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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Can We Learn from Yugoslavia?

Susan L. Woodward

The Graduate Center, City University of New York, USA
Email: SWoodward@gc.cuny.edu

Liquid Nationalism and State Partitions in Europe, by Stefano Bianchini, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar, 2017, 360 pp., $158.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781786436603.

Liquid Nationalism and State Partitions in Europe is Stefano Bianchini's *magnum opus*, reflecting a lifetime of working on the issues of ethno-nationalism in Europe, from Southeast Europe through Central Europe and the former Soviet space to all of western Europe. It is more than a book; it is an entire seminar, ranging not only geographically but also historically, from the Enlightenment to the second decade of the 21st century. Simply a list of the gems I learned would usurp all the space I have been given for this essay and much more. I choose to focus on one small part, what I take to be the primary motivation behind this book, namely his anguish over the lessons for western Europe "not learned from the dismemberment of Yugoslavia" (the title of Chapter 10), a case he knows so well. That chapter then begins with a quotation from another specialist on Yugoslavia, Jacques Rupnik, in *Le Monde* in 2014, "the greatest obstacle to the Europeanization of the Balkans is the Balkanization of Europe" (185). Nor are Bianchini and Rupnik alone in this concern. Already in 2012, Ivan Krastev convened two parallel seminars at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna on what he called, "The Logics of Disintegration" – of the Soviet case (Part I) and the Habsburg and Yugoslav cases (Part II) and their lessons for the European Union.

Bianchini begins from the same perspective as Marie-Janine Calic in two recent books, *A History of Yugoslavia* (2019) and *The Great Cauldron: A History of Southeastern Europe* (2019), namely, the importance of seeing the histories of eastern and western Europe as part of one piece. Calic challenges the standard view of the Balkans as "the backward, barbaric, and abhorrent contrast to the supposedly so civilized European continent … consistently written out of the European context" whereas, "a closer look" shows that "the region is tightly intertwined in the timeline of Europe's history in both good and bad ways" (ix). Bianchini adds Central and Eastern Europe to the Balkans in also insisting on a continental perspective: "the intense network of independent contacts and interactions across Europe as a whole" beginning in the 18th century, perhaps even from the 1470s with the printing press, that made Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans "the epicenter of a European geopolitical earthquake" by the mid-19th century (2–3). Not a liminal space of Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, but reimagining connections that, for example, can place Gavrilo Princip, the assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, in the "revolutionary political culture of the 19th century" shared by Italians such as Orsini and Guglielmo and the Russian *narodniks* and above all, for Bianchini, inspired by Giuseppe Mazzini.

By the end of the Cold War, which had contained the earthquake, the nationalist momentum for freedom and democratic rights that had torn down "the pre-modern dynastic empires, the colonial empires and [now] the Socialist federations" (183) was now partitioning states and moving its infection westward – Spain (Catalonia and the Basque country), the United Kingdom (Scotland and Northern Ireland), and Belgium, for starters. Borders were multiplying at a time when transnational forces were, too. The 18 walls during the Cold War had risen to more than 50 by 2015, "most of them

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with ethno-national and/or ethno-racial motivations" (176). In the European Union, a "renationalization of domestic and foreign policy by the European member states" (253) has made any decision-making at all difficult in a way that is reminiscent of the last days of Yugoslavia. As he explains, "the temptation of the governments to abandon exhausting and time-consuming negotiations with the other member states, in search of a 'national way' out of the impasse … was the last step that preceded the final Yugoslav collapse" (294). At the same time, he argues, the nation-state is challenged by transnational forces it cannot manage, threatening democracy itself.

Can this book repair the damage of lessons unlearned from Yugoslavia? What contribution can the East make to these challenges in the West if we engage in this pan-European comparison and conversation? I will suggest three that this book suggests, but that requires first asking what Bianchini means by the nation-state. He never defines it as a concept while its meaning appears to change often between the two parts of the European continent over many centuries. I have written, in *Balkan Tragedy* (223), of the empty-vessel, ever changing characteristic of nationalism as a political force, but a nation-state? How many countries are actually nation-states? What would be the consequence of not using the term at all?

Its first incarnation in his story is as independent states forged by nationalist movements against imperial rule, but what do we call the states that were formerly empires? Are the remaining rumps – Britain, France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and Sweden, for examples – nations if their states were not formed by a movement for national self-determination? We also do not refer to postcolonial states in Africa and Latin America as nation-states, though they were also a result of a nationalist movement. Surely it is not the case, more importantly, that states in western Europe are ethnically homogeneous. Bianchini comes closest to explaining that incorrect characterization when he refers to "a predominant discourse based on an imagined homogeneity, *one* standardized language, *one* predominant religion, *one* defined territory with *fixed* population, and a well-defined 'cultural recognition' between rulers and ruled" (291, italics in the original). What provoked such a discourse if it is not true, and why was there a demand in the period after the defeat of empires for homogeneity, as he tells us, and from whom (179)? Bianchini suggests a mid-19th century origin with liberal theories, especially of John Stuart Mill, that democracy required ethnic homogeneity and, further, that "security and democracy [were] compatible only *within* a homogeneous group (or nation)" (179, italics in the original). It is true that many contemporary political scientists use this argument, wrongly, but "a general belief"? And would not the current partitions and new borders to create ethnically homogeneous states then actually support democracy, as their argument goes, not be the threat that concerns him? Above all, the current spectre of ever more partitions and secessions must have some basis in a reality that these states are multiethnic, some even multinational, and certainly heterogeneous ethnically and linguistically, that is, not nation-states. Despite Bianchini's understandable worry that these could become violent because of the experience of Yugoslavia, James Fearon and David Laitin (2003) have demonstrated statistically that the more heterogeneous ethnically the country, the more stable it is. The problem comes with ethnic polarization, not heterogeneity.

While Bianchini is clear that it is the ethnicization of the nation currently that concerns him the most, the distinction between nations and ethnic groups/ethnicity is never made clear. The resort on occasion to the term "ethno-national" only reinforces my proposal that we dispense entirely with the term nation-state and then clarify what we mean when we use the terms nation, ethnicity, ethno-linguistic, and ethno-national to classify states. People in states in the East that had been part of empires – Russian, Habsburg and AustroHungarian, Ottoman – are quite clear that they are nations, not ethnic groups, by which they mean the right to self-determination. The legal distinction further between nations and national minorities in Yugoslavia or in Spain make clear that this is a political-legal construct to distinguish among a spectrum of rights, making it all the more important to clarify these terms and that of nation-state above all. This also goes to the heart of Bianchini's primary worry about the "renationalization of domestic and foreign policy by the European

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member states" (253); aren't these actors states, not nations? What meaning is being communicated by calling this "renationalization"?

Sambanis and Shayo (2013) argue formally and then find empirically that national identification, as opposed to ethnic identification, always discourages fighting. They follow with prescriptions for supporting national over ethnic identifications (and criticism especially of American counterinsurgency policies in Afghanistan for doing the opposite). They do add, however, that political institutions can mediate the relationship among ethnicity, national identification, and conflict. In questioning the lessons of the Yugoslav dissolution for western Europe and for democracy currently, Bianchini wonders instead whether "institutional regulations were not enough" to save Yugoslavia, but "perhaps a rooted democratic environment, which marks the Scottish and Catalan experience … represents a crucial difference" (184).

This question of institutions introduces a second contribution that the East can make in this comparative, pan-European conversation. Their alternative to homogenizing pressures in the states of western Europe, such as the brutality in 19th century France, though continuing up to the 1980s, and the functional integration that ignores national or ethnic identities, such as the European Union, were federalist and integrative institutions based explicitly on a recognition of the right of national self-determination. The model of Austromarxism proposed by Karl Renner and Otto Bauer in the late 19th century up to WWI to keep the Austro-Hungarian empire intact and then as a stepping stone to a socialist federation might well have succeeded had there been no war that destroyed the empire. One could say that it did succeed for 73 years in the Soviet Union and 46 years in Yugoslavia, both based directly on the Austromarxist platform and design. Current developments in Ethiopia, with a Leninist-Austromarxist constitution as well, are more troubling about the causes of this model's success or failure. The current threats to democracy in the United States from white supremacists against the country's ethnic, religious, and racial diversity, while not in an institutional context based on the rights of national self-determination, are based on analogous institutions, such as the Senate, its filibuster rule, and the Electoral College, that are based on the rights of slave-owning white males, reinforced after the Civil War with Jim Crow laws and Supreme Court decisions, despite formal emancipation. Decision-making rules do matter.

We are far from any consensus on the causes of these failed multinational federations in the East, but Alfred Stepan suggests in 2001 that this is because the literatures on nationalism, federalism, and democracy have not, or at least until then, been examined together. After all, he notes, the majority of populations in long-standing democracies live in federal systems, and all relatively long-standing multinational and multilingual democracies are federal (Stepan 2001). But to control for democracy and return to Yugoslavia, we can entertain Bianchini's proposition that the problem in Yugoslavia was actually decentralization, giving extensive autonomy to the federal units and ever more veto points on any effective decision-making for the country as a whole (hence the parallel with the European Union that concerns him now). Because the Yugoslav system was ever more decentralized starting in 1958 (if not even 1949 as I have argued), I propose that the outcome Bianchini fears cannot be explained until one adds the effect of the centralizing reversal under economic crisis – in the 1980s for Yugoslavia and after 2008 in Spain. Here the common pressure for decentralization throughout the continent under neoliberal economic policies in the 1970s and 1980s and its outcome under the global debt crisis is a far more compelling avenue to explore than nationalism. Whether the Bosnian revolts against the Ottoman Empire in the 1880s or Slovenia's decision to secede from Yugoslavia a hundred years later, they found political leverage in the definition of political rights in national (not ethnic) terms, but their protests were against taxation, fiscal policy, and policies of redistribution. Turning protests into independence required another factor.

This additional factor brings us to the third contribution of the eastern experience and particularly the Yugoslav case to the questions Bianchini raises about the West, namely, the major difference in the role of external interveners. Limiting this immense topic to the political definition of nations, their institutional embodiment, and the changing borders (at least ten times in 1908–99 in East Central Europe and the Balkans, Bianchini tells us), where is the parallel, if any, in the West

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to the decisions at Versailles, the role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Yugoslavia from 1949 through the 1980s, the diplomacy and intervention of the European Union (EU), NATO, and the U.S. in the 1990s, starting with the support for Slovene independence that then sealed the fate of Yugoslavia, and even, as Bianchini emphasizes, the activities of anti-communist emigrés, who "promoted ethno-nationalist and partition principles" (172) for many decades with the active support of the United States? Two of three lessons as yet unlearned from the Yugoslav case, according to Bianchini, decentralization and economic austerity, were largely a consequence of the policies of the International Monetary Fund; so, too, was the requirement to recentralize economic policy in the 1980s that propelled the Slovene government toward independence (ironically, on the slogan "Europe, Now!").[1] Along with the IMF's economic ideology was a political ideology – what Bianchini labels "liberal homogeneity" and associates with John Stuart Mill and then the Americans – by which the EU, some of its member states, and the U.S. made the "assumption that a democratic transition was possible only within Yugoslavia's constituent units, rather than within a federal framework" (191). Within less than one year, this meant the end of Yugoslavia. But this was the Slovene argument alone, in defending their insistence that republic-level elections must precede federal elections, against the will of all the others and also academic scholarship.[2] While the Croatian leaders piggy-backed on the Slovene moves, to the fury of Slovenes, no one in Yugoslavia other than a segment of republic-level Slovene politicians wanted its end (Bianchini reminds us that the referendum in Croatia did not even offer this option). Why did European states accept this argument?

While both Slovene and Croatian propaganda in support of their independence fit like a glove, intentionally, with American anti-communism, it is a futile exercise to identify some common principle on the issue of national rights in the decisive role on borders and new states that the outside powers held (and practiced), from Versailles through the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and diplomatic negotiations on the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. As Bianchini tells us, Woodrow Wilson shifts between ethnic (defined linguistically) and civic definitions for the postwar settlements, is then undermined by events on the ground and opposition from allies, then chooses ethnic over civic, and yet ends with declaring national self-determination an imperative principle (82–4). The Dayton Accord for Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995, another American product, swings among all three, as Bianchini tells us: a civic nation, a state of three ethnic nations (whatever that means), and an implicit right of national self-determination for all three Bosnian nations, but leaving a "primary ambiguity" about its political content (228), according to Bianchini, and thus keeping "the political destiny of partition alive" (226). Contrary to his argument that "Western diplomats realized their mistake" on Bosnia-Herzegovina in dealing with Macedonia, they actually repeated the same assumptions and policies from 1991 through Kosovo in 2008,[3] even though all three are entirely different conflicts from the national perspective. Nonetheless, in all three cases, the outsiders' decisions created *faits accomplis.*

Yet we have no need for the more than two centuries of nation-state legacy that Bianchini traces to understand Richard Holbrooke's approach to Bosnia in the Dayton negotiations; by the early 1990s, it was widespread diplomatic fashion to assume that a "power sharing" agreement among armed groups and its constitution will bring a stable peace. This is not a warning for the EU or western Europe, therefore, but very much for a large number of places subject to external mediation to end civil wars in the last 30-odd years, such as Lebanon (Taif Agreement of 1989), Northern Ireland (Good Friday Agreement 1998), and South Sudan (Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005), with the same set of assumptions and unfortunate results. This pattern does, however, support Bianchini's conclusion that controversy over the idea of the nation "may be determined more by the evolution of the regional and international balance of power" (234). I cannot resist raising the counterfactual question, of what would have been the result if Holbrooke and his State Department team had bothered to learn even a little about the role of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the Yugoslav federation beginning in 1943, on the one hand, and the institutions of the Yugoslav system, which they have reproduced, on the other?[4]

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To conclude, what about Bianchini's other pole, the transnational forces? He swings between the benefits of integration such as the European Union, which he supports, and the many challenges of globalization, especially its economic aspects, that face countries in all regions of Europe, and most prominently in his story, of mass migration and asylum-seekers? Is there something particular about a nation-state, once defined, that is unable to address these challenges? James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2008) analyze this contest, in their words between the "vertical encompassment" of states and an increasingly transnational political economy, or governmentality, as a challenge that cannot be understood in the old "nation-building" optic but rather leads states to reconfigure their abilities to spatialize their authority and thus remain superior. The contest is on-going, but the state has effective tools through their embeddedness "in a host of mundane bureaucratic practices." For Marie-Janine Calic, in *The Great Cauldron,* Southeastern Europe has always been, and still is, defined far more by "translocal, transregional, and transnational relationships of exchange" than by the idea that "the nation-state [was] the logical culmination of a supposedly linear process" (2). Ejecting the concept of the nation-state might help here, too, in analyzing Bianchini's concern.

The main difficulty comes, I suggest, in the pervasive concern throughout this book of the current threat of mass migration and asylum seekers to pan-European solutions as well as national responses – between Angela Merkel and Hungary, as he poses, with some trepidation. There is a hint that religion matters in European reaction, but how does it enter the concept of the nation in Europe, and what are the consequences? It has always been there, from the origins of state-building in the West and definition of their party systems, but even in the 1990s, external (EU and US) actors, thus Western, treated the northern and southern republics in Yugoslavia very differently, distinguishing it would appear between Habsburg and Ottoman former colonies, between Roman Christian and Protestant versus Orthodox Christian and Muslim.[5] Why is this left unsaid?

In the end, one can read this book as a prelude. For both Bianchini and Calic, the partition process in former Yugoslavia and the Soviet space is unfinished. He implies the same for Western Europe. While many of the current events discussed in the book have passed on since its publication, its very principle that this is an ever-changing process should keep its readers and larger audience engaged for a very long time.

Notes

1 See Woodward (1995) for details, including the dates for the path of decentralization, complete as a confederation by 1969, not 1974, and for the beginnings of consumerism in federal policy and reality in 1961, not 1965.

2 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan (1992) warned against the destabilizing consequence of this sequencing of elections in federal systems, for both Yugoslavia and Spain.

3 See Woodward (2007).

4 I want to note two factual disagreements I have in the chapter on Bosnia-Herzegovina that are important to me: (1) please do not equate Robert Fraser and Richard Holbrooke (247); Fraser understood; I want to imagine what a different outcome we would have had, if he had lived; and (2) a very common mistake: the Office of the High Representative established to implement the Dayton Accord in Bosnia-Herzegovina was not created by the United Nations; it is an *ad hoc* international institution created by the EU and the U.S., which is significant in understanding its operation and consequences, but also in sparing the United Nations of at least one criticism in this sad story.

5 See Woodward (2011).

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