

Social and Cultural Capital in Serbia

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Centre for Empirical Cultural Studies of South-East Europe

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SOCIAL CLASSIFICATIONS IN SERBIA TODAY BETWEEN MORALITY AND POLITICS

STUDYING SOCIAL CLASSIFICATIONS

The study of classification systems social actors use when interpreting social reality and organizing communal life has a long history in sociology. Durkheim's studies of "primitive classification", arguing that patterns of categorization reflect the structure of social groups and reveal the logic of relations within them, stand at its beginning (Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Durkheim 1965).

With his book *Distinction* (1979), Pierre Bourdieu refocused academic attention on the place of classification systems in the constitution of social reality. The Bourdieuan view of society rests on a number of assumptions: society is differentiated along several lines – class, gender, geographic, religious, generational, etc., hence social divisions and hierarchies are multi-dimensional; relations between social groups, as well as between individuals belonging to them, are always relations of power; social relations are conflict-ridden at their core; social struggles are transferred from the space of objective relations between positions taken by individuals and groups into symbolic space, where "magical boundaries" between groups are drawn and their hierarchy established in ways, and through deployment of resources, specific for this particular space; a manifestation of symbolic struggles is precisely *classification struggles*. These involve, on one hand, efforts by collective and individual agents to fight out a higher relative value of the capital they themselves possess, and on the other, conflicts over which criteria of evaluation and ranking of people, capitals, and practices will be sovereign, that is, who (or what) will be established as *the* measure of things social. Contest over the classification system to be adopted in a society, or over the "definition of the legitimate principles of hierarchization" (Bourdieu 1979: 362), are part and parcel of ongoing social struggles. In Bourdieu's perspective, even class

struggle is subsumed under the more general category of struggles for classification, or for the very right to classify.

Bourdieu distinguishes two types of classification struggles. The first, taking place within daily life, proceed spontaneously and without a plan, and generally take a rather crude and personalized form, as quarrels, fights, incidents. They feature the language of insult – curses, gossip, ridicule. The second type of struggles unfold in a deliberate, premeditated fashion, in a public arena and in a more or less institutionalized framework. The protagonists articulate their objectives in a polished, formalized language which indicates that in this case the objective is more generalized – it is to impose a certain way of looking at social reality and of projecting desirable constructions of the latter (Bourdieu 1987: 159–160). A major stake in this type of struggles is the monopoly of official, authorized, and therefore legitimate naming and classifying. Individual and collective agents wielding this right control the “production of common sense” and are in a position to “impose as legitimate those principles of constructing social reality that best suit their social being” (Bourdieu 1997: 223). For this reason, the political field becomes the prime battleground for imposing the “dominant principle of domination”, that is, for installing a particular resource as the most highly valued.

Bourdieu does not presume that the perception, appreciation, evaluation and ranking of others, of their tastes, attitudes, and practices may stem from a normative framework. In his approach, moral principles figure neither as independent supports for social agents constructing their strategies of distinction, nor as stakes in classification struggles. In Bourdieuan terms, “morality” appears in two equally truncated forms. One, as a particularist “morality of interest” of a class or social stratum – an aspiration to legitimize the possession of the specific resource which is the distinctive advantage of that class (“necessity turned virtue”). And two, as the specific “interest of morality”, i.e. as part of the discursive practice of the “ascending petty bourgeoisie” (office clerks, middle-range managers) who, lacking substantial economic or cultural capital, seek to build their symbolic identity and justify status strivings through moral asceticism.

An earlier study of strategies of distinction in post-2000 Serbia (Spasić 2006a), based on interview data collected in 2001/02, suggested that in contemporary Serbian society *morality* plays a prominent role in self-identification, strategies of presentation, definition of Others, and classifications. This belied Bourdieuan insistence on cultural distinction or material wealth as primary bases of symbolic capital and boundary-making, but confirmed the main thrust of another well-known study in social classification – Michèle Lamont’s *Money, Morals, and Manners* (1992). In the Serbian case, however, some additional factors have intervened. Such enhanced “moralizing”

could partly be explained by radical structural transformation and sudden shifts in patterns of social reproduction, which forced ordinary people, in the absence of stable objective evaluative references, to found interpretations of a changed social reality on ethics. The second reason was found in specific political circumstances, such as the nature of Milošević's regime, wars, international isolation and economic sanctions, that resulted in a devaluation of previously held resources, particularly economic and cultural. For many citizens of Serbia personal moral integrity became a resource in the genuine sense of the word – something they sought to preserve, build up, invest in and make sacrifices for, and, not least, something they could control. Thus thanks to specific socioeconomic and political conditions, morality was upgraded into a major organizing principle of identity processes and strategies of distinction.

In the past ten years no research of this kind has been conducted. We decided to use the eight focus group interviews to identify discourses of status differentiation existing in Serbia today, gauge the degree of their clarity and consistence, reconstruct ways in which our participants saw, valued, and ranked themselves and others, as well as the criteria they used in this process. We started from the assumption that the existing discourses are shaped, on one hand, by individual and collective representations of the actual distribution of important resources in the current restructuring of Serbian society and, on the other, by certain moral principles. Hence our two main objectives: first, to analyze classification systems springing up in focus group discussions for the perceptions of the newly emerging structure of social relations; and second, to map normative reference points used in building representations of social reality. These objectives called for two competing but not mutually exclusive theoretical instruments – one is Bourdieu's sociology, whose aspects relevant for our topic have already been presented, and the other is Boltanski's sociology of critical capacity, and in particular the theoretical model of the "economies of worth" he developed with Laurent Thévenot.

For Bourdieu, as we have seen, classifications reflect agents' struggles over symbolic capital, i.e. for the recognition of value of what they "have" and, therefore, what they "are". Consequently, in a society there are as many competing criteria of worth and principles of hierarchizing people, objects, and practices as there are social groups. Visibility, "strength" and legitimacy of each system of classification depends on the "strength" of the social group concerned, i.e. on the position it occupies in the structure of society and its capacity to maintain or improve this position. Since in this perspective orders of value are a stake and result of struggles for symbolic and real power, they are mutually exclusive and do not allow for agreement among actors on which value ought to be dominant.

The sociology of Luc Boltanski (1990) arose precisely in opposition to Bourdieu, attempting to address the latter's shortcomings. Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) model of the economies of worth is based on the observation that there are several "orders of worth" actors rely on and refer to in particular situations. Most frequently, these are situations of confrontation and clash of opinions, which break the routine flow of activities and induce heightened reflexivity. In such moments actors activate the appropriate idea of "worth" and the corresponding principle of qualifying people and objects, in order to grasp what is going on (i.e. the situation they are involved in at the moment) from the perspective of what should be going on (the "typical situation", in Boltanski's terminology). The aim is to find a solution to the dispute and to reach agreement, following predefined rules and principles of just qualification valid for the "typical situation".

This principle presupposes, then, that orders of value, organized around a particular conception of justice, act as normative references of action. They guide actors to follow a conception of worth in their actions, and to appreciate the people involved in a situation from the aspect of "morality", that is, on the basis of how much they embody a given worth, rather than on the basis of their social background, social position, or power. Similarly, it is presumed that the opinions and discourse of social actors when criticizing other people's views and defending their own are shaped by moral principles and a sense of justice, universalizable by definition, rather than particular interests. "Worth" is thus defined as "the way one expresses, embodies, understands, or represents other people (according to modalities that depend on the world under consideration). Worth is thus associated with a capacity for expression in general terms" (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 132).

For Boltanski and Thévenot, actors possess universal capacity for generalization and they manifest it most clearly when they are urged to judge and justify their appreciation of the relative worth of people and objects. In such situations they build their moral position and develop arguments for justification within the existing normative models or *polities*, theoretical modelizations of normative frameworks derived from a set of classical works in political philosophy. Initially (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]), six polities and their corresponding worths were described: the inspired polity, whose constitutive worth is *grace*; domestic polity (*respect*), polity of fame (*reputation*), civic (*collective interest*), market (*price*), and industrial polity (*productivity, efficiency*). In a later work (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999) the emergence of the seventh one is announced – the "polity by project", in which *communication* and *networking* are promoted as new kinds of worth.

Boltanski and Thévenot argue that this philosophical heritage has become an integral part of competences of social actors. It is activated, when necessary, in the form of critical competence which always includes reference to a particular conception of the good. In addition, premises of these theoretical constructions of justice have been translated into “political forms of worth” and built into institutions and apparatuses, which provide real-world support to the actors’ competences.

Contrary to Bourdieu’s approach, the economies of worth model assumes readiness and ability of actors, when engaging in debate with others, to find a solution by reaching consensus about the value that will serve as the measure of worth of people involved, and to subject the attribution of value to the imperative of justification. Underlying this model is the view that actors in so-called “critical moments”, seeking agreement, rise above the constraint of momentary circumstances, as well as above the necessities that otherwise shape their life paths. Agreements that actors reach at such moments are, thus, legitimate – because they may be justified, and because they are universal, i.e. they rest on arguments and normative models that are part of common knowledge, familiar to all, and that all without exception may refer to. In other words, in this perspective agreements are taken seriously, as a confirmation that not all social relations may be discredited as masked relations of power or resulting from pursuit of class interests.¹

CLASSIFICATION WORK IN PRACTICE

Confronting our data, we first took up Bourdieuan “classification struggles” model, complemented with Lamont’s “boundary work”, to examine the ways in which lines separating social groups are drawn in today’s Serbia – what these boundaries are based on, how rigid they are; where our participants place themselves; and who is seen as the opponent, as the one “unlike us”, the “Other”.

The discussions provided a picture whose basic outline was remarkably consistent across focus groups. Its most salient common features concerned the types of social groups being rejected or accepted; how these classifications were justified; and, finally, the connection of social classifications with the assessment of the actual condition of Serbian society.

First, in terms of the negatively defined category of people – or social “Others” – the single most often cited group was *politicians*: in virtually every discussion, if any

1 In this acknowledgement of a specific normative „surplus“ in human social life, irreducible to relations of power, Boltanski’s position converges with some other recent approaches such as Alexander’s (2006, 2007) culturalist take on social inequalities, and Dubet’s (2009) treatment of discourses of justice deployed by ordinary people. These studies have also inspired the present analysis.

social group was explicitly named as “Others”, it was this one. The terms used to describe politicians were rather extreme: they were said to be “parasites”, “spreading like cancer”, “the ones who’ve destroyed this country” and “inhumane”, who “lack morality” and “don’t have a gram of soul”.

The next, less often mentioned negative group was *tycoons*, followed by *showbiz stars* and *participants in TV reality shows*. In some individual cases, “Others” were defined by ideological criteria: extreme rightists, fascists, religious fundamentalists.

What is most striking at a general level, however, was that in drawing boundaries between social groups, and in their positive or negative evaluation, objective social criteria in the narrow sense were very rarely invoked, while criteria of morality and personal traits by far predominated. While Bourdieu’s or Lamont’s research lead us to expect that one’s fellows will be viewed primarily, or at least to a significant degree, through some objective characteristics that group them in a certain way – in Bourdieuan terms, through their distinctive capitals – in our data judgment by individual, psychological and subjective criteria prevailed, while appreciation itself was expressed mainly in a moral vocabulary. Thus people who are rejected (“the ones I’d never socialize with” or, if possible, not even “cooperate with”) were described as ruthless, mean, selfish, fickle and exploitive.²

“The only type I can’t accept are hypocrites, who say one thing, and think something else, who don’t keep their word, who want to take advantage of me instead of looking at me as their friend.” (sales manager, M, 29, Novi Sad)

“As for me, I’ve broken up many friendships with brutes, with unprincipled people, with those who today tell you one thing, and tomorrow do another.” (dentistry intern, F, Niš)

“I’d never socialize with people lacking morality, who don’t have face, liars. “ (kindergarten teacher, F, 27, Novi Pazar)

“I don’t like people who are vulgar, insolent, who are only thinking how to take advantage of you. Who complain all the time.” (cleaner, F, 49, Novi Sad)

² Interestingly, in the discussions, the phrase heard most often and in a variety of discursive contexts, was „trampling upon people“. It cropped up either as „I refuse to trample on other people“ or in the form „they“ – some kind of rejected Others – „trample upon people“ (and therefore I can’t be friends with them). Apparently, this phrase summarizes some kind of reality of living in Serbia today, at least in people’s subjective experience.

Types of people appreciated positively, that is, “my kind of folks”, were described in similarly unsociological and apolitical terms, as the reverse image of the former: honesty and high moral standards were dominant, followed by personal warmth and amiability. Some of the criteria cited were: similar outlooks (“an approach to life like mine”); getting along well (“mutual tolerance”, “good understanding”), positive energy (“people who don’t talk about problems all the time”, “people I can have fun with”); consistency (“people who keep their promises”, “those that don’t change their mind overnight”), loyalty (“who won’t let me down”, “true friends”, “who is honest to me”), personal integrity (“people who are good at their jobs, whatever it is”, “people who are dedicated to something”, “people who build themselves consciously”).

Moreover, it was not just that the Bourdieuan-Lamontian sociological criteria of classification were not dominant, but their relevance was explicitly *denied*: in most focus groups participants stressed that they *did not* select members of their social circle by financial standing, occupation, education, ethnicity, social background, or place of origin.³

“I can always find something, in any person. Whatever the education, school, material status, I can always socialize with people I feel good with. People who like to go out, to the cinema, to the theatre, walking in nature, who like chatting...” (cleaner, F, 49, Novi Sad)

“It doesn’t matter which car they drive, such things don’t matter. What matters is what kind of person it is, that it’s a normal person.” (unemployed technology engineer, M, 40, Novi Sad)

“I don’t divide people in such ways. Here we are Serbs and Bosniaks, Muslims and Orthodox... [What is important is] music, movies, similar interests, similar taste, which doesn’t mean we must have the same level of education.” (journalist, M, 41, Novi Pazar)

“...Interesting, capable of communication, not people who don’t know how to listen to others. Other things don’t matter – profession, status, whatever, that isn’t important to me.” (owner of a small private firm, BA philosopher, M, 48, Belgrade)

³ This is not to say they didn’t see such divisions as existing in the real social world, only that this sort of boundary-making was not part of their self-identity and their strategies of distinction.

In discussing these data, a reservation is in order. When comparing our findings with those of previous studies of social boundary work, methodological differences should not be lost sight of.⁴

It was only in exceptional cases that participants gave social characteristics as criteria to appreciate others and judge their desirability for friendship and professional cooperation. While one (and only one) participant cited religious affiliation as important, several mentioned “education”:

“I wouldn’t socialize with the newly-composed types [novokomponovanim]. They are uneducated “. (meat seller in a large supermarket chain, M, 49, Belgrade)

“I like to socialize with educated, decent, well-mannered, hardworking people”. (retired highschool teacher, F, 60, Niš)

Attitudes interpretable as cultural distinction emerged in a handful of other instances as well, e.g. in the statement of a young economist that the people he feels closest to are “independent intellectuals”, or in the form of “urban distinction” – a boundary drawn between “us, the Belgraders”, and “them, the newcomers/refugees/peasants”:

“In Belgrade, all these people who have arrived – my parents also came from the country – none of them has adapted to Belgrade. They all try to impose their mentality. And their lack of culture. This is horrible. I was born in Belgrade, this is my town. All those people, from Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, you name it. But these guys from the province, that’s horror.” (butcher, M, 37, Belgrade)

Perhaps curiously, urbanity as a classifying criterion arose only in Belgrade.⁵

Amongst these few examples of recourse to more strictly sociological principles of classification, we see that they come by no means exclusively from the strata one would expect:

- 4 While Bourdieu and Lamont based their conclusions on individual interviews, where interaction takes place between researcher and interviewee alone, we conducted focus groups, in which the pressure towards presenting socially desirable and morally „pure“ opinions tends to be stronger. When facing other people, whose background one is mostly unfamiliar with, a properly socialized and interactionally competent participant will prefer to skip delicate issues that might hurt the others present and refrain from publicly taking reproachable positions.
- 5 In contrast with a previous study (Spasić 2006b), this kind of boundary was virtually absent in Novi Sad, either as Novi Sad urban distinction or as the more general Vojvodinian regional distinction against „newcomers“ [dodoši]. This is almost certainly related to the fact that both Novi Sad focus groups included several obviously „newcomer“ participants, which made it very difficult for original Vojvodinians to express this sort of distinction, even if they wished to. Here we have a telling example of Goffmanian interactive constraint.

there are professors, but also butchers. Participants with the highest cultural capital and the most impeccable urban pedigree carefully abstained from giving such statements and were generally among the strongest promoters of the view that “such things do not matter”.

In light of the prevalently a-sociological character of the process of qualifying others, perhaps even the singling out of the only two recognizable social groups, with a place in the social space and definite social roles – “politicians” and “tycoons” – could be disputed as a purely social classification. These identification may as well be interpreted, at least in part, as a kind of *metaphorical signifier* not so much for concrete social groups, defined by their specific capitals, as for certain kinds of *practices* which are routinely judged negatively from a moral point of view and which, for a number of reasons, have come to “stick” to these two social groups more than any other.

Judging solely by what people said it was virtually impossible to identify positions in social space from which participants voiced their criticisms of the state, government, oligarchy, etc., so that it is hard to speak of socially-generated and -articulated discursive strategies. Rather, critique was coming from a moral position, whose class correlative is difficult to establish, and which at the same time relied on several ethical supports.

As a matter of fact, in our data no “classification struggles” in Bourdieu’s sense could be found: there was no direct clash between bearers of different capitals over the valuations of these capitals, with each side promoting a higher price for one’s own. When conflicting views of Serbian society did occur, it was in a rather individualized fashion: if we simplify a bit, it pitted “pessimists” against “optimists”, “the complainers” against “the positives”. Actors of these conflicts did not advance as members of some definite social categories, nor could their discourses be derived from their social positions, i.e. capitals they possessed.

WHAT IS “SUCCESS”?

This leads us to the next recurrent feature of discourses of social classification in our focus groups, and this is the connection of description of the social “Other” with the descriptions of social *success* in today’s Serbia. Relatively unexpectedly, or at least, in a marked contrast to available analyses of Western societies, negative qualifications of social types – people one would never choose to spend time with – are virtually the same as the portrait of those who have “made it”, who are “well-off” in present-day Serbia; and their faulty practices, by which these undesired fellow citizens are recognized, equal the answer to the question of “what is valued in Serbia today”.

For the inauguration of such “wrong” values the participants blame the state, system, politicians, the media. They challenge radically what they see as the pervasive

principles of hierarchization in today's Serbia. Normative projections of how society should be additionally confirm the conclusion that, for our participants, the actually operating value scale is not legitimate. It could be put even more sharply: this scale is seen as exactly the opposite of the normative one, like when people say: "What once used to be shameful is nowadays valued" or "It would be easy to put this society in order – just turn everything upside down".

Moreover, success as such becomes all but illegitimate: instead of being a goal that is "normally", self-understandably pursued, almost all kinds of success in life appeared in our discussions morally suspect: be it lots of money, an ambitious professional career, taking up public office, being in a decision-making position, possessing power of any kind, fame (except for sportspeople), or membership in elite social circles. Being rich was especially the target of contemptuous rejection. Very differently from what researchers found in other countries, especially the USA (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Aksartova 2002), the ability to make money was emphatically *not* used as a measure of an individual's integrity and personal strength. Earning a lot of money is here dubious almost in principle, and a kind of modesty – not wanting "too much", being content with "what is enough" – is extolled as value and virtue, and one which does not even have to justify itself. The more the participants stressed how much "money" is what is valued in current Serbian society – "Nowadays, it's bucks first, God is second, mother and father third", as a middle-aged citizen of Novi Pazar put it – the more they also stressed how wrong that is.

We see such an attitude in, for instance, participants' insistence that they personally do not strive for a lot of money, just a "minimum" sufficient for "a decent, normal life":

"With the 24000 dinars I earn, plus some extras, I live fine. All I need is for my fiancée to get a job, that we make a family, have a baby, and to have enough to give this baby to eat, drink, and what to put on. That's enough for me." (sales manager in a small private firm, M, 29, Novi Sad)

"Just a little is necessary for happiness." (museum guard, M, 43, Novi Sad)

"To have a healthy family, that is the basis of everything. You must first be content with yourself, your family, and then you can go on. And you should surround yourself with normal people, spend time with them. ... To go out with friends, go for a drink on weekends. Such things have no price." (salesman, M, 49, Belgrade)

"One doesn't need money to be happy. There is always some choice." (office worker, F, 34, Novi Sad)

Then, in denouncing others who make money over a certain “line” which is considered reasonable or justified:

“Nowadays, those who make more than their family needs are kings. ... I feel sick when I see how much money, how many square meters [in real estate] some people have grabbed. They simply cannot be honest.” (retired educationalist, F, 70, Nis)

Finally, it is often pointed out that lots of money doesn’t really bring happiness but only worries:

“Every time he sits in his big car and puts the key in, he probably thinks, is it going to explode? so I probably wouldn’t say he lives well really” (BA anthropologist, copywriter, F, 33, Belgrade)

“If you ask me, I think those with lots of money, they aren’t happy either. They have tons of worries, to protect all this huge money that they’ve got.” (retired highschool teacher, F, 60, Nis)

“There are people who should be happy, yet they aren’t. They have all they need and still they’re not satisfied. Probably the more one has, the more dissatisfied he is.” (cleaner, Novi Sad)

If some kind of success was allowed, this was mainly the private, profoundly personal and familial “success” in the sense of raising healthy kids, having a good marriage, or a lot of true friends. This kind of accomplishment did not include financial affluence and was generally formulated as something achieved *against* the material side of life. In short, success meant: to survive “these times” while preserving one’s moral and psychological integrity.

POLITICS AS AN IMPASSE

The striking gap between the values deemed legitimate and those seen as prevalent in society gives rise to what we may term “the paradox of social action” in today’s Serbia. This is the idea, often put forward in the discussions, that “people”, as individual persons, are still good and moral and know the right values, but that as soon as they get out of their little private worlds – as soon basically as they begin acting as social agents within social space – through a sort of magical transformation they

start behaving differently. Sometimes, this shift was accounted for in individualist and rather resigned terms, as people themselves changing inexplicably; more often, the explanation was collectivist and institutional: it is the circumstances that force them to behave in a wrong way.

In all focus groups, when asked what is valued the most in our society, participants were quick to point out that they themselves, their families and friends, and generally people they spend time with still hold “the right values”; *yet*, in society at large dominates their opposite, all the “wrong values” and shameful conducts. (Where exactly is this “society” then, one is tempted to ask?) Similarly, all participants stressed that they raised (or planned to raise, or always would) their children in such a way as to instill in them respect for the “right values” (honesty, knowledge, hard work) – *although* “such things do not pay off nowadays” and contrast with messages coming from other socializing influences (media, peer groups, “the street”, general social environment).

“I think there is a discrepancy between theory and practice: in theory, people accept positive values, but I’m not sure how much they apply them in daily life. ... There are creative people here, who want to do something, but very often they find themselves hemmed in, and are forced, to utilize some dirty ways to achieve their goals, even if they personally wouldn’t.”
(architect, PhD student in the USA, M 37, Niš)

“There are very few people here who have succeeded, and those who have, they did it only up to a certain point, and then they stopped, turned to that other side, started some shady dealings. Of the people I know, some initially succeeded following what would also be my recipee, but then continued in the way I’d never do.” (dentistry intern, F, Niš)

“I think that the people, as people, still have the feeling for certain values. But the conditions we live in, the way politicians in power behave, all this has driven people to lose the feeling for such genuine human values.”
(NGO activist, M, 55, Novi Pazar)

This paradox is at times so strongly formulated that it comes close to a sense of social blockade. It has significant implications for the action potentials of Serbian society.⁶ If it is not possible to act at all without sinking into morally dubious conduct, will one choose to act in the first place? If leaving the narrow confines of family and friendly circles implies betraying what one holds dear, isn’t a thorough passivization

6 A very similar finding has been made by other researchers, e.g. Greenberg (2011), Golubović and Jarić (2010), Mihailović et al. (2010).

of citizens an inevitable result? This fits well with the delegitimization of financial and other kinds of worldly success, discussed above; and also with the illegitimacy of political action, taken up in the next section.

Let us first note that, rather unexpectedly, the participants spontaneously divided the period of recent Serbian history at the year 1990 rather than 2000: frequent and routine references to “these twenty years” imply that 1990 is still treated as *the* rupture between the old and the new. And the two-decade period was presented as a more or less unbroken succession of troubles, crises, impoverishment and systemic failures. Only exceptionally⁷ the year 2000 was identified as the beginning of something new. This is quite indicative of the perceptions of the process of “transition” in Serbia thus far. It means that in spite of all the years and so many intervening events, including the hope-inspiring removal of Slobodan Milošević from power in 2000, the notion of “collapse” long noted by students of Serbian society that divides a pre-1990 normalcy from post-1990 abnormalcy is still very much alive.⁸ Furthermore, this telling periodization confirms that “5 October” – the symbol of an unlikely democratic victory of a maturing civil society – never managed to get engraved in collective political memory, mainly due to the mistakes of political elites, and in this way a potentially beneficial democratic capital was forsaken.⁹ The democracy that was supposedly ushered in 2000 was not described in very flattering terms by our respondents: “some things have arrived too suddenly”, we “weren’t mature enough for democracy”, this is just “would-be democracy” or “a distorted picture of democracy”, etc. Such bleak colors, combined with the continuous significance of the year 1990 as the breaking point, suggest one more thing: that real socialism from the period of SFRY remains the only available articulate model of a normal, livable society. It is by now clearly felt to be gone forever, and no respondent really recommended its resuscitation. Yet no other model has emerged in the meantime as something to be realistically fought for. Ideals and utopias may be fantasized about, but they are treated as just that – ideals and utopias far removed from real life.

This predominantly negative judgment of Serbia’s democratic transition can be broadened into an equally negative picture of politics as such. As a specific social sphere and specialized activity, politics as it is in today’s Serbia is thoroughly discredited. It is not perceived as a way to bring about change, to get out of the current situation, almost universally portrayed as extremely bad, even unbearable. Politics is not the place to struggle for the desirable and desired social arrangements.

7 Quite precisely: three times in all.

8 In Jansen (2005) post-1990 abnormalcy is called “the situation”, and in Simić (2009) “the Fall”. The lost and longed for normalcy is also stressed by Greenberg (2011).

9 This was ruefully predicted already in Golubović, Spasić and Pavićević (2003).

First of all, the regular institutional agents in the political field – professional politicians, parties, labor unions – are described in very negative terms, as essentially *unpolitical* actors, focused on pursuing their corporate or naked personal interest, especially of a lucrative kind. They are not seen as representatives of genuine social groups, collective values, or even ideological positions.

“Parties function as interest groups, as criminal syndicates” (psychologist, M, 30, Niš)

“If I saw I can change society through a party, I’d join it. But I don’t.” (journalist, M, 45, Novi Pazar)

Actually, in all the focus groups the short and angry phrase “they’re all the same” was heard, meaning that ostensibly different parties and politicians, although playing the game of mutual distinction, are at heart identical, since they share the same interests, against ordinary people. “They fight when we’re looking at them, they act it out like in a theater, but afterwards they go for a drink and have a good time together, because they are really buddies”, several participants said. A story told by one participant summarizes what many think, expressing in a nutshell this stance of profound alienation from professional politics:

“Recently Velja Ilić and Nenad Čanak [two prominent politicians from the opposite ends of the political spectrum] were guests in a TV talk show, quarrelling about ‘values’. Commenting on this program, Gorčin Stojanović [a well known theater and movie director] was asked, Are these the so-called ‘two Serbias’, one traditional, the other pro-European? He replied, No, they are one Serbia, you and I are another”. (journalist, M, 30, Novi Sad)

Focus group participants never articulated their critical positions in political terms: they used moral ones instead. Political alternatives were not put forward as ways out of the current situation; recognizably political goals were not set as something the society (or at least, the social group a given participant is identifying with) should aspire to. Ironically, it was even claimed that politics was better in times of the single-party, real socialist regime:

“Back then, there were criteria, there were programs, there were values that were agreed upon to be pursued. What is nowadays called politics, has nothing to do with what real politics is about”. (NGO activist, M, 55, Novi Pazar)

Finally, when some kind of oppositional action, or action towards social change, is envisaged at all, it has a strangely apolitical character. It is either purely individual (each of us should work on our personal growth, and then perhaps something will eventually come out of it¹⁰), or, when collective, it is described as a sort of existential rebellion of an undefined “people”:

“Poor, simple folks should rise up. [Treba da ustane kuka i motika.]”
(lawyer, M, 30, Novi Sad)

“We should take up shitty sticks¹¹ and rout those idiots who are now making circus in the Parliament.” (middle-aged skilled worker, M, Niš)

“If the people were smarter, they would pick up bats and clubs.” (economist, M, 32, Novi Pazar)

“We all seem to be quite happy, don’t we, for no one is rebelling?” (museum guard, M 43, Novi Sad)

CRITICAL CAPACITIES: THE USE OF “POLITIES”

In every group, there were participants who tended to provide careful, nuanced answers to the questions, to see a broader picture, to avoid stale phrases. This suggests a reflective critical activity, characterized by distancing from one’s own position in the social structure and rising above socially anchored interests. In this discursive mode, we find more participants with high levels of cultural capital, but by no means only them. If the latter did stand out it was in their tendency to advance this attitude with more verbal articulation and self-confidence. It is here that the social background of statements may perhaps be discerned – in the form rather than content of discourse,

10 For example: „We should try to give a personal contribution, each one of us within our capacities, to find our way, to see how we can and know to realize ourselves. We must not look at things pessimistically and just sit and wait for something to happen. We should turn on our own personal engines and move ourselves and, by the same token, also the society as a whole“ (PE teacher, M, 50, Niš). Or: „Let us not start with attempting to change society, let us first try to make a little bit of space for ourselves, to breathe, to live“ (copywriter, F, 33, Belgrade).

11 This popular, folksy figure of speech, used in several of our discussions, describes what is traditionally seen as the appropriate way of getting rid of a bad government.

in the speakers' demeanor, manner of addressing the moderator and co-participants, and linguistic competence.

There was also another, equally tenuous connection linking participants' discourses to their social fate. People whose subsistence was ensured, and who felt fulfilled professionally, and/or who found some other way to keep up their psychological balance and good mood, tended to be more flexible in discussing the question of wellbeing in today's Serbia. They allowed for a broader range of social roles and positions who could be said to be relatively well off, not just the "bad" ones – tycoons, folk singers, or politicians. For these participants, it was possible to be at once moral and live "well":

"I always view things from the positive side. All the people who have some work, they are well. Like, I know a shoemaker who works excellently, and who is very much esteemed in my neighborhood. So, the effort you make, the work you invest, that keeps you OK." (computer engineer, F, 45, Belgrade)

"In my mind, a person who has faith will succeed, if not today, then tomorrow, or the day after. If they know what they want, they will take the right road, and have problems for sure in the beginning, but after some time, success will come." (PE teacher, M, 50, Niš)

"The issue of wellbeing is an individual matter. A person who is not very secure financially can also be OK." (copywriter, F, 33, Belgrade)

If we refer to Boltanski's polities and their corresponding orders of worth, we may observe that our participants in their critical comments resorted to a number of value repertoires. The "civic polity" was set in motion when participants talked about the necessity for the collective interest (insistence on the general wellbeing, concerns over lack of solidarity) should prevail over the particular (personal interests of the politicians or narrow party interests). The exemption of certain officials, entrepreneurs, or the state itself from legal punishment is especially strongly criticized, and the sense of justice is here expressed as the demand for the rule of law.

The "domestic polity" may be recognized in the salient value of the "family" or "respect", and in the criticism of the penetration of market logic into friendly and familial relations.

The outlines of the "industrial polity" emerged in answers to the question "What ought to be valued?", when participants cited hard work, expertise, efficiency, discipline, commitment. Older participants, who had finished school and acquired their

first professional experiences in socialism, often recalled, when criticizing the actual situation on the labor market and the new working conditions, how it used to be in earlier times, when inequalities were much less pronounced, when one had a stable job, “when you were valued as a worker” (cleaner, F, 49, Novi Sad) and when “the union stood by every worker” (museum guard, M, 43, Novi Sad).

Among the younger generation, however, alongside a generally critical stance, a legitimizing tendency could also be noted. The young were much more ready to justify the new working ethics, even when challenged by the other participants; they defend energetically their attitude to work and its demands. They were proud to be flexible, communicative, proactive, positive, ready to take risks and surprises, keen to prove themselves, they accepted unpaid overtime as normal, and tended to blame themselves for their failures. It is precisely these worths that Boltanski attaches to the “polity by projects”. This new work culture, incidentally, is not at all connected by its proponents to systemic change or EU accession, which suggests it is taken as self-understandable and “natural”.

“As I grow older, I try to blame less and less the circumstances for what is happening to me. For me, key is flexibility to the circumstances of life.”
(copywriter, F, 33, Belgrade)

“These days no one can afford to just work at a job. One must be resourceful, improvise, be ready for many different surprises, and find the best way, for himself and for his boss as well.” (security worker, M, 30, Novi Sad)

“I literally started out from scratch. I began with packing, to manufacturing, to the office. I learned everything step by step, and now I can replace any worker in my company. And I think I achieved this with my own effort, my dedication to this firm.” (sales manager, 29, Novi Sad)

There is (again) a paradox here, referring to two different, but equally frustrating self-positionings of individuals as agents within the social framework. Participants who criticized the actual state of affairs in Serbia articulated desirable visions of society only in contrast to the given, or falling back on the socialist model; as has already been said, no new model of society has crystallized that would be at once desirable and practicable. At the same time, such critically minded respondents felt bogged by the effect of “social blockade” – the social environment was for them mostly an unwelcome world of alien ways, pressing on them and reducing them to powerless, victimized non-agents. On the other hand, respondents whose statements suggested

the possibility of a novel society, where the individual felt better, more free to pursue their ideas and ambitions, with more space given to their agency – such respondents abandoned the language of critique.

CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF DISCOURSE

We hope to have shown in this paper that citizens of Serbia possess significant critical capacities in accounting for the social reality around them. People were using their minds autonomously, and these proved not to be indoctrinated by imposed matrices. Remarkably, no official ideology was readily recognizable in their discourse, be it nationalism, religious orthodoxy, patriarchal submissiveness, or neoliberalism, although all of them are constantly being beamed out of various authoritative instances, such as the media, state officialdom, the Church, or the intellectual elite. None of such ideological positions was readily and uncritically accepted *en bloc* by our research participants; at best, ideologies showed up in unsystematic, often incongruous, bits and pieces. The respondents were highly critical of the society they live in; at the same time though, most of them proved incapable of articulating any new possibility, of “expanding the limits of the possible”, as Bourdieu used to put it when talking about the purposes of politics (Bourdieu 1997: 276-277). There was no clear vision of a different, better social order that would be worth fighting for. Amongst the vague general discontent and moralistic denunciations of money-grabbing manners of today, the closest the respondents got to establishing their own positions with any degree of clarity was, one, recommending the copying of models (allegedly) imposed by the EU, and, two, openly renouncing any hope of social betterment, ever, and withdrawal into embittered pessimism.

In this text, we have not dealt with objective, structural processes going on in society. Far from claiming these are unimportant, we do wish to point out that interpretive action and interactive exchange are an integral part of social reality. Thus, prevalent interpretations and discursive habits in Serbia today obviously contribute to the production of social blockade: pervasive moralism and weak legitimacy of politics are not conducive to formulating and operationalizing innovative political projects, even less to launching collective action. And a viable democracy can hardly do without these.

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