladies played a salient role in causing the ethnic violence and turmoil that erupted in the Balkans throughout the 1990s. Indeed, if history is any guide, it only makes sense, whereas nationalist leaders from Hitler to Mussolini were brought into power because they manipulated their constituencies’ “economic anger” and directed them at non-economic “others”, thus giving their polities someone to blame. On top of that, the reason why their divisive views were able to take hold in their societies was because their economic conditions made their subjects more desperate and broken-down, thereby making them more receptive to endorsing “illiberal” (Ost) and “anti-political” (Woodward) narratives.

In conclusion, I hope this essay sheds light onto the various causes for the ethnic wars that occurred in the Balkans. In doing so, I argue that the “ancient-enmities” thesis is wrong, not only because the facts say otherwise, but similarly because it fosters a mindset that gives Westerners an excuse for absolving themselves from the area, for if

the violence in this region is because of hatreds that go back centuries, there is thus nothing the West can do to help them solve it. On the same note, because this caricature adheres to the view of the Balkans as “naturally” unruly, western governments have responded by conversing with the Balkans in condescending manners, trying to impose their beliefs down the throat of the Balkan nation-states. This, in turn, has had the harmful affect of increasing the support of Balkan nationalist leaders while at the same time hampering the efforts of moderates who want to join Europe and who believe in democracy and capitalism.

This is why, among other reasons, it is important for the west to start seeing the ethnic conflicts that erupted in the Balkans as a direct response to both political and economic modernization. And when this finally becomes the norm, Europe and the Balkans will finally be able to sit down and get things done.

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