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## **STAYING "SANE" (AND EVEN GROWING) IN TIMES OF CHAOS: SERBIAN ANTI-WAR ACTIVISM AS A THERAPY**

**Abstract:** This paper begins to illuminate the *therapeutic function* of Serbian anti-war activism during the armed conflicts of Yugoslav succession. Such a specific aspect of civic engagement in the 1990s Serbia has been insufficiently explored in the existing accounts of the Yugoslav/Serbian pacifist efforts. Serbian anti-war activists perceived "sanity" maintenance as an important aim of what is normally considered to be exclusively *political* involvement. I draw upon in-depth semi-structured interviews and documentary sources to examine how collective enterprises, such as candle lighting, petitions, street protests and demonstrations were conceptualized as spaces of personal freedom without necessarily having specifically articulated political objectives. An inductive thematic analysis of the collected material revealed the following themes under the overarching category of *therapy*: staying "sane", recovering agency/empowerment, personal growth and maturation, and resistance to "psychologization". These themes are discussed in the light of complex interactions between the personal and the political through which social movements, groups and organizations, that generally tend to be perceived as disturbing elements of unrest and change, become islands of civility and creativity in a political environment marked by destruction and violence.

**Key words:** anti-war activism, Serbia, therapy

Serbian anti-war activism has remained a serious knowledge gap in the research devoted to the wars of Yugoslav succession, which represents a rather burgeoning corpus within the East European sociological scholarship (Bilić 2010a, 2010b). In the current paper I draw upon interviews and documentary sources to begin to illuminate the *therapeutic function* of Serbian anti-war activism. This is a very specific aspect of the (post-)Yugoslav/Serbian civic engagement which has been neglected or insufficiently explored in the existing sociological accounts. I argue that the political/civic involvement in the 1990s Serbia is nowadays perceived by

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many activists as important for maintaining personal mental integrity and "sanity"<sup>2</sup> in a violent social milieu.

Before presenting and discussing the results of this study, which constitutes a part of a larger research project on Yugoslav anti-war activism, I offer an account of the broader socio-political context in Serbia between 1990 and 2000 and I emphasize the main characteristics of the *ancien régime*. This is followed by a short section introducing some of the principal features of Serbian anti-war activism which are complemented with further historical information in the analysis. I also briefly review recent Anglo-Saxon sociological literature which approaches social movements and civic activism as sites of freedom utilized for an articulation of counterhegemonic discourses that are removed from the state's ideological control.

### **Serbian Socio-Political Context (1990-2000)**

The tectonic global restructurings surrounding the end of the Cold War were reflected in the Yugoslav context through a process in which the country started to implode due to mutually reinforcing nationalisms present in almost all of its constitutive republics. In the Serbian case, the regime managed to simulate institutionalized political order while simultaneously engendering enemies and promoting an atmosphere of fear, distrust, de-solidarization and a general dissolution of sociability (Dimitrijević 2005; Gordy 1999). Slobodan Milošević, a high-ranking official of the Yugoslav League of Communists and the subsequent leader of its Serbian successor – the Socialist Party of Serbia – became a personification of the regime's destructive force. He promptly capitalized on the enormous political potential of national populism and eliminated alternative power centres by stripping the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina of their autonomy (Thompson 2004). The regime resorted to numerous electoral manipulations that scattered and disorganized political opposition could hardly subvert. It also systematically usurped economic

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<sup>2</sup> I have placed "sanity", "mental illness" and other related terms and adjectives in quotation marks to emphasize a social constructionist view that "mental illness" is not a "reified" entity that inflicts individuals and characterizes the individual mind or body, but rather a set of concepts and practices that are constructed and maintained by the scientific disciplines that deal with human distress. Consequently, these concepts and practices permeate the sphere of lay knowledge and the way individuals perceive their own distress and the distress of others (Parker *et al.* 1995). Social constructionist inquiries of "mental illness" focus on the practices through which the mental health disciplines construct and perpetuate notions of mental health and illness, on the way these notions permeate the individual sufferers' understanding and dealing with their distress, and the counter-discourses that sufferers themselves have devised to resist these dominant representations (Bilić and Georgaca 2007).

resources, ruthlessly exploited the media, and formed a party oligarchy that was allowed to accumulate enormous wealth in return for its political loyalty (Golubović 2001). The isolation of the country was aggravated by the economic and political sanctions of the 'international community' which assumed ambiguous stances towards Milošević rule.

Golubović et al. (2003) argue that the regime in Serbia was promoting a *psychology of survival* throughout the 1990s. *Fear* was established as the dominant feature of the social life which became severely re-patriarchalized and re-clericalized. In a political system in which the judiciary was plagued by corruption, citizens felt *helpless* and *physically insecure*. Beleaguered by constant *existential uncertainty*, a substantive portion of the Serbian population complied with the regime's taxing measures which discouraged them from engaging in political activity. However, Milošević's reluctance to acknowledge a new state of affairs following the 2000 presidential elections (which took place in the wake of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign) prompted waves of revolt. It culminated on October 5, 2000 when a peaceful revolution finally forced him to resign (Bilić 2008). Milošević was extradited to the Hague Tribunal where he died in 2006, leaving his marathonian trial for the war crimes committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo without the Tribunal's final judgement.

### **Serbian Anti-War Activism**

Immediately prior to and during the wars of Yugoslav succession, there were continual instances of anti-war and pacifist engagement throughout the former Yugoslavia. These were taking place mostly in the republic capitals (e.g., Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo), but also in smaller provincial places which already had certain civic traditions (e.g., Pančevo and Osijek). Yugoslav anti-war and pacifist initiatives were often related to the feminist and environmentalist groups that already existed on the Yugoslav territory. Some of these groups were also tightly associated with the 1968 student protest. Yugoslav anti-war and pacifist activists, therefore, represented a rich tapestry of ideological orientations which had peace and co-existence as an important undercurrent.

Serbian and (post-)Yugoslav anti-war activism has not been up to now approached from a systematically articulated social movement perspective. This is a serious knowledge gap in the increasing amount of sociological and historical accounts pertaining to the complex process of Yugoslavia's dissolution. Such a state of affairs is primarily due to a widespread tendency of foreign, domestic and diasporic authors to employ nationalism as *the* explanatory paradigm for understanding the country's painful disintegration (e.g., Kaplan 1993; Glenny 1993; Magas 1993). There are, of course, scholars

who have provided more balanced explanations by complementing and qualifying the nationalist argument with an analysis of long term social and economic developments as well as of the country's cultural life (e.g., Dragović-Soso 2002; Gordy 1999; Mueller 2000; Sekelj 1992).

However, Dević (1997) claims that in an appreciable portion of the existing literature, multi-national and multi-lingual societies tend to be perceived as by definition conflictual and aspiring towards ethnically homogeneous nation-states. This limited approach presupposes that all political mobilization stems from ethnicity, which invariably obscures a range of anti-war and pacifist initiatives regardless of their form or scope. Such a 'nation-state' perspective does not do justice to fifty years of a relatively peaceful coexistence of the Yugoslav people in which intra-state conflict was primarily based on social rather than ethnic divisions.

Socially extremely disruptive phenomena, like wars and forced migrations, leave in their wake an ideological void which tends to be filled by denial as well as by numerous efforts to distort historical factuality and revise both personal and collective histories. The Serbian sociologist Todor Kuljić (2010, 240) maintains that once the armed conflict was over, "a civic war of remembrance" was initiated. To produce an impression that it is somehow natural for the newly created and still not fully consolidated nation-states to exercise their sovereignty in the name of purely ethnic affiliations, one had to marginalize a whole corpus of historical legacies and delegitimize Yugoslav socialist experience and some of its fundamental values (like e.g., anti-fascism).

It is, therefore, no wonder that the post-Yugoslav sociological scholarship has, in general, failed to appreciate anti-war and pacifist initiatives that developed before and during the country's dissolution. If not having a pronouncedly centripetal (federal) character, a good part of these undertakings were indisputably concerned with maintaining contact and perceiving Yugoslav territory as a unique cultural space. More extensive research covering the entire territory of the former Yugoslavia or more than one successor state, became increasingly difficult in the immediate post-war period exactly because communication channels were severely disrupted.

Another possible reason for a lack of interest in Yugoslav anti-war and pacifist activism is that, excluding a couple of popular anti-war gatherings and concerts that took place in Belgrade very early on (backed by political opposition and almost completely disregarded by the foreign media), activist groups were indeed small and elitist, disunited and sometimes overtly repressed. Civic challenges, and especially those in highly volatile political environments are intrinsically episodic and anti-war and pacifist efforts cannot be but marginal and brief once the war has already started. On the other hand, a lot of traditional Western sociological scholarship devoted to

democratization and civic engagement tends to skim over short-lived attempts and focus on permanent organizations or, at least, those that manage to better withstand regime pressure.

There are, however, a couple of studies devoted to Serbian and Yugoslav anti-war activism that have recently started to unpack this complex phenomenon. They have recovered a plethora of sometimes very divergent political orientations, collective identities and respective strategic options. Dević (1997) was among the first to document anti-war initiatives that took place on the Yugoslav territory prior to and during the 1990s armed conflict. Her contribution describes the emergence of anti-war campaigns in former Yugoslavia and provides an enumeration of collective actions and protests in all Yugoslav republics and provinces. She criticizes the widespread insistence on essentialized national identities and analyzes structural preconditions of ethno-nationalism as a top-to-bottom project of the desperate communist functionaries concerned about their weakening legitimacy. Dević posits that a genuinely non-ethno-nationalistic, urban, cosmopolitan and predominantly pan-Yugoslav identity provided the basis for pacifist activism towards the end of the 1980s in the disintegrating Yugoslavia.

Jansen's (2005) study constitutes one of the inceptive systematic and empirically buttressed academic attempts to go counter to the above-mentioned paradigms emphasizing national identity and claiming its ubiquity and undisputed salience in the region. Jansen demonstrates that Yugoslav anti-nationalism played an important role for many people in their everyday lives. It stimulated diverse identity articulations which remained the only anchor in times of political, moral and economic instability. However, this book also shows that the kind of anti-nationalism that Jansen studies in the two most important Yugoslav urban centres, namely Belgrade and Zagreb, tends to be frequently restricted to *urbocentric exclusivity*. By this Jansen understands a certain popular culture and a lifestyle that relegates as primitive almost everything that does not live up to the unwritten code of the Yugoslav urban etiquette.

Moreover, Fridman (2006) focuses on Serbian feminist activism, particularly on the agile group of the Belgrade-based *Women in Black*, both during and immediately after the wars of Yugoslav succession. She discusses the strategies that the activists employed to break the shell of denial and stir public debate around the country's criminal past. Fridman examines the contribution of Serbia's alternative scene to generate change and she follows the trajectory of the concept of conscientious objection from its subdued and purely discursive presence in the public sphere to its articulation as a political act and its enforcement through legal regulation. Fridman's study approaches the problematics of Serbian anti-war activism from a particularly pertinent angle which lies at the heart of pacifist collective enterprises and has to do

with the social dynamics surrounding the ways in which war-torn and post-war societies deal with conflict, memory and denial.

Trying to address the evident lack of more theoretically informed engagement with Serbian anti-war activism, Bilić (2010) came up with a model that goes beyond the focus on various mobilization aspects and takes into account the vital question of political attitudes underlying collective enterprises. This is a significant issue for (post-)Yugoslav anti-war and peace activism characterized by a pronounced division between its left-oriented and its liberal proponents. Such a theoretical hybridization, combining social movement theories with Bourdieu's theory of practice, could accommodate many threads of social movements research that otherwise would not cohere into a rounded theory. This approach is useful because its social movement 'portion' may account for the mobilization aspects of anti-war and peace activism, whereas its more Bourdieuan orientation could help to recover, better understand and socially root a multiplicity of political options propelling this engagement.

#### **Activist Groups as Sites of Freedom**

The idea that social movements are associated with sites of freedom has been present in social theory at least since Sara Evans introduced the term *free spaces* in her 1979 book *Personal Politics*. This has been followed by a conceptual proliferation ['halfway houses' (Morris 1984) 'sequestered social sites' (Scott 1990), 'havens' (Hirsch 1993)] trying to describe relatively small communities or movements voluntarily formed in an effort to resist direct subjugation to hegemonic discourses. As Evans and Boyte (1986, 17) argue in a frequently cited paragraph:

Particular sorts of public places in the community, what we call free spaces, are the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue. Put simply, free spaces are settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision.

The point of a lot of sociological and historical work on *free spaces* was to highlight the fact that, regardless of the particular circumstances in which they find themselves, the oppressed are never fully stripped of their resources for influencing social reality. Instead, they organize themselves around a shared vision of the future and "generate the cultural challenge which precedes or accompanies political mobilization" (Polletta 1999, 1). In this regard, *free spaces* are dense communities in which members both share and supply

themselves with alternative interpretations of the social reality. This kind of engagement might have a powerful psychological effect. Hirsch (1990, 206) claims that "havens insulate the challenging group from the rationalizing ideologies normally disseminated by the society's dominant group". Such formations bring together and engage in producing various forms of skills instrumental for group's maintenance as well as for its potential expansion and development.

Different conceptualizations of free spaces seem to be sharing the idea that these spontaneously formed communities serve as repositories of social capital upon which activists draw to combat oppression (Fantasia and Hirsh 1995; Hirsch 1993; Polletta 2001; Scott 1990). They are permeable but independent loci of negotiation and interpretation in which reality does not tend to be merely accepted as an inevitable given, but critically engaged with and re-created through alternative channels and strategic options. Free spaces are conceptual generators and promoters of counterhegemonic discourses that struggle to break through the ideological monolith of the regime which obscures social tensions and discourages political action. Such free spaces may include families, clubs, bars or student halls (Fantasia and Hirsh 1995). I am here focusing solely on more overt manifestations of political protest, such as public gatherings and street demonstrations. These initiatives must have been themselves preceded by more intimate and personal free spaces (in the sense of networks of friends and relatives) before starting to claim a portion of the public space in which their isolation as well as their political aspect came to prominence.

The concept of free spaces is essentially metaphorical and not particularly conducive to empirical substantiations. It is not altogether clear whether free spaces are an outcome or whether they constitute a precondition for protest initiation. Whereas Evans and Boyte (1986) argue that free spaces precede democratic action by schooling people into civic engagement and providing them with a vision of the common good, Fantasia and Hirsch (1993) posit that insurgency is the condition for making such alternative cultures overtly political. Polletta (2001) claims that these should not be perceived as the extremes of a binary opposition, but as interactive aspects of many collective undertakings. Mobilization is mounted on an intricate and dynamic combination of structural conditions, strategic options, resources and identity construction processes, all of which can undergo transformations as contention unfolds.

My intention here is primarily to offer an empirical contribution rather than a theoretical advancement. I am interested in starting to unpack the ideological and strategic heterogeneity of Serbian anti-war and pacifist activism in which the idea of free spaces (in its multiple articulations) seem to play an important role. The political situation in the 1990s Serbia was

characterized by claustrophobia and xenophobia stimulated by the regime-controlled media which promoted conspiracy theories and extolled patriarchy, ethnic stereotypes and kitsch. In such an environment, some anti-war initiatives were continually carved as sites of continuity and intimacy. The devastating social circumstances, such as impoverishment and destruction of economy and sociability (Gordy 1999) attributed to them a more dramatic – *therapeutic* – aspect which is rarely discussed in the Anglo-Saxon social movement theory which normally presupposes an enduring social structure.

### Methods

The empirical corpus upon which I draw in the current paper includes interviews done by other researchers (research dissertations), NGO publications as well as my own in-depth interviews with Serbian anti-war activists. The interview *sample* included 60 informants recruited for a larger research project throughout Serbia (in both urban and provincial areas) by using the *snowball* sampling strategy. Data collection was conducted in December 2009 as well as in January and July 2010 by means of mp3-recorded semi-structured interviews lasting between 40 minutes and 3 hours. The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide prepared in advance. The interview guide contained the relevant themes selected on the basis of bibliography and I referred to it to ensure that all the issues pertinent to the research questions were covered. Every interview started out with a broadly formulated question providing the participants with an opportunity to freely *narrate* a biographical *episode* that revolved around their involvement in Yugoslav anti-war activism, comprising thoughts, feelings and behaviours that propelled and accompanied their participation in pacifist initiatives. The therapeutic function of activism was not in my interview guide in the beginning, but I started increasingly discussing it with my respondents as my fieldwork unfolded.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed by using inductive thematic analysis, a foundational qualitative research method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data. A theme is a pattern in the information that "at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis 1998, 161). It captures an important and recurrent response or meaning within the data set and is dependent on the research question rather than on any quantifiable measures. The informants received prior information concerning the design and procedure of the study and gave their informed consent. They were also informed about how the interview data would be analyzed, documented and presented. Time and place for the interviews were scheduled after the

informants had agreed to take part in the study. Participation was voluntary and the participants' confidentiality was respected throughout the project.

### Analysis<sup>3</sup>

#### **Resisting fear and staying 'sane': activist group as a place of stability and normality**

One of the earliest instances of anti-war engagement in the 1990s Serbia was the so-called *Civil Resistance Movement* led by a couple of prominent Belgrade intellectuals, some of whom were coming from other Yugoslav republics. Every evening since the beginning of the armed conflict in late 1991, this small group of activists organized candle lighting in front of the Serbian Presidency in the centre of Belgrade. This location was intentionally chosen because the protesters wanted to send their message to the Serbian authorities, generally, and Slobodan Milošević, in particular. Candles were lit below a cloth that read *For all victims of war* and *Solidarity with all war opponents*. The activists were peacefully protesting every day and their number appreciably fluctuated, sharply increasing during the visits of foreign diplomats when the local representatives of political opposition thought that they might benefit from their appearance at an anti-war gathering. *Civil Resistance Movement* activists, among them most notably Nataša Kandić and Biljana Jovanović, also initiated a petition against the war for which around 70 000 signatures were collected both in Belgrade and in other parts of Serbia. One of the activists who regularly attended the evening meetings reminisces:

I went every evening to dutifully light the candles. I could not stay at home...but it was really more to satisfy myself and to calm down my conscience than really doing something...we were desperate... and if I wanted to be honest with myself I would say I was doing something for myself and not for anyone else. If we were serious, if we really wanted to achieve something, instead of going every evening to a peaceful neighborhood and lighting a candle, we could have started a march to Sarajevo, what we have been through was far from the fight of the poor people of Sarajevo (cited in Fridman 2006, 150).

The regular practice of candle lighting in the very beginning of the armed conflict had a very personal dimension. According to the words of the interviewed activist, this 'ritual' served to calm the conscience of the people who felt "desperate" and helpless. The informant emphasizes that she went "every evening to dutifully light the candles" because she could not bear the

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<sup>3</sup> If not otherwise specified, the quotes come from my interviews. All translations from the Serbian are mine.

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feeling of being isolated "at home" without doing anything for those who were suffering and whose lives were in danger. She makes it clear that the vast majority of participants had a similar personal motivation which, according to her, proved insufficient for adequately responding to the severity of the situation. The excerpt indicates that the activists were to a certain extent taken aback by the political developments in the former Yugoslavia. Candle lighting, thus, appeared as a very first reaction to the still very volatile and confusing political circumstances. Such a practice, it seems, could not go beyond the soothing psychological effect which it had for those involved.

Polletta (2001, 4) posits that "free spaces within movements [...] contribute to the spread of identities, frames and tactics from one movement to another". The practice of candle lighting, initiated in Belgrade, quickly started taking place also in a small Vojvodina town called Pančevo, located in the vicinity of the Serbian capital. It is not accidental that such a kind of public engagement could be transported to this provincial place given that Pančevo already had a certain history of civic engagement in the pre-war period. In the 1980s, there was an environmentalist initiative called *Zelena pega* which appeared as a reaction to the constant air pollution caused by the local oil refinery. Some of the environmentalist activists were the linking points in the constitution of the *Pančevo Peace Movement* which was very active until the end of the armed conflict. One of the activists in this civic initiative says:

I am a teacher and when I realized that my students started receiving recruitment letters...it also appeared somehow that these letters were mostly coming to multinational environments like Pančevo... knowing this, I thought that it would be impossible for me to go on without doing something about it...so we started organizing our evening gatherings in November 1991 and they went on until November 1995...we were creating our oasis, our own demilitarized zone [...] some of us were there all the time irrespective of whether it was winter or summer... if I had not done that, I would not have been normal...there was this need in all of us that defended us... (*Women for Peace* 2007, 20).

Anti-war engagement in Pančevo was taking place away from the principal centres of political power and small groups of those resisting it. Finding a group of similarly thinking people in such an environment provided a sense of community, continuity and stability. The activist says that the regular evening gatherings created an "oasis" and a "demilitarized zone" in a social milieu characterized by isolation and poverty. It is interesting to note here that until 1999 Serbia was not officially in war and no war action was taking place on the Serbian territory at the time of these protests. The need to create a "demilitarized zone" testifies to the extent to which the social atmosphere was saturated with fear and violence about which something must have been done

for the people to preserve the idea of mental and social normality. How taxing these circumstances must have been is shown by the belief of the activist that she would not have remained "normal" had it not been for the possibility to share her thoughts and feelings with her co-activists.

Similar ideas appear in the following passage coming from an interview with an activist of the Belgrade-based *Women in Black*. Dissatisfied with the activities of the *Centre for Anti-War Action* which, according to them, was perpetuating some patriarchal patterns, a group of feminists separated from it and had their first public appearance on 9 October 1991 when they staged a silent vigil in front of the Student Cultural Centre in downtown Belgrade. They were inspired by the first group of *Women in Black* which was founded in Israel in 1988 as a reaction to the First Intifada with the view of publicly denouncing the omnipresence of war, violence and unpunished crimes in their lives. This group staged regular silent vigils in the centre of Belgrade throughout the armed conflict. They were trying to subvert deeply rooted patriarchal values and represent feminist anti-war engagement as a political act. The interviewee ponders about the reasons that stimulated her to join the organization and she says:

I joined *Women in Black* on one winter day in 1992 because among them I found, how can I tell you, I found a soul asylum...it was something that gave sense to life...among the women there I found everything that I was looking for for years...that word feminism which I could not really pinpoint, the courage which I had...but I could not just stand on my own in the street...I was not alone anymore and I could meet other people that made me think I was doing something purposeful when everything else was collapsing...however painful the whole story was, this experience saved me...every Wednesday I was coming to the square to take a little bit of air and to breathe...

In accordance with a lot of research done on the biographical impact of protest participation (McAdam 1988; Searle-Chatterjee 1999), this extract shows that protesting can be a psychologically transformative experience because it constitutes protestors as political actors and creates a sense of freedom and agency. In the particular circumstances in which *Women in Black* street vigils were taking place, protest was seen as a purposeful activity which "gave sense to life". It reduced fear by building up group cohesion "when everything else was collapsing". The activist says that the regular participation in the public performances "saved" her. As we will see in the following section, the idea of perceiving civic engagement as a *breathing space expansion* is quite recurrent in the interview corpus and it seems to be employed also by other (post-)Yugoslav (non-Serbian) civic activists (see e.g., Teršelič 1997). The protestors found themselves in a morally unbearable

political climate in which only protest participation afforded them a possibility to remain loyal to their values and bring their behaviour in accordance with their identities.

**Recovering agency/empowerment: activist group as a place of freedom and creativity**

One of the most frequent representations of social movement participation has to do with the idea of feeling *free* among fellow-activists. During the anti-war protest gatherings one could talk about political topics openly, exchange information about friends and relatives, offer support and discuss concerns and emotions (mostly fears). An important function of participation in the Belgrade-based *Women in Black*, for example, was the notion of claiming, sharing in, co-constructing and defending a portion of social space in which group members could escape the requirements of the roles afforded to them by the patriarchal social environment (Bilić 2011). The organization is perceived as a site in which members are allowed to be what they are without feeling threatened. Coming together on the basis of shared grievances and condensing them through protest into a political message had a significant *empowering effect* on the group members. As one *Women in Black* activist says:

For us those protests were some kind of medicine. It might appear strange, but during this hour in the street, we would build up our own space in which, at least temporary, our own values were valid. That space was so openly different from the pervasive formal reality. It was a space in which we were free<sup>4</sup> and we could breathe. From time to time the aggression of the external world could be felt physically, but it is exactly because of that the links among the group members were growing stronger. I was feeling stronger within the group [...] all of that were islands of our own world and our own values were we gave each other strength to proceed (*Women for Peace* 2007, 23).

In the above extract, protest appears as a "kind of medicine" and a space in which protestors feel "free" and can "breathe". Protesting in a politically charged atmosphere promotes a clear-cut separation between the protestors and the audience. It strengthens the willingness to engage in further group undertakings (McAdam, 1988) because protest participation is "so openly different from the formal reality". Such an experience solidifies collective identity of the group and facilitates group recognition by pointing to its members' similarity in a public space. The activist claims that the group was becoming "stronger"

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<sup>4</sup> Note that the Serbian is a gendered language. The word *free* here is *slobodne* meaning *free women*.

exactly because of the instances of aggression against it. Witnessing their values endangered in a very physical way encouraged the activists to stick even more tightly to them. This attributed purpose to the activists' struggle to defend a certain value system and provided them with the "strength to proceed".

Another aspect of the anti-war engagement in the early 1990s Serbia is evident in the following excerpt:

I joined the initiatives organized by the Centre because I disliked the widespread regime's insistence on patriotism...the regime was pushing us into neat boxes...on the other hand, people were very creative at the Center...they were reacting quickly and they were constantly generating new ideas, coming up with projects, offering help, planning actions and performances...I was impressed and inspired by everything that was taking place there...and I can say that it is thanks to that involvement that I managed to find the strength to endure all those years...

The activist here refers to the abovementioned *Centre for Anti-war Action* which was established in mid-July 1991 by a couple of notable Belgrade intellectuals led by Vesna Pešić. This was the first peace organization in Serbia that aimed to promote a culture of peaceful conflict resolution. The *Centre* was very active at the dawn of the wars of Yugoslav succession and during 1991 and 1992 it organized anti-war protests which were massively attended. The above excerpt points to the juxtaposition between the obscure regime and more creative people engaged with the *Centre for Anti-war Action* opposed its destructive policies. The participation in the activities of the Centre was removed from the barren and monotonous regime insistence on "patriotism" which was suppressing political and cultural alternatives.

**Personal growth/maturation: activist group as a place of conflict and challenge**

Anti-war initiatives in the 1990s Serbia were often spontaneously undertaken by people who, in political terms, often did not share more than their anti-war orientation. Serbian civic efforts in this period represent a plethora of ideological options which stimulated tensions and misunderstandings among the activists. Challenges posed by the political situation, whose developments were very often unfavourable and unpredictable as well as accompanied by constant public marginalization, sharpened value orientations and revealed deeper political cleavages reflective of the long-term instability of the Serbian political system.

Nevertheless, in the collected empirical corpus there is an idea that the anti-war civic engagement politicized personal stances, promoted political maturation and defended the fragile existence of a certain idea in the public

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space. In spite of the fact that the activists were often aware that their engagement could not result in immediately perceptible changes, the defence of a certain set of values was the engine behind protest participation. Lepa Mladenović, for example, was from the very beginning involved in numerous women initiatives in an effort to help women who were victims of war. She was among the founders of the *Autonomous Women Centre against Sexual Violence* which belonged to the sphere of anti-war collective enterprises. Looking back at the 1990s activism, Lepa Mladenović remembers:

The years of war shaped many of us as feminists in Belgrade. During this period there were numerous disagreements among activists on every issue except one: that the dictatorship of the Serbian regime had to go [...] disagreements and misunderstandings among Belgrade feminists have been frequent, but during the war they were often particularly painful [...] in spite of the fact that during the ten years of war in the region of the former Yugoslavia, the peace movement did not change the militaristic course of the war, its persistence was extremely important as a statement of the possible existence of civil society even during fascism (Mladenović 2003, 158).

Mladenović argues that the war had a powerful politicization effect which "shaped many of us as feminists in Belgrade". Civic initiatives in which she participated were not only a place of disagreement within the broader political environment, but also dynamic spots of constant internal discussions. The common denominator running beneath these tensions was the (preservation of the possibility of) resistance to the ideological uniformity which took it for granted that the citizens would share into a publicly promoted system of values celebrating the nation (note that she characterizes the regime as "fascist"). Although internally conflictual, this cycle of protests was at the same time consistent about respecting the right to be different, maintain communication with other Yugoslav republics and express an alternative political opinion.

In the following passage, another anti-war activist points to an even more personal dimension of civic engagement throughout the 1990s:

...there is no doubt that the whole war experience and our engagement against it included a lot of learning...learning about life, about who we are, what we can do, how we can survive...those were the years of constant stress which challenged our capacity for change, for coming up with new solutions, for supporting each other and learning from each other...all those protests, statements, trips required so much energy, but they also taught us tolerance and endurance...

The activist claims that the years of war were a very stressful period that required a lot of energy, but they were at the same time an important learning experience. Being confronted with difficult living conditions in which political activism was a risky enterprise on a daily basis, anti-war activists were constantly stimulated to look for "new solutions" and survival options. In such a political climate one is quickly taught about the importance of cooperation, solidarity and endurance in a struggle for common goals.

**Resisting ‘psychologization’: civic activism as a right and obligation**

When embarking on my interviews with the anti-war activists in Serbia, I did not have in mind to specifically ask about what I now call the *therapeutic function* of anti-war civic engagement. However, as this aspect started frequently appearing in my talks with the activists, I decided to discuss it in the upcoming interviews in a more explicit fashion. From that point on, some interviewees agreed with me saying that the word *therapeutic* adequately captures some aspects of the activist experience. However, I also noticed a couple of instances of resistance to ‘psychologization’ of civic engagement. A feminist activist involved in the Belgrade-based anti-war initiatives from the very beginning says:

Well, you see, I do not really like that term ‘therapeutic’...however, it is true that this kind of activity saves you head...isolation is a horrible thing...it was going on and it was always accompanied by a certain kind of tension...but you do not know what that tension was actually all about...whether someone would hit you or do something else...you are in the street, it is strange, because you do not have any experience...but this feeling of isolation, half-empty streets, pervasive darkness and the fact that no one looks at you...in such an atmosphere we have created a political space because political engagement is a human need...there is nothing therapeutic about this...I think that this is a fulfilment of the elementary human need and right...

Although she posits that "this kind of activity saves your head", the activist is sceptical about ‘diluting’ the specifically political charge of the 1990s anti-war activism in Serbia. She claims that these collective enterprises should not be perceived as anything else but "the elementary human need and right" which create a "political space" and are supposed to send a political message. The notion of *therapy* is resisted because it might imply a process through which a burdensome element is to be reintegrated into and equalized with the broadly shared notions of the "normal" and the acceptable. This becomes problematic in times of war due to the fact that one of its devastating social consequences is the increased permeability of the categories of "(ab)normality" in which the dominant and the marginal may quickly swap. It

is, therefore, vital for the activist to make sure that the political and moral aspects of Serbian anti-war engagement are appreciated as its primary properties.

### **Discussion**

Serbian anti-war activism undoubtedly was, as such kind of engagement normally is, a political act. This is its most important element which should remain unobscured in spite of the fact that the political options and causal perceptions significantly differed among the activists, causing frequent movement tensions and fragmentations. However, along with its clear political orientation, this civic engagement had a prominent psychological dimension. Many people engaged in anti-war initiatives not only because they wanted to express their disagreement with the Milošević regime, but also because they perceived these small activist groups as safe-havens, as tiny oases of normality in which they could openly express and share their thoughts and emotions. Activist gatherings were perceived as places of stability and normality in which the participants could realize and recover their political agency, share thoughts and emotions and alleviate feelings of fear.

In relatively stable political environments, in which the possibility of direct physical exposure to or participation in war is very unlikely, the personal and the political are rarely intimately intertwined. In this regard, there is an interesting theoretical switch taking place in the context of (Serbian) anti-war activism. The vast majority of Western political and social theory stems from and presupposes a firm social structure in which social movements are a *disturbing* element of unrest and change which challenge legal boundaries. However, in a completely different political milieu, marked by chaos and destruction, these collective undertakings are turned into islands of peace, civility and creativity<sup>5</sup>. Although one could evaluate the achievements of Serbian anti-war activists in different ways, it is for sure that their courageous and consistent engagement managed to win a portion of the public sphere in which human rights, pluralism and dialogue were promoted as central values. One would need a much more extensive empirical work to offer a more precise evaluation of the impact that these small anti-war groups reviewed here might have had on the Serbian society as a whole.

The outcome of social movements is a complex issue that has been increasingly debated in recent sociological scholarship (Bosi and Uba 2009). One of the reasons for this is that it is problematic and empirically challenging

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<sup>5</sup> On the carnivalesque aspect of some non specifically anti-war street protests in Belgrade, see Dragičević-Šešić 1997.

to establish a causal relationship between social movements, on the one hand, and a societal change, on the other (Giugni 1998). When these changes are discussed, they seem to be framed in political and policy outcomes or they pertain to broader cultural and institutional effects. Movements tend to be perceived as a series of events and collective enterprises supposedly leading to a certain 'tangible' result. This could make one think that activism is a meaningful social engagement only in those instances in which it actually manages to produce such effects.

The case of Serbian anti-war activists presented here calls for an appreciation of social movements as less of *effect-* and more of *process-* oriented activities (Melucci 1995). Movement participation does not derive its meaning solely through its visible and empirically measurable achievements. Civic engagement can fulfil collectively distributed but still very personal needs that are not necessarily and immediately articulated as political issues. Being civically active in such circumstances is a testament to the presence of a certain idea in the public sphere whose promoters do not have any expectations that it might become widely accepted in the proximate future. It is, rather, the knowledge that at least something (and even though this "something" might be evidently insufficient) is done to resist oppression that counts for these people psychologically, emotionally and morally.

What the current account leaves largely unanswered, however, is the question as to why only such a small portion of the population sought emotional support and encouragement by means of collective undertakings. What were the principal survival strategies and mechanisms for maintaining cognitive continuity and reducing fear and uncertainty in the general population? Do these have to do with other forms of collectivities and network structures that provided spaces, to a lesser or greater extent, removed from the physical and ideological control of those in power? Were there certain kinds of *family abeyance structures* for many of those who opposed the regime but did not feel ready or willing to undertake concrete political action?

A different approach would be needed to start accounting for thousands of persistent regime supporters and bystanders. That is why it is crucial for the students of Serbian and Yugoslav anti-war and peace activism to address the question of *who were the activists?* – what were their demographic characteristics, social backgrounds and political orientations. It has to be explored for whom it was at all structurally and politically possible to be taken aback by Yugoslavia's agonizing demise to such an extent as to become determined to actually do something about it.

Finally, it is important to resist a purely national focus when studying anti-war activism in the context of Yugoslavia's dissolution and work on the three Yugoslav successor states directly involved in the armed conflict. A "trilateral" interest must go beyond the typical methodologists' praise of comparative

research design and more insightful material that it normally yields. A *trans-national* (Yugoslav) orientation should be pursued because war (and consequently, anti-war efforts) is by nature an interactive phenomenon, regardless of potentially asymmetric power distribution of those involved in it. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia are interwoven in an intricate triadic nexus that should be appreciated as a whole comprising an abundance of antagonistic war perceptions that shift with different geographical and ideological vantage points.

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**OPSTATI "NORMALAN" (PA SE ČAK I RAZVITI) U VREMENIMA  
HAOSA: SRPSKI ANTIRATNI AKTIVIZAM KAO TERAPIJA**

Članak predstavlja početak osvetljavanja *terapeutske funkcije* srpskog antiratnog aktivizma u vreme oružanih sukoba tokom raspada Jugoslavije. Ovaj specifičan oblik javnog angažmana tokom 1990-ih u Srbiji u postojećim osvrtima na jugoslovenska/srpska pacifistička nastojanja nije dovoljno istražen. Srpski antiratni aktivisti percipirali su održavanje "normalnosti" kao veoma bitan cilj u okviru onoga što se inače posmatra kao isključivo politički aktivizam. Služeći se dubinskim polustrukturisanim intervjuima i dokumentarnim izvorima, u članku razmatram kako su kolektivni postupci, poput paljenja sveća, potpisi-

vanja peticija, uličnih protesta i demonstracija, konceptualizovani kao prostori lične slobode, bez nužne artikulacije specifično političkih ciljeva. Induktivna tematska analiza prikupljenog materijala otkrila je da u sveobuhvatnu kategoriju *terapije* spadaju sledeće teme: ostati "normalan", povratiti individualnu delatnu sposobnost/ojačati se, lični razvoj i sazrevanje i otpor "psihologizaciji". Ove teme dalje se razmatraju u svetlu složenih interakcija ličnog i političkog, putem kojih oni društveni pokreti, grupe i organizacije, koji su po pravilu posmatrani kao izvori nereda i promene, postaju ostrvca pristojnosti i kreativnosti u političkom okruženju obeleženom destrukcijom i nasiljem.

**Ključne reči:** antiratni aktivizam, Srbija, terapija