

Reconnecting State and Kinship

Edited by
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CHAPTER 5

From Familial to Familiar

Corruption, Political Intimacy, and the Reshaping of Relatedness in Serbia

IVAN RAJKOVIĆ

In the spring of 2012, I researched a number of state-funded education classes in the town of Kragujevac in central Serbia organized for workers that were made redundant by a local car factory. Mostly blue-collar workers in their forties and fifties, seen as unemployable on the sparse local job market, they were often able to negotiate various evasions of rules while staying on the payment lists. They skipped class for several weeks in a row in order to do informal work or left class early. And while such behavior provoked disagreements with the organizers, both the participants and the instructors justified it through elaborate references to the bigger, and supposedly more serious, corruption of the local politicians. Commonly, the notion mobilized here was one of a family, for which both the ordinary people and the politicians had to provide.

A class in information technology skills held in March of the same year is a case in point here. Just after the class began, one of the participants, a fifty-year-old man, approached the instructor, Dejan,¹ who was in his midtwenties, and shyly asked to be excused. “It is okay,” Dejan anxiously told him, “but what if everyone left?” Embarrassed, the man took his things and left the room. Noting his discomfort, Mira, a loud, elegant lady and a former warehouse packer, intervened:

Mira: You have to understand him, Dejan. Nobody is here by choice.
He’s a man, and he has to provide for his house, kids. His wife is

likely also unemployed. This is not enough, as you know, and he has to wheel and deal elsewhere. Is your wage enough for you? One should understand others.

The group started speaking about the lack of employment opportunities. Somebody mentioned the speech that Serbian president Boris Tadić had given the night before while visiting a small family enterprise. Tadić suggested that starting a family business was a great opportunity for people to take responsibility for both their families and the national economy. Protesting, Mira said that the state had not created a good framework for small private entrepreneurs, mentioning how her husband, a car mechanic, had to deal with taxes, irrespective of whether he had made a profit over any given month. “It’s easy for them to speak like that,” she said. “If I was making money by stealing, I would speak like that myself.” Continuing with this theme of false yet understandable familialism, Mira shifted her focus to the town administration. Expressing nostalgia for Tito, the late president of socialist Yugoslavia, as for a thief “who stole, but gave as well” (*krao, al’ je dao*), she critiqued the local mayor not so much for being corrupt but instead for being exclusionary in his corruption.

Mira: We all know what thief Palma [the mayor of Jagodina, a neighboring town] is. Still, he gives to the people. But ours—he keeps everything for himself.

Another participant [laughing]: Well he gives, but to his own.

Mira: Yes, if you are close with him, he fixes a lot of things for you.

No, thanks. I don’t want him either to help me or to work against me. I want him to leave me alone.

I introduce Mira as a woman who constantly declares that she views the corrupt motives of the politicians as normal yet emphatically repeats that she is not “with” them. In the field, I was struck by the extent to which people explicitly used the notion of self-interest to decipher politicians’ motivations. Colleagues’, friends’, neighbors’, and politicians’ avoidance of rules alike could all be understood through the familiar notion of self-interest, which was broadly cast in the idiom of family responsibility in reference to the shared experience of having to support a family. What made the politicians seem particularly cunning was their ability to combine this universal logic of self-interest with the rhetoric of communal good, resulting in a more obscure and

potentially exploitative feigning of togetherness. As a result, many Kragujevans I met opted for a curious dual position: refraining from accusing politicians of moral deficiency yet claiming that they themselves, however, were not associated with anyone. How do we understand this development?

Anthropological literature on corruption can be divided into several strands. One strand describes the moral economy that underlies informal networks, favors, and connections in their situated formations (e.g., Pardo 2004). Another one sees the discourse of corruption as a key narrative through which the state is imagined and as reifying the otherwise disaggregated reality of encounters with bureaucracy (Gupta 1995). Generally, new approaches suggest a need to study “both the politics *and* the poetics of corruption” to grasp its complexity (Shore and Haller 2005: 7, emphasis in original). This is in line with the suggestion to approach both the practices and the representations of the state, focusing on the distinctive “relational modalities” it creates (Thelen, Vetter, and von Benda-Beckmann 2014: 7).

I am here concerned with the latter through a focus on what Michael Herzfeld has termed “cultural intimacy” (2005). Famously, Herzfeld defined the term as “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (2005: 3). The stuff of both state bureaucrats’ rhetoric and citizens’ rejection of the state, cultural intimacy is a skillful play on essentialisms and stereotypes to legitimize social actions when formal and informal codes clash. Mira’s reference to politicians’ lying and stealing as something she would do herself can be seen as an instance of cultural intimacy of corruption. It also exemplifies “secular theodicy” (Herzfeld 1993: 5–7)—a pragmatic usage of fatalist explanations as to why bureaucracy fails, which saves the face of social actors.

However, by dismissing the dichotomous “top” and “bottom” view altogether—for cultural intimacy and social poetics that connect them—Herzfeld’s original model proves difficult for addressing the partial involutions of social bonds. This is what my interlocutors have called *sužavanje krugova* (the shrinking of circles), conveying the insight that the room for maneuver around rules is being retained only for elites while others are left with the ever stricter regulations. This is where Herzfeld’s notion of corruption as a “political incest” (this volume) is more helpful: as he explains, both incest and nepotism are popularly seen as involving too much kinship from the standpoint of outsiders and are thus morally castigated for subordinating collective interests to more partial and personal concerns. If only the “big shots”

are able to manipulate the rules while at the same time performing a disinterested legal position, accusations of hypocrisy and cynicism emerge (Ries 2002; Martin 2009) and, more important for my point here, of *selective intimacy*. This reveals a betrayal of both political and kinship ties, kith and kin, echoing the “dark side” of belonging—its failure to provide support (Thelen and Alber, this volume).

I argue that in this context of selective market-based involution of social bonds, progressively a trend emerges in which familiarity (as the basis of mutual recognition) is intensified, whereas familiarity (as the basis of identification) is precluded. The key to this process is a shift in the idioms of kinship and nuclear family that establish a homology between politicians and “ordinary people” and their equivalency in that they are motivated by self-interest.² This forms what Neringa Klumbyte has termed “political intimacy” (2011)—a space of closeness, mutuality, and coexistence between the citizens and the state representatives. But at the same time, it marks all claims of collective identity beyond nuclear family as inherently suspicious inasmuch as they saturate all relations with self-interest. I thus suggest that familiarity is a relational modality in which collective *resemblance* is recognized, whereas collective identity is denied, instituting new forms of relations in the post-socialist context that go beyond what anthropology registers as the making of a collectivity.

I start by tracing the social distinctions produced over the last two decades in Serbia. The shifting usage of the idioms of good, bad, and equivalent kinship to understand politics and party corruption, I argue, illustrates a shift that separates resemblance from identification, *familiarity* from *familiarity*. I trace these two aspects back to Herzfeld’s original conception of cultural intimacy, arguing for their separation. I elaborate on this by examining a dense double corruption affair from 2012 that involved the Kragujevac police, the local party, and some ambivalent spectators unrelated to both camps. Finally, I show how the shift toward familiarity changes everyday relations, complicating trust outside the nuclear family.

Good, Bad, and Equivalent Kinships: The Changing Relational Modalities of Serbian *Politika*

As Victoria Goddard shows in her contribution to this volume, political mobilization often draws from and reproduces “appropriate” forms of

kinship. She demonstrates that the shifting notions of fraternity and of private and socialized motherhood in Argentina articulate the changing forms of state organization as well as the resistance to it. Such usage of kin idioms in politics should not be understood as simply instrumental, for they have the potential of creating different “relational modalities,” distinctive patterns of social bonds that draw on the “differing normative concepts on what a state should be and how it should act” (Thelen, Veters, and von Benda-Beckmann, 2014: 7). Put differently, as notions of state and kin mirror each other (Thelen, Thiemann, and Roth 2014: 120), tracing the language of familialism in politics through time often elucidates the intricate changes that reshape more immediate relations. Here I explore the recent developments in kinship politics in Serbia, where various political sentiments and mobilization drives thrived not just by stressing kinship idioms but also by evaluating them as *good* and *bad* kinship.³

After former president Slobodan Milošević was ousted in the elections, essentially by a million protesters who took to the streets on October 5, 2000, the change of power in Serbia was widely perceived as a grassroots achievement, promising an egalitarian future. With their promises of restoring “normalcy” in daily life, geopolitics, and the economy, the “democratic reforms” invoked an image of the state in which the state administrators served their citizens without resuscitating what would largely be perceived as Milošević’s oligarchy. And on occasions “democracy” has been framed as inclusive kinship. The official program of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, for example, promised at the outset “to cancel all the cadre’s privileges, and stop the *stepmotherly* behavior of the government against its citizens” (Demokratska opozicija Srbije 2000: n.p., my emphasis). In Serbian, the pair *majčinski/maćehinski* (motherly/stepmotherly) refers to the difference between caring and abusive authorities so that the new state is viewed as a true and loving parent.

Jessica Greenberg’s (2006) analysis of the public ritualization of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić’s death in 2003 brilliantly shows the extent to which the political bloc relied on such idioms of (in)appropriate kinship to forge belonging. Carried out by an organization called the Zemun Clan, a group that combined criminal with state and parastate security activities (under Milošević and in the new state order), Đinđić’s murder clearly revealed the enduring participation of previous forms of power and violence in the new state structures. In order to demarcate the new rule from the former “autocratic” predecessor, Serbian society was represented as being engaged in a

Manichean battle between democratic, liberal, and “pro-European” forces on the one hand and the nationalist, conservative, and anti-European relic of Milošević’s rule on the other hand. This divide was construed as one between good and bad forms of relatedness: one symbolized the murdered prime minister Đinđić, with the new state and its citizens representing a “civilized” European middle-class family in mourning, and the other was depicted as resembling extended kin in a sort of criminal “clan”: homosocial, nonreproductive, and violent (Greenberg 2006: 128–29). The distinction derived from older Balkanist divisions between modern and premodern that flourished in the anti-Milošević civic resistance (Jansen 2005a, 2005b; Živković 2011), in line with what Thelen and Alber (this volume) suggest as differing evaluations of kinship across the premodern/modern axis.

However, the reformist split between the “two Serbias” has gradually waned and given way to a new line of market-based distinctions between “them” and “us”: the corrupt, self-enriching elites and the honest and fair people. The economic restructuring carried out in the 2000s could not obliterate the traces of structural corruption. Privatization efforts often lacked transparency, seemed unregulated, and served only the interests of the privatizers. By the 2010s, this perception had been exacerbated by an endless stream of media revelations of politicians and high-level public servants abusing their offices, and the phrase “*opšta otimačina*” (all-encompassing plunder) was regularly used. In this context, as Spasić and Birešev (2012) have shown, the 2000s evidenced a new wave of grassroots attempts to redefine the social divisions based on morality. Social distinctions no longer relied on any clearly posited social positions (e.g., those of ethnicity, class, education, etc.); rather, an explicitly moralized vocabulary was deployed to distinguish supposedly selfish, dishonest, and immoral politicians from the amicable, normal, and moral people. This was a continuation of the widespread tendency to disassociate oneself from *politika* (politics) after the Yugoslav wars (Jansen 2005a, 2015; Helms 2007; Greenberg 2010), where the antipolitical stance served as a basis for the mutual recognition of the so-called normal and decent people (Spasić and Birešev 2012; cf. Spasić 2013). The common refrain has been “It does not matter who but, rather, what kind of person one is” (*kakav je ko čovek*).

It is important to note here that in conjunction with this new “antipolitical” sentiment, the notion of family acquired sinister connotations: not a sign of a good or bad form of extended family relatedness (as after Đinđić’s murder) but a pared-down notion of the nuclear family, a popular explanation

as to why somebody is not working in the public interest. FIAT's arrival in Kragujevac is a case in point. The decision of the Serbian state to enter into a joint venture with an Italian company in 2008 was legitimized as an investment for local youths, which the election campaigns of the Democratic Party promised would mean "the future for our children." In the same vein, the contracts that the former Zastava Automobili workers signed for their redundancies contained a clause that guaranteed priority for employment for their children. But when this did not materialize and the local youths generally were given highly underpaid positions in comparison to foreigners, one would often hear a saying that indeed it was all for children but those of the "Italian managers." Contrary to the use of the notion of the (middle-class) nuclear family to symbolize unanimity and harmony in politics (Spencer 2007: 80), here it started to represent a disjuncture that reveals those social ruptures that are suppressed from the official ideology of togetherness.

Many Kragujevans I met invoked such idioms of kinship infused with the vocabulary of morality to draw a line between (immoral) plunderers and (moral) victims (for a similar dynamic in Poland, see Pine, this volume). However, as we saw in the case of Mira, many of them also exhibited a more complex tendency in that they used the vocabulary of kinship to both distinguish themselves from the politicians *and* to stress their similarity with them. Such was the case with Milovan, a journalist in his early fifties who chronicled the political affairs of the state and the town since the late 1980s. One day in the summer of 2013 as we were drinking coffee in the local café, speaking about the 1990s in Serbia, Milovan suggested that Milošević was betrayed by his own collaborators in 2000, who estimated that they could not go on enriching themselves without the international market. Milovan added that it was a well-known fact that pensioners and refugees—supposedly the main pillars of Milošević's electoral support—voted him out simply because he did not fulfill their agendas anymore. With great amusement Milovan then narrated a joke, a sort of an antimyth of the foundations of the new state:

On the morning of the 6th of October [2000], the 18 parties of DOS [Democratic Opposition of Serbia] met to discuss what they would do now since they were in power. The eldest of them, Mićunović, told them that eighteen parties was a lot of mouths to feed, and that they should be cautious. "Be wise, my children," said Papa Mićunović, "be kind to your predecessors who stole, because we need to do some of that ourselves." This is why there was no

lustration—because it was unclear who would then stay in their positions at all and whether DOS itself would make it.

Here, we are once again presented with a picture of the new state leadership as an extended family organization engaged in an act of “feeding” themselves at society’s expenses. Voicing such “politics of the belly” (Bayart 1993), Milovan deconstructed the rhetoric of discontinuity at the dawn of the new state by pointing to the fundamental reliance of the reformers on previous tactics of embezzlement and illegal redistribution. However, Milovan did *not* make a strict moral contrast between the people and the politicians, condemning the latter. Rather, he stressed the continuity, a shared complicity of all in the corrupt behavior of a disordered world, which he recognized in his own experience with running a household:

This is nothing strange, because in Serbia, people do the same thing that politicians do, only at a lower level. Take me, for example. I don’t pay my taxes and bills regularly. Instead, I postpone them, until every six months they become so big that I have to negotiate and beg them to decrease the sum, saying that I have kids, and so on. . . . So this is what infuriates people about the politicians. It is not the fact that they stole, but what they say about it.

Milovan’s words illustrate the broader shifts in the discourse of belonging that I am interested in. If the main social distinction in the 2000s was between the progressive “European” and backward “nationalist” forces and if the later shift deconstructed it, claiming a break between an immoral plundering elite and the “normal” decent people, the only meaningful difference Milovan made was between those who were pretending they were above the tactics of the corrupt state and those who were sincere about it. A critique not of corruption but of the lack of transparency in the anticorruption discourse,⁴ this was an important shift from righteousness to “involvement,” a moral sentiment that stresses the speaker’s awareness of his complicity in the compromising circumstances (Anderson 2013). More important, if in Greenberg’s analysis notions of extended kinship still spurred a sense of belonging (in polarized spheres) and if later developments questioned the familial rhetoric as obscuring (as they masked private interests), Milovan and Mira evoked the metaphors of family not to symbolize either the good or bad aspects of being close but, more neutrally, to express an *equivalence* between how “politicians”

and “ordinary people” earned a living. We would all steal and cheat for our families, they seemed to claim; the only difference was that state officials were in a better position to do it. Representing political scheming and the coping strategies of the family breadwinner as just different ways of appropriating some communal good, motivated by one’s own self-interest, their narratives signal a broader shift in relational modalities in the Serbian political life from familiarity to familiarity.

The Familial and the Familiar: Disentangling the Layers of Cultural Intimacy

In order to understand both identification and disidentification with the local politicians that Milovan and Mira were voicing simultaneously, here I want to disentangle two aspects of cultural intimacy that were originally separated in Herzfeld’s earlier writing (1993: 31, 33), which then came to be viewed in tandem with one another. These are usually known as community making and mutual recognition, or familiarity and familiarity.

By *familiarity*, I mean various forms of the collectivity, togetherness, and belonging that since Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) have come to be seen as the hallmark of modern nationalism and state formation (Creed 2006). In Herzfeld’s work, familiarity stands for the metaphors of kinship, territory, and body that state bureaucrats and national leaders use to present their rule as close as possible to the common experience of the people and to forge relatedness. At the same time, it is present among the citizens when they yearn for immediate togetherness in or outside of the state such as the Cretan shepherds, who “define their moral purity in opposition to institutionalized values, and engage in reciprocal relations with each other rather than with centralized authority” (Herzfeld 2005: 174; see also Pine, this volume).

By *familiarity*, on the other hand, I mean the recognition that official representations of modern state have another side and thus are not to be taken at face value. “People recognize as familiar, everyday phenomena some of officialdom’s most formal devices, and this generates active scepticism about official claims and motives” (Herzfeld 2005: 4). At the heart of what Herzfeld called social poetics is the acknowledgment that social flaws are crucial for people’s attempts to “regularly inoculate themselves against any naive belief in state or market ideology” (Ries 2002: 277) and to create persuasive explanations for their own skillful manipulations of rules. Familiarity thus

represents the recognition of the double-bind nature of official norms, often by acknowledging their similarity to one's own tacit social tactics: "it truly takes one to know one" (Herzfeld 1995: 141).

For Herzfeld, familiarity and familiarity overlap because it is common embarrassment that marks the insiders. To be culturally intimate means both to be related and to share the "rueful self-recognition" (Herzfeld 2005: 6) of that relatedness. Hans Steinmüller's recent notion of "community of complicity" (2010) as a collective of those who share the knowledge of the inconsistencies of their world as well as ethnographies of the intimate circles of *svoi* among the Soviet cadre (Yurchak 2006; cf. Ledeneva 2011) echoes the same point. Furthermore, familiarity and familiarity come together because they both rely on the construction of what Herzfeld called "iconicity" (likeness) between people, territories, and states. These eventually "confuse resemblance with identity" (Herzfeld 2005: 102).

Here I propose a case where such a pairing is unmade, namely where familiarity develops despite the exclusion from social relations. Serbian postsocialist reforms, I argue, show how the disciplining power of the new state, with its promise of egalitarian and impersonal management, coincides with the emergence of newly closed spaces of social bonds. This generates the rhetoric of egalitarianism while limiting access and pushes transparency talk but leaves the impression of ever-growing obscurity (cf. Morris 2004). This phenomenon is especially visible in the social life of employment after 2000, when thousands were fired from state factories because their jobs were allegedly unproductive, while at the same time the public sector had added equally unproductive positions to accommodate those who had connections. As practices that mediate between the "world of people" and the "world of institutions" (Brković 2016: 111), here connections are constitutive of unequal citizenship in its embedded forms.

In this context, I argue, familiarity is progressively disassociated from familiarity. People recognize aspects of politicians' practice as similar to their own while simultaneously denying identification. In using the concept of familiarity, I have in mind Niklas Luhmann's definition of this notion as a "metalogical quality" that inevitably arises from living "in a familiar world with familiar dangers" (Luhmann 1988: 95). Close to confidence, familiarity revolves around the notions of externally conditioned danger and is thus different from the relation of trust (which assumes human agency and risk estimation). More important, I am concerned with the dialogical aspects of recognizing the similarity with the Other, which in this case happens against

the backdrop of the experience of having to care for the family (cf. Green 2012). Both Milovan and Mira used the notion of the (nuclear) family not so much to denigrate as to stress their understanding of the motive of self-interest among politicians that stems from their own experiences and yet also to underscore that they were not part of the dominant networks that operated under such principles. The notion of care for a family here creates equivalence and a framework for interpreting similar interests of various actors, however, without that ever amounting to any stable notion of community. In other words, I argue that a development of kinship idioms in Serbian politics creates a new relational modality in which *resemblance* (familiarity) is recognized and actively asserted, while *identity* (familiality) is denied. To show this, I focus on a double corruption affair that erupted in Kragujevac.

Between Two Groups of Kin Yet Related to None: A Double Corruption Affair

Why is there no sex in state firms?

They are all related.

—A post-Yugoslav joke from the 2010s

In Kragujevac, the local party Zajedno za Šumadiju (Together for Šumadija, ZZŠ), Šumadija being the central Serbian region, came to power during the anti-Milošević protests of 1996, when Kragujevac was one of the few cities where the Zajedno coalition had secured election victory against Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia. After a break (2000–2004), the ZZŠ party regained power in 2004, having greatly outnumbered the votes it had secured compared to the parties of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (which ruled on the state level). Together with the G17, the ZZŠ launched decentralization campaigns, often using the rhetoric of “togetherness” against “Belgrade.” This oppositional stance was further instituted through an ambiguous moral economy of employment. In the early 2010s the local government had been the town's biggest employer, with the ZZŠ controlling employment in the town council offices (the biggest after Belgrade) and in public-sector undertakings, such as water works and street cleaning services. My informants often acknowledged such clientelism as a form of caring, claiming that the ZZŠ “really wanted to help.” Mayor Veroljub Stevanović—generally directly

involved in resolving problems that individuals faced, such as unemployment, delayed health insurance, or state benefits—was affectionately referred to as “Verko,” “Čiča,” and “Čile” (meaning “uncle,” referring both to a kin role and an elderly person), suggesting intimacy and a “good” form of paternalism. Familiar to many as the ex-manager of the local car factory Zastava Automobili, a brave protester against Milošević in the 1990s, and a simple pigeon keeper originally from the local Worker’s Colony settlement, Stevanović seemed to be a more intimate and humane alternative to the alien “state” residing in Belgrade (for a similar dynamic in Serbian welfare services, see Thelen, Thiemann, and Roth 2014: 112).

Yet for many other ordinary Kragujevans, it was precisely this embeddedness that made the town’s administration look like an estranged elite, a “sect” and a “party army.” They criticized the ZZŠ for taking over the town, depleting the town’s budget to hire party members and relatives, and selling off public spaces to privileged private investors. The mayor was rumored to have been paid a percentage on all deals with some close investors and of making lists of those who were to be employed in the new firms. This was further complicated by the existence of an apparently different interest group, the Serb migrants from Kosovo and Sandžak, who seemed to occupy another strand of public office, namely institutions under the control of the central state (such as police stations and the tax department). Many Kragujevans I met complained about how their town was being “occupied” by “peasants” who, unaccustomed to urban ways, brought their backward ways to Kragujevac and formed a “ghetto,” united in their effort to garner public-sector employment.

Since the town’s population had doubled in the 1960s during industrial expansion, the distinction between *kaldirmaši* (cobblestoners) and *dodoši* (newcomers) has been salient in pitting the urbanites, who claimed an older urban pedigree, against the more “rural” migrants. This was a major symbolic dichotomy among the republics that constituted former Yugoslavia both during the industrial migration (Simić 1973) and later the war-related migration (Jansen 2005b; Stefansson 2007). But in the past five years in Kragujevac this had led to the division of two local statehoods (the town’s vs. the central state’s institutions) with two different networks and moral economies of employment. Thus, many people felt that they were caught between two estranged kinship-like communities: one “urban,” democratic, and “progressive” party “sect” and the other a “peasant,” conservative, and backward Kosovar “clan.” For them, the differences between these two factions became irrelevant in that both could secure employment in public firms for their

protégés, while others experienced massive unemployment. To follow the notion of too much kinship again (Herzfeld, this volume), most of the citizens of Kragujevac felt that they were caught between *two* “politically incestuous” communities of partisan employment and were thus unconcerned with their official lines of demarcation.

A set of events from the autumn of 2012 substantiates this clash. In October, just several months after the new republican government was formed under the Srpska Napredna Stranka (Serbian Progressive Party, SNS), which won the national elections for the first time, Kragujevac was one of those rare cities with a local parliament that was not under SNS control. Initially several people from the town’s Agency for Urbanization, all closely associated with the ZZŠ, were arrested on allegations of misuse of public funds. The key ZZŠ leaders responded by informing the public that they were victims of an organized “rumour mill” (Simović 2012a). They started publishing a series of “open questions” for the local police director, Ivan Đorović, accusing him of alcoholism, drug dealing, and personal enrichment. Before any clarity could be established, it was generally believed that the police were secretly carrying out an investigation on the local statesmen’s potential corruption, while the former, in turn, accused the police of extortion.

Soon afterward, it was revealed that the police had been investigating the potential misuse of funds by the ZZŠ leadership in a number of local infrastructural projects (the building of a new swimming pool and investment in a new industrial zone). But throughout these investigations, the ZZŠ was loud in depicting the police actions as illegitimate acts of insurgency against the legitimate local state representatives. Referring to the police as an institution that should serve the government and not question it, the ZZŠ framed the police investigation as a “microlocated coup d’état” (Kartalović 2012). The ZZŠ’s argument was that the SNS party, ruling on the national level, had conspired with the local police to oust the ZZŠ from the town parliament through fake corruption cases. The ZZŠ even declared that it had temporarily organized its own “party police” to fend off the seemingly illegitimate state police, claiming that such a form of self-organization was more faithful to the idea of a legal state than the official police.

In other words, competing accusations of corrupted governance and of fake anticorruption cases occurred, while the local state representative and the republic state authority competed for legitimacy. And yet instead of picking sides, most of the town inhabitants I spoke to reacted with a mixture of surprise, uncertainty, and mockery with regard to both camps. People had

already assumed that the politicians and the police were corrupt and now tried to figure out what an open clash between the two meant. To explain these curious shifts they recalled how “Verko and Đorović used to be pals,” surmising that since the town authorities had presented an award to the police the previous year, they would probably resume their cozy relationship. Put differently, people saw the mayor and the police commander as two coexisting patrons leading two kinship-like circles, which used to conspire but had a falling out and would inevitably reconcile at the expense of those excluded from both camps. As one reader of the Šumadijapress portal suggested:

I am an ordinary citizen, unemployed for the last 2 years, I have hundreds of other existential worries, and I am not noticing that atmosphere of fear, public unrest or the bad security situation in the town. Instead I know that whatever doors I knocked on to find a job, I got the same answer—only Verko and his people can do that, try getting in with them, try getting to him somehow, become a member. . . . And similarly, I was directly suggested I should not even think of seeking employment with the police as I am not from Kosovo or Sjenica. That’s all the same, they are all the same, they only care about themselves, all while pretending to care for all of us. Horrible! (Simović 2012a)

For this woman, it is precisely their informal employment strategies that made them “the same,” in comparison to her status as unemployed and unaffiliated to them. Rather than a communal aim of togetherness, or the notions of good and bad kinship that the ZZŠ was utilizing, what she saw was a picture of two *equivalently* closed-off communities. Both “clans” were marked by the “disemia”—the disjuncture between their professed aim to achieve an impartial common good and the experienced reality of personal ties (Herzfeld, this volume). Radio satirist Miroslav Miletić coined the phrase “Together for Police” to stress this similarity of the two sides:

[T]he police and the government are the same. . . . I mean, *vlast je vlast* (power is power). Dressed in a suit, or a uniform, it is all the same. You have that folk saying: you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours. One hand helps another. Or you have another one, *vrana vrani oči ne vadi* (a crow does not pick out another crow’s eyes)—a folk proverb meaning that the patrons do not battle between one

another. But what if a crow attacks another crow? What should then the other crows, simple ravens, sparrows on the trees, what should we small and big birds, flora and fauna, think? (*Iz glave* 2012)

Therefore, it was not just that people were not a part of the circles but that they were excluded despite supposedly operating within the same logic of interest as the more embedded political elites. Imagining a whole hierarchy of predators and the prey embedded in the same system of power—from “crows” to “us small and big birds, flora and fauna,” Miletić enmeshed the official state rhetoric back into the society by stressing the common logic of the existential struggle for survival that politicians and ordinary people shared.

“Don’t Call Me Your Neighbor!”: Marking Resemblance Without Identification

Writing about a Lithuanian satirical magazine from late Soviet socialism, *Broom*, Neringa Klumbytė used the term “political intimacy” to refer to the ability of political humor to blur the lines between “the state and the citizen, the public and the private, the hegemonic and the sincere, the powerful and powerless” (Klumbytė 2011: 659). As a field of power relations, political intimacy refers to the “coexistence of state authorities and other subjects in fields of social and political comfort, togetherness, and dialogue as well as in zones of shared meanings and values” (Klumbytė 2011: 659). As Miletić’s allegory of survival shows, the public affair in Kragujevac similarly blurred the line between the state and the nonstate, exposing their coexistence within the same rationale of self-interest. However, the important difference lies in the consequences of such coexistence. To the extent that the local state authorities attempted to create a community out of the affair, the jokes of nonparty commentators expressed a complex mixture of empathy and disidentification: recognizing their similarities with politicians while denouncing any affiliation with them.

A further development in the corruption affair explains this point. In December 2012 a senior ZZŠ representative, Nebojša Vasiljević, was arrested on suspicion that he had misappropriated funds from a big foreign transfer of a football player at a local club. Long before this, the local citizens had derisively given Vasiljević the nickname *Komšija* (meaning “Neighbor”) while adding a witty explanation: “because he has a flat in every building.” In what people understood as the police’s subtle continuation of the same joke, the

operation of arresting Vasiljević was also given the code name “Komšija.” When this was revealed, the ZZŠ party tried to reverse the joke by calling its new campaign “We Are Your Neighbors,” attempting to mobilize the romantic image of reciprocity that the institution of *komšiluk* (neighborhood), although not without problems, enjoys in the region (Sorabji 2008; Henig 2012). In a series of highly dramatic appeals to the public, the ZZŠ asked the citizens “Who do you believe more, your neighbors or the alienated centers of power?” (Simović 2012b).

Ultimately, this refraction of the same half-familial, half-mocking concept across many sides brought a rich interplay of critiques, ironies, and wordplay in people’s conversations about the events and in endless comments on the local news portals. “He is not my neighbor, and will never be,” some claimed, offended by the campaign slogan. Others saw the potential for creatively undermining the ZZŠ’s own rhetoric of togetherness. “Komšija, komšija!” my interlocutors jokingly chanted for days. After this people would stop using the term; they would say “oh come on, let us not be neighbors. Call me anything but *komšija*.”

These forms of disidentifications, expressed in jest as mockery, powerfully deconstructed the ZZŠ’s logic of togetherness. But they also opened up ways of understanding all sorts of collective identifications as necessarily burdened with partial interests, as the double meaning of *komšija* did. The mayor and his people are probably guilty and should be put on trial, my interlocutors reasoned, but this is all an attempt to install the rule of a competing SNS party in the town. This was supported by the fact that the SNS party local mayoral candidate was the president’s son, another example of politics as kinship (introduction to this volume).⁵ Hence, the police commander was distrusted as well. Seeing the affair as just another clash between two groups and forms of relatedness, many were eager to assert that they did not belong to either. Simultaneously, they expressed their understanding of the motives and even empathy for the conditions that ordinary party members, the mayor’s clients, found themselves in. “What could they do? Everybody has a family to feed.”

Community of the Unrelated? Forming Bonds by Claiming Equivalent Self-Interests

Sarah Green’s (2012) ethnography of the presence of the “undocumented” dead bodies of immigrants that wash up on the Lesvos coast makes an

important point on family and familiarity. Though the official treatment of these bodies is dictated by the logics of citizenship, the local inhabitants respond through an analogy to their own experience of having a family to mourn. Everybody has kin, however different from one's own, and therefore the experience of what it means to lose someone and not even know the location of the person's grave is imaginable. For Green, this creates an international relation of "familiarity" rather than "similarity": Greeks maintain the national difference between themselves and migrants' polities of origin yet create a wider homology of experience of mourning for significant others.⁶

Similarly, I argue that in contemporary Serbia the notion of the nuclear family comes to institutionalize not the sameness but rather the comparability of self-interests as the ultimate explanation of social life. Here, it is common to recognize people's responsibility to their families and their involvement in interest-driven activities of all kinds to fulfill that responsibility. But while establishing the familiarity of politics, this notion of a self-interested nuclear family simultaneously precludes equations. Everyone works for themselves and their own families, my respondents seem to argue, and this is basically what makes our interests *comparable*. But precisely because everyone works for themselves and their own families, they can never share the *same* interests.

"You cannot have friends any more, only close family," I was told by Mirko, an otherwise very sociable man in his forties who was attending a requalification class in carpentry. He referred to what he saw as a betrayal of his best friend from the former car factory. When FIAT privatized the factory, the friend seemed to be competing with all the others to remain on the job, humiliating them out of fear of losing his job. For Mirko, this was not because the friend's self-interest trumped their friendship but rather because of the friend's inability to follow his self-interest openly and thus in clear harmony with others' interests. He recalled the instance when he launched a business with smuggled petrol in the 1990s; the friend had initially hesitated to join out of fear but had pressured Mirko, once the business picked up, to allow him to join it. The inability to accept that "risk creates capital," in Mirko's words, made his friend utterly unhappy and a traitor to others with FIAT's arrival. Today Mirko continues to have many relations with people because, as he put it, "you cannot do anything in Serbia without people." Still, he does not consider them his friends or community by any stretch of the imagination.

In other words, the recourse to (nuclear) family developed at the expense of previously known intimate relations, such as friendships from the workplace. Tatjana Thelen (2005) has highlighted a similar dynamic in postunification

eastern Germany where, she argued, retraditionalization of social relations was intricately connected with the redistribution of risk after postsocialist changes. Once intensive sites of multifunctional personalized exchange, workplaces suddenly became unfamiliar, redundancy pathways were individualized, and trust was revoked from workmates and transferred to family relations in an attempt to minimize the risk of getting fired. I traced a similar move to withdraw from established social relations outside of the nuclear family and create new forms of bonds that idioms of self-interest develop.

“Until we realize that we all have only personal interests, we can’t live together.” This is what another interlocutor in my field, Ana, a middle-aged worker in a bakery, told me after a lament on the nature of interpersonal relations. She was against established forms of belonging: colleagues, neighborhood, extended family. She did not care for any of that, she said with a gesture of contempt. Yet, this did not mean that she was against every idea of a collectivity. “Helping is always one on one: help you, you help somebody else, and this is how we start associating again.”

In other words, by claiming nonbelonging to any collective, people paradoxically seek to create new forms of bonds. The question is, however, what kind of social bonds can be claimed when precisely bonding and togetherness are categorically denied? Since the rhetoric of togetherness and reciprocity seemed exploitative, my interlocutors did not voice “structural nostalgia” (Herzfeld 2005: 147–53) for a time of pure relations. On the contrary, they seemed to long for a world of open individual self-interests that would be easier to navigate than the messy reality of potentially cunning friends, kin, neighbors, and politicians. To the extent that they used this reasoning to explain social life, people reinterpreted existing social bonds in very different ways, creating new relational modality based on familiarity and equivalence of self-interests.

“It is always a stranger that helps you. If they are close to you, they fail you.” This is how Mirna, an accountant in her fifties, described the housing history she shared with her husband Brane. Back in the crisis-ridden 1980s, Brane was not able to get credit for an apartment until he accidentally met a man, a Vlah from eastern Serbia, who worked in Germany and happened to know someone at the Ljubljanska Bank. This got Brane a loan. After that the couple and the man in question visited each other for big family celebrations, such as the weddings of their children. They did not see themselves as friends and saw each other very rarely. However, Brane and Mirna seemed to have deep respect for the person who helped him, as a person who had a

family and therefore understood what it meant to have particular problems while not being a part of the dominant echelons, like themselves. Instead of a friendship, they seemed to cultivate an allegiance of nonrelatedness.

Conclusion: Kinship, Sideways the State

In this chapter, I have argued that my interlocutors used the notion of family to demystify and expose what they saw as the cynical behavior of politicians. Politics claimed to be egalitarian yet appeared ever more embedded in informal bonds; it promised transparency yet created even murkier circumstances. Rather than simply condemning corruption, my interlocutors challenged such situations by highlighting the indiscernibility of “kinship” and “politics” in the sense that they were both based on self-interest. But while postulating the common humanity of politicians and the “ordinary” people and thus making the state administration appear close and intimate once again, the notions of kin ultimately changed the very nature of social bonds that could be trusted beyond the nuclear family. All claims to a common identity become false and exploitative, clarified but tainted by a pervasive sense of familiarity of interest.

It has been common to associate kinship in its various forms with the production of togetherness that can fuel or contest state formation—as kinship *for* or *against* the state (see Pine, this volume). While showing both of these relational modalities in Serbia, here I have argued that they assume both familiarity *and* familiarity. Focusing on the situations in which kin idioms produce familiarity *alone*, I argued for another emerging register, which ultimately moves *sideways*, or laterally, with respect to the state: creating a space of dissent but ultimately changing social relations on the ground. Showing the continuing relevance of cultural intimacy in politics, familiarity thus represents a force that works beyond the national and, indeed, beyond what anthropology usually registers as the making of collectivity, shaping new forms of relations through ruptures that the postsocialist market economy creates.

Such a reading of family notions can be linked to Margaret Thatcher’s infamous proposition: “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are *families*” (Keay 1987: 9, my emphasis). This implied that “no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first” (Keay 1987: 9). According to Herzfeld, such

language stands for a momentous change in which “nationalism shifts from indexicality to iconicity, from social relations refracting cultural difference to a socially atomized cultural homogeneity” (Herzfeld 2005: 30). In other words, it is the state rhetoric of market individualism that enables resemblance without identification. In this process, the role of kinship notions has been underestimated. Turning our gaze to kinship idioms of familiarity as equally as to familiarity, we are able to tackle the subtle transformations of relatedness that develop beyond the collectivist ethos of contemporary nation-states.

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Notes

1. All interlocutors' names in the text have been changed to protect their anonymity.
2. On shifting notions of kinship in Poland, see Pine (this volume).
3. On the shifting political use of classifications of kinship more generally, see Thelen and Alber's introduction to this volume.
4. On the use of the notion of transparency in relation to kinship see Edwards (this volume).
5. President Nikiolić's son indeed came to power as Kragujevac's mayor two years later, in 2014.
6. On judging similarity and distance toward migrants in a Greek maternity ward, see Papadaki (this volume).

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