

RAZARANJE I REKONSTITUCIJA DRUŠTVA – SRBIJA NA PRELAZU U 21. VEK

Book review

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**Destruction and Reconstitution of Society: Serbia
in Transition into the 21st Century,
by Silvano Bolčić, Službeni glasnik, Belgrade, 2013**

*S*ILVANO BOLČIĆ'S BOOK IS A SUCCESSFUL WORK of synthesis, his life work actually, dedicated to the sociological analysis of the state and the processes of social destruction in Yugoslavia and Serbia at the turn of the 21st century. The theme of the book is clearly scientifically and socially significant.

Bolčić is one of the leading sociologists in the former Yugoslavia and nowadays Serbia. Considering the field (primarily sociology of work and economic sociology) and the quality of his studies, Silvano Bolčić is as prominent in Serbia as Veljko Rus in Slovenia and Josip Zupanov in Croatia.

In the Introductory part of his book S. Bolčić made an interesting autobiographical note informing the reader that he was born near Labin (Croatia). His father was a Slovene by ethnic origin; his mother was a Croat, born in Istria. He also considers himself a "Serb" by his Serbian wife and place of birth of his children (Belgrade). Bolčić underlines that, being of such a mixed ethnic fate, "with the disappearance of Yugoslavia disappeared an important part of his identity, too". Since October 2007 he has enjoyed his days as a retired professor of sociology of the Department of Sociology of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade. Bolčić's books may also be considered as "autobiographies of others" if one takes into account dedications of his books, especially the inscription to his tragically deceased son who died in 1992.

Despite “destroyed everyday life” which he lived during the past decades, Bolčić succeeded in writing this book and managed to do it *sine ira et studio*, professionally, in accordance with requirements of a good modern sociology.

The key concepts, themes and findings of his comprehensive, content-rich and complex sociological study will be briefly addressed.

It is known that causes of destruction of Serbian society and the disintegration of Yugoslavia might be divided into internal and external. While Bolčić, with valid reasons, argues that the causes of the destruction of society were predominantly of the internal nature (“internal war”), he does not neglect the external influences on the processes of destruction (“decay”) of former Yugoslavia and Serbia. He ranks causes of destruction by relevance by giving greater weight to internal causes and thus joins the prevailing view among Belgrade sociologists of middle and older generation. In relation to this issue of causes of destruction he presents his view on key social actors and policies that have led to the destruction of Serbian society. He states: “Although it is not easy to unequivocally prove, most of the key circumstances that have generated the destruction of society in Serbia, directly or indirectly, by the timing and their character, were a consequence of the described events (described in the book, S. V.) in the Serbian Party’s structures during the 1980’s, events which at the beginning had manifested as intra-party conflicts, continued later as Serbian ‘antibureaucratic revolution,’ or as the ‘happening of the people.’ The key characteristics of these events was the non-institutional dethronement of the legal power and also the non-institutional ‘resolving’ of the key social problems in the economy, culture, education, spiritual sphere, in foreign policy, in the regulation of relations with other ethnicities in Yugoslavia” (p.48). From the point of the role of personalities, S. Milosevic was explicit in orientation to the non-institutional “resolving” of social problems. Even if there are many who “deserve merits” for the dissolution of Yugoslavia, one would not easily question that S. Milosevic deserve the first place on the list of “meritorious persons” for the destruction of Yugoslavia and Serbia (pp. 48–49).

The key concept in the S. Bolčić’s book is the *concept of destruction of society* as a long-term societal process that cannot be reduced to the processes that are commonly referred to as the processes of transition or post-socialist transformation. Societal destruction becomes part of the everyday life, visible in all spheres of society, consuming resources and energies of all societal actors but without

adequate results; it ruins “nice day and peaceful dreams” of both ordinary citizens and of those most powerful individuals in society.

More specifically, the destruction of society implies processes of destruction of the very foundations of society (destruction of fundamental societal institutions) as a modern civilized community due to the destructive (violent, war-like) method of resolving of societal problems accumulated during the previous socialist period of development of the Yugoslav society. These also include processes of ethnification (in Bolčić’s terms “nationalization”) of all new societies created on the ruins of the until yesterday multiethnic Yugoslav society, which despite many previous external disapprovals and internal conflicts survived as relatively stable, non-chaotic community during the five decades following World War II. Then, the destruction of society refers to the process of rapid and dramatic collapse of the quality of everyday life of most citizens of this country. Finally, it is also about the process of establishing a dreary everyday life, where most of citizens live with the intense fear of losing what they currently have, where for most of them their own future and that of their children became cause for the gravest fears.

The destruction of society as a complex sociological concept that was not easy to operationalize was introduced by S. Bolčić for the first time in 1993 in his paper “Sociologija i jugoslovenska svakodnevica početkom devedesetih” /“Sociology and the Yugoslav everyday life in the nineties”/ and then in his book *Tegobe prelaza u preduzetničko društvo: Sociologija tranzicije u Srbiji početkom devedesetih* (1994) /*The Hardships of Transition into the Entrepreneurial Society: Sociology of Transition in Serbia during the Nineties*/. This concept had an impact on the development of the “Belgrade school of sociology”. Mladen Lazić edited the book titled *Destruction of Society* (1994). Karel Turza went further by writing about sociocide and S. Vujović about “a town in the shadow of war” and uricide. S. Bolčić and Andjelka Milić edited a voluminous collection of papers (13 authors) titled *Srbija krajem milenijuma: razaranja društva, promene i svakodnevni život* (2002) /*Serbia at the End of Millennium: Destruction of Society, Changes and Everyday Life*/. Ivana Spasić mostly dealt with the concepts of *everyday life* writing a book *Sociologije svakodnevnog života* (2004) /*Sociologies of Everyday Life*/ and saw the destruction of Serbian society of the 1990s as a process of chaotization.

We agree with Bolčić that the destruction of society is a fruitful concept to deepen and further develop. The author points out that in the subtext of his sociological analysis is not a catastrophic vision of Serbia as “destroyed society”.

It should be recognized, warns Bolčić that under the conditions of social destruction a society is constantly spending more and getting less. No matter how many (times) new politicians are elected, while not substantially calling into question the specific policies that have generated the destruction of society, there are no realistic prospects for social normalization, the normalization of everyday life of people in the community, for the true reconstitution of society.

In the concluding section of the book titled "On actors and reconstitution of society in Serbia" S. Bolčić writes on social actors and strategic directions of future changes in Serbia, on the "engaged sociology" and its role in understanding processes of destruction of Serbian society, as well as the essential preconditions and opportunities for the reconstitution of society in Serbia.

It would seem that the author's position regarding the reconstitution of society in Serbia is moderately pessimistic or very cautiously optimistic. He estimates that given the situation of two decades of long-term destruction of Serbian society a recent successful reconstitution of that society seems not likely. Among the reasons is the world economic crisis which began in 2008 and is still ongoing. Since destruction of Serbian society also has its roots in the malfunctioning of the previous Yugoslav society and in the destroyed Serbian economy in the nineties, negative influences of this world economic crisis aggravate the reconstitution of a modern Serbian society.

The first decade of the 21st century in Serbia was spent on pulling out this country from wars in the Yugoslav area in which Serbia was heavily, even if not *nominally* involved; on its return to the institutions and organizations of the international community, from which Serbia was excluded during the nineties; on the restoration of its statehood, which was also collapsed in those years; on reactivation of its own business potentials and obtaining all forms of economic assistance and support from abroad, in order to get more people back to work and stop and reverse the trend of pauperization. This decade also meant deblocking of transition, based on the new law on privatization and its implementation. Finally, affairs of importance for accession to the EU were initiated.

Bolčić indicates that the daily lives of people in Serbia of the 21st century are significantly different from the everyday life of these people in the 1990s. However, it is in the experience of not such a small number of people in today's Serbia that the nineties have not yet been completed, as if there were a significant continuity with that of the "poor everyday life" in those years, as if those social troubles and

dilemmas that marked those years were still on the social agenda. An analyst of today's events in Serbia must, says the author, search for explanations of such experiences of continuity in order to figure out essential prerequisites and prospects for the near reconstitution of Serbian society.

According to Bolčić, one of the key prerequisites for the reconstitution of Serbian society is the necessity of overcoming of the process of “ethnonationalization” (Ivan Colovic noted well that in Serbia ‘the happening of demos’ meant transforming of the ‘working people’ into ‘Serbian people’). We consider as appropriate Bolčić’s claim that in this historical time the process of “ethnonationalization of society” is a non-modern, untenable and therefore very destructive social process. In his opinion, the first sign of abandoning of ethnonationalization of Serbian society will be a consistent daily reaffirmation of the constitutional status of the citizen with full rights, to whichever ethnic or social corpus he or she belonged. In this respect, he considers “untangling of Kosovo mess condition of all conditions for the normalization of the overall social processes in Serbia”.

Bolčić believes that the reconstitution of the economy is unachievable if the “sanctity” of private property rights will come “hand in hand” with corruption; it takes a different, new ownership transformation, as well as the coexistence of liberal principles of freedom and socialist principles of equality, i.e. of social justice.

In addition, in order to open a process of the true reconstitution of Serbian society, it is necessary to create the social conditions for the rapid reduction in the number (now almost a million) of unemployed people in Serbia and for the renewal of prospects and real job opportunities for members of the society which are capable and trained to work, as well as for reducing the “brain drain” and a return to Serbia of at least some of them.

For the successful reconstitution of Serbian society it is essential to reconstitute the entire sphere of politics as a domain of people with honorable intentions, honest and competent. To make politics a responsible and accountable activity one needs permanently active “civil society” as an essential means of social control.

In times of “recuperation” of the economy and all other spheres of life, there is a need for overcoming widespread feelings of existential threats and basic insecurity, since such a positive change would lead to the regeneration of the “public” and its positive contribution to the reconstitution of politics as an honorable and responsible social activity. Regrettably, says Bolčić, after more than a decade of practicing “new politics” in Serbia, created and implemented by new, allegedly

“better persons” in comparison with politicians of the Milosevic’s era, the *type of politics* and *modal type of political personality* remained essentially untransformed. This is why Bolčić advocates also “moral renewal” and new prerequisites for social promotion. His vision of the society is “a decent society”; a healthy society and a healthy economy of sustainable development.

The section of Bolčić’s book titled “Committed sociology and destruction of Serbian society” has to be recommended to the young sociologists, of course, not only to them, since it elaborates the relations between knowledge and power, suggests the need to be aware of one’s own professional identity, moral integrity and to build proper self-consciousness. Bolčić is stressing the need to establish sociology as an autonomous science with its proper knowledge and its criteria of self-critics. Of course, sociology should also be an applied social science, but a sociologist should distinguish his or her role of a scientist from other roles, roles of a consultant, social animator, or an intellectual. Specific aspects of these roles are discussed in the book with the particular stress on sociology as modern science.

At the end, one could conclude that Bolčić’s book is one of the best *sociological* studies about the deconstruction and decay of former Yugoslavia, about the destruction of Serbian society and preconditions for the reconstitution of that society.

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