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978-0-521-08402-4 - Beyond Marx and Tito: Theory and Practice in Yugoslav Socialism

Sharon Zukin

Excerpt

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I

YUGOSLAV SOCIALISM: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The most important thing . . . that we can know about a man is what he takes for granted, and the most elemental and important facts about a society are those that are seldom debated and generally regarded as settled.

Louis Wirth

From the beginning, the purpose of this study has been to find out and to demonstrate rather than to prove. Often in reading about socialism and revolution, I had come upon references to 'the Yugoslav way' and the political institutions—workers' councils and communes—associated with it. Theoretically, the institutions of what the Yugoslavs called 'self-management' were based on the concept of participatory democracy; in practice, Yugoslavs and foreigners agreed that they worked. Some foreign observers went so far as to advocate the spread of the Yugoslav system to their own countries, indicating that only this kind of participation could eradicate the alienation and loss of social purpose that have afflicted the highly industrialized societies.¹

Saturated but not satisfied with these general statements, I started to question what 'self-management' really meant to people's lives. Perhaps I was reacting with the American distrust of (another country's) political slogans, or with my generation's disillusionment with established priorities, but I wondered how far institutionalized self-management had reached into the lives of ordinary citizens. If the concept is to be applied to very different societies, then we should know whether citizens living under the Yugoslav system come to feel that they are indeed managing their 'selves' and their problems. In short, when a journalist says that 'workers' councils in Yugoslavia seem to be

¹ See Roger Garaudy, *The Crisis in Communism: The Turning-Point of Socialism*, trans. Peter and Betty Ross (New York: Grove Press, 1970), ch. 4 and Robert A. Dahl, *After the Revolution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), ch. 3.

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successful',² we have to know *how* successful and *at what*. Until now, these have been open questions.

These questions coincided with an interest in studying alternative forms of socialism. A possible approach, indicated by the methodology of Alfred Schutz and the empirical work of Oscar Lewis and Robert Lane, involved trying to define the meaning of a socialist society in terms of its subjects' lives and perceptions.³ Basically, this sort of study would present an idea of how the whole social system works in a socialist country, as well as how ordinary persons perceive it, relate to it, and evaluate its working. In this way the student of a socialist society would be able to come to grips with the dichotomy between theory and practice on many levels, as well as to assess the relative impact of cultural and ideological norms on social change. The work of Schutz, Lewis, and Lane also suggests that a good medium for this sort of research is that of intensive conversation and participant-observation, working with a small number of people chosen to represent various parts of the social structure. Examining the everyday life and the life-experiences of these representative individuals — as well as public statements by political leaders, public opinion surveys, economic data, and studies of specific locales — should enable the social scientist to make a concrete, critical analysis of particular forms of socialism and the conditions surrounding their implementation. In contrast to studies of elites, processes, and institutions, a firm grounding in the real 'mass base' of politics would shed light on conflicts and contradictions in both theory and practice. Through collecting and reproducing the citizens' social reality, students of socialist societies could offer a clearer idea of the dynamic which lies behind often confusing accounts, say, of the "enemies" [who] constitute

2 Jack Newfield, 'A Populist Manifesto: The Making of a New Majority', *New York*, 19 July 1971, p. 43. Cf. the argument by a British student of participatory democracy that Yugoslav workers' councils have been functional to the country's economic growth. Carole Pate-man, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

3 Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964-7); Oscar Lewis, *La Vida* (New York: Random House, 1966); Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1962). For methodology, see appendix. 'Meaning' here denotes the interpretation that specified subjects develop to explain the way their social institutions work, the way their society hangs together, and the social purpose that they find in their own lives.

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a seemingly incompatible horde, described [by the Yugoslav leadership] as anarcho-liberals, pseudo-liberals, technocratic managers, Stalinists, petit bourgeois democrats, bureaucratic centralists, Cominformists, ethnic chauvinists in the various republics and emigré intriguers abroad'.⁴

This sort of direct documentation of life under socialism had not yet been attempted, but Yugoslavia seemed a likely place to try it. First, the concept of self-management as their ideological linchpin makes Yugoslavs particularly conscious of and willing to talk about their political needs and activities. Because they are proud of self-management and its potential, through workers' councils and decentralized local government, for the realization of Marx's ideals, they are amenable to explaining their society and their beliefs to outsiders. Second, the degree of political freedom is relatively high, and the distrust of foreigners relatively low, for a socialist country. So I had some confidence that Yugoslavs would talk to me about politics.

My plan was to live in Yugoslavia for a year (1970–1): participating as much as possible in daily life, observing the kinds of public and political interaction which characterize the society, and reading about everything else I did not see directly. Following Schutz, Lewis, and Lane, I tried not to start out with preconceived analytic categories. Instead, I tried to open myself to Yugoslav ways of thinking. Although the problems and vocabulary of social science eventually shaped my writing, my concerns for the most part coincided with questions that Yugoslavs — citizens and leaders alike — are asking themselves.

A significant part of their self-examination concerns the relationship between Marxist theory and Yugoslav practice. Despite domestic critiques of 'the Yugoslav way', foreign observers have been either unable or unwilling to confront this question. Perhaps those Western writers who, as I do, favor the idea of socialist self-management fear that criticism in this area would either cast doubt on the general principle of self-management or cause the Yugoslav government to react defensively. Moreover, as foreigners, they may recognize that Yugoslavs perceive such remarks as gratuitous, if not also harmful. Nevertheless, it is crucial that students of socialist societies join Yugoslav thinkers in examining

⁴ Raymond H. Anderson, 'A New Political Orthodoxy is Asserting Itself in Liberal Yugoslavia', *New York Times*, 2 January 1973.

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how everyday practice diverges not only from Marxist theory, but also from official Yugoslav ideology.

Surely the discrepancy between theory and practice is common to all political systems. It would be foolish to lash at the Yugoslavs — no matter how grand the claims of their official ideology — on this score. So instead of asking *why* the Yugoslavs have experienced a gap between theory and practice, we should consider *how* they have arrived at their particular form of this relationship. Indeed, this is the critical purpose behind the present work.

We might find it helpful to think of the relationship between theory and practice as a particular interplay between leaders and masses in which both sides act on the basis of expectations and calculations. Within this relationship, motivations of self-interest mix with definitions of collective goals and visions of future society. Neither pure altruism nor pure egotism causes the divergence between stated theory and experienced practice: this is a fact of social life for both capitalists and socialists, although capitalists prefer to work from implicit, rather than explicit, theory. However, in all societies we can separate empirically a 'founding' ideology or myth, current official ideology, formal or legal norms of institutions, actual institutional norms, perceptions of both formal and actual norms, and behavior of individuals within institutions. Although the leadership group usually determines the official ideology and establishes the institutions, the masses respond to their efforts with degrees of belief or disbelief, participation or withdrawal. This combination of the leadership's efforts and the masses' response makes for the changing relationship between theory and practice. So we may regard socialist self-management in Yugoslavia less as a full-blown ideological or institutional system than as an ever-emerging chain of choice and response under certain conditions.

In their choices within and responses to recent historical situations, both Yugoslav leaders and masses have shown a great deal of independence and initiative. On the one hand, the nation has been noted for its self-liberation from Hitler's army in a guerrilla war; on the other hand, the leadership has been cited for its defiance of Stalin, its defense of democratization and self-management, its renunciation of Communist Party dictatorship in 1958, and its denunciation of bureaucracy and other entrenched interests. But if we look at the goals and policies as-

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sociated with Yugoslav socialism over the past twenty-five years, then we find that the choice has remained overwhelmingly the leaders' and the response the masses'.

INTERPRETATIONS: THE LEADERS

Indeed, most analyses of the evolution of Yugoslav socialism — even those offered by Yugoslavs — are based on interpretation and evaluation of key choices that the leaders have made. To pursue the relationship between theory and practice in Yugoslavia, it will be helpful to review three of these analyses and to suggest a fourth. The three Yugoslav analyses are those of the dissenting former leader Milovan Djilas; the philosopher whom the leadership now accuses of harmful dissent, Svetozar Stojanović; and several political scientists and economists (notably Najdan Pašić, editor of *Socijalizam*) who represent the current official line.

The new class

Milovan Djilas is the former Yugoslav communist leader who, during the postwar period of consolidating power, began to question publicly the ethics of his associates. This sort of criticism resulted, over the next ten years, in his expulsion from the Yugoslav Communist Party and two imprisonments. Eventually Djilas renounced communism for a type of socialist democracy. Although he was removed from both leadership and Party for a series of critical articles that he published in Yugoslavia in 1954, significant parts of his critique have apparently been accepted by makers of official ideology. Aside from the Bolshevik leader Bukharin, whose observations were appreciated by a more limited public, Djilas was the first writer to alert widespread critical attention to the effects of leadership behavior on the communist social system. As Djilas did in his early writings, so subsequent Yugoslavs have also defined the stages of the communist revolution in terms of the leadership's choices in — or responses to — successive historical situations. Later writers have also shared Djilas' concern with the connection between state ownership and bureaucracy. The point on which these Yugoslavs diverge from Djilas is his condemnation of communist leaders as a distinct personality type (hungry for power, dependent on authority structures) with a preference for certain forms of or-

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ganization (cliques within the leadership, oppressive apparatuses toward the rest of society). Once in power, according to Djilas, communist leaders constitute the modern form of despotism. This is obviously a view that the makers of official ideology cannot accept.

Djilas depicts the leaders of a ruling Communist Party as 'the new class' — the group which directs the society through its exclusive and total control of power, ownership, and ideology.⁵ The key term here is ownership, which encompasses and symbolizes the extent to which 'the new class', in Djilas' view, has betrayed its revolutionary ideals. Once in power, Djilas states, the new class's sole motivation lies in 'strengthening its property holdings and its political positions'. But the 'strengthening' for which they aim is unquestioned and absolute control. Whether all property is under 'state ownership', as in the Soviet Union, or 'social ownership' as in Yugoslavia, the new class makes a mockery of socialist revolution. Thus the first premise of the official ideology of the new socialist state — 'socialization' of the means of production — does not mean what it implies, that is, the extension of all ownership functions to the collective citizenry. Nor do the stated corollaries of 'socialization', such as decentralization, liberalization, and self-management, really apply. As Djilas warns, 'Decentralization in the economy does not mean a change in ownership, but only gives greater rights to the lower strata of the bureaucracy or of the new class.' For Djilas, real decentralization or liberalization — in the economy as in the polity — would extend to free discussion of the leadership and open consideration of alternative systems. As he puts it, in the communist state 'liberalization and decentralization are in force only for Communists'. Similarly, Djilas goes on, the Yugoslav communist leadership has used workers' self-management as an ideological smokescreen. The leaders' original intention, in the 1950 adoption of self-management, was to make 'a concession to the masses' during the stressful period after Yugoslavia's break with Stalin. When Djilas wrote four years later, the measure had not been put into practice. From its inception, he states, self-management was 'increasingly relegated to one of the areas of party work'. Thus, self-management, like decentralization, be-

⁵ The exposition here follows Milovan Djilas, *The New Class* (New York: Praeger, 1957). For the convenience of the reader, all citations are from section 7 of the essay 'The New Class'.

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comes another property of the new class, to be managed, dispensed with, and distorted in its own interest. 'Without universal freedom', Djilas says, 'not even workers' management can become free.'

Djilas' general statements about the intention behind the leadership's adoption of various policies, such as decentralization and self-management, may well be accurate. He may also be right about the leaders' subsequent unwillingness to implement these decisions. After all, Djilas remained a member of the communist leadership from the prerevolutionary (prewar) period of clandestine organization and student agitation until 1955. However, several of his specific criticisms about the lack of policy implementation may have been rendered obsolete by the leadership's responses to new situations. Indeed, Djilas' subsequent writings have often modified his original critique. The indictment that he brings against the early non-implementation of workers' self-management is of particular interest for an examination of 'the Yugoslav way'. Djilas states that workers' self-management has not resulted in a real sharing of profits on any level, that the bureaucracy has levied taxes which leave nothing to the workers but 'crumbs . . . and illusions'. This point has been refuted not only by the official Yugoslav ideology, but also by numerous studies of domestic and foreign observers.⁶ Still, two of Djilas' questions about self-management remain unanswered: What is the influence of the Communist Party leadership on self-management? Can self-management be realized without total freedom in society?

Although twenty years have passed since Djilas first expressed his theory of the new class, his statement continues to exert an influence on attempts to analyze socialist societies in general, and 'the Yugoslav way' in particular. In terms of our immediate concerns, it is significant that Djilas' theory documents a distance not only between Marxist theory and Yugoslav practice, but also between (stated) official ideology and (observed) Yugoslav practice. According to Djilas, this gap is created and perpetuated by the communist leadership.

⁶ See, for example, Josip Županov, 'Samoupravljanje i društvena moć' [Self-management and social power], in *Samoupravljanje i društvena moć* (Zagreb: Naše teme, 1969). Cf. F. Singleton and A. Topham, *Workers' Control in Yugoslavia*, Fabian Research Series, no. 223 (London: Fabian Society, 1963), p. 23, cited in Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, p. 97.

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Svetozar Stojanović, a philosophy professor at Belgrade University, shares Djilas' concern about the distance between Marxist theory and Yugoslav practice. This concern is revealed not only in his writing, but also in the title of a collection of his essays which was published in 1969: *Between Ideals and Reality*.⁷ Like Djilas, Stojanović traces a departure from prerevolutionary theory to postrevolutionary realities. Stojanović also sees continuity broken and congruence shattered by the revolutionary leadership's assumption of power and the perquisites of power. This results in a double standard, sanctioned by the leadership, of impoverishing the masses and enriching the political elite in the name of socialism. But Stojanović differs from Djilas on two major points which deepen and broaden the common concern of their analyses. First, Stojanović does not condemn the communist leadership for a lack of morality. Rather, he blames the postrevolutionary leadership for perpetuating and enforcing a revolutionary ethic which is no longer relevant to social conditions. Thus, according to Stojanović, the communist leadership must respond to a changed historical situation by revising its theoretical assumptions. In Stojanović's terms, the leadership must make the transition from a theory of 'underdeveloped' to a theory of 'developed' communism.

According to Stojanović, the prerevolutionary and revolutionary situations — particularly the struggle for power — spawn an ethic of deprivation which becomes the norm for all relationships between the individual and society. Because it applies to all spheres of social action and belief, including individual motivation, economic relationships, and political institutions, its influence may be compared to that of the Protestant Ethic. In tone also, though not in content, the two ideologies show similarities, for the revolutionary ethic consists of 'solidarity, cooperation, general interests, discipline, moral stimulation, renunciation, equality in distribution'. In short, the revolutionary ethic replaces the ascetic individualism of the Protestant ethic with

⁷ Svetozar Stojanović, *Između ideala i stvarnosti* [Between ideals and reality] (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1969). Except as noted, citations in this section are from the essay 'Ka razvijenom komunizmu' [Toward a developed communism]. As cited here, Stojanović seems to appreciate and to justify the direction that the official ideology took after 1965; as events have proved, however, the leadership rejected Stojanović's analysis and its implications. See below, chapter 8.

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'collectivist and ascetic egalitarianism'. It directs individuals to work for the success of the new social order; it justifies economic relationships based on mass needs and equal distribution; but it accepts the domination of political institutions by a monolithic state and its oligarchic elite. Essentially, Stojanović's Revolutionary Ethic accounts for the combination of moral fervor, collectivism and egalitarianism, and subjection to political controls which characterizes the 'Stalinist' period of Yugoslav socialism (1945–50).

Unfortunately, Stojanović says, during the early postrevolutionary period the leadership of the new communist state acts to negate its own ideals. In the material sense, the leaders siphon off the country's meager resources; morally, they contradict the egalitarianism of socialism; politically, they emasculate all institutions save those which transmit their will down to the masses. These institutions trace their roots to the prerevolutionary period, when the clandestine revolutionary movement needs a 'centralized, hierarchical, and, in many ways, undemocratic organization' — in short, when the movement sets up a Leninist-type party. Once power has been attained, Stojanović says, these organizational forms have outlived their usefulness. But in the meantime the leadership has become wedded to its organization, and it is reluctant to give up these forms. What a paradox this is, says Stojanović, for the communist leadership to rely on an undemocratic organization not only before and during, but even after the struggle for power.

The revolutionaries got together of their own free will to fight for de-alienation, but the revolutionary organization has alienated itself from them and become the center of new forms of alienation in the whole society . . . Even more grotesque, such a party often carries out 'reorganizations', which turn in a circle, for they change the organizational chart but don't challenge the principles of organization and action.⁸

If this situation is allowed to continue, Stojanović warns, the society will degenerate. As the Russian, Chinese, Yugoslav, and probably the Cuban, experiences show, 'the positive revolutionary tradition can be safeguarded only if it is accommodated to

⁸ Stojanović, 'Revolucionarna teleologija i etika' [Revolutionary teleology and ethics], in *Izmedju ideala i stvarnosti*, pp. 193–4.

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changed conditions; otherwise, it is transformed into a conservative force'.

Stojanović asserts that the Yugoslav leadership has indeed responded to new conditions. Thus he identifies the stage of 'primitive' communism with Stalinism (even after Stalin's death) in the Soviet Union and with the 'Stalinist' postrevolutionary period (1945–50) in Yugoslavia. For Stojanović, the Yugoslav leadership's subsequent choice of decentralization and liberalization indicates that it has made the transition to 'developed' communism. In contrast to the collectivist and ascetic Revolutionary Ethic, the principles of 'developed' communism consist of 'Marxist personalism, humanistic hedonism, and stimulating material reward according to work'. Such norms are irrelevant to the first phase of revolution in underdeveloped countries. But once the country has crossed a threshold of survival — both economic and political — conditions have changed and the revolution must change its approach. To save the revolution, Stojanović argues, the leadership must reinterpret its ideology and organization so that they adapt to the new social conditions. Politically, this means moving from 'primitive politocratic etatism' to 'modern technocratic etatism', loosening up controls and sharing the direction of society with all those who are equipped for making decisions. Economically, this change implies granting material incentives and rewards, raising the standard of living, and accepting increased social differentiation not between the leaders and the masses but among the people themselves. Such changes imply a redirection of emphasis from collectivism to self-interest. The general interest of the society as a whole can be protected by nonpolitical coordination, especially by the self-management system and by a market mechanism. In this phase of socialism, the market will insure that reward is really commensurate with the quantity and quality of work performed. But Stojanović also points out the danger that the market mechanism could assume predominance over deliberate planning and conscious controlling of social development. Because a socialist society must provide for the welfare of its citizens without regard to their individual earning power, limitations must be set on the market's sphere of influence.

By and large, Stojanović's analysis of the transition from 'primitive' to 'developed' communism seems to describe the Yugoslav leadership's pattern of choice and response from 1950 through