



# Yugonostalgia. The Meta-National Memory Narratives of the Last Pioneers

Milica Popovic

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# YUGONOSTALGIA

## The Meta-National Memory Narratives of the Last Pioneers

### Abstract

*Taking into account the specificities of (post) Yugoslav neostalgia (Velikonja, 2010) there is a strong need for theory to take a closer look at the multiplicities of both Yugoslavia and its nostalgia(s). Introducing the political aspect of nostalgia, with particular focus on the last generation of pioneers (born between 1974 and 1982), we are leaving the banalizing official post-communist discourses (Buden, 2012) on nostalgic transition losers and those academic discourses that deny nostalgic sentiments of the ability to generate a political movement or a programme (Horvat and Štiks, 2015). Within revisionist political and cultural discourses, nostalgia emerges, through Svetlana Boym's concept of counter-memory (Boym, 2001), in public spaces without state control and without the control of dominant discourses of political elites, and as such is being translated into reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001, p.49).*

*Through this reflection, the last generation of pioneers creates memory narratives that interweave the political and the nostalgic. These narratives perform as "noeuds de mémoire" – exceeding attempts of territorialisation and identitarian reduction (Rothberg, 2010) and through their multidirectionality (Rothberg, 2009), they emerge as meta-national Yugonostalgic memory, creating a new paradigm in the political field*

*This essay aims to provide further reflection on possible theoretical frameworks for understanding the phenomenon of Yugonostalgia and its place within the political imaginary of the last pioneers. Remaining embedded in research and theory, I have decided to structure this article as an invitation to a dialogue, rather than a fully rounded academic article. The present political phenomena demand new perspectives and thinking about Yugonostalgia remains a challenge.*

## From Passive Sentimentalism to the (Possibility of) Articulated Resistance

Looking at the current political and social contexts of ex-Yugoslav countries, regardless the differences and specificities of their transitional journeys respectively, the mainstream discourse remains overwhelmingly “post-communist” (Buden, 2012) – since the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Yugoslavia was either ignored or represented as the worst period in its history. The “losers of the transition” are prominent in both media and academic insights regarding the phenomenon of Yugonostalgia and for the political elites anti-communism, including anti-Yugoslavism, has been the “key ideological tool” (Stojanović in Linstead et al. 2010, p.232).

The idea of Yugoslavism (the Panslavism of South Slavs) existed since the beginning/middle of the 19th century (Rajaković in Rupnik, 1992). The main idea of Yugoslavism is based on the cultural and linguistic proximity and complementary economies of the territories inhabited by the Slavic peoples in the Balkans (Čalić, 2013). Yet in the 1981 national census, approximately 5.4% of the population declared themselves Yugoslavs (Ramet, 2006). Even if the idea largely precedes the “second” Yugoslavia, anti-Yugoslavism neglects the fact of the existence of a monarchist Yugoslavia from 1918 to 1939, solely focusing on socialist Yugoslavia (1943-1991).

Anti-Yugoslavism has been manifesting itself as the ruling, mainstream and somewhat unavoidable common denominator for all politics and policies of ex-Yugoslav countries. Whether it has been institutionalized through, for example, the constitutional ban on forming any new Yugoslav alliances like in the constitution of the Republic of Croatia, or has remained political and often bordering with the absurd, like in the case of the mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić, who prohibited a cake in the shape of the red star to enter the City Hall on the occasion of the 100th birthday celebration of the partisan and honorary president of the Anti-

Fascist League of Croatia, Juraj Đuka Hrženjak. Anti-Yugoslavism has also been indirectly strongly supported by European tendencies and policies. In the context of a number of European declarations and resolutions condemning and remembering “victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes”, revisionist efforts in ex-Yugoslav countries were legitimized and Ustaše and Chetnik movements were fully revived as legitimate ideologies and forces in the World War II, even more so as victims of the Yugoslav “totalitarian communist regime”. Besides the political efforts of revisiting Yugoslav history, the academia, including a number of what Georges Mink would call, activist historians, fervently joined.

The ex-Yugoslav space was renamed in order to follow revisionist tendencies and to avoid any references to a common past – we are now inhabiting Southeastern Europe, or the Western Balkans, or just simply “the Region”. Significant absences and depersonalizing forms, all different discursive strategies (Fairclough, 2004), further strengthened, to the extent in which they reflected the realities of the ex-Yugoslav through the erasure of memory of Yugoslavia.

Historical revisionism is everywhere. Yugoslavia, as an idea of a common state of South Slavs, was and still is presented as a failure by the political elites in their efforts to legitimize their nationalist or neoliberal positions (or often both), linked with efforts towards nation building processes in the early 1990s. Histories multiply as official discourses decide on what to remember and what to forget. Street names have changed in many post-Yugoslav cities of the new states (Radović, 2013; Jouhanneau in Mink and Neumayer, 2007). Monuments from Yugoslav times have been demolished and/or neglected (Horvatinčić, 2015) and history schoolbooks have been adapted creating new versions of history (Stojanović in Linstead et al. 2010).

Erasing the past of a country in which most of today's active population was born, created a dynamic of its own. Between historical revisionism and intimate memories, collective memory has been created as

a meeting point between the representations of the past shared by individuals and the newly created historical memory, differentiated from history as a science (Lavabre, 1994). As the official discourses worked hard towards erasing any mention of Yugoslavia, unless it represented the dark ages of “the Region”, and to discredit any positive memories or even reflections on the socialist Yugoslav period, memory has become reactive (Mink in Mink and Bonnard 2010, p.24). Within this counter-memory being born (Boym, 2001), understood as memory created in public spaces without the control of the state and escaping the control of the dominant discourses promoted by political elites, the phenomenon of reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001, p.49) emerged.

Yugonostalgia was expressly dismissed as a politically irrelevant phenomenon, banal, or at its best, as a commercialized commodity that sells well. Tanja Petrović asserts that today’s revisionist and banal understanding of Yugonostalgia is actually denying individuals of any possibility to be taken seriously (Petrović, 2012, p.13). Or as we might put it, denying Yugonostalgic subjects of any political subjectivity.

Despite the fact that certain academic circles and artistic productions slowly started reappropriating the field, sparking reflections of a Yugoslav past and present, although most certainly still marginal, Yugonostalgia remained ousted from the political field. Theory dealing with the issue came down to two main currents – asking the following questions: can Yugonostalgia be a new idea for political mobilization (Buden, 2012), is it “subversive, anti-system and emancipative” (Velikonja in Perica and Gavrilović, 2011, p.92) or is it incapable of generating a political movement or programme (Horvat and Štiks, 2015)?

So, what is the political and subversive significance of Yugonostalgia, if any?

## Whose Nostalgia?

When discussing memory and nostalgia, the agents that we are deliberating are a crucial element in understanding the phenomena. On the one side, in order to leave the banalizing discourses which relate Yugonostalgia solely to the “old” generations that did not manage to adapt to the demands of the (brave) new capitalist and democratic societies, we need to look into different age ranges of the populations in question. On the other side, as Yugoslavia(s) were multiple throughout its history, memory and consequently the following nostalgic sentiments are strongly connected to the periods we are discussing – and thus generations we are focusing on.

A generation, as we understand it here, constitutes a form of collective identity and a community linked by values and aims, experiences and beliefs (Mannheim 1978 in Kuljić 2009), or as Todor Kuljić would put it, a generation is marked by “participation in the same events, real and constructed ones” (Kuljić, 2009, p.5). One such generation is the last generation of pioneers – people born in Yugoslavia between 1974 and 1982.

Starting from Maurice Halbwachs and the/his theory of collective memory, memory is always created in relation and in opposition to other memories and the position that “in reality we are never alone” (Halbwachs, 1968, p.2). In this impossibility of a “strictly individual” (Halbwachs, 1968) memory, we find a space of dialogue between intergenerational memories and public discourses, including the revisionism of political elites. Childhood memories are often explained as indirect memories, which we interiorize through the discourses of our closest environment, and of course, most significantly the discourses of our parents (Halbwachs, 1968). As most of the last pioneers themselves would claim, their memories are strongly influenced by the memories of their parents and they are well aware that their image of Yugoslavia is the one that has been mediated many times, through many filters – through their closest surroundings, through their school environments – changing textbooks and

confused (history) teachers, through revisionist political discourses and media (Popović, 2012).

So what comprises this “last generation of pioneers”? Delineating the time limits of a generation is always a methodological challenge. Here, I took as a point of reference the Yugoslav pioneers’ induction event: the last generation of adherents were born in 1982. This moment has marked the identity of the generation in their childhood, due to the importance of this event and its symbolic weight. It was marked as the start of the “ideological and political socialization” (Duda, 2015, p.110) and the ritual of maturing (Rihtman-Auguštin in Duda 2015, p.110). To become a pioneer meant to become a citizen, to become Yugoslav.

On the other side, 1974 marked the adoption of a new and the last Constitution of the socialist Yugoslavia which strengthened the decentralization and federalization processes, and also that same year, Tito was proclaimed lifelong president. Through the generational approach, I am accepting to take a generation as an autonomous social phenomenon and an independent variable, putting it ahead of the ethnic, religious or national principles (Perica in Perica and Velikonja, 2012).

The specificities of this generation may be many – from their memories of Yugoslavia being solely linked to their youngest age, thus creating more space for indirect memories and adoption and/or adaption of discourses in their closest environment, to the fact that it is a generation that travelled without moving – born in one country, growing up in another or several others; a generation which has, to varying extent, from its earliest days faced war trauma, depending on their geographical location, but also their ethnic and/or religious origins and whether they belonged to an ethnic majority or a minority in their surroundings.

These individuals constitute a generation deeply marked by the dissolution of Yugoslavia in their formative years while being exposed to everyday life in Yugoslavia for the shortest period of their lives, some of which have barely any memories to nourish.

Yet it would be a common mistake to underestimate the importance of the “rite de passage” of becoming a pioneer (Duda, 2015). As much as the message and the pioneer’s oath changed over the course of different Yugoslav periods, the fundamental values that were promoted resonated strongly in the complex of Yugoslav memories among the last pioneers – unexpectedly, brotherhood and unity were the first two associations that came to mind when thinking about Yugoslavia (Popović, 2012).

Last but not the least, this is the generation that was exposed to starting their adult and professional lives during the period of transition within newly founded ex-Yugoslav nation states. A generation that grew up with the promise of a very different life than the one it faced. A political generation born in the 1970s and 1980s, in the era of what would often be referred to as already an era of Yugoslav crises, able to reflect on their childhood yet from a critical perspective. All of them vividly remember becoming a pioneer as it was the most solemn event in their short Yugoslav childhoods. However, when asked about Yugonostalgia they strongly negate to be Yugonostalgic. Another prominent feature of their Yugonostalgic reflections reaffirms their position that a new Yugoslav state entity is not in the picture or in any possible form their wish. Yet, leaving behind the simple cultural identifications such as music, movies, linguistic proximity, and commodified Yugonostalgic parties, the last pioneers have formulated two political demands: one against the erasure of their Yugoslav identity and another against neoliberal policies and for socio-economic equality (Popović, 2012). Each of the two elements deserves further inquiry given their specificities and different political implications. Their entanglement with the global and European changing perspectives is another important element not to be undermined. The second demand, opening to the last pioneers the opportunity to reflect on leftist political ideologies, movements and parties can be noted in the recent resurgence of left-wing social movements and political parties in ex-Yugoslav countries. As the last pioneers would define it, Yugoslavia was “not a utopia, nor a tyranny” (Popović, 2012).

Reflections on Yugoslavia and Yugonostalgia within the political field are yet to follow. As previously mentioned, observations regarding the real impact and possibilities of the subversive potential of Yugonostalgia are yet to be made. Nevertheless, Yugonostalgic memory for the last pioneers defying imposed nationalist ideologies remains a resistance strategy and an important element of identity.

## Nostalgia on the Move

Failing to understand nostalgia as the embodiment of “a dialectic of modernity that should be remembered as we try to imagine a future beyond false promises of corporate neoliberalism and the globalized shopping mall” (Huysen, 2006, p.20) is prevalent. In public discourse, nostalgia is explained as an ephemeral trend, a phase in transitional trajectories which will soon pass; an inseparable element from post socialist identity of ex-Yugoslav populations; even a specific psychological trait of post-socialist societies in which citizens are in need of paternalist policies.

As nostalgia moves trans-generationally and across different ex-Yugoslav countries, through different social spaces, following a transnational turn in memory studies (Erl, 2011; Rigney, 2012, etc.), we believe further understanding and a proper conceptualization of the phenomenon can give us insight into its inherent subversiveness and thus, a clearer outlook on its political potential.

Given current developments in memory studies, research on Yugonostalgia should follow – leaving behind the traditional approaches of Maurice Halbwachs locating memory in geographically and culturally determined specific communities, and Jan Assmann, as much as Pierre Nora – all retaining understanding of mnemonic communities primarily within the borders of nation-states. However, with regard to its past, present and future, Yugonostalgia is transcending these borders. In attempts to delineate Yugonostalgic borders, we need to turn to two concepts that have been recently developed in memory studies: *transnational* and *multidirectional* memory.

Through the concept of multidirectional memory, Michael Rothberg managed to encapsulate the movement of memory through space, time and cultures, and beyond the singularity of identities (Assmann, 2014). Or, as Rothberg himself explains, “memory emerges from unexpected, multidirectional encounters – encounters between diverse pasts and a conflictual present, to be sure, but between different agents or catalysts” (Rothberg, 2010, p.9).

While in Slovenia, the last pioneers are almost unanimous about the inevitability of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, this hypothesis is much more questioned. But in both countries, they are acknowledging the existence of Yugoslavia even today – either through common cultural space; or the need for strengthened economic cooperation or, as one respondent from Bosnia-Herzegovina explained: “We can live in Yugoslavia even today, in a very different manner though, but we can satisfy this need, the social need to be with people from other republics” (Popović, 2012).

Rothberg acknowledges the productive dialogue into which memories and “all acts of memory that enter public space necessarily enter simultaneously... even if it is also at times filled with tension and even violence” (Rothberg 2014, 654). Most importantly, Rothberg reasserts that it is mnemonic communities that actually come into being “in a dialogic space” bringing “new visions of solidarity and new possibilities of coexistence” (Rothberg, 2014, p.654). The dialogue of historical revisionisms, which are all reproducing the same narratives (“Yugoslavia as prison of the people(s)” etc.), creates nationalist communities in perfect harmony with each other. Within this still unique (cultural and/or political) space shared by ex-Yugoslav countries, we can also understand the emergence of nostalgic mnemonic communities through the dialogue of nostalgia(s).

Or, if there is no Yugoslavia, it does not mean that there are no Yugoslavs. Memories move beyond borders, as much as nostalgias were forged across borders but also on the highways – looking just at one example: the carpooling Facebook

group “442” created by individuals often travelling between Belgrade and Zagreb, for either private or professional reasons. As agents of memory and nostalgia commuting across ex-Yugoslav countries, the transmission and exchange of memories among them, creates communities based on solidarity, resonating within intimate, artistic, cultural and political fields. As nostalgia travels, the stereotypical orientalizing and self-orientalizing images of “centuries old hatreds” are easily dispersed through simple interactions.

Without aiming to equate Yugoslavism with Yugonostalgia, the dialectics of the two concepts is exactly the space in which Rothberg sees new possibilities of coexistence and solidarity (Rothberg, 2014). Instead of being perceived as “lieux de mémoire” or “milieux de mémoire” they are, rather, “noeuds de mémoire” – exceeding attempts of territorialisation and identitarian reduction (Rothberg, 2010) and through their multidirectionality (Rothberg, 2009), Yugonostalgic memories of the last pioneers, surpass national frameworks. However, the question remains: how to perceive and understand those “noeuds de mémoire” as political elements in current ex-Yugoslav contexts?

Looking at and responding to nation-building processes in ex-Yugoslav states, Yugonostalgic memory of the last pioneers reasserts itself as anti-nationalistic – simultaneously being against those same nation-building discourses, but (often) also against supranational ones – in these cases, mostly directed against the European Union, but unanimously against a new Yugoslav state project as well. Transnationalising the political (Balibar, 2004) but leaving the transnational frameworks, poses a new challenge for understanding and conceptualizing the Yugonostalgia of the last pioneers.

Yugoslavism today, being an invisible element of everyday life, emerges through different layers. Leaving aside the socio-economic demands and reclaiming of leftist/socialist/communist ideologies, it could represent an anti-nationalist element – as one of the respondents from Slovenia would claim:

“I do not declare myself a Yugoslav, except when nationalists get on my nerves” (Popović, 2012). At the same time, Yugoslavism emerges as a supra-national layer of identity, compatible and aligned with other national or ethnic identities – one can be a Croat, Yugoslav and European simultaneously. The mixed origins of ex-Yugoslav populations should not account only to the phenomenon of mixed marriages – linguistic proximities, experiences of residence in different part of Yugoslavia, and family connections throughout the Yugoslav space still strongly influence identity formation.

Transnationalism can be understood in Aleida Assmann’s terms “beyond national borders and interests ...new forms of belonging, solidarity and cultural identification” (Assmann, 2014, p.547), or in the specific context, as Gal Kirn would define it “a common multiethnic space predicated on anti-nationalism” (Kirn, 2014, p.326). As Kirn (2014, p.327) rightly puts it: “One of the chief tasks of a critical reading of such memory politics is to recuperate the re-de-nationalized partisan so as to mobilize resources from a transnational and emancipatory past in order to intervene in the current nationalistic hegemony.”

But can this “community to come” (Kirn, 2014, p.335) or to say, immigrants of the past, still be perceived through the lenses of transnationalism?

## Surpassing Nationalism

Transnationalism remains embedded within the theoretical framework of the nation-state concept, despite the claim that it is fighting methodological nationalism. Nevertheless, it recognizes the significance of national frameworks alongside the potential of cultural production both to reinforce and to transcend them. As Yugoslavia once existed in the form of a multi-ethnic nation-state, yet without the national self-identification of Yugoslavs (as all censuses from Yugoslav times reveal that it was never a prevalent identity) isn’t it possible for Yugoslavs to exist without Yugoslavia today?



As Enzo Traverso (2009) explains: “The memory of the gulag has erased the one of the revolution, the memory of the Shoah has replaced the one of antifascism, the memory of slavery has eclipsed the one of anticolonialism; everything is taking place as the memory of the victims could not co-exist with the one of their fights, their victories and their defeats.”

As memory today seems to reach beyond victimization, Yugonostalgia’s multidirectionality and transnationalism are actively trying to overcome imposed boundaries and transgress victimizing approaches – whether from the perspective of revisionist politics, or more positive deliberations on the Yugoslav period. Understanding Yugonostalgia through its multivocal, multi-layered, multi-sited and multi-directional dynamic (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014), it challenges the idea that transnationalism is, as a concept, suited to explain the travelling that Yugonostalgia undertakes.

Why do we inquire if transnationalism does not fully correspond to the phenomenon of Yugonostalgic anti-nationalist memory? Could the introduction of a new concept, – meta-national memory – help our understanding of Yugonostalgic memory, notably that of the last pioneers?

Firstly, one needs to take into account that as much as Yugonostalgic memory crosses the borders of the newly established ex-Yugoslav states, at the same time it creates its own borders – not the ones identified by the promise of a new supranational organization or another (multi)nation state, but the ones obtained through temporal travelling, borders that have already existed. It does not connect “nations” – it already has one, in the past and in the present – represented on a meta-level. As such, it goes beyond all national identities. Referencing to transnational travelling places the concept back within the borders of the nation states.

Secondly, the agents of Yugonostalgic memories embed Yugoslav identities without Yugoslavia.

Yugonostalgic memory does not replace any national or supranational identities, yet adds another layer of imagined communities without seeking the institutionalization of that identity in the form of a state. It remains unattainable, yet alive and demanding acknowledgment, without (still) formulating a political demand that could be inserted in today’s political presents of ex-Yugoslav states. As such, the imaginary of Yugonostalgia transcends current political imaginaries.

Gal Kirn poses as the key question: “How to remember today outside of the national and totalitarian memory?” (Kirn, 2017), especially with regard to finding new ways of engaging the young and new generations in memory transfer and memory politics. Dragan Markovina (2015) questions if Yugoslavia is a name for a utopia that is (just) being born. We need to search for new concepts that would bring to the fore a more comprehensive understanding of Yugonostalgic memories of the last pioneers, the generation that is today active in ex-Yugoslav countries.

Acknowledging Yugonostalgia as a subversive and strongly political phenomenon, Yugonostalgic agents regain their political subjectivity. It would provide a par-excellence entry point for establishing continuity within political and social history of ex-Yugoslav spaces and for the purpose of reclaiming space for leftist ideologies. In bringing concepts that go beyond the tools we have today within theory to operate with the phenomenon we are facing, we would advance also the search for the expression of Yugonostalgic memory in the political field. Moreover, leaving Yugonostalgia behind the nation-state conceptualizations, we would further enhance its potential for rethinking not only the Yugoslav space but the very definitions of political space and political subjectivity today.

Understanding Yugonostalgia as a mobilizing force and a meta-national narrative, we create an opportunity to transform Yugonostalgia for the future, into Yugoslavism that acts in the present.



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