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A Marxist Analysis of Key Media Representations of the Migrant Crisis in Serbian Media

Abstract: This work aims to question the main contradictions of the migrant crisis by media coverage. The sheer amount of images and discourses produced to service the everyday political jargons is met by a Marxist critique of the political economy behind the mass displacement. Close attention is given to the economic and geopolitical conjunctures that preceded the events of 2015 and the earlier history of labor power allocation. This lays the groundwork for a more specific context, i.e. the role of the Balkans in this crisis and the ideology of its media. The problems dealt with are: the coining of the term “The Balkan Route”, the economic and political conjuncture that determines the contemporary Serbian media sphere and the several key representations of the migrant crisis, primarily in social and news media. The conclusion summarizes the main points of the article. Critical assessments are made on potential field research possibilities that could further strengthen the arguments developed in the course of the text.

Keywords: refugee crisis; migration; class conflict; ideology; media; Serbia; The Balkans

Introduction

The media coverage of the European migrant crisis started in early 2015 and reached its peak in the summer of the same year. The flow of people from the periphery to the center of the capitalist world system began much earlier. If we find ourselves separating the two phenomena, we have already erred and moved a step closer from understanding the full scope of the crisis to a managerial approach in dealing with it as it unfolds. In order to avoid this hidden ideological trap, we aim to do two things: First, to question the main contradictions of the crisis from the standpoint of the political economy of crisis stricken states. Second, to use these facts to help produce a critical understanding of different ideologies of Serbia’s media environment and their representations of the migrant issue. First, we must schematically present the basic political economy of the Third World, in general, and that of the Arab spring of 2011, in particular.

As was previously stated, many of our perceptions of the gigantic migratory movements are ill-informed precisely because we, whether openly or covertly, base our understanding less on solid facts and more on the current mass media representation. A fact from a joint UN and OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) study shines light on the brute numbers of global migrations in the last two decades. The period from 1990 to 2013 has been marked by the rise of South to North migration. In this period the number of “international migrants in the global North has increased by around 53 million (65%)”, which is far more than in any other region of the world.¹ In fact, these are only brief episodes in the overall chain of events that came about mainly as a result of US imperialism in the global South as a whole since the end of the Cold War – or, in broader politically economic terms, since 1975. In this part of the essay we will pay more attention to the overall effects neoliberalism has had on the Arab world. Let us first take a brief look at how the economies of the Arab republics were integrated in the global capitalist order.

Giovanni Arrighi has argued that after World War II the Keynesian “fair deal”, planned by the US administration, for the newly independent Third World states of Africa, the Middle East and East Asia, led to initial growth in those regions based on increased manufacturing and exports share in their GDP. This in turn led to episodes of stable development for a part of the 1950s and 1960s. However, in the cases of Africa and the Middle East this was not nearly as much as expected in relation to the GNP per capita. The early 1970s had a different effect in the Middle East and the rest of the Third World. “For initially the global crisis seemed to improve the economic prospects of Third World countries [...]”, Arrighi says. “In the early 1970s, the terms of trade – especially, but not exclusively, for oil-producing countries – improved for them. Moreover, the crisis of profitability in First World countries, combined with the inflation of oil rents routinely deposited in Western banks and ‘extra-territorial’ financial markets, created an overabundant liquidity. This excess liquidity, in turn, was recycled as loan capital on highly favorable terms to Third and Second World countries.”² It was at this time that the reinter economies most utilized their membership in OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Producing Countries). The developing African countries founded NIEO (New International Economic Order) and drew up the Lagos Plan of Action, in order to try to renegotiate the terms of their incorporation in the global political economy so that their development would be secure in the following decade.

¹ OECD and United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Migration in Figures, A Joint Contribution by UN-DESA and the OECD to the United Nations High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development*, 3–4 October, 2013, 1–2.

² “Third World regions increased their degree of industrialization (as measured by the manufacturing share of GDP) and urbanization (as measured by the non-rural share of total population) to a far greater extent than they improved their GNP per capita. Comparatively speaking, in other words, Third World countries were bearing the social costs of increasing industrialization and urbanization without the economic benefits they had expected to reap on the basis of the historical experience of First World countries.” See Tables 4 and 5 in: Giovanni Arrighi, “The African Crisis: World Systemic and Regional Aspects,” *The New Left Review*, 2002, <https://newleftreview.org/II/15/giovanni-arrighi-the-african-crisis>, acc. February 28, 2019.

The monetary policies of early neoliberalism, contrary to the previous period, consisted of contracting the world money supply, raising interest rates, lowering taxes for the wealthy etc. These measures successfully managed to draw capital from the periphery back the center. The US went from being the main source of world liquidity and direct investment in the 1950s and 1960s to the world's main debtor and the largest recipient of foreign capital in the 1980s.

In the Arab world, in the particular case of rentier revenue funded Syria, Bassam Haddad has written that these politically economic events led to a sequence of austerity measures in the country. This caused the shrinking of the state and public sector, and, supposedly, left more room for the private sector. To some external actors, including the amorphously labeled “international community”, for instance USAID (United States Agency for International Development), this development was desirable in Syria and in the region. “However, the overwhelming majority of the population, who has to fend for itself, does not view this in positive terms, as public provisions, jobs, and welfare dwindle”, Bassam Haddad writes. Later he adds:

The much heralded private sector is nearly everywhere in the region only picking up ‘shares’ of fixed capital formation from the embattled and bloated public sector, but is nowhere near compensating for job losses, let alone accommodating new job-seekers. The revolts of spring 2011 are not unrelated to the failure of the ‘private-sector-led’ alternative to state-centered economies. Neither model served people or sustainable growth.³

If we apply all that we learned from the case of Third World rentier economies after the 1970s, it would not be farfetched therefore to call the case of Syria similarly to those found in the African political economy.⁴ Namely, “perverse growth.” A term coined by Giovanni Arrighi and John Saul to describe “growth which undermines, rather than enhances, the potentialities of the economy for long-term growth.”⁵ The political events that triggered all-out war in 2011 are complex yet not unexpected, at least when they are viewed in light of the unsustainable growth and neoliberal economic turmoil behind the so-called “Arab Spring” in the case of Syria.

Keeping all this in mind we can now say with certainty that the aforementioned migrants and war refugees were and are actually a mass of contemporary proletarians of Third World/Middle Eastern economies, amassed steadily through the decades of impoverishing neoliberal monetary and geo politics. What happens when these groups of people move through a crisis prone region, such as the Balkans?

³ Bassam Haddad, “Syria, the Arab Uprising, and the Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience,” *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 4, 1 (May 2012): 118, 120.

⁴ Here we can recall the old and influential article by Hazem Beblawi on the concept of the *rentier state*, where he designates the economies of Syria and Egypt as more of “location rentiers” than typical oil ones. See: Hazem Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World” in *The Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciani (London: Routledge, 1990), 85–98.

⁵ Giovanni Arrighi and John S. Saul, “Social and Economic Development in Tropical Africa,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 6, 2 (August, 1968): 150.

The Balkan Route: media and the refugee

The first part helped lay the groundwork for a more specific context, i.e. the role of the Balkans in this migrant crisis and its media representation of it. The problems that will be addressed here are: the coining of the term “The Balkan Route”, the political and economic conjuncture that determines the contemporary ideological formations in Serbia and the several key representations of migrants. Here we will revisit Althusser’s theses on ideology to help analyze the given subject.

The term “Balkan Route” appeared in early 2015 in the media and was soon adopted by Frontex (their precise wording was “The West Balkan Route”), the infamous European Border and Coast Guard Agency.⁶ A part of their website gives basic data on the measured flow of migrants through the Balkans. The grim reality behind the seemingly neutral geo and infographic designation is that the Balkans is a form of “Balkanism”. As Rastko Močnik puts it:

As an ideology of domination, demonstrating that within *Balkanism*, two types of relations of domination are articulated: the relations of geo-political and economic hegemony, and the relations of internal domination within the societies geo-politically stigmatized as ‘Balkan.’ *Balkanism* supports, that is, ideologically mediates and reproduces the economic, social, and political dependence of a certain semiperipheral European region upon the Western European center, as well as the socio-economic domination of the ruling elites within the countries of the region.⁷

Indeed, the very term and the practices it entailed show us only too well the functions of the ideology of ‘Balkanism’ in maintaining the current hegemonic order, now slightly called into question by the wave of massive transient migration.

A movement of masses of “unwanted people” seems to have great potential in revealing the capitalist social formations in the Balkan states to the citizens of these countries. Perhaps Zdenka Badovinac articulates this possibility most eloquently in *October*: “Some of the main refugee centers on the Balkan route were set up in factories where, until recently, workers from various ex-Yugoslavian republics had come to work. Many of these factories failed or were downsized after the recent economic crisis.”⁸ She later continues: “Thus, the Balkan route has come to symbolize not only the refugees’ loss of home but also the loss of our own community, not only the loss of our former shared country but also, above all, the loss of a society of solidarity and welfare.”⁹ It is apparent that this crisis exposes the legacy of several other previous

⁶ <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/focus/frontex-activities-in-the-western-balkans-TW1ZIm>, acc. February 28, 2019.

⁷ Rastko Močnik, “Balkan as an Element in Ideological Mechanisms,” in *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragments*, eds. Dušan I. Bijelić and Obrad Savić (Cambridge MA, London UK: The MIT Press, 2002), 79–80.

⁸ Zdenka Badovinac, “Future from the Balkans,” *October* 159 (Winter 2017): 103–118, acc. February 28, 2019.

⁹ *Ibid.*

crises left in the wake of an important imperialist articulation of neoliberal capitalism – particularly, the 1980s offensive on Eastern European and Balkan postsocialism and the launch of the “primitive accumulation of capital” in this part of the world.

In order to theorize the several key media representations of migrants in Serbia in 2015, we must introduce the specular structure of ideology as theorized by Louis Althusser. In a well-known essay, titled “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, he presents his thesis that “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”¹⁰ The object of ideology is therefore not reality itself or any real object, but instead a *real relationship* transformed into an imaginary one. Althusser elaborated on this process of transformation in a less known earlier text named “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses.” It was part of Althusser’s attempt to criticize Lacan’s bold homology between the concepts of surplus enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*) and Marx’s surplus value.¹¹ This, Althusser claimed, was structural parallelism. A form of theoretical error that occurs when a theorist makes broad homologies between different, relatively autonomous, structures. In this case, Lacan made such a homology between the relative autonomy of the discourses of the unconscious and ideology. Althusser rejects such homologies. In his view, the discourse of ideology and the way it produces the subject-effect is distinct from that of the unconscious.

Ideology produces this effect via the structure of “specular centering.” “The subject induced is duplicated by a producing subject (the empirical subject [lower case ‘s’] is duplicated by a transcendental subject [upper case ‘S’], the man-subject by God etc.)” On the other hand, the unconscious subject-effect is absent. “We are dealing with a pseudo-centered structure, subtended by a *structure of flight or ‘lack.’*”¹² In order to produce an effect of a subject the discourse of the unconscious requires a symbolic supplement. This is where the master signifier steps in to “signify the signifier of the subject and produce the imaginary effect of the subject as ‘I’”, as Rade Pantić puts it. “The function of the discourse of ideology is therefore to ‘capture’ and anchor the discourse of the unconscious by giving this subject of the lack a mirror image in which he can identify himself by mistake and thus achieve a sense of self in this image of the Other.”¹³ Ideology therefore “produces the effect of the subject” precisely by “producing this identification by mistake via its specular structure.”¹⁴ Here we return to Althusser who says that every ideology has a material existence, which means it

¹⁰ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), according to: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.html>, acc. February 28, 2019.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *D’un Autre à l’autre: Le séminaire, livre XVI* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-16-from-an-Other-to-the-other.pdf>, acc. February 28, 2019.

¹² Louis Althusser, “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses,” *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings (1966–1967)*, ed. Francois Matheron (London, New York: Verso, 2003), 50.

¹³ Rade Pantić, “Kritičko-materijalističke teorije reprezentacije u savremenoj umetnosti i kulturi” (PhD diss., University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia, 2014), 130/1, http://eteze.arts.bg.ac.rs/bitstream/handle/123456789/40/Rade%20Pantic_Kriticko-imper.%20teorije.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, acc. March 3, 2019.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

has a function within the dominant mode of production of a given society. The mode of production requires many support-functions or Träger-functions in order to reproduce itself and the class domination that enables it. “This requirement remains abstract: the base defines the Träger-functions (the economic base, and the political or ideological superstructure *as well*), but the question of *who* must assume and carry out this function, and how the assumption of it must come about, is a matter of *perfect indifference* to the structure [...]”¹⁵ Ideology’s *role* is precisely to designate the subject that is to occupy a Träger-function. It interpellates individuals by constituting them as subjects and giving them imaginary reasons for assuming the support-functions defined by the base.

Let us now look at how various subjects were interpellated by the occurrence of migrants in Serbia in 2015. The far right dealt with the refugees and migrants as threatening outsiders and rapists.¹⁶ The Subject of their identification is the Nation. However, seeing that the vacuum of socialism has so far produced only nations in the form of “identity communities”, a testament to the impossibility of reproducing liberal and pluralist nation states of the 19th century in contemporary neoliberal circumstances, it is safe to say that their Subject is missing.¹⁷ This produces an effect of far right subjects misrepresenting their immediate social community as the Subject and trying desperately to reinstall the missing order of the historical nation state. The two main ideological practices of such identity politics are policing the hierarchy of the community on the inside, and preventing strangers from entering it on the outside. The construction of the image of migrants as “threatening outsiders” serves the cycle of producing and reproducing subjects for the right wing. The subjects of the colloquial “New Left” invert this image. “The threat” to the identity of their community “comes from the inside, not the outside”, as the old left-wing saying goes. The subjects of the missing Nation are the dangerous outsiders for them. On the inside, their immediate social community is represented as the “avant-garde party.” The use of the symbols employed and the jargon spoken are the measures of internal hierarchy and the aesthetic effect of authenticity in their usage constantly obfuscates the real political and ideological effects of such practices. Obviously, they produce an image of the migrants as the “international proletariat” to their missing Subject of the Left/Communism.¹⁸ In this way, they fail to leave the dominant ideology of identity politics.

However, the way in which these two typical identitarian media representations of migrants play into the government’s media strategy is more complex. The government, which is right-wing in its economic policies and ideology, appears here as a

¹⁵ Althusser, “Three Notes on the Theories on Discourses,” 51.

¹⁶<http://informer.rs/vesti/drustvo/281974/istinski-horor-beogradu-migrant-zarazen-malarijom-pobegao-bolnice-luta-gradom>, acc. February 28, 2019; <http://mondo.rs/a942765/Info/Drustvo/Subotica-Pakistanci-migranti-pokusali-da-siluju-devojcicu.html>; acc. February 28, 2019; <http://webtribune.rs/osvajaci-grcke-migranti-pale-ikone-i-traze-zabranu-crkvenih-zvona/#>, acc. February 28, 2019.

¹⁷ Rastko Močnik, “Fašizmi: historijski, neo- i post-,” *Spisi o suvremenom kapitalizmu* (Zagreb: Arkzin, 2016), 180/1.

¹⁸ <http://rs.n1info.com/a93212/Vesti/Situacija-na-Horgosu.html>, acc. February 28, 2019.

political center, a very ‘extreme’ one at that.¹⁹ Its ideological and political broadness is a result of the neoliberal hegemony over the traditional ideological and political differences in the West. An alternate term for such politics would be the one suggested by Rastko Močnik – “realist technocratic ‘non-politics.’” In way of class analysis, the Serbian government is an alliance of the majority of the comprador bourgeoisie, represented by a single ruling party.²⁰ The head of this political formation is a structural function in the dominant mode of production. We will call this function “the local administrator of capital” (LAC). This is an autocratic political figurehead. It serves to regulate the accumulation and circulation of large foreign capital in the country. In order to achieve better performance of its function, the LAC’s powers were expanded by foreign capital to control the entire political and media sphere of Serbian society. During the migrant crisis, the current acting LAC choose a non-identitarian, liberalist approach. By advocating and enforcing policies of safe passage and hospitality to all migrants traveling via the Balkan Route, the LAC tended to use statements based in liberalist ideology, where migration was depicted as an act of the freedom of movement.²¹

A very condensed image of this ideology showed up on Twitter when a BBC reporter tweeted an image of a Serbian police officer, an ethnic Albanian, holding a baby of migrant parents registering in the Reception Centre in the south of Serbia.²² The image showed the weak body that is in search of its basic human rights being helped and cared for by the citizen representative of the State. This liberal democratic State (the same one that is in reality fading into stable authoritarian neoliberalism) is the Subject here. A dictatorship of the comprador bourgeoisie is displaying its liberalist ideological arsenal in order to produce state subjects and thus strengthen the legitimacy of their dictatorship. The identitarian media practices of the far right/New Left provided a background for this operation. The right-wing generated fear and anxiety through government-controlled media in order for the ruling party and the LAC to appear as the necessary liberal counterweight.

¹⁹ We should keep in mind that it is the term Tariq Ali coined in order to illustrate the political situation in the UK and USA around 2015-16. It aims to make a play of words on the common political use of the adjective ‘extreme’ in relation to either left-wing or right-wing political parties. His main thesis is that since the forging of the neoliberal policies in the seventies, and especially after the end of the Cold War, there has been no room for any other type of politics except for neoliberal right-wing dogma. The usual: “free markets, debt driven economies and financialization.” He claims that this dogma has pushed the entire global political spectrum to the right and turned the traditional center into a bloated behemoth of former liberal and conservative politics whose differences almost cease to matter in the totality of the neoliberal consensus. Tariq Ali, *The Extreme Center: A Warning* (London: Verso, 2015), 9–21.

²⁰ Močnik, “Dvije vrste fašistoidnih politika,” 154–155; 176–177.

²¹ <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/1728273-vucic-srbija-ce-primiti-jedan-broj-migranata-mi-nepodizemo-ograde>, acc. February 28, 2019.

²² <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-34210994>, acc. February 28, 2019. This image should be viewed in light of the global xenophobic trends of the Twitter feed in which it appeared. See: Eugenia Siapera, Moses Boudourides, Sergios Lenis, and Jane Suiter, “Refugees and Network Publics on Twitter: Networked Framing, Affect, and Capture,” *Social Media + Society* 4, 1 (2018): 1–21.

Conclusion

The different ideological functions the media image of the refugee/migrant correspond to different support-functions in the economical and political conjuncture in Serbia. The appropriated identitarian far right/New Left and the ruling 'extreme' center all had their different forms of representing the transiting Middle Eastern masses in their ideologies. This part of the work aimed to sketch the dynamic of the current Serbian capitalist social formation. The approach taken was by first outlining the overall place of the "Balkans" in the current global hegemony and then by analyzing the ideological practices in the political conjuncture of Serbia. This was done in order to connect the two crises, one present (driven by hostilities in the former Third World and ideologically formatted by the global media) and one past (the reintroduction of capitalist classes and the "primitive accumulation of capital" in former Balkan and Eastern European socialist states). Further research activities would have to focus more precisely on the finer logic of this relation, theoretically reconciling both of the crises within i.e. a world system analysis.

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Article received: December 7, 2018

Article accepted: January 23, 2019

Original scholarly paper