

Questions for Professor Ost

1. What is the specific assignment for this essay?

This was the major research paper for a Political Science seminar titled “Eastern Europe As Social Science.” Each week, class readings dealt with some aspect of Eastern Europe from a particular theoretical approach in the social sciences. The paper assignment was that students would choose their own topics, but they had to apply several of the theoretical approaches that were discussed in the previous weeks. Students thus needed to separate the theoretical approaches from the contexts in which we read them, and apply them to the context they were writing about.

2. How did this assignment fit with your goals for the course?

Quite simply, this paper did an excellent job of looking at a topic we didn’t discuss much in class – the war in the former Yugoslavia – and analyzing it from various social science perspectives. It was a superb combination of good empirical research (on the Yugoslav conflict) with top-notch analytical thinking. Some of the best parts of the paper are a product simply of the author scratching his head and thinking, trying to see how various social scientific approaches can be used to explain a given phenomenon. My aim in the course was for students to learn how to make sense of history and politics, to learn to make their own analyses on the basis of established theories, and this paper does just that.

3. Why did this essay stand out for you as an example of strong writing?

Not many student papers are able simultaneously to tell a story and engage in theoretical analysis. This one does, and both the story and the theoretical argument flow wonderfully. The paper also builds up nicely: starting with a problem, presenting different approaches, then gathering evidence to try to figure out what makes the most sense and why. The paper does a good job also of layering – MacDonald doesn’t rush to say everything at once, but deals with one point after another, builds on what was said previously, and comes to a conclusion that is quite persuasive. Every paper can always be challenged, but that one cannot be challenged easily: that’s what it means to write a persuasive paper, and Jamie MacDonald has done here one of the best I have seen.

Questions for Benjamin MacDonald

1. How did you go about completing this essay? What steps did you follow?

The first step I took to write this paper is to find a paper topic—not a thesis, but a focus. I had read Ost’s book and wondered whether his argument could be applied to Yugoslavia as well; that is, were economic neo-liberalism one of the causes for the ethnic carnage in Balkans? And so I started researching in the library’s database. My main focus was to find other methods or theories for why ethnic cleansing erupted in the former-Yugoslavia. My intent then was to find which one(s) are the most convincing—note: this does not mean that I had to make a bold statement, but rather, I wanted to infer which theories were the most plausible.

After I found a sort source of literature on my topic, I then wrote all sorts of notes and observations on a notebook for all of the books and articles I read. For me, this was very

important. This is because I was then able to look over my notes and see the various arguments that the authors were making, thus helping me then form an outline of sorts.

I created a very loose outline, in that I kind of knew what I wanted to argue but was not very sure. This was fine because arguments change during the course of the paper. For my first draft, I just kept writing freely; I did not want to get bogged-down on focusing on any one part of it. Moreover, I also did not care about grammar, etc. After analyzing my first draft, I was able to see what I was trying to argue more clearly, which helped me then refine and further augment it in my second draft. After my second draft, my main focus was to correct any awkward sentences and to focus on grammar issues. I also wrote my conclusion. When this was finished, I went through two full revisions on my paper before I turned it in.

2. What was the most challenging aspect of this essay assignment?

The main challenge was that it was a social science paper, thus meaning it was not meant to focus on history. This was new for me because most political science papers focus on the history of politics. Another challenging aspect was to focus only on a few social-political theories that explain the Balkans conflict—this is not easy because there are so many of them.

3. How does this essay connect to your work in the course as a whole?

This essay connects to the course because it focuses on social science in Eastern Europe, which is the main focus of this course. In addition, I also used the arguments and theories from many texts that we read during the course and tried to relate them to the Balkans conflict, most notably I used Ost's and Wolfe's arguments.

4. What is the most interesting thing you learned from doing this essay?

One of the most interesting things I learned is political and economic constructivism: that social and economic realities happen because of human beings, who “invent”—or “construct”—ways to frame issues and events. And that the ways they caricature these issues have a profound impact on shaping the actions, views and relationships among people. I also found it interesting that 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. This is important for me because I used to agree with this promulgation, that is, I used to think that the turmoil in the Balkans was a result of ancient feuds.