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Moral (Dis)order and Social Anomie: Concepts of Community and Society in Post-Socialist Serbia¹

It is sometimes argued that post-socialist transformation in Europe brought so called “moral disintegration” of local communities. These ideas resonate well with the opinions of many people with whom I worked in Serbia during my fieldwork research in Novi Sad in the mid-2000s and again in 2013-2014. My informants tend to evoke the Durkheimian idea that society was brought into existence by people’s moral beliefs and sense of obligation towards one another; if this became eroded, society begins to suffer from *anomie*. In this paper I investigate those widely shared beliefs and the ways they relate to and reveal the ideas about morality, community and society.

Key words: post-socialist Serbia, community, society, morality, *anomie*.

Друштвени поредак и социјална аномија: концепти заједнице и друштва у постсоцијалистичкој Србији

У академској литератури се понекад могу наћи тврдње да је постсоцијалистичка трансформација у Европи довела до “моралне дезинтеграције” локалних заједница. На слична разумевања постсоцијалистичке трансформације у Србији наишла сам и током свог рада на терену, у Новом Саду, средином прве деценије XXI века, а затим и у поновљеној студији 2013. и 2014. године. Људи са којима сам радила друштво перципирају као мање-више кохерентну целину у којој важе јасна морална правила. Другим речима, друштво као морална заједница настаје формирањем заједничких моралних назора и осећаја узајамних обавеза, чијим еродирањем друштво почиње да пати од *аномије*. У овом раду разматра се како се ове широко распрострањене идеје односе према концептима заједнице и друштва, истовремено се кроз њих преламајући и дефинишући их.

Кључне речи: постсоцијалистичка Србија, заједница, друштво, морал, аномија.

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Introduction²

It is sometimes argued that post-socialist transformation in Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s brought so called “moral disintegration of the local communities” (cf. Nazpary 2002; Platz 2003). These ideas resonate well with the opinions of many people with whom I worked in Serbia during my fieldwork research in the mid-2000s in the Serbian town of Novi Sad and with whom I did a follow up study in 2013 and 2014. My aim is to investigate these widely shared beliefs of long duration and the ways they relate to and reveal the ideas about community, society and state. I analyse narratives about state, society and moral (disorder) which I collected during a yearlong fieldwork research in Novi Sad in 2005 and 2006 and during the repeated visits in 2013 and 2014. This combination of so-called Anglo-Saxon model of fieldwork research of “extended stay” and “back and forth model” of Eastern European anthropologies/ethnologies (Brković and Hodges 2015) enabled me to track continuity and change in the local community and the ways understanding of my informants’ social world had changed.

The fall of socialism in Europe was recorded in academic and other literature as a time of great turmoil and change, as well as uncertainty provoked by the radical change of social and political systems. It is assumed that that time had passed and that today, almost 30 years after the fall of Berlin Wall, we live in the time of post-socialism. However, it seems that certain feelings of uncertainty and prolonged transition to the imagined capitalism had still been hunting the former Yugoslav region. Furthermore, for people in Serbia, the process of “transition”³ had rather been the time of prolonged “situation” (*situacija*) – the state of affairs as it is, which applied not only to the circumstances of the Serbian state (corruption or inefficiency, for example) that people found themselves in, but also denotes a certain “state of mind” and “moral and social degradation”, as my informants called it, that developed during the 1990s and continued today in the various gazes.⁴ This “moral degradation of society” encompasses several interrelated issues that I dis-

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³ Some authors had argued that in Serbia and former Yugoslav republics we had late transition that started only after 2000 (Radović 2009). Similarly, in Serbian sociology it is common to assume that postsocialist transformation in Serbia can be divided into two periods: “blocked” (pre-2000) and “unblocked” (post-2000) period – the idea introduced by Lazić (2011). Although Lazić’s methodology is rather different from mine, it is true that was hard for people to conveniently divide time before and after socialism, as was perhaps possible in other socialist countries that were passing through a similar transformation.

⁴ Jansen (2005), working in Belgrade and Zagreb in the mid 1990s, noticed that the term “situacija” figured prominently in the people’s descriptions of their life and the political and social circumstances they found themselves in. He writes that “situacija” was “a place of specific liminality” [Jansen follows Turner’s use of the term] (Jansen 2005: 99), while the period of wars was presented as a period of “suspended normality, a time when the all rules of ‘normal’ human behaviour and civilization are suspended” (ibid). It seems to me that 20 years later “situacija” still figures prominently in people’s understanding of their social world.

cussed elsewhere (Simić 2014), while here I want to focus on the issues of society and community as specific categories through which these ideas had been acted out.

As it has already been said, the breaking point of 1990s has largely been seen as the “great fall from grace” (Simić 2014) when the previous (imagined) normality was suddenly interrupted by the disintegration of the country followed by wars and terrifying economic conditions. However, it will be wrong to assume that this normality could be so easily located in the pre 1990s time, as we are here dealing with what Michael Herzfeld (1999) calls „disemia“ – discrepancy between the ideal and the real of the social world. As he explains:

“two ideal types that are constantly and dialectically parlayed into virtually the entire range of social life. Both are ideals in that both are stereotypes; but by the same token, what gives both experiential reality is their use in day-to-day rhetoric of morality. That rhetoric constitutes reality.” (Herzfeld 1999, 113).

In that sense, both the “previous times” of socialism and the current situation of “prolonged transition” are part of the same coin of idealized Janus faced oppositions that inform each other. Thus, my aim is not to discover the sources of the “pollution” or to reconstruct the original state of affairs that was corrupted, but rather to show the ways Serbian “disemia” is worked out through the everyday understanding of “state and society” and their transformation.⁵

The fall of socialism and moral disorder

Writing about postsocialist transformations in Kazakhstan, Nazpary (2002) writes of the “moral disintegration” of the community in Almaty that he was working in (cf. Platz 2003 for the similar analysis). As he writes,

“according to most people, most houses celebrated collectively occasions such as New Year’s Eve, the Eighth of March, and May Day. Moreover, their doors were often open for each other and they invited each other frequently. Such celebrations and close relations had ceased to exist. Because of poverty, people could not afford to provide food and drinks for such parties now, as they did not trust each other as before” (Nazpary 2002: 24-25).

This resonates well with the opinions of many people with whom I worked in the mid and later 2000s as the first wave of “transition” brought similar turmoil in Serbia. Those early years known simply as “the 1990s” brought radical impoverishment with hyper inflation followed by the wars, NATO bombing and UN embargo. Thus it is not unusual that these tremulous years featured prominently in the

⁵That does not mean that I am arguing that there is a singular native’s point of view that would simply represent ‘the Serbs’. But, these discourses were strikingly homogenous and people from various social backgrounds shared similar concerns and ideas about state and society. Similar homogenous stances about the collective position in the world had been found in other parts of the European periphery (Herzfeld 1986, 1999; Bakalaki 2003, 210).

people's understanding of the situation in the mid 2000s. Most of my informants were in their late twenties, which means that they were children when Tito died and they had only very vague memories of socialism and had not actively participated in 'practicing' it. Their memories were rarely framed in terms of socialism; people rather talked about the (stable) state and (stable) society. Furthermore, their memories of the Yugoslav time rarely referred to socialism as such, or to some institutional practices that my informants considered typical for socialism, but rather were centred around the vague idea of normality (Greenberg 2011; Simić 2014; Jansen 2015). Some authors argue that this normality also mean, "that many have been persuaded to accept that socialism embraces extensive welfareism and the restoration of a moral component to economic life, from which morality was effectively expunged following the rapid expansion of European industrial capitalism" (Hann 1993, 13). I am not sure I agree with the contention that there is no moral component in capitalism (for an excellent analysis see for example Graeber 2001), but I will argue that it was different from that in socialism, especially as it was in the process of rapid change during the 1990s. But, when I returned to Novi Sad almost 10 years after my initial fieldwork, I was struck by the opaque similarities of the discourses that emerged in our conversations. It seemed that "normality", understood as certain living standards had been somewhat restored, but that social anomie remained. I will explain it more with the examples from my filed notes.

Filip⁶, one of my key informants in the mid 2000s, at the time an engineering student, originally from a town in northern Bačka, whose father is a successful small private entrepreneur who has an apartment in Novi Sad (bought for his sons) and a small business place he is renting out in their home town and who guided me through the murky water of small business, told me about his parents:

"When I see the social life of my parents now, who were used to diners in town restaurants and big bars, like Fijaker stari, or Dva goluba, I don't know all the places, but during the 1970s, they used to go čardas a lot. It was not a problem to go to Osijek to čarda, it was not a problem to go to Petrovaradin to listen to tamburica players, to listen to Janika Balaš... So, they got used to a completely different thing. Now, they are closed up in their houses, they are not going anywhere, not even to friends, because they do not have enough money even for a bottle of wine or brandy... You know, and your friend does not have money to make a dinner for you, so you make him a problem, you make yourself a problem, because you will have to return the dinner, problem, problem, problem..."

In this narrative, Filip was using the whole repertoire of symbols of 'middle-class' Vojvodina, including taverns, tamburitza players and especially the famous Novi Sad tamburitza player Janika Balaš, whose monument is placed near Novi Sad's Petrovaradin fortress. When I talked to Filip again several years later, he was already settled in Novi Sad and told me that "the situation" does not seem to improve. Still, this time his lament was not about the possibilities of "middle class"

⁶All the names of my informants are pseudonymous.

life that was threatened by the fall of socialism as it used to tell me before, but more about the ways the state operated through the system of “crony capitalism” which Filip dubbed “burazerska država” (on “crony capitalism” see Kahn and Formosa 2002). According to him, in that way the norms and rules had been constantly broken, which make people feel “helpless” and “trapped in the situation”. He told me that Novi Sad is full of people in their late thirties who do nothing but still go to betting houses, “sleep till 5 in the afternoon”, and then “he [the imagined man] gets up and take some money from his mother to buy cigarettes. That because you can’t find the job, even the simplest one, if you don’t have connections”.⁷

I am not arguing that in socialism “connections” were not important for the sort of business Filip is talking about as they continued to be after its fall.⁸ But, my aim is not to verify accuracies of those representations but to see the way they form the disemic binary opposition with the current social situation. In the ethnographic context described here, specific morality of sociality is played out in the critique of the current social (dis)order that speaks not only about proper way of doing business, but of sociality and social order in general. Thus, Milan, who came to Novi Sad from a relatively small town in western Bačka and was sustaining himself by doing various odd jobs, told me about the corrupted ways “things are done” in his home town and in Novi Sad, and then moved to the talk about general “system of morality”. He told me:

“We have a friend, he is my uncle [mother’s brother], I mean, my brother, you see [...] and he got so much money [trough various illicit activities of his father] – my brother [his uncle’s son] does not have any problems any more. I live in his studio flat [in Novi Sad] and pay for it, you see, and he [his uncle son – his brother] lives in an eighty-meter-square flat and has his own studio flat, and his sister has a flat and a studio flat for renting, and they have one more flat, also 80 square meters, they used to live in when they were students, and as soon as one of them graduated, you know [they got separate flats for living and a studio flat for renting]. And all that was started by their grandfather, and then their father continued, and know, you see, he [his uncle’s son] has something to build upon, ok, you know, maybe, maybe you should lean toward that, but it ends up with money, money and only money, and they do not think if that is going to be useful for

⁷ Filip was here imaging an ideal type man who lost his moral compass enabled to provide for himself, but still rely on his parents, instead of supporting his own family. There were also female versions of this lost moral compass which usually describe women as “sponzoruše” (sponsor-seekers). However, specific gender aspects of „lost morality“ are beyond the scope of this paper (there are numerous references on this point, for an relatively early overview that became a classic reference cf. for example Gal and Kligman 2000).

⁸ It should also be clear that I do not argue for the path dependency theories that claim that “transition” to capitalism in former socialist countries had been jeopardized because of the old vertical networks imposed by the one-party state that prevent the development of “western-style” economies (Harole 1996). Although I agree that old social networks and positions of power were important factors in gaining economic capital in the years immediately after the fall of socialism, I do not agree that “old cultural habits” were simply transported to the new circumstances.

their offspring, and how much it will be important for them to have fresh water, or fresh air, and to go out like, in a swim suit, swim shorts, whatever, and not, I don't know, to have to wear glasses and a protective suit to protect from the sun, because of Ozone, because of the fucked up Ozone layer and I don't know what".

What Milan was pointing at here was the different morality that the new rich have, as they did not care about common goods, such as the general one embodied in 'ecology', but were pursuing their own selfish interests. According to Milan these people were putting their private interests above the interest of the society as a whole and according to him that was unacceptable. It could be said that they were acting as "maximizing individuals" from the early economic theorists, like Malthus and Ricardo (cf. Graeber 2001, 5-12; Gregory 1982) and the writings of Adam Smith. As Smith himself writes,

"He [the maximizing individual] indeed neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. [...] He intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention" (Smith 1998, 513).

Or, as Graeber summarizes the work of Smith and his followers, "human beings are driven by desires; these desires are unlimited. Human beings are also rational, insofar as they always tend to calculate the most efficient way of getting what they want." (Graeber 2001, 10).

*Critique of this attitude and the idea that 'the market' is 'natural' and that it inevitably proceeded from the very 'nature of men' is well-known in anthropology starting with Malinowski and Mauss, not to mention various Marxist critiques, and I do not have much to contribute to that debate. However, I want to point out how some of the ideas about economics and personal gain were tied with the morality and social order. Milan's lament was not only a demand for the separation between politics and economy as advocated by the proponents of capitalism, as is clear from the quote above, but also a quest for a different morality that should be embedded in society. Here it was easy to slide from the ideas of communal gatherings described by Filip to the idea of "social morality" in general. In that sense, here we talk more about profound and all encompassing feelings of moral (dis)order that prevail thought the social fabric and shape the ideas of society and life in general. I will explain more in the following section introducing the Durkheimian notion of anomie. However, it is important to notice that I am not applying the **Durkheimian** concept of anomie as an analytical tool to the understanding of my fieldwork material. Rather, I am trying to show the ways my informants use the explanatory tools that resemble Durkheimian language, in order to explain their social situation. Thus, I do not suggest using Durkheimian analytical tools in order to understand*

“Serbian condition”, but rather to understand the ways Durkheimian type of analysis figured out in the lay sociology of my informants.⁹

Social anomie: society and community

Although these narratives seem quite different, they share the same undertone of morality and moral obligations tied to the idea of properly working *society* – not a local community as indicated by Nazpary but the totality of social fabric. Thus, I find it rather important that virtually all of my informants used the word *society* (*društvo*) and not *community* (*zajednica*), although when they talked about “sociality”, its meanings were probably close to what in a Western context is connected with the ‘community’ values of face-to-face relations that, for example, include communal gatherings and hospitality. Joseph (2002) in her critique of the idea of community writes that the usual romantic narratives of community see it as “a prior in time to ‘society’, locating community in a long-lost past for which we yearn nostalgically from our current fallen state of alienation, bureaucratization, rationality” (Joseph 2002, 1; cf. the critique by Rose 1999). In those discourses community is understood as involving face-to-face relations, while society is understood as ‘faceless’, capitalist and modern, despite, as Creed (2004, 56) writes, “repeated challenges and critiques this quality continues to include images of uniformity, cohesion, consensus, and cooperation—characteristics we might refer to as “romantic” (Creed 2004, 56).¹⁰

Joseph (2002) combines the insights of Marx and Judith Butler and claims that social formations are made possible through the performativity of (social and cultural) production that make “capitalism the very medium in which community is enacted” (ibid, xxxii). It might then be that people’s references to society, instead of community, may have something to do with their experience of socialism. Joseph (2002) observes that the usual discourse of community “contrasts community to modern capitalist society structurally: the foundation of community is supposed to be values, while capitalist society is based only on value (economic value)” (Joseph 2002, 1). In socialist society, both society and community are supposed to be based on non-economic value (although fulfilment of economic needs played an important and even crucial role). In addition, the Yugoslav slogan of “brotherhood and unity” of all Yugoslav “nations and nationalities”, and the strong ethnic element attached to the idea of nation/nationality, makes society a more inclusive wider term than nation, as society was supposed to embrace different nations. Thus, people would talk about the Croatian community (*hrvatska zajednica*) in Vojvodina, but also about Serbian society (*srpsko društvo*), which should include different ethnic communi-

⁹ There is not enough space here to discuss the notion of *lay sociology* in greater depth; further references could be found at Bourdieu (1990), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Chamboredon, Passeron and Bourdieu (1991).

¹⁰ Creed (2004) tries to show how the notion of community can be kept, but only if we allow that communities include conflicts and tensions (cf. critique by Young 1986).

ties or national groups (cf. Creed 2004 for the analysis of the relationship between community and nationality in Bulgaria).

It is important to notice that the idea of the ‘abstraction’ of society as opposed to the face-to-face character of community is a relatively recent one, even in the ‘West’. In nineteenth century England, for example, ‘society’ was usually understood as involving a particular group of people with certain social relations. People could be members of ‘society’, or they could be going to visit or participate in ‘society’ (society happened in particular places and times); but there were also people who were too humble to be acceptable to ‘society’ (as in Jane Austen novels, for example). In other words, society was understood as very concrete: it meant that group of people who formed elite and who interacted in a particular elite way, which also meant that it was strictly hierarchical and class based.

Situation in Serbia was rather different and that my informants’ understanding of ‘society’ was very much anti-hierarchical, expressing the ideas of helping others and collective responsibility, which echo socialist ideas (being also closer to current idea of ‘community’ in the UK). It seems to me that my informants’ ideas were based on their experience of socialism, as well as of the newly emerging state system. Anderson (1991) writes that the nation is “imagined as a *community*, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that prevails in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1991, 7). In the 1990s the socialist ‘comradeship’ of working people and citizens (socialist citizens) that was supposed to make socialist Yugoslavia, was replaced by national ‘comradeship’ based on ethnicity/nationality.

In the mid to late 1990s, widespread dissatisfaction with Milošević’s state triggered mass protests (although they were not necessarily anti-nationalist protests) that actually aimed to liberate “society” from the state. Similarly to the events in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, some NGO organizations as well as some ‘ordinary’ people were also looking for the development of ‘civil society’. As Hann (1993) writes, many accounts of the changes in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s adopted a kind of ‘Manichean’ perspective that sees the state and society as dramatically opposed. As he explains,

“In much of Eastern Europe in 1989 there was a sense, carefully fostered by opposition intellectuals over many years, of ‘people power’. The word ‘society’ was by no means just a technical term used in academic analyses. Rather, society was an active collective agent embarked upon the heroic task of emancipating itself from the socialist state” (Hann 1993, 14-15).

As Hann further writes, society here is understood as “a ‘natural’, organic entity composed of autonomous individuals and groupings who generate solidarity and consensus ‘from below’, together with the values and identities conducive to a fully human experience” (Hann 1993, 15). This is actually very close to the idea of community that Joseph (2002) criticized. As Hann (1993) himself observes, although these ideas may be prominent in the self-understanding of some Eastern Europeans, they may not be that useful as analytical tools. However, this debate car-

ries us too far from my main concern; civil society was not the major topic of conversations among my informants (although it figures in the speech of some of NGO activists I worked with) and I would like to return to the idea of community and state. Since the 1990s, most of my informants had perceived the state to be inadequate in its role of regulating society. This opinion was widespread in the mid 2000s, as it was in 2013 and 2014. People saw ‘society’ as a structured form of social interaction with values, rules and regulations that was policed and maintained by a state. It seems to me that people evoked both the Hobbesian idea that without this kind of management and control people would return to a ‘state of nature’ in which life would be anti-social, and the Durkheimian idea that society was brought into existence by people’s moral beliefs and sense of obligation towards one another; if this became eroded, society begins to suffer from *anomie*, which is a condition of instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values in a society as a whole (Dirkem 1972, 1997).

Durkheim’s concept of anomie is not clearly defined in his work (Besnard 2005). Anomie is a type of social environment together with three others: egoism, altruism and fatalism. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, anomie is understood as “the absence or defectiveness of the social regulation needed to bring about cooperation between specialized functions” (ibid, 163). Durkheim later describes anomie as connected with *egoism* (Watts Miller 2003), while egoism is described as a “modern ill” – “morally unconstrained pursuit of self-interest” or “a self-absorbed withdrawal that numbs feelings of attachment to our milieu” (ibid, 4). As Watts Miller writes, “this is part of a pathology later diagnosed as *anomie*—unfettered, morally unconstrained and limitless desire” (ibid, 4). According to Durkheim,

“we are motivated to the good and the ideal by positive sentiments of attachment to one another and to society. We are motivated to duty and the rule by respect for the moral law’s imperative authority, and by the will to control and order the crowd of our desires” (ibid, 10).

Durkheim insists that morality depends on the sense of obligation or duty to which we are motivated “by respect for the moral law’s imperative authority, and by the will to control and order the crowd of our desires” (ibid, 11). In that sense, for Durkheim solidariness is the very condition of social life and the source of morality (ibid, 25).

In the ethnographic examples described above, my informants deployed similar ideas of morality and order to the understanding of community and society; for them society as whole is based on a moral order that should be guarded by the state. Solidariness is understood as a cement of social life and moral order without which the society ceases to exist. Although the disruption of this moral order was rather sudden – a consequence of the 1990s fall that produced “acute anomie” of the temporary absence of norms (cf. Besnard 2005 for this type of classification), it seems that the anomic situation became “chronic”. In that sense, for my informants, Serbian society has been stuck in the chronic state of normlessness with no visible solution at sight.

Conclusion

Read writes that as “the contraction and restructuring of social security systems over the past 15 years has [...] generated new forms of economic vulnerability and marginalization” (Read 2007, 203), anthropologists working on postsocialist countries have noticed considerable nostalgia for some of the advantages of the old system over the new emerging one. Thus, Mandel, for example, writing about the former USSR states that

“impoverished populations hanker after the ‘good old days’ of the USSR, which in retrospect were for many a golden era marked by stability, as acceptable ‘equality of poverty’, guaranteed employment, generous social services, universal education and health care, and an absence of street crime” (Mandel 2006, 280).

However, my informants were generally not nostalgic about socialism either in 2006 or in 2013, and there were no wish to restore it. Social anomie that my informants felt can be analysed as a loss of the (imagined) normality of the previous sociality that was only vaguely connected with socialism. As Yurchak (2006) writes about post-socialist Russia,

“for many, ‘socialism’ as a system of human values and as an everyday reality of ‘normal life’ (*normal’naia zhizn*) was not necessarily equivalent to ‘the state’ or ‘ideology’; indeed, living socialism to them often meant something quite different from the official interpretations provided by state rhetoric” (Yurchak 2006, 8).

Similarly, for my informants, socialism did not figure out even as a term they used, but they rather talked about the unspecified “previous times”. In that sense, the disemic binary described at the beginning of the paper was rather a two side coin of social anomie versus (unspecified) moral order that has yet to be resorted.

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