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Unpacking Silence and Distortion: Mapping Misogyny in Serbia¹

This paper aims to exhibit and discuss the outcomes of a major feminist project in Serbia, which lasted from 1998-2004, and resulted in two volumes, including more than 60 authors, under the title "Mapping Misogyny in Serbia: Discourses and Practices" (Vol. I, 2000 and Volume II, 2004). The project started after the defeat of civic protests in 1996-1997, when the civic movement in Serbia became largely discouraged in its efforts to overthrow Milošević, and was conceived and conducted with the purpose to empower and recover the feminist intellectual scene, which was at that time, severely disillusioned about the possibility of positive political and social change. The intellectual aim of the project was to deconstruct misogyny as a cultural practice and a discourse, in very different domains of social life, and at different social levels. The specificity of the project was that it was conceived and carried out as a 'patchwork' project in a post-modern sense: it was a multidisciplinary 'patchwork' project based on different genres, including essays and academic texts, as well as visual contributions. The nature of the project thus corresponded to the nature of the phenomena in question, misogyny, which takes many different forms. The contributions provided for theoretical steps towards a better understanding of the social phenomenology of misogyny and it created contextualized knowledge about the gender regime in Serbia.

Keywords: misogyny, Serbia, Balkans, contextual knowledge, women's movement

Introduction

This paper aims to exhibit and discuss the origin and results of a major feminist cultural project in Serbia, which lasted from 1998-2004, and resulted in two published volumes, including more than sixty authors, under the title "Mapping Misogyny in Serbia: Discourses and Practices" (Vol. I, 2000 and Volume II, 2004).² The project was initiated just after the defeat of civic protests in 1996-1997, which lasted for three months, but were unsuccessful in their effort to overthrow Milošević. The Misogyny project was conceived, directed and managed by the author of this text with the purpose to empower and recover feminist intellectual scene, which was at that time, severely disillusioned about the possibility of positive political and social change. The intellectual aim of the project was to deconstruct misogyny as both cultural practice and a discourse, existing in very different domains of social life, and at different social levels. Also, Misogyny Project was aiming to construct

contextualized feminist knowledge about Serbian patriarchy, which was largely missing at that point of time.

The Former Yugoslav Context: Knowledge and Movement

Misogyny Project, its nature, innovativeness and its role, could only be understood within the context of lively and brave feminist scene existing in the 90-s in Belgrade, which itself was a part of former-Yugoslav legacy.³ Both gender studies and women's movement in Serbia arose within the specific political and social context of former Yugoslavia (second Yugoslavia), the most liberal of the communist countries, which was actually out of 'the [Soviet] bloc' and which, through the non-alignment movement, played a quite specific role in Europe and globally.⁴ Although Serbia is from the early 90s on steadily "pushed" into the global "South" as opposed to the global "North", the fact is that Serbia was part of Yugoslavia, which was in many ways an ideologically advanced country. For different political and social reasons Yugoslavia was a country which introduced large-scale social experiments such as: self-management (a form of workers' participation), uniquely high level of protection of ethnic/national rights and freedoms and the non-alignment movement. After the extremely painful dissolution of (the second) Yugoslavia it is quite difficult to 'prove' that those experiments did make sense in that time and context, and maybe even on a larger scale. This confusion with historical times, back and forth movements, the author of this text succinctly described in the title of her recent book: "Tomorrow was Yesterday: Contribution to Social History of Women in Yugoslavia in the Second Part of the 20th Century" (in Serbian, Blagojević Hjuson, 2015).⁵

It is worth mentioning that feminism emerged both independently as an intellectual project of a few outstanding individuals and it was simultaneously supported by intellectual circles within the Yugoslav Communist Party. Already in 1986, a special issue of *Marksizam u svetu* (Marxism in the World),⁶ a publication of the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Communist Party, was devoted to feminism, under the title *Studije o ženi i ženski pokret* (Women's Studies and the Women's Movement), with translations of texts by Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Sheila Rowbotham, Chiara Saraceno, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Juliet Mitchell, Ulrike Prokop, Natalija Baranskaja, etc. Two former Yugoslav authors were also included: Rada Iveković, who was also the editor of that special issue, and Lydia Sklevicky. The balanced international approach in the selection of authors, which gave voice to different

feminist traditions, was in line with the contemporary official Yugoslav politics of ‘openness’ and non-alignment.

But, Yugoslavia was not only receptive to new theoretical developments coming from the ‘West’, but was also quite advanced in its own promotion of gender equality, both within the country and internationally. Former Yugoslavia had affirmative action, equality laws and an exemplary Constitution on gender equality and reproductive rights. At the first UN World Conference of Women in Mexico (1975), SFR Yugoslavia delegation fought a successful battle for a strong outcome document on equality at the governmental Conference. Also, Yugoslavia was one of the countries, which rallied developing countries to vote (it did so itself) for one of the first UN resolutions on violence against women, then entitled modestly ‘Resolution in support of battered women’. Yugoslavia, under Vida Tomšić’s guidance, was one of the initiators and founders of INSTRAW and its first director was from Yugoslavia (Croatia – Dunja Ferencić).⁷

From 1975 to 1990 Yugoslavia had a representative national machinery for women’s equality, headed by the secretary for Social Affairs and Labour, with representatives from the Republics, academia and various other institutions. Men were involved in this work. In some domains there was high gender awareness, as in the case of the law on equal rights of spouses (mainly women) of Yugoslav diplomats working abroad. That law, passed in 1975, gave spouses of diplomats all social benefits (including retirement) and the right to return to their previous jobs after the assignment abroad ended. This was to promote the status of younger professional women who were reluctant to leave their jobs to follow their husbands. The US Department of State, at the end of the 1980s, sent a delegation to Belgrade to study this law as a possible model.⁸

Yugoslav statistics on gender were well developed and the Yugoslav Federal Statistical Office, from the 1950s on, regularly prepared special publications about gender related socio-economic and demographic indicators. In addition, the Yugoslav Federal Statistical Office processed its data in a gender sensitive way, making it quite easy to obtain data showing the actual gender stratification and segregation in education, politics and the labour market.⁹

Feminist movements appeared as early as the 1970s in Zagreb, Belgrade and Ljubljana as did institutional and legal support for gender equity. They were marginalised but not forbidden, due to the fact that Yugoslavia was rather open to the ‘West’ and very much under the influence of Western intellectual movements.¹⁰ The first second wave international feminist conference in any communist country (*Drug-ca žena*, i.e., Comrade woman), which attracted

a large number of outstanding feminists mainly from Europe, was organised by Žarana Papić in Belgrade in 1978, and included a number of feminist intellectuals from Serbia and Yugoslavia.

In the second half of the 1980s academic feminist publications, both in translation and including original feminist contributions, were available to the academic public. Yugoslav authors of that period include Rada Iveković, Žarana Papić, Lydia Sklevicky, Ruža First, Andjelka Milić, Vera Smiljanić, Nada Ler-Sofronić, Blaženka Despot, Marina Blagojević, Tanja Rener, Maca Jogan and others. In Zagreb, in the late 1980s the scientific journal *Žena* (Woman) appeared regularly with contributions from women authors from all over former Yugoslavia. In women's magazines in Belgrade and Zagreb gender topics with a feminist edge were also welcomed, reaching a wide public. In addition, other scientific journals – *Sociologija* (Sociology), *Sociološki pregled* (Sociological Review), *Marksistička misao* (Marxist Thought) *Psihologija* (Psychology), etc. – were open to feminist issues. In the early 1980s, the Croatian Sociological Association established a section on Women and Society, with Slavenka Drakulić, a sociologist and then a member of the Sociological Association, as one of the initiators.

In Belgrade, from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, a group of women named *Žena i društvo* (Woman and Society), initiated by a group of Belgrade's feminists (Sonja Drljević, Lina Vušković, Lepa Mladenović, Sofija Trivunac and Žarana Papić) regularly gathered in the Student's Cultural Centre to discuss recent feminist theoretical issues and to work on consciousness raising and women's empowerment. Round tables in Belgrade often had guest-speakers from Zagreb (Rada Iveković, Slavenka Drakulić, Jelena Zupa, Biljana Kašić, Vesna Kesić, Vesna Pusić, etc.).¹¹ The Inter-university Centre in Dubrovnik organised a number of international conferences and courses that were attended by feminist academics from Serbia as well.

From the beginning of the 1990s this lively and growing feminist intellectual milieu, which had largely started as a transnational Yugoslav scholarly project, was challenged by the tragic developments of the war. Serbian feminists, however, had many precious legacies from previous times, in particular well-developed international and former Yugoslav networks and an already well-established tradition of critical thinking within academia based on a strong rejection of colonial and neo-colonial discourses.

Cultural Shift: Construction of Otherness

The 1990s have brought a strong wave of misogyny into the public discourse, which was in fact an introduction of the qualitatively new cultural pattern, a kind of profound cultural shift in comparison with gender equality ideology dominating until the end of 1980s. That pattern was deeply connected to the nationalistic political project, and intense production of ‘Otherness’, in terms of both gender and ethnicity. Since the wars were ‘introduced from the above’, from political elites, powerful and extreme war propaganda was absolutely necessary for public mobilization. Propaganda was going in two directions: 1) to make a case for necessity of Serbian ‘protection’, since Serbs were ‘threatened’, and 2) to make a case for Serbian ‘difference’, in sense of superiority over Others. Serbianhood was constructed as Manhood, and vice versa, in a circular manner: Serbianhood was Manhood was Serbianhood.¹² Both misogyny and specific masculinity constructs were closely related to increased animosity to any kind of ethnic Otherness. In that profoundly changed cultural context misogyny simply exploded. Since the change took place in a relatively short period of time, it became noticeable and tangible. Nevertheless, the question emerged: how to capture misogyny, how to “discipline” it, and how to “prove” its existence and disclose the consequences?

Learning from the Movement: The Movement of Knowledge

At the beginning of the 1990s, Yugoslav academics with backgrounds in social sciences and humanities were mobilised by different parties and movements who perceived that historic moment as a unique opportunity for societal transformation. The major ideological and practical challenges for feminist scholars from Serbia were related to the wars and Serbian nationalism: how to translate ‘Western’ feminist knowledge – which had a prevailing influence at the time but had been articulated in different contexts and was based on different experiences – into the local women’s and anti-war movements? Pressure of historical events in the early 1990s did not allow for too much reflection or too much distance. Feminist scholars became extremely proactive since they felt a great responsibility to do ‘something’, and that ‘something’ took the form of many different initiatives. At the core of those initiatives was a group of active middle-aged feminists with more than ten years of experience in the field and a well-grounded knowledge, which they were highly motivated to invest in the women’s movement and resistance to the wars.

While feminist academics looked for their own intellectual and political communities and for ways to translate knowledge into social action, feminists from the movement were looking for theoretical backgrounds for their activism. Out of these two tendencies two projects emerged simultaneously in 1992: one was the introduction of women's studies at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade as an optional course called *Žene i društvo* (Women and Society); and the other was the foundation of the *Centar za ženske studije* (Women's Study Centre, WSC) in Belgrade. While Anđelka Milić, Žarana Papić and Marina Blagojević worked on the establishment of 'Women and Society' and coped with resistance from the Faculty of Philosophy, they were also engaged in establishing alternative educational institutions such as the Women's Study Centre outside the university.

Gender studies in Serbia in the 1990s, both at the University of Belgrade and at the Women's Study Centre, were political projects *par excellence*. They were an 'alternative political space' in which teaching, learning, researching and resisting the regime were closely connected.¹³ The women's movement itself represented an important source of knowledge for feminist scholars and it inspired the 'knowledge movement', through atypical feminist projects on the edge between activism and academia. Misogyny Project is a primary example of the interesection between women's movement and academic feminism in Serbia.

At the moment of political defeat it was important to strengthen the movement through engagement on knowledge production and gathering around some creative epistemic project. The author of this text saw the possibility in imagining and actually managing a project on "misogyny" which created quite unique intervention into the public patriarchal discourse. The project gathered more than sixty authors, including few men, who were coming from very different disciplinary and generational backgrounds. Project resulted in two volumes, and more than 1000 pages. The volumes represent huge effort in gathering evidence related to misogyny in both traditional and contemporary Serbian culture. They are the corner stones for understanding cultural shift in the 90s, with re-traditionalisation and re-patriarchalisation of Serbian society (Both volumes can be downloaded from academia.edu, for free). The specificity of the project was that it was conceived and carried out, methodologically, as a 'patchwork' project in a post-modern sense: it was a multidisciplinary 'patchwork' based on different genres, including essays and academic texts, as well as visual contributions. The idea behind it was that the nature of the project should corresponded to the nature of the phenomena in question, misogyny, which takes many different forms and appears in different domains of public and private lives. The assumption was that putting together and connecting those pieces

of knowledge can provide for theoretical leaps towards better understanding of the social phenomenology of misogyny. Theoretical evolution achieved by this gathering and interlinking of individual contributions, resulted in some very tangible theoretical movements forward, including the theoretization on misogyny as an *immanent ambivalence*¹⁴ as well as theoretization of *specific gender regimes* in the Balkans.¹⁵ This unique feminist cultural project has critical relevance in production of the contextualized knowledge about the specific gender regime and patriarchy in Serbia, and it still maintains its considerable academic, political¹⁶ and policy impact.

Instead of a Conclusion: Mutual Empowerment

It was the women's movement that provided strong impetus for this project. The sensibility developed through and by the movement, together with an overall sense of a new purpose and meaning of feminist knowledge, motivated other similar projects. In other words, participation in the movement, engagement with women's groups, and teaching and lecturing to non-academic audiences have contributed to the empowerment of gender scholars and have increased their power to negotiate in the academy. The women's movement has created the context of the research, since research projects were closely related to the movement, and also an audience for the results obtained.

Misogyny Project was a successful response to the major challenge of gender studies at the semiperiphery, which is related to the production of contextualized, and therefore, relevant knowledge. For that purpose, a strong link between academia and the movement remains necessary. There are relevant epistemic reasons why gender studies should remain open to the women's movement and to the gendered experiences that are reflected in and represented by the movement. At the core of that contextualized knowledge about gender should be a two-track epistemic strategy, stemming from the feminist epistemic and theoretical tradition. This strategy should on the one hand re-affirm the standpoint from the semi-periphery; on the other hand, it should re-affirm the connection between the ontology and epistemology of gender.¹⁷

¹ The paper read under the title "Silencing Women in Serbian History, Education, and Society" at the Conference *48th Annual Convention of Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies: Global Conversations 17–20 November 2016*, Washington DC, USA.

² First volume could be downloaded from:

https://www.academia.edu/25984981/prvi_tom_Mapiranje_mizoginije_u_Srbiji_diskursi_i_prakse,

and the second volume could be downloaded from:

https://www.academia.edu/25985156/drugi_tom_Mapiranje_mizoginije_u_Srbiji_diskursi_i_prakse.

³ Marina Blagojević, prir., *Ka vidljivoj ženskoj istoriji: ženski pokret u Beogradu 90-tih* [Towards Visible Women's History: Women's Movement in Belgrade in the 90-ties] (Beograd: Centar za ženske studije, 1998)

⁴ The non-alignment movement was an international organisation created in the context of the bipolar world after the Second World War. It was founded in 1955 and included states that were not formally aligned with either bloc. The founders were India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdul Nasser and the Yugoslav president, Josip Broz Tito. The purpose of the organisation was to ensure 'the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries' (Havana Declaration, 1979) in their 'struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony as well as against great power and bloc politics'. The countries included in the non-alignment movement represented nearly two-thirds of the United Nations' members and comprised 55% of the world population.

⁵ Book could be downloaded for free from:

https://www.academia.edu/23383225/Sutra_je_bilo_ju%C4%8De_prilog_dru%C5%A1tvenoj_istoriji_%C5%BEena_u_drugoj_polovini_20.veka_u_Jugoslaviji.

⁶ Rada Iveković, ur., *Marksizam u svetu* [Marxism in the World]: Studije o ženi i ženski pokret [Thematic Issue: Women's Studies and Women's Movement] Vol 8, no. 8–9 (1981)

⁷ Personal archive: my e-mail correspondence with Šilovic, June 2004.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See, for example, Marina Blagojević, *Žene izvan kruga: profesija i porodica* [Women out of the Circle: Profession and Family] (Belgrade: ISIFF, 1991), where gender statistics from the 1950s on was used extensively.

¹⁰ 'East' and 'West', although imperfect and vague constructs burdened with emotions and stereotypes and a tendency to over-generalise, are still necessary to denote vast differences between the core and the semi-periphery of Europe. The danger of a premature dismantling of those concepts is greater than that of using them, despite the over-generalisation.

¹¹ See: Lina Vušković and Sofija Trivunac, "Feministička grupa Žena i društvo" [The Feminist Group Women and Society], in *Ka vidljivoj ženskoj istoriji*, ed. by Marina Blagojević (Beograd: Centar za ženske studije, 1998), 47–60.

¹² Marina Blagojević, "Serbianhood as Manhood: Politics of Gender and Ethnic Identity in Serbia", in *Frauen und Frauenorganisationen im Widerstand in Kroatien, Bosnien und Serbien*, ed. by Grsak M., U. Reimann, K. Franke, T. Bewernitz (Frankfurt am Main: Ed. AV, 2006)

¹³ See: Marina Blagojević, "Belgrade's Protests 1996/97: From Women in the Movement to Women's Movement?", in *Women and Citizenship in Central and East Europe*, ed. by Jasmina Lukić, Joana Regulska and Daria Završček (London: Ashgate, 2006), 147–164.

¹⁴ Marina Blagojević, „Patriotizam i mizoginija: mit o srpskoj muškosti“ [Patriotism and Misogyny: Myth of Serbian Masculinity], u *Mapiranje mizoginije u Srbiji, diskursi i prakse* [Mapping Misogyny in Serbia, Discourses and Practices], ur. Marina Blagojević (Beograd: Azin, 2000), 281–309.

¹⁵ Book could be downloaded from:

https://www.academia.edu/20029786/Poluperiferija_i_rod_pobuna_konteksta.

¹⁶ Political impact of this project could be related to the fact, for example, that the promotion of the First Volume happened just after the change of the regime, October 5, 2000, and it was attended by the great number of the high level intellectuals in the crowded hall of Student's Cultural Scene. The book presentation gathered the core of liberal intellectuals in Belgrade at the time.

¹⁷ See: Maithree Wickramasinghe, "An Epistemology of Gender — An Aspect of Being as a Way of knowing", *Women's Studies International Forum* vol. 29, no. 6 (2006): 606-611, and Marina Blagojević, "Non-“White” Whites, Non-European Europeans and Gendered non-Citizens: On a Possible Epistemic Strategy from the Semiperiphery of Europe", in *Knowledge Production at the Semiperiphery* (Belgrade: Institut za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja, 2009), 27–65.

The book could be downloaded from:

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Оригинални научни чланак

Распакивање тишине и изокренутости: мапирање мизогиније у Србији

Овај текст има за циљ да изложи и образложи резултате великог феминистичког пројекта у Србији, који је трајао од 1998-2004, и резултирао у два тома која су укључила више од 60 ауторки и аутора, под насловом *Мапирање мизогиније у Србији: дискурси и праксе* (2000, 2004). Пројекат је започет после пораза грађанских протеста 1996/97, чији је циљ било смењивање Милошевића, у моменту када је цивилна сцена била веома обесхрабрена због тог пораза. Инициран је са циљем да оснажи и обнови феминистичку интелектуалну сцену која у том тренутку није више гајила наду у могућност позитивне политичке и друштвене промене. Интелектуални циљ овог пројекта био је да деконструише мизогинију и као културалну праксу и као дискурс, и то у веома различитим доменима друштвеног живота и на различитим друштвеним нивоима. Посебност пројекта је била да је он започет и спроведен као "patchwork" пројекат, у постмодерном смислу: он је био мултидисциплинаран, заснован на различитим жанровима, укључујући есеје и академске текстове, као и визуелне доприносе. Природа пројекта је тако кореспондирала са природом феномена о коме је била реч, мизогинијом, која има веома различите форме. Посебни текстови у ова два тома, посматрани заједно, омогућили су теоријске скокове у разумевању друштвеног феномена мизогиније и стварање контекстуализованог знања о родном режиму у Србији

Кључне речи: мизогинија, Србија, Балкан, контекстуално знање, женски покрет