

'It Was All a Big Theatre': Velvet revolutions, ethnic conflicts, and conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

In 1989 mass democratic – and later nationalist – movements rose up against governments in Eastern Europe and all communist regimes fell like overripe pears. The very speed and ease of this collapse gave rise to speculations and conspiracy theories in the general public, as well as among those who had taken part in the movements themselves. *Why did this all happen at once – so suddenly, why did it all go so smoothly, and who organized it all...?!*

The “staging” of the democratic revolutions (Central Europe) and their subsequent national ethnic conflicts (Yugoslavia, post-Soviet Caucasus), was blamed on diverse causes: the dark political forces of USA, Russia, EU, Germany, international capital, power-hungry politicians, the secret police, and so forth...

In this article I wish to record my own experience, as a student activist during the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution, and as a social anthropologist and war journalist working for several years during the ethnic wars in Yugoslavia and in the Post-Soviet Caucasus.

I address the main reasons that prevented understanding the post-communist mass movements and open a space to popular myths and conspiracy theories: 1. tendencies to *political theatre*, 2. spontaneity and self-organization of mass movements, 3. “mass intoxication” and the internal transformation of the *ecstatic actor* – activist. Exploring question marks and speculations about these key moments of these mass movements contributes to their understanding.

Keywords

Dynamics of mass movements, velvet and floral revolutions, ethnic conflicts, political drama and performance theory, conspiracy theories

It may not always be obvious, but for the last 30 years we have been living in a period of revolutionary changes and movements. They have not necessarily been accompanied, as we might expect of revolutionary events, by revolutionary violence from their start; they were rather characterised

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by new ways of mobilisation and organisation of the participants. We can speak of a new mode of revolutionary change.

First, and foremost, we had the ‘velvet’ fall of communism in 1989 (Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria). We usually describe most of these popular uprisings as *velvet*; yet, in Romania very similar process led to a short period of bloodshed, while in the former Yugoslavia and in the Caucasus it set off several waves of separatist and so-called ethnic conflicts and civil wars.

Nationwide, taking the masses to the streets in a civic, non-violent and positive mood can change the world. The success of the *velvet revolutions* that put an end to communism inspired a wave of *colour*, of *floral* revolutions that took place by the end of the millennium: the Bulldozer revolution in Serbia (2000), the Rose revolution in Georgia (2003), the Tulip (Kyrgyzstan, 2005), Orange (Ukraine 2004), Cedar (Lebanon 2005) and Saffron (Burma 2007) revolutions, the Twitter in Moldavia in 2009, the Jasmine in Tunisia in 2010/2011, the Umbrella in Hong Kong in 2014 and the Ukrainian Euromaidan in 2014.

The *Jasmine Revolution* in Tunisia set off the wave of the *Arab Spring* in 2011. Similarly, the changes following the fall of communism in Yugoslavia and the Caucasus and street protests in Syria, Libya and Yemen developed into armed conflicts, then into larger civil wars involving paramilitary forces and militias of a fundamentalist or terrorist nature.

These events represent a new kind of political change. The mass movements involved in the velvet-floral-colour revolutions seemed to have succeeded in turning the world upside down almost overnight. They used previously unknown means of mass mobilisation, *spontaneity* and *self-organisation*, sending nations into *ecstasy* through the *drama of political spectacles* that took place in the streets and yet was broadcast to the world via TV screens.

The unexpected power, speed, and effectiveness of these mobilisations raise all kinds of questions. A lack of critical reflection and understanding of the dynamics of these movements opens up space for wild speculations and conspiracy theories. This was particularly the case when, as in former Yugoslavia and in the Caucasus, mass movements that brought down totalitarian regimes ended up in the morass of ethnic wars – or when, as in the case of the Arab Springs, they led to the disintegration of the state and to civil war. In other words, questions proliferate when these movements turn out to not be wholly successful.

Conspiracy theories of the velvet revolutions and post-communist ethnic wars

‘Plans are hatched by night and carried out by day’

This article is based on my experiences as a social anthropologist, war journalist and also an activist in the course of these events in Eastern Europe. Yet I venture to say that much of what I suggest here applies to the colour-floral revolutions and to the Arab Springs at large.

I lived through the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution, in 1989, as a student activist and joined a film crew during the insurrection in Romania, also in 1989. I remember the sense of triumph when an enthusiastic mass first took control of the streets, then – after activist networks and centres sprang up throughout the whole country – of the state media and finally of the government and high politics. But I also recall how, as the revolutionary ecstasy and festive unity started to fade and the politics of euphoria gave way to political pragmatism, horse-trading and a plurality of particular political interests, people started to ask suspicious questions. How on earth could that revolutionary explosion have come out of the blue, out of nowhere? If things were as simple as that, then we could have overthrown the communist regime 5 or even 10 years earlier! How could it have all gone so smoothly, and almost of its own accord? Who the hell organised it all?

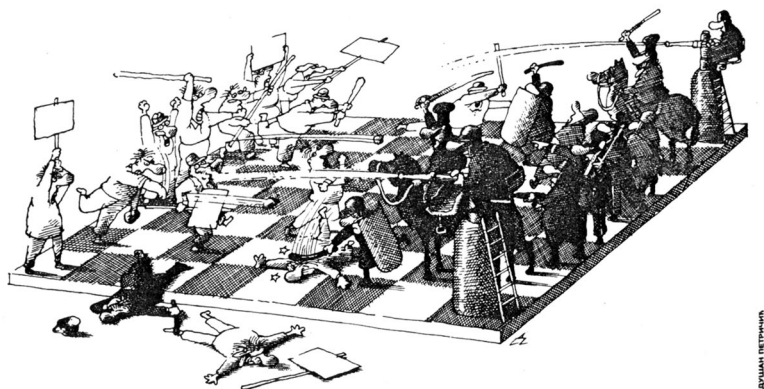


Figure 1. The sense of political alienation: Yugoslavia, like Central Europe in 1989, is turned upside down by huge demonstrations and subsequent nationwide mobilisation. People wondered who organised and was behind it: are we just pawns on the chessboard of history? (Drawing by Dušan Petričić, *Nin*, 13 May 1990, p. 28)

These questions were followed by a wave of easy answers, ready to hand: a wave of conspiracy theories that explained everything. For some people, the interests of Moscow – the East – were behind it all; According to this view, the Czechoslovak revolution of 1989 ‘was the result of a plot by Russian secret services’, usually with the paradoxical aim of ‘ending the era of communism to make it easy for them to move fast into business and start making money’. For others, the revolution was the result of a conspiracy led by the secret services of the West: ‘The USA and Europe wanted to open up the East European markets for their own goods’. Even better, there had been a conspiratorial plot between West and East. It made sense, after all; it was logical and pragmatic and so obvious... in any case, this is what one could hear in the pubs and in the media. Our readiness to listen was increased by the exciting veil of mystery around those questions of Who, When, and Why.

I also experienced the upheavals of the time as a war reporter and later as a social anthropologist in the former Yugoslavia (I worked in the Serbo-Croatian war, in Bosnia and in Kosovo), and post-Soviet Caucasus (Chechnya, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Here too I recall whole geysers of conspiracy theories explaining how the conflicts had come about. Rumours proliferated in cafes and in the press. They referred to dark forces within the nation, who were interested only in their own economic interests, and politicians interested only in keeping hold of power. Even better, they involved foreign powers (the West, the USA, Russia, Germany) and their lackeys on the domestic scene who would allegedly do anything for money. These big players behind the curtain were supposedly pulling the strings in pursuit of their hidden power agendas.

True, major powers (which is why we call them *major*) have their specific interests in conflict zones; but often their influence on the situation, especially on local actors, is fantastically exaggerated. ‘It wasn’t us, but America/Russia that started this bloody ethnic conflict’, people mutter, and some commentators in the media do too. ‘It’s the CIA that’s been organising the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans – they send their people here to give out cash, they get our people to say they want independence, and then sell them their old antiquated guns *at good prices for them!*’ – an Albanian teacher in Kosovo told me, although the previous day he was an enthusiastic, patriotic activist like thousands of others. On all sides people told me that what we witnessed during the protests and in the early manoeuvres of the volunteer fighter units was ‘just *theatre*, a cover up of the real interests of the powerful ones in the background’. The nation had once again been ‘betrayed and cheated’.

Conspiracy theories about post-communist conflicts sometimes stray right into the territory of fairy tale. Some say that the devastating earthquake that destroyed Armenia in 1988 was caused by a secret test of a Russian geomagnetic weapon intended to prevent Moscow's provinces from any attempt to gain independence. I was told that 'the war (this time) in Chechnya started as a way for the Russian army to write off its old antiquated weapons and cover up its financial machinations', that 'America and France are getting money from the Arab states in order to create an Islamic state in Bosnia' or also that the ethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia 'was staged by the USA, looming at the unique world resources of zircon in the Bosnian Mountains, which are essential for the production of its F-16s!' In a similar vein it is alleged that 'the war in Kosovo was started by the Western powers, so that they could access the gold mines in Trebča', as 'Kosovo has more oil than Kuwait'. Or again the Westerners wanted 'to destroy the home base of the Albanian drug mafia that controls Western European cities today'.

In short, 'these are all plans hatched at night and carried out in broad daylight', as another Albanian chronicler, himself a former active nationalist, told me mysteriously. 'We only see what is on stage and not what is in the wings...'

Many similar conspiracy theories were also to circulate following the later colour-floral revolutions, especially during the wave of the Arab Spring in 2011. Here, too, the hidden influence of the long arm of the West was blamed for the widespread desire for freedom and democracy, just as it was then held responsible for later failures, coups and civil wars.

What feeds conspiracy theories? Three constitutive elements in the background of the political alienation of mass mobilization

If we look closely at the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, we find an apparent paradox. On the one hand people, the press, political commentators and politicians seem to agree that, at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, 'after decades of totalitarian rule, we have wrested power back into our own hands; we have "awoken as a nation" and "gone out into the streets" in order to "speak out"'. They agree that what 'all of us together' are creating in the streets, and in some cases on the battlefields, is 'our common future', our glorious 'history'. There is a generally shared feeling that never before has our voice had so much power and weight as now. This makes for an urgent, burning sense of authenticity and meaning. I remember the mass demonstrations organising themselves with passionate spontaneity and giving birth to voluntary and unpaid political activism on a comparable scale. Later, in the time of nationwide mobilisation in the former Yugoslavia and the Caucasus, the emergence of paramilitary initiatives, groupings and defence groups was just as spontaneous and voluntary. Everyone spoke enthusiastically about how they 'must be involved', must be 'where it's happening' and how spontaneously and self-sacrificingly many threw themselves not only into the demonstrations but into the activist networks, and sometimes into the growing armed conflicts.

On the other hand, an equally strong feeling of loss of control and political *alienation* started to develop: a sense that it is not us, pawns in the streets, who are creating politics, who are making history, but rather, a mysterious *someone* behind the scenes. In this great political and historical struggle, we were just 'pawns (of the great powers) on a chessboard', just 'puppets'. This feeling of alienation became fertile soil for the growth of more elaborate convictions that however spontaneous and unexpected the great drama in the streets had looked, it had actually been 'planned in advance and organised by forces in the background'.

The contradiction between authentic participation in mass mobilisation and political alienation finds a plausible explanation in view of the disappointment caused by the turn of events, a sense that despite all enthusiasm things did not turn out as we dreamed. It can be seen as a response to the fact that the dream of better tomorrows ended in the pragmatism of political competition and

horse-trading, as in Central Europe, or even in the tragedy of ethnic wars – as in former Yugoslavia or in the post-Soviet Caucasus. I would not deny that the attempt to rationalise disappointment and to shift political responsibility to ‘those up above’, or ‘in the wings’, was a significant factor; yet, my goal here is to show that other key feelings were generating political alienation and encouraging comfortable explanations via conspiracy theories.

I would like to focus on three critical facets of post-communist mass mobilisation, which are relevant to this feeling of alienation. Because actors were unable to provide a satisfactorily theoretical frame to make sense of them, they caused a widespread feeling of loss of control, of alienation and consequently of suspicion. Yet they were largely instrumental to the success of the velvet/colour revolutions: the role of *spectacle and political theatre*, the *spontaneity and self-organisation* of the mass actions and *mass ecstasy and ‘intoxication’*. These are the subjects of the next three subchapters.

‘It was all a big theatre to pull wool over our eyes’

The lack of understanding of political drama

It was the crowds in the streets that first shook totalitarian regimes and eventually made them collapse. It was here that peoples called for independence, that campaigns for free elections would take place and that pre-war mobilisation started in the disintegrating Yugoslavia and the Caucasus. To call what was happening in the streets simply ‘protests’, however, would be pretty inadequate.

The ferment around the collapse of Yugoslavia and the pre-war mobilisation ‘was just a circus (...) They are *just actors*. It was all *theatre!*’, said an older Czech woman who lived through the years of the collapse of Yugoslavia in Croatia: ‘They take it just as a theatre. (...) simply theatre – a circus!’ She was not alone – others among my respondents and in the media saw it in similar terms. At that time, Yugoslav political weeklies were flooded with cartoons depicting the political ferment in the streets as one big theatre: the time of political ecstasy is like a *carnival in the ethnic caps of the Yugoslav peoples*,¹ like a *puppet theatre, with the Yugoslav peoples as puppets on the fingers of just one hand*,² like a *chivalric tournament*,³ like a *sports match, a boxing match*⁴ or simply a *masquerade*.⁵

The idea that the disintegration of Yugoslavia was one great *spectacle* was shared by eyewitnesses and ironic Yugoslav political cartoonists. Indeed, it buttressed academic theories on the collapse of communism, which claimed that mass mobilisation, not only in Yugoslavia but in most upheavals, should be seen as a great *political theatre*. They saw it as a *street theatre*, where what precisely is said on the platform is less important than what is being ritually *enacted*.

During the Central European velvet revolutions, in 1989, the crowds did not just demonstrate, shout slogans and clap: they also sang, chanted little jokes and laughed. They kept in line in a brotherly spirit, hand in hand; they danced, as they did on top of the Berlin Wall; they gave out flowers to the police; they shook keys over their heads as the death knell of the regime and waved flags from which the communist symbols had been ostentatiously cut out (as in the GDR, in Hungary and in Romania). They took part in a whole series of larger or smaller symbolic acts. The streets were dominated by *triumphant irony*, rather than by revolutionary violence. The high-ups, subject to this ridicule, seemed so small! What took place in Central Europe between 1988 and 1989 was a *Carnival of Revolution*, fed with disarming triumphant irony and the *subversion of power roles*, according to the American historian Padraic Kenney (2002). Similarly, what happened in China in 1989, when student protests were massacred in Tiananmen Square, had been great *street drama*, which the regime dismissively called *luan (dissipation and drunkenness)*, according to an eyewitness, the director and well-known performance theorist Richard Schechner (1993: 63).

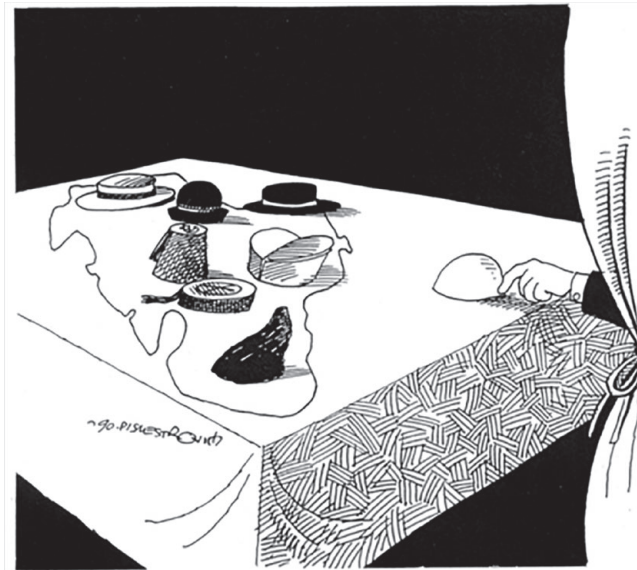


Figure 2. As the ethnic map of federal Yugoslavia changes into one great stage, the question arises: Who is pulling the strings from the wings? Who behind the curtain is trying to add an Albanian cap to the great ethnic play? After all, nothing happens just like that, spontaneously: where there is a theatre – there has to be a director! (Drawing by Petar Pismestrovic, *Vjesnik*, 21 September 1990, reprinted in Pismestrovic, s.d.)

Mass demonstrations in the disintegrating Yugoslavia and Caucasus were no less spectacular. Here, however, instead of cheerful carnival subversion, the predominant spirit leaned towards a search for identity and for ‘historical enemies’. The drama was about national unity and historical greatness, but also about current menaces, namely, by federal neighbours: Croatian crowds went into the streets with a statue of their ‘national leader’, the 19th-century *ban* Josip Jelačić, while Serbian crowds took the relics of St. Sava and the Montenegrins, the remains of King Nikola. They all hurried to move the sacred objects to new places of honour. The remains of Serbian victims of the interethnic massacres of the Second World War were also re-animated in the drama. Different national anniversaries were spectacularly celebrated, while all kinds of previously obscure or half-forgotten religious festivals were given new national content and honoured on a mass scale. Some of the participants wore national costumes or costumes of historical figures from a glorious past (see Čale Feldman, 1993; Čolović, 1994; Senjković, 2002; Žanić, 1998).

The mass events of the end of communism turn the world of East European politics literally upside-down. Great political theatre as *political ritual* is a radical alchemy working with the transmutation of society. ‘What happened was that Croatia entered, *sit venia verbo*, a liminal (Turner, 1982) phase of its, or should we rather say Yugoslav social drama, a “still-not-Croatia-but-not-any-more-Yugoslavia” phase, which the new (national) authorities tried to bridge...’, writes Lada Čale Feldman (1993: 12), stressing the character of the Croatian demonstrations of the time as a *rite of passage*.

It is after all the function of ritual to change us. Ritual can be seen as a ‘technology of self’, a technology by which we sustain our sense of ourselves, as Barbara Myerhoff (1990) puts it. Ritual is ‘reflective in the sense of showing ourselves to ourselves... As heroes in our own dramas, we are made self-aware. Conscious of our consciousness’, as Victor Turner (1982: 75) summarizes Myerhoff’s approach. What we are performatively creating and manifesting in the great street drama is our own ‘invisible kingdom’ – a dream about ourselves (Myerhoff, 1990: 248). Here, in the

exalted crowds in the squares, the ‘revealed community was striving to remake the world in its own image’, James Krapfl (2009: 75, 80) wrote of the Czechoslovak velvet revolution, commenting that in the subsequent general strike everyone ‘for two hours lived according to their idea of perfection’ (Krapfl, 2009: 78). ‘This is a battle for truth’, a slogan from a major Serbian demonstration read: a battle for a new essence of ourselves.

Obviously, such revolutionary *street drama* is an unusual and mysterious process, which seems to involve a sense of losing control. ‘Still events take a theatrical turn. (...) street theatre flourishes, soap box orators draw cheering crowds. Official (communist) leaders are cut down to size. (...) Not even the leaders (of the mass protests) themselves are sure what is happening’ (Schechner, 1993: 84–85).

Because **we lack a clear and comprehensive folk model** for political drama, suspicion and conspiracy theories immediately arise. It is indeed hard to grasp what actually happened in the squares. We say *revolution* – but instead of shooting and arrests, it involved theatre and carnivals in the streets... A second issue, one that attracts the greatest suspicion, is the *spontaneity* of these mass actions. However much we are actors and audience in one person, the very concept of theatre conjures up the notion of a pre-established *script* and a *director*. *Where there is theatre, there has to be a director!* ‘It was all just a great political theatre to pull the wool over the eyes of the masses’. ‘It was all a drama with a script that had been written years before’, people mutter in pubs and declare loudly in the media.⁶

‘It is happening of its own accord’

The lack of understanding of spontaneity and self-organisation

Another problem that participants in the mass actions that ended communism found difficult to process and explain is spontaneity. This is a mass spontaneity that does not stop with the initial theatrical gesture but leads to a certain spontaneous, self-ordering and self-structuring organization. What happened was not just an unprecedented scale of mass protests. The volunteer spirit and enthusiasm of the crowds also led to the development of revolutionary cells, of a revolutionary network and grassroots, self-appointed leaderships, electoral as well as separatist and pre-war campaigns and, in conflict regions, paramilitary structures, militias and home defence units. They agitate, spread information and basically do politics; later, they would eventually make war as well. In their hour of success, they take control of political developments and become political hegemony; political establishment can only cringe and bow, for it is imprudent to oppose the ‘will of the people’ and the ‘voice of the nation’, as those groups consider themselves to be and are considered to be.

Once again the question arises: who on earth is organising all this? I recall how, during the Czechoslovak velvet revolution, in 1989, more and more people (like me) turned up at our spontaneously emerging headquarters, the students’ strike Central Coordination Committee, and how they spontaneously took on more and more tasks. I recall how everyone found their place wherever they would feel ‘important’ and how everyone would ‘*be in on it* where something is happening’. According to the circumstances, everyone would go where they would sense that ‘it was urgent to be’. I can remember how people kept inviting friends until we lost any overall sense of who was doing what. I remember how we with a couple of friends at some point decided, more or less of our own accord, to travel as a kind of revolutionary delegation to one still sleepy town to wake the people up and create a similar structure, and more volunteer activists turned up, including people we had never seen before. I also remember how, after this was going on for weeks and weeks, I felt as if we were founding a new world, with its own rules, values and revolutionary culture. It was the kind of world we liked, the world we wanted to exist. An attempt to outline what was actually happening in the labyrinths of those spontaneously emergent *organisational structures without apparent structure* (Haluzik, 2011: 378–381) has been made by the historian Jiří Suk in his

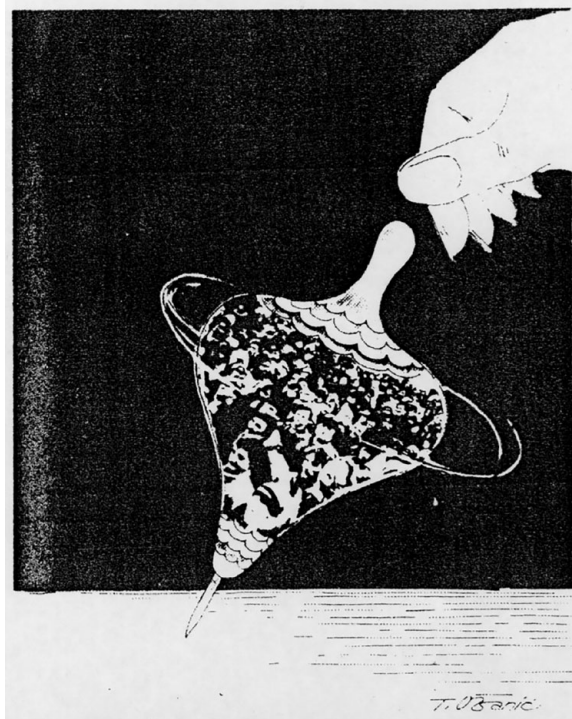


Figure 3. Who is the unidentified alien predatory power with sharp claws that has set the Yugoslav crowds spinning in ecstasy like a top, asks a cartoon in the Croatian magazine *Danas* in 1989. Who is winding up this wave of mass political intoxication? (Drawing by Tomislav Ožanić, *Danas*, 2 May 1989, p. 9.)

book *Through the Labyrinth of Revolution*. Suk writes that the national revolutionary centre in the *Laterna magika* theatre

was reminiscent of a mobilised ant heap. The way in which it proved possible at least for a time to respond to the demands of an accelerated revolutionary time was by elemental self-structuring and an improvised decision-making process. (2003: 112)

‘A mobilised ant heap’... Indeed, the system of organisation was so basic and so fluid that biological metaphors fit better than bureaucratic categories of the division of labour, hierarchical subordination and supervision. ‘This is like a sack of fleas, this is!’, said one of the few fixed points in the revolutionary ferment – the icon of the whole movement, Václav Havel (Suk, 2003: 102). During one of the gatherings attempting to make some order in this sack, Havel described its metabolism:

...It seemed to me that these organisms of ours, these associations, were somehow swelling. Some had ten people, the next day sixty and the third day two hundred, and were producing something smaller and operative out of themselves and two days later these two were swelling and the process went on and on. (Suk, 2003: 100)

Suk observes that it was because ‘many people wanted to be involved in it...’ and concludes that ‘revolutionary character clearly had the upper hand over the proclaimed democratisation and bureaucratisation’ of the movement (ibid.: 108).

Spontaneity and self-organisation within contemporary popular protests or revolutionary processes have been discussed by various other authors (Bayat, 1997; Tilly, 2003; Zhao, 2001). As both organisational principles and free-thinking spirits, spontaneity and self-organisation also underlie the development of national armies, militias and defence forces. As a war reporter in the former Yugoslavia and post-Soviet Caucasus, I remember listening to politicians and commanders of the new, self-appointed national armies talking about their organisational structure, ranks and discipline – but what I actually saw in the field was more often spontaneity, self-organisation and self-structuring as attempts to get over the general confusion and chaos.

There were some extreme cases. After the Soviet army's attack on the headquarters of the Armenian national army, in Yerevan in 1990, I could not paradoxically distinguish commanders from ordinary volunteers within the casualties, or volunteers from the gawkers who regularly turned up at the headquarters. And at the front, in Abkhazia, I saw even local volunteers failed to recognise their commander and almost arrested him for sneaking around the place. The Helsinki Watch *Report on the War in Abkhazia* (cited in Fairbanks, 1995: 21) commented on these units,

These fighters are not real soldiers in the professional sense. (...) These are, significantly, armed formations without non-commissioned officers, the disciplinary backbone of professional armies. There are no sergeants in these ranks, no one to insist on discipline among ordinary soldiers even of a strictly military, prudential nature – to sandbag positions, dig trenches, safeguard bivouacs...

During the war in Chechnya, I met small and completely independent groups of so-called 'Indians' fighting just on their own initiative. 'Most of our people were *Indians*... they do not obey anyone and go fight on their own free will when they feel fit for it', said one of Tishkov's respondents about the modalities of national mobilisation at the onset of the first Chechen War 1994–1996 (Tishkov, 2004: 94–95). It is also reported that when the Chechen offensive was launched on the capital city of Grozny, in August 1996, the scale of private initiatives was such that the numbers of men in arms mysteriously tripled or quadrupled from day to day, and even more took part in the march-pasts following the grandiose celebrations of victory (Tishkov, 2004: 97).

As in the case of political theatre in the streets, we again feel that a wave of enthusiasm for a common cause is a 'kind of miracle'; yet again we had no realistic *folk model* to explain it. This is partly due to the fact that such events were simply inconceivable in their time and place. As post-communist subjects, we were brought up in the hierarchical state machine of a planned economy, a world in which every little cogwheel in the regime machinery had its pre-established place, where every secretary was watched by an over-secretary and nobody would lift a finger without someone ordering him to do it and approving it. We could hardly believe that something could 'work of its own accord'. The idea that something as complex as mass action could operate spontaneously, without anyone directing it, seemed to us pure science fiction. Concepts such as the free market with its *invisible hand*, ecosystems with their own equilibrium or other networks without centre, like the internet, penetrated into the social awareness of these countries much later into the 1990s. As a matter of fact, this inability to grasp processes of spontaneous mobilisation and self-organisation opened up a space for conspiracy explanations. It was all 'directed from the wings' and 'someone invisible was necessarily pulling the strings from behind the curtain'.

'It was (like) intoxication'

The lack of understanding of revolutionary and wartime emotions, mass ecstasy and "that atmosphere"

Revolutionary movements, spontaneous mobilisation, self-organisation and self-structuring: all this worked differently from everyday life. In these upheavals, people behaved otherwise than in

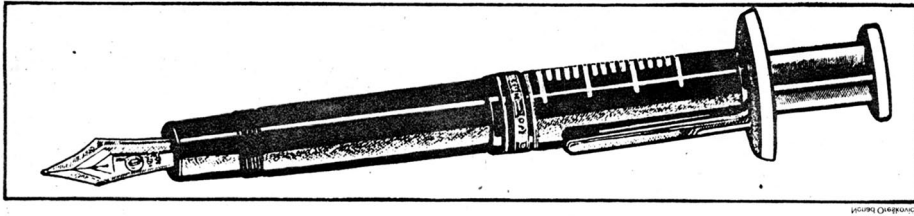


Figure 4. It is they – men of the pen – our famous national intellectuals, who gave us all a *shot of nationalist ecstasy*, suggests the Croatian cartoonist Nenad Orešković. (*Danas*, 26 December 1989, p. 31)

ordinary life. They enthusiastically cooperated with others, whom they might barely know before the protests. ‘It was just such an *intoxicating atmosphere*’ – they would recall for years to come. That ‘atmosphere’ was simply different, as were the great collective emotions experienced at the time. However, in this case too, the lack of a sound theoretical frame to make sense of this emotion paved the way for all sorts of conspiracy explanations.

In the case of the most striking and yet the most treacherous revolutionary emotions, for instance, the feeling of ‘revolutionary’ or ‘war *intoxication*’, rumours and sometimes even politicians dismissed the collective emotions with the theory that ‘drugs are to blame’. Similarly, drug conspiracies were also used to explain armed confrontations, killings and massacres in the wars, which were otherwise so hard to explain in terms of common sense. It was alleged that “soldiers who committed atrocities on the civilian population were on drugs”. During the wars in Yugoslavia and in the Caucasus, highly coloured stories proliferated about fighters who had ‘(hard) drugs handed out to them before attacks’, as well as urban legends about ‘*special cigarettes made with heroin* for the Serbian soldiers’ or alleged testimonies that ‘when the Georgian fighters in Abkhazia left the trenches there were needles and syringes lying around everywhere’ or at least chocolate wrappings ‘because everyone knows that addicts adore sweets...’

Theories of drug use were also dragged in to explain the courage and even the suicidal commitment of the fighters. As one ‘eyewitness’ (a Russian woman pensioner from Grozny speaking on Moscow TV) tried to explain the stubborn Chechen resistance to Russian army:

When the Chechens were defending that presidential palace of theirs for days against a bigger Russian force, you couldn’t even take a walk around there, because they were chucking whole buckets full of needles and syringes out of the windows! There were so many of those things that pavements were full of them. They fought and were in a drunken state - in ecstasy.

They were also intended to make some sense of the bestial cruelty of soldiers, and especially of their crimes against civilians. A former Muslim fighter in Bosnia told me:

A person with a conscience simply cannot take a knife and slice up an innocent person. But...*when they are on drugs*...! He’ll give himself an injection and lose his bearings. If he takes a drug, he’ll happily kill a person of a different faith, someone he used to live next door to (...). He takes *that*, and off he goes and cuts throats.

I was told, this time in Kosovo, even by those whose knowledge of drugs is confined to TV detective stories:

What kind of people are they that can commit those war atrocities, that are capable of raping an eleven-year-old girl? How can they sleep in their beds afterwards?! What sort of monsters are they?! They gave *them drugs* or they got drunk and then they went and started killing!

In short, ‘that’s what those units of theirs do: they take cocaine and then they do all kinds of things. A normal person wouldn’t do that’, an Albanian father whose one-month-old baby had been killed by Serbian soldiers told me.

In fact, the forces of post-communist wars were neither German Luftwaffe in the World War II, nor U.S. Army in Vietnam - where soldiers sometimes got amphetamines, nor some paramilitary forces in Sierra Leone - where they got things like cocaine based “brown-brown”. Drugs were here in the Yugoslav and Caucasian wars rather myth than reality. And where the myth of drug intoxication was not enough, or appeared as frankly unrealistic, witnesses had to make do with a mere drug metaphor: ‘It was intoxicating *like* a drug’. The Georgian president Gamsakhurdia was simply ‘a man who managed to give almost everyone *a shot of nationalism into the veins*’, I was told by his former supporters, who had already ‘sobered up’ from his ecstatic, crazy speeches, one civil war and two ethnic wars. Conversely, the young generations in today’s Croatia, who never experienced the ‘intoxicated’ enthusiasm of their parents for the political ferment, ecstasy and escalation of the upheavals in the 1990s, have started (sometime after 2010) to call themselves ‘*political abstainers*’.

It seems that the myth, or at least metaphor, of drug ecstasy is employed to explain that rapid, yet deep transformation that a person (and a whole society) can undergo in the blink of an eye when the person crosses over from a ‘normal’ stage of going to work and worrying about the family budget, car and garden to the ‘irrational’ nationally euphoric phase of protests and nationwide mobilisation often careering towards war. The conspiracy theory of drug intoxication explains the role of mass revolutionary and war emotions, otherwise so hard to grasp.

Conclusion: what happened to us in that turmoil?

Explaining the incomprehensible through conspiracy theories

The nature of some of the conspiracy theories that I have outlined seem like a reflection of the desire to see a clear, intelligible and identifiable driver behind the events. These theories are favoured not only by those who opposed mass movements but also by those who have sobered up and found themselves back in everyday reality after being intoxicated by mass euphoria. These are people desperately seeking a new meaning in the simple logic of conspiracy theories, to fill vacuum of insufficient explanation of turbulent processes of mass mobilization.

‘What happened to us?!’ – I hear all around. Even a conspiratorial, predatory logic stating that the world is run and shaken from behind is better than a world with no logic at all! It is better than a world falling into a loss of meaning and chaos. In this text I tried to outline why the understanding of the events and mechanisms of these great upheavals of recent decades is so difficult, not only for the ordinary crowd but also for political commentators. I have shown that in the case of the new velvet, floral/colour revolutions and the Arab springs as well as the post-communist ethnic wars, we witnessed a new type of revolutionary events. Events where what I call the revolutionary/war *ecstatic actors* (Haluzik 2011) behave differently than in their ordinarily lives. The events which created change primarily not by violence (although in some cases they eventually gave rise to violence) but by performativity and political theatre; their organisational mode was spontaneity and self-organisation and the driving force of all this lay in the enthusiasm of the revolutionary actors and their emotions. I argued that there has been a lack not only of a folk model but also of journalistic and even academic tools for conceptualising these phenomena, for explaining the unexpected power of the events that were generated and for making sense of the ease with which they turned the established order upside down. It

is this theoretical vacuum that encouraged the easy explanations so nicely offered by all sorts of conspiracy theories.

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Notes

1. Cartoon by Dušan Petričić on the title page, *Nin*, 1 January 1989.
2. Cartoon by Krešimir Skozret, *Danas*, 14 August 1990, p. 7.
3. Drawing by Petar Pismestrović *Vjesnik*, 7 April 1990, later printed in Pismestrović (s.d.).
4. Cartoon by Dušan Petričić, *Nin*, 30 November 1989.
5. Cartoon by Dušan Petričić, *Nin*, 19 April 1991.
6. Drawing by Joško Marušić, *Danas*, 12 March 1991, p. 2.

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