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# The streets of Beograd. Urban space and protest identities in Serbia

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## Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Serbia, this text explores spatial dimensions of the 1996–1997 protests against the Milosevic regime. It considers the significance of spatial practices of resistance embedded in the urban space of the capital city Beograd, and analyses the relationship between the formation of identities and symbolic practices of protest, by exploring the role of spatial metaphors such as ‘the City’ and ‘Europe’ in subversive discourses, gradually shifting the analytical focus from the urban locale, and tactics of territorialisation, to the spatial metaphors of ‘the City’ and ‘Europe’, and tactics of deterritorialisation. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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*Idemo dalje.* Let’s go on — thus said the electoral slogan of Milosevic’s Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) in November 1996. While this resulted in a resounding SPS victory in the federal Yugoslav elections, a great number of citizens seemed determined not to go any further with the ruling party in the subsequent municipal elections on 17 November 1996.<sup>1</sup> In almost all urban centres of Serbia, the polls were won by the opposition coalition *Zajedno* (‘Together’). The results, at odds with the Serbian regime’s understanding of democracy, were immediately overruled through overt government intervention in the civil service and in judiciary institutions.

To the astonishment of most local and foreign observers, hundreds of thousands of citizens came out on the streets, and rallies against the electoral fraud were organ-

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<sup>1</sup> The Albanian majority population of Kosova, as they call it, had decided not to join the SPS on its way long before. For years, they boycotted all Serbian political institutions (including elections), as a reaction to police repression and the denial of basic human rights by the Serbian regime.

ised in most Serbian cities. There had been mass anti-war and anti-regime protest in Serbia in the war years (in 1991, 1992 and 1993), but brutal police interventions and, on one occasion, tanks sent in by Milosevic had swept the demonstrators off the streets and plunged the country into a rollercoaster of war, nationalist euphoria, and socio-economic disaster. In terms of opposition, the resulting war-tiredness, disillusion with political initiative, preoccupation with everyday life survival and massive outmigration by the young and educated, hardly provided a fertile soil for action.

But in November 1996, things had changed. The post-Yugoslav wars were over, read: *lost*, and the electoral fraud by the regime set off a wave of overt dissent, which involved hundreds of thousands of people, and lasted for almost three months. The two main co-ordinating forces were the victorious *Zajedno* coalition and the student councils of Serbian universities. Sociologically, the protests had a relatively homogeneous base: empirical surveys pointed out that the participants were predominantly young or middle-aged, well educated, urban, and middle class (Bobovic, Cvejic, & Vuletic, 1997; Milic, Cickaric, & Jojic, 1997). However, politically, they represented a rainbow-like coalition of perspectives, ranging from committed peace-activists to ardent nationalists. According to polls carried out on the spot, some 13% were members of one of the political parties that made up *Zajedno*, and a further two-fifths considered themselves sympathisers of one of those parties (Bobovic et al., 1997, p. 22). Moreover, contrary to the ambitions of opposition party leaders such as Vuk Draskovic and Zoran Djindjic, only 4% of the participants explicitly stated support for opposition *leaders* as a reason for joining.

In this way, the demonstrations brought together a diverse array of people bound together by anti-Milosevic feelings. The latter's habit of strategic switching between political discourses made this possible: there were nationalists who blamed the *communist* Milosevic for Serbia's decay, and there were anti-nationalists who blamed the *nationalist* Milosevic for bringing war and poverty to the whole of former Yugoslavia. In practice, the only demand that was comprehensively articulated was respect for the outcome of the elections.<sup>2</sup> The demonstrations conveyed an unspecified anti-regime discourse, with 'the citizens' being the political subjects behind it (Mimica, 1997, p. 11). This was at once their strength, as the polysemy of its messages allowed for mass support, and their weakness, as it rarely transcended re-active transgressions of official topographies of power (Cresswell, 1996, p. 175).

### **Protest and politics: what if the why is the when?**

Sometimes history plays games with ethnographic studies. In that way, this text has been invited to play an uncanny version of hide-and-seek. When, in autumn 1996, I made final preparations to start ethnographic research for my PhD on anti-

<sup>2</sup> Research was carried out by local sociologists during the protests. See for instance Babovic et al., 1997; Radosavljevic, 1997; Anon., 1997a. Later, an English language special issue of the Beograd journal *Sociologija* was devoted to the demonstrations (1997, vol. 39(1)). The proceedings of a local conference on the protests were published in Cupic (1998).

nationalist resistance in former Yugoslavia,<sup>3</sup> everything seemed suddenly overtaken by new, overwhelming events. In Serbia, hundreds of thousands were on the streets against their own government. In England, where I was packing my bags, pub talk and front page photographs switched their focus from Bosnian battlefields to Beograd city streets. In the Western media-tinged gaze, at once, ‘the Serbs’ had changed from bloodthirsty Balkanese warlords to guardians of democracy in the face of an evil dictator.<sup>4</sup> In Serbia, nothing was ever going to be the same again, or so it seemed.

Well, it certainly wasn’t for me. The first months of my fieldwork in Beograd were entirely dominated by the adrenalin of the demonstrations.<sup>5</sup> By the time I had come back from fieldwork, in autumn 1998, the excitement had gone. With the benefit, or rather the tragedy, of hindsight it doesn’t take a lot of cynicism, and there is no lack of that in Serbia, to say that the 1996–1997 events were, at best, just another aborted attempt at democratisation. Although the demonstrators eventually succeeded in redressing the election fraud, the *Zajedno* coalition collapsed soon after. More recently, the Kosovo crisis and NATO air strikes have brought about yet another episode in the country’s decade of post-Yugoslav decay. If the situation in Serbia has changed since I carried out the research for this text, there is at least one factor in this play, so far, that hasn’t changed: the director. At the time of writing, Slobodan Milosevic still rules and, in that respect, the 1996–1997 protests, anti-regime in nature, have not been able to bring about any changes.

Moreover, since then, political earthquakes have overtaken the winter protest: terror and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, NATO bombs, and refugee floods changed the picture dramatically. Once more. And just now, with the whole fragile situation in the Balkans looming behind these words, what am I letting myself in for by digging up the story of the 1996–1997 protests? Is this the right moment? No, surely not, but will there ever be one? This text has been kicked around by history. And probably the kicking around hasn’t come to an end yet.

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<sup>3</sup> Ten months of ethnographic fieldwork on anti-nationalism in Beograd, after which one year of research in Zagreb, Croatia. I have returned to the region numerous times since, and in the summer of 2000 I started a new year-long research project in Bosnia.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the place of the Balkans, and particularly of Bosnia, in the US geopolitical imagination, see Ó Tuathail (1996).

<sup>5</sup> My role in the demonstrations was not one of a neutral observer, nor did I want it to be so, as the 1996–1997 Winter Protest in Serbia was the only large, sustained uprising against one of the governments responsible for the post-Yugoslav wars. Nevertheless, my participation was often uncomfortable and reluctant, due to the presence of Serbian nationalist elements, Orthodox imagery, or what I sometimes saw as urban snobism. Also, I regretted the relative lack of attention for what I thought were crucial issues (the wars, above all, but also xenophobia, minority issues, and so on). My reluctance reflects a general problematic aspect of public rallies, as it is not clear for instance to what extent everybody gathered in a certain rally identifies with the words that fill the air or with the flags that assert their claim over that place. A protesting crowd is heterogeneous, and a protest “discloses momentary voices of those opposed to dominating power within particular spatio-temporal contexts” (Routledge, 1996, p. 524) — but it often represents them, and is represented, as homogenous. However, I actively participated in the protests, mainly the ones organised by the students, believing they represented an important political outburst of popular energy which could, on the long term, make a difference.

## Protest and the city: the terrain of resistance

It is not my intention here to go into the party political or ideological dimensions of the winter protests,<sup>6</sup> nor do I analyse the events as a social movement. Instead, the focus is of a different, and specifically symbolic kind: I explore meanings and strategies of space, in terms of the way it was practised politically in the Beograd demonstrations. I hope to provide a critical insight into some aspects of the anti-Milosevic protests,<sup>7</sup> and particularly into the ways in which the protestors transformed the city into a 'terrain of resistance', which, following Routledge, I understand both in a metaphorical and in a literal way: it was the ground on which the protests took place, and the representational space in which the events were interpreted (1997b, p. 561).<sup>8</sup> Why did they come about when they did, and why were they concentrated in cities, and especially in the Serbian capital Beograd? How did this specific locale, location and sense of place (Agnew, 1987) inform and reflect the character, the dynamics and tactics of the events? What kind of place-specific discursive practice of protest was developed, especially in relation to spatial metaphors of 'the City' and 'Europe'?

It is important to note that the 1996–1997 demonstrations were strongly concentrated in the cities of Serbia, and particularly in Beograd<sup>9</sup>. It was in the urban centres that the opposition parties had won the elections, whereas the results in the countryside had still favoured the regime (Anon., 1997b). Also, in its efforts to contain the unrest, the police deployed heavy violence against any signs of agitation in provincial towns, which relied strongly on regime-controlled flows of information. All this consolidated a popular image amongst many *Beogradjani* that the Milosevic regime represented a victory of the countryside over the city (Ramet, 1996, p. 76). It was crucial to the self-presentation and to the tactics of the protest that the locale of the events was not a village, nor a field, but a city, and that the location was circumscribed by the post-Yugoslav crisis and the Milosevic regime. These factors, I believe, explain the strong movement towards territorialisation of the city in the protest. However, I would argue that for many participants of the demonstrations the urban character of the demonstrations went far beyond that. As we shall see, this links in with a more general discourse of urbanity, European-ness and opposition (see Jansen, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Although modern in their political discourses, in many ways, the demonstrations represented a post-modern political practice: heterogenous, symbolic, strongly media-ted (Routledge, 1997a). For attempts to begin the urgent task of a strictly political analysis of the demonstrations, see Thomas, 1999, pp. 263–318; Bobovic et al., 1997; Radovic & Veljanovski, 1997; Spasic & Pavicevic, 1997b.

<sup>7</sup> This analysis of the spatial practices of the protests does not claim to be exhaustive. I am aware of the existence of other exclusionary spatial discourses involved, for instance on a gender and ethnic basis. Moreover, I myself, of course, am implicated in 'geographies of exclusion' (Sibley, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> See also Routledge (1996, pp. 516–517; 1994, pp. 560–564); see Sharp, Routledge, Philo, & Paddison (2000, pp. 25–26); Massey (2000, p. 283).

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, this has changed after the 1999 NATO air strikes, when nodes of resistance emerged increasingly in provincial towns (see Jansen & Spasic, 2000).

## Movement strategies: territorialising the city

In November 1996, even when it had become clear that the street protest in Serbia was not simply a fleeting upsurge of popular energy, the regime continued to ignore the demonstrations in its media. While massive special police forces were called up, the crowds were allowed to walk more or less freely through Beograd and many other cities, as long as they kept away from sensitive spots such as bridges, official buildings and ministerial residences. Later, after what seemed like intentional provocations by the government, a number of incidents served as a pretext for a subsequent crackdown on the right to demonstrate. Thus, as so often, the notion of movement became increasingly central to demonstrations: tautologically, the will to walk through the city, even when facing police violence, proved to be a crucial element in the *mobilisation* of support (Spasic & Pavicevic, 1997a, p. 23). For months on end, protest marches were organised in many cities in Serbia, and even between them.

The term used locally for the demonstrations was *setati se*, consistently translated as ‘to walk’, not ‘to march’. Almost overnight, walking became a political act, and badges could be seen proclaiming the person who wore them a *setac* or *setacica* (‘walker’, m/f). The Serbian national motto ‘Only Unity can Save the Serbs’, represented by four Cyrillic letters S, which gained an infamous reputation during the post-Yugoslav wars, was modified and parodied into *Samo Setnja Srbina Spasava* (‘Only Walking can Save the Serbs’). Amongst the numerous postcards for sale on the streets, there were a number which typically carried a picture of the common trajectory of the walks. From these examples it is clear that, in the specific context I have described, the very act of walking took on a political meaning. This was illustrated when, after a series of violent interventions by the police, the organisers of the protests attempted to keep the citizens on the sidewalks in order not to provide the police with a pretext for more physical abuse. It didn’t work — the nature of the demonstrations was such that the act of walking on the streets simply became central to it.

The demonstrators also attempted to exert control over other movement in the city. Through the blocking of main streets and squares different threads of power came to be entangled in a way that was strongly spatially embedded (Sharp et al., 2000, pp. 21–22). The regime deployed its mechanisms of domination through the control of space, and *therefore* certain places became the potential sites for resistance (Cresswell, 1996, pp. 163–164). This text contains many illustrations of this, but I mention just one here: when the crowds moved to block the access bridges to the city, they were stopped by the riot police, but the forces of the regime could only do so by doing the job the demonstrators had set out to accomplish themselves. Traffic was brought to a standstill for hours.

Controlling space thus became an articulation of power: the dominating power of the regime aimed to keep people, information and goods *in place*, whereas the demonstrators relied on their being *out of place* (Cresswell, 1996). After a threatened police crackdown on any kind of ‘traffic disturbance’, a *Protest on Wheels* was called for. For hours on end the whole city was congested, as people drove their cars into

town and then pretended to have engine problems. Again, they showed, that they too could control movement in the city if they wanted to.

The protests constituted a specific form of what de Certeau calls 'pedestrian speech acts', which relate to an urbanistic city map like enunciations to a language system (1984, pp. 97–98). However, they were distinct from an ordinary walk through the city, as a result of elements such as their scale, their explicit political discourses, and their organised character. By going public, they broke the secrecy which, according to Feldman, is a typical tool for marginal groups whereby they resist agendas of control from the centre (1991, p. 38). In this respect, the demonstrations effected the practice of the 'swarm' (Routledge, 1997b, p. 2167): a massive movement of territorialising the city, overtly defying dominating state power by its numbers. The crowds occupied space and thereby claimed it, physically and politically, with their bodies, their noise, their banners and so on. While in many ways strongly subjected to the dominating power of the Serbian state, the protesters seized the initiative and re-articulated the 'given' order of the urban landscape by inscribing deviant political meanings into it. In that way, the demonstrations disentangled and re-entangled power relations through oppositional spatial practices (Sharp et al., 2000, pp. 22, 26), inserting their bodies into public spaces, and thereby probing the limits of regime control. Just by being in a certain place at a certain time, one participated somehow in the subversive metaphors of the demonstrations.

In their contradictory, ambiguous and multiple ways, the walking crowds challenged the dominant symbolic geography of the city and appropriated the urban landscape. The city map of Beograd acquired a whole set of modified meanings through the practices of the protests and the discourses underpinning them and arising from them. In de Certeau's words, the marches were 'spatial stories' which primarily served as instruments for delimitation, as they displaced or transcended existing boundaries and established new ones (1984, p. 123).

### **Re-defining space through noise: air, airwaves, and cyberspace**

Reclaiming control over Beograd did not only involve the politicised insertion of human bodies into public space. Another central element was noise: shouting, singing, music from sound systems, and so on. Usually, the demonstrations took place in the afternoon, but certain areas were filled with noise, and especially with the piercing sound of whistles, virtually day and night. More than anything else whistles became the emblem of these protests: people wore them conspicuously, they appeared on posters, stickers and postcards. Blowing a whistle and filling the air with noise was an integral part of the metaphoric process whereby the urban space of Beograd was to represent the field of politics. This had the simultaneous effects of territorialisation, through the imposition of noise upon urban space, and deterritorialisation, through the ungraspable nature of a noise invasion into regime-controlled space.

This became particularly apparent in a conscious symbolic action instigated by the students, which would become one of the most popular forms of expressing

dissatisfaction with the regime. At half past seven, the time of the main evening news report on state TV, the students gathered in the centre to produce an enormous outburst of noise. This action, called *Buka u Modi* ('Noise is all the Rage'), was announced as a symbolic attempt to drown out the misinformation spread by the regime-controlled media. The enthusiasm spread to the people living in the streets nearby, who joined in from their windows and balconies. After that, for weeks on end, every day at half past seven a true pandemonium would break out above the city of Beograd, including many of its suburbs. Hundreds of thousands of citizens took part, using all kinds of instruments (pots, pans, cutlery, garbage containers, radios, fireworks, etc). This action resonates with the symbolism of the Nepalese black-out protests, as described by Routledge (1994, pp. 568–569). Switching off the light or making deafening noise from one's flat, when done en masse, allows for the communication of a heightened sense of resistance with the advantage of relative anonymity.

The great majority of Beograd's places from where influence could be exercised remained firmly under governmental control. The Serbian airwaves were controlled by the government, as only the state radio and TV were allowed to run transmission equipment. Other stations could apply for a frequency on this transmitter, but they remained entirely dependent on the regime for this service. Most parts of rural Serbia relied on state-controlled media for their information, as reflected on a banner in the demonstrations: 'He and She on all channels, we on all streets'. 'He' and 'She' refer to Slobodan Milosevic and his wife Mira Markovic.

Having said this, two radio stations played a crucial role as channels of resistance in the 1996–1997 protests: *Radio B92*, and the student-run *Radio Index*. Both stations could only be received in Beograd and even in those areas problems occurred with their signal. Given the tense situation and the quick succession of events on the streets, the news reports on *B92* and *Index* fulfilled a vital role for many citizens of Beograd. Another important element in the 'imagineering of dissent' (Routledge, 1997a, pp. 369–371), was high tech media technology. From the outset of the protests, intensive use was made of Internet facilities to communicate information, particularly in international contacts. Cyberspace, more so than, say, urban landscape, seems to be a space which can never fully be anyone's, not even Milosevic's, 'proper' (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 36–36). Hundreds of protest pages sprang up, and the Internet soon became a place where official and various oppositional claims clashed — yet another aspect of the 'terrain of resistance'.

The insertion of elements of protest discourses into the air, the ether and the World Wide Web, illustrate how, by conceiving of space as an abstract, unbounded notion, the demonstrators denied the police the opportunity to fully suppress or contain it. Ironically, in response to the regime's attempts to virtually totalise the appropriation of Serbian society, the oppositional conception of political space became so slippery and deterritorialised in nature that it could not be completely controlled by anyone, not even the regime. In de Certeau's words: "No longer fixed by a circumscribed community, tactics wander out of orbit, making consumers into immigrants in a system too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it" (1984, p. xx).

## Our city, our Europe

In this section I explore some further specific aspects of how the 1996–1997 demonstrations were embedded in urban space. Respectively, I look at (a) Beograd's significance as the seat of all Serbian/Yugoslav dominant political institutions; (b) the demonstrators' self-presentations as captives in their own city; (c) their discursive tactics of recapturing the city; (d) the importance of discourses of urbanity and rurality; (e) the way in which music on the protests illustrated this discursive dichotomy; and (f) the role of the imaginary space of 'Europe'. In exploring such seemingly disparate issues, I gradually shift the analytical focus from the urban locale, and tactics of territorialisation, to the spatial metaphors of 'the City' and 'Europe', and tactics of deterritorialisation.

### *Beograd as the house of power*

Even though Beograd's vote had never been very supportive of the regime, its buildings housed the dominant institutions of Serbia and of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Likewise, most oppositional organisations had their headquarters in the centre of Beograd. During the winter protest, when time seemed to be against Milošević and his entourage, an increasing number of the citizens of Serbia imagined history nibbling at their leader's toes, and, in their efforts to speed up this process, the demonstrating crowds probed the boundaries of the 'proper' of their government.

If the demonstrators could not actually enter the regime's buildings, they engaged in a continuous process of symbolically re-claiming space. This endeavour was expressed first of all in the choice of localities where the demonstrations were held. They started on university grounds or on Republic Square, both in the heart of the city, and whenever possible the walks would break out to other places laden with strong symbolic meanings, thereby transgressing spatial–political boundaries (see Feldman, 1991, pp. 17–45; Cresswell, 1996). Marches to government and police buildings and surrounding them were frequent, but the most popular route became known as the *Media Walk*, as it led the crowds along a number of buildings of Milošević-controlled media. Whenever passing one of 'their' buildings, the whistling and the booing would reach its highest decibel level.

Great significance was also attached to Dedinje, the elite area where Milošević and a whole range of other members of the ruling elite live. On several occasions the students announced they were going to walk there with the full crowd. Of course they knew they wouldn't even be allowed near it — in fact they were already being stopped in the city centre. Prepared for this, on one occasion they placed a miniature 'Rubicon' on that spot, representing the borders of the 'Forbidden City' of Dedinje and preventing the people from that area from coming down to the centre, in the same way they were held from going up there. Furthermore, on at least ten different occasions smaller groups of people attempted to reach the president's residence, which provided material for heroic stories published on the Internet protest homepages. Climbing hills, ploughing through gardens and making their way through bushes and orchards, a number of them reached the legendary number 33, Milošević-

ic's residence, and succeeded in having their pictures taken before being carried off by security forces. This self-consciously non-aggressive and witty approach, epitomised by the fact that the whole campaign to reach the president's house was called *Mira, put the kettle on!* (Mira is Milosevic's wife), again shows how the most important objective was to transgress symbolically the boundaries set by the regime, and not to storm the Bastilles of Serbia.

*This city that is ours: captives in their own city*

While Beograd was the seat of Milosevic's power, many citizens of the Serbian capital liked to emphasise the *real* origins of the main political players. Throughout my fieldwork, time and again, I was reminded of the peasant background of the rulers. At best they were *sa sela* ('from the village'), or even *s brda* ('from the mountain'), and frequently it was pointed out to me that they were actually not even Serbs, but Montenegrins. In this way, the Milosevic regime was often represented as a kind of occupation force. Beograd, it was argued, was run by *dosljaci* ('newcomers') from the countryside — they were voted in by the countryside, against the will of the urban population. This, in conjunction with virulently anti-Beograd statements made by many radically nationalist protégés of Milosevic during the war [see quotes in Colovic (1994, p. 39) and Vujovic (1996, p. 144)], consolidated the idea that Beograd had been invaded and taken away from its citizens (Velikic, 1992, p. 32; 1994, p. 187; Vujovic, 1992, p. 62).

As a result, one of the dominant discourses of the demonstrations represented the protesting citizens as oppressed in their own home. Even though the demonstrators repeatedly stated they didn't depend on the permission of the regime to walk wherever they wanted, in reality they were often only allowed to gather in the pedestrian area of the city centre, surrounded on all sides by thousands of members of the riot police. This blockade of the streets by cordons was a poignant symbol of the political situation, a parallel which was exploited widely in the discourses of the protesting crowds themselves. The students, for example, restricted to pedestrian areas and surrounded by police, formed a prison circle, walking up and down the street with their hands on their heads. Symbolically imprisoned in what they saw as their own city, they faced police cordons brought in from other parts of Serbia, and, ironically, from Kosovo in particular.

One day, when the situation was very tense immediately after all marches were officially banned, a student representative announced the 'route' for that day. As usual, this was broadcast live on the oppositional radio stations *B92* and *Index*. He described a march calling on different spots in Beograd which amounted to a distance of some 70 kilometres all together, and added:

This is the route for the police forces, and not for the students. There is no way to keep the Beograd students from being in every part of *their city*. [my emphasis]

It is clear that, ultimately, even during the demonstrations, access to the streets and squares of Beograd was regulated by the government of Serbia, made visible

by the overwhelming presence of its special police (MUP, *specijalci*, renowned for their loyalty to Milosevic), and at critical times made tangible by their truncheons<sup>10</sup>. On several occasions the police resorted to beating demonstrators, who adopted tactics of non-violent obstruction, thereby inserting themselves into a global discursive practice of resistance. While some of their practices resonated with the tree-hugging of the Chipko movement (Shiva, 1986) or the chaining of many anti-nuclear protests (Heller, 2000), more explicit reference was made to Ghandi's activities and, especially, given the historical circumstances and the anti-communist nature of the demonstrations, to the fall of the Berlin Wall and to the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia.

A striking aspect of the protests was the determination to treat the city as their own. At the very outset, in November 1996, when opposition leader Djindjic invited the citizens to march for the first time, he phrased it like this:

This is our city. It is a beautiful city. Let's walk a little through it.

The whole tone of this statement resonates with the desire to re-appropriate the city, and to re-insert a socio-historical aspect into what had become a 'naturalised' place in regime discourse (Cresswell, 1996, pp. 164–165). Importantly, there is no undertone of aggression or revenge, but rather of possession and self-confidence, maybe arrogance. Beograd, Djindjic suggested, didn't need to be conquered (Spasic & Pavicevic, 1997a, p. 23). If temporarily invaded and controlled by the Milosevic regime, it was up to the citizens to simply reclaim it as theirs — because it *was* theirs already.

#### *Can't touch this: 'liberated places'*

Throughout the 1996–1997 protests, Beograd's symbolic geography was reconceptualised. The resulting configurations were highly contested and unstable because the process of redefinition continued on a daily basis. The protestors partly regulated the accessibility of the city centre, albeit largely through their involuntary, but very effective allies in this endeavour; the police. More importantly, however, certain areas in the centre of the city (e.g. *Terazije*, *Trg Republike*, *Knez Mihailova*) increasingly acquired the status of what I would call 'liberated places' (see Routledge, 1994, pp. 569–571). I use 'liberated' in its symbolic sense, leaving aside its ideological dimension as held by different demonstrators. However incomplete and unstable, the protestors appropriated certain spaces as semi-'proper' places. Still within view of the police forces and under threat of a violent intervention, these places came to represent opposition — as they inserted their bodies in the urban landscape. By their massive presence at most times of the day, the crowds succeeded to a degree in appropriating the central square and its surrounding streets. Likewise, the student

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<sup>10</sup> For details, see publications by Beograd organisations such as the Humanitarian Law Centre and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. See also Human Rights Watch (1997).

protestors asserted their claim over the university buildings, which resulted in a precarious ‘proper’, protected by a tight self-imposed security system.

‘Liberated’ places quickly became the scene of the sale of badges, booklets, posters, postcards, and other protest paraphernalia. Whistling, the emblem par excellence of the protests, was heard in these places at all times, day and night. Whereas on a normal day sustained whistling on the main squares of Beograd would, at best, cause puzzlement, and, at worst, arrest for disturbing public order, it now acquired an oppositional meaning. It is clear that the time dimension plays an important role here. In Beograd, on the occasion of a number of holidays, the sense of localised liberation was enhanced greatly. On Orthodox New Year’s Eve, for example, more than half a million people gathered on the central squares and streets of Beograd, where a stage and a sound system were set up. Several bands played for the crowd and video-images communicated support messages from Vanessa Redgrave, Emir Kusturica and The Prodigy, amongst others. Yet again, the spatial tactics of protest were broadened — and the regime stood by.

Or did it? These temporarily ‘liberated places’ in the city centre also played a part in the regime’s spatial strategies of containing the protests. Attempts by the demonstrators to invade the streets of the suburbs met with more brutal violence, which gave the first successful marches in these areas particular significance. This reclaiming of the city was visually represented in the independent and oppositional press with city maps triumphantly indicating all the neighbourhoods where there had been evening marches with a miniature walking person (Grujic, 1997, p. 7). This sort of map was particularly significant given the fact that different parts of the city carried different ‘reputations’ of political tradition<sup>11</sup>, so that marches in traditionally pro-regime neighbourhoods would be announced as new wins.

I have mentioned that ‘liberated places’ were by no means stable or complete. Rather, a continuous struggle took place to consolidate these places and to add other areas to the list. For example, when the university staff which supported them was locked out of the Chancellorship, the students decided to ‘exorcise the Devil’ from the building with prayers, candles and garlic. Similarly, on the day after a government-organised counter-rally of pro-regime demonstrators, the students ‘decontaminated’ the streets where this rally was held with detergents. This preoccupation with the idea of pollution was ubiquitous in my fieldwork: people often explained the crisis in Serbia in terms of a disease where the country was ‘infested’, ‘contaminated’, and so on. This is reflected in the name of a focal point of artistic opposition in Beograd: the *Centar Za Kulturnu Dekontaminaciju* (‘Centre for Cultural Decontamination’).

More specifically, in the demonstrations, an almost Victorian sense of what I would call ‘urban hygiene’ was imposed on the city (see Douglas, 1984). In both examples mentioned, the urban landscape of protest was cleansed of what was seen as

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<sup>11</sup> The protests deployed a homogenising discourse, emphasising unity of all *Beogradjani*. Nevertheless, I was often told, especially by people who grew up in Beograd, that different neighbourhoods carried different identities and reputations. In particular, a pattern was prevalent with concentric circles of decreasing ‘urbanity’ as one was moving away from the centre.

matter-out-of-place through a multitude of spatial tactics relating to different senses: tangibly, through occupation by human bodies; visually, through banners, flags, and candles; acoustically, through noise and prayers; and even smell-wise, by using garlic and detergents.

A parallel and connected process took place in the naming of places. Literally, in the oppositional press, *Trg Republike*, the central square which was the daily decor of protest gatherings, was renamed *Trg Slobode* ('Freedom Square'). However, I would suggest that a much more subtle, and probably largely unconscious play with place names developed in everyday conversations. de Certeau wrote of city place names that

these names make themselves available to the diverse meanings given them by passers-by; they detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define and serve as imaginary meeting-points on itineraries which, as metaphors, may be recognised or not by passers-by. A strange toponymy that is detached from actual places and flies high over the city like a foggy geography of 'meanings' held in suspension, directing the physical deambulations below (...). (1984, p. 104)

The quotation refers to ordinary walks, and not to organised ones like the marches in Beograd. However, I would suggest that an intensification of the process that de Certeau describes was taking place in the demonstrations. When someone said s/he was *na trgu* ('on the square'), not only would everyone know that this person was talking about a specific square, i.e. *Trg Republike*, but also one would understand that s/he was at the demonstrations. The same process developed in relation to other squares, buildings, statues, etc: *na Platou, kod Vuka, u Kolarcevoj...* In this way, locating oneself topographically automatically included a statement about where one was situated politically (one's stance, one's point of view, one's position). As Creswell would have it, the consumption of place became the production of place (1996, p. 165). In this way, certain spots, and particularly the ones which I called 'liberated places', allowed for the articulation of a renewed symbolic geography, attaching meanings to these places which became part of an ongoing discourse of opposition.

#### *Peasants and citizens: 'the city' as a discursive construct*

Up to now, I have taken this exploration of the role of the city in the 1996–1997 winter protests quite literally. In other words, I have looked at urban landscapes and the significance of the urban locale and location in the anti-regime events. That kind of analysis, I am afraid, is fraught with contradictions. Even though the divide between cities and villages was real, it was only one of many lines of differentiation in Serbia, and not a strict one at that. For example, a large majority of inhabitants of Beograd had very recent roots in rural areas (Vujovic, 1992, p. 62). Moreover, the question of whether a certain area was considered to belong to the city or not was always contested and unstable. And, politically, what about the impressive amount of people in Beograd who did support the Milosevic regime at the time of the demon-

strations? In order to deal with these issues, this section lifts the analysis to another level. I suggest that, if we consider the city as a discursive construct, we can understand the meaning of ‘the urban’ within the context of narrative strategies of the demonstrators. If the city was territorialised in the winter protest, it was simultaneously, I argue, deterritorialised: the narratives of resistance detached its meaning from the locale provided by the urban landscape.

Castells (1997, pp. 355–357) has proposed a conceptualisation of contemporary identification along three lines, counterposing defensive ‘resistance identities’ and communally-based affirmative ‘project identities’ to the officially sanctioned identities which legitimise domination. While the idea of ‘resistance identities’ might be useful in a range of circumstances, it seems that the Serbian context problematises and inverts some of Castells’ insights. Castells distinguished a trend towards a division between two forms of identification:

[...] on the one hand, the dominant, global elites inhabiting the space of flows tend to consist of identity-less individuals (‘citizens of the world’); while, on the other hand, people resisting economic, cultural, and political disfranchisement tend to be attracted to communal identity.

In Serbia, with the Milosevic regime permanently reinforcing its ‘rebellious’ and ‘transgressive’ character on the international scene, an ambiguous overlap existed on the level of identification<sup>12</sup>. A whole section of the protestors, and especially those who had been consistently critical of the regime, emphasised precisely their cosmopolitanism and denounced the relentless oppression in the name of a communal (i.e. national) identity that had been imposed upon them. And even in the counter-assertion of ‘city’ identity, it was precisely its ‘modern’, ‘individual’, and ‘cosmopolitan’ dimension that was taken up.

In this light, it is not a coincidence that the above words by Djindjic, which set off the first march, resonated strongly with modernist visions of urbanity. What one hears here is not a war cry, or a revolutionary call to arms. Rather, Djindjic delivers an invitation to stroll down the streets — in the civilised, decent and restrained manner of the urbanite one would expect to find in 19th century Paris, and not in Beograd 1999: the *flâneur*.

It is important here to consider the self-presentation of the winter protests as urban in the context of Serbia’s recent history. Especially in the late 1980s, Serbia had seen numerous mass rallies in support of Milosevic. It was by blowing the trumpet of Serbian nationalism — often to be taken literally, although he never played the instrument himself — on these meetings that the man had built his popularity. These pro-Milosevic rallies were often described to me in terms that set them as far apart from the present protests as possible. Something similar, but much less overwhelming than almost a decade ago, happened when, on 24 December 1996, the regime organised a meeting *For Serbia*. Tens of thousands of Milosevic supporters were brought

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<sup>12</sup> I explore this in detail in another text (Jansen, 2000).

in from Kosovo and rural parts of Serbia. The outlook of this counter-demonstration was very different from the oppositional protests: a limited amount of quite uniform banners were carried, overshadowed by a sea of portraits of Milosevic. One opposition-minded man told me later:

You should have been there on the *Kontramiting*. You should have seen it. Then you would understand. Just by looking at them. It was so different from the protests. Their faces said it all! They were *seljaci* [peasants]. They were bused in from the village and they received free lunch. They're used to do what they're being told.

This comment leaves no doubt that what was at stake in the urban/rural divide was not a topographical, but rather a moral or civilisational issue. I have to emphasise here that the very terminology of urbanity and rurality is omnipresent in everyday narratives throughout the whole post-Yugoslav region, and it is firmly anchored in language use. *Seljaci* literally means villagers, but it was one of the most frequently used pejorative terms for people who are considered primitive, uneducated, rude, and everything *not* urban. In that sense, certain members of the government were often referred to as *seljaci*, even though they had doctoral degrees and spent most of their lives in Beograd. The other pole of the continuum was represented by *gradjani*. This term refers to citizens in its various meanings: although it certainly includes a notion of *cityzen*, as in inhabitant of a city, it almost always takes on the meaning of *citoyen*, an educated and civilised self-conscious political subject.

In this way the winter protest was strongly conditioned by its location in Serbia, after a decade of life under Milosevic. I have mentioned before that, after the violent crushing of previous anti-regime rallies, withdrawal into the private sphere was the main mode of dissent. I think we can conceive of at least a part of the 1996–1997 demonstrations as a linking up of private pockets of non-articulated and non-effective resistance, adding new elements. Thus, small nodes of silent dissent in the living room were articulated into a new whole of massive, loud and public protest on the streets. After years of apathy, the electoral fraud, so I was told by many participants, was going just a bit *too* far, and in contrast to the dominant mood about Milosevic's war policies, this was a case where large amount of people felt they could and wanted to actually do something about it. Again, the spatial dimension of the demonstrations seems indicative, as it was a popular uprising against the overturning of the municipal elections by the Milosevic regime, which therefore pitted the City against the State. As this article shows, the struggle took on much wider meanings, but it did start off as a dispute about city councils.

The very fact that the anti-Milosevic demonstrations were peaceful, non-violent, and humorous was seen as a significant factor which set them apart precisely from the behaviour of *seljaci*. Many *Beogradjani* told me they were pleasantly surprised by the change in social interaction in public: whereas for years before, they felt, the city was characterised by unfriendliness, now civilised manners and politeness were taking root — especially in the 'liberated spaces' (Spasic & Pavicevic, 1997a). At a party during the demonstrations, several middle-aged, opposition-minded protestors

confided to me that this meant a return to ‘how it was before’. Moreover, as the evening and the alcohol flowed, they nostalgically told me about the city of their memories. They described *their* Beograd, the capital of the former Yugoslavia, which they remembered as a centre of avant-garde galleries and theatre, of cosmopolitanism and dissidence. And through the demonstrations, they argued, for the first time they felt that Beograd might find its true identity again; in the hands of its true, urban people, of course.

### *Sounds of the city*

For the demonstrators themselves, the urban character of the protest was tangibly present in the streets of Beograd. Most participants wore ‘modern’ clothing and their garments were often decorated with gadgets, icons of the protests, as the demonstrations gave rise to a sprawling petty trade in postcards, badges, whistles and so on. The role of radio stations *B92* and *Index*, and the Internet were crucial, and a veritable flood of protest publications, real and virtual, emerged. The content and the style of these publications, again, often resonated with the perceived urban qualities of the events. This was even more so in the banners and slogans which dominated the marches, as well as in the graffiti that sprang up everywhere. Freely and self-consciously quoting modern popular culture, there were references to music, film, philosophy, sports, and so on. Absurd humour and self-referentiality was omnipresent, such as in the banner which read “Did you come here to protest or to stare at a banner?”.

Music became a particularly powerful ‘vector of dissent’ in the Beograd demonstrations (Routledge, 1997b, p. 2167). I explained before how its ‘slippery’ relation to space allowed for its role in subversive tactics, but here I want to briefly illustrate its symbolical power in relation to spatialised identification (for a discussion, see Leyshon, Matless, & Revill, 1995; Stokes, 1994; Kong, 1995). The significance of music was particularly striking in an important public action by the students. As, one night, neither the police cordon, nor the students wanted to pack in and go home, a provisional sound system and a tiny stage were moved in, and *Diskoteka Plavi Kordon* (‘Discotheque Blue Cordon’) was born. The two cordons, one of the Law, and one of up to 30,000 students, faced each other for 178 hours. All nightclubs in town which normally catered to a student audience suspended their activities, because, even at minus twenty, they could not compete with *Diskoteka Plavi Kordon*. The music played at the *Diskoteka* was a unique, bizarre mixture. This is illustrated by the fact that, in my experience, three songs will always be associated with the 1996–1997 winter protests: *Mesecina* (a wild gypsy song based on Balkan brass), *Zajedno* (a remake of an old Croatian hit by Serbian supporters of the opposition coalition), and *Breathe* (a dance track by the British band The Prodigy). The diversity expressed through these songs was considered yet another urban quality — an element which counterposed the city to widespread images of homogenous, bland and unchanging ruralism (Pusic, 1995, pp. 571–574; Prodanovic, 1997, pp. 25–26).

Importantly, there was a self-conscious ban on *turbofolk*, an extremely popular synthesised type of dance music vaguely based on Balkan rhythms, usually sung by

scarcely dressed tarted-up women. Insignificant an issue as it may seem, it would be unthinkable for this music to be played at the demonstrations, even though it accounted for millions in the Serbian music industry. For many post-Yugoslavs, *turbofolk*, also known as *narodnjaci* ('folksongs' or 'national songs'), was a hated symbol of Milosevic's reign and the state of violence and overall deterioration. *Turbofolk*, in other words, was considered the antithesis of urban dignity and subjectivity. Not coincidentally, throughout the decade of its existence, the *B92* radio station which played such an important role in the opposition against Milosevic, prided itself that it had never played one *narodnjak*<sup>13</sup>.

### *The imaginary space of 'Europe'*

The front of one massive human caterpillar that crawled through Beograd streets in the Winter of 1996–1997, consisting mainly of students, was always marked by the same banner. It said *Beograd je svet* ('Beograd is the world'). This main slogan set the stakes: the demonstrators re-claimed their place in the world. But, as these were anti-Milosevic demonstrations, it also meant that they accused the government of having destroyed that place, of isolating Serbia from the world. In doing so, the most frequent reference was to Europe. This was one of the main themes in the political discourses of almost all the opposition parties: they would put Serbia back on the European map and give the country back its legitimate place in Europe. They were for 'a European Serbia'.

Topographically, Serbia is firmly located within the European continent. However, in the symbolic geography of politics it is often seen as only marginally part of Europe. It is in the Balkans after all — that stranger within Europe (Todorova, 1997; Norris, 1999, pp. 5, 11; Bakic-Hayden & Hayden, 1992). The local discourses on this issue were extremely ambiguous themselves: while vigorously asserting Serbia's place in Europe, the nature of what people said would often unintentionally imply the opposite. For example, friends, whom I had asked to find out whether international flights had been resumed from the bombed Beograd airport, recently wrote me that "at the moment, there are no flights to Europe".

In the context of the winter protest, the term 'Europe' referred, like the term 'city', to a discursive construct. The topographical borders of 'Europe' were not really important — it was an imaginary space. Furthermore, it was not even that imaginary space itself which was important, but the characteristics which were attributed to it,

<sup>13</sup> *B92* brings us to yet another dimension of the urban character of the protests. A situation occurred whereby viewers and listeners in many foreign countries had better access to information about the protests than many (rural) people in Serbia whose political future was directly involved. An extreme disassociation from topographical place took place when the regime picked the *B92* and *Index* radio stations from the airwaves. Since then, *B92* has been transmitted in real audio format on the Internet, which resulted in access for Net users all over the world, including many people in Serbia. This led to bizarre situations. For instance, on the night of the most severe clampdown on the demonstrations by the riot police, my housemates and me failed to receive *B92's* radio signal in our flat in a Beograd suburb, so we listened to their reports on the Internet. Only a couple of kilometres away from the *B92* building, we were using a connection via the United States.

its European-ness. ‘Europe’, then, was a polysemic metaphor, and depending on the context it evoked a whole different range of meanings (see Heffernan, 1998). These meanings might be contradictory and they were always slippery: just like the boundaries of the imaginary space of ‘Europe’ were blurred, so it was never really graspable what was meant precisely by it. Nobody seemed to be certain where ‘European-ness’ started and where it ended — but what everybody knew was that it was *not* Balkan-ness.

In the 1996–1997 protests, I argue, the urban landscape of Beograd was symbolically linked to the imaginary space of Europe. The above discussion of urban dimensions of the demonstrations showed how the notion of ‘urbanity’ was a very fluid one, referring to many things ‘Western’, ‘modern’, ‘educated’ or ‘civilised’. This reflects a wider tendency in Serbia to conflate ‘urban’ with ‘Western’ (Norris, 1999, p. 163; van de Port, 1994, p. 59ff; 1999). As a result, in the demonstrations, pop music evoked the congruent ideas of urbanity and European-ness, whereas the ban on its ‘Balkan’ variety *turbofolk* reflected an aversion of the rural and the primitive. Graffiti and banners with references to film and sports were part of a similar discursive practice. In some cases, these icons of popular culture were obviously of US origin, but this didn’t damage their metaphorical power. The point, after all, was not a topographical one.

In a similar way, the flags that were waved, scattered in the crowds — often flags of other states, sometimes pirate flags or commercial ones — mainly evoked a sense of being part of the world. While giving the events an international flavour, in contrast to the regime’s self-isolation, they self-consciously played with the frequent accusations of fifth columnism. In this way, regime depictions of the demonstrations as made up of foreign-funded mercenaries were answered promptly by waving the flag of Serbia’s supposed arch-enemy, Germany. Another important reference to the wider European scene came up when *Diskoteka Plavi Kordon* was on. Reports in the opposition press drew parallels with the Berlin Wall: a cordon of heavily equipped riot police protected what in the eyes of many was the last bastion of communism in Europe. Kolarceva Street, until then just a short street in the centre of Beograd, became laden with connotations of opposition and resistance. Again, Serbian politics were framed in and derived meaning from certain wider European contexts. Related to it, the non-violent character of the demonstrations inserted them into a global discourse of democratic resistance — a ‘travelling strategy’ (Said, quoted in Routledge, 1996, p. 526).

Thus, Europe equalled democracy, as reflected in the editorial line of the oppositional *Republika* publication, for example, which is constructed strongly around notions of Europeaness and urbanity. This brings us to another, related way in which the spatial metaphor of ‘Europe’ played a role in the demonstrations and, particularly in the wider oppositional networks of Serbia: the idea of a ‘European civilisation’. The protests were represented as run by self-conscious citizens, as illustrated by the banner that said *Cogito ergo ambulam*, Latin for “I think, therefore I walk”. Apart from reinforcing the idea that these were protests by *flâneurs* and people with brains and education, this obviously evoked the Cartesian rationalist axiom which underlies enlightened ‘European civilisation’. Another case was the night when riot police

invaded the student occupied Faculty of Philosophy. This caused harsh reactions on many sides, since it was unheard of for at least 60 years. In line with ‘European civilisational standards’, Serbian police had no access to university campuses without permission from the academic authorities. Serbia, then, finally needed to take up its place in ‘Europe’, a cultural universe to which it rightfully belonged.

### **Concluding remarks: protest, urban space and identity**

In this article I have explored meanings and strategies of space, in terms of the way they were practised politically in the 1996–1997 Beograd demonstrations against the Milosevic regime<sup>14</sup>. These demonstrations, articulated around the political agency of ‘the citizens’, conveyed a vague and multi-layered discourse, gaining mass support through its polysemy, but formulating little concrete evidence of programmatic unity beyond a desire to transgress official topographies of power. I provided some critical insights into the ways in which the protestors transformed the city into a ‘terrain of resistance’, both metaphorically and literally, and I explained how the character and the dynamics of the events was tightly interwoven with its place-specificity in the Serbian capital. This allowed not only for a critical analysis of the relation between the demonstrators and the regime, but it also shed a light on the centrality of the notion of movement, both physically and discursively.

The contestations of space and movement through that space formed part of the interplay of a multiplicity of different assertions of power which were entangled in a way that was strongly spatially embedded (Sharp et al., 2000, pp. 21–22). The regime relied on a variety of mechanisms of domination through the control of space, and, paradoxically, this also opened up the possibility for certain parts of Beograd to figure as sites of resistance. In that way, controlling space became a crucial part of the struggle, and through a massive movement of territorialising the city, the demonstrators challenged dominating state power through a re-organisation of Beograd’s symbolic geography. This included the crowds occupying space and thereby claiming it through the insertion of bodies, noise, banners and so on. Taking the matter up to another level, I analysed how discursive practices of protest were developed in relation to the spatial metaphors of ‘the City’ and ‘Europe’, gradually shifting the analytical focus from the urban locale, and tactics of territorialisation, to the spatial metaphors of ‘the City’ and ‘Europe’, and tactics of deterritorialisation.

This provided a number of insights into patterns of identification that informed the demonstrations and emerged from them, weaving a story of protest constructed around the political category of *gradjani*, both as inhabitants of the city, and as

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<sup>14</sup> In the spring of 1999, Serbia was in the news again, every day. Many Serbs were out on the streets again, albeit on a scale not nearly as massive as in 1996–1997. This time they directed their fury not against Milosevic, but, speaking from the perspective of a Belgian citizen (NATO’s headquarters!) who works in England (Tony Blair!), against — let’s face it — *us*. The Serbian protests of 1996–1997 and of 1999 illustrate how similar discursive strategies articulating space and identity can be deployed for entirely different goals and in entirely different contexts (see Jansen, 2000).

people who display the qualities of that city. In that way, the winter protest relied on a re-articulation of the relationship between place, politics and belonging, with the participants at the same time stepping 'out of place', in transgressing regime-imposed boundaries, and stepping (back) 'into place', by re-affirming their 'right to the city'.

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## Appendix A. Homepages

<http://turing.mi.sanu.ac.yu/~prot>  
<http://protest.f.bg.ac.yu/protest>  
<http://galeb.etf.bg.ac.yu/~protest96>  
<http://fon.fon.bg.ac.yu/~qpele>

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