

Neoliberalism and the Vicious Ideology of Humanitarian Wars: That Summer of 2000 in Croatia

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The vicious ideology of “humanitarian wars” invests war with merit while cancelling responsibility for consuming the lives of hundreds of millions of human beings. The new wretched of the earth are fleeing the American and European wars and the miserable impoverishment of their countries, rich in resources and lands, by the wars’ mother-ideology—rapacious neoliberalism. A report by International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War informs us that, following 9/11, the victims of humanitarian wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan alone were 1.300.000 people. This body count excludes the victims of the subsequent wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and the Donbas—as well as Somalia, the symbol of this epochal turn to the balkanization of the world, which also expressed itself in the actual Balkans in the 90s, killing Yugoslavia.

I still remember the shock in the 1980s when I returned to Italy after a five-year absence and saw my first beggar—the first since the war. It’s not that I didn’t already know theoretically that market fundamentalism would have this result. But seeing a mother with a child in one arm and the other stretched out begging in the street of a post-war Italian city felt uncanny. And nothing in the mid-1980s had happened yet—nothing like the monumental misery that followed the West’s peacock strut across the globe after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

As I write, 1.2 million people in Yemen are internally displaced; a lorry with seventy-one decomposing corpses of Syrian refugees was found abandoned on an Austrian highway. Vacationers on the Greek island of Kos, sunbathing on the beach throughout August, beheld the surreal emergence from the sea of exhausted “migrants”—and watched behind cold, dark sunglasses, without the wonder or solicitude of a Nausicaa, this new Odysseus shipwrecked by the phony “War on Terror,” collapsing on the beach. On the coast of dismembered Libya, “migrants”—30,000, reported in July—waited in terror on land to escape by terror on sea: fifty asphyxiated bodies found the previous week by Italian sea patrols. “Migrant,” is a legalistic cynicism to avoid using the legally binding term, “refugee,” which requires asylum.

Then, there was the Syrian little boy—drowned and washed up on a beach in Turkey.

But all this was preannounced.

Trieste, my city, borders on Croatia and Slovenia—Yugoslavia, once upon a time. In the so-called Cold War, Trieste was where the “Iron Curtain” ended in the south—and a “Cold War” hot spot. Fear of “commonism,” as Eisenhower and LBJ pronounced it, was propagandized by the military allied occupation, which governed the city until 1954. The American military

base in Aviano, with nuclear capability, lies today fourteen kilometers from Trieste. From here, the bombers took off, headed for Serbia every day between March and June of 1999 at 7:30 am, my mother told me, shivering as she remembered the roar of the engines overhead.



A U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft departs Aviano Air Base, Italy, during a close air support training exercise Dec. 17, 2013. Italy today functions as a gigantic American aircraft carrier in the middle of the Mediterranean. (USAF photo)

Back in what I still call Yugoslavia in summer of 2000, a few kilometers east of Trieste, I was in Opatjia, on the Gulf of Kvarner, at the northern tip of the Adriatic Sea.

Before 1918, Opatjia had been the Riviera of the land-locked Viennese aristocracy and bourgeoisie. After 1945, Opatjia was in Yugoslavia, and after the fratricidal wars of the 1990s, it found itself in Croatia. Sumptuous art nouveau villas perched on white karst rock over the emerald sea; luscious parks and gardens; shaded, wisteria-scented paths winding above lapping waves, the resort town's beauty seemed both intensified and diminished by a sense of desolation, as though ruing that it no longer belonged to itself, or even to a country, but to something transient and mercenary, calling itself the market.

Neo-capitalist entrepreneurs from Zagreb were buying up the villas for a song. I was buying all I could from the street vendors, who were actually beggars-exquisite lace work; artifacts in wood, even Tito's bust in a junk shop. One woman told me her mother worked all winter to make the lace to sell in Optajia's streets to feed the children.

The lace I bought from her is my loot from the "triumph of the West" over "commonism"-way too cheap for its incomparable skill and beauty, worked in little light and less warmth by old, patient hands somewhere in the hinterlands of Croatia.I had to fight hard in my youth to get from under the induced spectral fear of "commonism." Coming to

New York City, ironically, helped: I realized that the United States, the capital of the “Free World,” was an apartheid society with an impeccable history of aggression, then displaying itself spectacularly with genocidal zeal in Vietnam. But I still held some tiny residue of the erstwhile illusion of a reformed, anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, social-democratic Europe—more humane than the United States. The begging mother was, therefore for me, the last corrective sign to false consciousness.



Luciana (r)) and a friend, in Istria.

It was a hallucinating summer. Ten years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a global nightmare was materializing before my very eyes, disorienting because it felt as though the earth had suddenly turned on its axis to move in the opposite direction. A world, as before the war in the bourgeois liberal democracies, full of scrupulous social meanness, xenophobia, farcical politics, racial prejudice, bombastic military adventurism, intellectual bankruptcy—a world now bloated with a triumphant lack of solidarity, smirking at all humanity with the hubris of naked greed. In 2000, this old New World Order had behind it already, to its shameful credit, the bombing of a capital in the heart of Europe: Belgrade; the slow starvation and bombing of Iraq; the invasion of Panama, and the martyrization of Somalia.

One Sunday, I was invited through a friend to the country retreat of one of those Zagreb entrepreneurs who were buying up Opatjia’s post-socialist real estate. The house was a converted farmhouse, overlooking the Gulf of Kvarner, as far as Rjeka, from its lofty height on the rocky hill. It was stuffed with antiques—“from Tuscany.” One large, cool room, as stark and white as a monastic refectory, was set aside for “artist seminars.” The dining room was dominated by a life-size (if such a thing can be anything like life) wooden crucifix. “Freedom,” said our host pointing at it. I thought he would make a good Mephistopheles to Marlowe’s Faust.

We ate under the grape pergola, in the heat of the day, with that emerald sea down below languidly caressing the white fringe of coastal rock—that invaluable Istrian rock which, transported to Venice, shapes its architectural bone structure. We were not the only guests: there was the young son, and his companions—all amiable, all at ease with their Western guests, including, and especially, with the guest of honor, the “retired” American Pentagon man, in his prime, ending his two-year contractor’s tour advising the Croatian military on “how to modernize its army.” Huh, huh. The NATO makeover artist. He read my mind. He was insidiously seductive in his approachable, laid-back posture of unassuming power. In fact, even the boiling heat of the day seemed to calm and cool down around the solid perimeter of his imperturbable self-assurance. Not that his family was all-military, he suggested. I was not to think, he implied, that he was a vulgar “ugly American.” They had a son, of whom they were “very proud,” who taught philosophy at Brooklyn College. He and I, he added with a charming, self-effacing smile, would have much in common. I found this performative vulnerability his most lethal weapon.

Flitting around from guest to guest, like a nectar-sucking bumblebee, rolled the rotund shape of a Brussels financial bureaucrat, scraping and bowing around the military contractor and the Zagreb neo-capitalist. He would have made a good barber of Seville. But when the opportunity arose to agree, behind the American’s back, with some cautious remark critical of the “coarseness of American culture compared to European culture,” the wasp came out

of the bumblebee with all the resentment of an opportunistic, frustrated Othello's Iago.

Seated around the white-clothed table, we were served authentic peasant food: grilled sardines, fresh from the sea; purple malvasia wine; the crusty Istrian bread made from hard, unprocessed flour I loved so much; aged, hard and salty goat cheese; Istrian prosciutto, sliced by hand from the whole ham, as had been the custom in prosperous peasant homes. The Zagreb cosmopolite knew how to pay homage to local culture—and he wanted us to know that he knew it.

But who cooked and prepared the food? That was the former owner of the farmhouse and now a “friend”—Branko. By then, I was hardly steady on my feet, drunk with wine, heat, and the surreal conversation of an unaccustomed cast of characters. I made my tottering way to the back, where Branko was grilling more sardines. My Serbo-Croatian amounts to a barbarous Istrian village dialect. I was under strict orders not to attempt it in public, lest I dishonor the family making such infamous, never-forgotten mistakes as asking an octogenarian lady from Bosnia on a train if she was pregnant when I meant was she well. But the sweet malvasia had worked magic, giving me a reckless linguistic confidence, so I dared ask Branko, “Where you in the wars?” Branko started flinging sardines on the grill at the speed of flying bullets. When he stopped, his face was stained with tears and his words broken, “Brother killing brother . . . it was terrible . . . Tito was dead . . . we fought the Nazis together and then we started killing each other.” Unless he was telling me he was pregnant. I can't be sure. But, all the same, I thought how intolerably humiliating it must be for a former partisan to be cooking sardines in the house he no longer owned for a military, financial, capitalist troika lounging on the pergola. We both cried, in between a sardine or two and a glass of thick, fleshy, purple wine.

On the pergola, a party of Hungarians had joined the rest. They were staying in one the host's villas turned hotel. They smiled politely at everyone and everything, like extras without a script. Urged energetically by the host, we dutifully scrambled down the steep, rocky decline in single file to see the host's cave (he owned the whole mountain, apparently), no doubt a former partisan or arms hideout. As the sun sank red into the sea, inflaming the evening horizon, we all peered down into the cave's dark mouth from the top. Nothing to see.

Driven home around midnight by the host's son, I was racked by such fits of nausea that I vomited out the last of my rasping, embittered soul onto the hairpin mountain road at punctuated intervals. Was it the heat, the sardines, the malvasia, Branko's grief, or this absurd, surreal New Europe, with its beggars in the streets and its rapacious compradores in the hills? I don't know, but some intimation of the nasty world we live in now occurred there.

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