"The Serbian Bastille": Memory, Agency, and Monumental Public Space in Belgrade
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This article examines the relationship between memory, agency, and place in a central “lieu de mémoire” in downtown Belgrade called Republic Square. On the basis of archival and ethnographic research, the “symbolically charged” nature of the square is examined in terms of how its meaning has fluctuated over time and how it has been appropriated by the state and social actors at various historical moments. The national memory inscribed in the square is explored in relation to the city as a social space and, at times, a competing community of memory. The square is examined as a space where divided memories are negotiated and where the desire for entry into the symbolic terrain of Europe has been staged over the past century.

Keywords: monuments; memory; Belgrade; agency

During the North American Treaty Organization’s (NATO) 1999 bombing campaign of Serbia, the downtown core around Republic Square (Trg Republike) became the main meeting ground for mass demonstrations. The demonstrations were visited by citizens on all sides of the political spectrum whose divisions were temporarily overcome for the purpose of effecting a display of “absolute unity,” according to state-run media (Milisaljevic, 1999, p. 23). The Milosevic-dominated media continuously ran images of these gatherings as evidence of support for the regime, interpreted in the familiar categories of Serb nationalism: as redemptive signs of the enduring heroism of the Serbian spirit and the valorization of Serb sociality as a mark of resistance to Western individualism. As one protester featured in the daily paper said, his motivation for coming to the demonstrations at the square was to show that “our spirit
cannot be conquered by their bombs . . . and that in our country, there is absolute unity” (Milisaljevic, 1999, p. 23).

The demonstrations were held almost daily for the entire duration of the 3-month bombing campaign. There were approximately 15,000 people at the demonstrations daily, which usually involved song and dance and at some points had an almost car-navalesque character, in the Bakhtinian sense of subversion through reversal and parody. For example, in a series of staged events, on April 2, a donkey was led into the square with a plaque around its neck reading “Madeleine Albright.” The public gatherings were called pesma nas je odrzala, “songs sustained us.” Demonstrators gathered at the square and around and sometimes on the monument to Prince Mihail (Knez Mihailo), packed the cafés lining the square to join the protest, and kept track of the war planes flying overhead. Yugoslav flags and symbols regained their popularity during the anti-NATO protests. Demonstrators drew parallels between the NATO bombing and Yugoslav resistance to Nazism during World War II, and Tito-era Partizan films thematizing the war were broadcast continuously on state television (Jansen, 2000, p. 409).

These demonstrations were met with confusion in the West, interpreted as more evidence of “Balkan irrationality,” Politika, the state newspaper, printed the reaction of Madeline Albright to these gatherings at the square: “I just don’t understand anything, these people are totally insane” (Milisaljevic, 1999, p. 23). In retrospect, these gatherings have become a romanticized mark of Serb unity and resilience in popular mythology. And yet, the decision to meet at the square prompts questions about the symbolic links between the monument and Serbian autonomy and more generally between space and “modern historical recollection” (Heller, 1993, p. 36).

With this in mind, this article traces the history of Republic Square and argues that this lieu de mémoire (Nora, 1989) is where attempts at identity renewal—official and dissident—have been staged in 1867, 1944, 1991, 1997, 2000, and other times. This is not to say that the square is the only significant public place in Belgrade—Kalemegdan Fortress, Terazije Square, Student’s Square (Studentski Trg), and Radio and Television Serbia are but a few of the other important places that have featured prominently in the political and civic life of the city. Despite this, the square is a rich and complex site that raises questions about memory and agency that are worth investigating. Given the square’s centrality during crises but also in day-to-day normality, it is not surprising that there has been little written on the square and the monument. This is common, according to Nora (1998b), when symbols are “so closely tied to national identity, so familiar, and so inherently expressive of their own meaning . . . it was never felt necessary to ‘objectify’ them for the purpose of study” (p. x). Following from this, I examine how this symbolically loaded site has been the site of semantic struggle during times of political crises.

A couple of concerns drive this inquiry. First, Republic Square has been described to me as the “psychosocial” core of Belgrade and is bound with the imaginary of the city in ordinary and extraordinary ways. It has also been described as “the heart of the city” and a site that is “symbolically charged” (Spasic & Pavicevic, 1997, p. 5). The square illustrates how memory is an active social process that engages a monumentalized past, which from this perspective does not belong exclusively to the realm of artifact and history texts but enjoys a level of plasticity and productivity that is often unexpected. I wish to probe the spatial politics of the square and the links between memory and agency that it prompts, proceeding from Heller’s (1993, p. 49) claim that
“living history” creates the conditions for action, initiative, and creativity, so that the scope of memory exceeds the contemplation of the past as relic.

The second concern is to examine how the spatial politics of the square refers us to the symbolic and imaginary terrain of the “Balkans” and registers the symbolic borders of the post-Tito era. As Bakic-Hayden (1995) argues, pre-1918 divisions within the former Yugoslavia have become repoliticized by post-Tito nationalism. For example, politicians in Slovenia and Croatia have argued that they are more inherently European because of their Hapsburg (rather than Ottoman) history (Bakic-Hayden, 1995, p. 922). According to Mocnik (2002), belonging to Europe is at the core of post-
Yugoslav nationalist discourse that positions neighboring nations as “Balkan” and, hence, just outside the European civilizational axes. It is vis-à-vis the discourse of the nation that entry and exit to Europe (for which read “civilization”) is facilitated and where the gatekeepers stand to keep the Balkan others at bay (Mocnik, 2002, p. 83). Belonging to Europe, then, implies an escape from the complex of identity and difference characterizing the nations of the former Yugoslavia.

Zizek (2000) addresses this issue by asking the pivotal question “Where do the Balkans begin?” (p. 3). To this question he responds,

The Balkans are always somewhere else, a little bit more towards the southeast. . . . For the Serbs, they begin down there, in Kosovo or in Bosnia, and they defend the Christian civilization against this Europe’s Other; for the Croats, they begin in orthodox, despotict Byzantine Serbia, against which Croatia safeguards Western democratic values; for Slovenes they begin in Croatia, and we are the last bulwark of the peaceful Mitteleuropa . . . for many North Germans, Bavaria, with its Catholic provincial flair is not free of a Balkan contamination; many arrogant Frenchmen associate Germany itself with an Eastern brutality entirely foreign to French finesse; and this brings us to the last link in this chain: to some conservative British opponents of the European Union, for whom—implicitly, at least—the whole of the European continent functions today as a new version of the Balkan Turkish Empire, with Brussels as the new Istanbul, a voracious despotic centre, which threatens British sovereignty. . . . Is not this identification of continental Europe itself with the Balkans, its barbarian Other, the secret Truth of the entire movement of the displaced delimitation between the two? (pp. 3-4)

Republic Square poses the question of how this Balkanist discourse is inscribed within the memory-nation nexus and the urban context of Belgrade. I explore how Republic Square is a site where the boundary of belonging to the imaginary terrain of Europe has been staged and imagined over the past century. Mocnik (2002) argues that the nation is the site of this dynamic; I explore how the urban space of Republic Square reinforces and complicates the Balkanist discourse.

The “Europeanization of Belgrade”

Let’s begin by contextualizing the space historically in order to imagine what is at stake here in the Serbian imaginary. The actual territory that is occupied by the square now was near a Roman forum and the site of Roman ruins. In 1723, the Ottoman Empire constructed a gate, which was the beginning of the road to Istambol and was fittingly named Stambol Gate (Stambol Kapija). The site has been called the “Serbian Bastille” (Politika, 1979, p. 13), and there are some parallels between it and representations of the French Bastille. The Bastille is synonymous with redemptive themes; as Hugo wrote, its tower La Tourgue “epitomized fifteen hundred years of history: the Middle Ages, vassalage, serfdom and feudalism” (quoted in Amalvi, 1998, p. 121). Similarly, Stambol Gate had a tower at which disobedient Serbs were punished, executed, and displayed by the Ottoman administration. Given this, the place and the gate played a prominent role in the imaginary of the city, invoking themes of trauma, sacrifice, and humiliation. This was also the site where both Serbian nationalist uprisings against the Ottoman soldiers occurred, invoking themes of national assertion and liberation. The French Bastille reminds us that the materiality of the bastille represents
the monolith of the *ancien régime*, and its inscription into a cosmological order that renders it immutable. In Serbia, although the uprising meant the restoration of the Serbian monarchy, it also meant the final departure of the Ottoman administration from Belgrade and other, although not all, parts of Serbia.

The gate became the core of the newly liberated city following the uprisings, and in 1867, the prince immediately ordered that the gate be destroyed and a monument be constructed in its place. The destruction of the gate was a symbolic act of separation from the Ottoman Empire, a representation of a radical rupture with the past, in line with 19th-century revolutionary ideologies. Following this, the site was appropriated for a monument to mark the passage of the colonial situation, and if not so much the origin of Serb autonomy then at least the renewal of an autonomy disrupted in 1389 and a continuity with a remote medieval glory. Furthermore, the idea of monumentalizing Serb autonomy is consistent with 19th-century incarnations of the nation-state ideologies, representing Serbia’s desire to take its place among the nations of Europe.

The site was immediately allocated for a monument and was conceptualized as a place for the “gathering of people” (Aleksic et al., 1980), which had been relatively controlled up to then. This sense of the place as a site of public meeting and agency has had a lasting resonance and has since been a focal point of public demonstrations—official and oppositional, orchestrated and spontaneous. The monument to the prince marks the open space of the square and is the center of the city’s public life, not only during times of crisis but also in day-to-day sociality.

Stambol Gate was attacked in the first Serbian uprising in 1806 and was the burial site of one of its leader-martyrs, Karapica. The gate was finally destroyed in the final Serbian uprising in 1867. Surrounding the gate in the 19th century was an Ottoman mosque and a cemetery, and it is important to note that the site has long been considered the core of the city. The Austro-Hungarians who occupied the city had also intended to convert this space and a few blocks around it into a large central space for official events, parades and political gatherings (Aleksic et al., 1980).

The idea to build a specifically Serbian monument began to circulate in the mid-19th century (Aleksic et al., 1980). The idea was met with a considerable amount of hostility or suspicion, because there was no Serbian school of sculpture at the time, so its ability to represent or embody Serb autonomy was deemed suspect. The momentum around the project picked up in 1867 as the renewed autonomy of the Serbs gave rise to a new impetus for self-assertion and the consolidation of the memory-nation nexus. A new committee was formed to construct the monument, followed by a series of architectural changes, the construction of monuments, and the transformation of public space. This coincided with preparations to commemorate the 1,000th anniversary of Russia. A Russian sculptor who was involved in preparations for the commemoration approached Serbian diplomats in Petrograd with a proposal to construct a large monument in Belgrade, which thematized the liberation of Serbia (*oslobodila Srbije*). The proposal was considered, and much debate ensued, but it was ultimately rejected for “aesthetic and political reasons” (Documents from the Prince Mihail dossier, n.d.).

The rejection of the Russian project can be read as a refusal to make the major public marker of Serb autonomy concretely and symbolically linked with the larger Slavic world, especially Russian pan-Slavism: Instead, Serbia chose to establish closer proximity with Europe in this monument. The commission was given to an Italian sculp-
tor, who planned the design along an Italian classical renaissance model. The monument to the prince (who was assassinated before it was completed) is aesthetically typical of a classical renaissance sculpture of a man with a sword on a horse—there are several that are quite similar throughout Europe. However, what is significant here is how the face of the city was transformed at this critical historical juncture: Ottoman mosques, homes, and buildings were destroyed, followed by the reconstruction of the facade of many of the buildings downtown in European styles. Thus, the building of this monument is linked with a series of other architectural changes to the city that were part of the “Europeanization of Belgrade” (Skalamera & Jakovljevic, 1964, p. 36). Despite the fact that there has been a town on this site since Roman times, the majority of the buildings in the city are from the 19th century, which is a key metaphor for thinking about the interplay of memory and amnesia in the city.

Thus, the transformation of the square seems deeply linked with the process of the “Europeanization of Belgrade” that occurred after 1867, suggesting that Serbian autonomy and liberation were conceptualized as Serbia’s joining Europe and ridding itself of the traces of its Ottoman past. This suggests what Mocnik (2002) has argued is at the “traumatic” core of Balkanist discourse: that the location of the border of the nation, and implicitly autonomy, is dependent “upon recognition of the other” (p. 93). We can see the tension here between autonomy and belonging to Europe, closely linked with the monument and Balkanist discourse more generally.

Given this, although the monument is typical of what Nora (1998a, p. 615) has labeled “classical commemoration,” it is a highly ambiguous symbol. The appropriation of the site of Stambol Gate suggests a link or intermediary between Europe and the East, as it was literally the beginning of the road that led to Istanbul. On the other hand, there was an attempt to sever ties and erase signs of the Ottoman presence in Belgrade. The site selected for the monument is nonetheless where Serbian nationalism expressed itself in public gestures of defiance, so that autonomy and “the joining of Europe” have a difficult and complex relation. Moreover, this is mirrored for Western Europe and suggests why the post-Yugoslav wars are so troublesome for European identity. They bring to the surface Europe’s own repressed not-so-distant past, revealing the dynamic of the “displaced delineation” as Zizek (2000, p. 4) has labeled it, that situates the “Barbaric Other” within.

Following from this, in the construction of the monument and the remodeling of the downtown core around it, we can see how Serbia’s national assertion is being linked (symbolically and architecturally) with proximity to Europe. The archives describe the architectural and political transformation of the period between 1868 and 1880 as marking “the final departure of Turkish garrisons from Belgrade. This political event marks a historical turning point when Serbs were free to devote themselves to the construction of their capital city” (Skalamera & Jakovljevic, 1964, p. 36). The text continues that this period was characterized by the final departure of the methods of construction practiced up to this time and the transformation of the city, its buildings, and economic processes from a Balkan and oriental spirit to a European model. The development of Prince Mihail Street brings out the manner through which Belgrade was Europeanized and its architectural heritage is evidence of this process. (p. 36)

The entire street of Knez Mihailo, which leads from the square up to the fortress, has only one building left that predates the 1867 period, testifying to the comprehen-
It is generally claimed that it was only after 1867 that the city of Belgrade took its face (Cekulic & Skalamera, 1966, p. 38). Prince Mihail Street was the first to be named by Serbs in 1867 and remarkably is “one of the few that from the beginning to today has never changed its original name” (Vujovic, 1994, p. 121).

The square was originally called Theatre Square, as it was next to the site chosen for the National Theatre (Narodno Pozoriste), and the monument was unveiled in 1873, which “inaugurat[ed] the complete liberation from 500 years of Ottoman colonization and represent[ed] 19th-century Serbian artistic realization, on a scale with the rest of Europe” (Documents from the Republic Square dossier, n.d.). The restoration

Figure 2.

Source: Author.
of the integrity of Serbia was inscribed in the body of the prince riding his horse with a sword and his right arm thrown up in a gesture of defiance and victory. On the side of the monument, in relief, are scenes from Serbian history, such as the handing over of the keys by Ottoman administrators to the city of Belgrade on April 8, 1867.

Following from this, as the first official monument commissioned by the Serbian state in Belgrade, we can begin to imagine what is at stake in the selection of sites and symbolic resonance for the city.

From Theatre Square to Republic Square

On November 25, 1945, Tito made his first public address to the new Yugoslav socialist federation from the terrace of the National Theatre overlooking the monument and subsequently renamed the space Republic Square. The renaming of this square articulates the redefinition of the community, or, as Campbell (1998, p. 14) has argued, it is precisely these gestures that institute and ground new symbolic communities. By renaming the square, I would argue that an attempt was made to invent the imaginary of the Yugoslav socialist federation, incorporating the symbolic resonance of the city core. This official discourse hinged on the memory of the resistance to the Nazi occupation that occurred in this public space and the construction of Yugoslav unity engendered by the World War II-era opposition to the German occupation.

After World War II, the site became an object of discussion (conferences were devoted to the issue in 1949-1950, 1954, and 1960), and it is important to note that the square was perceived as a problem that had never really been resolved by the city but remained “open even today” (Aleksic et al., 1980). After the war, any immediately visible trace of the gate’s foundation was destroyed, and the plan was to transform the space into a more functional space for demonstrations (manifestacioni trg; Aleksic et al., 1980). The plan was to “solve” the problem of the square in a way that facilitated a “complete retreat from the repetition of its old form” (Aleksic et al., 1980). Thus, as the new regime constructed an official commemorative policy for the former Yugoslavia involving monuments, a curriculum, and state holidays, the square became an object of debate.

The square played a role in the World War II-era resistance; thus, it lent itself easily to triumphant postwar narratives. It was the site of clashes during the German occupation in 1941 and then again in 1944, so that in commemorative discourse, the site was mythologized, a place where lives were sacrificed against a powerful foreign occupier. The square was selected to be the burial ground for the 976 Red Army soldiers who died in the 1944 battle, and a monument was constructed to mark this here, although they were exhumed and buried across town in 1951. Thus, Republic Square was the burial place of “Serbian” martyrs in the uprising against the Ottoman Empire and then a cemetery for “Yugoslavs” who were killed fighting against the Germans. At one time, Stambol Gate was a link to occupiers from the East (Istanbul), and then, a century later, the occupiers came from the West (Germany). Thus, if the monument is generally interested in constructing an “imaginary wholeness” (Huyssen, 2003, p. 39), the square is the site of contact with others, where attempts are made to heal divisions and maintain integrity, an integrity that is enhanced in the face of a threat.

From the late 1940s onward, there was a synchronized campaign across the republics of the former Yugoslavia to map out the ideological version of World War II,
which was called the *National Battle for Liberation* (Narodna Oslobodilacka Borba). The National Battle for Liberation became the central category for socialist commemoration during Tito’s regime, which attempted to manage the highly divisive memory complex of World War II and structured discourse in schools, media, public spaces, and monuments. While the logic of commemoration in the Socialist Federation hinged on the appropriation of the memory of war, it also drew on the categories and logics of earlier memories. Vlaisavljevic (2002) has argued that ideology in the former Yugoslavia attempted to transform the memory of “pre-modern, mostly lost wars” into the memory of modern, “victorious national liberation wars” (p. 202). There was an attempt to fold the memory of the site—namely, the uprisings—into the official history of World War II. The commemorative logic of Tito’s regime reflected the urgency to construct a homogenous memory of a divisive war, but more than that, a founding gesture of the nation, what Vlaisavljevic (p. 206) has labeled the “constitutive political myth” of Titoism.

**From Republic Square to Freedom Square**

To this point, I have examined how official commemorative campaigns appropriated the square through the monumentalizing strategies of the nationalist and socialist variations. Despite this, the question of the city begs to be asked, because these commemorative spaces are central to micro, urban sociality and operate in concrete ways that, I argue, displace the centripetal intentions of a state memory-nation nexus.

Under the socialist regime, Belgrade emerged as the symbolic and administrative core of the regime, which is suggested by the declaration of the federation in the celebration overlooking the square in 1945. Consequently, Belgrade became a strong focus of resentment and division in the 1990s, and these tensions between the republics were exacerbated by the post-Tito discourse. For Croatia and the other regions, Yugoslavia represented the hegemony of Serbia and Belgrade in the federation, and to the Serbs, it represented quite the contrary, the sacrifice of Serb interests for the Yugoslav federation. Thus, during the intensely heightened nationalist climate in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Belgrade itself became an object of suspicion in Serb nationalist discourse because of its ties with the Yugoslav regime; it was labeled “Tito’s whore” (*Titova kurva*; Vujovic, 1997, p. 95). In addition, the city was also suspect in the nationalist climate because it was perceived as far less ethnically homogeneous than the other parts of Serbia. A discourse emerged that labeled Belgrade a multicultural, and hence suspicious, and socially derelict environment, which mirrored some of the 19th-century discourse on the city.

Jansen’s (2001, p. 38) research on the opposition movement in 1996 and 1997 examines how it mirrored this discourse by representing the regime as “the victory of the countryside in the city,” articulating itself in terms of a conflict between the city and the state. In this discourse, the city became the privileged site of democratic awakening, the link with Europe and the outside world. This discourse also constructed a self-consciously urban identity that actively distinguished itself from the rural majority of Serbia, which it represented as doomed to languish in the anomaly of the “Balkans”.

The crescendo of civic unrest in 1996 and 1997 was arguably the most dramatic and fascinating of the oppositional episodes. The civic unrest, which lasted for several months, was the unexpected and spontaneous reaction to municipal election fraud
and was composed of two streams: the Zajedno coalition (which had a concrete political objective) and the student movement, centered at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Belgrade (Filozofski Fakultet). The opposition demonstrations developed a series of complex spatial strategies involving the appropriation of symbolic public spaces in order to map out a supple and innovative critique of the regime. As Spasic and Pavicevic (1997, p. 2) point out, it was precisely this ability to graft a political discourse onto a geographical one that rendered key urban places of memory such as Republic Square able to express charged gestures of critique in the absence of other avenues of expression.

One of the main spaces for staging oppositional actions, as Jansen (2001, p. 46) points out, was Republic Square, and it was consequently informally renamed Trg Slobode—Freedom Square—by the protesters in 1997. Often, protesters were prohibited from leaving the downtown core by cordons of police, so that the tension between autonomy and containment was an interesting and productive one. This renaming suggests the site’s centrality in articulating opposition and arguably resonates with the longer memory trajectory of the site as a place of agency and the contestation of authority. Jansen (p. 38) notes that to go to the square during these periods of widespread dissent was to identify oneself as a participant in the opposition and implicitly a citizen in the political geography of Europe. Moreover, the name Freedom Square suggests, according to Jansen’s analysis, its status as a “liberated place” (p. 46). That is, the square was unhinged from its usual semantic context and reimagined in new ways in order to represent resistance to the regime, despite, as Jansen (p. 44) argues, the proximity of police forces. However, as I have attempted to illustrate, the resonance of this square with Serbian autonomy has a long and complex trajectory. The tension between the square’s monumentality (as a prop of the 19th-century nation-state) and the memory of spontaneous mobilization constitutes its “symbolically charged” nature and is reflected in the struggle between the regime and city staged here.

However, Jansen (2001) continues that the opposition discourse of “Serbian politics were framed in and derived meaning from certain wider European contexts” (p. 51). The diachronic reading that I have elaborated illustrates how this wider European context is already inscribed in the square, rendering it an effective reference point for reimagining the “civilizational axes” between Europe (urban) and non-Europe (rural). As Jansen describes, the Milosevic regime was seen largely as the domination of the rural (for which read “Balkan”) hordes over the city, and key regime players were described as “villagers” (p. 43). The boundary of the Balkan—“always ... a little bit more towards the southeast” (Zizek, 2000, p. 4) but always in close proximity—shifts yet again so that the walls of the city keep out the Balkan hordes and is represented in the spatial politics of opposition employed in Republic Square. Thus, how opposition discourse conceptualized the square as the point of entry into Europe—read as freedom and autonomy—echoes the Balkanist logic demonstrated during the “Europeanization of Belgrade” and the construction of the monument.

The square was the major site of protest in the 1990s, where witty and playful actions were staged, revealing a critical engagement with authoritarian memory structures. The examples are numerous, and in 1996, the demonstrations lasted for months and involved on average 100,000 people per day (Spasic & Pavicevic, 1997, p. 3). For weeks during the 1996-1997 opposition peak, people were asked to bang on pots and pans during the time of the evening news on Milosevic-run television, to drown out the propaganda (Jansen, 2001, p. 41).
On New Year’s Eve in 1997, a magician performed a trick for half a million people gathered at the square titled “a typical Belgrade trick,” which staged the miraculous evaporation of votes, a reference to Milosevic’s unwillingness to concede election results from November of that year (Dragicevic-Sesic, 1997, p. 78). When, a few days earlier, Milosevic had staged a rally at nearby Terazija Square, which gathered people from throughout Serbia who were given large portraits of Milosevic, a parallel oppositional rally was organized at Republic Square. On December 13, 250,000 people gathered to hold a silent vigil in recognition of Ferizu Balakcarjiu, a Kosovar who was the victim of police brutality (Vujovic, 1997, p. 175). Of course, the square was not the only site that played a role. Dedinje, the residence of Milosevic, and the Tito Memorial Center were objects of critique and satire. Radio and Television Serbia and City Hall also figured prominently (Dragicevic-Sesic, 1997, p. 76).

Thus, the tension between movement and inhibition at the square is a metaphor for how the site shifts from an official monument to a site of agency, from a reified to a politicized public space. The square is literally the place where divisions intersect and resistance is asserted, against the Ottomans, the Germans, and, in the 1990s, the state. Somewhere between the continuities and transformations within the square, a narrative emerges about its role in the national and urban memory nexus.

Reading the Square

There are a few key points that emerge from this discussion of Republic Square. First, Republic Square and the monument to Prince Mihail are interesting because they register the tensions between official history and public memory, the national and the urban. The monument and the square play, in the words recorded in the city’s archives, an “exceptionally important role in terms of the continuity [italics added] of the city” (Aleksic et al., 1980). I have traced the memory trajectory of the square since the monument was constructed in the late 19th century in order to consider both the continuities and transformations. What becomes evident is that the square (particularly its 19th-century undertones) has a plasticity that lends itself to the articulation of national, urban, official, and oppositional memory. In this case, the square as a prop of monumental history, the arid object of history textbooks and “dead memory,” appears insufficient to account for the role of the “symbolically charged” place in the historical memory of the city.

What emerges is an ambiguous space, because it is a site where memory rises and falls, where moments of collective uprisings in Serbian history are staged, where breaks with the past happen, and where day-to-day urban life is mediated. The heterogeneity of the city displaces the monumentalizing pull of the memory-nation nexus but also draws on it in order to articulate a specifically urban identity. Huyssen (2003) argues that despite global trends, memory remains inextricably linked with the nation’s past so that “the political site of memory is still national, not post-national or global” (p. 16). However, Republic Square illustrates the role the city can play in negotiating the “political site of memory” and the complex and often tension-filled relation between national, postnational, and urban forms of citizenship.

Third, the square reveals how deeply inscribed Balkanist categories are within the memory of the city and the nation. As Zizek (2000) writes, “the Balkans” refers not so much to a “real geography” as an “imaginary cartography which projects on to the real
landscape its own shadowy, often disavowed ideological antagonisms” (p. 4). The square is arguably suspended in these ideological antagonisms, and a shifting discourse that maps out the nation and city’s relation to the “Balkan.” The linkages between the end of the Ottoman era, Serbian autonomy, agency, the city, and the promise of Europe inscribed within the space are thematized in different registers at different historical moments. Given this, it should not surprising that on the 1-year anniversary of the assassination of Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic, the city of Belgrade announced that it was changing the name of part of the square to Doctor Zoran Djindjic Place. In fact, parallels have been drawn between the assassination of Prince Mihail in 1868 and that of Djindjic in 2002 (see Pupovac, 2004). The two are seen as kindred spirits: Prince Mihail is described recently as “a lonely European in a poor and unenlightened Serbia” (Pupovac, 2004), and Djindjic is being mourned and commemorated for having attempted the democratization of Serbia. As Vuco describes Djindjic’s legacy,

Zoran Djindjic will endure as a symbol of modern Serbia. . . . He attempted the impossible in Serbia. I don’t want to raise a monument to him . . . but I believe that Djindjic’s attempt to democratize Serbia will be carved in stone in Serbian history. This was an attempt by a politician to battle with monsters, and against not only a ten-year period but the whole post-war period, fifty years, even a hundred years, the whole non-democratic legacy of Serbia. (quoted in Pupovac, 2004)

Thus, the square became inscribed with yet another political inflection, this time the ambiguous legacy of Djindjic, a deeply controversial politician in Serbia who is commemorated in the square as having attempted to democratize Serbia and implicitly stage the exit from authoritarianism and the “Balkans.”

Finally, despite the square’s “origins” as a classical monument to the state, it manages to retain a degree of semantic openness and, I would argue, is suspended in the Belgrade imaginary between a marker of “collective effervescence” and the monumentality of 19th-century ideologies. The monument has a semantic power that is taken for granted because socialization into the city life involves tacit knowledge of “the horse.” The horse is arguably a central navigating feature, the compass of the downtown core, in ways that are ordinary and banal. On the other hand, it is where the politics of memory expresses itself at key junctures and where categories of belonging are imagined.

True to its monumentality, the square is a site that facilitates the reconciliation of divisions and the institution of new ones: Serbia against the Ottomans, Yugoslavs against the Germans, Europe against the Balkans, rural against the urban, and the city against the regime. While the square has had various ideological incarnations, it was constructed by the newly liberated Serbian state to represent its legitimacy as a concrete reminder of the stakes on which it was erected, marking the absence of the Ottoman other in its newly recovered autonomy. Despite this initial intention, it has sustained different historical narratives, and historical accident has rendered it a malleable public space for social actors, as much as a tool of official history. Thus, we can see that the distinction between official history and public memory, “real” and “mythic” pasts (Huyssen, 2003, p. 15), “inauthentic” state memory and “authentic” public memory (Olick, 1998, p. 383) are indeed difficult to discern, as they spill into each other continuously. What is revealed is the malleability and the resilience of the
sites where the present is imagined and the perennial struggle between remembering and forgetting that this entails.

Conclusion

Republic Square emerges as a complex urban space and lieux de mémoire that has lent itself to expressions of political will, highlighting the linkages between memory, agency, and place. In March 1999—the first day of the NATO campaign against Serbia—a decision had been passed to construct a large watchtower in Republic Square to count down time until the new millennium. As in many other cities, there were debates about whether the millennium should be celebrated that year or the following one. On January 1, 2000, as planned, the watch stopped counting backward and began functioning as a regular clock, counting time in a forward sequence (Prodanovic, 2002, p. 200). The following year brought more unrest but also the opportunity for renewal after October 5, 2000. When New Year’s Eve came that year to the square, celebrators were surprised when the watchtower malfunctioned and displayed “01.01.1901” (p. 200). This was met ironically, as Prodanovic writes: “This infallible apparatus confirmed what we had suspected for a long time: that Serbia had received an unsatisfactory grade for the 20th century and that we would have to repeat it” (p. 200).

The collapse of time represented in the dysfunction of the watch need not represent only the repetition of the catastrophic past but, more precisely, the pressing need to revisit the past and develop a critical and indigenous discourse on national responsibility, which rejects the binaries of Balkanist discourse. On the other hand, the opposition movement of 1996 articulated itself as engaged in a series of struggles, between “civilization and barbarism, democracy against tyranny” and most important for our purposes here, “the future against the past” (Jansen, 2000, p. 407). In these terms, the transition to the promise of Europe is read as a battle waged against the tyranny of the past, an exit strategy from the anomaly of Balkan memory, into the future, even the amnesia of “progress,” prosperity, and democracy. However, as Heller (1993) points out, in the theoretical insight that motivates this article, “living history” is what renders politics—democratic politics, one would hope—possible. Thus, the square signals that memory is not only a relation to the past but equally, as Heller argues, the resource for potential politics, initiative, and creativity. The square and the monument are the “props” (Halbwachs, 1941/1992, p. 25) and the spaces where the present is negotiated, staged, and transformed. Republic Square illuminates not only the links between memory, place, and agency but, perhaps more important, what is at stake in this complex relation.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge Zavod za Zastitu Spomenika Kulture Grada Beograda (the Institute for the Preservation of Monuments for the City of Belgrade) for granting me access to its archival materials in the spring of 2002. This article examines the politics of memory of the square and the monument to Prince Mihail (Knez Mihailo) that was constructed in the middle of it. The square was originally named Theatre Square because the National Theatre was built
next to the monument. The name was changed to Republic Square in 1945. The square and the
monument are referred to here as Republic Square.

2. See Vujovic (1997), Dragicevic-Sesic (2001), Spasic and Pavicevic (1997), and Jansen
(2000, 2001) for more on the opposition demonstrations throughout the 1990s.

3. See Jansen (2001) for a more thorough description of the reemergence of Yugoslav
symbols and discourse during the NATO bombing of Belgrade.

4. I am basing this description on newspaper coverage of the protests in the Serbian press
but also on nondirected interviews conducted during my fieldwork.

5. See also Bakic-Hayden and Hayden (1992) for more on this.

Modern Conscience articulates this. A Serbian soldier was asked about the Serb-Croat conflict
and about the differences between them, and to this question he answered, “They [the Croats]
think that they are better than us. They want to be gentlemen. They think that they are fancy
Europeans. I’ll tell you something. We are all just Balkan shit” (quoted in Kiossev, 2002, p. 189).
See also Todorova (1997) for more on Balkanist discourse.

7. I focus on three historical junctures: 19th-century Serbian nationalism, Communist Yu-
goslavia, and post-Tito Yugoslavia. I do not address the first interwar Yugoslavia.

8. In the archives, there are no fewer than 16 reasons for the “significance of the site” (zna-
cenja mesta). Most often, they are historical, such as demonstrations, uprisings, and deaths.
There are several references to World War II events, which occurred on and within a few square
blocks of the square: the location of the Gestapo prison, the location of important early Com-
munist Party meetings, and the place where five activists were killed by Germans in 1941. In the
file, these events become fused with the symbolism of the square.

9. For more on the economic, political, and symbolic importance of Belgrade to Serbia, see
Vujovic (1997).

10. See Banac (1984) for an examination of these relations dating back to the interwar era.

11. See Vujovic (1997) for research on representations of Serbian urbanity during the 1990s.

12. See Jansen for a thorough look at how the urban was equated with the European in the
oppositional discourse of 1996.

13. See Lazic (1999) for an interesting examination of the participants of this movement,
their reasons for being there, and their sociological profiles.

unrest in Belgrade and the relations between police sent to curb the demonstrations and the
protesters. It articulates this tension well. The film is both a commentary on the regime and the
rural-urban divide. The comic relief of the film is a policeman who is represented as a “villager.”
He is endlessly incompetent, he gets lost in Belgrade as he is not familiar with it, and he talks
incessantly about life on the farm. At the end of the film, he gets a promotion and becomes the
leader of the police unit.

15. Spasic and Pavicevic examine the carnivalesque character of the opposition demonstra-
tions of 1997, writing,

Our people lack the religious tradition of carnival . . . there were no ready-made formulas to be taken
over from the cultural heritage. Further, people who proved themselves capable of responding in this
way have lived all their lives under two endlessly stiff and dumb regimes. Where did the capacities
for this carnivalizing creativity stem from? They could emerge and flourish only in those sub-in-
stitutional, semi-public spheres which the former Titoist-regime left aside for free interaction (such as
pubs and cafes, private parties, the street or certain seemingly non-political, public manifestations).
The now-proved productivity of the free spirit created in these sites retrospectively asserts their sig-
nificance. (p. 11)
References


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