Reflections: Extreme Geographies

Extreme geographies: a response from a dependent semi-periphery of the post-neoliberal Europe

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We live in a time of paranoid borderism, a time of intense paranoia of the Other, and a time where the privileging of the nation state as the symbolic container of space, *our* territory, seems to have made a lurid return to the European continent. The consequences of this socio-spatial ordering and othering, the legacy of Euclidian thinking, and Cartesian models of knowing the world, can become an *extreme geography*: a form of cartographic cleansing that seriously needs to be addressed. In this short response to the Fennia Lecture given by Professor Henk van Houtum on *Extreme Geographies*, I offer a report from a region that has become a dependent semi-periphery of the new largely neoliberal Europe that emerged post-1989: a new Europe that is now entering a post-neoliberal era and is becoming increasingly neofascist. I draw from this region as a warning from history, and argue that the hopeful politics of the New Left in the former Yugoslavia provide an answer. The New Left, as it has been termed, in the Post-Yugoslav space, articulates the need for a new radically democratic European project: a project that is no longer neoliberal, but equally a project that does not turn to a nostalgic nationalism, a neofascism, or indeed any other form of authoritarian capitalism.

Keywords: cartography, borders, territory, nationalism, neofascism, Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina

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At the heart of our disintegrating EU there lies a guilty deceit: A highly political, top-down, opaque decision-making process is presented as 'apolitical', 'technical', 'procedural' and 'neutral'. Its purpose is to prevent Europeans from exercising democratic control over their money, communities, working conditions and environment. [...]
The more they asphyxiate democracy, the less legitimate their political authority becomes, the stronger the forces of economic recession, and the greater their need for further authoritarianism. [...]
This is the unseen process by which Europe's crisis is turning our peoples inwards, against each other, amplifying pre-existing jingoism, xenophobia. The privatisation of anxiety, the fear of the 'other', the nationalisation of ambition, and the re-nationalisation of policy threaten a toxic disintegration of common interests from which Europe can only suffer. [...]
Europe's pitiful reaction to its banking and debt crises, to the refugee crisis, to the need for a coherent foreign, migration and anti-terrorism policy, are all examples of what happens when solidarity loses its meaning. – Democracy in Europe Movement (2015)

Introduction

In this short response to the Fennia Lecture given by Professor Henk van Houtum on *Extreme Geographies*, at the Annual Meeting of Finnish Geographers, in Joensuu, Finland, 2016, I offer a report from a region that has become a dependent semi-periphery of the new largely neoliberal Europe that emerged post-1989: a new Europe that is now entering a post-neoliberal era and is becoming increasingly neofascist (Arsenijević 2014; Horvat & Štiks 2015; Riding 2016). I draw from this region as a warning from history, and argue that the hopeful politics of the New Left in the former Yugoslavia provide an answer. The New Left, as it has been termed, in the Post-Yugoslav space, articulates the need for a new radically democratic European project: a project that is no longer neoliberal, but equally a project that does not turn to a nostalgic nationalism, a neofascism, or indeed any other form of authoritarian capitalism.

The paper presented by van Houtum is timely. We live in a time of paranoid borderism, a time of intense paranoia of the Other, and a time where the privileging of the nation state as the symbolic container of space, *our* territory, seems to have made a lurid return to the European continent (Paasi 1999; Brenner & Elden 2009; Elden 2009; Painter 2010; Murphy 2013; Elden 2013). And as van Houtum and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy write in this issue of *Fennia*, it has resulted in a normalization of extreme politics in Europe (see also Bueno Lacy & van Houtum 2013, 2015; Ferrer-Gallardo & van Houtum 2014). For despite globalization, despite the increasing movement of people across national borders, despite the supranational European Union, and despite a concerted marketing of multiculturalism in the urban centers of Europe, the desire to find comfort in the 'we' of the nation, the continuing allure of dwelling in a nostalgic territorial fatherland, and the pre-defined 'purity' and singularity of a national identity, paradoxically remain (Nancy 2000; van Houtum *et al.* 2005). The consequences of this socio-spatial ordering and othering, the legacy of Euclidian thinking, and Cartesian models of knowing the world, can become, as is reported here, an *extreme geography*, an 'apartheid cartography' (Crampton 1996; Campbell 1999). A form of cartographic cleansing that, as van Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer (2005) have previously stated, seriously needs to be addressed.

I have argued in previous work that "going back to a regional geography can be a way of moving forward" (Riding 2015, 2016; see also Thrift 1983, 1994). Regional geography considers the view from below, or the view of social groups marginalized in orthodox political history (Agnew 2013). It is precisely through studying regions and writing at a regional scale – which unlike the national scale does not represent a privileging of institutions associated with the interests and outlooks of political elites (Agnew 2013) – that an emancipatory struggle can be physically placed in the landscape and an overbearing, often overtly nationalistic cartographic worldview can be deconstructed on-the-ground. Similarly, van Houtum (2010) argues in his work that geographers need to represent the mobility and dynamics of geography and geopolitics, the moving lines, the moving spaces, the moving minds, rather than focusing on and mapping the fixity. So, rather than merely presenting the dots, arrows and lines in geography and cartography geographers need to think about the choreography of geopolitics (van Houtum 2010). As such, van Houtum sets geographers the challenge to re-present the world, together with video-artists, photographers, and other imaginators (Riding 2017).

The void, the semi-periphery, the Balkans

I looked up at many maps of a Europe on slideshows in the concrete rooms of Joensuu during the Annual Meeting of Finnish Geographers, yet all contained a void, a space that was missing; it was simply not represented in the regional studies of Europe. When it was represented, and not cut off the bottom or the side of the map, it appeared as a different color, usually white, meaning empty, non-informative space, lacking any useful comparative data. But this space of the world is also intensively mapped (Elden 2005), it is overly-mapped and cartographically constructed in certain places when viewed at a national scale (Crampton 1996; Campbell 1999), so why is it now avoided, missed, forgotten, or represented as a corridor, a semi-periphery, a difficult region to explain in the largescale multidisciplinary studies of Europe? It is now, perhaps, in fact, a symbol of the increased ordering of time-space, and a paranoid desire to create more borders, a precursor of the neofascist ethno-politics

we are now witnessing on the European continent again, in amongst the death throes of neoliberalism. Slobodan Milošević may indeed be the most influential politician of our time.

Down there, always somewhere a little further to the southeast, the Balkans are still seemingly viewed as a photographic negative of what was until very recently cast as a tolerant, multicultural, post-political, post-ideological Europe. A 'postmodern racism' has existed for the past two decades or more, Žižek argues, where the Balkans are seen as the intolerant other, while the rest of Europe has supposedly come to terms with otherness in its much vaunted – indeed marketed – language of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism (Žižek 2000, 1–2). Yet, perhaps it is now time to return to the Balkans, the former Yugoslavia, and the cartographically constructed land of Bosnia-Herzegovina, to remind Europe of its own difficult recent history, and to where a newly reemerging nationalism in Europe and a carto-politics leads. The war in Bosnia, is after all, despite the mythic separating-out of Europe, a part of the European story (Rieff 1995; Riding 2015).

The region with which this response is concerned has been forgotten, its history unheeded. And the encircling 'cosmopolitan' Europeans (Nancy 2000), repeating a Balkanism (Carter 1977; Todorova 1997; Goldsworthy 1998; Glenny 1999; Žižek 2000; Mazower 2002), have ignored the devastating consequences of the endless post-socialist 'transition' in Bosnia-Herzegovina – after ethnic conflict and genocide – which has meant general impoverishment, mass unemployment and living under the post-democratic governance of divisive and corrupt elites (Arsenijević 2011). While, in the neoliberal new Europe, the very concept 'transition' is unilaterally and dogmatically followed. 'Transition' though, as Horvat and Štiks (2015) argue, is an ideological construct based on the narrative of integration of the former socialist European countries into the Western core. For Horvat and Štiks (2015), this actually hides a monumental neo-colonial transformation of this region into a dependent semi-periphery. They continue, arguing that adjunct concepts, such as a 'failed' or a 'weak' state, conceal the fact that these are not anomalies, they are instead the main products of 'transition' (ibid.). And since the 'new' liberal capitalist system is beyond questioning, widespread corruption must be related to culture dependent behaviour in the 'East' – an orientalist tradition imposed upon this region, understood under the term 'the Balkans' (see Horvat & Štiks 2015).

A warning from history, after the end of history

The war in Bosnia was eventually brought to an end in December 1995, when the Dayton Agreement was signed (Glenny 1992; Thompson 1992; Rieff 1995; Little & Silber 1996; Campbell 1998). 'Peace' has lasted to this day, although the framework agreement created in Dayton, Ohio, which divided the country in roughly half along ethnic lines, has prevented Bosnia-Herzegovina from developing entirely beyond wartime divisions (Toal & Dahlman 2011; Jeffrey 2013). Preceded by an agreement between Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats signed in Washington in 1994, the country was separated into two political entities: the predominantly Bosnian Serb, Republika Srpska, and the mainly Bosniak and Bosnian Croat, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, sometimes informally referred to as the Bosniak-Croat Federation. Locally, the country is further separated out, as the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has ten autonomous cantons with their own governments. Each canton is known as majority Bosnian Croat, majority Bosniak, or 'mixed' (Nancy 2000). Within the cantons are municipalities which further define the individuals living there. While Republika Srpska is lead more centrally from the *de facto* capital Banja Luka, there are still observable geographical divisions between the northern portion and southern portion of the state within a state.

This cartographic representational idiosyncrasy, or more precisely 'apartheid cartography', enforces a nationalist overhaul of space upon citizens in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Campbell 1999; Crampton 1996). Cartography has aided a post-socialist era of never-ending 'transition' politics, of brutal capitalism and diminished democracy, and the continuation of a nationalist governance that it was hoped would fade away (Horvat & Štiks 2015). Resembling Berlin after World War II, Sarajevo is a meeting point of the different lines that were drawn across Bosnia-Herzegovina and is partly in Republika Srpska and partly in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The *de jure* capital of Republika Srpska is Sarajevo, the *de facto* capital of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is Sarajevo, and Sarajevo is the capital of the country Bosnia-Herzegovina, where a weak central government also resides.

It is no surprise therefore that mass protests erupted here in February 2014, deconstructing the divisions on the map, as Sarajevo is a place that was for Jean-Luc Nancy (2000), a mêlée, due to its long history of multiculturalism in a real and not prescribed sense. A historical regional focus as bridge between East and West and the old power blocs, Sarajevo is a non-aligned space, a place where a profoundly anti-capitalist and radically democratic vision of society could form (Harvey 2012; Arsenijević 2014; Horvat & Štiks 2015; Riding 2016). Entangled within their emancipatory struggle protesters saw a present Yugoslavia, which was bit by bit disappearing. And they sought to retain what remains there were of that socialist state, and to reclaim a socialist space in a space of post-socialism. Most of all they sought to reclaim the commons, the factories, the museums, everything that the post-socialist 'transition' had in their eyes diminished.

It is now over a decade since the Constitutional Charter of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro was adopted, becoming the successor to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, rendering Yugoslavia former. Yet a socialist Yugoslavia of brotherhood and unity, made up of six republics, and two autonomous provinces – Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia, and Vojvodina and Kosovo – was destroyed years before 2003, in the days and months leading to ethnic conflict (Glenny 1992; Thompson 1992; Rieff 1995; Little & Silber 1996; Campbell 1998). There are though here on this *rebel peninsula* (Harvey 2012; Arsenijević 2014; Horvat & Štiks 2015), material and institutional remnants and lived personal experiences and memories of that bygone Yugoslav socialist era (Luthar & Puznik 2010).

The New Left in the former Yugoslavia

Organized autonomously, Plenum are the most radical experiment in horizontal democracy that can be found across the Balkans since the collapse of Yugoslavia (Arsenijević 2014; Horvat & Štiks 2015; Riding 2016). Plenum articulate socialism beyond the state and Plenum are not aligned to a single political party. Plenum are – in simply existing as they do outside of the traditional governmental and elite spirals and circles – post-nationalist spaces in a region that is heavily influenced by nationalist politics during the post-socialist 'transition' era. The political potential of space within a post-socialist country was taken up by those first protesters remembering Yugoslavia in the present. In so doing bodies were made political and people were given the opportunity to discuss politics beyond the municipality, the canton, the entity; beyond yet within the lines the Dayton Agreement drew across the country, and separated citizens along.

The following towns and cities now have their own Plenum: Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zenica, Mostar, Travnik, Brčko, Goražde, Konjic, Cazin, Donji Vakuf, Fojnica, Orašje and Bugojno. There are core Plenum principles, which translate as openness, transparency, and non-corruption. Plenum opened a space, a possibility into which people can jump. Almost everybody spoke at the Plenum of Citizens of Sarajevo, as the space enabled a kind of collective therapy (Arsenijević 2011). Certain performances were demanded from those who attended: no one voice is greater than another and no individual voice is perceived as animal howl. It is, as such, a space for speech beyond prohibition, enabling a disjointed society to collectively mourn a traumatic past and its enduring traces. In the desert of post-socialism, at Plenum, those present, imagine a forgotten future, a socialist future beyond the ethno-nationalist divisions of the 'transition' era (Arsenijević 2011; Helms 2013; Gilbert & Mujanović 2015; Gordy 2015; Hromadžić 2015; Jansen 2015; Kraft 2015; Kurtović 2015; Majstorović et al. 2015; Mujkić 2015; Touquet 2015; Murtagh 2016).

As I have argued elsewhere, Plenum are a *Eulogy for the Mêlée*, they are small eulogies for a Yugoslavia, a Bosnia, a Sarajevo of the certain past, before ethnic cleansing (Riding 2016; see Nancy 2000). They are in a phenomenological sense the spirit of what Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) calls, being singular plural. Plenum claim existence is co-existence, they are part of an emancipatory struggle, and they are a vital being-with, which the delineation of a formerly socialist space into nationalist segregation has denied for twenty years or more (Crampton 1996; Campbell 1999; Toal & Dahlman 2011; Jeffrey 2013). Documenting the morphology of regions and the fracturing of states, reveals here a nationalist overhaul of space, which manifests itself locally in the street, the city, the municipality, the canton, the entity, and indeed in the individual (see Elden 2013; see also Anderson 1983; Campbell 1998; Nancy 2000; Brubaker 2002).

Conclusion

Instead of division and fragmentation, the common language of Balkanist literature, the formerly socialist Yugoslav states have entered a new era of resistance after a recent rebirth of radical politics, as individuals forge a trajectory towards a democratic future (Arsenijević 2014; Horvat & Štiks 2015; see Bourdieu 1998). There is, as such, a region of the European continent, that part of the continent that has for so long been defined by its radical politics, which is rebelling against the core. Embraced, subsumed and made dependently peripheral within the 'new' liberal global economy, there are now new reasons to engender a radical politics in this region for a post-Cold War generation. Beyond the capitalist anarchism associated with other socio-political movements of recent times, *The Plenum Movement* openly questions the new Europe that emerged post-1989: a new Europe that is now entering a post-neoliberal era and is becoming increasingly neofascist (Arsenijević 2014; Horvat & Štiks 2015; Riding 2016). In short, this socio-political movement strives for a revolution (Smith 2010).

With a rebranded fascism on the rise across Europe, in what has become a suffocating post-democratic age, the hopeful politics of the New Left in the former Yugoslavia provide an answer to the paradox van Houtum outlines (see Štiks 2015). In a time of globalization, where in which the European Union is disintegrating, a paranoid desire to circumscribe the state and reinforce borders is growing, and is leading to less freedom within the states themselves. Europe is building walls faster than ever before and reverting back to the nation state as a singular definition of an individual citizen, while Europe's pitiful reaction to its banking and debt crises, to the refugee crisis, to the need for a coherent foreign, migration and anti-terrorism policy, are all examples of what happens when solidarity loses its meaning (Democracy in Europe Movement 2015). In response, the new radical politics in the old Yugoslavia, emphasizes the need for a new radically democratic European project, a project that is no longer neoliberal, but equally a project that does not turn to a nostalgic nationalism, a neofascism, or indeed any other form of authoritarian capitalism.

Decades after the forgotten socialist geographer Fred Singleton (1985) spoke of a Balkan Federation of Socialist States, as a response to Yugoslavia's fracturing, this region – which has exhausted the radical in many guises – once again provides a manifesto for a radically democratic future (Štiks 2015). We must now, over twenty years after the collapse of Yugoslavia, at the very least consider the unique position of *the bastards of utopia* living radical politics after socialism (Rasza 2015). For the end of neoliberalism is nearing, perhaps the end of the European Union as we know it, yet in its place an authoritarian, ethno-nationalist form of capitalism cannot be allowed to form. This region of Europe, the place from where this response emerges out of, knows most of all and deeply understands where carto-politics, border-making, and an ethno-nationalism will lead.

Acknowledgements

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