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Review

Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics After Yugoslavia

Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks (eds). London, New York: Verso, 2015. 288pp.

Joseph L. Derdzinski *

True to its title, or at least its secondary title, *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics After Yugoslavia* minces few words in its radical assessment of the past twenty years' impact on the societies, politics and economies of the post-Yugoslav Balkans. With an eye toward the pitfalls of a forced political and economic liberalization, the contributors' unalloyed assessments that liberalization's disruptions and malaise have made life all the worse reinforces an important perspective and critique into the West's unshakable belief in the twinned powers of democracy and the market.

Welcome... divides itself into four distinct but mutually reinforcing parts: a broad history of the Yugoslav variant of socialism, followed by the impact of forays into capitalism (especially on workers and unions); narratives to explain the societal changes of the post-socialist Yugoslavia; the impact and "bitter fruits" of political transition; and the possibilities for a contemporary rethinking of the region's trajectory.

Thematically constructed around the models of the pre- and post-Yugoslav economies, the initial three chapters are refreshingly direct in their respective assessments, of the predations of capitalism on the Yugoslav states. Vladimir Unkovski-

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Korica's chapter one makes clear that even the "Yugoslav Experiment," wherein a hybrid worker-involved but market-driven, economy holds promise for a more just economy belies the true problems that capitalism, in this volume's estimation, brings. Andreja Živković's chapter is at its heart a manifesto for a more equitable ordering of state and regional economies, arguing that the latest crises of debt lie with the capitalist system itself, which encouraged not only the restructuring of state and society toward a system amenable to capitalism, but massive debts to create this system. No doubt a nod to my own experiences in Slovenia, having seen the changes to the physical infrastructure (and the prices!) of post-Yugoslav Slovenia, the analysis that Slovenia's debt accumulation to finance these developments papered over the cost of the glossy exterior changes. His solution to the region's malaise by enhancing regional cooperation should compel at least some thought about alternative models. Rounding out the introductory trilogy, Marko Grdešić chronicles the regional and global trend (especially in the U.S.) of diminishing participation in workers' union. Those friendly toward worker collective mobilization will no doubt be discouraged by yet another narrative of labor's decline, even with his call for agriculturalists, workers and academics to work toward a more equitable world.

Part II's "reimagining" of the post-Socialist Balkans includes Maria Todorova's update to her well-received *Imagining the Balkans*, a discourse on the extensive use of metaphor in relation to the European project by Janja Petrović, concluding with Boris Buden's riff on the juvenilizing impact of the region's post-Socialist politics. The three combined with certainty are intellectually compelling and thought-provoking, particularly for those who do not regularly engage in the analysis of subtext and dialogue. Todorova needs little introduction for those who study the states of the former Yugoslavia, and this chapter is a welcome contribution to the collection. This is a complex chapter, which defies a facile synopsis; however, I can envision this chapter as ready-made for a small-group discussion of Europeanists eager to dissect historicity and identity politics to better understand contemporary social and moral issues that permeate and impact the region. Extending Todorova's discussion, Petrović and Buden's contributions (the latter appeared originally in 2010, as a journal article) seek interpretations and their related impact on contemporary language (in this case, metaphors) used to describe political events. This includes Europe as a "building," "family," or "journey," among others, which combine to hinder even rethinking of alternative realities; more disconcerting, Europe has created

children from those who just in prior years stood up against authoritarianism. Emblematically, Buden argues:

The notion of “children of communism” is therefore not a metaphor. Rather it denotes the figure of submission to the new form of “historical necessity” that initiates and controls process of the post-communist transition. On these premises, the transition to democracy starts as a radical reconstruction out of nothing. Accordingly, Eastern Europe after 1989 resembles a landscape of historical ruins that is inhabited only by children, immature people unable to organise their lives democratically without guidance from another. (133)

While lambasting those who take the more established understandings of politics and political change, Buden, indeed all three contributors, reminds us that language is powerful, having real consequences for real people.

Welcome's third section vectors into the more familiar territory of political and economic transitions. While Andrej Nikolaidis and Agon Hamza creatively treat their respective discussions on the crimes inherent in political transitions and Kosovo, for purely intrinsic reasons I found myself drawn most to Mitja Velikonja's discussion of “Titostalgia,” which was especially fresh and engaging. Essentially, Titostalgia is predicated on the phenomenon of interpreting the socialist Yugoslav with wholly warm and positive connotations, which speaks well to the shortcomings inherent in modern liberal political movements. Velikonja methodically works through—and rejects—eleven arguments, a small selection of which includes the idea that the more dire the present, the greater the nostalgia for the past; the influence of one's age (but which does not fully explain youthful interest in Tito); Tito's visage (like others of the time, including Mao and Che) and era-specific accoutrements are not relegated to latter-day forms and persons but rather have become a real focus in “new media”; the persistent notion that life in Tito's Yugoslavia was better and more humane than in other systems, when in fact many there may have been disappointed by their social and political standards due to their having more direct contact with the West; and, the proliferation of Tito's images—such as a muscled Tito on a motorcycle *ala* Brando's *The Wild One* (!)—explained as parody, but in fact likely has more entrenched social roots that might in fact be subconsciously founded and expressed in myriad ways, including public holidays. By extension, Velikonja serves to

warn us that an inherent danger in all forms of nostalgia, "...perfection can live only in nostalgia and exist only as utopia, which, as we also know, is a place that does not exist" (195).

Thematically consistent with the volume's organization, the final three contributions look toward past movements that might herald other potential futures in the region. Jana Baćević works to interpret the meaning of the student protests within the former Yugoslavia (which Michael Kraft's chapter on popular "insurrections" describes as well.) Admittedly, my knowing a couple of the leaders of the student movement sparked the popular revolt against Slobodan Milošević in the late 1990s likely focused my attention on this chapter. As familiar as that series of events is to many of us, however, Baćević gives a full and engaging account of the numerous and significant student-led protests, including the widespread movements in Croatia, as well as smaller movements in Slovenia and Serbia, all tied to the liberalization of higher education in response to European influences. He concludes rather insightfully—and hopefully?—that, "Student movements in post-Yugoslav states are thus exceptional not because they go *against* this trend, but because they exist *in spite* of it. The student protests represent a rupture in the fabric of neoliberal post-socialist reality, a conscious choice to stop-, question and criticize *even though* doing so is not 'useful' for one's own political or academic career" (241). Lastly, addressing the yawning and troubling gap in the post-Yugoslav literature, Anika Čakardić's "Women's Struggles and Political Economy" engagingly addresses post-Yugoslav feminist activism in the 1990s, to the current day. Čakardić ultimately seeks to bring to light the reductionist orientation of so much discussion of the role of women in society, which does not tie women's oppression directly to the capitalist system. Calling for movements that connect anti-capitalist struggles, students, union movements, Čakardić concludes, "It is time for all these actors to develop progressive emancipatory strategies appropriate for their time and the geographical region in which their struggles take place" (259). For those of us interested in the real impacts that economic models have on real people—and the responses to them—these three concluding chapters succeed at providing insights into avenues for potential future reforms.

This volume does very well what it intends: to provide a radical interpretation of the social and economic concerns facing the former Yugoslav states. For those predisposed to this position, then this will provide more evidence, or at least another set of examples,

of the societal effects of liberalized economies. For those with different, maybe even opposing, theoretical understandings, *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism* helps to give an understanding why not all persons may be enamored with their “new” world.