

# HELSINKI Bulletin



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## **The roots of anti-modern political culture in Serbia**

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*Translation of the last substantial essay written by the late Serbian historian  
before her tragically premature death*



**Olga Popović Obradović**

At the very start of the nineteen-nineties an institutional reform was carried out in Serbia (as in other so-called transitional countries), under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević. Despite numerous deficiencies, this reform did undeniably create the basic constitutional conditions for establishing a modern democratic order. The principle of division of power was introduced, together with a multi-party system and direct elections; a parliament was founded, and the media were liberalised. For the first time in Serbian history, moreover, a civilian was appointed to head the armed forces. Today, a decade and a half later, we witness a complete

debacle of these institutions. Instead of tracing the path to pluralist democracy, market economy and the rule of law, modern political institutions have served as a ruse for covering, or rather legitimising, a wholly archaic and anti-modern political project - one that was also criminal. The issues of state borders and ethnic homogenisation were defined as the primary interests of the Serbian people, before which freedom of the individual, as a value in its own right, either disappears or is at best of secondary importance. A patriarchal, authoritarian and strongly monistic culture emerged into full light, its internal image distinguished by collectivism, egalitarianism and intolerance towards the other or the different, its external image by ethnic nationalism and militarism.

The devaluation of personal freedom, and all the other values of liberal democracy, by Slobodan Milošević's regime does not mean that it did not enjoy a degree of democratic legitimacy - democratic in a populist (*narodnjački*) sense, but democratic nonetheless. Serbia embraced Milošević's policy as though unanimously, giving it near plebiscitary support. In this way the Serbians by their own decision entered not a free and open society but a war, whose legacy was impoverishment, self-isolation and a heavy burden of responsibility for war crimes.

Serbia still lives with this legacy. The Serbian electoral body, indifferent in its majority towards the issue of responsibility for the war and war crimes, continues to vote for the advocates of the war policy, for individuals and parties of an ultra-nationalist and populist nature, seduced by their nationalist rhetoric, sugary archaism and obsession with myths, as well as by their social demagoguery of anti-capitalism and anti-Westernism in general. Their accent shifts between the social dimension and the imperialist programme of uniting all 'Serb lands', depending on current political needs. We face daily examples of this organic unity of social populism, authoritarianism and imperialist nationalism. One of the most impressive was the grandiose concluding rally to promote the Radical Party's candidates for the post of mayor of Belgrade, held in the autumn of 2004, the rhetoric and scenography of which - combined with a disciplined yet passionate hailing and hymning of the Radicals' 'father', now Hague prisoner Vojislav Šešelj - represented an accomplished reproduction of the National-Socialist model. Its result was catastrophic. The oaths of loyalty to the Hague prisoner, and the public identification of the Radical Party with his deeds, have remained firm. At the same time, the general judgement that the Radicals represent the single most powerful political party in Serbia has conditioned the party-political calculations of the so-called democratic parties, especially in relation to the recent developments associated with the adoption of the new Serbian constitution, thus legitimising the Radical Party more effectively than anything else since 5 October 2000. It needed only a month for these parties to shift from public, forceful and firm demands that the Radical Party be banned, as a party that stimulates national hatred, to the position that its participation - with its decisive influence in elaborating the highest law of the Serbian state for the 21<sup>st</sup> century - was something quite normal and legitimate. Which of these parties will ever again have the right to question the legitimacy of the Radical Party?



Over the past fifteen years, in other words, Serbia has been voting for the same political option, moving the gravitational centre of its expectations from the nationalist to the social-populist component and back. Here - as indeed everywhere else - 5 October brought about no essential change. On the contrary, by giving victory to the policy of so-called legalism, i.e. the policy of continuity with the regime of Slobodan Milošević, it restored to this option its briefly shaken legitimacy and further strengthened it. This is why surprise at its current power is either hypocritical or politically naive, since it can only involve ignoring the fact that the strongest and perhaps decisive blow against the idea of modern Serbia came precisely after 5 October, when we were faced with the most dramatic testimony in our modern history that the transformation of Serbia into a modern state was not merely a labour of Sisyphus but also a punishable offence. The advocates of a modern Serbia, who had earlier been marked out as renegades and political trouble-makers, now became legitimate targets for assassination. This led to the Serbian 'murder in the Orient Express', when almost all the country's relevant political players - from generals and journalists to poets and clerics - in their different ways stuck their knives into the back of the prime minister Zoran Đinđić, who personified Serbia's modernisation and re-orientation towards the West. Instead of being named murderers, they were called patriots. The brutality of the attack on the modernisers in Serbia has always been in proportion with their potential. Zoran Đinđić in this respect cannot be compared with any other politician in Serbian twentieth-century history. This is why he elicited no mercy. The aim was realised: the vision of a modern Serbia is daily further from reality and increasingly close to the world of science fiction.

Why is it that Serbia, ever since the fall of Communism, has proved unable to recognise its own vital interest in the values of modern society, continuing instead stubbornly and systematically to oppose them? In other words,

what are the roots of the anti-modern political culture which, carried on the wave of 'democratic transition' at the end of the 1980s, erupted with mighty force to the surface and remained there, choking all differentiation?

The usual answer, which unhesitatingly points the finger at the Communist legacy and remains at that level, is quite worthless. It does not meet even elementary logic, because it is unable to provide the answer to two common-sense questions: first, why did Milošević gain support not only from Communists but also from anti-Communists, including the Serbian Orthodox Church?; secondly, why is the kind of resistance to modernisation displayed in post-Communist Serbia not present in other post-Communist states (such as Hungary, the Czech Republic or Poland) where Communism was far more rigid than in Serbia? The real problem with this answer is that it is socially damaging, because it blocks critical re-examination of our own history and the self-understanding, responsibility and political maturity that come with that. Here lies the responsibility of the elite, which, by fostering a distorted and mythological understanding on the part of the citizenry regarding the key processes and actors of Serbia's modern history, helps in fact to preserve the currently dominant cultural and political model. In short, the answer to the question about the debacle of the democratic transition in Serbia lies in far deeper recesses of history, those that preceded the Communist experience and that, after all, account for that very experience.



Nikola Pašić

'We are not nationalists, but *narodnjaci* [men of the people]', declared the president of the Serbian Radical Party, pointing thereby at the political tradition which gave birth to his party and provided the political articulation for contemporary Radicals. It is the tradition that emerged victorious from one of the crucial and lasting historical conflicts of modern Serbia: the conflict between two different concepts of state and society - between, broadly speaking, collectivism and individualism.

The content of this conflict was precisely defined by the Serbian political elite in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the first serious challenges posed by modernity. This was the period of the initial political articulation of broad layers of Serbian society, made possible by the introduction of a representative system and popular participation in politics. The above-mentioned political elite hence derived its legitimacy from the electorate.

What essentially marked this elite was a deep internal division over fundamental, strategic questions concerning the development of the Serbian state and society. It was a matter of projects which, whether in open or in latent conflict, were to become a permanent feature of Serbian history in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The basic dividing-line was attitude to the West as a cultural and civilisational model in the broadest sense, which implied differences with regard both to questions of social and economic modernisation and to interpretations of the nature of the state and its goals. At that time, and in response to the modernising project of the ruling liberal elite, the first Serbian Radicals headed by Nikola Pašić articulated the project of the 'people's state', with which they succeeded in organising a mass political movement and the largest political party in Serbian history: the People's Radical Party. Anti-individualism, the state as a patriarchal community, economic egalitarianism, and national-territorial myths of which the Kosovo myth was the most important, were to be the fundamental orientations of society. The party which mobilised, organised and programmatically shaped this political consciousness was the People's Radical Party. This political force was the first in Serbian history to transform *narodnjački* socialism into a mass political programme, thereby ensuring that the primary, decisive - and as history would show also fatal - political articulation of wider layers of Serbian society would be carried out on the basis of this programme. The liberal reforming elite, weak in regard to its social base but nevertheless dominant in Serbia up to the 1890s, was disunited in both the ideological and

the practical political sense. Its representatives can nevertheless be treated as belonging to the same ideological current, especially if one bears in mind the nature of the alternative: the enormous power summoned up by the emerging Radical Party. For the nature of this party, and above all its great social force, showed that political options in Serbia were being defined in accordance with specific criteria, the essence of which was not a choice between conservatism, liberalism and radicalism in the European sense of these concepts, but rather the acceptance or rejection of the European civilisational model in its widest meaning, including the nature of the state.



Lazar Paču

The programme of the 'people's state' in the original Serbian radical thought rested on a patriarchal, collectivist and egalitarian understanding of freedom and democracy. As such it represented a negation of the modern state in all its aspects. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Radical leaders defined their party clearly and unambiguously as a negation of liberal and an affirmation of radical democratic principles of socialist provenance. In contrast to the liberal parties, for whom the chief role of the state lay in protecting individual rights and political freedoms, the Radical Party - according to one of its ideologues at the time, Pera Todorović - took the position that the main task of the state was social and economic, i.e. securing 'popular welfare', and that political freedoms were only one instrument for pursuing

of this goal. Defining the state as primarily a social and economic category, Pera Todorović explicitly stated that it was necessary to know 'the difference between the aim and the means'.<sup>1</sup> Freedom and democracy, wrote another of the party's theoreticians Laza Paču, stand in opposition to the very essence of class-divided bourgeois society. In Serbia's case, according to Paču, its society is more or less homogenous in respect of class, which provides a fortunate situation for the immediate building of socialism by way of 'associated labour'.<sup>2</sup> The method of 'associated labour', said Nikola Pašić, constituted the programme of the Radical Party. 'The Radical Party' wants to prevent the people from 'adopting the errors of Western industrial society, where a proletariat is being created as well as immense wealth, and to build industry instead on the basis of association.' It wants 'to introduce full self-government ... as opposed to a bureaucratic system. Instead of capitalist enterprise ... there should be workers' associations.' That is how Pašić presented the ideological and programmatic positions of the Radical Party.<sup>3</sup> 'We don't need wealth. The Serb tribe is not the moneyed tribe of Israel...'<sup>4</sup>, one of the most influential of the Radical leaders, Archpriest Milan Đurić, was to say after the May 1903 coup, with his open antipathy towards the Jews - often publicly aired.<sup>5</sup> 'We are all equal ... we are not divided into classes as other nations are',<sup>6</sup> so legislative policy should aim at preventing the division of the family *zadruga*, is how M. Đurić explained the essence of the social philosophy that he advocated in the assembly on behalf of the Radical Party. Many other Radicals thought of the Serbian state in a similar manner. Arguing in favour of universal [male] suffrage, Aleksa Ratarac stated that 'Serbia [is] one large *zadruga*, and we are its representatives. It is better when more people are consulted.'<sup>7</sup> Laza Popović explained: 'There are many of us who are literate. When there were few literate people, Christ walked the earth; but a curse came upon us, since the number of those who are literate has grown. That's how things are, gentlemen! Our learning does not lead to improvement but to decadence.'<sup>8</sup> As late as 1910 the coalition government was having to invest great efforts in persuading the assembly to accept a legal proposal on the separation of judicial and police powers! The deputies attacked the proposal on the grounds that Serbia had to remain a 'peasant state', and that consequently the number of officials should be reduced, not enlarged. The manner in which the leader of the Old Radicals, Ljuba Jovanović, defended the proposal before his party colleagues in the assembly is highly

indicative of the social and political state of mind of the Radical-dominated assembly at the end of 1910. He argued that he himself had once been convinced that Serbia should remain a purely 'peasant country', but that he had changed his mind under the influence of the Boer War. For when he saw that the peasant Boer people, which did not wish to follow 'the path of economic development and industrialisation', had lost its freedom, 'he became convinced that if Serbia wished to remain free, [it] had to have, in addition to the peasantry, also other social strata.'<sup>9</sup> In Jovanović's estimate, clearly, the interest of national freedom was for the Serbian assembly the strongest argument in favour of capitalism.

In order to create and sustain such a state, the whole nation had to be organised in a form having simultaneously the character of a movement and the character of a party with a robust organisation, military discipline and a strong internal hierarchy. Consolidation of the internal organisation, centralisation and strict inner-party discipline - combined with the unquestionable authority of the leader - became at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially after the arrival of the Radicals in power following the adoption of the 1888 constitution, one of the Radical Party's most important tasks. A widespread network of party branches was established throughout Serbia, and a system of party membership cards introduced.

This emergence - in parallel with the first signs of modernisation - of a mass populist-socialist party, organised in a manner that elsewhere would become known only with the appearance of totalitarian ideologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is what makes Serbia a unique case in modern European history. The mass character of this party, or more precisely its comprehensive nature, made it a 'people's party', and earned its government an unquestionable as well as exclusive legitimacy that was denied to all other political parties on the grounds that they were not of the people [*narodne*]. The Radicals called those other parties 'proprietor's parties', implying that 'proprietors' were not part of the people and hence their participation in government was illegitimate. The opposition deputy Drag. Joksimović stated: 'Whenever they are in power, the Radicals say: Don't touch Mother Serbia, don't rend its bowels...because for them Mother Serbia is the Radical Party.'<sup>10</sup>

Insisting that 'demagogy' is 'fundamentally contrary to democracy', J. Prodanović argued that in Serbia 'the peasant cloak and sandals' were being courted, while 'the [town] coat and the intelligentsia were being

attacked. The people are being seduced by flattery and by denigrating the intelligentsia.'<sup>11</sup>

Being all-inclusive, the 'people's' party is identified with the nation, and its government with government by the people. In this way the difference between people's state, people's party, and the people as forming a single and politically homogenous whole is erased, and the principle established that there is no separation between state and society.

This self-evident truth, according to which the party and the people are one and the same, represents that element of the concept of the national state which the Radical Party was to maintain until the very end of its existence. The distinction in Serbia between people's or Radical party on the one hand and, on the other, anti-people's parties would provide the foundations upon which the project of the people's state, following the arrival of the Radicals in power in the 1903 coup, would be transformed into a party-state overlaid with a parliamentary form. The concentration of all power in the hands of a Radical Party that equated itself with the people - this is the dominant perception and practice of the so-called golden age of Serbian democracy between 1903 and 1914.



For the Radical masses, as well as for their leader Pašić, parliamentary politics meant seizing governmental power fully and for all time. 'All power had to go to the Radicals, while non-Radicals could live in the state only as second-rate citizens.' The only 'measure of a civil servant's quality' was his political position in the previous regime: imprisonment under Milan's government was of greater value than a university diploma', is how S. Jovanović described the introduction of the Radical regime under the 1888 Constitution. If municipal governments, which according to the new constitution and electoral law were to have the decisive role in the organisation and conduct of elections, happened to be in the hands of the

opposition - which was very rare - they were taken by force, if necessary with the help of the gendarmerie. 'The whole Radical Party rose with the strength of a great wave to the level of a ruling class', concluded Jovanović.<sup>12</sup> 'The Radical Party has subjugated in every way the state to its party and, upholding the motto that party is more important than the state, treats Serbia as a milch cow that is the exclusive property of the great Radical people's party', one of the Radicals' most strident critics wrote in 1908 in the journal *Nedeljni pregled*.<sup>13</sup>

Inherent in this concept of the people's state was the idea of the internal enemy. Pašić used to warn: 'The Radical Party must not allow its enemies to again seize power ... its opponents do not sleep, they engage in sabotage day and night, they must be carefully watched ... one must be on guard.'<sup>14</sup> In accordance with the leader's message, after the Radical Party won power under the 1888 Constitution its political opponents became targets of a systematic and even physical terror, which apart from revenge had the clear practical political aim of taking over the whole state apparatus, from top to bottom.

In order to justify this treatment of the minority, the Radicals proclaimed all members of the opposing party without exception to be traitors. 'For the past thirty years the people has been told that those who are not with Pašić are traitors, people who have sold their souls to the devil.' Mr Pašić is 'the personification of the Radical Party: those who are against him are traitors', was Slobodan Jovanović's bitter comment.<sup>15</sup> T. Kaclerović, leader of the Social-Democratic Party, whose representatives were called 'human degenerates' and 'sworn enemies of the Serbs', told the assembly that Pašić's Radicals 'believe that they alone are patriots and speak of their country'.<sup>16</sup>



Slobodan Jovanović



Kralj Milan Obrenović

This perception of the minority parties as enemy and traitors was accompanied by an understanding of the parliamentary system as inter-party war, demanding constant watchfulness, strong organisation and unconditional obedience. In this way the Radical Party introduced the idea of the internal enemy into Serbian political life. The party state that grew out of the project of 'the people's state', coupled with the idea of the internal enemy, represent the most lasting legacy of the original Serbian radicalism. It developed deep roots, survived all regimes, and became a component part of the Serbian political culture and mentality.

'Our idea of democracy is negative, because it is founded on the rejection of Individualism and Culture. It is a specific, intimate collectivism', wrote contemporary critics of the Radical Party. The journal *Nedeljni pregled* was most prominent in regard to its perception of the Radicals' damaging effect on Serbia's social and state development. According to these critics, the Radical Party's triumphal conquest of power after the murder of the last Obrenović in the coup of May 1903 diverted Serbia from its European path and oriented it towards the East, towards Russia. The introduction of the parliamentary system in Serbia meant the Radicals' supremacy, which was the same as 'the supremacy of Russophilism', i.e. of those people who [like Pašić] in their youth 'were physically in Switzerland but spiritually in Russia'. For Serbian Radicalism, 'Western forms' were merely 'blatant imitation' and when it adopted such forms it became 'wholly amoral'. Such forms were 'proclaimed as their aim' by the very same people who, when it became necessary after the Congress of Berlin to turn Serbia into a 'modern state' and take it into 'the European community', saw railways as 'instruments of "Austrian agents" designed to

export all Serbia and make its people starve'<sup>17</sup> - in short, people who in fact 'hated' the West with an 'intimate and sincere hatred.'<sup>18</sup>

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Todorović, at the main assembly of the Radical Party in 1882, in Latinka Perović, *Srpski socijalisti 19. veka, Prilog istoriji socijalističke misli*, pp 122-3.

<sup>2</sup> Lazar Paču, *Građansko društvo i njegove društveno-političke partije*, reprinted from *Samouprava*, Belgrade 1881, pp. 61, 164-6.

<sup>3</sup> Latinka Perović and Andrej Šemjakin, *Nikola Pašić. Pisma, članci i govori* (1872-1891), Belgrade 1995, pp 43-4, 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Stenografske beleške Narodne skupštine Srbije* 1903-1914, 1903/1904, p.79. Henceforth: *Sten.bel.*

<sup>5</sup> Disdain and intolerance towards the Jews, who were regularly called *Čivuti* [yids], was present in all parties except the Social-Democrats. Thus the independent deputy Gaja Miloradović: 'We must be on the guard against the Jews. The Jews have stolen everything - one day they will grab everything owned by Serbia.', *Sten.bel.*, 1909/1910, p. 998. *Narodnjak* Mih. Škorić described himself as 'the greatest opponent of the Jews', *ibid.*, p. 964. The Old Radical Miloš Čosić, deputy-speaker of the assembly, reproached a deputy for calling one journalist a Jew: 'you should not insult people, if you wish such writing to stop', *Sten.bel.* 1906/1907, p. 3875. The editors of the Progressive Party's journal *Pravda* rejected in public the 'false' allegations about their Jewish origins with the explanations that their families for generations had nothing to do with 'Semitism', *Pravda*, no.71/1908.

<sup>6</sup> *Sten.bel.*, 1910/1911, vol.2, p.12.

<sup>7</sup> *Sten.bel.*, 12.5.1910, p.2997.

<sup>8</sup> *Sten.bel.*, 25.9.1905, p.767.

<sup>9</sup> *Sten.bel.*, 1910/1911. 21.10.1910, p.5.

<sup>10</sup> *Sten.bel.*, vol.2., 1.2.1908, pp 618-19.

<sup>11</sup> *J. Prodanović speaking in 1909, Govori na Konferenciji samostalnih radikala*, pp 41-2.

<sup>12</sup> Slobodan Jovanović, *Vlada Aleksandra Obrenovića*, Belgrade 1934, vol.1, pp 226-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Nedeljni pregled*, no.2/1908, p.35.

<sup>14</sup> Nikola Pašić's speech in Smederevo on 9.3.1889; addressing the Radical Party in Niš on 28.5.1889; at the rally in Zaječar on 8.9.1891. In Perović and Šemjakin, *op.cit.*, pp 319-36.

<sup>15</sup> *Sten.bel.*, 20.6.1907, p. 4452.

<sup>16</sup> *Sten.bel.*, 4.3.1909, p. 1156.

<sup>17</sup> *Nedeljni pregled* here had in mind the strong opposition mounted by the Radicals in parliament against the introduction of railways, which Serbia was bound to carry out under the Berlin agreement. See Latinka Perović, 'Politička elita i modernizacija u prvoj deceniji nezavisnosti srpske države', *Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima 20. veka*, Belgrade 1994, pp 237-242. After 1903 too, senior Radicals retained the same attitude towards railways that had characterised the official position of the Radical Party in the 1890s. 'The railway has passed like a snake through our country... the Western snake has caught us and our simple yet glorious customs have started to retreat before those of the Western nations...'. Milan Đurić stated in 1906. See Olga Popović-Obradović, 'On the ideological profile of the Serbian Radicals after 1903', *Tokovi istorije*, 1-2/1994, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> J. Jovanović, 'Srpske stranke i parlamentarizam' and 'A Radical's reaction', *Nedeljni pregled*, 32/1908, pp 519-20, p. 114; D. Nikolajević, 'Naš demokratizam', *Nedeljni pregled* 5/1910, pp 65-7; Aristarchos, 'Rezultati radikalske politike', *Nedeljni pregled*, 27/1909, p. 409; Boy, 'Rđavo ortaštvo', *Nedeljni pregled*, 28-29/1909, p. 425; Lannes, 'Kriza demokratizma', *Nedeljni pregled*, 45-46/1909, p. 685; Marc, 'Opravdana želja', *Nedeljni pregled*, 13-14/1910, p.194. The contributors to *Nedeljni pregled* often wrote under pseudonyms, some of which we have succeeded in deciphering. Perić's pseudonym was Garrick, S. Novaković's Dardanus, M. Novaković's Fox, M. Čekić's Brutus and Macready.