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Concern for the State: ‘Normality’, State Effect and Distributional Claims in Serbia

Ethnographies of the post-Yugoslav region often focus on the production of the ‘state effect’ through narratives of statelessness, namely on the normative imagination evident in the yearnings for ‘normal life’. Drawing from fieldwork research in various after-sites of ‘Zastava’ industrial complex in Kragujevac – from car enthusiasts to the newly unemployed – I explore how such entrenched discursive tropes transform in a context of chronic superfluity in the job market and reliance on the state as the new interventionist hegemon. My interlocutors shared a belief that a significant positive change could only come from the ‘state’, while simultaneously agreeing that those who were excluded from that state were more morally fit to impersonate its key functions than the very statesmen and bureaucrats were. Turning moral superiority into a distributional claim, they described themselves not only as deserving, but as materially valuable for the state. This process elucidates a new hegemonic framework currently reshaping the Serbian welfare apparatus and social actors’ pragmatic adaptations to it.

Key words: normality, state effect, moral positioning, deservingness, unemployment, Serbia.

Брига за државу: „нормалност”, државотворни ефекат и захтеви за прерасподелу у Србији

Етнографије постјугословенских земаља се често фокусирају на производњу „државотворног ефекта” у наративима друштвеног хаоса, односно на нормативну имагинацију која прожима чежње за „нормалним животом”. На основу етнографског теренског истраживања међу различитим групама везаним за фабрике “Заставиног” индустријског комплекса Крагујевцу – од љубитеља аутомобила до незапослених – анализирам како се такве устаљене дискурзивне концепције мењају током дуготрајног бивања вишком на тржишту рада, а у положају зависности од државе као новог интервенционистичког хегемона. Моји испитаници су веровали да значајна позитивна промена може доћи само од државе, као и да су они који су искључени из те државе морално способнији да обављају њене кључне функције од самих државника и бирократа. Претварајући моралну супериорност у захтев за расподелом, они су описивали себе не само као праведно заслужне већ и материјално вредне за државу. Овај процес расветљава нови хегемонијски оквир који тренутно трансформише социјалну државу у Србији, и прагматичне адаптације друштвених актера.

Кључне речи: нормалност, државотворни ефекат, морално позиционирање, заслужност, незапосленост, Србија.

Introduction

*Oduvek sam hteo ja tebi u inat
da postanem nitkov, lopov i devijant.
Ali jednog dana shvatio sam foru:
ja sam sitna riba u ovom plavom moru, jer...
To rade, to rade skupštine i vlade
spremaju napade na strane ambasade!
To rade, to rade gangsteri iz Vlade
podmeću bombu pod Palatu pravde!*

*I always wanted, in spite of you
To become a scoundrel, thief and a deviant.
But one day I figured out a trick:
I am only a small fish in this blue sea, because
That's what parliaments and governments do:
They plot attacks on foreign embassies!
That's what gangsters from the Government do:
They set up a bomb under the Palace of Justice!*

SARS, *To rade* (Perspektiva, 2011)

The first time I heard SARS's song was in Kragujevac, Serbia, during the early steps of my fieldwork in this town. At this sunny October morning in 2011, its reggae beats resonated from a powerful sound system placed in the yard of the former Vojno-Tehnički zavodi – one of the oldest shop floors in the country dating back to the nineteenth century, now treated as a space of local heritage and often used for various town festivals. On that day, it was hot to Fićijada, the annual show organised by *fićisti*, the car enthusiasts dedicated to collecting the nationally iconic Zastava 750 brand (colloquially known as *Fića*) that was produced in Kragujevac from the 1950s-1980s and came to be seen as one of the most iconic symbols of Yugoslavia. An exhibit of about thirty *fićas* and some ten other 'old timers' of Zastava production – some glitzyly converted into sport cars, some restored to their pristine factory condition – the yard was crowded with several dozen *fića* lovers, along with their friends and families, from all over Serbia, who came to mark their beloved brand's birthday.

While we were waiting for the show to start, it was the music that shaped its political aesthetics. Early on, the DJ played what appeared to be a consistent selection of locally well-known tropes – of survival and informal coping, of macho transgression and irreverence to the state. These included: Atheist Rap's *Wartburg limuzina*, a cheeky homage to local car cultures and what is seen as *budženje* (jury-rigging) of sturdy cars by equally resilient men. This led to Generacija 5's telling number, *Najjači samo ostaju* (Only the strongest remain) and Familija's *Boli me kita* (I don't give a fuck). All extremely popular in the 1990s, these songs evoked celebration of making do and endurance that characterised much of pop culture during the decade of Yugoslav wars, UN embargo, hyperinflation and social upheaval. But as we progressed into the sounds of the new decade, the sounds of joyful masculine defiance gave ground to critical moralisation. Here, SARS's *To rade* read as the hindsight of a man who grew up thinking of himself as a sort of law-breaker, only to realise that the state politicians were the biggest criminals of them all. From the mischief of state-transgressing men, the show's soundscape built up into a declaration of concern for the wellbeing of the state.

Indeed, it was only later back at home, when I was looking through the pictures I took from the event, that I realised to what extent the 'state' and the 'law' were literally central to the event. Namely, in the very centre of the exhibition, a notable distance from all other old timers – as if it was the only possible, taken-for-

granted position for it – sat a blue *fića* replica of the iconic Yugoslav police car with a big sign MILICIJA. A requisite relic borrowed from a nearby movie set, rather than an authentic police car from the 1960s, the blue vehicle dominated the entire exhibit, epitomising the nostalgic ethos. In my conversations with the gathered *fićisti*, they commonly gestured to this car and its association with the Yugoslav statehood and its *organi reda* (lit. organs of order) as a moral rationale of their attraction to the brand. “All police cars were *fiće*, and they could catch every other car”, one *fićista* from Smederevo, in his 50s, told me. “They indeed did”, he added, “because you had to *stop* every time they would pull you over“. What the *fićisti* therefore appraised was not the driving capacities of *fića*, but its symbolic association with both the functioning state of the past and the moral discipline of its citizens. They proudly enacted such past order in their enthusiast practice by never drinking at their ceremonies (“because we are driving“) and acknowledging *Fića*’s symbolic links to the police, army, the Zastava industrial complex and other symbols of the former statehood. Conversely, they described the contemporary Serbian state bureaucracy as corrupt and decadent. As in SARS’s song, from its aesthetic of transgressing or criticising the state, the *fićijada* enfolded as the summoning of a more ordered and regulating state – one which, in its absence, *fićisti* claimed they were impersonating.



Image 1. The police *fića* at 2011 *Fićijada* in Kragujevac.

Accounts of people’s engagement with the ‘state’ in socialism often tell a story of bad faith, or to put it better, bad reciprocity. Workers in the factories, as well as communities marginalized from the centres of political life, it has been argued, understood the moral ambiguities of their ‘second economy’ activities – such as looting, lifting, theft and favours – in an overall context in which the state was not fulfilling its own obligations. Seen as suspicious, alienating and exploitative, the ‘state’ and its property were dealt with in an interpretative framework of mutual

trickery – a relation continuing into postsocialism as well (Wedel 1992; Pine 1999; Ssorin-Chaikov 2000). To an extent, such narratives of “honest bandits” (Ries 2002) and “normal heroes” (Humphrey 2012) resemble very well the post-Yugoslav narratives of statehood and the corrupt dealings of its politicians. However, when conducting my fieldwork in Kragujevac from 2011-2013, what I found most salient was an altogether different discourse, where people engaged in emphatic expressions of their care for the state. In their pleas for state interventions – on the job market, in the welfare state, in provisions for local infrastructure – people claimed that they were in an alliance with the state agenda that the statesmen themselves broke. When criticising the current Serbian statehood, it seemed important to represent oneself as complementary with the needs of some more essential ‘State’ itself and hence deserving a membership in its niches.

In this paper I address this apparent ethnographic paradox: namely, the fact that the ‘state’ is seen as both the biggest source of corruption and crisis and the only place from which some new, functioning social and moral order can be made. In its various forms, such simultaneous critiques of and yearning for state regulation have surfaced in various ethnographies of postsocialism in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to the extent that it became one of their organising motifs (Greenberg 2011; Spasić and Birešev 2012a; Spasić 2013; Jansen 2014, 2015; Mikuš and Dokić 2015; Simić 2014; Thelen, Thiemann and Roth 2014). Zooming in on evocations of statehood and statecraft in Kragujevac, I argue how the persistent, decades old narratives of chaos and corruption as well as the yearning for an orderly state get transformed in a setting in which state funds are the last remaining resort for many. In the context of job redundancy, as well as state interventionism in the locale, it is an alliance with the ‘state’ that is sought through narratives of rampart statelessness.

The choice of Kragujevac offers an ethnographic context rich with symbolic and institutional links to Serbian statehood. As Živković (2009) noted, the Fića model that was produced in this town is often remembered as the national symbol of the ‘golden era’ of state socialism – as opposed to later models of Zastava 101 (associated with the 1970-1980s) and Yugo (notorious for its connection with the coping practices of the 1990s). In this sense, the enthusiast practice through which some *fićisti* restore their cars to the ‘original’ factory condition has been explained as a symbolic commentary on the ‘chaos’ of the present, and a ritual act of going back in time to found a more ordered, innocent and lasting foundation of statecraft (Živković 2009). More broadly, the Zastava industrial complex in Kragujevac - which once consisted of several dozens of enterprises producing arms, trucks and automobiles¹ - is often seen as emblematic of the country’s past and its transfor-

¹ By Zastava industrial complex, I refer to a complex network of factories and enterprises that changed names from ‘Zavodi Crvena Zastava’ (1950-1990) to ‘Grupa Zastava’ (1990-2006) to ‘Grupa Zastava Vozila’ (2006-). During its heyday in the Yugoslav socialism, the main pillars of this complex was the manufacture of cars (*Zastava Automobili*, hereafter Zastava Automobiles), arms (*Zastava Oružje*, hereafter Zastava Arms) and trucks (*Zastava Kamioni*, hereafter Zastava Trucks). The complex also encompassed several dozen more supplier, trade, service and other enterprises, and employed up to fifty thousand people in the Kragujevac area in the late 1980s, with many more supplier firms and sales operations throughout former Yugoslavia. While the produc-

mation, and therefore as diagnostic tools for what Jansen (2015, 18) termed as popular “political pathologies” through which people perceive statecraft. Moving between various after-presences of the old Zastava complex – in the sphere of work, (un)employment and car culture – allows us to see not only how social actors use essentialist claims for various strategic ends (Herzfeld 2005, 8-9), but also how, by doing so, they adapt to transformations and continuing hegemonies of the Serbian state apparatus.

Framing disorder after Yugoslavia: 'corrupt' statesmen and 'normal' people

“What is the strongest weapon in a state? It's bread: because a hungry soldier does not fight, he surrenders.” A Serbian peasant, when commenting the lack of state subsidies for agriculture ²

In Serbia, the 1990s became a symbolic turning point from the Yugoslav “good life” to an extended period of upheaval, the so-called *situacija* (situation) (Jansen 2005; Simić 2014). The abrupt disintegration of the Yugoslav federation, nationalist mobilisation and wars in the former republics, hyperinflation, impoverishment and international sanctions, all happened alongside the erosion of the socialist welfare state and induced a sense of a wild and uncontrollable movement (van de Port 1998; Živković 2011). While this continued an older “apocalypse culture” that emerged in the 1980s (Ramet 1985), the notorious 1990s reached an entirely new level of experiential crisis. In an informal “book of complaints” that inhabitants of Kragujevac filled on a street one February morning in 2000, for example, an entry says “I want this government to make possible a normal life for me, which I was able to have ten years ago”. Another one adds: “I complain because I live, and I am not alive anymore.” (Nezavisna svetlost 2000). A sense of a loss of ‘normal life’ became chronic and pervasive (Jansen 2005; Bajić-Hajduković 2014).

Subsequent anthropological studies of ‘normalcy’, (dis)order and Yugo-nostalgic narratives underlined their normative assumptions, as well as their key role in the reproduction of ‘elusive state effect’ (Jansen 2015: 123). After Slobodan Milošević was ousted in 2000 and the country set to institutional reforms and market transition course in 2000, the tropes of abnormality, moral decay and lack of ‘order’ continued to interpretatively frame much of the postsocialist transformation (Gilbert et al. 2008; Greenberg 2011; Jansen 2009, 2014, 2015; Spasić 2012; Simić 2014, 2016). While this encompassed a variety of actors and spheres of activity, what connected them was a prevailing belief that conditions for ‘normal life’ can only be reached in a context of strong and ordered statecraft: one that people often

tion dissipated from the 1990s onwards, and the complex was largely dismantled into separate companies in the 2000s, the inhabitants of Kragujevac still refer to it as a whole (simply as ‘Zastava’) which is why I focus on the after-effects of the entire complex, specifying the exact enterprises only when they matter for the pathways of my interlocutors.

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCyMZaZr2KU&t=11s>.

saw as associated with the Yugoslav past, and still not fully re-emerged in the present. Thus, the student activists that Jessica Greenberg worked with in the early 2000s connected the loss of Yugoslav-style sovereignty with their own sense of moral incapability, believing that the state apparatus did not anymore provide predictable conditions necessary for having agency (2011). Similarly, the NGO workers and war veterans that Mikuš and Dokić studied in early 2010s relied on the ‘state’ as the ultimate social plane from which a substantial transformation should come (2015). Such evocations illustrate what Jansen called ‘grid-desire’: a yearning for a supreme vertical encompassment that “calls forth the state as the structural effect” (2015, 129). It is through *hope* for the state – seen as not anymore present, yet not reconstituted either – that an otherwise disaggregate array of ‘failing’ institutions come to cohere, what can be called a post-Yugoslav ‘state effect’ (Mitchell 1999).

In other words, Serbian narratives of disorder and state failure paradoxically perpetuate the hegemony of statist ideation. While this repeats the insights of many recent ethnographies of the state (Gupta 1995; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003; Kosmatopoulos 2011) here I am interested in the dynamics through which the language of state(less)ness comes to articulate the diverging agendas of various actors. This echoes what Herzfeld called ‘structural nostalgia’: a widespread longing for an idealised past time of trust before the state. While representing past harmony as chronically fading in favour of the moral corruption of the present, nostalgia enables various groups’ pragmatic manipulations. For state bureaucrats, it justifies the enforcement of the law as necessary to restore past order; for state outlaws, it legitimises various pragmatic accommodations of the law as more trustworthy than the state itself (Herzfeld 2005, 109). Hence the phenomenon of ‘*strong weak states*’, who establish their authority in the efforts of actors to ‘impersonate’ the statehood where it is seen as lacking (Reeves 2014). ‘Stateless’ times abound in etatist declarations.

While describing the actual state as failing, therefore, a myriad of social actors retain a moral upper hand to claim that they are *more* state-making than the very statesmen and bureaucrats are. In the post-Yugoslav region, such dynamics are led to its full contradiction by Ivana Spasić and Ana Birešev (2012a) in an analysis of social positioning in Serbia. Namely, the authors noticed a tendency of their focused groups participants to spontaneously and frequently evoke the state. “Invested with so many affects, charged with so many powers and responsibilities”, they wrote, “the State emerged in the discussions as a pivotal point deserving special analysis” (2012a: 146). This ran in two opposed directions. One was the description of the “actually existing” state in Serbia, made up of real people who are failing to produce order, a synonym for greedy and corrupt politicians and the ultimate culprit for all problems. Such a ‘state’ was routinely despised, as elsewhere in the region where ‘politics’ has deep connotations of immoral, shifty, greedy business (Helms 2007; Spasić 2012b; Brković 2016). But at the same time, this picture was seen “as just a bad edition, a counterfeit version of the idea of “State”, the state as it should be”, which was regularly called for (Spasić and Birešev 2012a, 150-151). How to understand this duality? According to Spasić and Birešev, through an overwhelm-

ingly popular discursive framework of 'action blockade' that their respondents shared, in which 'politics' trumped the values of 'ordinary people' (cf. Spasić 2013, 122-140) In this view, the 'political field' (the field of politician by profession - to use the authors' Bourdieuan language) – overgrew and obstructed the higher 'field of power' - the 'State' as the ultimate 'Great Classifier' of people, capitals, and values. Being invaded by politicians, this 'State' could not classify authoritatively anymore. Yet 'ordinary', 'normal', 'decent' people – respondents claimed, identifying with their own description – still cherished the right values and could re-educate the State to classify properly:

“Rather than the state being disputed in its role of authorised classifier, it seems that a reconnection is desired between the two, that is, between 'our' and 'the State's' classifications. The former, 'lifeworldly' classifications, although clearly seen as the correct/right ones, are equally clearly seen as insufficiently strong and authoritative, incapable of imposing themselves on the whole of society and becoming dominant. Instead, the State should be re-educated and made to accept 'our' valuations”. (Spasić and Birešev 2012, 155-156)

Here we see a characteristic distinction at play in contemporary Serbia: a belief that a significant positive change can only come from the 'state', followed by a claim that those who are excluded from that state are actually more morally fit to impersonate its key functions than the very statesmen and bureaucrats are. From the popular video clip of an angry Serbian peasant, who demands bigger state subsidies for agriculture by saying that the strongest weapon in a state is bread, through to Zastava Arms factory workers, who asked for their medical insurance dues to be written off, claiming that guns are a “political product” (and therefore cannot be entirely liberalised) to the former Kragujevac' leadership who, when faced with a police investigation of their conflict of interest, called it a “microlocated coup” (Rajković forthcoming), what we see is a proliferation of various actors' declarations of their centrality to the state. In my fieldwork in Kragujevac, such claims were rampant and always relied on the same division between immoral politicians and moral people that Birešev and Spasić identified. However, they were often paired with demands for state-assisted employment, funding, or other forms of interventionism in the market economy. Here, various actors seemed to compete not just in an abstract ability to have the right values and classifications for the State, but in the inscription of their social position into the very economic wellbeing of the Sovereign. Situating these claims in the new, if ambiguous landscape of interventionism in Kragujevac, I want to show that the State is evoked not only as a 'Great Classifier' but as 'the Great Distributor' in need of repair – a pragmatic position that allows various actors to claim that their distributional claims are not self-interested, but nourishing the very material essence of the state.

“Both for us and for the state”: statist declarations as distributional claims

When I came to Kragujevac in 2011, I would often hear that there was no “future” in the town because “people want to get rich overnight”. Usually an anecdote would be told, about an entrepreneur who appropriated some old enterprise that belonged to the former Zastava industrial complex or another factory from the locale, operated quite well, employed a couple of hundred people and then was arrested for not paying taxes or for some corruption scandal. Alternatively, the owner would take the subsidies from the state and the factory profits to build elsewhere, or to simply extract the profit out of the company, which ended in major debts and what is called *namerni stečaj* (“intentional bankruptcy”). What usually followed was the cancellation of the privatisation and putting the firm into a bankrupt status, which meant that the taxes due to the state are unpaid and unobtainable, the workers left without jobs and with unpaid wages and health insurance and the factory indebted. Such an image of unsanctioned greed was often given as the main reason for the temporary status of any new post-2000 project and for the endangerment of both ordinary Kragujevčani and the state budget.

While such local stories of corruption echo the widespread condemnation of ‘politics’ across the post-Yugoslav region (Spasić 2013; Helms 2007), they should be understood in relation to the new, ambiguous distributive role the state authorities had after 1991, most specifically regarding the Zastava industrial complex. During the 1990s, its production outputs were decimated, sales shrank and shop floors decayed and the company became dependent on state financing. The majority of employees, as elsewhere in the country, remained employed but on long-term forced leave for years, often surviving on selling contraband. After Milošević was ousted in 2000, being the biggest remaining industrial ‘giant’ in the country, the Zastava complex became the testing ground for the new market programme of the transitional government. Hence, the transitional Serbian government enforced a restructuring plan onto the company in 2001, dividing the complex into units that could be separately privatised, while making around fourteen thousand workers redundant. After a series of workers’ protests, an exceptional welfare programme was formed: with an obligation to requalify and reemploy the redundant, it financed monthly payments equivalent to 45% of former wages from state funds. And while the task of redeploying people mostly failed, and the ‘Zastava zapošljavanje i obrazovanje’ redeployment programme was cancelled in 2007, it is important to note that it was the state, not the company, that took on both the redundancy costs and the obligation of finding new employment for those laid off.

State ministries continued to play this interventionist role, looking for ‘strategic partners’ for privatisation of the remainder of the Zastava industrial complex. Throughout the 2000s, the inhabitants of Kragujevac thus expected the state ministries to find the ‘final solution’ for the factories (see Mitić 2003). For the former Zastava Automobiles car plant, the largest enterprise of the complex, this finally happened in 2008, when, right on the day of parliamentary elections, the Serbian government signed a privatisation contract with FIAT corporation. Front page

news, the deal made FIAT the owner of two thirds of the newly found 'FIAT Automobiles Serbia' company, the Serbian government owning one third. FIAT was to invest around 600 million euros, and start producing a new model in Kragujevac; the Serbian state was obliged to invest 200 million Euros of capital into the new venture, while adding all the land and real estate of Zastava Automobiles, (allegedly) subsidies of 10,000 euros for every worker employed, a new road detour, and tax reliefs for the next 10 years.³ And for around 2,000 made redundant in FIAT selection procedures, the Ministry of Economy and Regional Development became responsible for financing redundancy lump sum payment with the option of a 2 year long requalification programme and a loosely defined contractual obligation to reemploy these people later on in firms of the new partner FIAT. This agreement also granted fired workers' children priority access to FIAT's employment in the future, at least formally.

In short, the post-2000 developments around Zastava Automobiles made the state the key intervener and mediator in the new job market: one which took over the indebted formerly socially owned companies, enforcing and overseeing the privatisations while also taking responsibility for solving the unemployment that the new market creates. This parallels the experience of other Eastern European post-socialist countries where, to ensure public support for market reforms, the new state apparatuses both enforced privatisations and tried to partially absorb their social costs. As Read and Thelen (2007) noted, this made large parts of the population increasingly *dependent* on state support after socialism, in the face of new insecurities of unemployment and precarity in the deregulated markets. Among my respondents who were fired from FIAT, such process, frequently called *kupovina socijalnog mira* ('buying social peace') was met with a combination of apprehension and hope. Namely, both the teachers, coordinators and the redundant workers that attended requalification programs considered them pointless: as the Kragujevac job market was already sparse, middle-aged people were believed not to stand any chance of getting another job. With many of them still almost a decade away from the state-prescribed retirement age, workers often saw these classes as just a necessary nuisance to get a monthly payment of around 20,000 dinars (around the minimum wage) and a temporary semblance of work membership. As the prolongation of the state funding of the classes was uncertain and much speculated upon, this turned the classes into a collective site for sharing speculation, hopes and fears about their future. Here, I would often hear the claim that the FIAT deal and subsequent layoffs were detrimental to the state itself.

Such was my first interaction with people undergoing re-education for carpenters. About ten men in their forties and fifties, mostly blue-collar workers who had worked in Zastava Automobiles all their lives, they recalled watching various materials, machines, furniture and tools from the shop floor being cheaply sold as iron per kilo to Slovenes, Italians, the steel factory in Smederevo, the high manag-

³ The actual contract remained unseen to this day and the whole procedure subject of much rumour and speculation.

ers, “anyone” but workers when the factory was being emptied for the reconstruction. As elsewhere, remembering and imagining the paths of the sold materials served for these men the ultimate proof of the ‘plundering’ of the firm’s wealth and the Serbian politicians’ complicit role in that. But instead of just criticising it, these men called for the ‘state’ to include them.

Bojan: “It wasn’t shared. They emptied everything and told me ‘you can have this table’. But why would I need a table?!”

Miloš: “I say, instead of giving us money for this programme, they could have better founded a carpentry enterprise for us to work there. And then there would be enough both for us, and for the state - as we would pay the taxes.”

Bojan: “Well we had a carpentry workshop in Zastava’s, a complete one!”

Miloš: “True...”

Bojan: “Here, nobody cares for the state (niko ne gleda na državu) and for something to last. It was not done like a household head would do (domaćinski), it was not shared. No, everyone just thinks about their own pockets...”

Importantly, the ‘state’ didn’t appear here as simply a distanced and corrupt source of power that deserved to be cheated. Nor it was simply a remnant of a socialist state that promises guaranteed employment in socially owned firms. Instead, whether through evoking the traditional moral of *domaćin* (pater familias) who should share his property with other household members, or through a notion of the capitalist state as in symbiosis with the private sector through taxes, Bojan and Miloš expressed a desire for a state that would grant them allow inclusion, partnership in the market processes it aimed to regulate. By contrasting the supposedly endemic greed, disunity and disregard for communal property with their declared dedication to the state cause, two men legitimised themselves as thoughtful for the state benefit, hence making their own claims of dispossession socially relevant.

At first glance, such arguments may seem nostalgic calls for socialism. But this would miss the fact that they are often done in market terms, or at least in terms that describe economic benefit to the state. This came home to me one evening at a *slava* dinner of the family of Milovan and Nada, both unemployed blue-collar workers in their 50s who had troubles getting by under their new conditions. While Milovan was sacked from Zastava Automobiles, Nada had lost her job in the ‘22. december’ plant several years before, after the company went into closure under new owners. At that point, they lived on Milovan’s twenty thousand dinars of requalification programme money alone and were considering moving to their village cottage so that they can rent their home in Kragujevac. After she stopped being paid by the ‘22. december’, a dozen or so years before her minimum pensionable age, Nada persuaded her brother, a small shop owner, to employ her ‘on paper’ just so that she could have a continuous formal employment, without a wage. Every month she would pay her pension contributions through that ‘job’, looking forward to the pension to come after long years. But the brother soon got ill and died a year later, the shop closed, and she stopped being able to pay such contributions. She

now had delayed contributions to pay with interest,⁴ not knowing when she will be able to do so. Narrating this story, Nada quickly shifted her attention directly to the state-FIAT deal, to compare who is contributing more to the state:

“And so, they say FIAT is good for the state. But how can it be good if Serbia is the only one giving? 10,000 euros of state funding per worker, is that little? All those pieces of land and then tax breaks... And for me, it is only interest that accumulates. In comparison to them, I at least paid something into the state budget. I contributed more than FIAT did, in a way”.

From Great Classifier to Great Distributor again? The new hegemonic framework of interventionism

In this paper, I addressed an ethnographic paradox: the fact that the ‘state’ in Serbia is seen as both the biggest source of corruption and crisis, and the only place from which some new, functioning social order can be made. While the entrenched yearnings for ‘normal life’ and anti-political sentiment still mattered, they received new meanings from the ambiguous coupling of unemployment and state interventionism in Kragujevac. What interested my interlocutors was not to lay claim to an abstract ability to have the right values and classifications for the State, but to be able to decide on its distribution as well. Here, a dominant motto could be: “As I am more morally fit to impersonate the key state functions than the very statesmen and bureaucrats are, I am more useful to the state, and deserve a better position in its niches”. Arguing that they have better *values* than the politicians do, people also claim to be more *valuable* for the state, and thus deserving of its help. Therefore, older forms of social and moral positioning are merging with new welfare inequalities, allowing various actors to legitimate their own stakes in distribution as communally concerned. In comparison to the analysis of Spasić and Birešev (2012a), the state is not only seen as a Great Classifier but Great Distributor as well: one who, occupied by politicians, both classifies and allocates poorly, and should allow a higher material standard to the ‘ordinary’ people in order to repair itself.

Such finding would appear to confirm the long trajectory of ‘state-centred capitalism’ in Serbia (Lazić and Pešić 2012) as well as the continuing perceptions of the state as the main welfare agent (Ružica 2010). Notwithstanding these long legacies, here I wanted to show that etatist identifications are, first of all, *new* distributional claims, born out of the insecurities that the market creates. Specifically, whether they were groups claiming authority over certain parts of town heritage (such as *fićisti*), workers in the non-privatised factories, or the unemployed, a number of social actors in Kragujevac seemed to be operating in a context in which state finance was the last available resource. Redundant within the jobs market, and in a situation in which crucial niches of that market were mediated by state agencies, the

⁴ After her ‘job’ disappeared, Nada was put on a different, self-paying stream of pension contributions, which incurred 4% interest for late payments, and she simply stopped paying.

unemployed and under-employed tried to reinvent their value by claiming their *usefulness for the state*. As with the narratives of Yugonostalgia among Zaječar railway workers that Ognjen Kojanić studied (2015), socialist past is here remodelled for new, capitalist restructuration, and selves adaptively reshaped.

Such creative attempts are a part of a broader ‘distributional labour’ of many in contemporary capitalism, through which the ‘superfluous’ try to recast claims of deservingness by mixing logics of production and redistribution after de-industrialisation (Ferguson 2015). However, in Serbia, they are also part and parcel of hegemonic state narratives. Namely, the 2010s witnessed the gradual co-option of once grassroots social distinctions - such as those between ‘normal’ people and ‘immoral’ politicians – as the new ideology of the Serbian state itself. These are often used to legitimise welfare cuts. To this end, in an election campaign in 2012, the then president Tadić featured on posters with villagers, pensioners and the socially vulnerable. Quoting one the villagers he met, who supposedly said that his idle neighbours are just waiting for the remittances from abroad, Tadić called for a wide alliance between those who are ‘really endangered’ and the Serbian state, at the expense of the large number of ‘phonies’ who were just work-shy (cf. Mikuš 2015). Similar connections between an ‘endangered’ state and endangered marginal groups is nowadays regularly made by the Prime Minister Vučić, who often regularly declares that “he is not interested in politics” but “just wants to do his job”. Positioning himself outside of the world of ‘dirty politics’ altogether, Vučić is able to ask each individual to sacrifice their labour for the task of remaking the Serbian state and the nation (Rajković 2015).

As Navaro-Yashin (2002, 186) has argued, the state idioms survive beyond deconstruction because the state is “a doer as much as signifier” on whose reproduction citizens depend. It is the new hegemonic framework of state interventionism – as both the key intervener in the market, as well as the highly moralistic arbiter of people’s deservingness - that people around the Zastava complex after-sites were pragmatically reacting to, when expressing their dedication to the State as a distributional claim. Or in the words of one of the teachers of the redundancy courses, when she advised the unemployed to make an NGO for unemployment that would get state funding: “You should think of some state interests, in order to get something for yourself”.

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