Thirty Years after the Break-up of Yugoslavia

The Primitive (Dis)accumulation of Capital and Memory; or, How (Not) To Make This Country Great Again

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Abstract

The contribution sheds a critical light on the thirty years since the break-up of socialist Yugoslavia. It presents three hypotheses for a critical reorientation of the 1989–91 sequence. Firstly, rather than seeing 1989 as the start of the *longue durée* of a democratic process, for Yugoslavia this trajectory was ‘realised’ as political chaos and ethnic wars in 1991. Secondly, criticising the chronological view of ‘post-socialism’, it posits post-socialism as having already emerged after 1965, marked by market reforms that ‘withered away’ socialism. Thirdly, and specific to the 1990s, in order to facilitate the transition to capitalism, a ‘primitive accumulation’ of memory and a high degree of violence unfolded, which actually dis-accumulated the socialist infrastructure and socialised means of (re)production. The post-Yugoslav transition proved a genuine ‘contribution’ to ‘making our country great again’: ethnically cleansed nation-states on the horizon of European peripheral capitalism. The contribution concludes on an affirmative note, pointing to the slow resurgence of the Left.

Keywords

Introduction*

Thirty years ago the destruction and break-up of socialist Yugoslavia unfolded. What was supposed to be a peaceful continuation of the fall of Berlin Wall and transition to democracy turned into a nightmare. This text will shed a critical light on the transition that led to the condition of ‘post-socialism’, into allegedly free and democratic societies with open markets. Despite the many objective advantages of the federal and socialist idea and its infrastructure, this article will not be embracing a kind of nostalgic retrospection of Titoist ‘brotherhood and unity’ that sees Yugoslavia as a ‘self-managed’ paradise for working people, but rather calls on us to learn dialectically from the victories and defeats of the partisan, workers’ and social struggles. The text is a critical intervention in what has become the dominant and self-legitimising ideological nexus of ethnic nationalism and an increasingly authoritarian neoliberal formation on the one hand, as well as a critique of a more established left-wing trope that ‘nothing took place’ in 1989 on the other. Against these two seemingly incompatible strategic positions on 1989, this text will pose three connected hypotheses that contribute to a critical reorientation of the 1989–91 sequence and the predominantly negative effects that ensued.

Firstly, rather than seeing 1989 as the start of the longue durée of democratisation, and former socialist states’ ‘desired’ path to future EU and NATO integration, (post-)Yugoslavia’s trajectory came to an abrupt end in 1991. This arose due to the proliferation of ethnic wars, the partial or complete destruction of socioeconomic infrastructure, and an extremely flawed democratic process. Secondly, this text argues for a more nuanced notion of post-socialist transition by claiming that, drawing on Marx’s theoretical legacy, the temporality of capital, and history in general, is not linear but rather unfolds unevenly, and that post-socialism cannot be seen as a merely chronological phenomenon of the dominant historiography, that is, as the period that marks everything that follows 1989 in the former East. This linear, and let us add teleological trope

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1 The most famous representative of this position is Alain Badiou, his political meditation Of an Obscure Disaster (Badiou 1988) in particular has central passages devoted to this question. We could add to this orientation also the later works of Toni Negri, especially part of his book Goodbye Mr. Socialism (Negri 2008).

2 To quote Pupovac: ‘The beginning of post-socialism, its historical inception, immediately presents itself as an end, a beginning in and through an end: the end of socialism, the end of communism. This end is an exhilarating one: the end of a perceived disaster, the liberation
that pre-emptively defines the origin, subject and goal of the post-socialist transition became an integral part of an apologetic ‘transitologist’ discourse. In this text I will briefly outline my previous research findings, where I defined post-socialism as a contradictory process that marks a gradual ‘withering away’ of socialist elements and the concomitant strengthening of a (proto-)capitalist tendency. This had already taken hold in the period following 1965 that introduced market reforms in the name of ‘decentralisation’. And thirdly, in order to complete the transition to capitalism (and not postsocialism) the post-Yugoslav context was marked by a major dis-accumulation of socialist ownership, infrastructure, and the means of (re)production and socialised ‘general intellect’ created and built by working people in the decades of socialism. Another specific aspect of the post-Yugoslav ‘accumulation by dispossession’ was an intense ‘accumulation of memory’ by the state that conducted a ‘nationalist repossessing’ of memory, of past and future, that rendered the nation an eternal subject of history. Rather than giving the credit to Trump’s notorious slogan ‘MAGA’, it was actually already within the sequence of 1989–91 that we can trace a genuine contribution to the call, ‘Make country x great again’. This call signalled a tremendous change for the former East: in terms of political framing, the model of ethnically cleansed nation-states was instituted triggering an array of ethnic animosities from within and without, while economically the former East was swiftly integrated into the periphery of the European capitalist core, where cheap labour, relations of dependence through debt, and privatisation of the most profitable companies provided an opportunity for major companies.

Last but not least, despite the grim circumstances and a prolonged political and economic crisis that fuelled post-Yugoslav national-neoliberalism, the text will conclude by noting the slow resurgence of the Left in the post-Yugoslav context over the past ten years, which apart from disillusionment with the neoliberal/postsocialist utopia, and a new generation of engaged youth, has to do with a specific mobilisation of past revolutionary resources, most notably the self-management and partisan liberation struggle.

3 For a fine critique that evaluates the transition in the Balkans see Močnik; see also my own longer article that criticises transitology and postsocialism, Kirn 2017, pp. 54–8.
4 I develop a critical outline of the political-economy of market socialism in Chapters 7–11 of my book Partisan Ruptures (Kirn 2019). For more on the specific post-socialist turn as a withering-away of socialism, see Kirn 2019, p. 218.
5 Kirn 2020, pp. 20–5.
Back to 1989: Liberal-Democratic Nostalgia

A few years ago, a number of historians, journalists, and commentators of a liberal or conservative provenance looked back at the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. As is customary on the occasion of such an anniversary, the dominant reference to such an event took on two directions and questions: Firstly, one reflects upon the very status of the event, and poses the question: what really happened back then, and what was the dominant image of the event? And secondly, one can finally ask whether the post-socialist transition itself delivered the promised democratic goals. These questions were made obsolete by a profound analysis elaborated by Boris Buden in the wake of the end of the twentieth anniversary.6 There, Buden lucidly demonstrates that the liberal – conservative ideological consensus was structured along class/racist lines that were set on a clear teleology, where the former necessity of a communist future got replaced by the ‘end of history’ in/with capitalism. In other words, for Eastern socialist countries there was never any alternative but to follow ‘enlightened’ nations and empires of past and present. In the case of the post-socialist transition from the totalitarian past they needed to catch up with, and modernise in accordance with, the standards of Western capitalism. In the former Yugoslavia, this exclusive alternative was structured even more sharply: either you go towards Europe (freedom, democracy, progress, peace, the free market), or you stay in the Balkans (backward-oriented, an inefficient economy, corruption, war, totalitarianism)!7 The constellation of signifying chains clearly prioritised one particular answer and in the matter of just a few years a tectonic shift was executed: class topics were translated into nationalist-ethnical strife, and the famous alternative announced by Rosa Luxemburg’s ‘Socialism or barbarism?’ was clearly inverted: ‘Capitalist realism or barbaric socialism?’ What post-socialist transitologist discourse and historical revisionism in general8 succeeded in doing was to portray the whole former East, and socialism as such, as a homogenous totalitarian entity that

6 This is one of the central arguments of his book Zone des Übergangs (Buden 2009); for the revised English version of this argument see two translated chapters in his more recent book, Buden 2020, pp. 39–75. Cf. Harvey 2013.

7 This is where the ideological intersection of class and race came into play, and where the (self-)orientalising discourse (Said 1978) of the integrative agencies of the European Union went hand-in-hand with free-market ideology and a set of economic reforms. For details on the exclusive ideological (non-)alternative, see also Močnik 1999, pp. 142–52, while for the creation and constitution of the dominant imaginary on the Balkans, see the most in-depth analysis performed by Maria Todorova (Todorova 2009).

8 One of the most important studies was undertaken by Domenico Losurdo (Losurdo 2015).
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comprised an inefficient economy, authoritarian leadership, censorship, lack of a democratic culture and workers’ struggles. This ‘totalitarian’ legacy kept infecting and haunting the post-socialist condition, for which there was no other remedy but (neoliberal) ‘shock therapy’ to facilitate the proper transition. This therapy was accompanied by a conservative historical revisionism that imposed collective amnesia on former socialist countries and their own histories of struggles for (socialist) democracy that preceded 1989. The long-term democratic political work that took place during the 1980s, from waves of strikes, workers’ protests and their own specific forms of organisation, to feminist, student and ecological movements became embedded in the narrative of an anticommunist and dissident past.9

What at first seemed to be marked by the prefix post- as an actual state of affairs was actually openly negational, and best deserves to be oriented around the prefix anti-. The real negative starting point of 1989–91 of the dominant ideological doxa and retrospective lenses is based on anti-Yugoslav(ism), anti-Marxism, and anti-socialism/-communism.10 In such a climate former communists and the remaining Marxists became either ostracised/removed from public life, or adjusted themselves to a more mainstream transitologist discourse, with the institutional frame provided by political apparatuses, NGOs and academic organisations that participated in the policy-analysis of post-socialist area studies (which has proved dominant over a large part of the former East).

Fast-forward to 2019, and old and new pundits ask: have we now finally and successfully moved from an authoritarian – totalitarian political system and inefficient socialist command economy into open, democratic and free-market societies? But can we now dispense with the infamous prefix ‘post-’ of post-socialism? Unsurprisingly, the answer given was negative. Fukuyama himself conceded that history has not yet come to an end, with the same holding for socialism, which ‘ought to come back’;11 but then, how to understand how a large part of the post-socialist landscape is now firmly inhabited by extremely conservative-nationalist ideologies and authoritarian leaderships? A prevalent liberal reading has it that this lapse into ‘illiberal’ democracy has to do with a certain regression to the ‘primitive’ totalitarian remnants of the past (especially as demonstrated in the discourse of an ALDE Party-type politician when

9 Evidently, the very existence of any democratic movements stands in stark contrast to the totalitarian tale (Ghodsee 2014), namely: how would grassroots and long-term political work and struggle even be possible within the totalitarian dictatorships that supposedly granted no freedom, but only censorship and violence?

10 For a detailed explanation, see Kirn 2019, pp. 15–20.

11 See the interview, Fukuyama 2018.
scolding Orbán)? How is it, then, that the post-socialist (semi-)periphery – that had for the past 15 years been ‘integrated’ into the European Union, with its institutional framework of the rule of law, human rights, the free market – turned its back on ‘official’ Europe and fallen into authoritarianism and ‘illiberal democracy’? Where did the Western neoliberal and post-Enlightenment project go wrong? The literature of transitology has been warning of a self-fulfilling prophecy, and thus the failure can easily be inscribed within the disciple itself: the countries of the former East had never tackled their ‘lack of a democratic culture’, and their cumbersome totalitarian legacy might at any stage have been summoned from collective memory in order to obfuscate deeper class antagonisms.\(^{12}\) In the initial stages of transition, in the brave new world of the 1990s, the anomalies of high unemployment and class stratification as well as lack of a democratic culture were seen as merely temporary obstacles, while the accompanying, openly conservative ideological formations taking shape in the re-traditionalisation of societies, with their religious and patriarchal revivals, the invention of nationalist-mythological traditions and the rise of xenophobia and racism, were never really thematised. This is not to say that such ideological formations did not already exist during the era of socialism, but that they entered centre stage not only through the new political apparatuses but also through the economic and political empowerment of the Church (becoming one of the major land-owners in the countries of the former East). All in all, either the negative consequences of the transition were repressed, or were predicted to dissolve through the full realisation of market competencies, individual entrepreneurship, and fully-functioning democratic institutions guided by the rule of law and human rights.\(^{13}\) This naive belief in the democratic progress that would accompany neoliberalism came to a full stop – if it had not done so earlier – with its complete domination within the European economic system,\(^{14}\) that was expressed politically following the

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12 Močnik’s ideological critique of transitology on the periphery (Močnik 2003) pointed out that precisely such notions (lack of a democratic culture, the remnants of totalitarian rule, etc.) work as ‘gaskets’, as empty signifiers that displace class antagonism, that is, leave the question of class-exploitation and other forms of domination out of the transition. I have developed an epistemological critique of transitology elsewhere (Kirn 2017, pp. 43–68).

13 I rely on some of the findings in the works of Buden (Buden 2009), Močnik (Močnik 2003), and the volume edited by Horvat and Štiks (Horvat and Štiks (eds.) 2014), who have all outlined a series of important epistemological and critical observations on so-called post-Yugoslav transition studies. For a more general critique of post-socialist transition from a political-science perspective, see Jović 2009.

14 For a critical contribution to studies on the disintegration of the European and former Yugoslav economic space, see Becker 2017; for the world-system perspective on (Yugoslav) peripheralisation see Močnik 2006, pp. 13–21, and Podvršič 2018.
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The crisis of 2008–10 and its now-infamous disciplining of the working people of Greece and the leftist government of Syriza. 30 years after the dissolution of socialism in the former East it is clear that putatively temporary anomalies are not anomalies but rather part of the normal functioning of the capitalist mode of reproduction, that has also been extended deep into the former West.

The last decade is marked, therefore, by the collective feeling of a failed neoliberal utopia and increasing disillusionment with the European horizon and the democratic promise of 1989. This disappointment and discontent has bifurcated into various political subjectivities identified with grassroots and new Left parties, as well as far-right politics. The dominant political establishment and mainstream pundits, what Tariq Ali called the ‘extreme centre’, have long accepted that the neoliberal ideological consensus does not and cannot think about its own failures and the negative consequences of the post-socialist transition. One may detect a minor concession in the retrospective nostalgic view that sees the early 1990s as heroic and golden years, which saw the reinvention of ‘liberal democracy’ that led the former East into the European integration process.

However, the dominant consensus forecloses any option that could announce 1989 as an event of historical defeat. Not defeat in the sense of some kind of old Left perspective, as a conspiracy of Western imperialism, their state secretaries and Soros-es orchestrating the transition from behind the scenes, but to understand 1989 as defeat of socialism in dialectical terms: on the one hand to understand it immanently, as the implosion of democratic-socialist forces and their cause’s usurpation, via official nationalism, on the part of corrupt socialist elites that sought merely to reproduce power relations and thus helped tarnish the socialist and communist promise, and on the other hand, externally, as the unforeseen consequences of an oil crisis and neoliberalisation, and the increasingly stronger integration of socialist countries into the world economy amid a changing geopolitical situation. Moreover, the post-socialist transition dismantled the final pillars of the socialist ‘social contract’ between working people and the political bureaucracy, that is, the material base of the ‘working people’ and their conditions of reproduction: secure jobs and a well-functioning public infrastructure that was concerned not only with schooling, health, and a decent pension, but also social housing.

Neoliberal experimentation from Latin America to the former East produced even more uneven and asymmetrical relationships, but also it had far-reaching effects that were to be visited upon Western Europe as well. To

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15 Ali 2015.
16 Lebowitz 2012.
17 Boatca 2006.
understand that the transition is an asymmetric and uneven process we need to take a close look at the divisions along lines of class, race, nation, and gender. For the sake of brevity, let us posit that socialism, with all its problems associated with the vanguard party line, different forms of oppression and modes of repression, nevertheless addressed a clear political referent: a homogenous political subject of working people that had a relatively stable material base, while the subsequent transition brought defeatism, fragmentation and the political disorganisation of ‘working people’. Transition created a disenfranchised majority, which the ideological apparatuses of the new states hegemonised as new, authentic, ethnic – religious subjects. As Salecl has already nicely demonstrated, the new – old double bind materialised into the pairings Croat – Catholic, Serbian – Orthodox, Bosnian – Muslim, Slovenian – Catholic, and so on, while the rest were to be expelled, marginalised and racialised along various other categories.\(^\text{18}\) Furthermore, and in terms of differentiation and fragmentation, the majority was also framed in terms of marginalised populations and/or identitarian ‘minorities’: ethnic minorities, the unemployed, the erased, migrants, the elderly, youth, and women. This mass was precariously employed or unemployed, and often identified as victims of the transition by those (Yugo-)nostalgic for the socialist past. Despite their constituting a majority in real terms, the ideological effect of ‘interpellating’\(^\text{19}\) this mass into ‘marginalised’ and ‘minority’ subjects isolated from one another sat well with the free market of ideas, the new parties, and civil initiatives that then completely identify individuals around single-issue identities. Naïve expectations and a weak cosmopolitanism consecrated by the European horizon not only underestimated the negative consequences of the thoroughgoing restructuring of the social, economic, political and cultural life of the semi-periphery, also, the European core and ‘extreme centre’ disciplined through dispossession and blackmail any sort of real political alternative, as shown so emphatically in the case of Greece in 2015.\(^\text{20}\)

The claim of this text is not merely that the state of affairs intensified, and that the European post-socialist periphery ‘always already’ contained in embryonic form its current national – neoliberal – authoritarian constellation. Rather, the claim is that the counter-revolutionary caesura had from

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18 For the instrumentalisation of religion in the service of strengthening ethnic differences and even amassing support from parts of the international community, see Salecl 1994, pp. 16, 35–6.
20 Varoufakis has written a very illuminating account from the inside, at some historical distance, of the Greek-EU negotiations (‘non-deal’): Varoufakis 2017; for a more conjunctural reflection that pushed Syriza towards a clear left-strategy, see Sotiris 2014, pp. 262–73.
the very beginning – and as I will show through the example of the break-up of Yugoslavia – signalled its very truth: *that 1989–91 was an utter failure, which changed things for the worse for the large majority of people.*

This hypothesis aims to criticise two ‘meta’ and oppositional narratives, the first being represented by Francis Fukuyama and the second, perhaps surprisingly, by the communist philosopher Alain Badiou. Fukuyama’s famous trope figures 1989 as the sign of the ‘end of history’, where the paradigm of liberal democracy finally defeated authoritarian forms of governance and socialism as an economic system.

In this perspective, not much needs to be invented other than what had already been achieved in the West, in the political form of the state and liberal democracy, while globally there is the absence of an alternative: capitalism has no competition. Opposed to Fukuyama is the premise of French political philosopher Alain Badiou, whose book *D’un désastre obscur* claims that *nothing took place in 1989* other than the restoration of capitalism and liberal democracy. This made 1989 an ‘obscure disaster’ and not a triumph of democracy, or anything that can be seen as ‘event’ that holds a truth procedure. Yet although these two philosophers come from different political camps, they both regard 1989 not as a revolution and revolutionary caesura in the post-Kantian sense but rather as a revolution in the premodern sense summed up in the word *revolvere*. For Fukuyama, 1989 revolves around the liberal-democratic triumph, which (had always-already) ended history; for Badiou, this event also represents the liberal restoration of the state of affairs. However, if nothing really took place – other than restauration – then was socialism only ever an illusion of Communism, a sort of bad state-capitalism, and indeed a false alternative that did not change anything for anyone? Would that mean that any future socialism needs to avoid imagining any global and systemic alternative despite actually existing socialism’s inconsistencies and failures? It is curious to see that these politically opposed arguments share at least two central aspects that will be of concern here when redefining the concept of post-socialist transition. Firstly, on a general level, their respective theoretical viewpoints are not

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21 Interestingly, despite practically all the political and cultural apparatuses of the new nation-states of post-Yugoslavia openly promoting anti-communism and anti-Yugoslavism, and a history revised according to national lenses, more people increasingly – when asked in public surveys – express a more favourable attitude toward socialism, and past governance, than their current capitalist nationalist realities (Petrović 2013). Rather than being some cheap nostalgia, this can be explained by the ability of people to judge the thoroughgoing changes to their everyday life, with its race to the bottom, a heightening of poverty levels, worsening and narrowing of prospects for youth and the less educated, etc. Socialism, notwithstanding all its deficiencies, not only afforded the majority of the population social security, but also a future horizon.

interested in tackling the processes of the transition, but conclude in their respective claims of ‘the end of history’ and that ‘nothing changed’ after 1989. Secondly, they both fail to assess properly the past social formation, namely socialism – this contradictory social formation from which the transition took place.\textsuperscript{23} Changes after 1989 were dramatic for all the socialist countries, however it was in socialist Yugoslavia, emblematised by the violent and symbolic destruction of Yugoslavia and socialist self-management, that the anticlimax and the closure of its democratic promise was abruptly instantiated. This confirms Badiou’s thesis regarding the obscure event, counter-revolution, while promoting a more analytical view of the socialist and post-socialist past and future.


The memory of 1989 might bring on nostalgic tears and dreams of a democratic society for some, while for others the transitional reality had already turned into a real nightmare by 1991. This was the year of the break-up of Yugoslavia, the country that was long regarded as one the first to systemically put self-management socialism into practice,\textsuperscript{24} contributing to the history of federalism and socialism in its own way,\textsuperscript{25} and which also made vital contributions to the creation of the non-aligned movement\textsuperscript{26} that moved beyond the Cold War division of the world. In 1991 it was not the only country to have descended in war, but what also dissolved was a certain belief, an idea that another world and another socialism, more democratic and oriented around workers and social reproduction, is possible. Thus, we do not need to turn to the financial crisis of 2008 to discern the truth of the post-socialist transition when we already have the Yugoslavia of 1991 (or the Chile of 1973): the advancement of neoliberal capitalism in no way stands in contradiction to a closure of democratic promise. Also, to make this country great again was not so much the belated response to the financial crisis and the failure of the centrist establishment in dealing with the post-crisis economy, but invented following the geopolitical shake-up of the 1990s. 1991 was, then, the start of a long process

\textsuperscript{23} For details on this point see Kirn 2017, pp. 54–8.
\textsuperscript{24} Samary 1988.
\textsuperscript{25} Kirn 2019; Suvin 2016.
\textsuperscript{26} Prashad 2007; Rubinstein 1979; Stubbs (ed.) forthcoming.
of historical failure/failing (for the majority of population), in connection with which Boris Buden colourfully describes the example of Yugoslavia:

The process of transition is accordingly understood as the process of normalisation. So everything that happens during this process automatically gains the teleological meaning intrinsically tied to the transitional narrative. This also includes the logic that before things get better – normal, capitalist, democratic, etc. – they must first get worse in comparison to the former situation, concretely to the state of actual socialism. But the problem is that the transition process can turn into a real disaster. This is precisely what happened in former Yugoslavia: the collapse of the state, civil wars with horrible destruction, ethnic cleansing, atrocities, human losses, economic breakdown, political chaos.27

Also, if we want to speak of a specific democratic promise and legacy we need not to go to the early 1990s, but rather can turn further back to the late 1960s, and on to the turbulent years of the 1980s. It is there that we will find an array of democratic-socialist initiatives within the party apparatus (the youth of the League of Communists) and also outside (the student movement, workers’ strikes, social movements) that aimed to strengthen the socialist, democratic and federal orientation of Yugoslavia.28 The question of the very status, existence and differentia specifica of Yugoslav socialism should not be dogmatised into a mutually-exclusive alternative: there are substantial analyses which

27 Buden 2020, p. 156.
28 Why these initiatives failed, and why the internal and external communist critique of the established party apparatus and orientation was unable to bring about a more durable alternative aimed at preserving the federal project at the end of the 1980s, is a topic for a much longer treatise. Darko Suvin, Rastko Moćnik, Catherine Samary, Susan Woodward, Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, the present author, and a few other theorists have recently written on the issue of the long-term demise of socialism in Yugoslavia from a Marxist perspective; however, no serious study has been undertaken to evaluate the final years prior to, and during the wars. In the year prior to the breakup of Yugoslavia, political lines became increasingly polarised: on the one side was the axis of the richer North (The League of Slovenian Communists, and also the Croatian Communists), while on the other the political ground was held by the leadership of Milošević and The League of Serbian Communists. The nationalist genie was already out of the bottle when the last prime minister of Yugoslavia, Ante Marković, attempted to ‘save’ the federation. Marković’s attempt to save the federation, however, came with a clear neoliberal agenda to undertake a series of market reforms supported by the US, introducing private property and permitting the bankruptcy of many companies. On the adoption of private property, see Geoffroy 2006; for a work focused on Slovenian independence within the international conjuncture, see Villa 2018.
assert that Yugoslav socialism developed into a form of mere ‘state capitalism’ in the late 1940s and 1950s,\textsuperscript{29} while some saw it disappear in late 1980s,\textsuperscript{30} while I have argued, alongside Darko Suvin\textsuperscript{31} and Catherine Samary\textsuperscript{32} that the first serious rupture within socialism took place at the time of the market reforms in 1965. This reading supports the argument that Yugoslavia had already become post-socialist in the 1960s, and that post-socialism cannot be grasped solely as a chronological phenomenon that follows 1989 as the only caesura.\textsuperscript{33} Rather, market reforms strengthened the proto-capitalist tendency whereby liberal ideology and a specific osmosis between the political bureaucracy from richer republics and the technocracy (managers of firms and banks) took control at the expense of the working class, and poorer regions of the federation, most notably Macedonia and Kosovo.\textsuperscript{34}

Very telling is that the shift in the balance of political and ideological power was openly admitted to by Vladimir Bakarić, one of the leading economic theorists and members of the League of Communists, who, after the Congress of Self-Managed Workers in 1971, stated the following: ‘We could say that the Communists were in the minority within their own organisation regarding a series of issues.’\textsuperscript{35} This is the start of the veritable withering-away of socialism that dissolves international-interrepublican solidarity by openly adopting competition as a vital principle. What however changed towards the end of 1980s was a further shift in the ideological and political configuration, whereby liberal and nationalist currents inside the League of Communists were drawn towards the idea of the dissolution of the entity of Yugoslavia, within the context of a prolonged economic crisis. The withering-away of socialism was followed by the withering-away of Yugoslavia’s multinational and federal framework, both aspects crucial to the emancipatory and partisan idea of Yugoslav socialism. The latter was not framed on the basis of any ethnic identity, rather it was successful to the extent that it primarily solved the social – class – question

\textsuperscript{29} Unkovski-Korica 2016; Živković 2015.
\textsuperscript{30} Géraud-Legros 2006.
\textsuperscript{31} Suvin 2016.
\textsuperscript{32} Samary 1988.
\textsuperscript{33} For details see Kirn 2017, pp. 59–66.
\textsuperscript{34} The first world-system study in socialist Yugoslavia was performed in the early 1980s on the case of the development of undevelopment of Kosovo, which clearly states that the objective economic differences became much larger following market-reforms (Kirn 1982, pp. 53–95).
\textsuperscript{35} Bakarić 1983, p. 518.
while leaving sufficient autonomy for and assigning equality to all nations and nationalities.\(^{36}\)

The major rupture that the Yugoslav break-up meant for Europe and beyond in 1991 was the fact that war ravages Europe once more, for the first time since WWII. The triumphant images of the Berlin Wall were dissolving and refracted through images of the destruction of the old bridge in Mostar that stood as living memory to the very possibility of peaceful coexistence. We see the images of the underground tunnels in the besieged and shelled Sarajevo, a city that once prided itself on having had a strong Partisan and multicultural past during WWII and in socialist Yugoslavia. The fascist dead have been resurrected in order to haunt the land of the living, and the once-defeated, vicious past is thus now materialised in the painful images of those clinging on to life in the concentration camps. *Socialism, and finally also Yugoslavia was there no more.*

The reading and evaluation of this political and symbolic death is crucial here: it is neither a sign of some tribal and eternal hatred that was always already boiling away behind the scenes, nor was it destined by corrupt post-Yugoslav leaders' signing a devil's pact with the global economy. As mentioned above, the process of the withering-away of the Communist Party, of socialism and of the Yugoslavian federal state had already been in progress for a long while; however, the path to the ethnic wars cannot be ascribed to the socialist and Yugoslav past. The road to war was actually paved by the very first decisions and choices of the new liberal democracies: let us recall that going to war was not decided by Communist Parties but by the newly democratically elected governments, some of them recognised by the ‘international community’.\(^{37}\)

The newly independent countries of Slovenia and Croatia were recognised by newly-unified Germany, prematurely *it should be added*, which was of utmost importance for the recognition of other countries that were preparing for deeper European Union expansion under the signifier ‘integration’.\(^{38}\)

Furthermore, the final settling of accounts in the post-Yugoslav situation was realised through a series of NATO interventions, where the role of central diplomatic and military power was played by the US government, the Dayton peace

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36 This is one of my key arguments on how to return to the legacy of the People’s Liberation Struggle in Yugoslavia, to what I have called the ‘partisan rupture’, and can be viewed as a dialectical movement between national and social liberation. This is elaborated in Kirk 2019, Chapter 3, where I also show that partisan struggle as a revolutionary movement had strong consequences for the postwar constitution of Yugoslavia’s federal, socialist and later also self-managed and non-aligned orientation.


38 Becker 2017.
treaty reflecting this new imperialist constellation.\textsuperscript{39} Despite the US having the final say, their corporate interests were relatively minor compared to those of the other Great Powers: part of the Balkan region was incorporated into the economic periphery of Europe dominated by the capital interests of Germany and Austria (Slovenia, Croatia, partially also Bosnia and Herzegovina), while some of it remained under the economic influence of the Russian Federation (Serbia).

Despite the clear shift in the international conjuncture it should not be forgotten that it was the new democratically elected parties and governments in post-Yugoslavia that started dispatching their people to ethnic wars in the name of nationalist disintegration or nationalist re-integration. Ethnic nationalism was not something that came ‘organically’ and spontaneously to the masses, but had first to be promoted by intellectuals, especially cultural bureaucrats in the socialist republics of Slovenia and Serbia,\textsuperscript{40} and adopted by political bureaucrats in the power struggles for federation and hegemony of the League of Yugoslav Communists, and its republican branches. As Mušić’s analysis – mostly in the context of Serbia – clearly shows, nationalism seized the working classes later on and was connected to more severe economic dispossession.\textsuperscript{41}

4 From ‘Primitive Accumulation’ of Memory to ‘Accumulation by Dispossession’

Various critical researchers in the post-Yugoslav context have agreed on the horrific aspects of the transitional process: ethnic wars and rising inequalities were often cited as central features of the transition. Critical scholarship, however, did not agree on the prime movers and causes of the way the transition unfolded.\textsuperscript{42} Depending on their methodologies and political affiliations they would divide their theoretical labours according to two trajectories. The first theoretical approach focused on the analysis and critique of nationalist ideology, the instrumentalisation of media and state, and often called for the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{39} See Gowan’s analysis (Gowan 1999); for more on the Dayton treaty, see Živković 2015.
\item \textsuperscript{40} I presented some of my research findings in the last chapter of Kirn 2019, pp. 196–216.
\item \textsuperscript{41} For a fine study of strikes and the autonomous organisation of the working class in Serbia under late socialism, see Mušić 2021. Also, one of the important validated hypotheses of the book is that nationalism seized the masses fairly late, contrary to the conventional tropes of the 1990s.
\item \textsuperscript{42} For a detailed summary, ideologically positioned on the liberal-left, see Ramet 2005, pp. 54–76.
\end{itemize}
protection of human rights and minorities. Meanwhile, the second approach was focused mostly on the critique of the transition to capitalism, pointing to various degrees and forms of economic dispossession, the dismantling of the socialist welfare state, and the re-peripheralisation of large parts of former Yugoslavia that was only intensified in the European integration process.

This contribution aims to productively combine, following the Althusserian notion of ‘structural causality’, these two approaches. In order to fully understand the post-Yugoslav transition these two approaches cannot merely be integrated into their own self-fulfilling prophecies: the first approach returns to the methodological primacy of the state in all its excesses, where the main protagonist is the ethnically defined nation, while the second approach focuses on capital as the only agent of history that was always-already there, from socialism to neoliberalism, which determines and consigns (post-)Yugoslavia to a peripheral status within European capitalism. The nexus of nation-state and capital has been a dominant methodological tool and imaginary, while we can tease out the specificity of the break-up of Yugoslavia in the following way: the post-Yugoslav transition demonstrates that the ethnic wars were not caused primarily or ‘determined’ by neoliberal economic reforms and corporate interests. The whole shock-therapy and dismantling phenomenon actually took place much later in the 1990s. This means that the conjuncture of transition did not follow a simple formula: economic changes necessitated politico-legal, ideological and cultural changes. Rather, I suggest that we reverse the optic: in the earlier stage transitional societies were dominated by an ideologico-political instance. This means that society was guided and mobilised by democratically elected parties and the national governments with the utmost assistance of the media and cultural apparatus: instead of the old and emptied-out socialist slogan of brotherhood and unity, national unity reigned supreme across the post-Yugoslav space. Mobilising people for war, should that be required, was done in the name of one nation in one state, and did not follow any rational economic formula. Disintegration, break-up, wars, all had a major negative impact on the economies of the new countries.

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44 Močnik 2003; Veselinović et al. (eds.) 2011; Gajić and Popović (eds.) 2011; Bembić 2013; Podvršić 2018; Živković 2013.

45 ‘Shock therapy’ was in fact a war that legitimised shortages and austerity, while the real reforms and massive wave of privatisations unfolded later on. For example, even in Slovenia, the richest republic that avoided the war, a more gradual model of change identified with social-democratic compromise between work, state and capital took place (see Bembić 2013), which was only undermined upon its arrival into the European Union.
early 1990s were marked by extreme economic hardship, the illegal arms trade, war profiteering and clientelist networks that appropriated and managed the once socially-owned companies. From the perspective of national political-economy, the transition and the wars were not economically ‘rational’: the major companies lost their former markets and lines of economic cooperation, most of them were brought to their knees and eventually sold off cheaply or closed, while entire countries had to deal with high(er) unemployment and emigration due to the closing of factories, and at-times gradual, at-times abrupt restructuration processes.

This hellish transitional atmosphere operated through dialectical movements and the reversal, albeit temporary, of the primacy of instances, economic, politico-legal and ideological, and here one’s analysis benefits from borrowing Karl Marx’s concept of the ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ that he introduced in the very final chapters of the first volume of *Capital*.46 Tracing a set of historical (pre-)conditions that enabled the rise of the capitalist mode of production, Marx prompts us to think about the non-economic constraints that unleash extremely violent processes. Marx discusses a set of legal policies (e.g. the expropriation of communal land, the laws on beggars; dispossession of the commons; relations of debt), which were accompanied by state- and other forms of violence (e.g. as directed against women)47 and the history of colonialism/imperialism (e.g. the expansion of markets and the struggle to guarantee resources, military conquest).48 This contribution makes for a more complex take on the ‘origins’ of capitalism, which unravelled the logic of co-existence of diverse modes of exploitation and domination and opened up the path to the fundamental relation between free labour and capital in which the latter took its hold. A series of authors have used this conceptual framework outside the context of the primary/initial stage of capitalist ‘origins’ and have insisted on the recurring and renewed nature of the cycles of ‘primitive accumulation of capital’. Speaking of ‘accumulation by dispossession’49 in this way offers a powerful framework in which to understand enclosures and extraction,50 but also the brutal push for privatisation in the former East that took away the achievements of both socialism, and the struggles of the organised working class more broadly.51

49 De Angelis 2001; Harvey 2013.
50 Bonefeld 2011; Fraser 2016.
51 Perelman 2013.
In the actual analysis of the break-up of Yugoslavia, one should not confine oneself to observing the thinning of the layers of socialist onion, how workers were removed from the protections afforded by a socially regulated market of labour and more generally by the socialised means of reproduction.\(^{52}\) Rather, one needs to observe that the very first stage involved an openly vulgar and brutal power grab, where ideologico-political violence found itself translated into ethnic wars. I should like to provide a modest contribution that is usually understood within the framework of ‘ideology-critique’, but has a much more productive power and which I propose to read under the ‘accumulation of memory’ by the state. As has already been demonstrated by a series of Marxian thinkers, conservative ‘historical revisionism’\(^{53}\) had been intensifying throughout the 1980s, as manifested in academic and ideological discussions, while in the Yugoslav context it yielded strong material consequences in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Mnemonic wars and symbolic violence were waged against any symbols or imaginaries that stood in a direct relation to the recent past, be they partisan, Yugoslav and/or socialist. The post-Yugoslav symbolic and memorial landscape went through various forms of destruction, demonisation, disappearance and oblivion: physical destruction of partisan monuments and books,\(^{54}\) the renaming of streets and schools; the erasing of ideas that evoked the non-aligned, modernist, partisan, and socialist figures and times. It was these very symbolic means of violence, mediatised extensively, that opened a path to political, economic, and military conquest and ethnic cleansing of the (post-)Yugoslav territories. The very existence of those who failed to belong properly (by way of ethnic identity) to and comply with the newly imagined nation-states became imperilled. One nation in one state was the ultimate formula of ethnic wars and the political horizon of the new nation-states that tore down the multinational and federal structure of Yugoslavia.

The wars in the former Yugoslavia can be seen as the ultimate ‘expenditure’, a physical waste and ruination of emancipatory ideas connected to Yugoslavia, non-alignment, socialist self-management, gender and national equality; of (working) people that due to their location, beliefs or whatever resisted transformation into the ethnic subject; and also of the infrastructure, wealth and social fabric created, accumulated and socialised in the time of socialism. This process of dis-accumulation and popular impoverishment has ever since been producing an uninterrupted brain drain and flow of labour-power moving to the regions of the European core and beyond. Rather than a more conventional

\(^{52}\) See Hajdini (ed.) 2013.
\(^{53}\) Ghodsee 2014; Traverso 2017.
\(^{54}\) Lešaja 2012.
primitive accumulation of capital in the former East that progresses through change of ownership and dispossession of companies, state, land and public sectors, in post-Yugoslavia such ‘war capitalism’ entailed a huge amount of destruction and dis-accumulation of past social wealth and infrastructure of the self-managed society.

New ideological apparatuses and historians were very creative in the process of the ‘invention of national tradition’:\(^{55}\) travelling from Ancient Kingdoms (in North Macedonia it was the figure of Alexander the Great and the whole mnemonic project to remake the capital Skopje) to Kingdoms of the Middle Ages and also the more sinister rehabilitation of the fascists and local collaborationists of World War II. It was the defeated ghosts of World War II who were resurrected and started to feature in the heraldry and slogans of the new states. Local collaborationists were promoted as the only true patriots – Chetniks, Ustashe, Home Guards and others – and subject to a series of new monuments, books, exhibitions, series, songs, and became very much alive in these wars and throughout the transition.\(^{56}\) Also, in the countries that did not undergo ethnic wars (e.g. Slovenia, and now North Macedonia) the process was undoubtedly less brutal in terms of the ruination/destruction of infrastructure and people, but nevertheless it also weaponised feelings of national pride and ethnic hatred.

However, even in places that avoided direct war we cannot speak of any full-scale privatisation, neoliberal advancement and a weak state. Rather it was via the strengthening of the emerging state apparatus that relied on the former socialist-republican political framework that expropriation of working people and the primitive dis-accumulation of social capital was executed. Nation-states and their new governments implemented a double-bind process: on the one hand, robbing working people of their means of production and of their future in a general process of capitalist dispossession, while on the other hand conducting a process of ‘nationalist repossession’, taking care to curate new national realms of memory, museums, weaponising myths of glory and victimhood aimed at at-least ideologically empowering nations in the project of independence.

In Yugoslavia’s history of self-management, of pivotal importance was ‘social ownership’, a legal and social innovation of the Yugoslav communists that aimed to critique the political and economic monopoly imposed by the Soviet bureaucracy that diminished workers’ political capacity within the sphere of production. In order to achieve workers’ self-management the already nationalised means of production needed to be socialised (and managed by future

\(^{55}\) Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds.) 1983.

\(^{56}\) Pavlaković 2018; Kirn 2020 (see Chapter 4).
associations of producers). This is why the introduction of a new form of (non-) property or what today would be called ‘the commons’ was undertaken.\textsuperscript{57} On the journey back to capitalism this whole process of socialisation of the means of (re)production had to be reversed, and this is also one of the reasons why in the post-Yugoslav context the first step implied the introduction of ‘nationalisation’, a transfer of economic power back to the state that oversaw repossession, management and then redistribution among the previous factory and land-owners (the families of capitalists that had been expropriated, and the Church most notably). This process of transfer of economic power is often dubbed tycoonisation, crony capitalism, where management of the big companies was placed in the hands of the experts/managers who had close ties with the leading fraction of the political class. There were different certificate schemes, whereby the population received part of the social wealth, some of it was transferred to state funds, while the rest was given to workers that worked in the particular company (that was nationalised, and gradually privatised).\textsuperscript{58}

Needless to say the political representation and power of the workers, the self-management legacy and laws, were completely side-lined in this process, while the management in major companies, through their machinations, cheaply bought-up workers’ shares, and in this way amassed personal wealth, or took over, with or without state funds, the ownership of these companies. In Slovenia the process of ‘wild’ privatisation received media attention throughout 1990s and was subject to a form of political control led by the \textit{Agency for Revision of Property Transformation of Companies}. Many of these cases were not brought to court, but the numbers speak for themselves: in 2004, the last report of the agency concluded that more than 1,000 cases were recognised, and compensated (over the course of the years up to 2020) to the sum of 1.4 billion Euros. The main form of mismanagement in dealing with the property changes was found in instances of unfounded cancellation of claims and unfair distribution of profits that used intermediary companies, all of which point clearly to the injustice done to workers.\textsuperscript{59}

At least in parts of the former Yugoslavia, and most notably in Slovenia, nationalisation and the enabling of a layer of domestic tycoons with economic power was done from the perspective of creating a ‘national bourgeoisie’\textsuperscript{60} that would defend the national interests, and a degree of economic autonomy

\textsuperscript{57} I discuss the paradox of this form of non-property in Chapter 6 of my book \textit{Partisan Ruptures} (Kirn 2019), while examining the emergence and dominance of the bank-manager – local bureaucrat class in detail in Chapters 6 and 12.

\textsuperscript{58} Bohinc and Milković 1993.

\textsuperscript{59} For details on the numbers, see Zupan 2021, pp. 69–71.

\textsuperscript{60} Močnik 2010; Podvršič 2018.
that could safeguard a class compromise between labour and capital.\textsuperscript{61} This early transitional form and compromise was dissolved everywhere in the 2000s, when the requirements of the European Union leadership toward EU candidate-members involved the prerequisite of further privatisation, which only intensified after the crisis of 2008–10. With a new wave of privatisations that opened a path to global capital, the already weakened compromise openly robbed working people of their material base, and hence of the material conditions for their alleged ‘national pride’. But the more the transitional elites sold off companies and opened up to ‘direct foreign investment’, the louder they became in matters of the defence of the national interest and true patriotism. It was precisely at the time and in the context of the nation’s assets being subject to market-speculation and sold on the global market that the nationalisation of memory, and the instrumentalisation and at times even mythological \textit{speculation with the past} played its role. New nation-states and their ethnically cleansed and religiously unified communities could now focus their speculations on inventing a glorious past and crying over their abiding victimhood, what I have elsewhere called the ‘nationalist repossessing of memory’\textsuperscript{62} and has been a recurring feature on the long road of ‘transition’. We now come full circle: if the initial stages of the transition to capitalism were marked by vulgar ethnic wars, clientelist nationalisation, conservative historical revisionism and the emergence of nationalist state apparatuses, the primacy of the capitalist economy from the late 1990s onwards returned things back to capitalist business as usual, that regulated, through private initiative or more-organised European intervention, privatisation and austerity policies that cemented the status of the former socialist countries on the periphery. Capitalist economy becomes the primary mover of the processes of privatisation and foreign investments, exacerbating the debt-relation and the more brutal dismantling of (socialist) welfare infrastructures.

\textbf{5 \quad In Conclusion: Affirming the Unfinished Project of Yugoslavia and the Awakening of the (Partisan) Left in the Balkans}

The aim of the central hypothesis of this contribution has been to re-orient the caesura of 1989, both to 1991 as the truth and the historical failure of the democratic promise of the post-socialist transition, as well as situating the specific formation of post-socialism in the time of market reforms in the mid-1960s.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Bembić 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Kirn 2020, pp. 2–14.
\end{itemize}
It was here that the veritable political-economic post-socialist vision of the future and the fracture of Yugoslav self-management and the political system began. The latter already announced the break-up of Yugoslavia, the autonomisation of republican leaderships and the proto-capitalist transition that was to enter a much more intense phase following independence. In the light of thirty years of independence, lack of vision and political investment both yesterday and today, and the eternal return of post-Yugoslav Trumps, there is really not much to celebrate. The structural sense of deep economic and social crisis that kicked in throughout the Western world following the financial crisis of 2008 ended for good any expectation of the neoliberal utopia of 1989; however, in the post-Yugoslav context, it can be claimed that from the period of the late and turbulent 1980s the crisis never really ceased. Evidently, the period of ethnic wars stands as the major caesura, but increasing economic dispossession, increasingly comprador political elites, the constant migration of young, skilled and unskilled workers to Europe and beyond, the dismantling of welfare institutions, social and environmental protections, all this came at a time when the political Left was in a state of complete disarray and defeat. The political projects of socialism and Yugoslavia were also symbolically defeated, as mentioned above, either demonised, or ‘at best’ yearned for in a nostalgic fashion – commodifying memory in the master-signifier, Tito.

However, despite all odds and in tough circumstances, the last decade has seen an impressive body of critical theory, political initiatives and even Left parties, art collectives and works that have been engaged in alternative political imaginaries, that have been resurrecting the self-management, antifascist and revolutionary struggles of the past and present. As Stojaković and Štiks showed, we can speak of a resurgence of the Left in the Balkans despite all the shortcomings from 2011 onwards.63 In the winter of 2011–12 we saw an array of uprisings against the corrupt leaders and austerity policies that followed the Troika’s shock therapy (a wave of uprisings in Maribor and Ljubljana); there were also uprisings that united various segments of the population across the ethnic divides in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Tuzla – Sarajevo – Banja Luka); recurring student blockades and university occupations (Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana); a re-imagining and practising of workers’ solidarity, with or without trade unions (take-overs of plants and companies, general strikes against austerity); an emergence of urban initiatives that fought for the commons and the right to the city (Pravo na grad, Zagreb; Ne davimo Beograd); an environmental movement that protects water/rivers (directed at huge hydroplant projects and the pollution of groundwater; the case of the Rio Tinto company being

63 Stojaković and Štiks 2021.
kicked out of Serbia); and finally, the first openly leftist parties that embraced a socialist vision and entered parliament(s). Most of these initiatives were highly critical of the capitalist transitional fairy tale and the privatisation(s) that was supposed to bring affluence and democracy. Furthermore, they – in a major way – aimed to protect what had already been achieved during socialism, focusing especially on the defence of workers’ rights, public goods, infrastructures and services (health, education, housing). Needless to say much of the popular energy and demands of the initial uprisings were catalysed within a more moralistic critique, aiming for a more human and just capitalism that simply requires stricter respect for the rule of law. However, there were also some stronger political effects that took hold in the first major revindication of the socialist future, new political parties that made it into parliament (Levica, in Slovenia) or local municipalities (Možemo, in Zagreb; Moramo in Belgrade). In the last few years, embracing socialism, Tito and Yugoslavia has ceased being simply a nostalgic affair on the part of the older sections of the population – despite objectively and for a majority of the population, socialism having guaranteed more dignified and better conditions of work and reproduction –; now it presents a reinvigorated socialist horizon that can prove a genuine source of alternatives for new generations. The latter, growing up in the newly-independent states, were unburdened by the totalitarian ghosts and demonisation of socialism, and are now starting to organise grassroots politics and enter upon the political stage.

This is not to say that the thinking of memory and the past is merely a cultural praxis that should be separated from political and economic struggles. We have known for a long time that mobilising revolutionary resources and recovering the ‘tradition of the oppressed’ is an important aspect of our envisaging a post-capitalist society, of the very anticapitalist fight. And there are many people, artistic groups, engaged scholars, and political initiatives from the post-Yugoslav context that take seriously the mobilisation of the resources of the past, be it the partisan, non-aligned or self-managed past, which has become an important anchor for intervention into present struggles. Importantly and beyond the cultivation of defeat, the left and oppressed need to reconstruct and cultivate their histories, also through their smaller arsenal of victories. To resurrect figures of the past, to accumulate and reload them politically, is not to preserve their memory in aspic or idealise them in marble, but make them our – partisan – contemporaries, imaginary partners in constructing a new socialist world. This is where the picture of last thirty years – pessimism of the intellect – becomes less grim and invites us to engage again in the project of

64 Benjamin 1968; Traverso 2017.
radical transformation. Since we cannot ignore the consequences of transition and the hard reality of the new nation-states, it would be extremely unwise to deliver a partisan call-to-arms to the forests of the Balkans, or to merely think in terms of a repetition of Tito and Yugoslavia, to restore past glory and ‘make this country great again’. What one can do, however, is to push for strategic alliances of urban and ecological struggles that have been springing up in the past decade and to connect them to the task of establishing new Left parties on the one hand, and on the other to reflect on how to integrate part of the legacy of workers’ self-management into intersectional partisan struggles that already run through and connect various sections and groups of the oppressed. This could be less of a call to the past than a way to organise struggle in our own contexts, to address the political disenfranchisement of the various precarious workers and workers from the reproductive sphere.

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