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Before the first blood spilled in the civil wars of doomed Yugoslavia (1991-1999) the world press was already calling political leaders of several republics “nationalist”.

In my opinion the designation at that time was couched in the original definition from the Greek of epithet, meaning “characterization” or “delineation” (as in the 1942 edition of Webster’s New International Dictionary). No more, no less.

That was perfectly natural. The region itself, Southeastern Europe, was where two multinational empires – Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman – had collapsed amid violent struggles for national identity.

Moreover, during the acrimonious conflicts leading to interethnic wars and the step-by-step collapse of the Yugoslav Federation, political leaders and parties proudly employed nationalistic rhetoric, programs, slogans, songs and symbols. So Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia, Franjo Tudjman of Croatia, Alija Izetbegovic of Bosnia, Milan Kucan of Slovenia and others. Many continued to do so afterward.

Unsurprisingly journalists and scholars took to labeling this or that Balkan political leader “nationalist” - and not just when he or she appealed to plainly nationalist sentiments and aspired to nationalist goals. At that time the usage was relatively infrequent and as a descriptive label it seemed not to have a flatly negative connotation. [Reporting from the region as a foreign correspondent, my own use of “nationalist” as a descriptive term commenced in 1982 in the context of clashes, personalities and parties involved in the ethnic rivalries of multiethnic Yugoslavia.*1 Scholarly works on nationalism and nationalists tended to divide on whether nationalism was negative or positive.]

As violence spread across the Yugoslav republics from Slovenia to Croatia, on to Bosnia and ultimately to Kosovo (the autonomous province of Serbia) and Macedonia, the connotation of "nationalist" in the media was quietly transmuted. What was initially a weightless description became "a term of abuse or contempt" – (to use newer dictionary terms). In the process it became an example for me of how the definition of epithet changed. (William Safire, in his June 22, 2008 New York Times column On Language noted that it was a word whose original meaning had been largely altered.) In the case of journalism and scholarship, however, it has been a change so subtle and insidious, in my opinion, as to go unnoticed.

In addition, what never raised questions - either among journalists or, as far as I can determine, among scholars - was the subsequent drumbeat repetition of an intensifying prefix ("ultra") or adjective ("extreme") added to the "nationalist" labels attached to leaders and parties.

Thus in the media what may have begun as a value-free attempt to characterize political leanings descended without any caveat to a form of vilification. "Nationalist" became denunciatory codeword.

This change followed the trajectory of the definition of epithet to its current, almost universal application as a "smear word" or derogation. The American Heritage Book of English Usage (1996) - in its category of "word choice: new uses, common confusion, constraints" - charts the transformation, saying: "Strictly speaking, an epithet is not necessarily derogatory. Students of classical literature will remember the epithets of the Greek gods: gray-eyed Athena, or ox-eyed Hera, rosy-fingered Dawn and so on. But epithet is also used as a simple synonym for term of abuse or slur, as in the sentence 'There is no place for racial epithets in a police officer's vocabulary.' Eighty percent of the Usage Panel accepts this usage."

In the case of Yugoslavia it was as if all at once foreign journalists donned special spectacles with which they could determine what shade a politician's "nationalism" was colored - from "moderate" to "extreme" and, at the outside, "ultra" and "far-right". Among these were many former colleagues from The New York Times.

I recall one musing aloud circa 1992 about how to dub a Bosnian Serb leader, saying: "I could call him 'an extreme nationalist.' No, how about 'ultranationalist.' That's even better!" Indeed he then proceeded to write "extreme" and "ultra" in stories about Serbian "nationalists."

Curiosity has prompted me to use the Google search engine on the Internet pairing the word “nationalism” with various Balkan countries to see what turned up. There were – as of May 2008 - for Albania, 184,000 hits; for Croatia, 187,000 and for Serbia, 238,000.

When paired with “ultranationalism”, Albania registered 10,600; Croatia, 17,900; Serbia, 92,700. (The figures are somewhat misleading since closer examination shows duplication among the items and also considerable cross-identification such that Serbian “nationalism” or “ultranationalism” not infrequently appears in the Albania or Croatia pairings as the principal triggering mechanism.

Again, if “extreme” is paired with “nationalist” Google triggers 38,400 listings for Albania; 44,300 for Croatia and 56.600 for Serbia. Still, the preponderance of the listings involving Serbia would support a contention that Serbs and Serbia were singled out for stigmatizing.

A parallel search of The New York Times online archive since 1981 shows pairings of “nationalist” with Albania pulling up 3,310 entries (again many with Serbia mixed in); Croatia - 8,720; Serbia – 31,200.

Altogether The New York Times archive records 1,100 articles connecting “ultranationalist” to Serbs, beginning in 1992. The same Times archive contains 1,360 articles connecting “extreme nationalist” (or variations) to Serbs, beginning in 1990

There appears to be no guideline at The New York Times and probably none anywhere else for “branding” or what may be perceived as stigmatizing that would apply to “nationalist” and its variants, nor any evident criteria either among scholars.

However, The New York Times Stylebook, which is the widely respected and imitated guideline for usage at the newspaper, does have an advisory on the use of intensifying prefixes such as “ultra”. It reads: “In applying ultra to a person or a belief, beware of a pejorative suggestion of excess. Ultraconservative, for example, can seem to mean too conservative. And a faction described as “ultra-conservative may consider itself merely Orthodox.” (“Ultra” coined from the Latin for “on the far side”) by Camille Desmoulins to designate opponents - enemies – of Danton during the French Revolution, has becn a form of derogation ever since.)

One might imagine that “nationalist” in the form of epithet-as-smear would gradually recede with time or even disappear at least in the Balkan context. Far from it.

Here is Dan Bilefsky on February 22, 2008, writing in The New York Times about “Tomislav Nikolic, a far-right nationalist,” leading the Radical Party, and again on March 9, about upcoming elections in Serbia: “Nikolic, a right-wing nationalist.” On May 3 of Mr. Nikolic, “the leader of Serbia’s far-right Radical Party” whose program is a “potent cocktail of feel-good nationalism and socialism.” In that same piece he also quoted a diplomat describing the prime minister, Vojislav Kostunica as “a 19th-century, anti-Western, romantic nationalist.”

Again on May 11 Bilefsky wrote of “Vojislav Kostunica, the prime minister who helped overthrow Slobodan Milosevic but who has since adopted Mr. Milosevic’s harsh nationalist language.” The slant is obvious.

(Close readers of The Times could see that from April 2000 until December 2007, Mr. Kostunica was described in 36 articles as “a moderate nationalist.” Suddenly, in 2008 he lost the “moderate” qualification and was described as using “harsh nationalist language” – without explanation by the reporter.)

On June 28, Bilefsky wrote that Mirko Cvetkovic, “a low-key technocrat in the pro-Western Democratic Party of President Boris Tadic, [This is erroneous – Cvetkovic is not a member of Tadic’s party] would succeed Vojislav Kostunica, the departing nationalist prime minister.” Note how Bilefsky continues: “Mr. Kostunica, who helped lead the revolution that overthrew Slobodan Milosevic
in 2000, has railed against the West in recent months.” He adds the descriptive, “Mr. Tadic’s pro-European party...”

Nor was Bilefsky alone: Here was Christine Spolar, writing in The Chicago Tribune on June 10, 2008 of “The Serbian Radical Party, an extreme nationalist stalwart.” Here was Renate Flottau, interviewing Tomislav Nikolic for Der Spiegel on May 23, 2008, as “the leader of the ultra-nationalists.” On the academic side there is Andras Riedlmayer of Harvard University: in his brief history of Bosnia, in May 2008 called Serbian Radical Party “extreme nationalist.” These are a few among many recent examples of “nationalist” as a derogatory epithet selected at random.

Pause, at this point, to consider the reflections of the English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, who wrote in the Book of Fallacies, of politicians dodging the danger of being specific - using the tactic of “avoiding the question in debate by substituting general and ambiguous terms in the place of clear and particular appellatives.”*2 Drawing from Aristotle whom he quoted in Latin, “petitio principii,’’ he said this constituted “begging the question.” (By substituting “epithet” for “appellation” subsequent scholars made Bentham the father of the widely used term “question-begging epithet.”) Bentham wrote further of people who subtly attacked others by “employment of a single appellative” which was “passion-kindling.” He then described the technique as: “a man whom it is your object to consign aversion or contempt, you apply the dyslogistic term.”

This seems to me to be a fitting analogy to the use of the ambiguous term, “nationalist” for Balkan politicians during the last two decades, especially when combined with intensifying addition of “ultra” or “extreme.” It could also qualify for listing in Robert Jay Lifton’s category of a “thought-terminating cliché” (a phrase he popularized in his psychological study on “totalism”.)*3

Why bother with this?

The labeling and stigmatizing of Serbs and Serbia seems to me to have gone on for so long that it is now entrenched as a kind of unquestioned truism: “Serb equals nationalist” with a subtext of “nationalist equals bad.”

Having lived in Serbia (when it was part of Yugoslavia) and traveled there frequently for more than four decades, I can attest that none of the Serbs I know and none that I have met consider themselves “nationalists” or even think in what could be clearly considered ”nationalist” categories. I have of course encountered Serbs who consider themselves patriots – both loud ones and quiet ones. But nationalism was not and is not a topic or a preoccupation for the country’s citizens.

If told they were “extreme nationalists” or “ultranationalists” ordinary Serbs would shake their heads in disbelief.

Similarly, some Serbs might even reject the characterization of Slobodan Milosevic as an

archetype of “extreme nationalism/ultranationalism.” (Recall, that starting in the early 1990s Milosevic was a favorite target for labels like “ultranationalist” because he was supposed to desire a "Greater Serbia." It even figured in the Hague tribunal's indictment of him. In fact there is no evidence that Milosevic ever championed such a cause. Instead his original aim was a recreated Yugoslavia with Serbia as its dominant component.*4 Of course there is absolutely no question that Milosevic employed nationalist rhetoric, viciously so, to advance and sustain his political career within in Serbia - and well beyond. (I was one of the first in the foreign press to write about him in this vein.)*5 For that matter Vojislav Seselj, the Milosevic ally, without any doubt used even more violent nationalist invective than Milosevic.

But just as so-called experts, when questioned in the 1980s, could not define or agree about what they meant when writing about "terrorism" *6 - so few who write about "ultranationalists" could define their criteria and what they would include as the characteristics of a Balkan "ultranationalist". A solid definition would be even more difficult today because Serbian cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia is no longer an issue. As for the “ultranationalist” Seselj, he was not handed over to the court. Rather he flew to The Hague voluntarily in February 2003. His trial began in November 2007. The only remaining issue Serbia has with foreign governments or international institutions is its non-acceptance of the independence of Kosovo (unilaterally declared in February 2008) which it maintains is its – autonomous - province. As for cooperation with the European Union – a recent poll shows more than 60 percent of the Serbs want their country to attain membership.

Yet the drumbeat of stigmatization/vilification from abroad (principally the United States and various European Union countries) has been going on so long that it is infecting the political discourse in Serbia. Perhaps permanently. For example, Serbia’s 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections were dominated by a discourse over the platform slogan of the Democratic Party and its coalition allies which was: “For a European Serbia.”

As if Serbia were not a part of Europe for its entire existence - more than seven centuries - or that its European-ness was doubtful. This kind of propaganda was welcomed and echoed by such anti-Serb officials as Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried, who remarked July 4 that “Serbia has expressed the wish for a European future and we will work on this with the new government in Belgrade.”

The subject of concern here has been labeling – in journalism and in scholarship – and whether it enlightens or obfuscates, whether it fairly describes or unfairly smears. The label at hand has been “nationalist” and the main object has been Serbia. But other labels and other objects may be appropriate for examination in a parallel context.

In the case of the former Yugoslavia there could well have been a basis for some form of labeling in the fact that Yugoslavia was constituted as a federal state of numerous nationalities and “national minorities,” with a self-conscious slogan - and invocation - promoting “brotherhood and unity.”

For that matter, Tito’s Yugoslavia had been consciously created as an answer to the destructive menaces of the narrow ethnic polarizations that contributed so strongly to the destruction of royal Yugoslavia (1929-1941). That first Yugoslavia was foredoomed by the basic theses of Mussolini’s and Hitler’s policies: its utter destruction and division into “friendly” (interior parts of Croatia and the Moslem portions of Bosnia-Hercegovina) and “unfriendly” (Serbia and Montenegro) satraps.

On another side of the political spectrum, the interwar Comintern had been ambiguous toward “Yugoslavia” – explicitly opposing it in the 1920s and finally accepting it on the eve of World War II.

A principal charge leveled against Tito’s Yugoslavia in June 1948 by Stalin’s Comintern successor, the Cominform, read: “The Information Bureau denounces this anti-Soviet attitude of the leaders of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, as being incompatible with Marxism-Leninism and only appropriate to nationalism.” Six months later Stalin himself wrote in a statement published in the name of the CPSU Central Committee: “The leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia has broken away from the internationalist positions of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and has taken up the course of nationalism. Tito’s group, by pursuing a nationalist policy, is playing into the hands of the imperialists, isolating Yugoslavia and weakening it.”

In retrospect, it appears that Tito had been quite comfortable with the stance of Lenin and Stalin (who was the Communist who framed the party stance on nationalism) on the subject in which the Soviet leaders stated that the proletariat "while recognizing equality and equal rights to a national state, it values above all and places foremost the alliance of the proletarians of all nations, and assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers' class struggle.”*7

In fact Tito and his closest aides - the Slovene Edvard Kardelj, the Serb, Aleksandr Rankovic and the Montenegrin Milovan Djilas – were creating three years after the end of World War II a kind of supranationalism expressed in the unwieldy term Jugoslavenstvo – Yugoslavianism -

(which also had some currency in the first Yugoslavia). This was supposed to supersede ethnic loyalties to Serbia, Croatia and the other “ordinary” nationalities. Yet at the practical level, one’s narodnost (ethnic group) noted in every citizen’s personal identity card, remained the cardinal factor determining schooling, job opportunities and other essential elements of life.

Reflecting on Tito’s views in the wake of Yugoslavia’s disastrous civil wars, Aleksa Djilas, son of Milovan, wrote: “In a simplistic, Marxist-Leninist manner, Tito saw nationalism as “bourgeois ideology” and national conflicts as caused by “capitalism.” So after the war, with the “bourgeoisie” defeated, he did little to combat nationalism and forge unity.”*8

On the international front Tito in 1955 co-founded the Non-Aligned Movement, which in its way enshrined the nationalism of the new, ex-colonial states. Six years later he launched an initiative leading to the first official Non-Aligned Movement Summit, held in September 1961 in Belgrade. But in his case this should be interpreted principally as a strategy to protect (multinational) Yugoslavia against predators from East and West.

When he saw his rule at home threatened, Tito led campaigns against a nationalist movement in his native Croatia in 1971 - and sought almost immediately to achieve a kind of compensating rebalance by way of crackdowns on the far less dangerous liberal - but not nationalist - elements in Serbia and Slovenia.

The “president for life” made two more innovations involving nationhood which had the gravest consequences in the next two decades: granting a separate “nationality” in 1968 to Bosnia’s Moslems and granting “autonomy” in 1974 to the province of Kosovo, where ethnic Albanians already made up the majority of the population. Tito’s moves served only to postpone - and in a way foster - the next spasms of nationalism, which commenced in Kosovo in March 1981 ten months after his death.

In retrospect, Stalin’s banishment of Yugoslavia from the Soviet Bloc was equally a blessing and a curse – the blessing of liberation from a totalitarian prison and the curse of those unchained Yugoslavs fighting to the death over the spoils of freedom. And ripping asunder his and everyone else’s Yugoslavia.

Here are comments by two former Yugoslavs on the relationship between communism and

nationalism that are appropriate:

“It probably takes much longer to get a fried chicken franchise than it took to convince the world that Yugoslavia should be replaced by as many little states as the natives desired” wrote Charles Simic, the Serbian-American poet. *9 He added: “Nationalism as much as Communism provides an opportunity to rewrite history”

“Nationalism was a strong weapon in fighting Communism.” Janez Drnovsek (1950-2008) president of Federal Yugoslavia 1989-90; prime minister of - independent - Slovenia. 1992-2002, president of Slovenia , 2002-2007. (The observation is hypocritical, in the author’s opinion, since Drnovsek’s political career was fostered from the beginning by the Communist party.)*10

Finally, a glance at the evolution of nationalism as a concept with some relevant citations:

George Orwell observed at the end of World War II., which pitted established nationalisms against each other as well as creating new nationalisms, that “The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, not for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.” And: “Every nationalist is capable of the most flagrant dishonesty, but he is also - since he is conscious of serving something bigger than himself - unshakably certain of being in the right.*11

About the same time Hans Kohn, a pioneer in the field, wrote in “The Idea of Nationalism” that a distinction could be made between a “western” type of “civic” nationalism that emerged in England and France from 1600 to 1800 and an “eastern” type that appeared later. The “civic” and “liberal” western version he identified with “the masses and with popular forms of politics” while “ethnic” and “illiberal” eastern nationalism was employed to justify the creation of a nation-state. Kohn evaluated the western type as “authentic, liberal, democratic and good” while the eastern type (which he assigned in part to German origin) was “alien, ethnic, racist and generally bad.* 12

However Kohn might have intended it to be interpreted, his dichotomy has since been accepted by numerous social scientists and historians as proclaiming “my nationalism is good; your nationalism is bad.”

I believe that together, Orwell's and Kohn's pronouncements created the foundation on which the relatively recent transmutation of "nationalist" from epithet as description to epithet as derogation took place.

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* 1. Following are a few summaries of articles by David Binder employing "nationalist" as a descriptive term for Serbian politicians:

U.S. Aides Express Concern Over Yugoslav Crisis

...between their appreciation of Mr. Milosevic as a catalyst forcing through sorely...Serbian leader, by playing on nationalist passions, might create unbridgeable...looking to the opponents of Mr. Milosevic to "speak out more and show...

October 12, 1988 - By DAVID BINDER, Special to the New York Times - World - 673 words

Evolution in Europe; Yugoslavia Seen Breakuing Up Soon

...under its president, Slobodan Milosevic. The authors of the intelligence...official concerned, blame Mr. Milosevic as the principal instigator...Albanians and for stirring Serbian nationalist passions. After an auspicious...from the federation and Mr. Milosevic has lately pursued a go...

November 28, 1990 - By DAVID BINDER, Special to The New York Times - World - 778 words

Yugoslavia's Military Drops Out of Sight

...Riza Sapunxhia. But Mr. Milosevic may have miscalculated...Albanian population, Mr. Milose vic
dismissed the province...has been close to the
nationalist
leadership of the Serbian republic under Mr.
Milosevic
. Both he and the armed...

March 19, 1991 - By DAVID BINDER, Special to The New York Times - World - 675 words

* 2. Book of Fallacies. Jeremy Bentham. John & H.L. Hunt. London. 1824. p. 287

* 3. Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism. Robert J. Lifton. Norton & Co. New York. 1961. p.429 (Lifton wrote: The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. These become the start and finish of any ideological analysis. Thought-terminating clichés are sometimes used during political discourse to enhance appeal or to shut down debate. In this setting, their usage can usually be classified as a logical fallacy.)

* 4. Slobodan Milosevic;The Serb Who’s Giving the Orders. David Binder. The New York Times. Oct. 14, 1988.

* 5. In Yugoslavia, Rising Ethnic Strife Brings Fears of Worse Civil Strife. David Binder. The New York Times, Nov. 1, 1987.

* 6. Wanton Acts of Usage - Terrorism: A Cliché in Search of a Meaning. Christopher Hitchens, Harper's, September 1986: pp. 66-70.

* 7. 1915; J. V Stalin, Stalin, Marxism and the National and Colonial Question. London. Martin Lawrence Ltd. 1936. V.I. Lenin, Lenin Miscellany VI. Published according to the translation by N. K. Krupskaya, with corrections by V. I. Lenin. Moscow. 1927 (originally written in German, October, 1915;

* 8. Aleksa Djilas, Tito's Last Secret: How Did He Keep Yugoslavia Together. Foreign Affairs July/August 1995.

* 9. The Unemployed Fortune-Teller. Charles Simic. University of Michigan Press. 1994. Ann Arbor, Mich. p. 38.

* 10. Milosevic's Wars. Janez Drnovsek. Southeast European Politics. Budapest. October 2000. pp. 60-70.

* 11. George Orwell: 'Notes on Nationalism' Polemic London. 1945.

* 12. The Idea of Nationalism. Hans Kohn. New York, Macmillan. 1944.