

***Flag on the Mountain:
A Political Anthropology of War
in Croatia and Bosnia***

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In the propagandist's kitchen, an ideological heritage is like a cupboard full of ingredients. The chef selects a different combination of ingredients from his or her cupboard, depending on what kind of dish he or she is preparing. Similarly, a propagandist draws on different elements of an ideological heritage, depending on what political purpose a particular speech or text is intended to serve. Just as a chef sees no contradiction in preparing a roast leg of lamb one day and a vegetarian dish the next, so the propagandist may see nothing wrong in conjuring up entirely contradictory messages using different ingredients from the same heritage. A century ago, the heretical left-wing agitator Georges Sorel noted that simple symbols counted for much more in the realm of political mobilisation than did correct theory. Sorel consequently rejected the often dry-as-dust Marxist theorising of his generation of socialists in favour of an appeal to phenomena that, he considered, might strike more of a chord with the masses – nationalism and anti-Semitism. That Sorel's politics were cynical and destructive – he was one of the intellectual fathers of fascism – does not diminish the perceptiveness of his observation: in propaganda, symbols with emotional content count for more than correct reasoning.

Today, much of left-wing politics involves a battle over symbols and signifiers in which intellectual rigour is largely abandoned. Ivo Zanic's book *Flag on the Mountain: A Political Anthropology of War in Croatia and Bosnia*, is a brilliant study of how motifs drawn from the common post-Ottoman cultural heritage of Serbs, Croats, and Muslim were manipulated in an often contradictory manner by politicians and warlords from all three nationalities for the purposes of self-legitimisation and nationalist mobilisation during the 1990s. Yet it is a study that will be of wider interest for anyone wishing to understand the politics of symbolism and the manipulation of ideological heritages.

Those of us with a background in left-wing activism will be familiar with the concepts against which our left-wing heritage has traditionally been defined: ‘imperialism,’ ‘fascism,’ ‘anti-Semitism,’ ‘Stalinism,’ ‘genocide,’ and so forth. Inevitably, there is much disagreement, both on the Left and among scholars, over what these things actually mean. Notoriously, it has proved impossible to find consensus among scholars over the meaning of ‘fascism’; whether it is more right-wing or left-wing in character; whether it is revolutionary or conservative; whether ‘Nazism’ forms a sub-set of it or whether Nazism and fascism are fundamentally different phenomena; and so on. Inevitably, different people mean different things when they talk about ‘fascism.’ Yet it is a sign of the degeneration of much of left-wing politics in recent years that frequently much more energy is expended in disputing what ‘fascism’ is than in actually combating the phenomena so described. This has much less to do with an insistence upon intellectual rigour than with a simple struggle for possession of the ‘fascism’ signifier.

A couple of examples may serve to illustrate the point. A few years ago, the present author attended an anti-war meeting in Cambridge where Tariq Ali was speaking. Ali made the audience laugh with his description of Western leaders’ supposed abuse of the Nazi analogy, saying something along the lines of ‘they told us that Galtieri was Hitler, that Saddam was Hitler, that Milošević was Hitler and that Bin Laden was Hitler, but surely, they cannot all have been Hitler?’ This speech came to mind some time afterwards, when I read an editorial about the government of post-Saddam Iraq by Susan Watkins, Ali’s partner and political fellow-traveller, entitled ‘Vichy on the Tigris’ (Watkins 2004). It is, in theory, possible that the Ali-Watkins household is fundamentally divided over the appropriateness of using the Nazi analogy in propaganda, or that Ali and Watkins are in agreement, but feel there are sound intellectual reasons for considering that it is Bush, rather than Galtieri, Saddam or Milošević, who is Hitler. But at the risk of being accused of unwarranted cynicism, I should suggest that a third explanation is more likely.

Or consider the case of Britain’s Socialist Workers Party (SWP), whose best-known blogger Richard Seymour, self-named – in apparent unawareness of the concept of irony – ‘Lenin,’ recently took issue with those of us who characterised the regime of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia as ‘fascist.’ To do so, Seymour told us, ‘degrades the very concept of fascism.’ Meanwhile, the SWP runs a front organisation called the ‘Anti-Nazi League’ (ANL), which regularly portrays the British National Party (BNP), not merely as ‘fascist,’ but as ‘Nazi.’ In every possible respect – authoritarianism, rejection of democratic practice, territorial expansionism, incitement of populist

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chauvinism, continuity with actual pro-Nazi groups from World War II and actual employment of mass violence against ethnic minorities – the Milošević regime scored higher on the ‘fascist’ scale than does the BNP. Yet it is the ‘Nazi’ BNP which provokes SWP supporters to organise rallies, at which ‘Nazi scum – off our streets!’ is screamed at tiny or non-existent BNP gatherings, while the same SWP supporters will favourably compare the ‘not-even-fascist’ Milošević regime with the supposedly ‘real’ fascists who are, apparently, to be found nowhere outside the white populations of the liberal-capitalist West.

Seymour writes of Milošević’s Serbia that ‘a state with an elected government, legal opposition parties, independent trade unions, and opposition demonstrations permitted could not be characterised as fascist, for all its brutality.’ This glowing portrayal of democracy under Milošević can be compared with the description in Robert Thomas’s *Serbia under Milošević: Politics in the 1990s*: ‘More importantly the new ‘pluralist’ system had not effected a separation between the state and the party... The SPS [Socialist Party of Serbia] remained interconnected with all the main institutions of the state. The state media in particular remained faithful to the party line, and was a key element in the Socialist election victories from 1990 onward... The formal structures of parliament were effectively a hollow shell. Real power was located with the Serbian President [Milošević] and in the political-economic bureaucracy.’ (Thomas 1999, pp. 422-23). Lenard J. Cohen, in *Serpent in the Bosom: The Rise and Fall of Slobodan Milošević* has described Milošević’s system of rule as a ‘soft dictatorship’ (Cohen 2002, pp. xiv-xv). Robert J. Paxton in *The Anatomy of Fascism* has described Milošević’s regime as the ‘functional equivalent’ of a fascist regime (Paxton 2004, p. 190). Seymour’s portrayal of the Milošević regime as democratic, therefore, is at variance with the interpretation of serious scholars. Yet it may be a necessary misrepresentation for the activist of an SWP that allied with the supporters of Milošević over Kosovo in 1999, as more recently with the supporters of Saddam and Zarqawi over Iraq.

Naturally, the SWP reserves the ‘fascist’ label for those it demonstrates against, even if they are remarkably similar in character to those it demonstrates alongside. Nevertheless, its efforts at manipulating the ‘fascism’ and ‘Nazism’ signifiers for the sake of its political tactics of the moment would appear justified in their own terms: pinning the ‘Nazi’ label on the BNP, the ANL was in 1993 able to organise a mass demonstration at Welling, East London, tens of thousands strong, to protest the election of BNP candidate Derek Beackon to a council seat in Tower Hamlets. This may be compared with the tiny or non-existent demonstrations that have greeted

the genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur. That the extermination of tens or hundreds of thousands of people might objectively be more worthy of organised opposition than the peaceful local-election victory of a far-right candidate in a single council seat is, in this context, irrelevant – what counts is who carries the ‘fascist’ label and who does not.

This is why some members of the Left have devoted particular energy to denouncing the term ‘Islamofascism’ when applied to Muslims who rail against the Jews, incite chauvinism and violence against other ethno-religious groups and seek the establishment of a totalitarian empire or caliphate from which the Enlightenment would be banished. Writing in *the Nation*, Katha Pollitt complains about the concept of ‘Islamofascism’ on the grounds that ‘Italian Fascism, German Nazism and other European fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s were nationalist and secular, closely allied with international capital and aimed at creating powerful, up-to-date, all-encompassing states’ (Pollitt 2006). Since ‘the worst barbarities of the modern era were committed by the most modern people, I think it is worth preserving “fascism” as a term with specific historical content’ (i.e. one that cannot be applied to Islamic extremists today).

Yet it should not be supposed that the irritation that the term ‘Islamofascism’ provokes in some left-wing circles is genuinely the result of their acceptance of the hoary old liberal myth that nationality and religion are wholly separate, and of the resulting misconception that religious fundamentalists are consequently not nationalists and cannot therefore be fascists. Still less is it the result of the wholly erroneous belief that our contemporary Islamists are simply traditionalists, rather than members of a thoroughly modern revolutionary movement. Rather, the term ‘Islamofascism’ is objected to by those who do not wish ever to see a Welling-style mass demonstration against the Islamists take place. This is not a struggle over terminological accuracy, but a struggle to monopolise the right of usage.

What can be said of the term ‘fascism’ can equally be said of other terms with symbolic and emotive meaning for the Left. The massive expansion of the world’s population since the days of Marx, Lenin, and Gramsci; the proliferation of independent states with their own armies and foreign policies; the mushrooming globally of new political movements that copy the ideologies and practices of those of earlier generations – all would suggest a greater likelihood of instances of fascism, imperialism, genocide and all the other negative phenomena associated with the modern world. Yet much of contemporary left-wing discourse is devoted to trying

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desperately to restrict the use of such signifiers to a tiny number of ‘traditional’ and ‘safe’ targets: ‘fascism’ to the BNP and the French National Front; ‘imperialism’ to the U.S. and its West European allies; ‘Stalinism’ to the historical supporters of Joseph Stalin in the 1930s, 40s and 50s; ‘genocide’ to something that has happened only a couple of times in history – perhaps only to the Armenians in 1915, the Jews in 1941-45 and the Tutsi in 1994.

Inevitably, what begins as a supposed insistence on correctness of terminology rapidly descends into denial and apologies for the phenomena in question – leftists who have never lifted a finger to oppose the mass killings in Bosnia or in Sudan will nevertheless devote time and energy to insist that these mass killings are ‘not genocide.’ One might have imagined that such differences over terminology could be set aside in view of the higher cause of actually opposing such mass killings. Yet the attempt to monopolise such signifiers and ensure their ‘correct’ usage inevitably becomes a life-and-death struggle to the part of the Left that would be unable to mobilise, or even to exist without them. In order to avoid being outflanked by heretics who might seek to ‘misuse’ such signifiers, leftists of this kind often feel forced to engage in re-branding exercises that draw upon other elements of the left-wing heritage in their search of suitable euphemisms. Fascist dictatorships become ‘regimes independent of the West’; their domestic opponents become ‘stooges of imperialism’; genocide becomes simply ‘atrocities’; supporting international action against fascism or genocide is ‘imperialism’; even denouncing fascism or genocide is ‘media demonisation’ or ‘diverting attention from Iraq/Israel.’ Thus, insistence on supposedly ‘correct’ terminology slips easily into moral relativism.

Ivo Zanic has compiled an impressive array of data and case studies to show how competing regimes and nationalist movements among a group of neighbouring nationalities on the one hand draw upon the symbols and heroes of a common heritage for the sake of their contemporary propaganda and political mobilisation, and on the other switch between identification with different and conflicting aspects of this heritage according to the needs of the moment. This is particularly interesting because these conflicts are played out on the traditional Islamic-Christian borderland of Europe, where the heritage of popular folklore is the product of centuries of Ottoman rule over a religiously mixed population. As Zanic writes: ‘The heroic epic of the Serbs, the Montenegrins, the Croats and the Bosniaks is the only example “among all known literatures” where in the same language... and in the same form, there are songs and poems about the same events and the same

persons on both of the belligerent sides – the other side being mainly the Muslim side of the former battlefield.’ (p. 519).

Thus, Bosnian Serb and Croat epic poems celebrate the heroics of the hajduks, the Christian bandit-rebels who fought the Ottoman beys and agas, while the Muslim poems celebrate the latter’s exploits against the former – the same characters appearing in both sets of poems, which are simply related from opposing perspectives. If Samuel Huntingdon’s thesis of a ‘clash of civilisations’ had not already been utterly discredited, Zanic’s work would have constituted yet another mortal blow against it.

An example of how this heritage was manipulated is provided by Zanic in his account of the evolution of official Croatian discourse during the 1990s. Croatia (as opposed to the Bosnian Croats) had never fallen wholly under Ottoman control, and those portions of it that did, were liberated much earlier than neighbouring Bosnia and Serbia, so Croatia does not have the same folk heritage drawing upon the history of popular resistance to the Ottomans. Yet in the era of Communist Yugoslavia, the authorities identified with the *hajduks* as early warriors for class and national liberation, and in Croatia, they found a counterpart to the *hajduks* in the sixteenth-century peasant rebel leader Matija Gubec. Consequently, the post-Communist nationalist regime of Franjo Tuđman rejected Gubec as a positive historical figure, instead choosing to identify with aristocratic heroes of Croatian history such as Ban Jelačić, who resisted Hungarian domination as an ally of the Habsburgs during the revolution of 1848-49. The Croatian Serb rebels who resisted the Tuđman regime in the early 1990s were denounced as ‘*hajduks*’, though these rebels themselves readily accepted such a characterisation. Yet when Tuđman’s Bosnian Croat satellites rebelled against the Sarajevo regime of Alija Izetbegović, they themselves adopted the *hajduk* mantle.

Muslims were also capable of presenting themselves as reborn folk heroes and rebels – dissident Muslim warlords such as Mušan Topalović-Caco, Ramiz Delalic-Celo and Jusuf-Juka Prazina, all of whom eventually came into conflict with the Izetbegović regime, portrayed themselves as latter-day noble outlaws in the mould of Robin Hood, much as did their counterparts among the Bosnian Croats – men such as Mladen Naletilić-Tuta, chief of the ‘Convicts’ Battalion’ and a former collaborator of the German Baader-Meinhof group, which itself had sought legitimacy as a force for combating the wealthy. Izetbegović’s rival Fikret

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Abdić, who led an armed rebellion against Sarajevo in 1993, was portrayed by his supporters as the reincarnation of Mujo Hrnjica, a hero of Muslim epic poetry.

As Zanic shows, the readiness of former-Yugoslav politicians and warlords to manipulate the heritage of folklore was not simply cynical, but in many cases genuinely reflected the fact that these individuals instinctively viewed current events through the prism of folk memory. The claim of the Bosnian Serb nationalist leader Radovan Karadžić to be a descendant of Vuk Karadžić, the great Serb linguist and one of the founding fathers of modern Serbia, was rubbished by the Belgrade opposition journalist Milos Vasic during the 1990s, who logically deduced that the two men called Karadžić could not have been related. As Zanic showed, however, in the mental universe formed by the traditional patriarchal world from which Radovan Karadžić stemmed, 'every clan... considers itself a natural community created by kinship. It is not just a military and a political group but also a kinship unit, and the proof is the legend that all members derive from a common ancestor... According to such criteria, and from such a perspective, it is not just Radovan's and Vuk's family, but many others as well, no matter where an individual happened to be born, that are forged into a tight unity' (p. 372). Zanic's work helps to explain the mind-set of South Slavic nationalists who portray their conflict with the Bosnian government in Sarajevo as a continuation of the historic struggle against the Ottomans; or who celebrate fugitive war-criminals, on the run from the war-crimes tribunal in the Hague, as romantic heroes.

When current politics are automatically interpreted on the basis of popular legend, the borders between fantasy and reality are inevitably fluid. Zanic recounts the darkly comic events surrounding the publication in Sarajevo, on the eve of the recent war, of a satirical article by the independent Muslim youth paper Vox, entitled the 'Agenda for the Immigration of Bosniaks from Turkey.' It was presented as a Bosnian parliamentary plan to resettle in Bosnia four million Anatolian Muslims of South Slavic origin, so as to create a Bosnian population of ten million. The purpose of this article was to lampoon both the pretensions of the Bosnian nationalists on all sides, as well as the scare stories that they put about concerning each other's alleged agendas. But the joke turned sour when activists of Karadžić's Serb Democratic Party printed hundreds of thousands of copies of the article and distributed them to the Serb population of Bosnia and beyond, presenting it as an authentic document. It was seriously discussed in the media of the Bosnian Serbs and of Serbia as evidence of a Muslim plan to destroy the Serbs: the satirical 'Agenda' entirely confirmed the Serb-nationalist paranoid fantasies of the time.

The 'Agenda,' it appears, may have even been used as evidence by Milošević in his negotiations with Tudjman in the spring of 1991, when he attempted to convince his Croatian counterpart that the 'Muslims' – both of Bosnia and more broadly of the entire South East European area – were the greatest danger to peace in the region. According to Zanic: 'At one level... Tudjman was clearly the victim of a con-trick on Milošević's part, although he did not perhaps completely fall for it, at least not at once. But clearly his deep personal animosities toward Bosniaks and Islam in general, and his conviction that, unlike Croatia and Serbia, Bosnia was not an authentic and indigenous political and historical formation, prevented him from rejecting the text as a manifest fabrication.' (p. 338).

Zanic's book does not discuss the Serb-nationalist fantasies concerning the break-up of Yugoslavia – as the work of dark, Satanic forces including Germany, the Vatican, the U.S. and Islam. Yet such fantasies were themselves the natural product of a mind-set that interprets geopolitical events purely on the basis of ideological preconceptions, rather than of an analysis of reality. This is another phenomenon with which those of us who study the politics of the Left will be familiar. Vocal elements on the Western Left developed their own set of myths about the break-up of Yugoslavia that derived entirely from their paranoia and ideological prejudices rather than from any attempt to analyse reality: that the break-up was engineered by 'German imperialism'; that reports of Serb atrocities were the work of a Western media conspiracy to 'demonise the Serbs'; that the Muslims of Sarajevo were besieging and shelling themselves in order to blame it on the Serbs so as to provoke Western intervention; that the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 was motivated by an 'imperialist' desire to destroy Serbia's 'socialist' industry; and so forth. The most recently popular of these myths is, perhaps, the claim that the U.S. was engaged in transporting Al Qaeda militants to Bosnia to fight against the Serbs. These left-wing myths and those of the Serb – and sometimes Croat – nationalists entirely resembled and reinforced one another.

Zanic has provided us with an extremely valuable, well researched study of the role of traditional culture and folklore in determining modern political practice in the former Yugoslavia, rich in evidence and detail. Yet it is a study whose relevance is not limited to the area. People other than South Slav nationalists, in the Western world and elsewhere, can and do interpret contemporary politics solely through the prism of ideological prejudice and dogma fired by emotion and nostalgia. It is the symbolism of phenomena and events, as they evoke connotations with elements of

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a beloved ideological heritage, that frequently determine the political choices of individuals.

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