

**THE PHENOMENON OF THE EXCHANGE OF THE HOUSES BETWEEN SERBS
AND CROATS DURING THE NINETIES WARS**

By

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Abstract

My project deals with the notions of identity and ethnic enmity and with the phenomenon of the exchange of houses, happened during the Nineties War between Serbs of Croatia and Croats of Serbia, in the Serbian region of Vojvodina and in the Croatian region of Slavonia, at the border of the two countries. Through eleven interviews, gathered from April 2018 to August 2019, all the range of possibilities are covered: Serbs obliged to move from Croatia, a Croat obliged to move from Serbia, and Serbs and Croats that remained to live in the same place.

The existence of this phenomenon suggests that the theory of *ancient hatreds* claimed by some historians, as George Kennan and Samuel Huntington, might be weak. Even during a war that was involving their countries, Serbs and Croats signed peacefully some contracts to exchange their private houses in front of a Catholic priest, an Orthodox monk, or a notary. This fact shows that in this area it exists a nationally mixed society and the personal identity of its inhabitants reveals its multi-layered and intricate essence, in line with the *liquid modernity*, theorized by Zygmunt Bauman.

My thesis is that the phenomenon of the exchange of the houses demonstrates the feebleness of the ethnic enmity's paradigm. The multicultural society and the existence of nuanced identities enhance the theory of *living together* expressed by Marina Blagojević Hughson promoting her idea of *pozistorija* (positive history). My goal is to oppose this idea to the stereotype/prejudice founded on the strength of ethnic diversities. The peculiarity of my dissertation is given also by the chosen approach, a mix between Oral History and Micro History.

Acknowledgements

*You were the fire and I was the fodder
You were a bull and I was the rider
But now I'm a loner and everything is lighter
But I miss the struggle and the burning desire
You told the truth and I was a liar
You thought it out and I just retired
But now that we're older and everything is brighter
I miss the chaos when life was just water
Already on the other side,
Ruby Haunt, Sunbelt.*

Today is Easter Sunday, 12th April 2020, the year of the global Coronavirus outbreak. I am on a balcony with a grey rusty railing, a soft cushion on top of a wooden chair and green leaves that chromatically match the blue sky behind them, up there. Everything seems pending, just like in a poem written by Giuseppe Ungaretti: less violence, but the same apathy. You cannot hear cars driving along *Rottenbiller Utca*, here in Budapest. Its hermetic silence is only interrupted by an untimely neighbor lighting up a cigarette and opening a Soproni canned beer.

While I am writing my article on the Rusyn minority in Vojvodina, I stop before the words of an old Greek Catholic priest from a small village called Ruski Krstur. In a similar way, I stopped a few years ago, listening to the words of a Slovak journalist from Bački Petrovac. The wisdom those sleepy and oftentimes bored people are sometimes able to hand out is astonishing. I feel the urge to write about them more than anything else. Endless supplies of knowledge, they pass down stories and anecdotes as easily as a modern search engine.

I have now started writing the acknowledgments to my article, and I will most likely be done in no less than a couple of months. This is however the right time to start; a sleepy, lazy Sunday afternoon.

This work of mine is dedicated to two people, a man and a woman: Giuseppe e Liliana, from Apulia and Sicily, respectively.

When my mind is numb and tired, it is you whom I think about. I think about my father picking up bottles made of glass and carrying them around; I think about my mother sewing inside the firm's building she works for. I think about my father watching my mother from behind a glass in a hospital ward; I think about my mother singing in the kitchen the day after receiving a bad news, whereas I was in my room, with a lump in my throat. Manual workers in life, scholars when it came to family education. That is the reason why, when I think about you, I always find the energy that I need to keep going. No neckties and a few grammatical mistakes, but also dignity, elegance and willpower combined with a peculiar sweetness, unknown to many other regions, Italian or foreign. I am indeed proud of being a

child of the forgotten and often neglected Southern Italy. I am eventually going to write about that strip of land as well; actually, I already know how to do it: with a slow pace, ideally walking from Francavilla Fontana to Gela, from Giuseppe's town to Liliana's.

Thanks to Stefania, Antonio and Giorgio, thanks for being close when I most needed it, in February and March. Luchino, your 'Uncle Map' is coming back to quiz you on maps, are you ready for that?

A month later and it is mid-May. I am sitting on a bench, gazing at the Danube, pensive and idle. Both the river and myself. People have started walking around, with wine bottles and plastic glasses. Bars and restaurants remain shut, but people are opening themselves again.

The Danube is still the same river it was on our first stroll alongside it, when we first climbed these steps together. This year can hardly be compared to anyone else I have lived so far; it has taken away several of my certainties. Among those which I have lost along the way, you. Surprisingly, the Danube keeps flowing, despite my conviction that we would have seen it flowing for many other years is now gone. The river keeps flowing, unconcerned.

Yet, I must thank you, Sanja, because obtaining my third degree would have just being unfeasible without you. Tons of transcribed interviews, thousands of phone calls, the villages we visited, the churches we discovered, the bridges we crossed, the rivers we admired, hand in hand. My gratitude gets lost in the unrelentingly flowing water, but it will not get out of my clear memory, now dealing with melancholy and nostalgia. I wonder whether I will ever find another river like you, somewhere else.

It is the end of May: Varosliget, the park, the sun coming and going, an uncomfortable bench, pen and paper.

If I have come to my third degree, I especially owe it to a university professor. My greatest academic gratitude is for you, Antonio, or better Professor Antonio Violante, undisputed example throughout my studies. A warm greeting to your wife Sandra. Thanks to Lorenzo, or Professor Lorenzo Bertucelli, for the patience you showed in sending off letters of reference. Thanks to Professor Marek Sobczynski for the first ever conferences and publications of my academic career.

Here, between Vienna and Budapest, I wish to thank Professor Mate Nikola Tokić. I could hardly forget an e-mail he sent me overnight, in one amid the most difficult days I had this year, explicitly recommending that I temporarily suspend my studying activities and do something else.

Furthermore, thanks to Carsten Wilke, Laszlo Kontler, Constantin Iordachi, Brett Wilson and Matthias Riedl for their understanding, courtesy and kindness. Working and studying with you and listening to your lessons, in this exciting environment, was like living in a dream.

Besides, I would like to thank two other people from the CEU: Monika Horvath, for her constant willingness to help me in my two weeks of quarantine, and Aniko Molnar, for her willingness to help me in any occasion.

The list of people to thank still goes on and includes a plenty of friends. Thanks to Riccardo for his offer during a summery ice cream. Thanks to Matteo, personal beacon of mine, who managed to make me cry in late March. Thanks to Simona, for the amazing days you spent in Vienna with me. Thanks to Lorenzo and Eleonora, dear travelling companions. Thanks to Simone and Filippo, I am not going to forget Mafiosi's pizzeria. Thanks to Daniele and Moreno for visiting me in Vienna. Thanks to Sara and Silvia, for the sweet time we spent together in Budapest. Thanks to Valentina, Gilberto, Carolina, Sara (yes, you again), Marco, Elisa, Mattia, Vittoria, Alessandra, Ambra, Chiara, Stefano, Cristina, Luca, Ilaria, only to mention who has been really close to me in these tough months, be it with messages, phone calls, recipes, or musical suggestions.

Thanks to Serena and Tania. When I received the proposal from the CEU on a Friday of a late July 2019, you both told me, with no hesitation, to simply accept it without even entertaining the idea of refusing. One, while shedding some tears; the other, sipping her beer and trying to play it cool.

Thanks to all the friendships I was able to build here. The strongest, with Samira, Adam and Marija. Who knows where we are going to meet again, since we are obviously going to meet again. Thanks also to Armin, Aleksandar, Anja, Zsofia, Berker and Balša. Thanks to Dara and to the 'Serbian Crew', for the amazing nights we spent together. Thanks to anyone who at least once kept me a place on my favorite sofas in one of the many libraries in Vienna or Budapest.

Thanks to Diego. I retain a wonderful memory of the 2019 Viennese autumn, to which I will hold on. Our last lunch together at the Romanian restaurant remains unforgettable, as well as the dinner when you mistakenly order a menacing and unappetizing liver-based dish. While it is true that we will never experience this autumn again, it is also true that we will live through other seasons together.

Thanks to Marija, because these months in Hungary would have been hugely different without our quarrels and some bottles of Irsai Oliver. Thanks for our walks and chats, for your cheese, my chips, for the tears we shed and dried together. Thanks for that walk at the sunset, after some cocktails, simply unforgettable. My heartfelt thanks to Giovanni as well.

Thanks to Giancarlo, unexpected flatmate. Here it is, a friendship born on uncertain grounds and now much steadier than I could ever imagine. I am going to miss your Veggie Carbonara, but I know you will cook it for me again next year, when I will be visiting you in Vienna.

Finally, from the long corridor of my Hungarian house, from my armchair made of five pillows since my neck pain is still not ready to leave me alone.

How ludicrous it seems to look at statistics and numbers rattled off mostly to make up another news report, in which nobody is genuinely interested. The severity of what is happening is lost in some digits, with little room for emotions or awareness. This is what Coronavirus has been to me, a long sequence of numbers.

That is the reason why I need to go beyond it, delve into each story and analyze it; scrutinize it. A better understanding means to get to the bone, unearth the details and raise personal awareness. Here is where I see many similarities between Story and Science.

Hence, I became keen on Micro History and Oral History. I feel proud when I manage to tell a forgotten story which has been neglected, sometimes deceptively, sometimes out of modesty, sometimes because of ignorance. I find narrations that deal with wars and focus on governments rather than people to be truly redundant and quite disconnected from reality. Mussolini, Hitler, Milošević or Tuđman will never be *the* Italians, Germans, Serbs or Croats. They will never represent these populations.

Describing the details, getting lost in marginal features, falling in love with minor matters, being fascinated by biographies, understanding individual choices. That is what I will keep doing in life, with or without a PhD. I am convinced that the history of a community is a chimera that rarely leads to effective solutions for the future. I am convinced that the history of a person is the exact opposite, and capable of bringing about concrete results if properly analyzed.

I will now go home and start from scratch, just like 5 years ago, after my experience in Kosovo. Poorer somewhere, richer on the inside. Sometimes life truly repeats itself. 2015-2020. Just as History does. When you think you have built something, there comes a day when, with a clear mind, on a wooden bench that was painted green, in front of a castle that leaves you speechless and a river that does not cease to amaze, on which barges flow very slowly and birds glide very fast, you realize you could and should have done much more. That feeling will leave you numb, emptied on the inside, still in search of your own path. But I am now starting to grow weary of searching for my own path. I stop and watch the Danube for the last time, and I feel the oncoming tears that, just as if they were bullets, I am not able to hold back.

I realize I miss my life very much when it was chaotic, but indeed very profound as well; when life was just water, and it all seemed simpler. *I miss the chaos when life was just water.*

But then, all it takes is some red curly hair, a yellow dress, a night cab, Mexican cocktail, some ‘Cantucci’ cookies and some strawberries in order to find the right bridge and cross your inner river, the only one that it is really important to cross. I am not concerned whether these ‘Cantucci’ and these strawberries will be there once I have crossed it; what truly matter is to already be *on the other side*.

Already on the other side.

Budapest, June 3rd, 2020

Ringraziamenti

*You were the fire and I was the fodder
You were a bull and I was the rider
But now I'm a loner and everything is lighter
But I miss the struggle and the burning desire
You told the truth and I was a liar
You thought it out and I just retired
But now that we're older and everything is brighter
I miss the chaos when life was just water
Already on the other side,
Ruby Haunt, Sunbelt.*

Oggi è Pasqua, 12 aprile 2020, anno del Coronavirus. Mi ritrovo su un balcone con una ringhiera grigia arrugginita, un cuscino soffice su una sedia di legno e delle foglie verdi, le quali legano cromaticamente con l'azzurro dietro, là, in alto. Tutto è sospeso, come in una poesia di Giuseppe Ungaretti. Con meno violenza, con la stessa apatia. Non si sentono macchine passare qui a Budapest, in *Rottenbiller Utca*. Il silenzio ermetico è rotto da un vicino ingombrante, il suo accendino e la sua lattina di birra Soproni.

Scrivo l'articolo sulla minoranza russina di Vojvodina, mi fermo intontito di fronte alle parole di un anziano prete greco cattolico di un piccolo villaggio, Ruski Krstur. Come mi ero fermato intontito qualche anno fa, di fronte alle parole di un giornalista slovacco di Bački Petrovac. La saggezza che sgorga da personaggi assopiti e spesso annoiati. Io devo raccontare voi, più di qualsiasi altra cosa. Fonte inesauribile di conoscenza, tramandate aneddoti e storie con la facilità di un motore di ricerca.

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Quando la mente è stanca, penso a Voi. Penso a mio padre che raccoglie le bottiglie di vetro per portarle in giro, penso a mia madre che cuce nella sua ditta. Penso a mio padre che guarda mia madre dal vetro di un reparto di ospedale, penso a mia madre che canta in cucina il giorno dopo una brutta notizia, mentre io in camera avevo il magone. Operai nella vita, laureati nell'educazione familiare. Ecco, quando penso a Voi, trovo sempre le energie per andare avanti. Senza cravatte e con qualche errore grammaticale di troppo, ma con una eleganza, una dignità e una forza d'animo mista a dolcezza sconosciuta ad altre latitudini. Anche italiane, sia chiaro. Sì, sono orgoglioso di essere un figlio del Sud Italia dimenticato e spesso tralasciato. Prima o poi racconterò anche questo lembo di terra, e ho già in mente come. Lentamente, camminando da Francavilla Fontana a Gela, dal paese di Giuseppe a quello di Liliana.

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Metà maggio, un mese dopo, mi trovo su una panchina a guardare il Danubio, pensoso e pigro. Sia il fiume che me stesso. La gente inizia a camminare in giro, con bottiglie di vino e bicchieri di plastica. I bar e i ristoranti sono ancora chiusi, ma la gente si sta riaprendo.

Il Danubio è lo stesso fiume della nostra prima passeggiata, dei nostri primi scalini saliti insieme. Quest'anno è stato imparagonabile a molti altri della mia vita, mi ha portato via molte convinzioni; tra queste, lasciate per strada, ci sei anche Tu. In maniera inaspettata, il Danubio continua a scorrere, nonostante la mia certezza di vederlo scorrere per tanti anni con te al mio fianco. Lui continua a scorrere, disinteressato.

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Fine maggio, Varosliget, parco, sole che va e viene, panchina scomoda, penna e carta.

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giusto per ricordare chi mi è stato più vicino in questi mesi, con messaggi, chiamate, ricette di cucina o consigli musicali.

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Grazie a Diego, punto di riferimento quotidiano. Ho un ricordo splendido dell'autunno viennese 2019 e me lo terrò stretto. Indimenticabile l'ultimo pranzo al ristorante romeno e la cena dove hai sbagliato piatto, prendendo del fegato di qualcosa. Se è vero che questo autunno non tornerà più, è anche vero che ci saranno altre stagioni da vivere insieme.

Grazie a Marija, questi mesi ungheresi non sarebbero stati gli stessi senza i tuoi scleri e le nostre bottiglie di Irsai Oliver. Grazie per le passeggiate, per le chiacchierate, per i tuoi formaggi, le mie patatine, per le lacrime che ci siamo raccolti a vicenda. Grazie per quella passeggiata all'alba dopo qualche cocktail di troppo, semplicemente indimenticabile. Grazie, di cuore, anche a Giovanni.

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Infine, dal lungo corridoio della mia casetta ungherese, dalla mia poltrona, costruita con cinque cuscini, perché il mal di collo non mi abbandona.

Quanto è assurdo leggere delle statistiche, dei numeri, snocciolati per dare delle notizie, le quali però non interessano nessuno. Quanto la drammaticità di quanto è accaduto si perde in un numero. Non trovano spazio nemmeno la commozione e la consapevolezza. Questo è stato il Coronavirus per me, una sequenza di numeri.

Ecco perché devo andare oltre, entrare nelle singole storie e vivisezionarle. Anatomizzarle. Comprendere meglio è entrare nel profondo, nel dettaglio, nella consapevolezza. In questo vedo molte somiglianze tra la Storia e la Scienza.

Così, mi sono appassionato di Micro History e di Oral History, quanto mi rende orgoglioso raccontare quella storia dimenticata, tralasciata, a volte con inganno, a volte con modestia, a volte con ignoranza. Quanto trovo pleonastici e slegati dalla realtà quei racconti storici che parlano di guerre, citando i paesi e non le persone. Mussolini, Hitler, Milošević e Tuđman non saranno mai gli italiani, i tedeschi, i serbi e i croati. Non rappresenteranno mai questi popoli.

Raccontare i dettagli, perdersi nelle minuzie, innamorarsi delle piccolezze, rimanere affascinato dalle biografie, comprendere le scelte dei singoli. Questo è quello che farò sempre nella mia vita, dottorato o no. Convinto che la storia di una collettività sia talmente una

chimera che raramente porta a soluzioni per il futuro. Convinto che la storia di un singolo invece sia esattamente l'opposto, porti davvero a risultati tangibili se ben analizzata.

Ora torno a casa e ricomincio da zero, come cinque anni fa, dopo l'esperienza in Kosovo. Povero da qualche parte, ricco internamente. Come si ripete la Vita, a volte. 2015-2020. Esattamente come la Storia. Quando si pensa di aver costruito tanto, arriva un giorno, a mente libera, su una panchina di legno pitturata di verde, di fronte a un castello che ti lascia senza parole e un fiume che ti intontisce, in cui le chiatte passano lentissime e gli uccelli planano velocissimi, dove invece ti rendi conto che avresti dovuto e potuto fare di più. E allora, ci si sente come inebetiti, vuoti dentro, ancora alla ricerca del proprio sentiero. Ma io inizio ad essere davvero stanco di ricercare questa strada. Mi fermo a guardare il Danubio per l'ultima volta, sento le lacrime e sono come proiettili che non riesco a fermare.

Quanto mi manca quel periodo così caotico, ma anche così profondo, dove la vita era solo acqua, ed era semplice. I miss the chaos when life was just water.

Ma poi bastano dei capelli rossi ricci, un vestito giallo, un taxi notturno, un cocktail messicano, dei cantuccini e delle fragole per trovare il ponte giusto ed attraversare il fiume che corre dentro, l'unico che devo davvero oltrepassare. Non mi interessa nemmeno se questi cantuccini e queste fragole rimarranno ad attraversamento compiuto, l'importante sarà essere già *dall'altra parte*.

Already on the other side.

Budapest, 3 giugno 2020

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Introduction. Everything flows

*“Whoever lies awake at night in Sarajevo
hears the voices of the Sarajevo night.
The clock on the Catholic cathedral
strikes the hour with weighty confidence: 2 AM.
More than a minute passes (to be exact, seventy-five seconds - I counted)
and only then, with a rather weaker, but piercing sound,
does the Orthodox church announce the hour and chime its own 2 AM.
A moment after it the tower clock on the Beys' Mosque
strikes the hour in a hoarse, faraway voice,
and that strikes 11, the ghostly Turkish hour,
by the strange calculation of distant and alien parts of the world.
The Jews have no clock to sound their hour,
so, God alone knows what time it is for them,
by the Sephardic reckoning or the Ashkenazy.
Thus, at night, while everyone is sleeping,
division keeps vigil in the counting of the late,
small hours, and separates these sleeping people who,
awake, rejoice and mourn, feast and fast by four different
and antagonistic calendars,
and send all their prayers and wishes to one heaven
in four different ecclesiastical languages.
And this difference, sometimes visible and open,
sometimes invisible and hidden,
is always similar to hatred, and often completely identical with it,”
Ivo Andrić (Letter from 1920).*

“To those who have not visited them, the Balkans are a shadowland of mystery; to those who know them, they become even more mysterious.... You become, in a sense, a part of the spell, and of the mystery and glamour of the whole. You contract the habit of crouching over your morning coffee in the café and, when you meet a man of your acquaintance, at least half of what you say is whispered, portentously. Intrigue, plotting, mystery, high courage, and

daring deeds - the things that are the soul of true romance are today the soul of the Balkans.”¹

In 1908, the American traveler Arthur Howden Smith depicts in this way the Balkans, creating a sort of magical world, apparently far away from Western world. This stereotypical image seems the right one for the path that this project would like to follow.²

Maria Todorova plays with this dichotomic, between Western and Eastern countries, and prejudicial perspective in her *Imagining the Balkans*, where she does not hide the existing diversities, but tries to canalize them, dividing them in historical truths and invented figments. For instance, one of the classical stereotypes regarding Balkans is the one that consider this area as a *bridge-land*, probably a sort of corridor between two distinct cultures; being amidst, this area retains some nuances from both of them. This is an interesting point of view, but I think it should not become a paradigm, as Eugène Ionesco does, “an original and authentic Balkan *culture* cannot be really European. The Balkan *spirit* is neither European nor Asiatic. It has nothing to do with Western humanism.”³ It is always extremely complicated to turn the gaze towards Eastern Europe with Western glasses, the main goal of the scholars is wonderfully clarified by the anthropologist Mary Edith Durham, when she suggests that the academic world should study Balkan perspective, without using Western paradigms and archetypes;⁴ only modifying this way of thinking, it is possible to avoid precarious dichotomous positions, as the Samuel Huntington’s one. In 1993, in his article “The clash of civilizations,” he tries to highlight, giving it new significance, the classical division between Catholics and Orthodox, which disorient still more, especially after the end of the Cold War.⁵ It is crucial to start to avoid these dichotomies, which do not permit an adequate approach to the study of the topic

¹ Arthur D. Howden Smith, *Fighting the Turks in the Balkans, An American’s Adventure with the Macedonian Revolutionaries*, cited in Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, (Oxford: University Press, 2009), 14.

² For all my dissertation I am using excerpts and statements from the paper personally written for the course Twentieth-century Balkan History (Winter Term 2020, code of the course HIST5878), taught by Professor Mate Nikola Tokić. The title of my paper is “Bargaining chip. Ethnic (?) cleansing during the Nineties War in Yugoslavia” (April 2020).

³ Eugène Ionesco, *Présent passé: Passé présent*, cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 47.

⁴ Mary Edith Durham, *The Burden of the Balkans*, cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 121.

⁵ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 132.

and continue to encourage a kind of Western superiority and the validity of pointless stereotypes, as the one I would like to unmask with my dissertation.

These stereotypes built a concept, called *Balkanism*, which can be compared to the similar notion, invented by Edward Said, named *Orientalism*. According to Todorova, “while Orientalism is dealing with a difference between types, Balkanism treats the differences within one type” and she adds that “Balkanism was formed gradually in the course of two centuries and crystallized in a specific discourse around the Balkan Wars and World War I. In the next decades, it gained some additional features.”⁶ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche explained this sort of *crystallization*, “the reputation, name, and appearance, the usual measure and weight of a thing, what it counts for - originally almost always wrong and arbitrary, ... - all this grows from generation unto generation, merely because people believe in it, until it gradually grows to be part of the thing and turns into its very body. What at first was appearance becomes in the end, almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such.”⁷ In the Western popular imaginary, the adjective *Balkan* is linked with something that is backward, frozen, and outstanding; moreover, at the same time, this geographical area seems to be always undergone by riots and conflicts, as also the writer Rudyard Kipling underlines in the introduction of his book, *The light that failed*.

Scholars should avert these viewpoints, following other perspectives, as the ones of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Tsvetan Todorov; indeed, Balkanism deserves detailed and deepened studies. As Chakrabarty quotes, historians should avoid to study Oriental and Balkan History, using Western paradigms and benchmarks, especially because Westerners do not behave in the same way when they write their own History.⁸ This approach creates a sort of ‘*Western xenophilia*’, concept invented by the Bulgarian scholar Todorov, who states that “for the

⁶ Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 19.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 19.

⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of Subaltern Studies,” cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 61.

Westerner, our traditions... are exciting with their primitiveness, the elemental quality, the backwardness, the exoticism of the wild.”⁹ Fighting prejudices is not particularly easy if also the term itself is so imbued and soaked with negative connotations; indeed, *to balkanize*, and the relative translation in many other European languages, means “to break up into small, mutually hostile political units, as the Balkans after World War I”¹⁰ and after the Nineties War and the Kosovo War of the end of the past century.

The *crystallization*, the backwardness, the *xenophilia*, the meaning of the verb *to balkanize* bring clearly to believe that the factor of national, religious, ethnic hatred is simply the cause of the violence. With my dissertation I do not argue this idea, since national, religious and ethnic diversities can obviously bring violence, but simply I would like to demonstrate that, firstly, it exists, in Slavonia and Vojvodina, during the war, also a different way to perceive the *otherness*, and these non-violent exchanges of houses, occurred during the violence, are the demonstration of this nonaggressive approach; and, secondly, this phenomenon allows the discovery of some intricate and interesting layers of identity, which relevance is often underestimated. Indeed, the aim of this project is to unmask the paradigm of the ethnic enmity. My project will investigate the current multi-layered society living in Vojvodina (and partially in Slavonia) at the end of the twentieth century, examining the phenomenon of the exchange of the houses, happened during the Nineties Wars between Serbs of Croatia and Croats of Serbia. My thesis is that this phenomenon is the demonstration itself of the weakness of the ethnic enmity in these lands, and that in these borderlands areas the intermingled and multicultural framework shape a society, founded more on integration, aggregation and on the concept of *living together* than on nationalistic conflicts and chauvinistic enmities, often overcame by the former. My aim is, consequently, to fight the existence of the stereotype founded on the strength of ethnic diversities.

⁹ Tsvetan Todorov, *Zabeležki otnosno kristosvaneto na kulturite*, cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 61.

¹⁰ Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 34.

This framework is the necessary first step of my research and Rogers Brubaker helps creating a sort of paradigm in his brilliant book *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*; he explains that “national minorities, nationalizing states, and external national homelands are bound together in a single, interdependent relational nexus.”¹¹ The starting point of this concept is that these three actors “are, however, not fixed entities but variably configured and continuously contested political fields.”¹² A brief explanation is necessary. First of all, a national minority is a group that declare itself as part of an ethnocultural nation diverse from the country where it lives; this group is usually represented by some organizations, sociocultural movements, or political parties that claim cultural and political rights for their nation. Secondly, a nationalizing state is an entity that, through organizations and political parties, tries “to be a nation-state, the state of and for a particular nation,” even though it is simply an “*unrealized nation-state*.”¹³ Thirdly, an external national homeland is simple a “state responsible, in some sense, not only for its own citizens but also for ethnic co-nationals who live in other states and possess other citizenships.”¹⁴

This model does not account for every single instance; indeed, the Balkan area is usually more intricate. For example, it does not provide an accurate interpretation for the peculiar case of the village of Kijevo, a small Croatian Catholic village that, before the Nineties wars, was surrounded by Serbian Orthodox villages of the Knin area, which were all part of the Croatian State, in turn part of Yugoslav Federal Republic. Brubaker himself acknowledged that reality is often more complex and many-sided, and personal identity is often regarded as something of malleable and fluid which “people have, forge, and construct.”¹⁵ For instance, one of the milestones of the Balkan history dates 1389 and it is the demonstration of this

¹¹ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 58.

¹² Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed*, 60.

¹³ Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed*, 60-63.

¹⁴ Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed*, 67.

¹⁵ Rogers Brubaker, and Frederick Cooper, *Beyond identity*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 28.

malleability and fluidity. On *Vidovdan*, the day of the celebration of Saint Vitus, namely June 28th, 1389, according to Gregorian calendar¹⁶, in the *Kosovo Polje*¹⁷ Battle there was the epic clash between the Ottoman Empire, led by the Sultan Murad I, and the Serbian troops, led by Lazar Hrebeljanović and his Bosnian ally Tvrtko I Kotromanić; as the Slovenian historian Jože Pirjevec reminds, on the one hand, among Ottoman forces, there were Christian vassals, and, on the other hand, Vlachs, Albanians, Croats and Bulgarians soldiers fought with Serbian armies.¹⁸ This instance could be fraught with consequences, but it shows that the considered *holy war* (especially from the Serbian side) between Christians and Muslims was, instead, particularly many-sided and more complex to define. This indistinguishable intermingling is poetically expressed also by the Nobel Prize Ivo Andrić in the quotation of this introduction. In the last century, in the Balkan area, six wars were fought also for these national and ethnic reasons, and currently national groups seem as the galaxies in the Edwin Hubble's theory: they are incessantly distancing each other.

Gellner describes nations as a “fusion of will, culture and polity,”¹⁹ he thinks that nationalism engenders nations, and not the other way around. To this regard, he is adamant: traditions are a creation of nationalism, which uses cultural and historic elements in a very selective way. That is the very deception of nationalism: the anonymous and impersonal establishment of a culture within a society. The reality is the exact opposite of what nationalism wants us to believe. Nationalism does not act in the name of a popular culture; on the contrary, it tends to subjugate it.²⁰ Eric Hobsbawm agrees with this vision: nations are a myth, nationalism takes preexisting cultures and makes them its own. Both ideas are dual phenomena,

¹⁶ On June 15th according to Julian calendar.

¹⁷ It means field of the blackbirds.

¹⁸ Jože Pirjevec, *Serbi, croati, sloveni. Storia di tre nazioni*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), 16.

¹⁹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 53.

²⁰ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 53-55.

constructed essentially from above, and they do not match the needs of ordinary citizens. That is why, in today's Western society, national identification is not superior to the remainder of the set of identifications which constitute the social being.²¹

Following the idea of Edin Hajdarpasić, nation building is an *endless process*,²² instead Ernest Gellner believes that behind every form of nationalism lies a sort of “selection of traditions,”²³ meant as creation of nationalism. I would like to trace the origins of these traditions and determine whether they came from sociocultural or political practice; in the latter case, I would adopt Pieter Judson's idea of indifference. Indeed, Judson encouraged to “think situationally about nationhood, rather than in terms of identities.”²⁴

Politicians instilled in his unarmed inhabitants an ethnic and a national idea, and clearly it was followed by a huge part of population. Nevertheless, the intermingled society present in some parts of Vojvodina and of Slavonia and the related multi-layered identities of its inhabitants made possible the phenomenon of the exchange of the houses. The main aim was the ethnic standardization and they were able to instill it in many areas of the country; nevertheless, where the multiculturalism was the only known typology of coexistence, this process was not working as expected, and, as I have already declared, a sort of local feeling seemed stronger than a national one in few villages around Šid, where I conducted my interviews. The fact that some of these exchanges were sometimes organized peacefully by Catholic priests or lawyers, and the fact that this research of houses was often planned asking to friends of the other national group, who inquiring relatives or friend living in the opposite

²¹ Erich John Ernest Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870. Programme, Myth, Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 11-14.

²² Edin Hajdarpasić, *Whose Bosnia?: Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans, 1840–1914* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2015).

²³ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.

²⁴ Pieter M. Judson, “Nationalism and indifference,” in *Habsburg Neu Denken. Vielfalt und ambivalenz in Zentraleuropa. Kulturwissenschaftliche Stichworte*, ed. Johannes Feichtinger, (Wien/Köln/Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), 153.

country, are all factors upon which scholars should carefully reflect, since they unmask the ethnic enmity in an evident way.

The Italian movie director Graziano Conversano dedicated his documentary *Il tempo del dopo*²⁵ to the figure of Predrag Matvejević, a half Croat half Russian writer and teacher of French Literature at University of Zagreb and at the Sorbonne University. The documentary goes through the entire life of Matvejević, from his childhood in Mostar to his *academic* town, Zagreb, passing through Sarajevo, where he completed his studies. In the introduction, the movie director decided to narrate the fall of the *Stari Most* (the Old Bridge, the Mostar's bridge). The images of that catastrophe were recorded by a Muslim soldier that had a vacation day exactly on November 9th, 1993; for this reason, he went with his camera to record the Old Bridge already unsafe, because of the bombs of the days before. He was exactly there in the moment which the bridge fell down, his images were the only ones that every television channel broadcasted regarding this tragedy. Interviewed by Graziano Conversano, he claimed that he could not believe that the bridge was really collapsing. The crash had a loud thud inside the blue waters of Neretva river. In the meantime, the camera operator had the need to move away his head from the camera and to watch with his eyes because he was incredulous and shocked.

Despite the image is evoking the destruction of a multicultural town as Mostar, I strongly believe that this is the perfect metaphor I need for my project thesis: moving away from the broad perspective to narrow the point of view, revitalizing the idea of Oral History mixed to Micro History to fulfill the real aim of my personal being an *historian*. A small detail, an individual story, a forgotten village, a disregarded event can help to comprehend better the totality, the whole. It exists also a rhetorical device that explains this process: the synecdoche. It is similar, but diverse, from the metonymy: in the latter there is a sort of semantic proximity,

²⁵ "Il tempo del dopo," Vimeo, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/131762372>.

created by spatial, time or causative clauses;²⁶ instead, in the former, the sematic closeness is more linked with the concept of greater and lesser extension, namely from the particular to the general, from the singular to the plural.²⁷ Hayden White underlines the difference between these two rhetorical devices, “Burke argues that metonymic usage is *reductive*, while synecdochic is *representative*. (...) Metonymy, being reductive in its operations, (...) is characterized by an apprehension of the historical field as a complex of part-part relationship and by the effort to comprehend that field in terms of the laws that bind one phenomenon to another as a cause to an effect. Synecdoche, by contrast, would sanction a movement in the opposite direction, towards integration of all apparently particular phenomena into a whole, the quality of which was such as to justify belief in the possibility of understanding the particular as a microcosm of a macrocosmic totality.”²⁸ I am not declaring that the exchange of the houses is representing the reality of what it happened during the four years of war at the border between Serbia and Croatia, because sieges, fights and deaths demonstrate clearly the opposite. Nevertheless, I believe that the synecdoche is the perfect rhetorical device, adequate to represent my attempt to consider the exchange of the houses as a small instance which depicts the multi-layered and intricate social relationship and the population’s personal identities in a highly politicized society of a small area at the border between Serbia and Croatia; and, furthermore, this picture, in its turn, represent the fluidity of Yugoslav identity itself.

Repeating Brubaker words, identity is often regarded as something malleable and fluid which "people have, forge, and construct."²⁹ I strongly believe that only the understanding that the totality is extremely multifaceted can help in the avoidance of simplistic labels or

²⁶ “Metonimia significato,” Treccani dizionario (dictionary), accessed April 21, 2020, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/metonimia/>.

²⁷ “Sineddoche significato,” Treccani dizionario (dictionary), accessed April 21, 2020, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sineddoche/>.

²⁸ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 72-73.

²⁹ Brubaker, and Cooper, *Beyond identity*, 28.

stereotypes. I found the Brubaker concept of identity like the Heraclitus idea of *everything flows*, “you cannot step into the same river twice, for other waters are continually flowing on;”³⁰ exactly, as the river, which cannot be the same twice, also a person should be considered as something that continues to mutate, to transform, to modify itself. As Giangiuseppe Pili declares, “sia il fiume che noi stessi siamo in continuo cambiamento e, per ciò, non siamo mai la stessa cosa,”³¹ both the river than us are in a continuous modification and, therefore, we are never the same. Pili concludes affirming that from one side, there is an unceasing dynamism, from the other side an eternal certainty regarding this dynamism. In other words, identity is something that is changing without stopping, being unique and tiered at the same time.³² This comparison does not solve the fact that often the national identity is something of extremely strong and alive, indeed concretely the awareness of the Heraclitus’ dynamism does not reduce the role of the identity in a society. Nevertheless, it minimizes the value, creating the conditions for a fragmentation of the identity itself; the widespread comprehension of the existence of several facets of an identity can have only beneficial implications within a society.

This methodological and introductory part is necessary to clarify my *malleable* perspective and my belief in a fluid society. The structure of my thesis will be divided into two chapters. In the first one, I will utilize some specific interviews gathered between April 2018 and August 2019; precisely, they are 11 interviews to a Croat that came back to live in Croatia, Croats that decide to remain in Serbia, Serbs that moved from Croatia to Serbia, and Serbs that continued the normal life in Serbia. In the second chapter, I will try to organize an intermingled analysis between the words of the interviewed people and the multiple layers of identity,

³⁰ “Heraclitus said, ‘You cannot step into the same river twice, for other waters are continually flowing on.’ How does this statement help illustrate his belief that ‘all is change’?,” *eNotes Editorial*, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/heraclitus-said-you-cannot-step-into-the-same-377647>.

³¹ “Eraclito: vita e opere,” *Scuola Filosofica*, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.scuolafilosofica.com/630/eraclito>.

³² *Ibid.*

starting from the comprehension of the Yugoslav identity, passing through some notions of identities, alternative to the nationalistic one, relevant in the process of every singular nation building, and concluding with the attempt to catch the deep meaning of the concept of *triadic society*. I will mirror two different kind of identity: the nationalistic one, created by default by politicians, and the anti-nationalistic one, created by social and cultural circumstances, which create two groups definable as *starosedeci* and *došljaci*. *Starosedeci* should be defined as people whose families have lived in a specific village or area for at least two or three centuries, even though, in the reality, many families arrived just after the Second World War considered them in this way. *Došljaci* are instead people whose families came to this area over the last decades, via several migrations. From this comparison I personally shaped the concept of *triadic society*, which involves three different groups of people: the two nationally different group of *starosedeci*, Serbs and Croats, and the third group, the *došljaci*'s one, namely Serbs in Croatia or Croats in Serbia.

Before to enter in the transcription of the interview, the last part of this introduction is dedicated to a short summary of the twentieth century in Yugoslavia. As Peter Munz declares, “one’s past defines one’s identity and the perception (...) of a shared past promotes a sense of community. (...) we are the products of the past. (...) we are the way we are because of our past.”³³ Provocatively, Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević could agree with the statement of the German historian, but it is not wise to convey to them the birth of chauvinism, since they did not exist in a vacuum of power.

After the Second World War, Tito became the new political reference point of these lands, bringing the concept of *socialist brotherhood*, which theoretically would have deleted the nationalistic divisions. Đorđe Tomić, in his brilliant article entitled *From ‘Yugoslavism’ to*

³³ Peter Munz, “The historical narrative,” in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley (London, England, and New York, New York: Routledge, 1997), 851.

(post-)Yugoslav nationalisms: understanding Yugoslav identities, points out that, throughout its life, the main problem of the Yugoslav communist political elite was clearly the national question, since “the Yugoslav federal state was based on the premise of equality among the different nations.” The failure itself of Yugoslavia is in this concept, in the “formal distinction between peoples.” This situation appeared as a “good compromise” for the different national groups and entities present in the country, but, during the Sixties and the Seventies the “existing social and economic regional disparities grew again, especially after the adoption of the new Yugoslav constitution of 1974, and this created further grievances.”³⁴

Tito was partially able to create and shape a sort of Yugoslav mentality and identity; nevertheless, in 1974, the just mentioned Constitution laid the foundations for the birth of *chauvinistic thoughts*, even though it was created for the undermining of chauvinism itself. Indeed, dealing with the topic of identities in Yugoslavia during Eighties and Nineties is not possible without taking into consideration the Yugoslav Constitution of 1974. It was the consequence of some purges happened between 1971 and 1972 in many Yugoslav cities; the most violent purge was in Zagreb, as reaction of the *Croatian Spring*.³⁵ Tito and his reliable ideologue, the Slovenian Edvard Kardelj, were able to restore the *socialist order* and to *shift* an entire group of politicians. The result, as I have already said, was the writing of the Constitution; as Jože Pirjevec states, the Yugoslav situation was extremely delicate and *nationally intricate*,³⁶ and this Constitution was an attempt of building a flexible tool in the hands of Communist Party. The key points were the following:

- . the Communist Party was the custodian of the Constitution and it could maintain this role through the JNA, the *Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija* (Yugoslav People’s Army).

³⁴ Đorđe Tomić, “From ‘Yugoslavism’ to (post-)Yugoslav nationalisms: understanding Yugoslav identities,” in *European National Identities. Elements, Transitions, Conflicts*, ed. Roland Vogt, Wayne Cristaudo, Andreas Leutzsch, (Milton Park: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 276.

³⁵ The Croatian Spring was a cultural and economic movement of protest born in Croatia, whose ask for social and political reforms and for a wider autonomy of the Croatian republic, within Yugoslavia.

³⁶ Jože Pirjevec, *Le guerre jugoslave. 1991-1999*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2001-2002), 25-26.

. Yugoslav was officially divided into six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia) and two provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina); every entity had wide powers of self-management and even right of veto in some topics of common interest.

. six republics had also the right of self-determination and the right of secession.

. only few tasks were attributed to the central power: foreign policy, defense and economic policy.

. after the death of Tito, the President had to be chosen in rotation between the eight entities composing Yugoslavia.³⁷

Regarding the issue of chauvinism and the role of the ethnicity in this area during the second half of the twentieth century, Dan Diner writes “while social conflict in the West was embodied in the iconic urban barricade - class against class - in Europe’s East such conflict took on ethnic colors. Barricades now became borders.”³⁸ Pierre Hassner changes the words, but not the content, and states “the balkanization of communism has prevailed over the communization of the Balkans.”³⁹ Tatjana Sekulić, on the other hand, underlines “the support given by the former communist élites to ethnic policies and secession.”⁴⁰

According to Francesco Privitera, the core of the question is that the national elites were granting “some liberality and tolerance towards society and its cultural expressions, without the intrusiveness that characterized the Stalinist Soviet state.”⁴¹ This model had encouraged somehow also multinational integration, but, as Lorenzo Bertucelli points out, “in a time of economic crisis the system revealed its weakness and failed to pass reforms, thus triggering a

³⁷ Pirjevec, *Le guerre jugoslave. 1991-1999*, 26.

³⁸ Dan Diner, *Raccontare il Novecento*, (Milan: Garzanti, 2007), 22.

³⁹ Pierre Hassner, *Violence and peace*, cited in Mark Mazower, *Dark continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century*, (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 289.

⁴⁰ Tatjana Sekulić, *Violenza etnica. I Balcani tra etnonazionalismo e democrazia*, (Carocci, Rome, 2002), 20.

⁴¹ Francesco Privitera, “Balcani 1989. Le origini della crisi e l’avvento del postcomunismo,” *Novecento*, 13, (July - December 2005): 85.

swift institutional disruption that prevented any switch from a nation-driven representation to a democratic one”⁴². This means that the regime’s disruption followed a national, rather than a pluralistic path, but it is the crisis of the state that pushes nationalism to success, not the other way around. As Norman Naimark points out, “socialism gave way to capitalism and democracy...but the absence of historical experience with the marketplace or with parliamentary democracy undermined programs for a rapid transition.”⁴³ Buttino reminds that “while it is often thought that the breakup of Yugoslavia was caused by nationalistic movements, the opposite is true. Nationalistic movements stemmed from the political crisis, and they were fed by a political culture that lurked within federal institutions.”⁴⁴ Sekulić and Mazower share the same idea: the former states that “the hatred spread by predominant nationalistic movements of Yugoslavia was a consequence and not the cause of the conflict”⁴⁵; while the latter confirms that “the revival of nationalism, in other words, was far more a consequence than a cause of 1989.”⁴⁶

As I have already declared, this Constitution of 1974, the death of Tito, seen as the binding force, and the economic crisis of the Eighties made visible the weaknesses of the Yugoslav entity and they helped the formation of some nationalistic parties by Tuđman and Milošević. They created the ground for the spread of chauvinistic feelings in a parallel way and, consequently, for the creation of those nationalistic, intricate and multi layered identities.

Stevo Đurašković, in his illuminating article entitled *Nation-building in Franjo Tuđman’s political writings*, outlines a threefold perspective concerning the ideology of Tuđman: the general perspective of nationalism and independence of national states, the perspective of “supranational ideologies, such as liberalism and communism, and the peculiar

⁴² Lorenzo Bertucelli, Mila Orlić, *Una storia balcanica. Fascismo, comunismo e nazionalismo nella Jugoslavia del Novecento*, (Ombre corte: Verona, 2008), 11.

⁴³ Norman M. Naimark, *La politica dell’odio*, (Laterza, Bari, 2002), 180.

⁴⁴ L. Bertucelli, M. Orlić, *Una storia balcanica*, 26.

⁴⁵ T. Sekulić, *Violenza etnica*, 11.

⁴⁶ Mark Mazower, *Le ombre dell’Europa*, (Milan, Garzanti, 2000), 365.

perspective regarding the Croatian nationalism.”⁴⁷ The main concept of the Tuđman policy gravitates around the forgetfulness of the memory of the Second World War “with the goal of reconciling the descendants of the Ustaša and of the Partisans in order to unify around the struggle for an independent state.”⁴⁸ As Đurašković reminds, mentioning Bette Denich, it is also curious to notice that this forgetfulness was also offspring of a sort of Yugoslav mentality, that brought the “suppression of local memories of these mass scale killings, especially the ones perpetrated by the Ustaša against the Serb population in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”⁴⁹ These suppressions had also a spontaneous consequence, namely the creation of a wider identity; but, from the other side, perhaps unexpectedly, they “reinforced preexisting national sentiments.”⁵⁰ In 1981, Tuđman declared that small countries and small nationalities should fight with more conviction to obtain their independence, since they are “endangered by... the hegemonism and imperialism of bigger nations which use ideologies in various kinds to mask their domination, whether in the name of Catholic Universalism, enlightened cosmopolitanism, bourgeois democracy, Nazism, Fascism, or socialism.”⁵¹ From this last sentence, he could easily derive his teleological perspective, declaring that Croatia was a national entity existing also before of communist period. This is a relevant key point, the belief that Croatia was one of the oldest nations of Europe, adding that the period from the First World War onwards represents “a kind of ‘black hole’ in the national history.”⁵²

To analyze the Serbian side, the article of Pål Røren, *The Securitisation of Ethnicity in Serbia (1987-1991)*, is a precious starting point. In the introduction, he explained that Slobodan Milošević was able to establish a sort of threefold protection in Serbia: protection of Serbian

⁴⁷ Stevo Đurašković, “Nation-building in Franjo Tuđman’s political writings,” *Croatian Political Science Review*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (2014): 58.

⁴⁸ Đurašković, “Nation-building in Franjo Tuđman’s political writings,” 59.

⁴⁹ Đurašković, “Nation-building in Franjo Tuđman’s political writings,” 61.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Franjo Tuđman, *Nationalism in Contemporary Europe*, cited in Đurašković, “Nation-building in Franjo Tuđman’s political writings,” 65.

⁵² Đurašković, “Nation-building in Franjo Tuđman’s political writings,” 65.

minorities from other national groups outside Serbia, protection of his personal position “within the Serbian government,” who allowed him to generate and maintain his policies “based on ethnicity,” and a counter-protection, result of “the Croatian government and Serbian political opposition which enabled Milošević to declare a state-of-emergency.”⁵³ The Serbian contemporary history has a relevant date, often underestimated, highlighted by the author: on September 24th, 1986, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts published a *Memorandum*, in which Serbian scholars pointed out two critical points of the Serbian society in the Eighties. Firstly, the request for a more centralized system, reducing the spread of power, generated by Constitution of 1974; secondly, the identification of the “external enemies of Serb nationality,” as Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Albanians. As Jasna Dragović-Soso, mentioned by Røren, declares, *Memorandum* “fueled the nationalist sentiments in large portions of the Serb population,” taking into consideration the dangerous situation of Serbian diasporas groups.⁵⁴ While communist elite reacted with indifference to the *Memorandum*, Milošević “remained ambiguously vague,” and this fact allowed him to rise as the leader of the Serbs.⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, he represents the symbol of the transition from socialist framework to nationalistic one, and this shift happened between the two visits in Kosovo in 1987 and 1989. The first one is remembered for the sentence ‘*No one should dare to beat you again!*’ told by Milošević to the Serbian angry crowd as warning against the Albanian policemen, on April 24th, 1987;⁵⁶ according to Miroslav Solević, a nationalistic leader among Kosovo Serbs in the Eighties, in that occasion, “to say we put him in power is wrong, but we made a real leader out of him!”⁵⁷ The second visit I mentioned is the famous speech of June 28th, 1989, hold in Gazimestan, the

⁵³ Pål Røren, “The Securitisation of Ethnicity in Serbia (1987-1991),” E-International Relations Students, accessed May 15th, 2020, https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/12/the-securitisation-of-ethnicity-in-serbia-1987-1991/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=facebook.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ “Kosovo Polje 1987,” YouTube, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luZoUa0YqpA>.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

location of the Kosovo Polje battle against Ottoman Empire 600 years before; in that occasion, Milošević became the unchallenged lighthouse of Serbian nationalism, initiating a chauvinistic policy against Albanians and Croats. The main cores of his speech were: the aspect of historical revisionism, according to which Kosovo was (and is, and will be) a Serbian land and Serbs were the last defenders of Europe and of Christianity against Muslim and Albanians, and the probability to solve this situation in the same modality of 600 years before, through military actions.⁵⁸

Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević are the pivotal politicians that modified the cultural and social path, from the socialist framework to the nationalistic one. They are still nowadays a sort of lighthouse for every Croatian and Serbian political party, since their parties are constantly on the ridge of the Croatian and Serbian politics. They reignited the matches of the chauvinistic feelings and thoughts in their countries, and especially in those *mixed* and multicultural areas, object of my study. They were able to fulfil this goal in three steps: forgetting the socialist memory, in a sort of historical revisionism, highlighting the differences from the alterity, seen as incompatible, and applying a teleological perspective to the historical account of the country. In some regions of the countries, their ideas were followed by people, but in some intermingling borderlands, these ideas shaped something of unique and unusual. Through the interviews, I will try to portray the existence in Vojvodina and in Slavonia of these multi-layered identities, which brought and still bring towards a peaceful perception of the alterity. The occurrence of the exchange of the houses allowed the creation of an intermingled society where the national differences clashed against the social cultural ones in an interesting mix where the ethnic enmity lost itself.

⁵⁸ “Slobodan Milošević’s speech at Gazimestan, June 28th, 1989,” Learning History that is not yet history, accessed May 16, 2020, <http://devedesete.net/slobodan-milosevics-speech-at-gazimestan-june-28-1989/>.

This introduction could appear disconnected in the various paragraphs, but hopefully, the stream I would like to create is clear. Since everything is fluid, *everything flows* is the main sentence of this chapter; the same flow that in the Balkan folklore is called *promaja* and bring misfortune, the same flow intrinsic in the Serb-Croatian language, with the accent, which generally falls on the first syllable, giving a sort of cantilena. The aim of my thesis is a deep investigation in the roots of an unusual phenomenon, which should unmask the ethnic enmity paradigm, should show the existence of many nuances, facets and layers in national identities, and should highlight the relevance of *living together*. As declares Luigi Pirandello, “nel lungo tragitto della vita incontrerai tante maschere e pochi volti,”⁵⁹ during the long path of the life, you will meet a lot of masks and few faces. The ethnic enmity paradigm was a sort of *political manifestation*, since the *chauvinistic* masks were purposely brought by politicians; the *everyday manifestation*, represented by the interviews of the next chapter, shows that the ethnic hate was not always present and helps to unmask the paradigm itself.

⁵⁹ “Frase di Luigi Pirandello,” Citazioni e frasi celebri, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://le-citazioni.it/autori/luigi-pirandello/>.

1. Anatomizing a relocation of people

*When I started to date my wife,
I did not ask her if she was Croat or Catholic,
I did not mind. I discovered after a while.
My Serbian family and her Croatian one
educated us within socialist brotherhood.
In 1992, my Croatian wife and me
had to leave Croatia,
she still does not understand the reason,
Miroslav from Kukujevc.*

*I was born in Gibarac in 1948, I am Croat and I have never felt
any difference from a Serb starosedeoeci as me.
For instance, during football matches,
in the municipality of Šid, the biggest football rivalry
was between Gibarac and Kukujevc, both Croatian villages.
Nationalism does not belong to my area,
it was imported by incompetent politicians,
Slavko from Osijek.*

In this chapter I will deal with eleven interviews gathered between April 2018 and August 2019. The main aim of these interviews is the attempt to trace an analysis of the unusual phenomenon of the exchanges of the houses between the Serbian minority of Croatia and the Croatian minority of Serbia. For this reason, I chose every possible combination of this process, regarding Vojvodina, the northernmost region of Serbia; unfortunately, the impossibility to travel did not allow me to complete in a more analytical way the case with all the reciprocal possible cases, coming also from the Croatian region, named Slavonia. Interviews are divided in four groups:

. Serbian people that remains to live normally in their country, and it is possible to consider them as a sort of witnesses of the process.

. Croatian people that continues to live in Serbia, despite the severities of the situation.

. Serbian people that left Croatia and moved to live in Serbia, confirming the political ideas of *ethnic cleansing* by Tuđman and Milošević.

. the last interview represents the opposite of the latter, a Croatian man that was living in Serbia and moved in Croatia.

This phenomenon took place especially in few villages at the border between Serbia and Croatia. From one side, villages in Serbia more interested by the exchange of the houses are located in the municipality of Šid, and they are Kukujevc, Gibarac, Vašica, Morović and Sot; these villages had an absolute or relative Croatian majority before of the Nineties Wars. From the other side, villages in Croatia involved in this process are in the municipality of Vukovar and Osijek, and especially some of them, Borovo, Poganovci, Petrovci and Čepin, were particularly affected by those shifts of population. Few exceptions are represented by Virovitica, Gačište, Donji Miholjac and Slatina, in Croatian Slavonia, and by Hrtkovci, near Sremska Mitrovica, in Vojvodina; these villages can be considered an exception because they are located more far away from the border.

I organized my interviews through the following preset format of questions:

Are you Serb or Croat?

What is the history of your village? Something about their inhabitants (numbers, statistics, graphics, ...)

Are there books about the history of your village?

How many villages inside this municipality?

Which is your language in daily life?

Which is your religion?

Which languages did you study at school? And which languages are teaching now?

How many generations of your family did they live here? From when?

Which nationality were/are your parents and grandparents?

What was the situation of your minority during Tito? And during Milošević and Tuđman?

How were relationships between Serbs and Croats in the past? And during Nineties?

Were there any everyday problems with Serbs/Croats (both physical violence than everyday issues, as shortage of electricity or hot water)? Were these issues addressed only to the other national group or were widespread in the entire village/neighborhood/town?

Were there any issues with other minorities?

How many mixed weddings were there in your village/neighborhood/town? How were they organized?

What do you feel about European Union?

How much was and is important religion in your life and in your community's life?

In which way did and does your religious identity decide your nationality? Through which activities?

Could you explain how the exchange of the houses was organized?

Which villages were interested on this phenomenon?

What do you think about it? It was the only solution? Did you have the feeling that it was organized by someone or was it casual?

Do you remember those days? Would you like to talk about it? Can you provide some anecdotes?

My preset format was divided into two parts. The first part was purposely focused on the general background of the interviewed, simply because it was useful just to frame his/her life. I will not utilize many of the answers related to this part. The second part, instead, was particularly focused on the key topic of my research, the exchange of the houses. The interviews were held directly in Serb-Croatian language with a translator that helped me firstly in the phase of performing them, secondly in the next phase of transcription.

a. Serbs who live in Serbia. Jadranka and Vanja from Šid (April 24th, 2018)

Jadranka and Vanja are respectively the coordinator and an employee of the Red Cross of Šid. Jadranka starts the interview telling an anecdote regarding her uncle; he married a Croatian woman and they lived happily until the Nineties in a small village near Šid, Kukujevcí. At the beginning of the war, her uncle decided to move near Osijek, considering that area safer for his family. Mixed marriages underwent terrible moments in that period: members of these couples had to decide where to go and when to abandon their houses, and, in general, components of a family had to separate themselves, without any certainty about the future.

When Serbian people arrived from Croatia, the country did not give them an amount of money to rebuild their lives from the beginning. Nevertheless, they could get a loan from some humanitarian organizations and Jadranka was working in one of these organizations during the Nineties. These humanitarian organizations were able to provide some services, as the reparation of the roof or the painting of the house's walls. By the way, the amount of money was usually too low: for instance, with that money her *relocated* neighbor could buy the fence for the pigs, but he could not buy pigs. In general, for them, it was extremely hard to restart a job activity.

Nevertheless, Serbs that arrived from Croatia, in general, had a higher knowledge than people that were living here; consequently, they managed to find a solution, maybe slowly, but the most part of them were able to satisfy their needs. In particular, they moved here also their knowledge about the cultivation of tobacco. Before of the war, there were few fields dedicated to tobacco near Kukujevcı; since their arrival, this cultivation spread in all the municipality of Šid, and not only among them, but clearly among the entire population. Currently Kukujevcı is a sort of exception in Serbia because the unemployment rate is one of the lowest in all the country, thanks also to the production of tobacco, brought indeed by Serbs of Croatia.

In general, according to both interviewed, Serbs coming from Croatia were and are hardworking and ambitious, much more than inhabitants of this area; for instance, currently, they are the owners of some craft breweries and of several farms in this area, producing goat milk and cheese⁶⁰ or meat. These improvements they took were good not only for themselves, but for all the multicultural community. This economic growth was extremely relevant for this area, because, unfortunately, there are not many investors in municipality of Šid, often seen only as a transit zone. Youngsters are moving away from this area and Jadranka thinks that,

⁶⁰ Before of the Nineties Wars, in the area, there was no tradition of production of milk and cheese from goats, but only from cows.

without this growth taken by Serbs of Croatia, the economic situation of this municipality would be incredibly worse.

In the Fifties there was the first movement of Serbs in this area, and they came from Dalmatia, not from Slavonia. They live in a peculiar area of Šid, especially in a street; in the Nineties, when other Serbs from Dalmatia⁶¹ arrived here, they moved in the same area and, according to Vanja, they were often relatives between each other, belonging to different generations.

Serbian people coming from Slavonia did not have the same luck: they did not know anyone, and they arrived in this area without any connection. Jadranka declares that, regarding the phenomenon of the exchange of the houses, in Kukujevcı it sometimes happened during the night, suddenly. The process was surely present also in other villages, as Sot and Gibarac, *her neighbors could change from the sunset to the sunrise*. The older men of Serbian families originating from Slavonia asked everywhere in the villages surrounding Šid, and when they found a Croat family interested in the exchange, they organized it in few hours. In few occasions, Jadranka knows they used a lawyer; otherwise they took a piece of paper and they wrote the basic information, signing a sort of contract between them. The houses present in Vojvodina were worse than the houses in Slavonia, but both the interviewed confirm that they did not see these last houses, therefore, probably, from their point of view, this statement can be a hearsay. Nevertheless, Jadranka reports that, according to Serbs coming from Croatia, the economic situation in Slavonia was extremely better than in Vojvodina. Who decided to organize this exchange could not receive any help from humanitarian organization, because the support of the latter went usually towards relocated people who were not owner of a house and, therefore, they really need a logistic or financial help.

⁶¹ They are ironically known in the town as the laziest and the whiniest social group.

The idea of exchanging the house was created during the chaos of the war, there was not a real plan, scheduled by someone, according to both of interviewed. Jadranka specifies that she regrets for her past Croatian neighbors, and she misses them; she is also sure that the same chagrin was felt by many Serbs. Furthermore, she declares that there were not conflicts between Serbs and Croats that were living in the municipality of Šid. Indeed, antipathies and enmities were not driven by nationalistic frameworks: firstly, she had many Croatian friends, and few of them are still there; secondly, many Serbian families were used to go to seaside in Istria, in Northern Croatia. Politicians used this dichotomy and in the Nineties these nationalistic rivalries, which before were completely absent and absurd, were created through openness to multi-party politics and chauvinistic principles and ideas. Despite this creation, even during the war, relationships between Serbs (living there) and Croats (who decided to remain) were regular and continued peacefully; the novelty was brought by those Serbs, defined *došljaci*, who came from Croatia: there were some issues with this group of people, but it was not derived from the nationalistic framework, but from the fact that they were unknown, and they altered the already existing relationship between people, especially in the small villages. Furthermore, they were particularly despised by the poorest segment of the population because they received some economical help by humanitarian organizations.

Vanja declares that, nowadays, the situation is completely modified and that sometimes she does not know or does not remember who arrived in Nineties because *došljaci* are completely integrated. Jadranka partially disagrees, declaring that the most nationalistic politicians, or people in general, are often *došljaci* and rarely *starosedeooci*; for instance, in Kukujevc *došljaci* families put a huge billboard at the entrance of the village where there are the pictures of some Serbian heroes, as the scientist Nikola Tesla and the tennis player Novak Đokovic, or Serbian politicians, as the current Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and the extremist radical Vojislav Šešelj. Nevertheless, he adds that the nationalistic feelings were not

able to root in this area, and, for instance, still nowadays, in her street, she has Slovenian and Rusyn neighbors that say *Dobar Dan* (Good Morning) in their language. Moreover, the most interesting aspect is that also Croats that left this area in the Nineties continue to come back regularly to visit relatives and friends (clearly also Serbs); and in the last year a couple of those Croatian families decided to re-move in Serbia. She concludes affirming that clearly this coming back is possible also because there was not huge conflicts in the municipality of Šid, and their houses were not burnt or destroyed, as, instead, it happened in Slavonia and in Dalmatia, especially around Knin.

b. Croats who live in Serbia. Mijo from Sot, Ljubica from Batrovci, Josip from Šid (August 2nd, 3rd, 2018, August 6th, 2019).

Josip's interview was probably the most interesting one, he is a Croatian retired high school professor, member of some Croatian associations, among which *Matica Hrvatska*, and of the Department of Culture of the Croatian National Council (*Hrvatsko nacionalno vijeće*), the Council that protects the rights of the Croatian minority of Serbia. Ljubica and Mijo are two Croatian citizens of two small villages of Šid municipality, respectively Batrovci and Sot, both interested by the event of the exchange of the houses.

Josip states that the exchange of the houses was not a peculiar phenomenon that interested the period of the wars: it existed also before and it happened always in a peacefully and commonly modality. He clarifies that these families that anticipated this occurrence did not predict the arrival of a war, they were not the most clever or the wisest, but simply they needed more than others the necessity and the sense of belonging to somewhere. At the outbreak of the war this process stopped because the border between Serbia and Croatia was closed: it was possible to reach Croatia only through Hungary, and this aspect made the relocation extremely complicated. The phenomenon restarted slowly in 1993, but the apex was

in the second half of 1995, after Operation Storm. Until that moment, families that decide to move were convinced to make it by that need of belonging to somewhere just explained. The choice to leave, to try to find a shifting house was usually taken by the oldest members of a family; indeed, it is not a coincidence that the families that stay here usually did not have components of older generation. These elders remembered the split during the Second World War and, through those *bad memories*, so defined by Josip, they had the wisdom to suggest the relocation to the younger generations, because *during a war it is better to live where you nationally belong*. Ljubica has a similar opinion, but she claims that if it is true that some elders suggested to younger members of the family to move, it is also true that probably they did not move with them, since *they preferred to remain in the land where their ancestors were born and died*.

In the first two weeks after Operation Storm, the confusion was strong; Josip knows some families that exchanged their houses simply on the trust, *with your eyes closed*, with few pictures of the other house, without a lawyer, without economical certainties and through Hungary. In this chaotic situation, the worst side was, according to Mijo, the Croatian one: indeed, Serbs arrived in the area around Šid and they had the possibility to choose the new property, but Croats did not have this opportunity and they sometimes decided to leave without any guarantees regarding the new habitation. Josip remembers that he helps some friends from Gibarac to pack their stuff and to find the truck drivers for the relocation; he adds an interesting detail, concerning the truck drivers, affirming they were often Macedonians. As a matter of fact, some Croatian acquaintances sometimes did not receive the same property mentioned on documents or represented on pictures, and he heard that the house was sometimes even destroyed; he is sure that the same situations happened also in the opposite case, regardless of the nationality. After all these chaotic situations, they started to utilize lawyers and there was

the obligation to check firstly the house; consequently, exchanges were more controlled and clearer, and citizens had more guarantees.

Josip declares that in the two next days following the end of Operation Storm, he received at least thirty visits by Serbian people that were living in Croatian Slavonia. They arrived in his house with pictures of their own houses and documents to eventually sign the contract. He called his Serbian friends and neighborhood and he decided not to leave because they reassured him and his family; nevertheless, a close relative, the mother of his wife, went a couple of days to Petrovci, near Vukovar, looking for houses. There was a moment that *they were on the edge* to leave, but his relative did not find anything of interesting and worthwhile, so they decided to wait more. He concludes this anecdote, telling that a friend of him moves to that village, but still now he is not accepted, since he is seen as a foreigner, even though he is Croat; and he even continues to come back in Šid every weekend to spend time with his Serbian friends.

It is still more curious the fact highlighted by Josip that currently the consideration of a Croat of Croatia towards the Croats of Serbia that decided to stay to live in Serbia is even lower. He juxtaposes this *low consideration* with the ease and the comfort that he feels in his neighborhood with people of other nationality, even though he reminds that not all Croats perceive this ease; he is quite muddled in this answer, but he claims that being a Croat in Serbia is something of completely unique after the Nineties Wars because you do not have the feeling of home nowhere, *this is the uncomfortable destiny of some unlucky minorities in the Balkans*.

The account of Ljubica is completely different because she states that her family decides to remain in Batrovci simply because the occurrence of the exchange of the houses did not spread enough in her village. She admits that Croats from Batrovci received some violent requests to leave their home by Serbian paramilitary. Nevertheless, the most interesting part of

her interview is when she declares that a Serbian inhabitant of Batrovci, member of the Yugoslav Army, was called by these Croatian neighbors, asking for help; after that call, he intervened somehow, stopping injustices and abuses by Serbian paramilitary. For this reason, Croats could remain to live in Batrovci, demonstrating, as Ljubica states, *that everything was a political game, and the ethnic differences were a mere pretext*. Without the interference of that man, it is likely that every Croat family would have left its property. Nevertheless, few of them (three or four families of the village) decided to exchange houses and to leave Batrovci: this was their decision, and, according to Ljubica, they were not forced to make it. These few exchanges in Batrovci happened in a legal way, some members of both families went to check the other house and they decided without violence and deceptions; two of these families, which decided to make it, now live in Virovitica and in Gačište, in the surroundings of Virovitica. Moreover, she admits that some members of these families that took the decision to leave were surely more nationalistic than the rest of Batrovci's inhabitants and they saw their future more comfortable in Croatia than in Serbia; nevertheless, she suggests that maybe there were also other reasons, more economical than ideological, which pushed these families to go away: *the richest families did not exchange anything*. In conclusion, she states that Croats of Batrovci were probably luckier than Croats of other villages, such as Gibarac, Kukujevcı and Vašica. The Serbian policeman already mentioned was probably able to protect them and to avoid the relocation, because in the other three villages it happened, violently and suddenly. She has some Serbian friends in Vašica and these friends admitted her that they were wrong in that period, since they did not protest and they allowed that their Croats neighbors, starosedelci as them, left the village. Currently, they regret their past neighbors, they miss them because they are not able to recreate the *rules of good neighborliness* with the new Serbian neighbors, obviously došljaci.

Mijo, from the village of Sot, accounts that in Gibarac and Kukujevcı the exchange of houses was abrupt, and it interested more than 80% of inhabitants, but in his village the situation was not aggressive, the few families involved who wanted to exchange the house had the time to choose and to check properties in Croatia. He says that not many Serbs came in his village, looking for a house, maybe because geographically is more far away from Šid than the other two villages. Furthermore, he states also that in the village there was a military squad, with some Serbian soldiers from the village, and the hearsay was that they was protecting this village more than others; he does not know if this is true, but it is a fact that Croatian properties in Sot were more preserved. Nevertheless, he confirms that he received many nightly phone calls during 1995 where they tried to frighten him and his family, naming them *ustaša*. Few Croatian families, more frightened than Mijo's family, decided to exchange houses, but the shift did not happen with violence. He personally knows a couple of families that took the decision to run away during a night, but, also in this case, they did not abandon their house, they decided to move in a temporary place (in Croatia) and to organize the exchange from there.

In the village, before of the war, there were Serbian, Croatian and Rusyn families, and, according to him, the integration was completely normal, *among starosedeci the integration was a feature of their everyday life*. He adds that došljaci families, arrived during the war, brought some issues in the life's community. After more than twenty years, these issues disappeared slowly, but it still does not exist a sort of *village identity*, especially among younger generation; indeed, during some *slava*⁶², Serbian došljaci still sing patriotic Serbian songs with high volume and loud voice, and, clearly, Serbian starosedeci do not behave in this way. Mijo concludes, affirming that he does not comprehend why Serbian došljaci were considered refugees, and they got some financial help from the country; according to him, they were not

⁶² *Slava* is an Orthodox festivity: every Serbian Orthodox family has a personal Saint that protects their home. Therefore, every family celebrates this Saint, according to their calendar.

refugees, since they restarted their life with a property, some fields, machinery for agriculture and some animals.

According to Josip, the quality of the houses exchanged was equal, it is a hearsay the fact that houses in Croatia were better than the ones in Serbia. He adds that this phenomenon was less present in the cities and extremely more usual in the villages and, according to him, there were no many differences among those villages interested in this process: for instance, he knows that many Croats of Serbia that lived in Gibarac exchanged their houses with many Serbs of Croatia that lived in Poganovci, and he defines both villages quite poor and devoted to agriculture. According to him, this was the usual situation, because it was the most comfortable for both families, exchanging not only the building, but also the farm, the fields, the machinery for agriculture and even the animals. Josip accounts something of specific concerning the agricultural framework: in those villages in Slavonia, farmers produced tobacco, instead in those villages in Vojvodina, they produced especially corn and watermelon; it is curious that now both areas produce both tobacco, corn and watermelon because farmers, at the beginning, could not change their *new* machinery and they could not decide what to produce; after few years, they were able to diversify their production and to plant what they cultivated in their *old* fields.

c. Serbs who moved in Serbia. Miomir from Gibarac, Nena from Kukujevc, Miroslav from Kukujevc, Lazo from Šid, Anđa from Hrtkovci (August 3rd, 4th, 5th, 2018).

Miroslav is the mayor of the village of Kukujevc, and he starts his interview explaining the demographical situation of his village. Before 1993, 99% of Kukujevc inhabitants (about 2300) was Croat, presently only seven or eight of these families remained there. The case of Kukujevc is really unique: Miroslav estimates that there are Serbian families coming from 115

different villages of Bosnia, Hercegovina and Croatia. The most part of them came from Slavonia, the easternmost region of Croatia.

He was born in Donji Miholjac, town at the border with Hungary, but he was living in Kapelna, nearby his birthplace. In his village, war did not arrive, but Serbs living there got fired suddenly in 1991, and, in few cases, he knows that Serbian houses were destroyed. Therefore, they were obliged to go away, they did not have alternative. In Donji Miholjac the exchange of houses started even in November 1992, almost three years before than Operation Storm. He declares that this exchange of houses was driven by Catholic Church, which organized in details this occurrence; it was not a coincidence, arranged individually by people. It is really interesting that, according to him, there was a sort of precise list of villages: after Virovitica and Slatina, they started to exchange houses in Donji Miholjac, Kapelna and villages in the surroundings. It is not clear who oversaw this list, but Miroslav underlines the role of Catholic Church in the organization and logistic of the exchange itself. This role was really relevant, since it avoided the frauds that it was often happening; nevertheless, he clarifies that only believers followed the suggestions of Catholic Church, non-believers utilized a lawyer.

The personal experience of Miroslav is that, in 1992, he exchanged three houses in Croatia with a big house in Kukujevc, defined by him as *an underdeveloped and poor village*. He crossed the border between Hungary and Serbia on November 28th, 1992, with his wife and his son. He was sure that they were moving just temporarily, not definitely. After more than 25 years, he has always a weird feeling towards Serbia, even though he is Serb: he does not feel at home in Serbia and in Kukujevc. Nevertheless, he will not come back to live in Croatia, he is just satisfied to go sometimes to the graveyard of his ancestors. His wife, as Croat in Serbia, was not worried, and the reality is that, according to them, in the area around Kukujevc the hate is not really strong: *people is respecting each other more than in Zagreb and Belgrade or in the South of both countries*. He adds that he knows that between starosedeooci and došljaci

there are everyday issues, but *the paradox is that in Kukujevci we are all došljaci*, and these issues are not present. Both Miroslav than Lazo explain that the first everyday issue is represented by the alphabet and the dialect: Serbian starosedeooci often utilize Cyrillic and *ekavica*, Serbian došljaci are more accustomed with Latin and *iekavica*.⁶³

The story of Lazo is peculiar. His family is Serb since at least five generations, and all of them lived in Slavonia, around Virovitica. I found him selling fruits and vegetables outside of the city market of Šid, in a small dusty shop, but his first sentence surprised me, “*I am an economist, I was CEO of a company in Slatina, in Croatia, I had more than one thousand workers beneath me.*”⁶⁴ Currently, he is working as greengrocer because his two degrees in Economics lost their value. He remembers that there was a meeting to choose the CEO of the company and Croats voted for him. At the beginning of 1991, some new soldiers and policemen arrived in the village, nobody knew them, they were young, they were aggressive towards citizens, both Serbs than Croats, and they spoke with a Dalmatian accent. He accounts, with emotion, that, in summer 1991, he decided to leave Slatina when his best friend, a Croat, went to his house and tell him that he did not belong to Croatia, since he is a Serb. This friend was *just one of the Croats that helped him during that period, he knows many Croats that did not agree with chauvinistic policies, and some Croats friends were sincerely crying the day he left.* Nevertheless, he received many violent phone calls, especially during the night. Therefore, after that talk, he moved to Hungary only with his two sons, just to avoid the military conscription. His wife could not go with them, and she stayed in Croatia, even though she is Serb too, protected by some Croatian friends. It was the beginning of the war and he was one of the first Serbs that got fired; he adds that who occupied high positions lost his job before

⁶³ Ekavica and iekavica are two different versions of Serbo-Croatian language. The former is spoke mainly in Serbia, the latter more in Croatia.

⁶⁴ Lazo, direct interview with the author, August 4, 2018.

than employees and workers. He arrived in Šid in 1994, with his sons, and, in that moment, his wife reached him. They were able to exchange their house in Slatina and a flat in Virovitica with a property in Šid. He organized legally the shift, with a lawyer, but he admits that the level of the latter is extremely lower than the quality of the former. He declares that he did not have alternative, he could not choose because, to be certain that everything went in a proper and correct way, he decided to exchange his house with a friend of him.

Miomir is a Serb coming from the village of Slatina, in Croatia, and he is the mayor of Gibarac, one of the villages most affected by this phenomenon. Before of the Nineties War it was a Croatian village (more than 99% of Croats), currently only 8% is Croat. He declares that the exchange of the houses in Gibarac happened rapidly, suddenly, but quite peacefully. He mentions that it was possible to find announcements or adds regarding new houses also on local newspapers. In the most part of the cases, people, through the intermediation of a lawyer, agreed on the exchange of the houses, even though, clearly, in some situations it was a loss for someone. According to Miomir, it sometimes happened that Serbs, arrived by foot after Operation Storm, were underprivileged because they needed a house immediately and, therefore, they exchanged also big properties or cozy flats in big Croatian towns with a house in an rural village, as Gibarac. Miomir underlines this difference, but he is aware that it was not easy neither for Croats to leave their birthplace, adding that probably also for people accustomed to the countryside was not easy to move to a big town. Personally, he has a good memory of the Croatian family that exchanges his house with his parents: between them everything worked perfectly, without obstacles. His parents decided to move not during the two big waves of relocation in 1991 and post Operation Storm, but in 1993, and he thinks it was the most comfortable moment to make it. In that moment, Gibarac was inhabited by 50% of Serbs and 50% of Croats. He remembers his parents decided to leave because suddenly in

Slatina not only new policemen arrived, as also Lazo accounts, but also Serbian ones stopped to work; this change frightened some Serbian inhabitants, who chose to move. From that moment, it sometimes happened that some Serbian houses were destroyed by the *new Croatian policemen*, who put bombs during the night. He concludes affirming that the living situation of Serbs in Croatia cannot be compared with the living situation of Croats in Serbia: the former risked their life in many different situations and the most part of them came in Serbia by foot in line, the latter exchanged peacefully their houses, moving to Croatia by trucks and by private cars.

Summarizing, the perspective of the event for a Serb is clear the opposite of the point of view of a Croat. According to Miroslav, Miomir and Lazo, Serbs were unlucky because they could not choose the house, instead Croats, who did not exchange houses but left Serbia suddenly, arrived in villages that were becoming empty and, therefore, they could choose the best property; nevertheless, it seems also clear that not every Croat had this luck. Regarding the ones involved in the shift, Serbs went to a small village, devoted to agriculture, instead Croats went to live everywhere, also in Zagreb and in big towns, even at the seaside. According to Miroslav, this is the demonstration that the exchange was not equal, and it was a great advantage towards Croats. The most part of his Serbian neighbors arrived after Operation Storm, in 1995. In that moment, in Kukujevcı, according to Nena, situation was extremely chaotic, because every day Serbs had to ask Croats if they had the intention to leave the village, but also Croats did not know how to behave. There were soldiers at every corner of the village, and Nena does not remember any fight or any aggression in those days between Serbs and Croats, *she remembers only the Serbian humbleness and the Croatian kindness*. As already explained by Jadranka, Nena highlights the bravery and the tenacity of Serbian *newcomers* that started the production of tobacco for the first time in Vojvodina. At the beginning, their ability

and their being so hardworking was not completely accepted by starosedeoeci people of the surrounding villages, they were seen as foreigner and it made more complicated the integration in the area. Miroslav points out an interesting aspect of došljaci's side: their wish to improve Kukujevcı is opposed to the lack of interest of starosedeoeci in investing on the villages nearby. His explanation is quite trivial, but successful, "*došljaci did not have anything and they had the aim to improve their new community life, starosedeoeci did not have this will and settle for what they have already had.*"⁶⁵

Nena arrived in Kukujevcı in August 1995, after the Operation Storm, from the village of Srb, near Donja Suvaja, in Krajina. Her account is the most tragic one, since she came by foot from her village, she was within the huge line of people, walking without destination. She tried to exchange her house, but the Krajina's area around Knin was considered as not suitable for this kind of occurrence. She accused the Serbian state because it had to support better and to pay more attention towards Serbs from Krajina, because they did not have any possibility to exchange the house. After seven different properties, her family was lucky to find a small property from a Serbian family from Virovitica. They were not renting this house, since they could not pay anything, and the owners did not ask them the monthly rent for few years. Afterwards the end of the war, they could renew their house in Krajina, through the economical support of Croatian state. Unfortunately, they did not find anyone for the exchange, and they decide not to come back to live in Croatia.

Anđić is the secretary of the city hall of Hrtkovci, she is Serb from Bosnia, but she lived in Zagreb from mid-Seventies to 1991. During the summer of that year, during the night, sirens started to sound, electrical current were shut down and Serbian properties were destroyed and

⁶⁵ Miroslav, direct interview with the author, August 3, 2018.

burnt in Zagreb. Her husband, her three daughters and she were living in a flat and they were luckier since they could not put explosive in a building of the city center. In autumn 1991, her husband suddenly got fired and they decided to move to Hrtkovci. A Croatian man found them, and they were able to organize the exchange peacefully, without any issue: they went to check their new house, and Croatian family went to Zagreb for the same reason; they did not maintain relationship with them. They carried out the shift through lawyers, but Anđa admits that she was disadvantaged: she had just renewed her flat in Zagreb, and she changed it with a small property in an agrarian village. She adds that a friend of her husband from Zagreb, a Serbian policeman, suggested them, at the beginning of 1991, not to renew the flat because they would have left Zagreb soon. This friend added them that, at the police station, many Croatian colleagues from Dalmatia and especially from Hercegovina were quartered in Zagreb, and Serbs were dismissed every month.

The account regarding Hrtkovci is peculiar for two reasons: firstly, this village was known in Serbia to be one of the most populous Croatian settlement (2700 inhabitants, more than 45% of Croats); secondly, the etymology of the village itself, linked with a starosedeoici Croatian community that founded the settlement. At the beginning of the war, Croats living in Hrtkovci did not feel themselves safe and they tried to exchange their houses immediately. Already in 1992, they fulfilled their aims, and only a small percentage of Croats (less than 10%) remained in the village. She concludes, telling that some Serbian friends were not able to exchange their houses in Zagreb. In 1995 they were the most unlucky because they were obliged to find some temporary properties and to change them many times; but, after few months, they became the luckiest ones because they still had the property of a house in Croatia and Croatian country helped them in the renewal of it. Some of them even decided to come back to live there.

d. Croat who moved in Croatia. Slavko from Osijek (August 7th, 2019).

The family of Slavko was living in Gibarac from 1747 to 1994, when he was obliged to move in Osijek with his family. He was a journalist (now retired), and he was known in the area around Šid. At the beginning of 1991, his Serbian colleague and his Serbian friends suggested him to go away, to reach Croatia; some of them were emotional to tell him those sentences, declaring they could not protect him.

He admits that he did not follow any legal procedure for the house in Osijek where he is currently living. The owner of it died without accepting any exchange; nevertheless, in 1994, he left Gibarac occupying the house in Osijek. Consequently, the sons of the owner accepted the shift. Before of it, he looked at more than forty houses in Osijek, and his house was viewed by more than fifty Serbian families living in Croatia. Croatian starosedeci did not accept him and his family, and the integration was really traumatic. In general, starosedeci were not welcoming towards Croatian došljaci, especially because they believed that the latter could steal them work vacancies. As Croat, he affirms that he heard many cases where the acceptance of Serbian došljaci in Serbia were incredibly nicer and more polite than the welcoming of Croatian došljaci in Croatia. For instance, his wife was a teacher of Serbo-Croatian language and literature during Tito, but, after the exchange, Croatia did not allow her to teach in Croatian schools.

In 1994, when he left Gibarac, more than half of the Croatian inhabitants of the village was still there and planned to stay there. But, after Operation Storm, everything changed and they were obliged to move, suddenly, without any kind of prior notification. It happened that Serbian people were walking firstly to Gibarac, Vašica and Kukujevcı because they were villages with an absolute majority of Croats. For this reason, in these villages, everything happened suddenly and rapidly. In the surrounding villages, as Batrovci, Sot and Morović, there were shifts of houses, only in a second moment.

The chief of police station of Gibarac was a friend of him: he admits to Slavko that he called Serbian paramilitary to defend Croats of the village, since he was worried that only few policemen could not avoid riots. He cannot swear that there was not violence at all, because situation was chaotic and particularly nervous. Nevertheless, he affirms that in the most part of the cases Serbs arrived and exchanged peacefully their houses with Croats still living in Gibarac. Shifts happened through lawyers and through Catholic Church, more than through Orthodox Church. He adds a peculiarity regarding the role of the Catholic Church: in that period, priests released a sort of document, which Croats need to show at the border, as demonstration they exchanged their house and they were entering in Croatia, looking for their new property. Slavko declares that there was a conventional signal when a house was already shifted: a white blanket was hung from the portico or from a window. Beyond some cases of looting, the biggest inconvenience, according to Slavko, was more the fact that everything occurred in few hours, rather than the aggressivity of the people. In some cases, he heard that some Croatian families packed everything in the morning and left their birthplace in the afternoon.

When they moved, Croatian people could, just temporarily, sleep in some schools, equipped with beds. By the way, the most part of them exchanged houses or had connections in Croatia, so this arrangement was often exploited only for a couple of nights. He knows that Croats from Gibarac moved mainly to Osijek and Donji Miholjac. Currently, in Gibarac, there are some Serbs from Krajina, but they did not exchange their house, since Serbian houses in that area were destroyed and burnt; thereafter, they probably bought houses in Gibarac from Serbs coming from Slavonia.

In this chapter I simply report the transcription of the interviews, as an archaeologist. Firstly, I dug with my questions, discovering these answers, considering them as oral artifacts,

and, secondly, I meticulously restored them and shaped them in a written source. I did not add any kind of superfluous comment, since the aim of the next chapter will be exactly a comparison between these interviews and some historical articles and texts. I saw this comparative examination as a necessary test bench to integrate them in History itself.

2. Malleable and fluid identities

*“I slowly reached for my passport
and handed it to a Slovenian policeman...
It was the old red Yugoslav passport, of course.
All of a sudden, I became aware of the absurdity of our situation (...)
There we were citizens of one country falling apart
and two countries-to-be, in front of a border
that is not yet a proper border,
with passports that are not good any more...
Walls are being erected throughout Europe,
new, invisible walls that are much harder to demolish,”
Slavenka Drakulić.⁶⁶*

*“Somebody had to be invented,
through the process of intense differentiation
of we-ness versus they-ness,
which easily turned into the opposition to
Otherness and hate towards the Other,”⁶⁷
Marina Blagojević Hughson.*

In this chapter, I will analyze the notion of identity, not from a nationalistic perspective. For this reason, I will try to anatomize this notion, firstly considering a wider and bigger identity, and, secondly, exploring the various possibilities of a narrower identity (maybe not only narrower, but also parallel). The interviews have a deep and hidden meaning, and somehow their words should be explained by scholars, who should be able to highlight some

⁶⁶ Slavenka Drakulić, cited in Robert M. Hayden, “Imagined communities and real victims: self-determination and ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia,” *National Council for Soviet and East European Research*, Title VIII Program (July 1994): 13. The Croatian journalist and writer Drakulić said this sentence on her first crossing from independent Croatia into independent Slovenia, in January 1992.

⁶⁷ Marina Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans: Towards Ethnic and Gender Reconciliation,” *Social Inequalities and Social Exclusion*, Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research of Belgrade, no. 47011: 25.

interesting perspectives and the related facets. Without this academic job, the tool of the interviews would lose the relevant aim to be a sort of historical proof, remaining trivial fantasy. The goal of this chapter is the attempt to give the correct significance to the sentences and the thoughts of the interviewed people.

I would like to start this chapter with the position of Katherine Verdery, gathered by Robert M. Hayden in the introduction of his article, *Imagined communities and real victims: self-determination and ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia*, and with the brilliant point of view of Hayden himself. Verdery declares that the recent anthropology "sees nation as a construct, whose meaning is never stable but shifts with the changing balance of social forces, and it asks what kind of leverage this construct has afforded certain groups and why those groups rather than others."⁶⁸ Hayden continues, affirming that "if reality is *socially constructed*, it is nonetheless reality."⁶⁹

This is the starting point of my chapter, simply because it is necessary to be clear since the beginning. The awareness that the ethnic paradigm was an excuse to perpetrate some crimes does not minimize the fact itself: the intentional will to eliminate the alterity, the otherness happened following the ethnic path. This dissertation does not want to declare the opposite, and I agree with Hayden when he states that "nation may well be a construct, whose meaning is never stable, but political action may also succeed in rendering some past constructs impossible for the future."

Through this thesis, I would like to direct some efforts towards a different approach: Serbian and Croatian politicians emphasized this *ethnic diversity*, which it became the main argument and the main point of conflict in the Nineties War, but the phenomenon of exchange

⁶⁸ Katherine Verdery, "Whither 'Nation' and 'Nationalism'?", cited in Hayden, "Imagined communities and real victims," 2.

⁶⁹ Hayden, "Imagined communities and real victims," 2.

of houses overcame this emphasis on *ethnic diversity*. I agree with Hayden also when he confirms “that now matters is the history written by the political victors. (...) The political goal of those implementing the victorious social construction is indeed to construct reality, and ethnic cleansing, both military and bureaucratic, is the logical corollary, and thus often political necessity, for bringing this about.”⁷⁰

The position of Hayden is expressed in the last paragraph of his introduction, and I am inclined to agree with him when he avoids linking the violence of Nineties Wars with the nationalism that was repressed during Communism, but he argues that there is a strong link with the political ideologies and the associated political parties “that won in the democratic elections of 1990.” Politics addressed the events and brought the ethnic hate “in regions where the intermingled population formed living disproof of its validity;”⁷¹ for this reason, it was necessary to rebuild a new society, eliminating the alterity. It seems extremely clear: this is not ethnic hate, but trivial politics.

These national differences were not clearly something of new, they existed since decades, but they received a new boost after the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution and the death of Tito; for these reasons, at the end of the Eighties, politicians could exploit the nationalistic framework, “the separate nationalist political movements were all justified on the grounds of self-determination.”⁷² Nevertheless, the reality is that “national identity was not a primary focus of most people's concerns in the early 1980s.”⁷³

The accounts gathered sometimes side for a national group. For instance, Croatian interviewees, as Josip and Mijo, declare that Croats were disadvantaged, and also Serbian ones, as especially Miomir, Lazo and Miroslav, state exactly the opposite. Most probably, *the truth, the reality lies somewhere in the middle*: in the most part of the cases both Serbs and Croats

⁷⁰ Hayden, “Imagined communities and real victims,” 2-3.

⁷¹ Hayden, “Imagined communities and real victims,” 3.

⁷² Hayden, “Imagined communities and real victims,” 5.

⁷³ Hayden, “Imagined communities and real victims,” 8.

could check many houses before of the fateful choice; in the remaining cases, the attempt to find a sort of advantage is something of pleonastic, it probably depends case by case. If it is certainly true, as many Serbs declare, that an exchange with a Serbian house at the seaside is an evident benefit for Croats, it is also true, as Miomir wisely affirms, that moving from an agrarian village to a town was hard and complex also for Croats.

The idea of the nonexistence of the ethnic hate is quite widespread among interviewees. The most part of them knows perfectly that the phenomenon analyzed in this dissertation does not derive from it. Jadranka and Vanja are persuaded that there was not a real plan and exchanges happened individually, without organization; Miroslav believes that the Catholic Church had a relevant role, since priests knew perfectly the social and the urban composition of the village. Slavko minimizes the role of the Catholic Church, affirming that priests released some documents for the border, but they did not have any significant role in the shift itself. Beyond the topic of the planning of the occurrence itself, it is particularly interesting to notice that the most part of interviewees agree on the fact that the ethnic hatred was brought by some incompetent politicians or, according the starosedeci interviewed, as Jadranka, Vanja and Mijo, by some nationalistic došljaci.

The idea that everything was merely a political game is believed especially by Ljubica, Mijo, Lazo, Miomir and Anđa. The first two affirm that their village were *saved* from the swap of the houses by a Serbian policeman in the case of Batrovci and by some Serbian soldiers in the case of Sot; if it is complicate to confirm this theory, it is also extremely unclear how and why the inhabitants of these two villages were extremely luckier than the inhabitants of the surrounding villages. Lazo, Miomir and Anđa underline the fact that the members of the police force were changing in Croatia: Croatian guys from Dalmatia and Hercegovina were relocated in Slavonia and Serbian policemen started to lose their job positions. According to them, this

is a proof that the ethnic hatred was allegedly brought in those areas purposely for some political reasons.

In this introductory part, I would like to say why I am investigating this topic with these premises. As Marina Blagojević Hughson affirms in the introduction of her article, “the main purpose of this paper is to promote the idea of *pozistorija* (positive history), the history of living together which has been largely marginalized in the Balkans and elsewhere.” I strongly believe that the fact that the phenomenon of the exchange of the houses happened mostly peacefully is the demonstration itself of the validity of the idea of *pozistorija*. I am fascinated by this idea of positive history, I see it as an optimistic and precious approach, wonderfully defined by Blagojević Hughson “as a method of deconstruction of discourses of hate and exclusions, and as an approach which can disclose marginalized evidence on real and lived multiculturalism in former Yugoslavia;” this kind of perspective is crucial for the future of the Balkans, because it “can feed the hope and encourage reconciliation processes in the Balkans.”⁷⁴ From my point of view, this kind of perspective is the only one that allows a complete understanding of the intricate situation of these borderlands, or peripheric lands; in other words, the approach that gives “emphasis on commonalities, shared experiences, common practices and discourses, intercultural exchanges,” the approach that Blagojević Hughson defines more *social* than *political*, the approach that “explores the realities of everyday life, of actual *living together*,”⁷⁵ namely integration and multiculturalism, the approach of the private, the day-to-day, the individual.

Furthermore, I prefer this approach, namely the history “of cooperation, communication, adaptation, exchange, building commonalities,” in relation with the history “of separation, confrontation, war conflicts,” simply for a reason: in the Balkan area “the

⁷⁴ Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans,” 17.

⁷⁵ Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans,” 35.

history of *living together* lasted longer than the history of conflicts.” The *living together* approach is an interesting mix of local and micro history and a supranational attitude and *Yugoslavism*: indeed, it “deals with practices, such as everyday life experiences, supranational identities, multiculturalism, inter-group mixing in everyday life, exchange, shared discourses and meta-narratives of ‘togetherness’ (‘brotherhood and unity’), attitudes reflecting small ethnic distance, interethnic marriages; memories on commonalities, Yugo-nostalgia; spatial mobility throughout common territory and emotional appropriation of that territory (emotional maps); cultural hybrids consisting of different cultural traditions; shared cultural space; kinship and friendship networks throughout the common space; professional former Yugoslav communities and business contacts; shared media space.” This approach should be not reduced in a sort of communist version, but in something of wider, more linked with public and private sphere, “while the prevailing explanation of the wars deals with the public sphere, the prevailing explanation related to *pozistorija* should deal with the private sphere, everyday life. These two perspectives do not exclude each other, but rather complement each other.”⁷⁶

Lazo, Josip and Slavko, among others, are the demonstration itself of the strength of the *living together* approach. The support to the Lazo’s wife by their Croatian friends, the closeness of the Serbian neighbors towards Josip and the tears of the Serbian colleagues of Slavko are proofs that underline the impossibility to write an adequate account of these borderlands areas without taking into consideration the significance of the *history of living together*, which overcome or, at least, continued in parallel with the ethnic difference’s approach.

⁷⁶ Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans”, 35-36.

a. *Supra-identity*

The first step is the attempt to discover the Yugoslav identity in comparison with the regionalist or nationalistic identities. It is possible to call this identity as a sort of *supra-identity*. The Hana Srebotnjak's article, *Tracing the decline of Yugoslav identity: a case for invisible ethnic cleansing*, allows to explore "the remaining number of self-identifying Yugoslavs, one of many nationalities of the bygone country whose gradual decline can attest to a form of 'invisible' ethnic cleansing." The Srebotnjak's approach for this topic was particularly interesting, since she decided to gather interviews from the specific group of Yugoslavs, "called *Naša Jugoslavija* (Our Yugoslavia);" moreover, I personally agree with this kind of attitude, perfectly expounded by the author, "by using personal narratives this analysis is a critical examination of 'bottom-up' history, 'which looks not *at* but *through* events' and is therefore most suitable at reconstructing the experiences and the changes in the position of Yugoslavs amid Second Yugoslavia and now." The author demonstrates that the Yugoslav identity was still present at the outbreak of the Nineties War; its existence itself showed the failure of a nationalistic new realm, but subsequently it was obliged to disappear "overshadowed by the (...) genocidal spectacle orchestrated by extreme nationalists."⁷⁷ This coexistence is peculiar in the Yugoslav state, as Srebotnjak, mentioning Sabrina Petra Ramet, underlines, "the Yugoslav socialist patriotism (...) was a form of wider patriotism, which did not debar narrower patriotism, but in fact presupposed it."⁷⁸

Hayden defines this *Jugoslavism* as an indicator of heterogeneity and, analyzing his growth between 1971 and 1991, "primarily in Belgrade and the Vojvodina in Serbia, in the major industrial centers in Bosnia, and in Istria and some larger centers in Croatia, as well as in the 'mixed' regions of Croatia," he underlines an interesting aspect, namely that especially

⁷⁷ Hana Srebotnjak, "Tracing the decline of Yugoslav identity: a case for invisible ethnic cleansing," *Nationalities Affairs New series*, 48 (2016): 67, DOI: 10.11649/sn.2016.005.

⁷⁸ Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Nationalism and federalism in Yugoslavia, 1962-1991*, cited in Srebotnjak, "Tracing the decline of Yugoslav identity," 70.

young people declared themselves as Yugoslavs, assuming that “Yugoslavia was developing an increasing sense of community and that support for the multinational community was likely to increase.”⁷⁹

The paradox seems to be that theoretically the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing in the Nineties War was mainly directed towards the wider patriotism: the first enemy of every national patriotism was not a further national patriotism, but the *Jugoslavism*, or Yugoslav patriotism. This is an important point of view because it assumes that every national patriotism could have a hypothetical common purpose: the delegitimization of the wider patriotism. The final assumption could be that it was more acceptable the formation of a national patriotism represented by the alterity, than the confirmation of the obsolete *Jugoslavism*. Indeed, after the death of Tito, “the figures of Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević, respectively, gradually adopted a more nationalistic rhetoric”⁸⁰ and “Yugoslavia’s national question thereafter developed into an assertion of mutually exclusive nationalist ideologies,” which made the superstructure useless and void. Even though the nationalism was the antithesis of the multiculturalism, the Serbian writer Danilo Kiš, mentioned by Srebotnjak, claims that the nationalist “lives only by relativism, identifying himself in opposition to others. The actual content of ‘the other’ becomes insignificant.”⁸¹

It seems possible to state that there are two different parallel lines, in this realm of overlapping identities: the awareness to be different from something of wider and obsolete, and the parallel consciousness to be diverse from a further and narrower patriotism. This dualistic identity appears shaped with those features. Srebotnjak mentions Dubravka Ugrešić, who “reveals the importance of memory in preserving an identity,”⁸² confirming the nationalistic perspective, and Peter Burke, who claims a sort of difference between victors and losers. In a

⁷⁹ Hayden, “Imagined communities and real victims,” 8.

⁸⁰ Srebotnjak, “Tracing the decline of Yugoslav identity,” 70-71.

⁸¹ Srebotnjak, “Tracing the decline of Yugoslav identity,” 71.

⁸² Srebotnjak, “Tracing the decline of Yugoslav identity,” 76.

macro history approach, this process could work, with the related division between two teams with two different flags; nevertheless, in a micro history approach it is necessary to take a step backward, especially in the case of Serbs that lived in Croatian Slavonia, and Croats that inhabited the Serbian Vojvodina.

A dowel is missing, I would put the nationalistic glasses on the desk, I would take a book of Rogers Brubaker, and I would repeat that everything is fluid, malleable and extremely overlapped and that the political and economic instability shapes every identity even more fluid. Hana Srebotnjak declares that “the past can only be converted into memory if it is articulated.”⁸³ Perhaps memory and history (or past) are overlapped between themselves, and it is not possible to delimit the beginning of the latter and the end of the former. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that the nationalistic and bright memory/history in Zagreb and in Belgrade is not comparable with the muddled and foggy memory/history present in the borderland’s areas, and, consequently, scholars should avoid restrictive definitions. Blagojević Hughson underlines this difference between periphery and the center, this division between a global and a local perspective in her paper related to gender identities, “it is necessary to de-essentialize and de-naturalize gender, as well as nation, by disclosing deeper structural and discursive configurations, globally and locally, at the roots of identity politics.”⁸⁴ Many interviewees explain me that it exists a different approach to nationalism and chauvinism, confirming the validity of Blagojević Hughson’s approach; in particular, they have the awareness to realize that the ethnic hatred is surely more present in the capitals and in the south of Croatia and of Serbia, rather than in their borderlands areas. Miroslav highlights that it is true that došljaci rarely feel home in the country where they moved, because the link between starosedeci’s families of different nationalities is always stronger, overcoming the nationalistic diversities themselves. A further step is represented by the fact that also the decision to remain created a

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans”, 18.

peculiar feeling, explained by Josip, who declares that the condition of Croatian minority in Serbia and of Serbian minority in Croatia is something of *unique*, “it is not really easy to feel home somewhere for the members of these unlucky minorities.”⁸⁵ Personally, I find this aspect as the most interesting in the confrontation between periphery and the center.

What is clear is that the free elections of 1990 did not bring democracy and did not flatten these differences; from socialism, Yugoslav framework was catapulted into *chauvinism*, and the ‘class enemy’ of socialism was replaced by the enemy to the nation of this particular local chauvinism.”⁸⁶ The *nation* modify itself from a secondary symbol to the paramount symbol and “the imagination of community produces real victims, which is, of course, what ethnic cleansing is all about.”⁸⁷

Within this chauvinistic society, as Blagojević Hughson underlines, “the winners are, therefore, the states and the political elites. Losers are so called ordinary people.” I would add that every inhabitant could become a winner, only if he accepts chauvinistic pre-conditions. Accepting them means considering the society as formed by different group, linguistic, ethnic, religious or national, despite the fact that these conditions did not exist in Yugoslavia; indeed, “the population was primarily atheistic (in the Seventies, Eighties, and early Nineties), and discrimination against minorities or ethnic groups, in each of the republics/provinces, was extremely weak. In fact, data from the 1981 census demonstrated convincingly that almost nowhere in former Yugoslavia individual upward mobility depended on ethnic origin.”⁸⁸

b. Sub-identity

The second step in the path of my chapter is an analysis of the consequence of the ethnic mixing. Indeed, after having stated that the ethnic cleansing was not a prerogative of the hatred

⁸⁵ Josip, direct interview with the author, August 6, 2019.

⁸⁶ Hayden, “Imagined communities and real victims,” 9.

⁸⁷ Hayden, “Imagined communities and real victims,” 18.

⁸⁸ Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans,” 24.

between Serbs and Croats, but it was addressed also to the *Jugoslavism* patriotism, and that the two sides are not homogenous and that it exists a relevant diversity between the center and the periphery of the country, it is necessary also to declare that the “Serb-Croat relations in the twentieth century have been overshadowed by the periods of mutual violence.”⁸⁹ Starting from this reference point, I strongly believe that “it is necessary to differentiate the issue of ‘why’ the wars happened from the issue of ‘how’ they happened,”⁹⁰ as Blagojević Hughson reminds; reasons can be economical, institutional, and political, all of them related to the collapse of communism. It is particularly interesting the viewpoint of some interviewed, who declare that the shift itself often interested the poorest families, “*the richest families rarely decided to exchange their house.*”⁹¹

In her brilliant explanation, Blagojević Hughson points out that “wars in the former Yugoslavia happened in the institutional setting which was seriously weakened, in a transition from one structure to another, from the socialist to the capitalist system, from party state to democracy, from command economy to the market economy. It was the lack of structuring, an increasing vacuum that was a background of the wars, rather than some well-defined deterministic system.”⁹² This last sentence explains the difference between *why* and *how* a war happened; the *why* is simply “an explanation based on logical and chronological connection between causes and consequences,” the *how* is more complex, it creates a sort of connection with the concept of different identities present among the actors of the conflict. In other words, the economic crisis, the political vacuum and the institutional failure increased the power of

⁸⁹ Vjeran Pavlaković, “From Conflict to Commemoration: Serb-Croat Relations and the Anniversaries of Operation Storm,” Academia EDU, 1, accessed April 22, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/855537/From_Conflict_to_Commemoration_Serb-Croat_Relations_and_the_Anniversaries_of_Operation_Storm.

⁹⁰ Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans,” 19.

⁹¹ Ljubica, direct interview with the author, August 3, 2018.

⁹² Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans,” 19-20.

individual and collective social agents, those who actually created identity politics, and therefore bear the major responsibility for choosing war over peace.”⁹³

Vjeran Pavlaković, in his explanation, adds the terms *ethnic hatred*, which personally I would avoid as overall meaning. Nevertheless, I agree with him when he claims that abuse and manipulation entered in the Yugoslav history and in the account of collective memories, creating boundaries and animosity; this manipulation helped “the resurgence of violence after 1991, including the instrumentalization of commemorations, memorials, collective memories of victims, and other aspects of the memory culture in this region.”⁹⁴ In other words, the ethnic hatred was created by default, and, consequently, it did not attach in the same way in every region. The paradox is that exactly in the area at the border between Serbia and Croatia, between the Serbian municipality of Šid and the Croatian town of Ošijek, became famous for one of the most fierce battle, in Vukovar, the critically-acclaimed national difference between Serbs and Croats is light, almost imperceptible, demonstrating the whole groundlessness of the Samuel Huntington’s theory of ancient hatreds.⁹⁵ The cases of Batrovci and Sot, where Serbian policemen and soldiers protected the Croatian inhabitants of the villages, or the individual situations already mentioned of Lazo, Slavko and Josip, where personal friends of the opposite nationality supported the interviewees or their relatives, confirm this paradox.

Leaving aside the chronical events of the *Operacija Oluja* (Operation Storm), happened at the beginning of August 1995, Pavlaković concludes his paragraph, mentioning the statistics given by the Croatian Helsinki Committee, namely “the destruction of approximately 20,000 houses and buildings in the hundred days after Operation Storm, rendering the formerly Serb municipalities virtually uninhabitable.”⁹⁶ From this fact, it is interesting to notice the

⁹³ Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans,” 20.

⁹⁴ Pavlaković, “From Conflict to Commemoration,” 2.

⁹⁵ Samuel Huntington, *The clash of civilization and the remarking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁹⁶ Pavlaković, “From Conflict to Commemoration,” 3-4.

“diametrically opposed narratives of the Operation Storm:” from the Croatian side, this military event is seen as the long-awaited liberation of a part of Croatian country; from the Serbian state, it signified the umpteenth chapter in the long history “of victimization in the national collective memory.”⁹⁷ Lynn Tesser has the same opinion, “the flight of Serbs from Croatia helped in Serbia’s project of homogenization,” and “the exodus of Serbs (...) in Operation Storm would essentially remove a minority linked with recent nationalist attempts at creating Serb breakaway areas,”⁹⁸ liberating definitely the Croatian territory.

After the war, commemorations, memorials, collective memories of victims were able to *nationalize* both communities, thus something that neither the war itself was able to instill in the whole population. Regarding collective memory, it is interesting the study of Nida Bikmen, from Denison University, entitled “Collective Memory as Identity Content After Ethnic Conflict: An Exploratory Study,” she declares that “the collective memory narratives presented to participants in this study contained elements of victimization and suffering;” then, she divides the argument according two groups of scholars, “focusing exclusively on the ingroup’s suffering and victimization (...) has been shown to have negative effects on intergroup reconciliation efforts. (...) In contrast, Vollhardt argued that a construal of intergroup conflict that focuses on shared suffering and similar experiences of the groups involved might facilitate the emergence of empathy and other positive emotions toward the outgroup and contribute to reconciliation.”⁹⁹ According to Bikmen, the multiculturalism, meant in this case as *sharing sufferance*, is again the key point. The mayor of Kukujevc, Miroslav, would agree with this theory, since this sharing sufferance is the main reason of the peaceful

⁹⁷ Pavlaković, “From Conflict to Commemoration,” 4.

⁹⁸ Lynn M. Tesser, “Postwar ‘Ethnic Cleansing’ in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina,” Academia EDU, 1, accessed April 24, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/30145660/Postwar_Ethnic_Cleansing_in_Croatia_and_Bosnia-Herzegovina_2012_Unpublished_Paper.

⁹⁹ Nida Bikmen, “Collective Memory as Identity Content After Ethnic Conflict: An Exploratory Study,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2013): 31.

community of its village, where inhabitants came from 115 different villages of Bosnia, Hercegovina and Croatia.

In other words, empathy and reconciliation are still possible now, there are no ancient hatreds, there is no memory of the past, unless the Nineties are considered already producers of memories. Indeed, two of the most important dates in Croatian country nowadays, November 18th, and August 5th, originated both from the last war, showing the evident difficulty for the memory to memorize itself or to be memorized. These festivities probably are not a memory, they are an artificial or human construction, following a precise political decision. For instance, regarding Croatian situation, Tesser underlines that “postwar trends also enhanced ethnic homogeneity. For Croatia, government officials and institutions expressed only tepid support for postwar Serb return, and more interest in the movement of Croat refugees into areas where they would serve government aims. Over time only about half of the prewar Serb population returned to Croatia, with many choosing to sell their homes and properties.”¹⁰⁰

It is curious to notice that the condition of the members of minorities drastically worsened after the Nineties Wars, as Blagojević Hughson highlights, and it is a paradox because wars “started in the name of the protection of minorities, as minorities have felt ‘threatened’, but at the end of the process of dissolution the position of all minorities is actually degraded.”¹⁰¹

I strongly believe that in Slavonia and in Vojvodina, where the mixed weddings were an ordinary habit during Yugoslavia, where a mixed society existed peacefully for decades, where boundaries between Serbs and Croats appear less strict, the deep meaning of ethnic cleansing lost itself. As Hayden reminds, “from the early 1950s through the 1980s, ‘mixed’ marriages increased in absolute numbers and in proportion of all marriages throughout most of Yugoslavia but were particularly common among Serbs and Croats and among Serbs and

¹⁰⁰ Tesser, “Postwar ‘Ethnic Cleansing’,” 2.

¹⁰¹ Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans,” 25.

Muslims in Bosnia and Hercegovina. Not surprisingly, the highest rates of intermarriage came in the places in which the populations lived most intermingled: the large cities, the province of Vojvodina, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and the parts of Croatia that had large numbers of Serbs and Croats.”¹⁰² Furthermore, he declares that “the 1991 census showed that 12,2% of the population of Croatia were Serbs, primarily in Zagreb, (...) specifically in Slavonija, Banija, Kordun and Lika;” indeed, even 35% of the marriages were mixed in the big cities of Slavonia. Consequently, the children of these marriages had and have a mixed background, complicate to eradicate and to *cleanse*.¹⁰³ In some interviews I reported these cases of mixed marriages, as the case of the uncle of Jadranka or the personal cases of Miroslav. It seems, in general, that, in case of mixed couple, the motherland of the husband was preferred to the motherland of the wife.

Therefore, technically, these commemorations, memorials, collective memories of victims should separate the two national communities, even in those multicultural villages, but, as a matter of fact, these attempts do not work properly. As Brubaker states, the reason of this could be that “groups (...) bounded and physical entities do not exist (...) we should not uncritically adopt categories of ethno-political practice as our categories of social analysis.”¹⁰⁴ Michael Portmann, in his paper entitled “Ethnic cleansing’ in peacetime? Yugoslav/Serb colonization projects in Vojvodina in the twentieth century,” underlines the relevant aspect that not only the nationalistic motives should be considered.¹⁰⁵ Every interviewed overcame the nationalistic diversity, arriving to a further level of difference, given by a social and cultural framework. In particular, the most significant is the case of Ljubica, from Batrovci, who reports

¹⁰² Hayden, “Imagined communities and real victims,” 5.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), cited in Michael Portmann, “Ethnic cleansing’ in peacetime? Yugoslav/Serb colonization projects in Vojvodina in the twentieth century,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, volume 18, no. 4 (2016): 448-449, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2016.1227561.

¹⁰⁵ Portmann, “Ethnic cleansing’ in peacetime?,” 449.

that her Serbian friends in the near village of Vašica complained because they did not protest against the exchange of the house and they miss their old Croatian *starosedeoeci* neighbors, since it seems hard to recreate the *rules of good neighborliness* with the new Serbian *došljaci* neighbors.

Following this idea, the brilliant Italian writer and journalist Paolo Rumiz expresses his point of view in his book, *Maschere per un massacro* (Masks for a slaughter); according to him, the real split in this dowel of Yugoslav society is not represented by the dichotomy Serb/Croat, but by the dichotomy *starosedeoeci/došljaci*.¹⁰⁶ The author would like to demonstrate that the differences between *starosedeoeci* and *došljaci* are indeed much bigger than today's differences among people from different nationalities, even between Serbs and Croats. Carolin Leutloff-Grandits points out the relevance of this difference too, because “while it is often assumed that co-ethnic migration is a form of privileged migration, as these migrants are perceived to integrate more easily into the receiving society based on their common ethnicity (compared to migrants who do not share the same ethnicity as the receiving society), we have to consider that in former Yugoslavia these *co-ethnics* became first and foremost victims of the wars along ethno-national lines and were forced to leave their homes.”¹⁰⁷

In conclusion, my perspective, instead, is a mixing of these approaches. In my past fieldwork researches, I discovered that the *fluid and malleable* society creates a sort of short-circuit, shaping a *triadic society* in Vojvodina, especially in the area at the border between Serbia and Croatia, namely the geographical area mostly interested by the phenomenon of

¹⁰⁶ Paolo Rumiz, *Maschere per un massacro* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ Carolin Leutloff-Grandits, “Ethnic Unmixing in the Aftermath of the Yugoslav Successor Wars: The Integration of Co-Ethnics in Former Yugoslavia in Comparative Perspective,” Academia EDU, 2, accessed April 24, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/716383/Ethnic_unmixing_in_the_Aftermath_of_the_Yugoslav_Successor_Wars_the_Integration_of_Co-Nationals_in_former_Yugoslavia_in_Comparative_Perspective.

exchanges houses. This triadic society has three main actors in Vojvodina, namely Serbs that remained to live in his house, Serbs that moved from Croatia, and Croats that decided to stay, or simply was not obliged to run away (in this third group, I would add also the members of other national minorities); clearly, the reverse case in Slavonia, namely Croats that stayed in his country, Croats that lived in Serbia, and Serbs that took the decision to continue to live in Croatia. Tesser reveals that it exists, in Croatia, a peculiar way to define those three groups, “definitions also mattered. While referring to local ethnic Croats as *prognanici* (expellees) and Croat refugees from nearby countries as *izbjeglice* (refugees), Serbs were instead defined as *raseljene osobe* (displaced persons).”¹⁰⁸ Referring to Serbian country, Leutloff-Grandits uses different terms, but the concept seems always similar, “a further line of conflict was the one between villager (*seljak*) and town dweller (*građanin*). People from Belgrade perceived themselves as belonging to a more cultivated society, while refugees who spoke *Ijekavian*¹⁰⁹ were often seen as uncivilized villagers who brought an inferior culture to the cities.”¹¹⁰

The triadic society’s approach would like to be an attempt to demonstrate the current intricate society. This approach does not depend only on national or ethnic grounds, and it is not circumscribed, as Rumiz’s attitude. Interviewed people suggested me this path: *the strength of a local identity that overcomes the national one, but at the same time it depends from an indelible national dynamic*. I agree with Leutloff-Grandits, “the establishment of transnational ties is often attached to migrants who move from their home country to another nation state, where they differ from the ethnonational majority and therewith receive fewer rights and experience a cultural stigmatization. Interestingly, (...) both migrant groups are co-ethnics in the countries of immigration, but they still experience a stigmatization and non-integration into

¹⁰⁸ Tesser, “Postwar ‘Ethnic Cleansing’,” 6.

¹⁰⁹ *Ijekavian* is a peculiar dialect of Serbo-Croatian language, spoken in the Northern Serbian borderland areas, at the border with Croatia and Hungary, and not in the capital.

¹¹⁰ Leutloff-Grandits, “Ethnic Unmixing in the Aftermath of the Yugoslav Successor Wars,” 15.

the receiving society.”¹¹¹ Beyond cultural and social reasons, this difficulty of integration, as Slavko suggests me, derives also from logistic reasons, since who is moving to another country is always looking for a job position in any possible condition and situation, worsening the work conditions of autochthonous people; and from linguistic reasons, since the alphabet and the dialect spoken in Vojvodina are different from the alphabet and the dialect spoken in Slavonia and, clearly, people who is moving to the other region is bringing with themselves the opposite alphabet and the opposite dialect, creating a sort of linguistic barrier, as Miroslav and Lazo wisely underline.

¹¹¹ Leutloff-Grandits, “Ethnic Unmixing in the Aftermath of the Yugoslav Successor Wars,” 18.

Conclusion. History is not a bargaining chip

*“What experience and history teach us
is that people and governments
have never learned anything from history,”
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.*

The essence of the Balkans and the real comprehension of these lands' history flows through the existence of enclaves and of minorities. This area is indeed often considered and studied as a whole, rather than being ethnically and geographically anatomized. I would rather suggest that, in order to avoid commonplace prejudices and stereotypes, it is necessary to analyze this land and its people with a more appropriate analytical, itemized and thorough perspective. Examples of small groups that have been struggling for centuries to obtain autonomy or independence can be found all over the Balkans. That is even more true specifically in the territories of Serbia and Croatia. Most of these groups are minorities belonging to the larger Slavic family; however, there are also some notable exceptions, such as Roma, Vlachs,¹¹² Ashkali, Egyptians, Jewish, Greeks and Germans.¹¹³ In addition to that, there are a few broader ethnical groups, namely Romanians, Hungarians and Albanians. The other minorities are Slavic, all following a Christian religion, with multiple instances. Aside from Serbian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, there are various branches of Protestantism: the Slovak minority in Vojvodina and Slavonia belong for the most part to the Slovak Evangelical Church; in Veliko Središte,¹¹⁴ there is a small community of Hussites Czechs; and

¹¹² The Slavic origin of Vlachs is nowadays subject of debate among scholars.

¹¹³ The number of German inhabitants is steadily decreased after the Second World War.

¹¹⁴ Veliko Središte is near Vršac, in Eastern Serbia.

there are several Protestant communities all over Vojvodina and Slavonia, as well as Nazarenes, Adventists, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists and so on. Moreover, Ruthenians of Vojvodina and Slavonia are Greek Catholic, and in the southeast of the country can be found a few Bulgarian Orthodox churches,¹¹⁵ due to Bulgarians settlements in the area.

Furthermore, some non-Slavic minorities also belong to the Christian faith: Hungarian are mainly Catholic, with a small minority of Calvinist;¹¹⁶ most of Roma and Vlachs belong respectively to the Serbian Orthodox or the (Croatian) Catholic Church; the Romanian minority in Vojvodina belongs to the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the Romanian minority in Southern Serbia is nowadays¹¹⁷ returning to attend Romanian Orthodox functions. Among non-Slavic minorities, only Jewish and Albanian groups are not Christian. Most of the Albanians who live in Serbia are indeed Muslims, with a small percentage of Orthodox and Catholics.

This is how oddly chaotic the situation in Serbia appears today. Vojvodina alone, its northernmost region, is home to many of these aforementioned minorities. When driving from Sombor to Vršac, from Kikinda to Šid or from Novi Sad to Subotica, it is possible to read road signs in two alphabets and seven languages. My five research fieldworks about minorities in Serbia have provided me with the opportunity to unmask the stereotype concerning ethnic enmity and ethnic conflict, often used by the Italian press and also present in the Italian academic debate. The power of this biased viewpoint is brilliantly represented by Zygmunt Baumann and his concept of liquid modernity, “what is happening at present is, so to speak, a redistribution and reallocation of modernity's *melting powers*.”¹¹⁸ According to Ulrich Beck, mentioned by Bauman, these *melting powers* are families, classes, neighborhoods, seen as

¹¹⁵ These churches are located around Pirot, Bosilegrad and Dimitrovgrad.

¹¹⁶ Their headquarter is in Feketić, in Bač area of Vojvodina, between Bačka Topola and Vrbas.

¹¹⁷ The Monastery of Malajnica was built by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 2004. After that year, a dozen of Romanian Orthodox churches were established in all over Eastern Serbia, in the area around Golubac, Despotovac, Zaječar and Kladovo.

¹¹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 6.

“‘zombie categories’ and ‘zombie institutions’ which are dead and still alive;”¹¹⁹ I would add to this list also national groups. Bauman and Beck *challenge* the new deep meaning of the “core of family life”,¹²⁰ in a parallel way I would make the same also with the *core of national entity*. Every melting power should be considered as shaped by many realities and many layers.

These layers, meant as national, social, ethnic, religious group of people, are the main topic of the brilliant book by Serge Moscovici regarding the psychology of minorities, entitled *Social influence and social change*. In this book, the author claims that every member of a group is both a source of influence and a target of influence. As a result, the influence is reciprocal: from majority to minority and conversely.¹²¹ Furthermore, Moscovici adds that the essential condition to enable this kind of influence is the conflict, seen as a starting point or as an essential condition to modify the others, to stimulate a change and to establish new relationships; the uncertainty and the deviousness are concepts and situations that derive from the conflict, which Moscovici also called interaction.¹²² The author furthermore states that there is no perfect modality to influence a minority, since everything depends on the circumstances, the details, the current situation of majorities and minorities, and on the relationships with the surrounding social environment.¹²³ I personally think that Judson’s concept of *situational thinking*, already mentioned in the introduction, is similar to the concept of *temporary situation* put forward by Moscovici. Moreover, I am fascinated by the idea that circumstances often address and guide some events in History, and consequently, some decisions in everyday life. Among those decisions, the choice to belong to a specific *group of people*, again on purpose vaguely defined, since it can be a national, religious, ethnic, or linguistic group.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid*

¹²¹ Serge Moscovici, *Psicologia delle minoranze attive*, (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1981), 83-84.

¹²² Moscovici, *Psicologia delle minoranze attive*, 124.

¹²³ Moscovici, *Psicologia delle minoranze attive*, 175.

This conflict between the minority and the majority is both existential and intrinsic. Indeed, the etymology of the word conflict refers to a fight or collision between two or more different objects or entities.¹²⁴ The ancient Greek divinity Eris is considered the God of conflict and discord, of everything that is not concordant, harmonious, on the same level or layer. Besides the relevance of the circumstances, the concept of multilayered identity is the main aspect I wish to highlight in this conclusion: every reality is a conflict between different layers, and even inside every individual there is a conflict between different layers of personal identity.

With this dissertation, I tried to prove and to show the weakness of the concept of ethnic enmity in the mainly rural areas at the border between Serbia and Croatia. I tried to demonstrate it through a peculiar phenomenon, such as the exchange of houses between Serbs of Croatia and Croats of Serbia. The lack of violence and hostility and the utilization of lawyers or Catholic priests as mediators are the two main aspects that show how little relevance the ethnic differences (realistically) had in this process, portraying a much more harmonious relationship between Serbs' families and Croats' families. I believe that the choice of the approach, which is a mix between Micro History and Oral History, was crucial to my understanding of this notion.

Carlo Ginzburg provided the reasons that lead me to choose an approach based on Micro History when he wrote, "the choice of a circumscribed and close-up perspective reveals a dissatisfaction with the macroscopic and quantitative model."¹²⁵ Again following Ginzburg, I strongly believe in the efficacy and efficiency of Micro History approach, which focuses on a typical historical event, which I do not consider as *petite histoire*, as for the Richard Cobb and Raymond Queneau's approach, who instead focuses on an unpredictable and unrepeatable

¹²⁴ "Conflitto etimologia," Dizionario etimologico online, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.etimo.it/?term=conflitto>.

¹²⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi, and Anne C. Tedeschi, "Microhistory: two or three things that I know about it," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 20, No. 1 (Autumn, 1993): 17.

fait divers.¹²⁶ Ginzburg mentioned Luis González, who wrote, “here microhistory is synonymous with local history (...) from a qualitative rather than a quantitative perspective.”¹²⁷ Through this perspective, the role of circumstances and details becomes extremely relevant, showing that *History could always go in a different way*.

Jan Vansina, instead, provides a reason for my appreciation of the Oral History approach, stating that “much can be learned about the past from oral sources that are not concerned with the past and (...) that characteristic make them more reliable precisely because they are unconscious contributions.”¹²⁸ I would add that oral sources that are to some extent connected to the past may also be considered reliable when the number of the interviewees is sufficiently high (surely more than eleven, as it is in this dissertation) and if they provide a sort of common *line of thought*. When it comes to my research, the ethnic enmity was regularly ignored in every interview I conducted in this area (not only the ones related to this fieldwork research), which lead me to believe that ordinary people do not commonly assign a specific significance to ethnic differences in that area. Following Vansina’s viewpoint, it becomes possible to create a sort of *immediate history* just by comparing these interviews to the “available written or printed information and, if possible, also information from radio and television.” By thoroughly and accurately selecting the witnesses (in my case, the choice of witnesses from all four fields, thus covering all four different versions), it is also possible to reach the specific purpose suggested by Vansina, who wrote “the goal is to save sources from oblivion, to come to a first assessment of the events/situations studied, and to promote consciousness among the actors of the happenings themselves.”¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Ginzburg, Tedeschi, and Tedeschi, “Microhistory,” 16-17.

¹²⁷ Ginzburg, Tedeschi, and Tedeschi, “Microhistory,” 12.

¹²⁸ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 28.

¹²⁹ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 13.

I believe the most appropriate conclusion to my dissertation is represented by the words of Marina Blagojević Hughson and by a suggestion by Predrag Matvejević.

The former maintained that, whether it is true that there is “an overwhelming feeling that it was not *us* who want the war, but *they*, (...) nevertheless there is much evidence of mutual help across ethnic lines during the wars.”¹³⁰ She mentioned a book by Svetlana Broz, *Good people in an evil time. Portraits of complicity and resistance in the Bosnian War*, in order to demonstrate that “the war was actually perceived as some kind of a ‘natural disaster’ over the heads of ‘normal people’, causing spontaneous solidarity.”¹³¹ If even the war was perceived as a natural external event, that should probably lead us to believe that politics, nationalism and ethnicity were not as relevant as they had been portrayed; thus providing another demonstration of how misleading the concept of ethnic enmity is in describing the causes of a conflict.

The mutual help and the weakness of the concept of ethnic enmity should be acknowledged in every part of the countries, in capital cities as well as in the Southern areas, thus preventing demagoguery and populism from spreading unobstructed their own version of the events. This is the typical task of the scholar, who should try to provide the tools for an easier rapprochement between ordinary people and History, not as in the Eighties in Belgrade and Zagreb, since, as Josip, the wisest among my interviewees, affirms, “the real issue of Balkan countries is not the low percentage of educated people, but it is the lack of culture and politeness. During Tito, there were not more educated people than now, the numbers are roughly equivalent. The real difference is the level of culture and politeness. Without education you can build something, without culture you cannot.”¹³²

¹³⁰ Blagojević Hughson, “Undoing Gender, Undoing the Balkans,” 38.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Josip, direct interview with the author, August 6, 2019.

The Yugoslav attitude of Predrag Matvejević shined through his words, since he remained convinced until his death that a solution could be found to the issues between Yugoslav nationalities, and especially between Serbs and Croats. According to him, Yugoslavia could have entered the European Union, even though he firmly believed that Balkan inhabitants should not need to enter, since they are already part of Europe. He dreamt about a Europe of the citizens, not one of the states, he dreamt about a Europe without nationalities. The Nineties Wars in the Balkans went exactly in the opposite direction of his hopes, and he then predicted that the destiny of the Europe would be the same of the Balkans', if Europe will not comprehend that *History is not a bargaining chip*.¹³³

¹³³ "Il tempo del dopo," Vimeo.

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List of interviews

- . April 24th, 2018: Jadranka and Vanja from Šid.
- . August 2nd, 2018: Mijo from Sot.
- . August 3rd, 2018: Miroslav from Kukujevc, Ljubica from Batrovci.
- . August 4th, 2018: Lazo from Šid, Miomir from Gibarac.
- . August 5th, 2018: Nena from Kukujevc, Anđa from Hrtkovci.
- . August 6th, 2019: Josip from Šid.
- . August 7th, 2019: Slavko from Osijek.

There is a light that never goes out, The Smiths

*Take me out tonight
Where there's music and there's people
And they're young and alive
Driving in your car
I never never want to go home
Because I haven't got one
Anymore*

*Take me out tonight
Because I want to see people and I
Want to see life
Driving in your car
Oh, please don't drop me home
Because it's not my home, it's their
Home, and I'm welcome no more*

*And if a double-decker bus
Crashes into us
To die by your side
Is such a heavenly way to die
And if a ten-ton truck
Kills the both of us
To die by your side
Well, the pleasure - the privilege is mine*

*Take me out tonight
Take me anywhere, I don't care
I don't care, I don't care
And in the darkened underpass
I thought oh God, my chance has come at last
(but then a strange fear gripped me and I
Just couldn't ask)*

*Take me out tonight
Oh, take me anywhere, I don't care
I don't care, I don't care
Driving in your car
I never never want to go home
Because I haven't got one, da...
Oh, I haven't got one*

*And if a double-decker bus
Crashes into us
To die by your side
Is such a heavenly way to die
And if a ten-ton truck
Kills the both of us
To die by your side
Well, the pleasure - the privilege is mine*

*Oh, there is a light and it never goes out
There is a light and it never goes out
There is a light and it never goes out*

With God on your side, Bob Dylan

*Oh my name it ain't nothin'
My age it means less
The country I come from
Is called the Midwest
I was taught and brought up there
The laws to abide
And that land that I live in
Has God on its side*

*Oh, the history books tell it
They tell it so well
The cavalries charged
The Indians fell
The cavalries charged
The Indians died
Oh, the country was young
With God on its side*

*The Spanish-American
War had its day
And the Civil War, too
Was soon laid away
And the names of the heroes
I was made to memorize
With guns in their hands
And God on their side*

*The First World War, boys
It came and it went
The reason for fighting
I never did get
But I learned to accept it
Accept it with pride
For you don't count the dead
When God's on your side*

*The Second World War
Came to an end
We forgave the Germans
And then we were friends
Though they murdered six million
In the ovens they fried
The Germans now, too
Have God on their side*

*I've learned to hate the Russians
All through my whole life
If another war comes
It's them we must fight
To hate them and fear them
To run and to hide
And accept it all bravely
With God on my side*

*But now we got weapons
Of chemical dust
If fire them, we're forced to
Then fire, them we must
One push of the button
And a shot the world wide
And you never ask questions
When God's on your side*

*Through many a dark hour
I've been thinkin' about this
That Jesus Christ was
Betrayed by a kiss
But I can't think for you
You'll have to decide
Whether Judas Iscariot
Had God on his side.*

*So now as I'm leavin'
I'm weary as Hell
The confusion I'm feelin'
Ain't no tongue can tell
The words fill my head
And fall to the floor
That if God's on our side
He'll stop the next war*