

# Identity Building Practices In Former Yugoslavia

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## **Abstract**

My proposal for our panel concerns a particular kind of political practices, namely public demonstration and procession developed, in different ways, in each Yugoslavian republic during the 80s and the 90s. This point of view, apart from permitting an interesting deepening in semiotic studies of these topics, could at least answer to the question: is a demonstration in itself a source of identity? In example, the difference between the style and the course of demonstrations in Serbia (the famous Milošević's mitintsi), in Slovenia or in other countries, could be interpreted as the manifestation of a different trajectory of identification for these national identities? This perspective could develop a significant insight in the processes of identity-building in a situation of crisis, and in its relation with the construction of new political practices. This research will be performed by instruments provided by latest sociosemiotic and cultural studies, aware that a tight dialogue between different disciplines is the key for a better understanding of these events.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

My paper will analyse practices through a broad point of view, whose methodology lies principally on lotmanian semiotics of culture, and will concentrate on a brief examination about practices developed in the political sphere.

Practices are indeed a complex subject, covering an high number of phenomena (linguistic metaphors, computer games, urban trajectories and so on), and somehow problematic for the classical semiotic analysis: they are neither texts nor models, and incites scholars to develop a specific analytical strategy; moreover, it is impossible to discuss about practices in a general way, because each of their different occurrences demand different instruments to study them.

Only adopting this point of view is then possible to draw generalizable conclusions about this wide and elusive object of study. What I can say, in this introduction, is that semiotics, which is a science intended to construct its own theory working on his case studies, seems to be the more adequate discipline to perform this task.

The main concept of my paper will be identity, or, in a more specific way, those public practices that involve or influence the identity of the subjects that develop them.

I chose to analyse political demonstration as a crucial example of this kind of practices. In fact, identity is a central feature in every demonstrations, and it is constructed in, and through, a superimposition of overlapping language games, credences, styles and so on. I then consider language neither as a medium for the representation of an extralinguistic reality nor as a medium for the expression of our inner thoughts and emotions. Rather, it constitutes a rule-bound system of meaning and action that conditions the ultimately political construction of identity.

The second choice I did is the selection of a specific case study, that will be a little corpus of demonstrations that took place since 1981 to 1992 on Yugoslavian territory. My question is then in which way these demonstrations influenced and shaped the new national identities which were taking form in last days of socialist Yugoslavia. As a matter of fact, public practices, category in which I include demonstrations, played a central and decisive role in throwing into crisis (symbolically and politically) the entire «brotherhood and unity» system on which socialist Yugoslavia was built.

### 1.1. Objectives of the paper

My study intends to shows how — when a determined organization of society and identity seems to dissolve — even the choice of a particular behaviour in demonstrating opposition to the established power could become a strategy to differentiate «ourselves» from the «others». This point of view inserts itself into the wider work I'm performing in my Ph.D. research, dedicated to the analysis of nationalism in former Yugoslavia.

As we will see, demonstrations, in any form, have been a powerful instrument to conduct and manipulate public opinion in a country where associationism and civil society were far from being important voices in the public sphere. Public sphere that was by then strictly directed and organized by Communist party (the League of Communists) or local apparatus of power exercise.

The central dynamic is the *construction of difference*, and is without any doubt a typical semiotic dynamic. In the words of Yuriy Lotman (1984), we can call it an *enforcement of the border* between two semiospheres in contact, which depends by the relations between discourses and texts spread from both directions. The mutual translation between values and texts, or rather the assimilation or the refuse of them, define power relations between two conflicting cultures and identities.

In which way can I say that demonstrations have been one of the source of new identities in former Yugoslavia?

First of all, I must recall that in that period Yugoslavia was facing the reappearance of *nationalism*, which was previously heavily persecuted by the regime; an example is the *Croatian Spring* of 1970-71: it was a huge mobilization of people demanding autonomy for this Republic, which expressed by picketing public buildings and demonstrating outside military barracks. No need to say that it was immediately labelled as *counter-revolutionary* and put down by the army, while its leaders (many of them members of the Communist League, as the future president of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman) were all imprisoned or sentenced.

But something changed, in Yugoslavia, after the liberalization of public opinion after Tito's death.

In the 80s similar demonstrations not only were not persecuted, but they became one of the most powerful instruments deployed by new political elites to obtain mass support, even in open contrast with the constitution and the symbols of Yugoslavian federation.

## 1.2. What should we call a demonstration?

A typical demonstration presents a lot of elements susceptible to be analysed in a semiotic way: a concentration of people doing some actions (marching, singing, yelling) at the same time, in which are shown particular symbols (flags, banners) and directed *towards* or *against* something, which can be a person, a government, an institution and so on. I analyse this kind of practice as a single semiotic object made of different elements which co-operate on the comprehensive meaning of the practice as a whole. But they develop this meaning because they are managed in a specific environment, be it cultural, social or political. In some way, demonstrations try to contest or to change this environment: in many cases, they are acts which aim to modify or influence the political agenda of an institution by «presenting» in a public space a particular theme or request.

These demonstrations are *practices bond to the political sphere* also because they contribute to the definition of a particular identity (be it also a simple *counter-identity*). But they are indeed not reducible simply to politics, because nationalism is a complex discursive form, whose goal is to make the nation the unique source of political legitimation. To perform this task, nationalism develops a wide narrative frame, generated by a manipulation of the history and the characteristic of a specific human group, which is inserted into a *great narration* whose protagonist is the nation. Symbols, myths, texts and practices became then occurrences of this discourse, and their central dynamic is the textualization of the *national identity* of that group.

## 2. YUGOSLAVIA IN THE 80S

The crucial role of the political system, even more in a country like Yugoslavia, cannot be neglected: nationalism and civil society have been, in the 50s and 60s, the principal victims of the socialist homogenization. In Former Yugoslavia, political demonstration were deeply driven by political system, and usually took the form of *public celebrations* of the country and its leaders, or of military parades. What I am discussing here is, at the contrary, a different type of demonstration, which I can call *protests* against an existent or established political system. When the economic and social situation of Yugoslavian Republics, facing unemployment, public debt and lack of social reforms, went over the point of no return, this kind of demonstrations spread in almost every part of the federation: they started with the revolts of Kosovo workers in 1981, happening cyclically during the decade, and finished with the huge demonstrations in Slovenia and Croatia, demanding independence, in 1990-91.

These last two examples are interesting to underline the subject of my paper: even when the social context (the declining Yugoslavia), the request of the participants (independence) and the institution against which they're demonstrating (Yugoslavian institutions) are the same, the need of building new identities could develop in different and often opposite ways. They depend by the reasons leading these demonstrations, which is to say the source of the manipulation of the Subject deprived from his object of value.

It seems obvious that demonstrations in Yugoslavia, although caused by economic or social reasons, did not spread from civil society and associationism, which have been almost completely eradicated from the socialist system.

They actually originated from the same political sphere, at least in those areas of the political sphere less convinced by the opportunity to prosecute Yugoslavian project. That was the fault from which nationalism substituted socialism as the principal source of political legitimation.

The consequences of these demonstrations have been structural, because they managed to produce a complete and definitive change in the political organization of the country. In the meanwhile, the state wasn't able to channel these protests in a way that could guarantee a peaceful and unanimous transition. This situation permitted to these demonstrations to broaden the *differentiation* between those who took part to it and those that did not, qualifying the seconds as «remnants of the old system». Demonstrating became then a strategy to define someone as a *new subject*, broken out from a dark age of suppression and tyranny. Conclusion that was not entirely true, but, as semiotician, I think we know that the important is not its trueness but whether it was considered true or not by the people.

I can say, then, that demonstrations in Yugoslavia have been the place in which a *passional* and *emotive* theme, which I would call «will to change», tied itself up with nationalism, which became the unique plausible way in which this change could be accomplished. This consciousness took on a pre-reflexive form, feeding itself with historical reminiscences, traditional group repertoires of myths and symbols that could testify past victories by revolutionaries. These collection of stories and symbols, which is a typical nationalist trait, can assume a *sacral* or *religious* nature, becoming the source of a political culture made by elementary certainty. As I recalled, flags, anthems, historical songs, popular symbols, and so on.

To exemplify this considerations, I will start by analysing a first, very famous, example of demonstration, which was held in Kosovo Polje the 28 June 1989, Vidovdan.

### 2.1. 28/06/1989. The Kosovo Polje Rally

In Serbia the constructed and manipulating nature of these demonstrations is particularly evident: first Serbian nationalists protested against the central party denouncing a *crawling genocide* against their people, backed, officially or not, by Yugoslav institutions. But when Serbia became the only plausible guide in the transition towards a different form of Yugoslavia, they started to swear their support to traditional loyalties, like religious faith and the party itself.

The 28 June 1989, after the annexation of Kosovo and Vojvodina decided by president Slobodan Milošević, one million people gathered in Kosovo Polje, which is a plain not so far from Pristina, to celebrate the six hundredth anniversary of the battle in which Serbian army was defeated by the Ottomans, inaugurating five centuries of Turkish rule over western Balkans. This happening turned into a great nationalist demonstration, whose peak was reached during the speech Milošević performed in the afternoon.

Three elements seems central to me:

1. The participation;
2. The display of particular symbols;
3. The place in which this demonstration happened.

I'll start from the latter. Kosovo Polje is a symbolic place for a human group, which is Serbian people, and no one else: in this sense, being in that place meant being member of the Serbian nation, in first instance. Even if Yugoslavian institutions were still alive, people that gathered there chose to define themselves as Serbian, instead of Yugoslavian.

From a stage 30 meters tall, Milošević charged up the million present there, reciting a discourse which many commentators indicate as the beginning of his nationalistic politics. The people answered, at every pause, with applauses and yelling the name «Slobo», which was the typical form of referring to the — at that time — Serbian President.

This kind of demonstration shows has a significant characteristic of «rally» demonstrations: the contemporary presence in the same place of a high number of people celebrating the same event, and physically answering to the same leader, renders it a way of strengthening the common identity of the participants.

The militancy in a movement, and its realization in a demonstration, institutes a *valorizing form of identity* (Pizzorno 1991), which I can describe as the formation of a new *habit* which relates with other, more personal and unique, habits. The power of demonstration in *manipulating* the identity of those who participate to it relies on the reason of their presence there: there is a value that transcend their individual biography, and they want to celebrate and protect it. This value, concerning nationalist movements, is evidently the absolute pre-eminence of the nation over every other form of identification. I think this could be a perfect application of Benedict Anderson's concept of *imagined communities*: even if no one of the participants knows each other, their contemporary presence in that demonstration is the symbol of their being a community. Symbols shown and songs sung in the demonstration are deeply linked to

this *community*, which maybe does not acquire a «real existence» as a nation, but nevertheless lives as a nation in the *imaginary* of people gathered there.

But this is not the only important element. There is a tower in the middle of that plain, called *Gazimestan* («place of the hero»), built there to remember the sacrifice of the Zar Lazar Hrebeljanović against the Turks of the sultan Mahmud II. On it it is possible to read a really explicit sentence, attributed to Lazar himself and known as «Kosovo curse»:

*Whoever is a Serb and of Serb birth  
And of Serb blood and heritage  
And comes not to fight at Kosovo  
May he never have the progeny his heart desires!  
Neither son nor daughter  
May nothing grow that his hand sows!  
Neither dark wine nor white wheat*

The day of the Kosovo Polje rally, Gazimestan was covered by two huge towels: the Serbian flag, and an icon representing the Emperor as a Saint. In this superimposition of politics and religion, deployed in the demonstrations through a valorizing process, could be possible to find a way to study the passions which are strictly connected with political participation. But this discussion would lead me away from the objective of this paper, and I'm forced to postpone it in another occasion.

What I can say is that the image of Sveti Lazar (Saint Lazar) was there to appoint Milošević as the new leader of the Serbs, thus resolving the rally in a *legitimation of the leader*, who represents the union of an entire people in a single nation. That's the way by which this kind of demonstration tied an imagined community, the nation, with a real human group, the Serbs.

By this perspective, it is possible to consider demonstrations as strategies of differentiation developed by public practices. Demonstrations seems to be, in this point of view, an interesting case study to show how practices develop in everyday life, taking the form of a collective action which have deep consequences on every single participant.

The central concept of *collective action* is problematic, due to the polysemy of the term *collective*. This is not the place to broaden this discussion, but it's important to underline that the participants of a demonstration «do something» together on the basis of shared motivations and in function of shared values. Since demonstrations are *intentional collective acts*, I can define practices as *concatenations of habits and tendencies* manifested by texts, actions, at the extreme *thoughts*, that nevertheless exceed these occurrences.

This demonstration saw the birth of a new Serbian identity, constructed on nationalist arguments. But national populism in Serbia was obviously part of a more general wave of xenophobic nationalisms in many post-Communist states, facing disintegration and the desperate need to reform. However, the mass populist and nationalist demonstrations in former Yugoslavia cannot be explained away so simply, for they also represent a distorted attempt at a popular, communitarian, and grassroots expression of the growing disenchantment of very broad layers of the population.



If nationalism was a central feature in Yugoslavian demonstrations, at the opposite I must recall that also the request of democracy played its role. Nationalism and democracy can be considered, in my opinion, as the opposing scales of values in Yugoslavian demonstrations, to be intended as the extremes of a *continuum*. To testify this hypothesis, let's have a look to one more example, coming from Slovenia.

## 2.2 The New Collective's Hoax and the marches for independence in Ljubljana

Slovenia was the Republic less affected by the economic crisis of the 80s, but nevertheless played a central role in the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, and very often sloven people expressed their critics towards the central institution through demonstrations.

These demonstrations were very different from Serbian ones: first, they were marches, and not rallies. Second, very rarely the leader limited his presence in the demonstration with a single discourse from a stage, like Milošević. Milan Kučan and Janez Janša, the first President of independent Slovenia and its first Minister of the Defence, often walked with demonstrators and delivered speeches only at the end of the event. There was not that personification of the leader we saw in Serbian case. That shows a different dynamic of developing a conflicting identity with the past, and seems by itself an instance of differentiation by the traditional political behaviour in Yugoslavia, which was similar to the Serbian «follow the leader» type. Then we can consider Slovenia institutions as a quite different Destinant, that does not claim its right to lead Yugoslavia, as Serb ones did, but to secede from it.

In Slovenian demonstrations were denigrated Yugoslav symbols, as the 1987 NK's hoax demonstrates quite well. NK, which is New Collective, was an association which participated to the contest for the poster of the Day of Youth, *Dan Mladosti*, in 1987. As a deep critic to Yugoslav institution, they proposed a revised copy of a Nazi poster, dated 1936, obviously purged by nazi symbols which were replaced by Yugoslav ones. So the swastika was substituted by the partisans' red Star, the German Eagle with six candles representing the six Yugoslav Republics, and so on.

Thus, the semi-symbolic relation between the two posters described Yugoslavia as similar to Hitler's Germany. But the odd part of the story was that this poster was actually chosen as the official broadsheet for the celebration, in some way confirming the accuses from NK. This was a symbolic but striking attack to the coherence of Yugoslav narration.

In a similar way, demonstrations in Slovenia were almost peaceful but very critical against Yugoslav symbols and institutions, including Tito, Kardelj and various figures of partisans' and communists' legend. Kardelj, Tito's Man Friday, is a good example, because he actually was a sloven from Ljubljana. Mocking the image of Kardelj signified that being sloven was not important in the years before: it was important in that very moment, during those demonstrations. Past was qualified (or, better, *was being qualified*) as an heavy and negative burden: a new story was beginning with its brand new protagonist, which was no more Yugoslav and surely not communist.

The separation between Yugoslav and sloven identity was by then almost realised: the latter was choosing a specific trajectory of identification by far different from the first. It seems possible to associate it with Landowski's schema about the styles of *otherness*: slovens followed

the trajectory of the *snob*, who aspires to join an *elite* which represents an *elsewhere*. No need to say, I think, that this *elsewhere*, euphorically connoted, is Europe, as furthest as possible from those confuse and warlike Balkans.

This dynamic also underlines a traditional stereotypical way of thinking about the Balkans, which is deeply discussed and analysed in Todorova (1997). Thus I can suggest a particular trajectory of the Sloven subject defined by those demonstrations: the construction of sloven nationalism began with the separation from Balkan totalitarianism, represented by the Socialist past, and continued with the definition of a Sloven subject, still in forming, which aims to connect with its object of value, that is *democracy*. That could be possible only by acquiring a secondary object of value (*freedom*) that guarantees the «can-do» which distinguishes it from Yugoslavian *non-democracy*. That goal was reached by permitting to non-communist parties to run at the elections, by liberalizing associations, and by publishing articles claiming for an independent Slovenia. But these purposes would not have been reached without that huge popular mobilization which characterized the two-year period of '89 and '90.

An interesting point of discussion can be which dynamic guaranteed this mass participation. Landowski (2004) proposed the model of *contagion*, that I can describe as an operation in which the Subject «feels» what another subject is feeling, a sort of «putting himself in his shoes», that leads him to acquire the point of view of the second subject. A similar description could explain specific situations, but however seems ineffective as regards these objects of analysis. What guarantees the sharing of points of view between more subjects cannot be a simple contagion of passions and feelings, that does not explain how these feelings *pass* from a subject to another. More useful seems to me, as a suggestion for the future, to discuss on dynamics of *convergence* of values between different individuals, that generates a new habit. The contagion, if exists, is the consequence and not the source of this convergence, which depends by the relations between the values of social subjects and real circumstances of their daily life. More different imagination is from reality, more probable is that this conflict turns out in social mobilization, even heavier than the one generated by imitation as in the contagion theory.

It is, in fact, the construction (in the semiosphere) of a human group which shares, also partially, some values; the central feature is the transformation from an *imaged community* to a group active in real life, which is guaranteed, in demonstrations, by co-presence and by developing together a certain set of actions: marching, yelling, singing, maybe *destroy*. No one of this actions is vital to perform this task, because the meaning resides in the complete practice (demonstration) those people develop together. Thus it is not a *ritual*, as it has been simplistically said, but a complex concatenation of different *habits* which aims at constructing a common platform of values between more social subjects.

### 2.3 Some considerations on Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina

If Milošević's *mitintsi* and sloven democratic demonstrations can represent the extremes of the same *continuum*, the demonstrations in Croatia and Bosnia could be placed half way from each one: more similar to Serbian ones in Croatia, more similar to sloven ones in Bosnia.

But they're different indeed. In Croatia, where the experience of the Croatian Spring left political power in the hands of a elite preoccupied to lose not what have gained, national-



ist insurgence took place later than in Slovenia, and assumed a more explicit form. In Split, in 1991, hundreds of people gather in the central place, not far from Diocletian's Palace, and march towards the local JNA (Yugoslav army) base, trying to assault it to take arms and ammos. Violence found its road to the eyes of the public exactly through this kind of demonstrations, which were directed against institutional symbols of Yugoslavia, like the army or federation buildings, and developed without a direct political manipulation: it defined a complete separation from the original Yugoslavian narration and a deleting of every remaining legitimation of the Yugoslav system.

On the other hand, in Bosnia, where a national *sentiment* was far to be spread in a large section of the population, even in 1992 in Sarajevo members of different nationalities manifested for peace, obviously following the process I highlighted before, which is showing symbols of a common identity. The interesting thing is that those symbols were still Yugoslav symbols: Tito's portraits, the Federation's flag with the red star, and so on. They were demonstrating that there was no way for further differentiation in Yugoslavia, and that every person living on its territory was strictly connected to the others, as friends and sisters. But, since nationalism had already become the main political ideology in most Yugoslav Republic, that demonstration was repressed in blood, and a girl named Suada Deliberović was killed by a Serbian sniper. A sad event that could demonstrate how determinant could demonstrations be in shaping culture and identity.

I can say, in this sense, that practices are more connected to *credence* than to *action*, as regulated acts whose programs settle the aims, the behaviour and the competence of social actors.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The particular kind of practice I call political demonstrations, in relation to the examples provided from the Yugoslav situation, seems to fit very well in an Peircian and Lotmanian analytical frame of analysis. Practices are combinations of different *habits* that influence (and are influenced by) the identity of the subjects that develop it. More specifically, in the political sphere, practices are a way of *communicate* and *share* someone's identity, or someone's values, regarding a specific state of things.

Nationalist demonstrations institute a more valorizing thematization of *identity* more the reason of the demonstration transcend the life of the single subject, and ties itself up with wider spheres of social life and public actions.

As I noticed, demonstrations are a mass phenomenon that developed, in Yugoslavia, in two extreme ways, which I intended as a *continuum*: by one side, demonstrations like the Serbian one, that I labelled «follow the leader»; by the other side, demonstrations like Slovenian ones, in which the main theme is *difference* and the main strategy is the construction (or the reconstruction) of a new identity in open contrast with the past. It's significant that the behaviour of different leaders, Milosević or Kučan, Tuđman or Izetbegović, reflected in the way in which demonstrations were organized and developed, and whether their goals were reached or not.

Those different styles of demonstrating, originating by different concatenations of habits, are nevertheless able to constitute new *habits* in the peircian sense: at their best, they can define and spread a new identity for the social group which participate to these demonstration. But they can also constitute new frames and *predicative scenes* where the identity and the values are manipulated by political or symbolic powers, as the state and its leaders, or the Church and its patriarchs.

Obviously this short presentation cannot exhaust every facets of the problem. As I told in the beginning, practices are phenomena which can be analysed only selecting a particular layer of pertinence, that is to say by defining *a priori* what the scholar wants to study in them. I concentrated on the identity layer, and socio-semiotic dynamic by which a specific practice shapes and influences individuals' credences and *habits* about themselves and their social group, thus constructing new *imagined communities*.

In particular, I let aside considerations about passions and the construction of an emotive frame of the demonstration, that can have influences on the psychology and the sensibility of social subjects. A deeper research, that will of course consider a wider corpus and broaden the methodological frame of analysis, is then entrusted to the future: in this project, I think many suggestions could come from the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1994) and his studies about society and practices, and from the results of recent interpretative anthropology, that not by chance uses more and more semiotic instruments, as the central concepts of *narration*, *habit* and *discourse*.

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