



# Anthropology and genocide in the Balkans

An analysis of conceptual practices of power

Thomas Cushman  
*Wellesley College, USA*

## Abstract

This article examines scholarly discourse on the wars in the former Yugoslavia. It focuses on relativistic arguments put forward by anthropologists and shows how such accounts mask and elide central historical realities of the conflict. Relativistic accounts of serious modern conflicts often mirror and offer legitimation to the accounts put forth by perpetrators. In this case, several leading accounts of the wars in the former Yugoslavia display a strong affinity to those asserted by Serbian nationalists. The article addresses the issue of ethics and intellectual responsibility in anthropological fieldwork in situations of conflict and the problem of the political uses of anthropological research.

## Key Words

Bosnia-Herzegovina • Croatia • ethics • former Yugoslavia • genocide • nationalism  
• propaganda • relativism • war

On 29 June 2001, Slobodan Milosevic, the former President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, was delivered to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague (ICTY) to stand trial for crimes against humanity, violations of the laws and customs of war, grave breaches of the Geneva Convention of 1949, and genocide. This represented a notable milestone in the history of international law, since no former head of state had ever been charged with genocide (the term itself was not yet in place at the time of Nuremberg, even though the Nazi defendants were, *de facto*, being put on trial for the crime).

The ICTY was formed in 1993 with the recognition that serious war crimes and crimes against humanity were committed in the former Yugoslavia. Ironically, the formation of the tribunal, which symbolically represented the willingness of the 'world community' to act in accordance with the ethical and moral principles of international justice which emerged after the Second World War, occurred even as key members of

that community turned a blind eye toward the atrocities being committed in the former Yugoslavia. The United Nations was formed out of the ashes of the Second World War, and the ICTY represented a real organizational embodiment of the principles upon which the UN was founded. Yet, the first trials were rather uneventful in the sense that those who were being tried were rather small cogs in a much larger apparatus of mass killing and atrocities. Those most responsible for the carnage in the Balkans – Slobodan Milosevic, Radovan Karadzic, Ratko Mladic – enjoyed impunity borne of the *realpolitik* negotiations which ended the war in 1995. Indeed, Milosevic himself negotiated the end of the war with western powers and traveled to the United States to sign the Dayton Accords. It seemed then that, like many war criminals in the 20th century, these leaders would die in power or in retirement, immune from the hand of justice.

The NATO war over Kosovo, however, changed the situation remarkably. Milosevic, destabilized beyond repair, was forced from office and the new regime, comprised of more liberal forces (but not, of course, completely liberal), in return for western aid and support, delivered Milosevic to the Hague. For those who had been cognizant of Milosevic's crimes, the charge of genocide levied against Milosevic – committed by Serbian forces under his command in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina – vindicated to some extent those who, in legal and academic analyses, had argued that what was occurring in Bosnia was, in fact, genocide (see, for instance, Boyle, 1996; Cushman and Mestrovic, 1996; Gutman, 1993; Ramet, 1992). As early as 1992, the International Court of Justice had handed down a judgment, which noted that actions taken by Serbia against its neighbors were genocidal in nature (Boyle, 1996). During the period when the most severe crimes were committed, though, there was a rather pronounced struggle over the issue of whether Serbian aggression constituted genocide. For the most part, political leaders who did not want to intervene in the Balkans denied that the events there constituted genocide: to acknowledge that it was genocide would have obligated those who had signed the Genocide Convention of 1949 to intervene and such an intervention would not have been politically expedient. Yet, ultimately, those who had argued that the events were genocide were vindicated by the delivery of the principal actor in these events to stand trial for the crime.

It is clear, in retrospect, that during the war in the former Yugoslavia and after, the history of events included a steadfast denial of and indifference toward the crimes committed there. This denial was perpetrated by political elites, but they did not do so alone. In fact, the denial that genocide was occurring in the Balkans was written by policy consultants, public intellectuals, and academic experts, including several key anthropologists, all of whom provided the conceptual and analytical apparatus which legitimated indifference in the face of the worst crimes against humanity to have occurred in Europe since the Second World War.

My aim in this essay is to outline the relationship between anthropological knowledge and power in social outcomes – in this case, gross violations of human rights – in the Balkans. In the face of the events there, political actors made the decision to practice a kind of active indifference and a hesitance to intervene. This is to be expected, since, in spite of the rhetorical commitment to ethics and morality which is the basis of the UN Charter, states still, more or less, are guided in their actions (or inactions) by the spirit of *realpolitik*. But in the case of legal and social-scientific analysis of the war, there was a distinct class of experts who aided and abetted this indifference by providing

analytical and conceptual justifications for it. By denying the reality of events in the Balkans, such experts provided the cultural legitimation for indifference and non-intervention to prevent genocide and other crimes against humanity.

In this article, I focus on anthropological accounts of the conflict in the Balkans. While grounded in the rhetoric of social science, objectivity and neutrality, these accounts were far from disinterested. In fact, the accounts under scrutiny here are notable since they converted several nationalist themes of the Serbian perpetrators of genocide into respectable accounts which served to define the cognitive frames and terms of discourse with which other academics and political leaders framed their own interpretations of the Bosnian war. In this respect, these accounts, while having a scientific status, also had moral and ethical implications, which were unspoken and masked, but nonetheless crucial to political outcomes. The anthropology of the Balkan wars was, in retrospect, an important conceptual practice of power.

In addition to showing exactly why this was the case, I wish to raise some more general theoretical and methodological questions related to the role and function of anthropologists who work in situations where egregious human rights abuses are occurring. The analysis of anthropological knowledge presented here demonstrates that anthropological work is never disinterested. In fact, in this case I analyze here, there appears to be an inverse relationship between the extent to which certain anthropological accounts claimed the mantle of objectivity and neutrality and their degree of interestedness. The case is not meant to single out anthropologists for any kind of moral disapprobation – although one could certainly do so based on the story which I tell here – but to bring to relief the ethical and political dangers inherent in anthropological work (and of social scientific work more generally) on situations of intense conflict. Through the analysis of several cases in which anthropological knowledge served to obscure and rename the reality of the situation in the Balkans and thereby perpetuated a narrative which worked against the rectification of gross violations of human rights, I hope to show that ethical concerns are not distant from, but central to, anthropological analyses of situations of extreme violence and cruelty.

Anthropologists have specific ethical obligations to (a) avoid producing work that legitimizes or rationalizes the accounts of perpetrators of mass violence and (b) avoid producing accounts which deny the phenomenological realities of social suffering, especially as those realities are felt and experienced by victims. Accounts that are produced as a result of anthropological work are never neutral, in spite of their rhetorical pretensions to being so, and always stand in relation to the ‘native’ accounts in the settings in which anthropologists work, and in particular to the accounts produced by perpetrators of violence and crimes against humanity and those who suffer from it. In that sense, such accounts should and must be considered in regard to their ethical implications. This task is all the more important for those social scientists who imagine themselves and their work as ethically engaged and practically related to helping others, as, for instance, in the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992, 1995). Anthropological work on the Balkan wars was an important conceptual practice of power (Smith, 1997). In the cases analyzed here, scientific analysis presumably acted as a form of ‘soft denial’ of genocide and thereby served to perpetuate rather than alleviate the situation of those who suffered at the hands of violent nationalists in the Balkans.

## RELATIVIST THOUGHT-STYLES AND THE BALKAN WAR

The primary approach in this article derives from the sociology of knowledge. The analysis presented here moves beyond the Balkans itself and makes the central object of study the objectifiers of the objective history of war and genocide in the former Yugoslavia. Its focus is on the knowledge produced by western intellectuals about the war and the concrete relations between those forms of knowledge and western political practices in relation to the war. The sociology of knowledge is not a usual complement to international relations theory, or even to political science more generally. Yet it is clear that particular types of knowledge produced by western intellectuals about the wars in the Balkans had a decisive, independent influence on the outcomes of the wars. While there are many types of knowledge produced about the Balkan wars, the focus of this analysis is the *relativistic 'styles of thought'* that have been a central part of western thinking since the beginnings of the Balkan wars in 1991.

There have been many bloody conflicts in the 20th century and intellectuals have made much commentary on them. Yet the hallmark of the recent Balkan war is the prominence of equivocal or relativist positions among interpretations of the war. It might even be said that perhaps in no other conflict has so much 'balance' in interpretation been demanded by so many western intellectuals. A comparison of the present Balkan war with the Spanish Civil War is instructive. Because the facts of Franco's aggression were so clear to the world, it would be difficult to imagine, in the moral context of the times, a conference or a volume on the Spanish Civil War in which the points of view of representatives of the Franco regime were represented as morally equivalent to the points of view of the victims of Francoist aggression. Still more difficult to imagine would be one in which Francoist positions were actually affirmed and ratified by prominent western intellectuals. Even though western powers imposed an arms embargo on Spain, among western intellectuals there was a great deal of *consensus* about the moral dimensions of the war and most critical, liberal intellectuals distinguished themselves from apologists for fascism by adopting critical stances toward Franco. Similarly, if we consider the main bodies of intellectual work on the destruction of European Jewry by Nazi Germany, we would not expect that representatives of the point of view that the Jews provoked the Germans and therefore brought about their own extirpation would be given credence by serious scholars. One could not imagine, for instance, at a contemporary conference on the Holocaust that those who deny the Holocaust or seek to revise its proportions would be given any credence at all.

Yet in the 1990s, when the facts of overwhelming Serbian responsibility for the war and genocide in Bosnia were quite well known, when evidence for planned military attacks on civilians and systematic extirpation of people based on their ethnicity abounded, conferences, volumes, scholarly papers, media coverage, and editorials which commented on the war regularly featured empathetic accounts of Serbs as victims of such things as Croatian nationalism, Bosnian Muslim fundamentalism, and western imperialism. The attempted systematic extirpation of Bosnian Muslims by Serbian forces surely represents one of the most significant acts of barbarism in the 20th century. What is different in this case is the response of the West: perhaps in no other conflict in the 20th century have western intellectuals proved themselves so willing and able to offer accounts that occlude, obfuscate or even deny the central historical facts of military aggression and mass killing. Many western intellectuals who ordinarily espouse quite

liberal or even radical positions quite unproblematically echoed the sentiments and political propaganda lines of individuals who have been indicted for the most prolific war crimes to occur on European soil since the Second World War. In some cases, prominent intellectuals went so far as to praise the actions of individuals who have been indicted by the UN war crimes tribunal for heinous war crimes and genocide.<sup>1</sup>

If in a previous age intellectuals were characterized by an almost overzealous degree of commitment to various causes, the present age is characterized by a stance of almost 'aggressive ambivalence' on the part of many western intellectuals. This is a trend that demands critical interrogation and concrete sociological analysis. It cannot be understood solely by examining the 'objective facts' of the history of the war – a history which is admittedly complex – but also by examining the culture of late capitalist societies which frames intellectual activity and political policy. Critical interrogation of this trend toward relativism and equivocation is all the more important since relativist reinterpretations are likely to increase as the temporal distance from the Balkan wars increases.

To be sure, it should be said at the outset that there are no guiltless parties in the conflict in the Balkans. All sides in the conflict committed atrocities and war crimes, albeit in different degrees, but the Serbian side has been accused of genocide by the International War Crimes Tribunal at the Hague. In the Serbo-Croat war of 1991, following the brutal invasion of Croatia by Serbian dominated forces of the Yugoslav National Army, Croatian forces (both official and paramilitary) committed war crimes against Serbian civilians and soldiers. Following the truce between Serbia and Croatia, Croatian forces attacked Muslim forces in western Bosnia-Herzegovina. A number of Croats have been indicted by the Hague Tribunal for crimes committed in those acts of opportunistic aggression.<sup>2</sup> Yet Human Rights Watch and Helsinki Watch both distinguish between the degree and severity of crimes committed by Croats and those by Serbs, noting in their reports that crimes committed by Serbs were far more premeditated and extensive.<sup>3</sup> It is important to keep such distinctions ever present when establishing the facts and chronology of the Balkan war. As Brendan Simms (1996: 576) notes, 'Both quantitatively and qualitatively, Serbian policies differed from the essentially opportunistic transgressions of Croatia . . . and the reactive behavior of the Muslims, loyal Serbs and loyal Croats supporting the Bosnian government.' And perhaps no one has put it more clearly and succinctly than Patrick Moore (1995: 5) of the Open Media Research Institute: 'It is true, as in any war, that no one side consisted entirely of angels. But what made Serbian atrocities different from those committed by others was that they represented not an incidental development in the conflict, but a deliberate instrument of policy. The rapes, expulsions, burnings lootings, and massacres were a conscious and calculated means of setting up a Greater Serbia.'

I should stress that what follows is not a critique of the idea of relativism, per se, nor is it a call for the celebration of some idea of absolute truth in historical interpretation, generally speaking. Rather, it is an attempt to examine relativistic thinking as an independent cultural force, which affected the interpretation of concrete, objective historical events in the Balkans and concrete policies of western political elites. In the analysis, which I put forward here, I wish steadfastly to avoid the banal characterizations of relativism put forth by many conservative culture critics.<sup>4</sup> For these thinkers, relativism is adjudicated as being essentially 'bad', while western cultural values and some idea of absolute truth are seen as inherently 'good'. The question of the superiority of western

values is quite another issue and beyond the scope of the present analysis, as are questions about the existence of absolute truth. I would only point out here that I am sympathetic to the idea of scientific cultural relativism, which argues against cultural superiority and toleration, but I am very critical of the ways in which science can lead to a kind of moral relativism which argues that moral judgments or affirmations of universal cultural values are not possible.<sup>5</sup> While I shall argue in favor of the application of universal cultural values in the response to the Bosnian conflict, I favor an approach to the Balkan war which adjudicates accounts on the basis of their *verisimilitude* or what the philosopher Karl Popper (1963: 399–404) refers to as ‘truthlikeness’. The critique of relativism here focuses on the latter not as something which is a priori adjudicated as ‘bad’, but as a style of thought which produces knowledge that denies or obscures the reality and verisimilitude of certain objective historical facts. Relativism, I argue, works against the establishment of verisimilitude in accounts of the war and genocide in Bosnia. The critique of relativism mounted here does not deny the complexity of historical events in the Balkans. Rather, it focuses on the ways in which certain relativist interpretations contribute to revisionist accounts of the Balkan war and the genocide that took place there. In this sense, this critique is part of a body of work that seeks to critically interrogate revisionist accounts of other genocides in Europe (see, for instance, Lipstadt, 1993; Vidal-Naquet, 1992, 1995).

I also wish to note that relativistic interpretations of human events are necessary to the human sciences, in general, and to the interpretation of the Balkan war, in particular. Events in the former Yugoslavia cannot be interpreted in an unrelational way. Further, I acknowledge that some scholars might have been led to relativist interpretations of the war by the sheer complexity of events in the former Yugoslavia, just as I am willing to admit that many of those who insist on an absolute truth about the situation often deny facts and evidence in order to retain their belief in their absolutist interpretations of the conflict. As Ernest Gellner (1990: 23–4) notes: ‘People may become subjectivists or relativists because respect for the truth led them to such conclusions, and others may be absolutist out of opportunism and desire to embrace the comforting conclusion, whether or not it is logically warranted.’ Thus, I would note at the outset that any attempt to deny the expression of relativistic thought purely on the grounds that it is ‘relativistic’ would be erroneous and censorious. In what follows, I merely reserve the right to critique its manifestations and to articulate and criticize the relations between relativistic thinking about the Balkans and western passivity in the face of genocide. What concerns me here is relativism as a way of thinking which independently prefigures, shapes, and forms knowledge about the Balkan conflict such that it:

1. denies certain objective facts about war and genocide in the region and occludes and masks the recognition of certain key events that occurred in Bosnia and the causes of those events
2. works to shape political action of appeasement, toleration, and legitimation of territorial, political, and economic gains won through military aggression.

### **RELATIVIST THOUGHT-STYLES AND THE BALKAN CONFLICT**

As a starting point for this analysis, I find it useful to begin with Karl Mannheim’s notion of ‘styles of thought’. Mannheim (1993[1953]: 261) notes that ‘individuals do not *create*

the patterns of thought in terms of which they conceive the world, but take them over from their groups. . . . There are different schools of thought distinguishable by the different ways in which they use different thought processes and categories.’ For Mannheim, styles of thought are essentially products of groups. The analysis of meanings, which is the central method for Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, must ultimately take place with reference to the groups who develop and deploy particular kinds of meanings.<sup>6</sup> There are many positions that western intellectuals have taken in the conflict, but one of the most significant is *relativism*. Most broadly, in the social sciences, a relativist position holds that there is no unique truth or objective reality about the social world (Gellner, 1985). In relation to the Balkan conflict, relativist positions usually took the form of *moral equivalence*, arguing that ‘all sides are equally guilty’ for beginning the conflict and for committing war crimes, atrocities, and genocide. Because of the alleged equivalence of sides, the attempt to make moral judgments or definite conclusions about the ‘truth’ of the conflict is problematic. This style of thinking is evident across a broad range of ideological positions from left to right and has done much to shape concrete policies of non-intervention and appeasement in the Balkan conflict.

Relativist discourse can be found throughout many western media, but my aim here is to focus on anthropological accounts that illustrate the most fundamental rhetorical and discursive practices, which comprise the structure of relativist styles of thought on the Balkan conflict. This is important because several leading anthropologists assumed the status of experts on the Balkan conflict; in many cases they advised political leaders or their accounts have been quoted in justifications for particular political policies. The articles and their authors thus form part of the core of the expert system, which drove much of western understanding of the Balkan conflict and political action in the region. What I aim to show here is how supposedly objective, dispassionate, academic analysis of the conflict worked at another level as propaganda which both legitimated Serbian military aggression in Croatia and Bosnia and helped to justify the lack of response to stop genocide by western political powers.

## ANTHROPOLOGY AS APOLOGY

### The Serbs as victims I: Collective memory and pre-emptive genocide

One of the strongest elements of relativist discourse on the war in Bosnia is the idea of the Serbian people as historical and contemporary victims of Muslim and Croatian domination. This discursive practice seeks to deny Serbian culpability for the present war and atrocities by focusing on and amplifying past instances of Serbian victimization. Historically, Serbs were dominated by the Ottoman empire for more than 400 years and there is a strong collective memory of oppression at the hands of the ‘Turks’. In the 20th century, Serbs experienced persecution and genocide during the Second World War in a Nazi quisling state called the Independent State of Croatia (NDH in the Croatian acronym), which was led by Ante Pavelić and a group known as the *Ustasha*. The Ustasha regime was notoriously ruthless toward Serbs, and while a fierce debate rages as to the number of Serbs that were actually killed, there is little question that Serbs suffered greatly at the hands of the Croatian fascists. Hundreds of thousands of Serbs were killed by the Ustasha.<sup>7</sup> The collective memory of this genocide has remained alive in the present, in particular among the Serbs of Croatia, where the slaughter was carried out.

In 1990, Franjo Tudjman, a former Yugoslav general, dissident historian, and leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), was democratically elected president of a soon-to-be independent Republic of Croatia. Tudjman, an ardent nationalist with strong authoritarian leanings, had written a controversial book which sought to downplay the atrocities of the NDH and which made a number of statements that were construed by many as revisionist and anti-Semitic (Tudjman, 1989). After assuming power, the new Croatian state revived a number of symbols, which were highly offensive to Serbs living in Croatia. The new Croatian flag, for instance, featured a red and white checkerboard coat of arms dating to medieval times which had been used as the centerpiece of the flag of the Ustasha regime (the Ustasha flag, however, featured a prominent U at the top which was not incorporated into the flag of the new Croatian republic). This coat of arms had been used as a symbol of Croatia since the middle ages and had been incorporated into the Communist era emblem of the Socialist Republic of Croatia after the Second World War; nonetheless, its association with fascism was objectively and subjectively real to many Serbs living in Croatia. In addition, the new Croatian government began to use a new unit of currency, the *kuna*, which had a long history in Croatia, but which had also been used by the Ustasha regime. In spite of the fact that the kuna was not introduced until 1993, well after Serbian forces had invaded Croatia as a response to 'provocations', the willingness of the government to use the *kuna* was no doubt known before the Serbian invasion and seen as a provocative act by many Serbs. Finally, the new Croatian constitution specified that the official language of the new republic would be Croatian, written in a Latin script. Serbian, written in Cyrillic script, was classified as a minority language.<sup>8</sup>

These actions were clearly symbolic and had little value in terms of the practical political tasks of the new Croatian state (Pusic, 1992: 258–9). But, they were perceived by many Serbs as direct provocations against Serbs and a symbolic indication that the new Croatian regime might not respect the rights of the Serbian minority in Croatia, which had suffered so greatly at the hands of the Ustasha in the Second World War. The acts of the new Croatian government represented a form of symbolic violence against the Serbs. This symbolic violence was experienced as a provocation by both Croatian Serbs and their allies in Belgrade and was met by physical violence. In 1991, Croatian Serbs engaged in an armed insurrection aided by the armed forces of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), which was controlled by Serbia in the aftermath of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In the ensuing onslaught, Serb forces seized one-third of Croatian territory and set up an 'independent' republic known as Krajina, destroyed major Croatian cities, and forced Croatians to leave their homes. In all, an estimated 20,000 Croatians were killed in the military onslaught and thousands more were disabled and displaced (Cigar, 1995, 1996; Primoratz, 1992). A significant number of Croatian women were raped as well.

In the political justification for the invasion, Serbs claimed that the attack on Croatia was necessary as a pre-emptive strike to forestall the repetition of genocide perpetrated against Croatian Serbs in the Second World War. Croats, on the other hand, claimed that the threat was exaggerated, that minority rights were guaranteed under the new Croatian constitution, and that Serbian forces had, through the use of propaganda, consciously stirred up anti-Croatian sentiment among Croatian Serbs as a pretext for the expansion of Serbian territorial ambitions in Croatia. For Croats, the invasion was part of a plan for the establishment of a 'Greater Serbia'.



In the West, the conflict between Serbs and Croats became the object of debate and discussion among intellectuals. In such debates, it became readily clear that scholars were 'choosing sides', that is, offering interpretations that favored either the Croatian or the Serbian interpretation of events. In 1994, an article entitled 'Dismembering Yugoslavia: Nationalist Ideologies and the Symbolic Revival of Genocide' was published by anthropologist Bette Denich in the prestigious anthropological journal *The American Ethnologist*. It is worth noting that this was the only article on the conflict published in this journal of anthropology throughout the course of the Balkan war. In fact, very few articles specifically about the war were published in either sociology or anthropology journals (this was also the case before or during the Second World War, when very little scholarly attention was devoted to the war). At the time of its publication, the facts of the war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were quite well known in the West: the two countries had been recognized as independent by the community of western nations and were granted seats in the United Nations, and it was acknowledged that they had been invaded by Serbian forces. Yet, this article makes very little mention of these facts. Instead, its express purpose appears to be to understand the 'symbolic revival of genocide' by the new Croatian government as a causal factor in both the dissolution of Yugoslavia and in the ensuing conflict. The article begins by constructing the war as a 'civil war' in which all sides have committed war crimes:

In the Bosnian civil war, systematic terror was used by all the warring ethnic factions (Serbs, Croats, and Slavic Muslims) to displace ethnic populations as a means for establishing control over territory. Armed forces committed atrocities against civilians to intimidate them into fleeing as refugees. While the basic methodologies were shared by all sides, atrocities reported on the largest scale were committed by Serbs against Muslims, and the greatest numbers of refugees were Muslims, fleeing as Serbian forces gained territory. (Denich, 1994: 368)

The above quotation is rather representative of relativist discourse on the war: it acknowledges rather limply the fact that the Serbs are the primary aggressors, but excludes further exploration of the specific facts of the Serbian invasion of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina by defining the conflict as a civil war in which all sides use the same 'methodologies'. The rhetoric of 'civil war' makes it difficult to assign culpability for aggression, for in a civil war both sides usually have armies that engage in offensive and defensive maneuvers. In this case, the JNA was, at the time of the invasion, the fifth largest army in Europe. The war itself is only mentioned in this brief passage: there is no reference to the facts of that war such as the killing of over 20,000 Croats, the mass destruction of Vukovar and other cities; there is no mention of the western arms embargo which left the Serbian forces far superior to either Croatian or Bosnian forces; and there is no mention of the programs of forced migrations (known as 'ethnic cleansing') planned and carried out by Serbian forces under the specific direction of Serbian political and military authorities. In addition, even though the article was published in early 1994, there are no references at all to the invasion of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which occurred against an even more defenseless population and was accompanied by well-documented atrocities committed against Bosnian Muslims by Serbian armed forces, even though the facts of these atrocities were already quite well publicized in the West.

Rather, the focus of Denich's article is on understanding Croatian symbolic politics as provocations, which fueled the Croatian Serb insurrections that began the Serbo-Croat war of 1991.

From the standpoint of an interpretive social science, which attempts to grasp social action in terms of the subjectivity of the actors involved, the central task of Denich's article is quite valid and the answers rendered are quite plausible. Yet, the interpretive positions put forth in the article, while seemingly grounded in the rhetoric of *Wertfreiheit*, are not especially detached or value-free in relation to the actual conflict in the Balkans. In fact, the interpretive strategy in the article crystallizes and legitimates Serbian positions from within a welter of rhetorical commitments to *Verstehen*. Denich argues that the source of the dissolution of Yugoslavia lies primarily in the rise of separatist Croatian nationalism (embodied in the figure of Franjo Tudjman) and the 'symbolic revival' of the memory of genocide by the Tudjman regime. Denich's article provides a highly empathetic account, which constructs these acts as forms of 'symbolic violence'. Her highly empathetic account works to establish the authenticity of Serbian claims of provocation. She notes, quite rightly, that the symbolic actions of the new regime were quite disastrous for the general state of relations between Serbs and Croats and were of direct causal significance for starting the war. The Serbs who revolted were moved to do so by the strong collective memory of genocide, which circulated through minority Serb communities in Croatia. Denich's empathetic account, though, works to establish equivalence between two disparate phenomena: *symbolic violence* and *physical violence*. It does not acknowledge the causes or outcomes of the war beyond a focus on Croatian symbolic aggression against Serbs and some brief discussion of the rise of nationalism in Serbia proper. In so doing, the article rhetorically raises Croatian symbolic actions to the level of the Serbian actions such that questions about who the primary aggressor was, how the war was planned, who was responsible for the outbreak of the war, or what the specific conduct of the war was, all become difficult to ask.

What is at issue in explaining these events is not the subjective reality of Serbian grievances against Croats and their actions. The symbolic acts of the Croatian regime exerted direct causal influence on Croatian Serbs and interpretive sociology must explain the causal sequence of events in terms of the subjective feelings of those involved. What is at issue is the ways in which accounts of this rebellion move beyond an understanding of events to an empathetic rendition of Serbian actions that masks significant historical facts about the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ensuing war. In the first case, there is a distinction to be made between symbolic violence and physical violence: from a normative standpoint, it might be argued that killing cannot be justified as a response to symbolic provocation. Otherwise, for instance, African-Americans would be justified in killing white Southerners for flying the confederate flag. In historical terms, the fact of political and military sponsorship of Krajina Serbs by Serbia proper is not mentioned at all in Denich's account of the war. Tudjman claimed that the Croatian Serbs were incited to rebel by Belgrade, but this claim is steadfastly denied in Denich's account (as it is in all official Serbian accounts). She neglects to mention that many Croatian cities were shelled and destroyed, that tens of thousands of civilians were killed and disabled, and that Croats were driven from their homes in a policy of 'ethnic cleansing' that was systematically orchestrated by Serbian political elites in Croatia and Serbia proper. While Denich's account contains a strong tone of condemnation and moral outrage at

the symbolic acts of the Tadjman regime, there is not an equal condemnation, or even affirmation, of the acts of physical violence that were unleashed against Croatia by the Serbs and the JNA. Denich accepts, *prima facie*, and reproduces the idea that the symbolic actions of Croatian nationalists were the provocations and the cause of Serbian aggression. Her account self-consciously seeks to establish the authenticity of the Serbian claims to provocation and it provides intellectual legitimation to those claims in a highly regarded journal of anthropology. Military aggression and acts of genocide are always grounded in specific accusations of provocation on the part of the aggressor (Staub, 1989: 11–12). Denich's view commits itself to a value-free and ethically neutral anthropology and is, indeed, seen as such by fellow anthropologists, but it resonates strongly with and provides intellectual justification for the official Serbian view that Croatian actions were a direct provocation.

What is at issue here is not the veracity of Denich's account, but the way in which the narrative is constructed so that it elides central elements of the Balkan conflict. In this sense, her account has moral ramifications. Her account gives moral precedence to empathetic sociological understanding of the Serbian point of view rather than to the facts of the consequences of armed invasion. Actions which were deeply offensive to Serbs symbolically were also used as a pretext for armed aggression and the *physical extirpation*, either through murder or forced migration, of Croats living in areas deemed to be Serbian. This was the cornerstone of the Serbian propaganda campaign that was the ideological grounding for the military invasion and occupation of Croatia: the constant reference to the Croatian actions of World War II and the conscious attempt to link all contemporary expressions of Croatian nationalism with Ustashism and the NDH. What is most notable in Denich's work is that it recapitulates the argument of the supposed collective guilt of Croats and provocation, which is the cornerstone of official Bosnian Serb propaganda. One element of official Serbian propaganda is the view that 'the Serbian side never attacks; it responds to enemy provocations' (Thompson, 1994: 17). Indeed, in Denich's account, we have only an outline of the provocation rather than an explanation of the ways in which this provocation was amplified and used as a legitimation device for military aggression and pre-emptive killing in Croatia. In some cases, the connection between past and present is made quite overtly as, for instance, when authors directly make a connection between Croatian atrocities of the Ustasha period and current acts of defensive Croatian aggression against Serbs in Croatia which occurred *after* the Serbian invasion of Croatia and the occupation of one-third of Croatian territory. This strategy of linkage is a mainstay of Serbian propaganda and is adopted in many western accounts, of which Denich's is only one significant and notable example. In most cases, though, the accounts that are proffered are empathetic in the sense that they give credence to the idea of collective historical guilt of the Croats, an idea that was the central justification for the Serbian invasion of Croatia in 1991.

It was clearly in the interests of Serbian elites to insinuate that symbolic violence was equal to physical violence in Croatia. Such a relativizing strategy, especially one that relied on the sensitive theme of the Holocaust, could clearly create doubt as to who was the aggressor and who was the victim in the present. Yet in the highly visible account under scrutiny here, there is virtually no mention of the ways in which the sentiments of Croatian Serbs were manipulated by Serbian political elites. The evidence for Serbian manipulation of historical memory is quite clear, although nowhere is the evidence more

clear than in the words of Jovan Rasković, psychiatrist and leader of the Serbian Democratic Party of Croatia who admitted the manipulation: 'I feel responsible, because I prepared this war, although not with military preparations. Had I not provoked this emotional tension with the Serbian people, nothing would have happened. My party and I have set fire to the fuse of Serbian nationalism, not only in Croatia, but everywhere else, particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina' (in Rupnik, 1993: 58–9). It is worth pointing out that Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, who has been indicted by the war crimes tribunal in the Hague, appeared on the CBS television news magazine *Sixty Minutes* in September 1995 and declared that Bosnian Serb aggression against the Croats was necessary to prevent the latter from doing to Serbs what they had done in the Second World War. He also noted that Europe would thank him and the Bosnian Serbs for protecting Europe from the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, presumably by killing Bosnian Muslims. In addition, in another interview Karadzic (1992: 50) noted that:

Historically, the Croats and Muslims have coalesced against the Serbs. So why are we fighting? We are fighting to protect ourselves from becoming vulnerable to the same kind of genocide that coalition waged upon us in World War II when 700,000 Serbs were killed. Today, Serbs would be 60 per cent of the population of Bosnia if this genocide had not been committed. We will never again be history's fools.

The idea of the connection between past Croatian atrocities and present ones is a strong element of official Serbian propaganda not only in Bosnia, but in Belgrade as well. Official reports made in the journal *Yugoslav Survey* (Government of the FR of Yugoslavia, 1995: 4), an official organ of state power in the rump Yugoslavia, stress the memory of the Second World War genocide and, more importantly, its connection with the present. Consider the following official government statement:

More than 700,000 Serbs perished in a monstrous genocide committed against them only in the Independent State of Croatia, a Croatian-Muslim creation, under the auspices of the Axis powers. The testimony about that is offered by Jasenovac, the biggest concentration camp in the Balkans, in which besides Serbs, also many Jews and Gypsies perished. *Unfortunately, this symbol of the genocide committed against the Serbian people has recently fallen victim again to Croatia's latest armed aggression against the Serbian people.*

The 'armed aggression' in this case refers to the Croatian recapturing of the Krajina, which had been recognized as a part of the new Croatian state, seized and ethnically cleansed by Serbs in 1991. In a speech delivered by the Yugoslav Federal Prime Minister Dr Radoje Kotic, the same kind of linkage between past and present is noted:

A just and lasting peace, based on equal treatment of all warring parties and as the outcome of the Yugoslav crisis, would be the best way to mark the fiftieth anniversary of victory over Fascism and pay tribute to the victims of the Second World War. . . . Unfortunately, the war lords are still on the scene. Croatia has committed unprovoked acts of aggression against the Republic of Serb Krajina. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia most strongly condemns this glaring act of aggression by the Croatian

authorities and calls on the parties to the conflict and the relevant international factors [sic] to prevent further violence, to get the parties involved to return to their original positions and to provide for the renewal of the peace process. (Government of the FR of Yugoslavia, 1995: 7)

What is striking about Denich's account is its remarkable similarity to the official Serbian propaganda quoted here. As with official accounts, Denich's account ratifies the idea that contemporary manifestations of Croatian nationalism are incarnations of fascist Ustashe nationalism and insinuates, in relativist fashion, that the Croats are the primary aggressors in the region. Much relativist discourse on the war is grounded in a more general negativity toward nationalism on the part of western intellectuals. In this case, Balkan nationalism is seen as a 'virus' and very little attempt is made, either by academics or by policy makers, to distinguish between types of nationalism and their pragmatic consequences (Lytle, 1992: 304–5).

The result is a highly relativistic one – all parties involved in the Balkan conflict are 'infected' with the disease of nationalism and, therefore, no one nationalism is seen as 'better' or 'worse' than the other. In relativistic thought structures on the war, Croatian nationalism, in particular, is particularly suspect because of the legacy of the Ustashe regime and the genocide against the Serbs. As Ivo Banac notes, 'Serbian nationalist historiography, aligned to Milosevic's movement, set out to prove that every resistance to Belgrade, not just among the Croats, necessarily tended in the direction of Ustasism and genocide' (Banac, 1992: 155). The linkage of all expressions of Croatian nationalism to the fascist regime during the Second World War is a particularly powerful tool for the delegitimization of Croatian claims to self-determination. Conversely, such linkage is a powerful tool for the legitimization of Serbian nationalist aspirations and territorial aggrandizement, which were carried out under the conscious political manipulation of the collective memory of genocide and the continued construction of the victimage of the Serbian people. The Ustashe was so ruthless that 'Croat self interest of whatever provenance (including reform communist and liberal) could easily be tarred with the brush of fascism, by the help of innuendoes, criminally constructed. It was a temptation that no embattled Serbian or centralist tendency failed to utilize after the war' (Banac, 1992: 154). Indeed, though, there has been a variety of expressions of Croatian nationalism, in general, such expressions – regardless of their content – tended to be judged rather negatively by western intellectuals because of the patina of the Ustasha atrocities (Cuvalo, 1992). This included even those expressions of nationalism that were evidently liberal in their origins and aspirations. The uprising in the 1970s which came to be known as the 'Croatian Spring' was inspired strongly by the liberal ideas of the Prague Spring, yet the association between this expression of Croatian nationalism with the Czech resistance was denied in favor of a linkage between Croatian nationalism and Croatia's fascist heritage (Cuvalo, 1992). For most western intellectuals, the reference point for Croatia in the present becomes the period that is most tainted and, not insignificantly, it is this reference point that is amplified in the present by Serbian nationalists and intellectual defenders of the Yugoslav idea, not only in the former Yugoslavia, but in the West as well. Throughout the discourse on the Balkan war, and especially in relativist discourse, the image of Croatia that is invoked is strongly negative and this has served well in the construction of accounts which seek to amplify the historic

victimization of the Serbs, and, in so doing, establish moral equivalence, justify Serbian armed aggression against defenseless civilians, and justify non-intervention by western powers in Balkan affairs (Banac, 1992; Cushman, 1996; Cuvalo, 1992).

### **The Serbs as victims II: The orientalist fallacy in the Balkans**

In the previous discussion, I have provided a critique of the interpretive schema that works toward the construction of Serbs as victims of symbolic violence. This schema relies on empathetic accounts that privilege the authenticity of the subjectivity of Serbian minorities in Croatia, a subjectivity which directly fueled genocidal aggression against Croats in various regions of the newly independent Croatia. This empathy, which allows the social scientist to grasp the point of view of the 'native', is vitally important for understanding the history of the war in the former Yugoslavia and no sociological or anthropological account can proceed without it. Yet, such empathy is not ethically neutral: in this case, relativism culminates in a position broadly empathetic to the Serbs in stressing their status as victims. The construction of victimization is central to the establishment of a 'rhetoric of provocation' central to the establishment of genocidal activities by Serbs in the former Yugoslavia.

In what follows, I provide an analysis of another form of relativistic thinking which stresses the idea that Serbs are victims of a more general, ongoing process of symbolic domination: '*orientalism*'. While some authors stress the collective memory of physical violence against the Serbs, others stress more subtle processes of supposed cultural domination of Serbs by other ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia. A representative example of this theoretical strategy is found in an article by Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden in the prominent journal *Slavic Review* (1992).<sup>9</sup> The central thesis of the article is that the Serbs and other Eastern Orthodox peoples have been subject to an essentializing discourse, which seeks to construct them as backward and regressive. This '*orientalism*', which emanates primarily from 'politicians and writers from the north-western parts of the country' (presumably from Slovenians and Croats), is seen as one of the root causes of the crisis in the former Yugoslavia and, ostensibly, as a tool of cultural and political domination of the 'eastern' peoples of Yugoslavia (presumably Serbs and Macedonians).

The authors note that 'contrasting images [of superiority of northwestern peoples and inferiority of eastern peoples] help nationalist political figures in Croatia and Slovenia to justify the need to break away from the Balkans' (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992: 2). In addition, according to these authors, not only are such constructions rhetorical legitimizations for breaking away, but also conceptual practices of power and domination. The authors note: 'Orientalist knowledge has been both a tool for and justification of cultural as well as political dominance, in that it both presumes and restates the inferiority of eastern races, religions and societies to those of the West' (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992: 2). The description of the attempts of Slovenian and Croatian politicians and intellectuals to distance themselves rhetorically from an imagined 'other' as '*orientalist knowledge*' presumes that these politicians and intellectuals are involved in a project of cultural and political dominance. The authors then proceed to look at different expressions of orientalist rhetoric in Yugoslav political life and relate these to concrete political crises in the former Yugoslavia. The article ends with a paean to Yugoslavism, which celebrates the idea of 'civilized federalism' as opposed to the 'essentializing nationalisms' which seek

to destroy the Yugoslav idea. It should be said at the outset that the article does not mention at all the fact that the Serbs, the presumed target of domination from the 'north-west parts of the country', invaded both Slovenia and Croatia.

Said's concept of orientalism is a powerful one for cultural analysis; it has been very influential in the analysis of cultural domination in a variety of historical contexts. His analysis demonstrates convincingly that the physical domination of Muslim peoples by western imperial powers was grounded in a cultural strategy of domination, which essentialized and naturalized 'orientals' as inferior, barbaric, and uncivilized (Said, 1979). Said's concept is highly specific to the particular history that it purports to describe: the cultural domination of the East by western imperialist powers. At the most elemental level, though, the transposition of Said's orientalist argument to the Balkan case is flawed, since the historical situation in the Balkans is quite different than the historical situation of imperial domination which led to the emergence of orientalist discourse in the West. There are a number of specific problems with the Bakić-Hayden and Hayden application of the orientalist argument to the Balkan situation.

First, many peoples of the former Yugoslavia, including the Croats and Bosnians, are subject to the same processes of orientalism from the more 'civilized' countries of western Europe (Cushman, 1996; Mestrovic, 1994). The idea of the Balkan peoples as tribes who are inferior to 'civilized' and 'Enlightened' Europeans is a persistent one in western political and intellectual discourse and seldom are distinctions made between Balkan peoples as to the degree of tribalism each one displays. In fact, it might be said that the Croats (who have traditionally been associated with Nazism) are subject to more essentializing discourse at the hands of Europeans than the Serbs, who have been staunch allies of western powers in the 20th century and who have been the ethnic group most associated with the protection of the Yugoslav idea (and thus the hegemony of Serbia in the Yugoslav federation). The metaphor of 'Balkanization' which has come to signify persistent, intense, and intractable fracturing of human communities is often applied to all of the peoples of the former Yugoslavia (although probably less to Slovenians). Croats, Serbs, Bosnian Muslims, Montenegrins, Macedonians are classified together as Balkan peoples, as tribalists and savages who have been engaged in 'age-old conflicts' (Gamson, 1995). Thus, as opposed to being a central part of a European discourse of domination, Croatia and perhaps even Slovenia are significantly distanced from western Europe proper through the exact same process of exclusion and the process of the social construction of otherness that is the hallmark of the 'orientalism' that Bakić-Hayden and Hayden describe in their analysis. It is possible to see the situation as quite the opposite to that described by Bakić-Hayden and Hayden: while Croatian and Slovenian intellectuals sought to distance themselves from Serbia, this was less an act of 'orientalism' (which, if we remain true to Said's conception, must be accompanied by physical or political domination) than it was an act of self-definition or self-determination, which worked as a means of resistance to Serbian hegemony and as a cultural legitimation for the idea of independent nationhood. Seeing such rhetoric as a device for differentiation that works to liberate ethnic groups from Serbian hegemony is difficult, since as we noted earlier, the negative attributes of Croatian nationalism, especially in the discourse of proponents of the Yugoslav ideal, are usually stressed instead of its actual or potential liberal dimensions.

Second, the application of the term 'orientalist' to Croats and Slovenes connotes that the latter dominate Serbs. This connotation is not in keeping with the strong

sociological evidence for Serbian hegemony in the former Yugoslavia. For the Croats or Slovenes to be orientalists in Said's sense of the term, they would have to be in a position of tangible power over Serbs in Yugoslavia, since orientalism *is* the cultural domination that accompanies tangible political domination. Orientalism is a discourse of the powerful, not of the oppressed. With the exception of the period during the Second World War, it is decidedly not the case that Croats were dominant in Yugoslavia. In fact the situation was quite the opposite: Serbs were the dominant ethnic group in Yugoslavia in terms of numbers and in terms of tangible political and military power. In the political realm, for instance, in 1988 Serbs comprised 44 per cent of the membership of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) in relation to a population of 38 per cent in Yugoslavia as a whole. Croats, the next largest ethnic group, represented 13 per cent of the membership of the LCY in relation to a population of 20 per cent of the country as a whole. In military institutions, Serbs were also dominant: in 1991, Serbs constituted 60 per cent of the officer corps of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) in relation to a population of 36 per cent in the country as a whole. Croats represented 13 per cent of the corps in relation to a proportion in the country as a whole of 20 per cent (Hashim, 1993: 325). These are quite remarkable and powerful indices of Serbian hegemony in the former Yugoslavia. Said's notion of orientalism loses all its theoretical power if it is applied to peoples who are the hegemonic power in a social relationship rather than to those who *resist* hegemony. Bakić-Hayden and Hayden construct a scenario in which hegemonies are the supposed 'victims' of orientalism at the hands of those who are themselves subject to Serbian hegemony. Such was not the intention of Said's original work and this application would likely be refuted by Said himself.

Another fact that is worth mentioning along these lines is that Bakić-Hayden and Hayden construct Serbs as the target of orientalism at the same time that Serbian forces were mounting a military offensive against Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. They completely ignore this act of domination, as well as the cultural work of Serbian orientalists who created a discourse which dehumanized Muslims as a legitimizing strategy for the physical extirpation of Muslims and the establishment of a Greater Serbia (Cigar, 1995: 69–73).<sup>10</sup> Given the fact that Said's model was specifically designed to examine the cultural construction of Muslim identity by imperial powers, it seems better applied to the interpretation of the cultural work, which grounded a rational plan for genocide carried out by one of the largest modern armies in Europe. Thus, in Bakić-Hayden and Hayden's account, Serbian orientalism is explicitly masked in favor of an account which constructs the image of the Serbs as victims of symbolic domination and violence.

Finally, Bakić-Hayden and Hayden's view dismisses the possibility that there *are* actual cultural differences between 'East' and 'West' in the Balkans. While it is the case that these differences are socially constructed and that intellectuals magnify these differences (or deny them) for political purposes, this does not preclude the exploration of the independent effects of culture on human action. As W.I. Thomas noted in his famous sociological axiom, 'if men define situations as real they are real in their consequences'. This theorem is a mainstay of contemporary cultural sociology. However useful it is to label cultural sociology as 'essentialism' or 'racism' in order to mobilize political sentiment against sociological analysis, such labeling also denies the possibility of a non-essentialist cultural sociology which could explore:



- (a) the actual cultural boundaries and differences between Croats and Serbs and
- (b) how these cultural differences might, from a theoretical perspective, exert an independent effect on various types of social action in the Balkans, including acts of aggression.

The idea that the espousal of cultural differences as a source of social action is a form of orientalism thus denies a cultural sociology which may, in fact, provide some understanding of current events in the region (Mestrovic, 1993).

Making an argument for culture as an explanatory variable does not preclude one from working for the denial of cultural difference as part of establishing a modern and liberal social order. As I have noted, it was decidedly the case that Serbs were the victims of genocide at the hands of the Croatian Ustasha during the Second World War. That genocide was grounded in a Nazi-like ideology of the racial inferiority of Serbs rather than in a nuanced and sociologically informed conception of cultural difference. Just as all expressions of Croatian nationalism can be elided with the Ustasha, so too can reasonable efforts to discuss real cultural differences between the peoples of the former Yugoslavia be elided with overtly racist ideological pronouncements emanating from reactionary and racist expressions of Croatian nationalism. It is worth stressing that the rhetorical construction of Serbs as victims of the symbolic violence of orientalism, the cornerstone of Bakić-Hayden and Hayden's work, took place at the same time as a program of organized physical violence was occurring against Croatian and Muslim populations at the hands of the supposed 'victims' of orientalism. Again, as with the case of Denich's article, this discourse resonates strongly with the rhetoric of victimization, which is the core legitimation strategy of Serbian propaganda. In each case, the rhetorical strategies and discursive practices are intellectual reworkings of some of the elemental themes of the Bosnian Serb propaganda that underlay acts of aggression against Croats and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia.

While the examples offered in the Denich article are not overt apologies for Serbian aggression and genocide (although they could be read as that), they rely on the same rhetorical structures that exist in formal Serbian propaganda which sought to justify and legitimate military aggression and violence against Serbian enemies in the former Yugoslavia. In such propaganda, there is very little mention of any acts of Serbian aggression; those acts, instead, are masked by a focus on acts of barbarism perpetrated against Serbs by Croatian fascists in the Second World War, by the linkage of all acts of Croatian nationalism with fascism, and by the conscious attempt to deny that distinctions between victims and aggressors existed in this *fin de siècle* Balkan war. In this sense, the arguments under criticism are not at all detached and neutral, despite their grounding in the rhetoric of adherence to the rhetoric of social scientific norms of 'balance', 'objectivity', and 'understanding'. Such discourse imagines itself as critical of a 'one-sided' discourse and, in offering the 'Serb side of the story', claims to establish balance in the debate. Balance is achieved, but often at the expense of making confusing analytical and empirical distinction by the misapplication and decontextualizing of theoretical concepts, or by stressing one set of facts over another. In this sense, the articles discussed earlier might be seen as 'relativistic performances' which demonstrate their partisanship, not only by what they include but by what they exclude. As Kenneth Burke (1965: 49) notes: 'Any performance is discussable either from the standpoint of what it *attains* or

what it *misses*. . . . A way of seeing is a way of not seeing – a focus on object A involves a neglect of object B.’

There are both philosophical (or moral) and political consequences of such relativistic styles of thought. In the first case, such styles of thought make the *moral analysis* of the war problematic. Moral judgments, the assignment of responsibility for war crimes and genocide, and the establishment of verisimilitudinous accounts of the war are lost in the privileging of interpretations that favor the use of morally neutral, relativistic categories to the interpretation of the Balkan conflict. Relativistic styles of thought do not deny the possibility for the assignment of primary responsibility to Serbian forces (and they do acknowledge it in most cases), but they strain at the same time to raise other events to the same status and, thus, create the perception of equality of guilt and the assignment of equal responsibility for collective violence and mass killing. It is this elevation of competing, incommensurate accounts that is central to relativist thought structures and the principal mechanism by which such thought structures work to influence pragmatic political outcomes. These outcomes are many and a discussion of them is beyond the scope of this article. Relativistic interpretations of the war in Bosnia, interpretations that were created and disseminated by these anthropological accounts, served as important frames of reference or typifications, to use Alfred Schutz’s terminology, which guided the choices and actions of western political elites in relation to the Balkan conflict. The homologues between these anthropological accounts and those produced by political elites who had a vested interest in staying out of the conflict are instructive.

Throughout the Balkan conflict, western political policy toward the Balkans and toward the genocide that was occurring there was one of appeasement and toleration of Serbian military aggression and genocide. This policy was facilitated by the presence of relativistic styles of thought that circulated in western intellectual discourse on the war. It is sufficient here to point out some of the most prominent examples of political rhetoric which mirror the rhetoric of the articles discussed earlier:

- In responding to the initial reports emanating from Croatia and Bosnia which provided evidence of genocide, George Bush announced: ‘In all fairness I have to say to the American people that what’s happening [in Serbian concentration camps] is not genocide’ (in Brewda, 1992: 46).
- Cyrus Vance, on 5 November 1991, opposed sanctions against Serbs, claiming that it was ‘not at all clear who is the aggressor and who the victim in this conflict’. (Brewda, 1992: 49). It is worth noting that this statement was made *after* the Serbian dominated Yugoslav National Army had already invaded Croatia and begun the policy of ethnic cleansing and murder of thousands of defenseless Croatian civilians.
- In an interview with *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 29 November 1991, French President François Mitterrand focused on Croatia’s Nazi past: ‘All I know is that the history of Serbia and Croatia has been filled with such dramas for a long time. Especially during the last world war, many Serbs were killed in Croatian camps. As you know, Croatia was part of the Nazi bloc, [while] Serbia wasn’t’ (in Brewda, 1992: 50). This statement is particularly striking given Mitterrand’s avowed collaboration with the Vichy regime during the Second World War.

- On 23 April 1991, US Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger reported on the *MacNeil Lehrer News Hour* that the war would not end until Croats and Serbs 'got tired of killing each other' (Brewda, 1992: 51).
- In 1992, US State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler noted that 'there are also others who have been involved in contributing to the violence, and in fact, excuse me, some of them were Bosnian armed individuals' (Brewda, 1992: 51).
- Yet another observer would claim, 'This war has never been quite as simple as aggressor or victim . . . there are elements of aggression, there are elements of civil war, there are elements of provocation on all sides' (quoted in Maass, 1996: 255).

Relativistic discourse on the war represents an active and independent cultural force that *enabled* and *legitimated* policies of appeasement or inaction in the region. Relativistic accounts work not so much because they are the dominant element of discourse on the Balkan war – in fact, it should be noted that many intellectuals opposed the war on moral grounds and refused to engage in equivocal or relativistic interpretation of the war. Rather, relativist accounts work precisely because they are grounded to such an extent in the rhetoric of reason and a commitment to the scientific and balanced interpretation of historical events. Thus, they appear reasonable and plausible and, regardless of their empirical veracity, they exert their effect by drawing on the rhetoric of reason and objectivity to raise doubt among those who might be inclined to take a moral position or to engage in one course of action that might favor one side or the other. Relativistic thought styles are not simply a reflex of the social positions of the intellectuals who produce them, but, once created, are active and independent cultural forces that guide the formation of subsequent ideas of other intellectuals and the political practices of elites in other sectors.

While the relativist disposition is enduring, it has its roots in the concrete history of the study of the former Yugoslavia. The western Balkan Studies community consists of many intellectuals – in particular those from the left – who were deeply committed to the Yugoslav project of federalism. Tito's break with the Soviet Union and the condemnation of Stalin's excesses made Titoism and the Yugoslav variety of communism particularly attractive to left intellectuals. The project of Yugoslav federalism, however, was accompanied by the very real political dominance and hegemony of ethnic Serbs: it might indeed be said that Yugoslav communism was subject to a gradual process of what Jean Baudrillard (1996: 84–6) has referred to as '*aserbisement*' or 'Serbianization'. In this respect it is no coincidence that favoritism toward the Yugoslav idea among western intellectuals was accompanied by positions which were more accepting and accommodating to Serbian positions, even nationalist ones, which defended the 'Yugoslav idea'. The acceptance of Serbian perspectives on the war was enhanced even more as it became clear that the nationalist activities of non-Serbs in the former Yugoslavia were the key impetus for the unraveling of the Yugoslav federal project. Commitment to Yugoslavism as an ideology, which maintains that Yugoslavism was the only means for keeping southern Slavs from murdering each other, is not necessarily a commitment to civilized ideals such as tolerance and interdependence, although it *could* be that. Because of the connection of Serbian interests to the Yugoslav project, the ideology of Yugoslavism also served to maintain Serbian hegemony in the region: when that hegemony was threatened by social movements for self-determination such as those

that occurred in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the response of many western intellectuals was to see such movements as the cause of the crisis, rather than an indication of a more general crisis of Yugoslav communism itself, or the domination of Serbs over other ethnic groups. Western intellectuals who were committed to Yugoslav federalism became what some call 'Yugonostalgics', who were so pained by the break-up of the FRY that they were willing to accept the views of even quite extreme Serbian nationalists. Many of them located the crises of Yugoslavia in the expressions of nationalism which were increasingly evident after the death of Tito and which were the basis for the secessionist movements for independence, which ultimately brought on the dissolution of the country. An alliance with Yugoslavism, at least in the way that it expressed itself in the 'actually existing socialism' in Yugoslavia, brought with it an acceptance of Serbian hegemony. As a result, the kinds of relativist discourse outlined earlier could be expected to resonate quite strongly with Serbian ideological claims which underlay the different expressions of Serbian aggression in the region.

Western policy toward Bosnia was grounded in a commitment to a form of rationality which excluded moral and ethical analysis of the conflict. In fact, the accounts analyzed in this essay were, in spite of their rhetoric of scientific objectivity and pretensions toward suspending the ethical, masking an ethical position of support for Serbian aggression. The idea of an 'interested anthropology' is a desirable one, though a certain degree of detachment and objectivity is still important. Nancy Scheper-Hughes has laid out an argument for an ethically involved 'militant anthropology' which calls for the ethical grounding of anthropology. The accounts here seem to be the antithesis of a morally engaged analysis of the Balkan tragedy, not only because they skirt the question of the ethics of the conflict but, more importantly, because they echo the views of aggressive Serbian nationalists who committed vast crimes in Bosnia. At the very least, a centrally important aspect of a morally engaged anthropology is the responsibility not to offer intellectual legitimization to those who commit crimes against humanity. Given the nature of the contemporary world and its persistent conflicts, we must ask ourselves whether we want an anthropology that sponsors appeasement and rationalizes violent aggression, or an anthropology that produces knowledge in the service of universal human rights and the protection of the weak.

### **Acknowledgements**

A longer version of this paper was published as *Critical Theory and the War in Bosnia and Croatia* in the Donald W. Treadgold Papers in Russian and East European Studies (Cushman, 2000). The present version appears at the invitation of Richard Wilson, the Editor of *Anthropological Theory*, who felt that some of the arguments made deserved a wider audience among anthropologists. I am grateful to Professor Wilson for the invitation to publish this shortened version of the original paper and to Glennys Young for granting me permission to reprint parts of the original paper. I am also grateful to Sabrina P. Ramet for urging me, in the first place, to explore the issues here.

### **Notes**

- 1 There are many examples of this that could be cited, but a particularly interesting one is found in a letter to the editor of *The New York Review of Books*, 21 December 1995, by *New York Times* journalist David Binder. Responding to an article by

Robert Block, critical of the indicted war criminal General Ratko Mladic, Binder writes: 'I strongly wish to disassociate myself from his [Block's] assessment of the general as a crazed killer. Until compelling evidence to the contrary surfaces, I will continue to view Mladic as a superb professional, an opinion voiced by senior American, British, French, and Canadian military officers who have met him or followed his career and who are better qualified to judge him than either Block or I' (Binder, 1995: 85).

- 2 Crimes committed against Serbs, which include summary executions of soldiers and civilians, torture and mistreatment of prisoners in detention, arbitrary arrests and disappearances, destruction of civilian property and robbery, killing, assault and harassment of journalists, are perhaps best documented by Helsinki Watch in an extensive and well-documented 'Letter to Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, Vol. 4, Issue 4 (13 February 1996). For a detailed scholarly description and analysis of the nature and causes of war crimes and atrocities committed by Croatian and Muslim forces in Bosnia, see Norman Cigar (1995, 1996).
- 3 Thus, writing early on in the conflict in September 1991, Human Rights Watch noted that:

The majority of abuses committed by the Croats involve discrimination against Serbs: the Croats' beating of prisoners in police custody and their failure to rigorously prosecute a killing are also serious violations. The abuses committed by the Serbs involve physical maltreatment – including the beating and use of electric shocks against prisoners – and egregious abuses against civilians and medical personnel, including the use of human shields and the taking of hostages. The Yugoslav army is also committing serious human rights violations by attacking civilian targets in coordination with the Serbian insurgents. Recent examples of such attacks occurred during the week of August 19th, when the Yugoslav army attacked civilian targets in Osijek and Vukovar. (Human Rights Watch, 1991: 27)

- 4 Two most notable examples of such critiques are the works of Allan Bloom (1987) and William J. Bennett (1992).
- 5 This important distinction between moral relativism and cultural relativism is made clearly and compellingly by Daniele Conversi (1996: 246). Conversi establishes a point that is central to this article, namely, that equivocation and equidistance in historical interpretation are a consequence of moral relativism.
- 6 Using a Mannheimian approach to explain relativist thought-styles is odd in the sense that relativism is the charge that is most often raised in criticism of Mannheim's approach. This is a complex issue. I consider it ironic, rather than contradictory, to use Mannheim to ground a critique of relativist thought-styles in relation to the war in Bosnia. Mannheim himself sees the task of the sociology of knowledge not to deny the possibility of absolute truth, but to increase the possibility of objectivity in the pursuit of knowledge: 'The problem is not how we arrive at a non-perspectivistic picture, but how, by juxtaposing the various points of view, each perspective may be recognized as such and thereby a new level of objectivity attained' (quoted in A.P. Simonds [1978: 179–80]).

- 7 There is, as yet, no complete English-language treatment of the Ustasha period. While uncritical of Partisan atrocities in the Second World War, Richard West (1993: 77–102) offers a detailed account of the scope and ferocity of the Ustasha terror.
- 8 Article 15 of the Croatian Constitution states, though, that ‘Members of all nations and minorities shall have equal rights in the Republic of Croatia. Members of all nations and minorities shall be guaranteed freedom to express their nationality, freedom to use their language and script, and cultural autonomy.’ A critical examination of Serbian misstatements about the content of the Croatian Constitution (and the acceptance of those misstatements by prominent western intellectuals) can be found in Letica (1996: 178–80).
- 9 *Slavic Review* is regarded as the most prestigious journal in Balkan and East/Central European studies. It is the official journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS). It is worth noting that there were very few articles published in the journal on the dissolution of Yugoslavia and none about the resulting war and its salient traits.
- 10 For an actual example of such orientalist discourse, which seems to be shared by a number of western intellectuals, see Radovan Karadzic (1994: 15–17), who constructs the primary identity of Bosnian Muslims as terroristic fundamentalists.

## References

- Bakić-Hayden, M. and Hayden, R. (1992) ‘Orientalist Variations on the Theme “Balkans”: Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Politics’, *Slavic Review* 51(1): 1–15.
- Banac, I. (1992) ‘The Fearful Asymmetry of War: The Causes and Consequences of Yugoslavia’s Demise’, *Daedalus* 121(2).
- Baudrillard, J. (1996) ‘The Serbianization of the West’, in T. Cushman and S. Mestrovic (eds) *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bennett, W. (1992) *The De-valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children*. New York: Summit Books.
- Binder, D. (1995) ‘Letter to the Editor’, *The New York Review of Books*, 21 December: 85.
- Bloom, A. (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Boyle, F. (1996) *The Bosnian People Charge Genocide: Proceedings at the International Court of Justice Concerning Bosnia v. Serbia on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. Amherst, MA: Aletheia.
- Brewda, J. (1992) ‘Bush Sees No Genocide in Bosnia as Death Toll Rises’, *Executive Intelligence Review* 19(35): 46.
- Burke, K. (1965) *Permanence and Change*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Cigar, N. (1995) *Genocide in Bosnia: The Policy of ‘Ethnic Cleansing’*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Cigar, N. (1996) ‘The Serbo-Croatian War, 1991–1992’, in S. Mestrovic (ed.) *Genocide After Emotion: The Postemotional Balkan War*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Conversi, D. (1996) ‘Moral Relativism and Equidistance in British Attitudes to the War in the Former Yugoslavia’, in T. Cushman and S. Mestrovic (eds) *This Time We*

- Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Cushman, T. (1996) 'Collective Punishment and Forgiveness: Judgments of Post-Communist National Identities by the "Civilized" West', in S. Mestrovic (ed.) *Genocide After Emotion: The Postemotional Balkan War*. New York: Routledge.
- Cushman, T. (2000) 'Critical Theory and the War in Croatia and Bosnia', Paper Number 13 (Monograph), Second Edition, *The Donald W. Treadgold Papers in Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies*. Seattle: Henry M. Jackson School of International Affairs, University of Washington.
- Cushman, T. and S. Mestrovic, eds (1996) *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Cuvalo, A. (1992) 'Croatian Nationalism and the Croatian National Movement (1966–1972) in Anglo-American Publications – A Critical Assessment', *Journal of Croatian Studies* 30: 69–88.
- Denich, B. (1994) 'Dismembering Yugoslavia: Nationalist Ideologies and the Symbolic Revival of Genocide', *The American Ethnologist* 21(1): 367–90.
- Gamson, W. (1995) 'Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and the Politics of Exclusion', *American Sociological Review* 60(1): 1–20.
- Gellner, E. (1985) *Relativism and the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gellner, E. (1990) 'La Trahison des La Trahison des Clercs', in I. Maclean, A. Montefiore and P. Winch (eds) *The Political Responsibility of Intellectuals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Government of the FR of Yugoslavia (1995) 'Statement of the Government of the FR of Yugoslavia on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Victory over Fascism', *Yugoslav Survey* 36(2).
- Gutman, R. (1993) *A Witness to Genocide*. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International.
- Hashim, I. (1993) 'Regional Polarization in Postwar Yugoslavia and the Impact on Regional Politics', in R. Ali and L. Lifschultz (eds) *Why Bosnia? Writings on the Balkan War*. Stony Creek, CT: Pamphleteer's Press.
- Helsinki Watch (1996) 'Letter to Croatian President Franjo Tudjman', *Helsinki Watch* 4(4) 13 February.
- Human Rights Watch (1991) 'Yugoslavia: Human Rights Abuses in the Croatian Conflict', *Human Rights Watch* 3(14).
- Karadzic, R. (1992) 'The Road to Sarajevo', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 9(1).
- Karadzic, R. (1994) *Bosnia: Le Enjou Tragique*. Lausanne: L'Age d'homme.
- Letica, S. (1996) 'The "West Side Story" of the Collapse of Yugoslavia and the Wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina', in T. Cushman and S. Mestrovic (eds) *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia*. New York: New York University Press.
- Lipstadt, D. (1993) *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. New York: Free Press.
- Lytle, P.F. (1992) 'U.S. Policy Toward the Demise of Yugoslavia: The Virus of Nationalism', *East European Politics and Societies* 6(3).
- Maass, P. (1996) *Love Thy Neighbor: A Story of War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

- Mannheim, K. (1993[1953]) 'Conservative Thought', in K. Wolff (ed.) *From Karl Mannheim*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction.
- Mestrovic, S. (1993) *Habits of the Balkan Heart: Social Character and Fall of Communism*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Mestrovic, S. (1994) *The Balkanization of the West*. New York: Routledge.
- Moore, P. (1995) 'Milosevic's War: The Tide Turns', *Transition: Events and Issues in the Former Soviet Union and East Central and Southeastern Europe* 1(20): 5.
- Popper, K. (1963) *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Primoratz, I. (1992) 'The War Against Croatia: Salient Traits', *Journal of Croatian Studies* 32/33: 91–111.
- Pusic, V. (1992) 'A Country by Any Other Name: Transition and Stability in Croatia and Yugoslavia', *East European Politics and Societies* 6(3).
- Ramet, S. (1992) *Balkan Babel: Politics, Culture, and Religion in Yugoslavia*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Rupnik, J. (1993) 'The Reawakening of European Nationalisms', *Social Research* 63(1).
- Said, Edward (1979) *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1992) *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1995) 'The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology', *Current Anthropologist* 36(3): 409–20.
- Simms, B. (1996) 'Review of *Genocide in Bosnia: The Policy of "Ethnic Cleansing"* by N. Cigar', *The Historical Journal* 39(2).
- Simonds, A.P. (1978) *Karl Mannheim's Sociology of Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, D. (1997) *Conceptual Practices of Power*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Staub, E. (1989) *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, M. (1994) 'Complete Control', *New Statesman Society* 7(308): 17.
- Tudjman, F. (1989) *Bespuca povijesne zbiljnosti: rasprava o povijesti i filozofiji zlosilja*. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske.
- Vidal-Naquet, P. (1992) *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Vidal-Naquet, P. (1995) *Holocaust Denial in France: Analysis of a Unique Phenomenon*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University.
- West, R. (1993) *Tito and The Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson.

---

THOMAS CUSHMAN is Professor of Sociology at Wellesley College and editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Human Rights*. He is the co-editor of *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia* (New York University Press, 1996). Address: Department of Sociology, Pendleton East, Room 334, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02481, USA. [email: tcushman@wellesley.edu]

---