Jelena Spasenić

Department of Social Anthropology,
University of Stockholm, Sweden
jelena.spasenic@socant.su.se

The Significance of Serbia's Recent War-Ridden Past for Young People's Identity Perceptions

How do we ethnographically chart the ways in which a recent war-ridden past features in everyday identifications of young adults, who have little or no direct experience of that past? One way is to treat this question as a matter of how everyday knowledge is constituted and transferred between individuals, as well as how historical legacies, cultural and political models enter their life-worlds, what they think and know, and who they are. These inquiries stood at the core of the study I conducted among two high-school classes between 2007 and 2009 in Novi Sad. This article will shed light on my main conclusions and problematize the notion of collective confrontation with the past. My contention is that arguments for collective confrontation with the past, together with official policies informed by this discourse, need to take into account social psychological mechanisms of identity construction in order to avoid the assumption that knowledge and moral insight can be mapped onto people's minds.

In the 1990s, as Yugoslavia descended into disintegration, Serbia, ruled by Slobodan Milošević, entered a period of grave isolation which unsettled its society politically, economically, socially and morally. It was the re-awakening of the Serbian national question,[1] first in Kosovo, then in Croatia and Bosnia, that would intensify anomisities between Serbia and the rest of Yugoslavia. While most Yugoslav leaderships viewed Yugoslavia as a failed project that should be abandoned, Milošević wanted to keep it at almost any cost.

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[1] It pertained to the situation of a large Serbian community that lived outside Serbia, in the neighboring republics of Croatia and Bosnia, and also in the Albanian dominated Kosovo, which at the time was only an autonomous province in the south of Serbia.

Between 1991 and 1995, during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, Serbia was put under the UN's economic sanctions that destablizied the economy through hyperinflation, rising unemployment, as well as large shortages of food, fuel and medicine. This impoverishment virtually wiped out Serbian middle-class and forced hundreds of thousands of educated individuals to leave the country (Cohen 2001). Simultaneously, an almost equal number of refugees fled the war-stricken areas to take shelter within Serbia's borders. Though the Yugoslav war ended in 1995, Serbia still had another front line awaiting its denouement. In 1999, due to the escalation of armed conflicts with Albanians in the southern province of Kosovo, Serbia was bomed by NATO.

Conducting his rule in a semi-authoritarian manner (Cohen 1995), Milošević managed to stay in power throughout the 1990s. Although some sections of Serbian polity did provide resistance to his regime, it was not until October 2000 that such efforts bore fruit. The Hague Tribunal, to which Milošević was extradited in 2001, indicted him for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Milošević's sudden death in 2006 interrupted the trial.

This article explains the ways in which the ramifications of this recent war-ridden past feature in everyday identifications of young adults in Serbia, who have little or no direct experience of that past. I charted these processes ethnographically, by observing and interviewing two high-school classes in Novi Sad, Serbia's second largest city, between 2007 and 2009 (Spasenić 2011). My investigation centered upon the relevance of the Milošević regime in the 1990s for how young adults,[2] born in 1989, perceived Serbian society. I approached this question through phenomenologically inspired sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann 1967). Therefore, when asking how the recent war-ridden past features in young people's identifications, I actually seek to explore how everyday knowledge is constituted and transferred between individuals, as well as how historical legacies, cultural and political models enter their daily lives, what they think and know, and who they are. In accordance with this perspective, I have investigated the students' life-world through four realms of everyday experience – family, school, society and the inner world of the self.

My arguments will be based on a phenomenological view of the self that permeates some of the main contemporary sociological and social psychological identity theories that do not usually feature in anthropological discussions of reconciliation or confronatation with the past (see e.g. Borneman 2002, Jackson 2002). In the following, I will bring these theories into interplay with the most conspicuous tendencies and conclusions drawn from my research material. In the end, I will put my findings in a critical relationship with the notion of collective confrontation with the past.

Already at the outset, it is important to bear in mind two overarching themes that my discussion appertains to. First, I treat the influence of the past on young adults in an empirical and non-normative manner, as a sociological rather

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[2] At the time of my investigation they were eighteen and nineteen years old.

than a moral philosophical question. The purpose of the study, whose conclusions this article will put forward, has always been to explain and understand *what* knowledge becomes part of young people's salient social identitites, *why* some knowledge is more relevant than other, as well as *how* it comes to be perceived as relevant, rather than focusing upon what knowledge *should* or *should not* be internalized in order to reform Serbian society. Thus, I have primarily focused on understanding the dialectics of socialization (Berger and Luckmann 1967), as well as its relation to the creation of self-concept and identity. The relevance of this explanatory model for anthropological analysis lies in its effort to bridge the gap between the external world and subjective experience with a theory of internalization which does *not* view reality as something simply and unproblematically mapped onto the mind.[3]

Secondly, and in line with the previous point, my study is critical to explanations that (in)advertently suggest that cultural models dominate whole societies, or that such models are uniformly internalized by society members. Despite their compellingness and popularity (cf. Goldhagen 1997), the monocausal simplicity of these arguments leave us with what Christoffer Browning (1996:97) calls "keyhole history," which "views events through a single narrow vantage point that blocks out context and perspective." Seen through "keyhole history," Serbian society has, for instance, often been characterized as having a cultural predilection for authoritarianism; or, in other words, a non-democratic value orientation is embedded in Serbian culture.[4] This originally psychological explanation, based on a Freudian model and reconfigured by Theodor Adorno and his associates, has for the greatest part been abandoned in studies of genocide and the Holocaust, which it originally purported to explain (Waller 2002). In a similar fashion, the authoritarian personality syndrome (or any other kindred model that pathologizes a whole society)[5] has been employed to make sense of Serbian polity,[6] its indoctrination by a party regime,[7] and in the final instance, to legitimize the requirements for moral transformation, including, of course, that of 'disoriented' Serbian youth.[8] I am not convinced that frameworks which rest on ideas about blocked drives of sex and aggression, in a society that counts millions of people, can aptly explain why Milošević came and stayed in power throughout the 1990s; or, why some sections of Serbian society

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[3] Such theoretical inquiries have been pursued consistently by cognitive anthropologists, who explore the links between culture *both* in the world *and* in the mind (Quinn 2005, Quinn & Strauss 2006, Strauss & Quinn 1997). It is the latter ("in the mind") that especially complicates anthropological investigations, as cognitive presuppositions about the internalization of reality are made all the time but seldom put to scrutiny (Desjarlais & Throop 2011, Throop 2003).

[4] See Straus (2006) for a critical discussion of the same topic in the Rwandan context.

[5] Steflja (2010:243), for instance, refers to Ramet who "argues that one can recognize in Serbian society 'patterns of thought, speaking and behavior with marked neurotic and/or psychotic characteristics".

[6] See e.g. Antonić 2002, Cohen 2001, Golubović 2006, Kuzmanović 2010, Vujačić 2004.

[7] One of the most dominant, if not the most dominant, thesis related to the authoritarian syndrome in the studies of Yugoslavia. For an alternative view see Vladisavljević (2008).

[8] For anthropological discussion on this topic see Greenberg (2011).

supported the regime;[9] or, why so many in Serbia are reluctant to acknowledge the responsibility of their country for the Yugoslav war. Neither am I convinced that models operating mainly with indoctrination and propaganda can fully explain attitudes to leaders and out-groups – a claim that has never been sufficiently corroborated (cf. Green & Saher 2003; see also Turner 2005).[10] The answers are hardly to be found in "psycho-history," which, by turning individuals into captives of overwhelming psychological instincts over which they have no control, deprives them of agency, responsibility, and common sense (Zukier 1997). Such more or less tacit assumptions constitute, in Henri Zukier's words, a history of mindless agents (ibid.). In this article, I will provide arguments to the contrary, by departing from theories that may help us understand better how young people take part in historical processes and make social change possible.

How does social identity interpret experience?

In the late 1960s, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967) synthesized nearly a century of theoretical thinking on the origins of social reality and reshaped sociology of knowledge. They are most remembered for their concept of social construction of reality, an idea so commonsensical nowadays that its original meaning is rarely re-examined.[11]

For Berger and Luckmann (1967:174), identity is a product of socialization, i.e. "a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society." In this respect, identification with so-called "significant others" during two distinct phases – signifying primary and secondary socialization – has been of particular interest to my investigation. I studied the relationship between my informants and their significant others in the realms of family and school. In the same vein, I made inquiries about how the students perceived their so-called "less significant others" – or fellow men – who also maintain a sense of reality.

On a deeper level of meaning, the origins of identification are to be found in an intrinsic human ability to take the perspective of the other – a quintessential

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[9] It is, as Cohen (2001:84) states, in particular among "the agricultural population in the rural and underdeveloped regions of Serbia, as well as among unskilled, semi-skilled, and highly skilled industrial workers" that the regime garnered support. However, Branković's survey (1995) from 1990, just prior to the elections, shows that noticeable support for Milošević's SPS existed among upper middle-class individuals, former members of the communist party and political and business executives. A year after the elections in November 1991, the greatest fall for SPS was among farmers and workers, among whom SPS at the same time continued to be the leading party.

[10] Green & Saher (2003:512) state the following: "The claim that mass communication shapes the salience of particular policy concerns is politically important, but much less so than the more forceful claim that communication creates or strengthens attitudes." And also, "Regardless of one's preferences regarding the terms racism and prejudice, and regardless of which syndrome of prejudiced attitudes one chooses to consider, the fact remains that the empirical link between mass communications and attitudes toward out-groups remains uncertain" (ibid:514).

[11] This state of the matter is in itself an interesting argument for Berger and Luckmann's theory of sedimentation of knowledge.

thought of George Herbert Mead (1970 [1934]), for whom the self is a product of society.[12] Mead, however, argues too that, due to the reflexive nature of conscious-ness, the self does not just mirror the world, but reflects and acts upon it. Thus, although socially determined, the individual is unique in the way he/she responds to others. Reflexiveness stems from two mechanisms through which the self operates – one oriented towards attitudes of others assumed towards oneself, and the other that organizes responses to these attitudes of others.

Mead's idea of self encapsulates the phenomenon of identity. The latter is concurrent with the enactment of roles in social interaction, through taking the perspective of the other and assuming attitudes of others towards oneself. More precisely, the self consists of a multitude of identities in form of "internalized role expectations" that are products of regularities contained in social structure (Stryker & Burke 2000:286, 289). In this perspective, the concept of a so-called "role-identity" brings together the external social structure and the internal structure of the self.

Stryker and Burke's proposition that identity interprets experience can be understood further in terms of Tajfel's social identity theory and Turner's categorization theory, which both define interpretation through categorization and some of our most basic psychological needs, such as the need to belong and have a positive self-image.

In Tajfel's argument (1974:69), social identity is that part of self-concept that is based on knowledge of belonging to a social group together with "emotional significance attached to that membership." Elaborated and empirically tested by Turner and other disciples of Tajfel, this model suggests something entirely crucial – that *only* the perception "by individuals that they are joined in common category membership" is a sufficient and necessary condition for group behavior (Turner 1982:8). In this context, the needs mentioned above are highly significant. The need to belong is a motivational force conjoined with its opposite, the need to differentiate, which results in the phenomenon of "psychological distinctiveness." This, according to Tajfel (1974:74), is "the major outcome of the sequence social categorization-social identity-social comparison."

The implications of Tajfel's theory are vast for scholarly understanding of social identities, identity conflicts, stereotypes, and discrimination. Most importantly, should we accept his conclusions, the prevalent idea of choosing an identity, or some cultural characteristics rather than others, in order to achieve specific ends, loses much of its currency.[13]

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[12] See also, for instance, Hood (2012) for a relevant contemporary account of the self-concept which builds on latest research in neuroscience.

[13] An argument originally made by Kjell Magnusson in a lecture. This is where Barth's theory of ethnicity, still so influential in anthropology, has according to Magnusson failed to deliver a consistent explanation, not flavored with ingredients of rational-choice. Social identity theory problematizes the very notion of choice – if the mere perception of belonging to a group is a minimal condition for social identity, then what is the "choice" of identity based upon? In other words, the process is hardly as conscious or deliberative as the choice-argument purports it to be. Secondly, this is also a good example of how Berger and Luckmann's understanding of social construction

In my work, I have used Tajfel predominantly in order to shed light on the issues related to ethnicity, nationalism and the Yugoslav conflict. But its reach is more comprehensive. *All* group behavior – whether it pertains to stratifications in terms of class, gender, race, age or other social categories – can be derived from this mechanism.

As will be demonstrated later on, the mechanisms of self and identity are of consequence for how individuals comprehend the past and present of their society. We might explain better why some traditions, narratives and practices stubbornly persist, whereas others are less relevant or dominant, if we lay bare the ways in which these legacies are connected with people's sense of who they are.

In the following, I will describe how these theoretical claims can be applied to the students' relationships at school, in family, and society. In all these realms, a historical dimension is taken into account.

At school

I conducted my study in Novi Sad, Serbia's second largest city, situated in the northern autonomous province of Vojvodina,[14] well-know for its multiethnic composition. My field consisted of a technical and an academic school, and two high-school classes with approximately thirty-five students each. I spent a whole shool year with them in 2007-2008, and returned for a shorter visit in the spring of 2009.

The students' background varied: farmers, working class, and lower and upper middle class. Some were born in other parts of former Yugoslavia, and several were of other ethnic origin than Serbian. Many commuted from nearby towns and villages, whereas others were born and raised in the city of Novi Sad. In both classes, girls were in majority.

Already from the start, I regarded school environment as an important arena for secondary socialization. The school carries further a process that starts in the family sphere – with primary socialization (Berger & Luckmann 1967). Whereas in the primary phase, the individual is highly malleable and susceptible to acquiring knowledge that will retain a quality of permanence and inevitability throughout his/her life, the secondary phase is shakier. Whatever one learns, it can be challenged and altered.

The two phases of socialization had to be brought into my analysis precisely because of this dialectic. At the time they arrive at school, students already have

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of reality has acquired meanings originally unintended by the authors. There is no intrinsic link between the notion of identity as a social construction in the original sense of the phrase and contemporary deconstructivist interpretations of identity.

[14] According to the census from 2002, the largest ethnic groups are Serbs (65.05 %), Hungarians (14.28 %), Slovaks (2.79 %), Croats (2.78 %), Yugoslavs (2.45 %) and Roma (1.43 %). Other groups include Albanians, Romanians, Bosniaks, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Vlachians, etc. ("Upoznajte Vojvodinu").

many identities that emerged during primary socialization. What they know, and who they are, will then be further consolidated and tested by peers from close or more distant social worlds. This was important to observe in relation to their group behavior. Who associated with whom, and for what reasons? And *vice versa*, whom did they avoid? Even more importantly, could some of their conflicts and divisions be understood through recent developments in Serbia's history? If so, which developments had the greatest effect?

Instead of seeking answers about the influence of the past in history textbooks, I searched for them in the perceptions of friendships students made, broke and mended on everyday basis. In fact, textbooks were of almost negligible significance to what they thought of their surrounding world. It was from one another that they learned in matters of style, taste, opinions and values, and naturally, they became attached to those who meant most for their personal growth. On the other hand, competition, failure, disappointment, selfishness, and backtalk consumed thoughts of most of them. These were experiences difficult to assimilate in the self-image and blamed for the greatest part on others. In terms of identity making, it was the students' *commitment* to some social relationships (cf. Stryker & Burke 2000), and not others, that was most crucial. Such commitment grows from the perception of characteristics, outlooks and resources necessary for being acknowledged as a group member; i.e. it depends on whether the individual has a certain identity or not.

Although significant, the influence of the teachers was less than one might have expected at first. For teachers, this attests to the degradation of their profession in Serbia, while researchers, in their turn, add that media nowadays shapes values among the young (Joksimović 2003, Malešević 2004, Popadić 2003). Yet, the teachers' role should not be downplayed. Students learned a great deal from them about authority and power issues, importance of rules, hard work and professionalism, or, in more unfortunate cases, the lack of it. It is against the background of the frequently discussed moral hollowing of societal norms that it is worth noting that students perceived a relationship as positive, if (a) they worked hard and their efforts were justly awarded, (b) if the teacher was friendly disposed, and (c) if the rules were clear and followed. These were the conclusions drawn from their *own* experiences with some of the teachers, who thus served as positive role models.

If we go back to the issue of social identities related to group behavior mentioned earlier, the school environment showed examples of group divisions related to both more distant and recent history in Serbia. It is particularly through these divisions that the recent past manifested itself in social relationships at school. The urban-rural distinction, which gained momentum after the Second World War in Yugoslavia, still provokes strong and interrelated social oppositions. On the one side, there were those students who came from respected families residing in Novi Sad for generations. On the other side were families living in rural areas from which children commuted to school, or families who escaped the war in Croatia, Bosnia or Kosovo, and who were occasionally looked down upon by some of my informants and their parents. The biggest division was, however, manifest among youth subcultures that defined themselves in contrast to mainstream culture, put on a par with

the phenomenon of *turbo-folk* and so-called *grand kultura*. Most often their antagonistic relationship is rendered in valorizing terms of well-adjusted and maladjusted social groups and classes, both in the academic discourse as well as among the students themselves. The rural and working class are, thus, associated with low culture or a lack of it (Serb. *nekultura*), while the higher social echelons are the producers and consumers of high culture. Lower forms, such as *turbo-folk*, are usually considered to be Serbian, nationalist and chauvinist, whereas the latter is inspired by Western Europe and considered modern and liberal (see e.g. Čolović 2008, Đurković 2009, Kronja 2007).

Social identity theory attempts to explain this dynamics. Groups affirm self-categories that tend to be positive. We need to think well of ourselves, social psychologists say, which also means that groups with attitudes and values other than our own will produce negative affects and stereotypes. For Turner, this relationship between identity, self and value demonstrates a categorization process: "there is a real sense in which the 'valuing' of oneself or others as positive or negative is much the same thing as appraising the degree to which they are 'self' or 'not self' at some higher level of abstraction" (Turner et al. 1987:59). Viewed thus, to value is to ascribe a self to those we compare ourselves to – a self that is similar and compatible with our own, whose sense of worth draws on belonging to a particular life-world.

Many of the reasons due to which the students did not associate with each other at school originate in historically shaped differentiations and mechanisms outlined in social identity theory that sustain them. However, to speak with Tajfel, identity is both social *and* personal. In behavior, these distinctions intersect; in theoretical models, they are neatly delineated. Therefore, we should think of identity as a flexible structure, where parts of the self-concept are triggered by other individuals, situations and life-world realms. Family is one of them.

In family

Though vigorous, family, like school, succumbs under destabilizing social processes. As Vera Erlich's (1971) seminal study showed, changes that came with modernization in Yugoslavia recast social roles and caused much disarray in family life. Likewise, the crisis of the 1990s in Serbia set new disruptions into motion. High unemployment confined many women to the household and decreased their social status; single-parent households and divorces increased; marriages and family formation were put on hold; existential and economic interdependence grew; family members were lost in the war, whereas others were displaced and ended up in overcrowded homes with "new extended families" (Bobić 2004, Čičkarić 2005, Milić 2004, Nikolić-Ristanović 2003).

Similarly to what has been said about the school, family too sets a stage for the performance of socio-historical discrepancies. Nowhere is this more apparent than in my informants' portrayals of family types. Although one's own family is viewed as a safe haven, where students feel sheltered from the outside world, loved

and cared for, they view family life as *typically* "under strain, entrenched in the traditional patriarchal order, with male violence, oppression, and disrespect towards women and children as its hallmarks" (Spasenić 2011:211). The contrasts between two family models that kept re-appearing in the students' descriptions will be evident from the following summary:

> The first model stands out as a locus of harmony, love, and success, while the latter is a milieu marked by problems and disturbed relationships. Alcoholism, drug-abuse, promiscuity, lack of education and manners together with neglected appearance, are seen as the stereotypical distinctions of the non-modern. And the non-modern is, in general, a state of backwardness, or put otherwise, the lack of culture that the educated and well-mannered people are claimed to have. Namely, they possess knowledge, competence, and higher skills. They behave, dress, and speak well. Theirs is a sophisticated taste. They read and participate in cultural events at theatres and cinemas. They talk, as opposed to inarticulate and brutal fighting. All these assets and properties make them appear as good, rational, and well-balanced people, even superior to others in some respects, since they can distinguish between what is good and what is bad, or acceptable and inacceptable. So, the culture of their life – how they live, act, behave and communicate – is better than the culture of life of those who are uneducated and unversed, unemployed, ill-mannered, and sick. In the acute language of stereotypes, expressed both by working-class and middle-class informants, the former is a "European" form of life, while the latter is Serbian.
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> (Spasenić 2011:193–194)

Apart from pointing to the opposition between traditional and modern in Serbia throughout the 20th century, these models are also indicative of another recent development – "re-patriarchalization" of both private and public sphere. This process, in which traditions are adjusted to new contexts (Blagojević 2003:168), has been unfolding against the background of a ruined economy, demographical shifts in Serbia due to the Yugoslav wars, and a succession of ideologies since the 1990s. It is part of what Swidler (1986) calls "cultures of unsettled lives." By recourse to familiar recipes of knowledge and strategies of action, re-patriarchalization signifies an attempt to bring stability into unstable conditions which disclose the vicissitudes of struggle between cultural models, as they are transformed "from *ideology* to *tradition* to *common sense*" (ibid:279, emphasis in original).

Related to the family realm, the experience of "societal atomization" (Tomanović & Ignjatović 2006) is another manifestation of unsettled lives. Both atomization and usettledness are bound up with a lack of sources for a postive self-evaluation, and a sense that the world one identifies with is constantly diminishing. This leads to frequent declarations of non-belongingness and dissociation from the surrounding world seen as hostile, untrustworthy and inauthentic – something that was often communicated by the students, their parents and teachers, and that was particularly evident at school when the students' identity perceptions were challenged. The feeling of non-belongingness is a predicament of many in Serbia,

where enlarged cleaveages in cultural preferences, financial status and moral codes result in emphasizing one's distinctiveness. There are various Others in relation to whom one defines oneself politically, socially, and economically, on the scales between rich and poor; literate and illiterate; modern and traditional; liberal and conservative, etc.[15]

The most telling aspect of these, in essence, ordinary psychological processes is how amplified they become by situational unsettledness. As mentioned in the beginning, our need to belong goes hand in hand with psychological distinctiveness, i.e. distance is always part of the equation. But it is situational cues that determine its magnitude. Thus, we see here a relationship between (a) unstable social conditions that challenge identity perceptions, and (b) the feeling that one does not belong to a society, group or a school class that does not contribute to a positive self-understanding. One of the parents explained this well in her own words: "Our whole world and the whole of our Serbia have come down to our family circle. [In the family], we're somehow closely united, and we have tried to meet each other there and protect ourselves from everything."

In society

Of many issues linked with Serbia's recent past that the students were interviewed about, in my final analysis I chose to focus on the following themes: (a) who Milošević was and what he should be held accountable for; (b) what happened in Srebrenica; (c) the reasons for NATO's intervention in 1999; (d) perceptions of the West. It is worth noting that these topics were *not* addressed at school in any systematic fashion. What the students knew about the 1990s was, for the greatest part, learned through media, peers and families.

Since there is no room to go into their answers in more depth, I will summarize only the most important conclusions.[16] Not unexpectedly, the students differ with respect to the relevance these issues hold in their lives and for their identities. A range of emotions towards the past, from indifference to indignation, was displayed. Both narrative and statistical analysis indicate that the differences are associated with what social class they come from; where they live; what school they attend; and what their sex is.[17] Thus, variations in their responsiveness to the war events correspond with different social positions and a biographical articulation of role-identities (Stryker & Burke 2000). In terms of the phenomenological understanding of sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann 1967), this variety of in-

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[15] The very notion of "the Other Serbia" (Serb. *Druga Srbija*), as opposed to "the First Serbia" (Serb. *Prva Srbija*), exemplifies this phenomenon on a macro level.

[16] For a more detailed account see Spasenić (2011).

[17] For instance, in depiction of Milošević, prominent attitudes are: (a) *indecisiveness* among the girls; students who live in the rural areas; middle- and working-class children; and the students in the academic class; (b) *defensiveness* among the boys; urbanites; and middle-class children; (c) *criticism* among the girls, working-class children, and the students in the technical class. Taken all together, 38.2% of the informants are indecisive, 21.8% defend and 30.9% condemn him.

terpretations points to a differential typification of social phenomena in the processes of internalization and objectification of knowledge.

The notion of differential typifications reflects a schematized nature of social structure and knowledge.[18] Like any other modern society, the Serbian holds myriads of life-worlds and cultures, whose structures are part of people's identity perceptions. Yet, despite the overall differences, in search of an explanation for consistent patterns in young people's attitudes towards their society and its past, one realm of the students' life-world merits particular attention – the family.[19] It was repeated over and over again by the students that "everything stems from the family." This determinism, however, is far from an unequivocal, uniform process of transferring beliefs, simply by acts of telling children what to think. The attitudes of others, as Mead suggested, are internalized in a reflexive way – their meaning is created through our intrinsic ability to take them upon ourselves *and* reflect upon them. Some meanings are, however, experienced as being especially permanent and inevitable for the individual's self-concept. The following statement of one of the students illustrates this intersubjective process: "I think that our political opinion is not the opinion of our parents but it is the way in which we are brought up, raised … if you have all your life taught that grass is green, nobody will convince you tomorrow that grass is purple." Socialization gives thus rise to identity perceptions maintained through patterned interactions with significant others, and it is reflexive in the sense that the individual is capable of apprehending him/herself as both an *object* and a *subject* in the process.

Another consistency in the students' responses is related to the reluctance to condemn their people and country as the main wrongdoer in the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars that ensued. As soon as the notions of guilt and responsibility of the Serbian people were brought up, the majority reacted by reclaiming the national identity and stating that only one side could not be blamed for the Yugoslav conflict. There is, thus, little evidence in my ethnography attesting to the students' denouncing of their Serbian identity, when put in the context of the Yugoslav war. This finding also resonates with another similar topic. Most of the students see Serbia as inferior to the West, and yet at the same time, Serbia is not *only* looked upon as a backyard of the prosperous West. They also take much pride in their country, setting up the "normality" of Serbian society against the West, which they often associate with disturbed close relationships (e.g. friendships and family life). I will develop this topic further in the upcoming section; for the time being, it suffices to remember once again the two defintions of identity employed in this article – (a) a mechanism that mediates between individual and social environment by interpreting behavior; (b) that part of the individual's self-concept that is related to his/her awareness of belonging to a group together with the emotional significance attached to it. As long as membership in a group contributes positively to self-

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[18] See Howard (1994) for a relevant discussion of social cognitive conception of social structure. Also Schutz (1972).

[19] This does not surprise considering a general lack of reliance on the institutions and the Serbian state.

image, that identity will be maintained. This is precisely the case with the students' Serbian identity.

Altogether, the interpretations of crucial events and figures of the 1990s (e.g. Milošević; Srebrenica; Nato bombings) reveal mostly ambiguities enclosed in imprecise and inconsistent explanations, and their influence on young people's lives is subtle and tacit rather than obvious. Put simply, to their everyday life and social relationships, the recent past for the greatest part lacks significance. To gain it, the past would have to be *made* relevant and introduced as a legitimating source of action, e.g. in the manner of beliefs and ideologies operating in "cultures of unsettled lives" (Swidler 1986). This, however, is not the whole picture. These beliefs and ideologies still need to be perceived and recognized as relevant to the individual's identities in order to orient his/her actions. Phenomenologically speaking, for knowledge to be internalized and have any significant impact on behavior, it has to be both emotionally and cognitively relevant to the the self-concept (cf. Monroe 2008).

Self and Other

In this section, I will dwell shortly on (a) the experience of distrust and inauthentic appearances that characterizes the relationship between the students and less significant others/society who call their understanding of the world into question; and (b) the experience of shame/pride that features in the students' conception of their society when compared to the West.

On the whole, the students' descriptions of Serbian society and fellow men evoke the notion of a culture of distrust (cf. Giordano 2012). *Pretense* is experienced as a dominant mode of being, and appearances are said to be both important and false – an understanding epitomized by the opinion that nowadays little is true. Put in identity terms, the construal of appearances that do not match or confirm one's own identity perceptions will result in snap judgments, negative stereotyping and a lack of communication. Or, as one of the students observed, echoing social identity theory, "the more one strives to make one's group belongingness conspicuous, the greater the risk that there will be no contact with members of other groups." This issue has already been touched upon in the section on family, in relation to the phenomenon of societal atomization and the experience of constant distancing from numerous Others (politically, socially, economically), which maintains the sense of psychological distinctiveness.

As for the feelings of pride and shame the students nurture towards Serbia, they cannot be understood without taking into account the contradictions of Serbian society, shaped by discrepant historical legacies and socio-economic processes. Disrupted by wars and ideological shifts, as well as conflicts between authoritarian governments and a rebellious polity, Serbia is often denunciated by the students as backward and disorderly. But, at the same time, it is highly appreciated and loved for its unique qualities of life, which they believe they would hardly find anywhere else. I breached this topic in the previous section and will try to develop it here.

To understand the importance of national identity and the ideas about 'what is specifically Serbian' on a collective level, regional and international government policies in the Balkans and Serbia proper must be considered. Serbian identity is constructed both in relation to other neighboring nations and ethnic communities, but also through transactions with Western powers, whose intentions are not always seen as benign. It is with the image of prosperous countries of Western Europe in front of their eyes that the students characterize Serbia as primitive. And yet, the same prosperous West is simultaneously described as a hypocritical world of cruel and cold relationships, where people are more concerned with making money than enjoying themselves in the company of friends and family. How do these conceptions go together?

John Plamenatz (1973; see also Gellner 2008, Greenfeld 1993) argued that imitation *and* competition, acceptance *and* rejection, were hallmarks of the so-called "eastern nationalism", which he explained as a ramification of "western nationalism." According to Plamenatz, this ideology was passed to the Slavs from Germany. The appropriated model entailed an imitation of foreigners, but there was no identification with them. As a consequence, the Slavs found themselevs in a double bind. On the one hand, they had to transform themselves and become modern, and on the other hand, they felt compelled to retain their "ancestral ways" as markers of identity.

This explanation, with social psychological undertones, sheds light on attitudes that, at first glance, may seem contradictory. What they, in fact, communicate is that if we wish to understand the salience of national identities in the Balkans, we should be looking not only at regional animosities and competition, but also at Western policies towards the Balkans and their resonance in the self-understanding of its peoples (cf. Mazower 2000).

The Other is constituted through the process of categorization on different levels of abstraction (Turner et al. 1987) – from small units such as individuals to larger ones, such as groups, communities, and whole societies. Which of these identity perceptions will be salient depends on the cues inherent in the situation. I will now let the implications of this condition conclude my argument.

History that deals with the minds of the agents

> *History as the account of human experience must deal with the minds of the agents, lest it become mindless history.*
>
> (Zukier 1997:198)

One of the girls in the academic class said once that a persistent problem of Serbian society is how absorbed it is with matters of national survival, territories and borders. She explained,

> When you have an apple, and you share it with a couple of people, it belongs to everyone and no one. It's the same with a country. Country is an artificial creation; the borders are imagined … The essential

thing is whether you are capable of setting limits to something that is imagined. And here nobody's capable of that.

A key meaning of this quote, captured by the phrase "setting limits to something that is imagined," is *not* to take ideological explanations at face value. That few people can act thus – which is articulated at the end of the quote by saying, "And here nobody's capable of that" – features also in scholarly explanations of nationalism, ethnic conflicts and genocidal violence, where ideology is treated as an independent and singular variable (Waller 2002). In a similar fashion, a leader propagating that ideology can be viewed as a source of causality (Zukier 1982, 1997).

Such explanations rest on two conceptions. The first one is that of cultural and political models distributed (more or less) evenly across a population and internalized in a (more or less) uniform way (cf. Hinton 1998). The second is that of alluring powers and capacities embedded as characterological traits in leaders' personalities. Despite much psychological and sociological evidence to the contrary,[20] these interpretations remain tenacious. In slightly different terms, their message is that if we want to change young people's minds on matters salient to their identities, we can do it by telling them what to think, through persuasion and coercion, manipulation and indoctrination.

The assumptions underlying these arguments cannot be taken for granted: (a) What is the connection between what we think and what we do? (b) How does something we are told become part of what we think and perhaps even do?[21] The former invokes the idea of consistency in human behavior; the latter refers to how we internalize social reality.

Throughout the article, I have been stressing that the process of internalization is reflexive due to the character of human consciousnees. The students acquire intersubjectively only parts of the social stock of knowledge, through patterned social interactions that build on their ability to take the perspective of the others with whom they feel they belong – in the circle of family, friends, political party, religious community or ethnic group. Naturally, all these identities are collectively constituted but also biographically modeled. To speak with Tajfel, they are both social and personal.

The differences among the students' perspectives on their society are, sociologically speaking, related to the fact that knowledge is socially distributed – what one knows about the world depends on the place from which one is looking. This is a matter of position in social structure. If we have accepted that social reality is constructed, then we need to show who is constructing what, how, and for what reasons, *simultaneously* holding in mind that (1) cultures are *not* integrated wholes; (2) that our models need to accommodate agency and possibilities for change and con-

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[20] For an overview see Waller (2002) and Zukier (1997).

[21] The third one concerns the question of power and legitimacy. For an interesting answer to this question see Turner (2005).

flict; but also (3) that social groups can hardly speak for others in opposition to whom they define themselves.[22] My argument is that without a coherent and explicit theory of consciousness and internalization, which allows culture to be in the world *and* in the mind,[23] such analysis will be vapid.

What about behavior then, and the connection between what we think and what we do? In social psychology, the relationship between attitudes and behavior has been re-thaught so as to accommodate the multilayered structure of the self-concept and its context sensitivity. It is inconsistency, rather than its opposite, that has proved to characterize our interactions (Zukier 1982, 1997). In determining our actions, "external pressures of the situation" outweigh "internal instigators such as hatred and hostility" (Zukier 1997).[24] Put differently, behavior is a function of situational cues and identity perceptions, rather than personality characteristics or cultural models.

How does this relate to my previous discussion? Explanations that use ideologies (e.g. Serbian nationalism), or personality syndromes and cultural models (e.g. authoritarianism), to account for the behavior, or even more importantly, changes in the behavior and identification of millions of people, are problematic. Their impact *is* significant, but far from being single, decisive or straightforward. Contrary to these suppositions, my data show that neither patterns of behavior, nor attitudes, nor cultural and political models are completely dominant among the students. The influence of the recent war-ridden past is *differential* rather than *uniform*. My analysis of family, school and society realms, as perceived by the students, points to marked divisions – especially on the axes urban/rural, traditional/modern – driven by historical forces. Once again, there are many Others in relation to whom young people strive to maintain a positive self-image – e.g. classmates and their families; co-citizens; other ethnic groups; the West. These categorizations and comparisons typify social polarizations that recent history has made more acute. Moreover, it is hardly surprising that, when challenged by narratives they do not interpret as part of their ethnic identification, the students are so united in their embrace of Serbian identity. These perceptions *are* susceptible to change, because they are intrinsically sensitive to contextual interactions. However, a transformation requires *re-interpretation* of self-image and *commitment* to new relationships and identities, which in the case of whole ethnic and national communities does not come about so easily.

These insights are critical to our understanding of collective confrontation with the past. Establishing one truth with regard to either past or present social conditions is feasible only so far as those groups who identify with a particular version of events will also be the ones who maintain it. However, we cannot presume that

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[22] For instance, letting English-speaking middle-class elite in Serbia define and speak for working-class or agricultural population, who is by the former regarded as "cattle-like," "an unenlightened, uneducated people" (Greenberg 2006).

[23] See Strauss & Quinn (1997).

[24] Studies conducted by Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo are pivotal in this context.

everyone will or can accept it. Identity formation rests on social mechanisms and cultural regularities in inherently plural and differentiated modern societies, as well as on our ability to reflexively interpret experience through acquired and emerging identities. As pointed out by Zukier (1997:198) in the introductory quote, if we want to escape the history of mindless agents, we need to deal with their minds. Only by doing so do we grant them freedom, moral accountability and a capacity to change their socieities.

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Јелена Спасенић

Значај недавне српске ратне прошлости на перцепцију идентитета младих људи

Постоји ли начин да се етнографски документује начин на који недавна ратна прошлост утиче на идентификацију адолесцената који имају врло мало или нимало директног искуства са том прошлошћу? Један од начина да се приђе овом проблему јесте да се сагледа како се свакодневно знање гради и како се преноси међу појединцима, затим како историјска наслеђа, културни и политички модели налазе пут до њихових живота и света, шта они мисле и знају, и ко су заправо они.

Ова питања су била у првом плану истраживања које је обухватило два разреда средњошколаца, између 2007 и 2009 године, у Новом Саду. У раду ћу изнети закључке до којих сам дошла током истраживања и такође, проблематизоваће се идеја колективне конфронтације са прошлошћу. Мој став је да колективно суочавање са прошлошћу, заједно са званичним стратегијама овог дискурса, морају узети у обзир друштвене и психолошке механизме који учествују у изградњи идентитета, да би се избегла претпоставка да сазнања о знању и моралу могу бити "утиснута", или нацртана, попут мапа.