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Bringing the Left Back: Radical Performances of Dissent from the Remains of ex-Yugoslavia

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This essay focuses on the leftist cultural expressions that emerged from excavations of the legacy of socialist Yugoslavia. It proposes the notion of the worksites of the Left as a critical lens through which to re-examine the socio-political dissent in the region and the emerging of the Leftist public discourse. The essay turns to Etienne Balibar's concept of the worksites of democracy, Janelle Reinelt's transposition of the concept to the context of theatre and Alain Badiou's notion of Event to map the parameters of worksites of the Left pertinent to the given contexts and its manifestations of discontent both through various public protests and through theatre. The essay focuses on two theatrical performances 'Born in YU' (2010) and 'Our Violence, Your Violence' (2016) to examine how theatre operates as a worksite not only through its subject-matters and modes of its representation, but also through a degree of unpredictability inherent in the theatrical event. The essay argues that theatre is a unique worksite in its capacity to generate subsequent worksites, looking at 'Do you Remember Yugoslavia?', a roundtable discussion that emerged from the 'Born in YU' performance; and numerous public and media debates, sparked from 'Our Violence, Your Violence'.

'Balkan population has survived the last big war on the European soil, that's why we are your latest entertainment hit from the heart of Europe!' ⁱ says the protagonist of the show *Our Violence, Your Violence* (2016) by Croatian director Oliver Frlić. Ex-Yugoslavia, or post-Yugoslavia, where more than twenty-odd years have passed after the latest 'big war on the European soil', where graves have perhaps settled, but decisions about how to mourn those in them and whose bodies are more 'grieveable' ⁱⁱ than others have yet to be negotiated; where billboards and neon lights of international corporations have been propelled all too quickly on crumbling facades of socialist buildings, taking the newly emerged little states on the road to privatisation and free-market; where some have climbed to unforeseen reaches, while others are experiencing levels of poverty unprecedented in communist time; where, within the process of European integration and neoliberal dogmas, the Right has

found new fuel to self-perpetuate—this ex/post Yugoslavia is a particularly rich soil to unearth the urgent need for a new Left in the Balkans and beyond.

Arguably, of all so-called communist regimes the Yugoslavian was the most permissive, not part of the Eastern Blok, but rather the founding member of the non-Aligned Movement and truly multicultural. Yet of all communist regimes in Europe it broke apart most brutally. This was a place where promises, possibilities, shortcomings, contradictions and tragedies of the 20th century Left played out in a variety of ways. Therefore, this might also be one of the places to watch for the rise and shaping of a new Left to the demands and complexities of the 21st century. In this essay, *Our Violence, Your Violence*, as well as other relevant theatrical and political performances, will be analysed to foreground the emergence—from the remains of ex-Yugoslavia—of a new cultural Left.

Worksites of the Left

In his book *We, the People of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, Étienne Balibar develops the idea of the *worksite of democracy* as a locus of critical participation and intervention in democratic societies. He advocates ‘a gradual construction of a new historical hegemony, that is both a new way of thinking a new collective ‘common senseⁱⁱⁱ’ and interacting between multiple interventions stemming from both civil society and the public sphere’ (Balibar 2004, 172). Balibar identifies four worksites specifically related to the European context: the question of justice; trade union struggles; the democratisation of borders; and issues of culture and language barriers, especially prioritising the role of translation. In her 2015 essay ‘Performance at the Crossroads of Citizenship’, Janelle Reinelt turns to Balibar to add theatre (and performance) to his list of worksites of democracy and to expand their geographical scope: ‘Worksites can be seen as situated within the European

context, but with various adjustments, would no doubt be useful foci in other concrete situations around the world' (Reinelt 2015, 13). Her proposal of theatre as an additional worksite for democracy and citizenship is based on 'the kind of negotiation of determinant matter among the social actors' (Ibid., 13) that is key to both the notion of worksites and the workings of theatre. Both the worksites and the workings of theatre operate and make available an embodied repertoire of aesthetic and political gestures. The proposition of this essay is to look into forms and manifestations that could be identified as worksites of the Left along the lines of Balibar and Reinelt. However, this application of the concept not only aims to confirm theatre as a worksite and identify some additional worksites, but also to foreground the Left rather than democracy in the opposition to the rising Right in the Balkans and beyond. This shift to the worksites of the Left that the essay proposes is fitting not least since both democracy and the Left have faced various points of crisis. The meanings of both have been too often renegotiated and stretched to points where both democracy and the Left have encompassed a wide range of politico-social set ups and manifestations. The term Left has become the umbrella term for too many Lefts, while the term democracy has been rendered nearly useless to describe a wide variety of contextual variations.

Democracy refers to structures, processes and institutions of political participation and representation. However, the term has also been viewed as carrying a certain politico-ethical weight: democracy as oppose to monarchism, totalitarianism, dictatorship. Current regimes in two of the biggest world democracies, for instance, Donald Trump's in the USA and Narendra Modi's in India (not to mention their smaller counterparts such as in the current governments of the countries of former Yugoslavia), have shown that the inherently progressive ethics of the idea of

democracy are as fragile as its structures, institutions and electoral processes. The Left has been more often than not globally situated in the discourse of failure: at best understood as crisis, at worst identified as a threat and embodied in totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Alain Badiou has criticised the discourse of failure warning that it leads to abandoning of the communist hypothesis and to denouncing its emancipatory potential. He offers an ironic account of the dominant anti-Left rhetoric that preaches the values of the ‘free world’ while,

[...] socialist regimes are loathsome despotism and bloody dictatorships. At the level of the state, this socialist ‘totalitarianism’ must be contrasted with representative democracy which, while it is of course imperfect, is by far the least bad form of government.[...] Because it has ended in failure all over the world, the communist hypothesis is a criminal utopia that must give way to a culture of ‘human rights’, which combines the cult of freedom (including, of course, freedom of enterprise, the freedom to own property and to grow rich that is the material guarantee of all the freedoms) [...] (Badiou 2010, 2)

In the specific context of former Yugoslavia, the discourse of failure and crisis has had a specifically complicated historical trajectory. The idea of Yugoslavia emerged in the late 19th century out of the Balkan Wars for liberation and independence from the Ottoman Empire. The notion of Yugoslavia as a multicultural nation-state that would unite South Slavic peoples of the Balkan peninsula, became quickly linked to socialist thought and activism. It gained prominence during the First World War, out of which emerged the Yugoslavian Kingdom. The socialist ideals further evolved in opposition to the monarchy and through the antifascist struggle of Yugoslav communists and partisans in the Second World War out of which the second Yugoslavia came to being. This new Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, however, inherited the complexities epitomised in the conflicts between the royalists and the partisans. ^{iv} In the post WWII period, there was the state Left embodied in the regime of President Tito that in its time required a critical response. However, in

recent years there have been attempts to look beyond the demonization of this system and to ask: are there any remnants of this Left worth excavating and salvaging?^v In the 1990s with secessionist wars raging, the third Yugoslavia emerged, comprising only Serbia and Montenegro and replacing its multicultural paradigm with war-mongering nationalism.^{vi} Within the third Yugoslavia the name Left was entirely hijacked by the ruling, nationalist regime of Slobodan Milošević and its satellite parties. This appropriation of the term Left by what was essentially the nationalist, jingoistic regime leaning to the Right, made any political identification markers with this nominal Left impossible to sustain. The Left had no name any longer and without its main semantic marker it lost the language to formulate itself. Even though the question of appropriating the term seems like a mere semantic matter, relatively small in comparison to the political drama of the 1990s, I would argue that once its name got hijacked, the Left had no place in any forms of resistance to the regime at the time. Hence, the anti-war and anti-regime resistance of the 1990s in Serbia found its political formulation through a united democratic opposition which was ranging from centre at best to another variation of the Right at its worst.

Within the wider context of Europe, the place of the Left and the communist history has also been marginalised. Balibar argues that ‘It is not possible to deny that communism as an idea or ideology is at the heart of European social thought.’

(Balibar 2003, 86) He urges for re-examining the place of communism in European history asking:

What is the relationship between the history of communism and the history of Europe—indeed what is the relationship between the history of communism and the fact that *there has been history in Europe*? It is necessary to pose this question (or to begin to pose it, because it is not going to be settled by a few theses) *against the current* of the dominant orientation of political science, not only because the political science approaches the question with unfavourable bias, but especially because it

is entirely dominated by ahistorical neoliberal problematics. [...] As a consequence of this bias [...], we are exposed today to the risk of the great repression of the history of communism and the very concept of that history. Perhaps it would be better to say: the risk that communism's great repression of its own history (political, social, and intellectual), with the active aid of anti-communism, might never be lifted. (Ibid., 86-7)

Badiou, who clearly also recognises the repression of communist history in Europe, insists unapologetically on recuperating the term communism. In the context of ex-Yugoslavia, as in the countries of the former Eastern Block, the term communism comes immediately with an anti-communist subtext or, at its most positive, is used to describe an iconography of post-communist nostalgia. Nevertheless, the term Left not only needs to be recuperated from the anti-communist discourse, but given its appropriations and mutations in the political drama of the Yugoslavian downfall, it also needs to be reclaimed. Therefore, for the new, emerging worksites of the Left, at least, in the context of former Yugoslavia and perhaps even within the wider European context, there is scope in reclaiming the name. Arguably, this reclaiming of the term is necessary both to reformulate the new emerging Left and to situate it within its own history.

Balibar's worksites are checkpoints and testing grounds for the workings of democracy. Worksites of the Left are at an earlier stage—the stage of reclaiming, rediscovery, renegotiations, reformulation of the Left (local and then potentially global) for our times. At these worksites, we see a half-formed new Left still in the process of its making. The worksites of the Left operate within concrete spatial parameters (for example, the street, the university, the factory and, I argue, the theatre) but also depend on different temporalities. Unlike most of the worksites of democracy that Balibar lists, current worksites of the Left more often than not operate outside institutions of the system rather than from within. They are marked by sharper

antagonistic relationships with hegemonic structures—as they are not only critical check-points and new *modus operandi* between civil society and the public sphere, rather they often call for their radical rethinking. Worksites of the Left are still in the process of formulating and negotiating their parameters of action and their structures of operation, therefore they often become experienced as ruptures within the appearance of normalcy.

In his seminal work *Being and Event* (1988), Badiou also points to moments of rupture in science and art that have opened the space of radical rethinking of reality.^{vii} For Badiou, an *Event* is a rupture in the dominant order that at the same time tends to define a new order. Like Badiou's concept of *Event*, the worksites of the Left open the space for rethinking reality often by asserting a part of the society or of the public discourse that has been marginalised or suppressed, having the potential to make dimensions of the discourse appear that have not previously been there. Like *Events*, worksites of the Left have a tendency to emerge suddenly and even unexpectedly. At times, they take shape of a revolt, at other times though, they emerge on smaller scales sparking incidents or inspiring debates. While Badiou's is an *Event* with a capital 'E', *events* generated within worksites of the Left could be spelled both ways depending on the situation and scale. The worksites of the Left are transitional phenomena positioned conceptually in between Balibar's worksites of democracy, which also have a legal foundation, and Badiou's *Event*, which is rather experiential, yet often with the tendency of rewriting the social contract. In the given context of the Left on the ruins of former Yugoslavia, the worksites emerge as both a new 'collective common sense' (Balibar/ Gramsci) and as ruptures within the hegemonic structures (Badiou).

Doing Leftist Politics In Small Steps

In the past several years a number of manifestations across the young, struggling states of former Yugoslavia have been taking place (albeit still somewhat marginally)—political protests, workers’ unrests, small issue movements, initiatives that emphasise the culture of memory, organisations that describe themselves as anti-fascists, as well as theatrical and other performances—that all in their own ways became worksites and pushed for the necessity of rethinking what was left of the Left and how to salvage it. Political scientists have also turned to Yugoslavian legacy to analyse the current state of affairs, one of whom, Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, described it as ‘the reversal of the glorious liberation tradition that had reunited Yugoslavia in the Second World War’:

The subsequent advent of liberal capitalism has not reversed the region’s pervasive poverty and underdevelopment. Instead, it has deepened dependency on foreign capital, imposed limited sovereignty, and limited democracy across the region. Revisiting the situation will not be easy but it must involve learning from the past. (in Horvat and Štiks 2014, 43)

Toppling the communist ideology and the socialist state did not bring the desired prosperity. Moreover, entering into the free market economy came, as it were, at a high price and with strings attached. Workers as well as other social strata, including the middle class, have gradually become vulnerable, impoverished and often even in economically precarious situations. As a result, number of anti-regime protests have been erupting regularly across the Balkans embodying the Gramscian notion of hegemonic struggles.^{viii}

In June 2013, citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina hit the streets demanding that their politicians come to an agreement on unique civic registration numbers. This seemingly trivial administrative issue triggered civic awakening across the post-war ethnic divide when a baby in urgent need of medical treatment abroad could not get a

passport. Mass protests against nationalist political elites erupted in all major cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina bringing together communities of different ethnic backgrounds. These events echoed the mass peace protest of 1992 in Sarajevo, when citizens of different creeds and ethnicities came together in a desperate attempt to stop the civil war, inadvertently conjuring the lost spirit of unity and solidarity of Yugoslavia.

In February 2014, even bigger civil unrest took place sparked by the protests of workers in the Bosnian town of Tuzla, who lost their jobs due to ruthless privatisation.^{ix} As the protests, spreading all over Bosnia, started to make headlines, an image emerged that soon became iconic: a group of workers holding the slogan 'Bosnians, Serbs and Croats – United in Poverty.' The notion of Yugoslavian unity was evoked deliberately, not with nostalgia, but as a means of protest that acquired a clear anti-capitalist dimension. A democratic assembly, termed the *Plenum* (echoing in name political assemblies from Communist times), was formed to gather all the citizens, regardless of their nationality and religion, to fight poverty and social injustice^x. Commenting on these riots for *The Guardian* in February 2014, Slavoj Žižek wrote:

In one of the photos of the protests, we see the demonstrators waving three flags side by side: Bosnian, Serb, Croat, expressing the will to ignore ethnic differences. In short, we are dealing with the rebellion against nationalist elites: the people of Bosnia have finally understood who their true enemy is: not other ethnic groups, but their own leaders who pretend to protect them from others. It is as if the old and much-abused Titoist motto of the "brotherhood and unity" of Yugoslav nations acquired new actuality. (Žižek 2014)

In Croatia in 2011, over ten thousand people marched across Zagreb denouncing the political system and all the political parties. In 2016, three years after Croatia became a member of the EU, another wave of mass protests took place in the

capital Zagreb accusing the new centre-right government of manipulating education reforms. Even though the protests evolved around a single issue, the polarization between the government and the protesters has been part of a wider discourse opposing the country's Right turn. Historian and founder of the Croatian New Left Party (2016) Dragan Markovina points to the political context within which to situate these protests when stressing the need for greater 'social justice, respect for anti-fascist values, protection of ethnic minorities, as well as for resisting aggressive nationalism and clericalisation of the society.' (in Kerbler 2016).

These are but a few of numerous similar protests that have taken place in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and Macedonia over the past several years. Other forms of radical thinking have been entering the public sphere through a range of gatherings and forums clearly identified as anti-capitalist and of the Left (including *Mayday School* in Ljubljana, 2015; *Subversive* festival in Zagreb active since 2007, and *Antifest* in Sarajevo established in 2012). In their book *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism*, Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks call for rejecting folkish nostalgia, while interrogating activist accounts of the socialist heritage for experiences that can help us develop a political stance towards our present and think about alternatives. They describe post-Yugoslavian manifestations of activism as follows:

In their efforts to defend the remnants of the socialist state (primarily in education and health), natural and social resources (water, electricity, internet), and jobs (remaining industries, the public sector), they also begun to formulate a profoundly anti-capitalist and radically democratic vision of their societies. This is how radical politics was reborn in the rebel peninsula. (Horvat and Štiks 2014, 2)

Horvat and Štiks point to single-issue movements that, although rarely successful, have emerged as means of formulating various instances of public dissatisfaction.

We often think of single issue movements as instances where people share a common view or interest around a particular matter, but might otherwise differ both ideologically and politically. However, some of these post-Yugoslavian cases are different in that the people gathered around a single-issue movement often also share views on other political and civic matters. The single issue that has brought them together is indeed a manifestation of a broader dissatisfaction that is also shared. They point to the crisis of oppositional leadership, demonstrate scepticism for big top-down political programmes and express anxiety over ideological dogmatism—a lack of confidence in oppositional partisan structures that bring their own hierarchies and hegemonies.

These worksites of the Left display fragmented manifestations and performances that nonetheless invite us to think how to do Leftist politics-in-small-steps, without imposition of a party structure that often poses a danger of dogmatism. These worksites of the Left bring about questions concerning critical relationship between horizontal and vertical structures of being/ doing the Leftist politics and also between cultural and political Left. They demonstrate the strategy of doing Leftist politics-in-small-steps, which has the capacity to include other issues that emerge in our time in addition to those of workers' rights and union struggles, including right to the city, autonomy of universities, and also recently solidarity with migrants and refugees to mention a few.

These manifestations and performances through which the new Left has been formulating itself have the following features in common: they emerge from the ground—bottom-up—and according to need. In the public sphere, forms and issues they express are characterised by a spillage or overflow, connecting different worksites of the Left both spatially and thematically. Doing Leftist politics-in-small-

steps charts a network of worksites from the factory to the street, from the university, to the theatrical stage, from the institution to the media, from the auditorium to the neighbourhood, and to the street again. The re-writing of the social script is a work-in-progress.

Theatre as a Worksite of the Left

Theatre is a unique worksite for a number of reasons: its immediacy—the here and now—that always carries the potential of spillage, of overflow, from the stage into the auditorium and beyond or the other way round—from the outside into the auditorium and onto the stage. In other words, it holds the possibility of the unexpected, of a rupture whereby a theatrical performance exercises its potential of becoming an *event* (with a small *e*). Its immediacy comes with repetitions and variations—a kind of temporal extension through which repertoires of strategies, gestures, relations and feelings become rehearsed, established, revisited, and renegotiated. In what follows, I will focus on two performances—two specific theatrical worksites— where the interplay between repetition and immediacy, and between theatricality and performativity, formulates a repertoire of strategies through which to rethink the place of the Left both in the context of former Yugoslavia and within a more international context. The performances in question are *Born in YU* (*Rodjeni u YU*) from 2010 and *Our Violence, Your Violence* (*Naše nasilje, vaše nasilje*) that premiered in 2016. Even though very different, these two performances have in common a dramaturgy of contrasts and contradictions and a series of performative instances where different kinds of overflows took place as incidental and impromptu crossings of the proscenium arch. These crossings caused ruptures either to the performance itself or to the dominant public discourse, and at times they have

disturbed both. Different forms of spilling into the public sphere have occurred in relation to these two performances that allow us to think of them as worksites of the Left.

Worksite I: Born in YU

Born in YU (2010) was directed by Bosnian director Dino Mustafić for one of the leading theatres in the region — the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade, Serbia. It was created through a devising process with a team from different parts of the former Yugoslavia. The performance script included the actors' autobiographical stories combined with scenes written by some of the leading playwrights of the former Yugoslavia such as Goran Stefanovski (Macedonia/UK) and Dušan Jovanović (Slovenia). The director, Mustafić, engaged actors from different generations: the oldest was born before WWII, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, while the youngest was born on the eve of the country's breakdown. This casting strategy immediately reinforced the interplay between personal histories and the history of the country. Moreover, the Yugoslav Drama Theatre was established soon after the end of World War II, in 1947, as a representative cultural institution of the newly formed socialist state. Its ensemble, much like the cast of *Born in YU*, comprised the most talented actors and theatre makers from all over Yugoslavia and has had a very important place in shaping the post-war cultural and theatrical history of the region. Hence, to devise and perform a piece that grappled with Yugoslavian national and cultural identity at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre also added a meta-theatrical dimension to *Born in YU*'s 'ghosting'^{xi} of Yugoslavia..

The opening scene of the show starts with an intonation of the Yugoslav national anthem *Hej Sloveni*. The entire cast is standing still, central stage, solemn and dignified, while almost always half of the auditorium spontaneously follows suit

to honour the ghost anthem of a country that is no more. As soon as the tunes of *Hej Sloveni* fade away one of the actors steps forward to deliver the opening lines: ‘Fuck Yugoslavia! Nobody gives a fuck for that story anymore!’^{xii} (Mustafić 2010) and he is greeted with a loud round of applause from the audience. This moment illustrates vividly the painful contradictions of Yugoslav identity, its grappling with nostalgia and trauma, with memory and forgetting, and above all with deep, tragic identity confusion. At every performance, this opening section spills over the proscenium arch—at every performance, some audience members stand to honour the anthem, others applaud the cursing of Yugoslavia, and some do both.

Contrast and contradiction are used as key dramaturgical devices throughout the show, so that not even pleasant memories are safe: a scene that starts as a party in Zagreb during the 1980s, where protagonists laugh, dance and make love, ends with rape somewhere in the war zones of the 1990s. In another scene, the actress plays a little girl enjoying a tag game of a kind we all played as children, which then turns into an attempt to run away from the sniper fire in the besieged city of Sarajevo. The performance confronts the audience with the painful ambivalence teetering between a sense of nostalgia and a confrontation with the violence of the recent past. The original provocation of the show places Yugoslavia as a space of memory and the obsolete Yugoslav identity central stage.^{xiii} The dramaturgy of contradictions central to the entire piece opens a space that is both affective and discursive. It takes the participants and the audience on a journey from personal memory, nostalgia and/or trauma to a wider political question of what has been lost with the disintegration of the socialist state. The performance does not attempt to answer this question, but rather leaves it open and riddled with contradictions to be grappled with beyond the duration and the scope of *Born in YU*.

There are two instances, however, when the performance spills over and further realises its potential as a worksite, moving the issues of *Born in YU* from individual to collective rethinking and from an existential crisis and paradox of a lost identity to an ethical question and political idea. The first is the aforementioned instance of performance spilling over the proscenium arch in the opening scene of the show when the audience reacts to both the Yugoslav anthem and to the cursing of the country. In this moment, individual ambivalences and dilemmas became experienced together—they became a collective question. Theatre turns into a worksite at this point, but the invocation of the Yugoslavian leftist legacy has not fully taken place yet. The performance becomes a worksite of the Left in the second instance, when the original question of what is meant to be born in Yugoslavia enters into the public sphere, inspiring further rethinking and discussion. This occurred in the form of a round table discussion entitled ‘Do You Remember Yugoslavia?’, directly inspired by the performance and it took place in the Centre for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade (October 2010).^{xiv} The roundtable was organized by Serbian weekly magazine *Vreme* and the Fridrich Ebert Foundation which had the mandate to promote democracy and political education in the region. Hence, the performance *Born in YU* emerges both as a worksite through its own discursive space and as a stimulus that prompted another worksite to emerge in the form of the public debate ‘Do You Remember Yugoslavia?’ .

The discussion pointed out the need to resist the culture of erasure and the need to retrieve historical memory, not as “regression into personal anecdote”^{xv} (Bazdulj 2010, 14), but as a dynamic relationship between personal and political memory. The event involved the actor from *Born in YU*, Mirjana Karanović (Serbia), film director Želimir Žilnik (Serbia), and authors Ante Tomić (Croatia), Miljenko

Jergović (Croatia/ Bosnia) and Muharem Bazdulj (Bosnia). Their discussion was a public re-thinking of Yugoslavia, which explored its social and political legacy. This was, arguably, one of the first attempts to think about Yugoslavia in rational terms, rather than through the conflicting emotional frames—from nationalist passions to Yugo-nostalgia—that had so far dominated the discourse. The speakers and the audience asked, collectively: what was Yugoslavia and what of its leftist legacy is worth salvaging?

The discussion in question framed Yugoslavia neither as a communist anomaly nor as a failed social experiment, but rather as part of a historical continuum that could be traced back to the 19th century when the idea of Slavic unity started to emerge and the socialist political thought was taking hold. This public discussion was also one of the first attempts to look into the legacy of Tito's Yugoslavia, through which the ethos of Yugoslavia actually evolved, despite obvious shortcomings of the system (including the one-party system and the life-long presidency of Tito). The participants agreed on a number of key aspects of Yugoslavia's communist history that should have been cherished, but have been overlooked and often neglected, such as social welfare, workers' self-management, multiculturalism and the ethos of anti-fascist struggle. For the novelist Ante Tomić the most valuable aspect of Yugoslavia was "this socialism through which we have learnt that white and blue collars can live next door in the same apartment buildings." (Tomić 2010,13) He continued:

When we talk about this terrible world in which solidarity no longer exists – in which workers are like dogs that one can just throw out on the street, this experience of Yugoslavia is useful to me. It is useful as this time when we had free healthcare, when we had good and free education, when we would get our apartments from the state, without having to pay for them. (Ibid.,13)

Filmmaker Želimir Žilnik added that, with the emergence of the nationalist regimes in the region, the anti-fascist legacy of Yugoslavia had also been thrown out of the window. The anti-fascist war and its heroes have not only been forgotten, but actively stigmatized. In their stead, various quisling figures, much better fitted for nationalist patriotic narratives, were quickly rehabilitated ‘to compromise the one thing that still could be shared’ among the various peoples of former Yugoslavia and ‘of which we all could still be proud.’ (Žilnik 2010, 12). This discussion did more than remembering and excavating the legacy of the Yugoslavian Left; it also warned of the dangers coming with the culture of forgetting and the nationalist revisionist histories that have been ominously plaguing the nation states in the region for the past twenty years— ever since they had emerged out of the downfall of Yugoslavia.

Born in Yu ends with a monologue echoing *Antigone* where Yugoslavia appears as the corpse of the Other, who belonged to the wrong side, who does not deserve to be mourned and who cannot be properly buried:

Suddenly this country was proclaimed bad. Then I start to feel shame, shame for loving something that’s so inappropriate...something that’s so... you know... [...] I want to end this; I want to mourn this death. You know I’ve never cried properly. [...] I haven’t found closure. I haven’t said “Ok. That’s it. It’s over. Let’s come to terms with it.” I must give this death a burial. (Mustafić 2010, 88)

Even though the show searches for a closure and it ends in the attempt to let Yugoslavia rest in piece, this never gets fully accomplished. Stage deaths and burials are never final. The Bosnian author, Muharem Bazdulj, contests the political fallacy that Yugoslavia ended in mass graves, which has been used in various versions and to various ends from all the sides of the Balkan conflict to prove that Yugoslavia was a social experiment, doomed from its very beginning, when saying: ‘And the truth is that Yugoslavia didn’t end in mass graves and concentration camps. This is where its successors—the little nation-states, ethnic entities, provisional and occupied

territories—began, in the 1940s and in the 1990s’ (Bazdulj 2010, 13). Hence, to look back at Yugoslavia asking, *What did it mean to be born in YU?* is no longer a lament nor an identity crisis, it is not even just a way to understand what happened and why. It is rather an important critical perspective, not only to come to terms with the past, but rather to confront the present. *Born in YU*, its audience and the overflow of the performance into the public discourse, have made this show about personal and political histories, traumas and memories into an actual *worksite-of-the-Left*, through affective and discursive gestures that have challenged and intervened into the hitherto dominant positions that framed Yugoslavian legacy through the discourses of failure.

Worksite II: Our Violence, Your Violence

While *Born in YU* in its digging into the pleasures and traumas of Yugoslav abject identity somewhat paradoxically opened the door for a more productive and even optimistic re-examining of the Leftist legacy of former Yugoslavia, in Oliver Frlić’s *Our Violence, Your Violence*, the political landscape has turned unambiguously dark. In *Our Violence, Your Violence*, the violence is no longer contained within the ethnic turmoil on the Balkan peninsula, instead political hypocrisy and cruelty have been spreading globally like an infectious disease. This show is a European co-production involving theatre production houses from Austria, Switzerland, Croatia and Slovenia and funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation. This devised performance created by Frlić, his dramaturg Marin Blažević and their team of performers, zooms in and out from the political microcosm of the Balkans and former socialist countries into the wider European context. Frlić, an already established agent provocateur of European theatre, positions the issues of refugee crisis, religion and otherness at the centre of this performance. Several aspects

make *Our Violence, Your Violence* a worksite of the Left in a manner that is an unapologetic slap in the face of contemporary Europe. The provocative content of the production painted a dystopic, cynical picture of European democracy under neoliberalism. However, a particular incident during one performance, in the Croatian town of Split, ‘spilled over’ provoking strong affective reactions in the local audience.

The performance starts with the protagonists introducing themselves and telling the audience how they met Frljić and how they ended up in the show. Most of them identified as exiles from Islamic countries now living in Europe in a tone that almost suggested a cheerful, multicultural effervescence. The second scene is already much more ambiguous and ends in an homage to, or a parody of Carolee Schneemann’s seminal feminist performance piece *Interior Scroll* (1975).^{xvi} In *Our Violence, Your Violence*, this scene depicts a naked female performer save for her hijab and inscriptions on her body in Arabic, who pulls the Croatian flag out of her vagina. In this act, the female body is marked in a range of contradictions epitomised through the conflict between exposure (nudity) and concealment (hijab), Islam and Christianity (specifically Croatian Catholicism), and even through the tension between the historical feminist performance and the parodic gesture that echoes it. Even though it is in the first place a provocation to Croatian nationalism, this scene alone is an invitation to a debate on several levels, asking: How to read this quotation of Schneemann’s iconic piece? Whether taken as an homage or as a parody, the context of the female body on stage is different as the quotation is transferred from the live art framework to a theatrical framework. Schneemann’s agency is unquestionable, the agency of the actor performing the scene over and over again and as part of a directed *mise-en-scène* opens a whole new set of questions. While the performance gesture in *Interior Scroll* asserts female body as site of knowledge, does

the same gesture, directed for the purpose of another kind of critique and within the theatrical setting, become instrumentalized? Frlić's performance, however, emerged through a devising process where the actors were integral to its shaping. Yet, even though the actor in the controversial scene never denounced her artistic and political agency, this moment in the performance calls for further feminist analysis of *Our Violence, Your Violence*, which is beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, for Frlić's parodic directorial gesture to be accessed it requires familiarity with Schneemann's piece, which the majority of local theatre going public does not necessarily have. The more immediate meaning of the national flag coming out of a vagina (and that of a woman wearing a hijab) is arguably, rather an in-your-face provocation to Croatian nationalism than a take on feminist performance of the 1970s. The female performer giving birth to the national flag, reiterates and pokes fun at the idea of the mother nation and patriotism, complicating matters further by marking the body of the mother nation as Muslim.

In the final part of the performance, an actor representing Jesus climbs down the cross made of oil canisters and enacts the rape of a Muslim woman. This was another strongly contested moment in the show, cited as one of the key reasons behind cancelling the performance of *Our Violence, Your Violence* at the Sarajevo theatre festival MESS (*Festival Malih i eksperimentalnih scene/ Festival of Small and Experimental Theatres*). A representative of the Catholic Church deemed it blasphemous, asking rhetorically how a scene where Jesus is shown as a rapist could be performed in a theatre only a short walk away from the city's Cathedral. Safety was given as a reason for cancelling the public performance in Sarajevo amidst threats of violence from various religious groups. Instead, a closed performance of the piece was given to the festival guests and the jury.

In Croatia, *Our Violence, Your Violence* was the subject of heated media and TV debates, public uproars and more threats of violence, but nonetheless it did go on. In advance of the performance at the *Marulićevi Dani* festival in Split, nationalists, Right wing groups and war veterans (from the secessionist war of 1990s) gathered in front of the theatre protesting and insulting theatre goers who wanted to see the show. Some of the opponents of Frljić's performance also bought tickets and tried to subvert the show protesting and booing to prevent the actors from performing. At that point, the performance spilled over from the stage into the auditorium—a battle of audiences ensued. While the right-wingers shouted curses and sang nationalistic songs, the other part of the audience responded with singing a famous children's song '*Kad bi svi ljudi na svjetu...*' ('If all the people of the world...') by a legendary Croatian singer Arsen Dedić that called for understanding and solidarity—the same song that became the anthem of the 2016 protests over education reforms. Self-righteous anger from one party was met with a rebuttal in a song about tolerance, which overpowered the theatre. The Croatian New Left also openly stood in defence of the show: 'The nationalist and religious hysteria aroused by a theatre performance, which has been shaking Split for days now, demonstrates the full intellectual and moral depravity of the local Right.' (in Kerbler 2016). The open support from the Left has further framed the performance that spilled into the battle of audiences along the lines of Leftist resistance.

Europe without the Left

The provocation of *Our Violence, Your Violence* reaches beyond the local post-Yugoslavian context, asserting a Leftist critique of neoliberalism as the only radical possibility to confront the European political consciousness with its complicity. One of the central and, arguably, most powerful scenes of the show starts

with the performers dressing in orange uniforms reminiscent of Guantanamo prisoners. They are forced to sing American pop songs and tap dance, while being killed off one by one. As they lie on the stage, the audience is asked to honour with a minute of silence all the victims of terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, Germany, and the United Kingdom. When the minute passes another moment of silence is requested, this time for 4 million people killed in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon by Europeans and Americans from the 1990s onwards. Microphones are then placed next to the slayed prisoners for each to deliver a monologue, as if speaking from beyond the grave. Their lines include:

Those who are against fascism, but not against capitalism, those who complain against barbarism that is born out of barbarism, are similar to those people who like to eat their piece of veal, but do not want the calf to be slathered. They don't mind eating the calf, but they don't want to see its blood. They are not against proprietorial relations that cause barbarism, they are just against barbarism... (Frljić 2016)

Another continues, 'I'm ashamed for being European, I'm ashamed of Europe which doesn't respect human rights and sends humanitarian aid to wash up its own guilty conscience, I'm ashamed of class differences' (Ibid). The audience and theatre itself has not been spared either. The critique of voyeurism is evident in the moments of the performance's own self-criticality:

I'm most ashamed of you, theatre audience. Amongst you there are no heroes of our time. People who are in Turkey, Greece and Macedonia at sea and on land fight with police for the freedom of movement... Meanwhile, you sit and watch this performance in which thousands of people are dying... For you, their death is an aesthetic experience, part of the cultural offering we are performing for you... (Frljić 2016)

While the emerging worksites from *Born in YU* called for a rethinking of the legacy of Yugoslavia through which a new Left might have been imagined, *Our Violence, Your Violence* was a Leftist worksite of a different spatio-temporal

framework. Only a few years apart, the latter turned from the ruins of Yugoslavia to contemporary Europe where the tensions take place against the backdrop of the rising Right. The battle for 21st century Europe is becoming the battle between those who claim that capitalism and its neoliberal paradigm has no alternative, and those recognising the urgency to resist this paradigm. The dystopia of Frljić's provocation is the depiction of Europe without solidarity and ethical grounding that could only be combated from the Left. *Our Violence, Your Violence* is a vision of Europe without the Left that Frljić offers as a warning. As a worksite, this show proposes a critical methodology that does not spare anything or anyone, and not the least theatre itself. Yet in the incident of the performance's overflow into the audience, in the battle between the song of solidarity and the curses of Right-wing hardliners at the theatre festival in Split, the voyeuristic act of watching turns into doing. From this dystopic performance and from the ideological conflict it provokes, a utopian moment emerges and leaves a thin ray of hope that *senso commune* could still emerge in a dark landscape.

Conclusion

This essay has explored theatre as a worksite of the Left situating the two case studies within the wider repertoire of socio-political manifestations that foregrounded the Left in the mode of legacy and retrieval. Even more so, it argued for the interventionist potential of cultural Left to articulate dissatisfactions with the current political regimes and foreground tropes of social justice and solidarity. While *Our Violence, Your Violence* confronted the audience with a strong critique of liberal capitalism and suggesting an urgent need for an alternative and resistance, the Left paradigms of *Born in YU* and the public discussion that it inspired, were not only reactive to the rise of the Right, but called for reevaluating of the leftist legacy. The

performance called attention to core leftist values of care for the commons as politico-ethical and social practices that should be salvaged in their own right and only as modes of resistant practices. Both case studies though demonstrate how theatre operates as a worksite not only through its subject-matters and modes of its representation, but also through a degree of unpredictability inherent in the theatrical event. In other words, theatre here becomes established as a worksite of the Left through what it communicates, as well as through how this communication becomes interrupted and continued by the viewing publics. In both instances the rehearsed performances on stage provoked spontaneous performances in the auditorium and beyond. Moreover, theatre has emerged as a unique worksite in its capacity to generate subsequent worksites—‘Do you Remember Yugoslavia?’ roundtable discussion spilling over from the *Born in YU* performance; and numerous public and media debates that sparked form *Our Violence, Your Violence*. They included a number of different ideological positions, but also enabled a public platform where the marginalized voices of post Yugoslavian Left gained prominence. In both cases, the performance scripts of theatre professionals were interrupted by improvised performances of conflicting socio-political publics. As Christopher Balme notes when writing about instance of the theatrical public sphere, in the given worksites of the Left, ‘the closed circuit of primary theatrical reception’ is also ‘broken open and engagement with other public spheres takes place,’ (Balme 2014, x). The dilemmas, discomfort, uneasiness, and anger that both performances in different ways grappled with and further instigated through other emerging worksites, showed the necessity for leftist cultural practices as modes of activism and resistance. In these instances, the theatre makers, performing their critique of liberal capitalism, and workers (and

other citizens), voicing their grievances against the political elites in various protests all across the region of former Yugoslavia, are no longer too far apart either.

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ⁱ All the quotations from Frlić's performance are transcripts from the video recording of the show at the Mladisko Gledalište, Ljubljana. All translations are mine. I am grateful to the dramaturge Marin Blažević for enabling me to access relevant materials as well as this performance recording. I also wish to extend my thanks to the anonymous readers of this essay, as well as to the editors of the *Studies in Theatre and Performance* for their thoughtful and insightful feedback.

ⁱⁱ The concept of grievable and non-grievable bodies is proposed and elaborated by Judith Butler in her book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*

ⁱⁱⁱ The notion of common sense could be understood here along the lines of Antonio Gramsci's *senso comune* that foregrounds beliefs that are held in common. This is a kind of collective knowledge acquired through encounters rather than through critical and reflections: 'What matter is not the opinion of Tom, Dick, and Harry, but the ensemble of opinions that have become collective and a powerful factor in the

society,' (Gramsci 1996, 347). Given that for Gramsci fundamental inequalities of class are interwoven through all aspects of society, the notion of *senso commune* is of great importance as it brings the intellectual and the subaltern together.

^{iv} For more information on the history of Yugoslavia see John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country* (Cambridge UP, 2016); Ivo Banac, *The National Question of Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*. (Cornell UP, 1988); Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State Building and Legitimation, 2018-2005*. (Indiana UP, 2006)

^v See S. Horvat and I. Štiks, *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism* (Verso, 2014);

^{vi} For more on the downfall of Yugoslavia see Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia* (Penguin 1996); Slavko Goldstein, *1941: The Year that Keeps Returning* (Penguin, 2013); S. Jestrović, *Performance, Space, Utopia: Cities of War, Cities of Exile*. (Palgrave, 2013)

^{vii} Badiou's examples of *Events* include the Paris Commune, Russian Revolution, the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, and more recently the Arab Spring, as well as Schoenberg's invention of tonal music, the emergence of modern art, Cantor's formulation of set theory in mathematics, and so on. Nevertheless, even though the notion of the *Event* is applicable to a range of examples, Badiou maintains that the list should remain limited as the *Events* are rare and exceptional.

^{viii} Gramsci's notion of hegemonic struggles foregrounds the role of intellectuals in mobilising and organising the struggles: 'Critical self-consciousness signifies historically and politically the creation of intellectual cadres. A human mass does not "distinguish" itself and does not become independent "by itself" without organizing itself (in a broader sense), and there is no organisation without intellectuals' *Il materialismo storico* (Gramsci 1966, 12)

^{ix} For more on this protests see also the documentary film by Vanessa Redgrave and Carlo Nero, *Bosnia Rising* (Dissent Productions 2014)

^x The term *plenum* echoes socialist/ communist legacy, as meetings of the communist party were called *plenums*.

^{xi} The concept of theatrical ghosting has been elaborated by Marvin Carlson in his book *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*.

^{xii} All translations of the lines from *Born in YU* are mine. I am grateful to Svetlana Paroški of the Yugoslav Drama Theatre for enabling me to access the unpublished performance script and other relevant material.

^{xiii} I wrote elsewhere about how this performance grappled with contradictions of Yugoslav identity as abjection. See Jestrović, 'Born in YU: Performing, Negotiating and Transforming and Abject Identity' in *Theatre and National Identity: Re-imagining Concepts of Nation*. Ed. N. Holdsworth. (Routledge 2014)

^{xiv} The Centre for Cultural Decontamination is an independent cultural institution founded by dramaturge and public intellectual Borka Pavićević in 1994 as a response to the nationalistic and jingoistic cultural and political climate.

^{xv} This translation and all the subsequent translations from Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian sources are mine.

^{xvi} In her seminal 1975 performance, first performed in East Hampton, NY and later that year at Telluride Festival, Colorado, that extends the discourse about female body as a site of knowledge and critiques its objectification, there is a moment when Schneemann begins to pull a small folded paper scroll from her vagina while reading it aloud.