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The multi-functionality of the body in conflict

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The cardinal feature of any conflict of the present time as well as of the past history is the presence of the human body. Whether we

are talking about civil wars, inter-state wars or ethnic wars, all of them are intrinsically linked with the human body. Nonetheless, whenever the body is part of a conflict, it is automatically involved in multi-layered power relations, which are able to 'invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks' (Foucault 1991, 25). Hence, the aim of this paper is to bring a cogent argument on the inter-play between body and conflict, particularly the role of the body in the ex-Yugoslav Wars and the power relations it had been involved throughout the 90's.

Therefore, the argument of this paper is broken up into two parts. In the first part, I will try to comprehend the relation between conflict (violence, torture) and body. More specifically, I will try to find out which are the changes that pain and torture towards the body inflicts in people's mind. In the second part, I will try to mark a shift in the way body is related to conflict especially through the perspective of the person who conducts the acts of violence. Therefore, I will emphasize two perspectives which are diametrically opposed but which are connected by the presence of the body. Whereas, in the first part I will emphasize a materialistic perspective, in the second part I will underline the importance of ideas, culture and meanings as catalysts for action and conduct of violence. The first part underlines the perspective of the person who

suffers violence, whereas the second part is devoted to the analysis of the body of the person who conducts violence, particularly how he or she transforms from a normal person into a violent person.

From an ontological point of view, the first part is conceived on materialist presuppositions, which implies that the material forces are essential in society rather than ideas. However, this assertion is not dropping the role of the ideas, but 'the materialist claim is that effects of non-material forces are secondary' (Wendt 2003, 23).

The Ex-Yugoslav Wars are well known especially for the massive brutality that was employed in the conduct of the military operations of the multiple paramilitary and military groups. One of the main aims of these conflicts was the achievement of an ethnical pure territory. Whether we are talking about the Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Croats or the Bosnian Serbs, their purpose often converged, namely an ethnical pure territory to live in (Huttenbach 2004, 25). This atrocious process involved multiple types of violence, which were focused on the body. The methods used were abominable and consisted of 'rape, castration, craving crosses in living flesh' (Sorabji 1995, 83) and many others, however all these practices have in common the body. These methods were practiced in order to inspire fear but also to induce in victim's consciousness the certainty that they will have to leave the places they were living almost all their lives and never come back. The suffering body was an entity,

which was carrying a message of permanent expulsion toward the other ethnic-like people. Therefore, these acts were aimed towards a

body (directly) but also (indirectly through fear or for revenge) to other people. For example, rape is mainly used to 'humiliate and exploit the victim but, also to revenge for acts blamed on victim's relatives' (Jones 1994, 117).

The acts of torture toward the body have not just the aim to inspire fear but it is also a tool of identity deconstruction. Whereas, the war deconstructs 'the concrete physical fact of streets, houses, factories, and schools, torture deconstructs them as they exist in the mind of the victim' (Scarry 1985, 61). Moreover, there were many cases in which the victims of the Bosnian conflict who suffered torture or captivity had their 'memories and meanings erased' (Sorabji 1995, 91).

Nevertheless, the process of deconstruction is not just emptying the individuals of their identities but in the same time it is reconstructing another one, largely different. Concisely speaking, the pain of the body determines a dialectical shift¹ from deconstruction to reconstruction of a new identity, meanings and values. After the body had to endure torture and pain or as it was the case of Bosnian War, it is alienated from a certain territory through numerous ways of ethnic cleansing, 'the old ideas and images are

erased and retrospectively rebuilt and replaced' (Sorabji 1995, 92). Consequently, as it could be seen, the

body is not just the perpetrator's tool, which has the aim to inflict fear in a wide group of people in order to make them obey his or her will. Instead, in the inter-play between body and conflict/torture/pain the individual is reconstructed and his or her beliefs, values and meanings are reshaped.

Conversely, in the following part I will emphasize the role of ideas and how are articulated on the body of the future perpetrator. As I underlined above, the body is part of a multi-layered power relations where it can be tortured but also determined to conduct action of torture, even if until that time it was unconceivable to do it.

One of the most intriguing features of the Serbian-Croat War as well as the Bosnian War was the means war had been conducted and also by whom was conducted. The bodies of simple people, with normal lives were transformed in killing machines. The atrocities were often conducted by -once- generous and respectful people against their 'neighbors, colleagues and friends' (Sorabji 1995, 90).²

Instead of material forces, this transformation happened due to ideas, culture, education and memory. For example, from 1970's the educational system shifted from a 'salient Yugoslav identity to a divided Yugoslav identity' (Wachtel 1998, 187) which emphasized the particularistic identities. What is more

¹ Broadly speaking this process is similar to the Hegelian dialectics but my interpretation is ontologically materialist, whereas in the case of Hegel the ontology is an idealistic one. For further details see (Kolakovski 1978, 387-392).

² For further information about the transformation of normal people into cruel soldiers see. (Bauman 2012).

interesting is that the people that fought in the wars from the 90's were the generation educated on separatist principles. Moreover, they were 'led not by the generation that grew up in "soft" Yugoslavism (50's-70's), but by a group who had come of age during or just after the ethnic slaughter from World War II' (Wachtel 1998, 197).

Among other factors, which had been articulated with the body and transformed it into a killing machine are discourse, symbols and narratives. It is worth mentioning the discourse of Slobodan Milosevic on June 28, 1989³ in front of one million Serbs in Kosovo on the Field of Blackbirds where he entailed numerous symbols and also depicted the Serbs as victims even if 'they liberated themselves and helped others to do it' (Silber 1996, 72) (Glenny 1996, 34-36). The political discourses were also augmented by the emergence of writings, which were emphasizing the sufferings of the Serbs in Kosovo and 'the Croatian massacres of Serbs during the war' (Wachtel 1998, 219).

Therefore, all these ideal factors were not isolated in the mind of the Serbs or Croats but they were articulated in their bodies. The separateness was sown not just in the mind of the different ethnicities, which were living together, but it was also articulated in their bodies. Education, discourse, 'mythical thinking, polarized' (Denich 1994, 382) the population mentally and physically as well.

However, the willingness to live separately (mentally and then physically) was not the only factor which led to the use of

torture, rape and other cruelties between the different ethnicities within Yugoslavia. The power of the bodies was enforced with guns consequently this particular fact determined the feeling of superiority toward the unarmed (weaker) civilians. Basically, it is a similar reaction with the 'Stanford prison experiment'⁴ which transformed normal people in cruel persons with pathological violent actions. This kind of behavior was present in Yugoslavia as well, with the mention that people were using heavy guns and the relation between the constituent parts of the conflict was distorted and totally polarized.

Therefore, this could be a way to explain the ardent violence and hatred of the Serbs against the Croats and Bosniaks. The Serbs were bombarded by documents and past memoirs, which were antagonizing in relations with the other ethnicities (e.g. SANU Memorandum, *Timor Mortis* by Slobodan Selenic, the cruelties of Ustase), then these feelings were augmented by guns and other armaments disseminated from the JNA into the hands of the Serbs, Bosnian Serbs and the Serbs from Croatia (Silber 1996, 217-218). Therefore, the coalesce between the antagonizing ideas and the superiority provided by the armaments, enabled the Serbs to use their bodies as killing machines towards neighbors, friends and colleagues.

³ See. (Milosevic n.d.)

⁴ For further details see. (Haney 1973)

Thus, the relation between conflict and body is bi-directional. It is changing the victim and the aggressor in the same time. On one hand, conflict redefines the tortured victim into an alienated person from its territory, community and values. On the other hand, the conflict enables normal people to behave in uncommon cruel ways, transforming them in killing machines. Generally speaking, the body is multi-functional whenever is involved in a conflict. In my case, the relation between body and conflict is defined by the victim and by the perpetrator. Whereas the tortured body induces the feeling of unrootedness in the victim's conscience, the empowered body is rather boundless in its hatred and violence.

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