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YOUTH AND TRANSITION IN CROATIA

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FOREWORD

I ask the reader to try and imagine what the sociological atlas or at least a map of Croatia today would look like, if someone were to draw it. It seems to me that it would be much like a map of the Antarctic. What I mean is that continent is visualized as a large white surface underneath, which the true relief of land is hidden. Croatia would not quite resemble a compact white surface, but more large white patches, which would make its relief only partially visible. What would these patches represent? They would be the social phenomena on which we have no or very little scientific empirical data. In other words, where there was no systematic sociological research we would be faced only with whiteness.

True, the map of socialist Croatia would also have quite a few white patches, but this would be due to other reasons. In the Croatia of those days, the insufficiency of empirical research was in good part conditioned by the self-censorship of the scientists. During the past ten years, though, the main reason for this has been the financial drought that was, in a certain way, caused by the war. To be more specific, the war has introduced some new elements to the national priority list – for example, the cost of the purchase of weapons or allocating funds to provide for the refugees and exiles. And science, as in the socialist Croatia, did not hold a high position on that list. By adding new goals to the existing list, science was suppressed to even lower levels on the scale of national priorities. Hence the financing of research projects becomes very questionable.

But, in socialist Croatia (as in most parts of the former Yugoslavia) the issue of youth was well covered by empirical research. How can this be explained? Is it possible that the political regime back then was more liberal toward such research? However strange this might sound today, it is logical to assume that the regime really was more liberal in this regard. When it comes to the young, the same factors were at work as in Western Europe and America, and they were recognized as the factors of modernization. Indeed, the authors of this monograph were right to stress that the appearance of the young as a specific social group was a direct result of the modernization of the society. In the traditional society, youth as a separate social group could not have been formed, because the inclusion of an individual into the sphere of work started very soon (even in early childhood), and this process slowly and invisibly progressed to the adolescent years. The thing is that there was no long-term education as there is today, when inclusion in the educational process can last even up to one's thirties. This long lasting education separates young people from the world of labor and they are in a way isolated from society in separate sub-cultural groups. An

important part of these subcultures is modern music as the backbone of the so-called pop culture, which is, in turn, positioned between the traditional folkloristic culture and the high culture as defined by the humanistic intelligentsia. Of course, the pop culture has, in the widest sense of the term, amalgamated with the consumer society, the mass media and show business. The import of pop culture, as well as of some elements of consumerism, was allowed in the socialist period because the political elite did not deem it might endanger its political monopoly. This is why the researchers of youth had considerably more freedom in their work than their colleagues in some other fields. Apart from this, empirical data about the political attitudes of the young toward the political-institutional system, even in the beginning of the 1980's, still indicated these attitudes were very positive. I have used that data myself to prove that the "great coalition" between politocracy and the working class, as the base of social stability, had not yet been seriously disrupted, in spite of the economic crisis.

Of course, in the development of research into young people we cannot disregard another factor, the great agility of the researchers, in that period, who belonged to the young or the younger middle generation of the Croatian scientists. The authors of this book were also a part of that generation. It can be stated that a certain tradition of empirical research into young people was created and that this tradition is being renewed after the period of war.

Here, I must observe that it is a pity this research was not conducted in the period between 1992 and 1995. To be more exact, the changes that probably took place in that war period could have been directly identified. First of all, the process of becoming an adult, which is still a very interesting phenomenon, is especially intriguing during times of war, when growing up occurs on the frontlines. We might take this as an experiment – of course, not a laboratory or a field experiment – which might be treated as some sort of a natural experiment. Furthermore, there was a chance to observe a deviation from the influence of modernism on the attitudes and behavior of the young, that is, a certain move back to traditional values and away from secularity (re-traditionalization and desecularization). Just to portray one detail: the first volunteers from the cities went to war with rosaries around their necks, which is otherwise unusual even for the rural areas in Croatia. To specify, rosaries were used by women in prayer, but very rarely by men. But, we have no empirical information about that element of re-traditionalization. What is even worse, that which was missed during years of war cannot now be replaced. Every intention to reconstruct that period through a retrospective survey would be methodologically, extremely unreliable. The authors of this book are obviously aware of this.

So why was it that the researchers did not start this research project earlier? Simply because they could not secure even the minimal financial means for it. But, three years after the Dayton agreement, they succeeded in obtaining the necessary funds, and they conducted some research in which many of the ques-

tions, used in the survey conducted in 1986, were replicated. This helped obtain a longitudinal study, which tells of changes in the attitudes and behavior of the young, during a longer period of time. However, the dynamics of those changes could not be completely reconstructed, because the war period had not been specifically investigated.

It is obvious that the modernization factor is still at work today, regardless of what took place during the war period. However, another dimension appears here: pop culture in Western countries was only one side of modernism in action. The other side consisted of rebellion against the establishment, expressed especially in 1968, and political campaigns actions against war (primarily the one in Vietnam), against neo-colonialism and the policy toward the so-called third world. But, at the end of this period, a certain reintegration of some youth (especially student) leaders occurred. Those who successfully finished their studies also ensured success in their careers and on the financial markets, and turned into yuppies. And, some of them made a successful political career, and became the pillars of order and the system. It is sufficient to mention just two names: Javier Solana and Joschka Fisher. This, of course, did not end the somewhat "oppositional" action of the young in the West, but, it seems that, after the breakdown of the socialist utopia, this type of engagement is considerably more realistic than before the fall of the Berlin wall. This imposes another question: will the democratization in Croatia open up space for political engagement of the young, not just within the parties as such, but in the sense of associations of the civil society? The survey data from 1999, speak of a considerable aversion of youth toward politics. This remains to be seen.

Besides modernism, an important factor of changes in the attitudes and behavior of the young was the war itself. Is this factor still at work? Probably not, but it left scars expressed in PTS and the increase of the number of suicides of former soldiers. Along with that, in the immediate post-war period, which started with Dayton and is still going on, there are other factors related in some way to the war. I could outline a certain discourse on "deconstruction" and the demythologization of the Homeland War. Does this have the same influence on the young as on the older participants of the war? Has this anything to do with PTSS and the increase of the suicide rate? This question is difficult to answer because we lack studies from the war period.

There is one more type of reaction to all those turbulent times, the aspiration to emigrate, as well as real emigration. In other words, an escape from the existing situation. Plus, emigration is always selective: the ones who leave are the ones with better education, with the knowledge of foreign languages and culture, the ones more adaptable to life in a modern society and the ones who have the "guts" (in the sense of entrepreneur abilities and affinities). Combined with the sharp decrease in the birth rate, the flight of such young people to other countries is also becoming a severe demographic problem.

At the beginning of the ninth decade of the twentieth century a new factor, about to have a long-term influence on the attitudes and behavior of the young appeared on the Croatian scene. It was transition. Transition in itself creates grave problems for the young generation even there where this process has passed more successfully than in Croatia. Namely, we need to be aware that the transition into capitalism is a far more complex thing today than it was half a century ago. Today, in the era of globalization, there have occurred – due to many reasons, which I cannot detail here – significant changes in the relationship of labor and capital. In short, the fact is that capital no longer has to worry about the reproduction of the labor force, and this is reflected on the labor market. The general tendency is the decrease of full-time jobs, which used at one time to be a rule. There is an increasing growth of so-called flexible employment (temporary employment, part-time employment, work for a subcontractor who rents his own production capacities and services to large companies, and pays his workers when a contract with that company is signed, and the like) or, technically speaking, new jobs open up mostly in the secondary, and less in the primary labor market. In Croatia this is expressed mostly through the replacement of the work contract by the services contract. This most of all affects young people searching for employment after having finished school. Certainly, this is true for other transitional countries as well: the young people there are gravely affected as well, that is, their social position has deteriorated. But, as is emphasized in this book, this has occurred in Croatia more severely than in the countries where transition has been more successful – e.g., in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia. To be more exact, beside the problems normally related to the transition into modern capitalism, transition in Croatia started at the most adverse moment, which brought about the well-known consequences. This is why Croatia has clearly fallen behind in the process of transition: we are again at the very beginning of that process. This problem has been addressed in the book, but there are still very few comparative studies with other, more successful transitional countries. This is certainly a subject for future research, which will, hopefully, follow in the coming years.

But, in the meantime, this comparative study should not be underestimated, because it deals with the relevant aspects of the issues of youth in Croatia in the middle of the 1980's and the end of the 1990's. In this connection, it should be pointed out that the special value of this research is to be found in the fact that it is the only research conducted after the 1990, that covers all the main segments of the young population on the entire territory of the Republic of Croatia. I believe that this research announces a successful restoration of the tradition of empirical research into the young generation, which was started in the last two decades of the socialist period.

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