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YUGOSLAV CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGIES - INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Introduction

This special issue explores a largely invisible tradition of Yugoslav critical psychology. Rarely used and never formally defined, the term has no clear boundaries or specific referents to anchor it. Instead, it offers a way of exploring what we know once existed, what we suspect may still be flickering around us, and what we hope might take a clearer form in the future.

The remnants of the heterogeneous set of intellectual and practical formations we can associate with Yugoslav critical psychology can be found in various forms: in forgotten books, small university departments, in thoughts, discussions, friendships and initiatives like this one. We chose 'Yugoslav' over alternatives such as 'Balkan' or 'Southeastern European' for three reasons. First, it names a historical community bound by a specific political-economic formation rather than by geography alone. Second, it acknowledges a shared linguistic space, without forgetting the minorities within it who speak non-Slavic languages. Third, and most importantly, it lets us claim an intellectual common ground: a body of locally produced critical psychologies we can excavate and, crucially, a method for doing so. But rather than confining Yugoslav psychologies to knowledge production exclusively within Yugoslavia as a former socialist state,[1] we aim to broaden their spatial and temporal configurations, defining 'Yugoslav' through all past, present, and future work in the field of homegrown critical — Marxist, socialist, liberation — psychologies. Following the dominant

[1] One might object that the term *Yugoslav* predates socialist Yugoslavia and was also used to designate *the Kingdom of Yugoslavia* (existed as a kingdom from 1919 to 1941, with this specific name from 1929 to 1941). Indeed, the Kingdom of *Yugoslavia* itself can be understood as a political project that, despite its many contradictions and limitations, challenged the ethnonational fragmentation that dominated both the region and the world in the early twentieth century. In this sense, the term Yugoslav has a longer intellectual and political genealogy than socialist Yugoslavia alone. Nevertheless, the symbolic and theoretical horizon that primarily informs this Special Issue is rooted in the experience of the socialist state under different names: Democratic Federative Yugoslavia (1943-1945), Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1963) with its final name of *the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia* (1963-1991).

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epistemologies of dialectical and historical materialism in Yugoslavia, we understand the present through its past contradictions, meaning that the term 'Yugoslav' names not only a past object of study, but also the standpoint from which we study it.

The historical base of Yugoslav critical psychologies lies in Yugoslavia's specific political-economic system of workers' self-management of the means of production, its political organization as a multinational federation, as well as its geopolitical positioning as a non-aligned country. Within this context, practitioners and theoreticians across the psy-disciplines that would from the contemporary perspective be characterized as critical, revolutionary or liberatory were part of the mainstream. They were supported by the state in their efforts to conceptualise new forms of subjectivity from Marxist humanist perspectives, work that fed into broader cultural production well beyond psy-institutions (Antić, 2021). Connected simultaneously to the capitalist West and to the Global South during the decolonial restructuring, they combined Marxism with the psy-disciplines, especially psychoanalysis, in innovative ways, aiming above all at revolutionary praxis: the creation of a revolutionary subjectivity grounded in the assumption that material and psychological liberation were both possible and necessary (e.g. Jakovljević, 1959 in Antić, 2021). Critical strands of psychology shared this Marxist theoretical base and revolutionary orientation while also distancing themselves and critiquing the official strands and practices when deemed necessary (Pehar & Reberc, 2024a). Various strands of this heterogenous intellectual tradition are captured in an extensive body of literature of marxist-humanist perspectives on subjectivity (e.g. Golubović, 1966; Supek, 1985), psychology of self-management (e.g. Brajša, 1978; Dunđerović, 1982; Ilić, 1979), as well as in more general critical perspectives on psychology found in university textbooks of the time (e.g. Pečjak, 1983; Zvonarević, 1978; Tomeković, 1989).

This tradition is characterised by both rupture and continuity, shaped by the socio-historical, political-economic, and linguistic specificities of the region. The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia into ethno-nationalist states during the nineties, the restoration of capitalism, and the rise of new ideologies obscured past achievements and created both generational and theoretical discontinuity. Yet, this gap also holds a potential for contemporary critical psychologists, to link our work to the achievements of Yugoslav revolutionary knowledge production — a body of work that did not succumb to revisionism — while remaining open to new international connections not bound by its historical limits. The aim of this special issue was thus double: to expand the network of critical psychologists working in the region through a collaborative project and to explore the traces of critical psychologies' past, capture their current forms, and extend them toward the future: as memory, inspiration, spur, curiosity.

Contributions

In its final form, this special issue comprises five papers. They take different forms and address various topics, including historical analyses of different cases in Yugoslav psychology, theoretical contributions, and a qualitative empirical study. Critical psychology occupies different roles in the collection: it figures as an object of historical analysis, as an established theoretical anchor but also as a more diffuse position and background, underpinning the intertwining of political and research goals.

The special issue opens with two historical contributions. In the first one, *The Development of Critical Psychology and Its Contribution to Social Change in Slovenia,* Mirjana Ule discusses the development of critical psychological theory and practice in Slovenia and traces its transformations in

the context of social changes during the transition from the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia to the formation of the capitalist state of Slovenia. Through the careful mapping of the social and activist movements, important events, figures, theoretical influences, and forms of intervention that characterised different periods, the author shows the importance of locally situating and analysing past critical psychological endeavours and thereby grounding present and future initiatives. In the following paper, *From sex reassignment to medical gender affirmation - A critical review of the work of the Belgrade sexological team,* Jelena Vidić offers a historical contextualization of gender-affirming medicine in socialist Yugoslavia and independent Serbia, showing how local practices and understandings were shaped through ongoing engagement with international standards and debates. Vidić's article examines how psy-professionals in Yugoslavia functioned as "gatekeepers" in gender-affirming medicine, adopting international pathologizing standards that reproduced conservative social norms around transgender identities rather than promoting client autonomy and emancipation.

The next section groups two theoretical contributions on contemporary phenomena. In his *Governing the neoliberal subject through therapy culture: self-help books and the entrepreneurial self,* Milan Urošević proposes the concept of the "self-entrepreneurial fantasy". Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, he describes a socially shared framework that organises desire and provides meaning within the neoliberal order, and uses it to explain how engagement with therapy culture contributes to the reproduction of neoliberalism in everyday life. The concept is offered as an analytical tool for critical psychology, opening empirical questions about the relationship between subjectivity, desire, and therapeutic discourse, and enabling more critical reflection on how neoliberal ideals are internalised, reproduced, and potentially resisted. In his paper *From Negative Emotionality to Emotionally Wounded Subjectivity: A Process of Neoliberal Subjectification,* Ognjen Janić proposes an integrative theoretical framework arguing that neoliberal subjectification simultaneously demands invulnerability to negative affect while promoting identification with "emotional injury." Drawing on post-Kleinian and contemporary intersubjective psychoanalysis — which emphasise capacities for receptivity, love, and the tolerance of ambivalence and conflict — he contends that deconstructing such subjectivities through psychoanalytic work opens a route toward emancipation. In doing so, he envisions negative emotionality as an embodied, embedded, and interactive site of transformative engagement, while also demonstrating how critical psychology can examine the interplay between socio-political processes, mainstream psychological concepts, and the possibilities for reflection and social change.

The special issue concludes with Sara Ristić and Bojana Tamindžija's in-depth qualitative empirical research paper *Living Wage Sounds Like Dreaming in Vain: Expression of Working Conditions on the Psychological Wellbeing in the Narratives of Industrial Workers in Serbia.* Ristić and Tamindžija examine the lived experiences of industrial workers in Serbia through qualitative interviews, situating their subjectivities within exploitative working conditions and within a broader analysis of Serbia's labour force in global supply chains — particularly in relation to foreign-owned companies operating in the country. A central contribution of the study is its linking of macro and micro processes, using the study of subjectivity to move beyond representations of workers as passive and to illuminate the cultural resources and social relations available to them. To explain the absence of collective mobilisation despite severe exploitation, the authors develop the concept of "the collapse of imagination" — an inability to envision alternatives beyond the existing social and economic order — demonstrating how psychological research of situated subjectivity can deepen understanding of both the constraints on and the possibilities for human agency.

Apart from providing space to explore the present contours of Yugoslav critical psychology, an important goal of this project behind the special issue was to expand the network of critical psychologists active in the region. With both goals in mind, this introduction to the special issue also acknowledges proposals that did not ultimately develop into full papers. Their authors nevertheless participated in the project's initial collective meeting, where they presented their ideas and discussed them with the group, contributing to the collaborative intellectual process that shaped this special issue.

Two proposals engaged with the disciplinary history of psychology under socialism. Isidora Popović proposed an archival study examining whether, and to what extent, mainstream psychology in socialist Yugoslavia was also a socialist psychology — drawing on psychology theses from the University of Belgrade and on psychology-themed texts from Radio Belgrade's Treći program as windows into how the discipline reproduced itself academically and communicated with the wider public. Otilija Dajč proposed a reconceptualisation of Pavao Brajša's General Psychodynamics of Self-Management Behavior, evaluating its present relevance for contemporary emancipatory movements and for questions of mental health.

A second cluster took up feminist and gender-critical questions, spanning both the historical and the contemporary. Dijana Džamastagić and Ana Cvelfar proposed a revisiting of Vida Tomšič's writings on women's emancipation and gender relations in Yugoslav socialism, with an emphasis on her ideas of the "free individual" and the humanisation of gender relations. Maša Suša and Tina Kuhar set out to analyse and reflect on the contemporary feminist actions of the Critical Psychology Reading Group at the University of Ljubljana. And Marija Radoman proposed a qualitative study of how feminist knowledge shapes psychotherapy education and practice in the post-Yugoslav space.

A third cluster examined psychology's entanglement with contemporary political economy. Vanja Međugorac proposed to problematise the question of energy transition in the post-Yugoslav region from the perspective of critical psychology. Konstantin Tomić and Svetozar Kuzman proposed a qualitative study of gambling practices in Serbia, with particular interest in psychologists' role in both gambling marketing and in the conceptualisation and treatment of gambling addiction.

Finally, Hana Hawlina's proposal was oriented toward the future: a study of political imaginaries linking memory of Yugoslavia to visions of the post-Yugoslav future.

Conclusion

The development of this special issue coincided with a broader social and political moment marked by student occupations, blockades, and collective attempts to imagine alternative political futures in Serbia. The call for papers was published on 4 December 2024, a few weeks after the beginning of the student blockades that eventually shut down most faculties in Serbia.[2] The events resonated strongly with questions explored throughout the issue: the relationship between subjectivity

[2] The blockades were a response demanding accountability and political consequences following the tragedy in Novi Sad in early November 2024, when the roof of a newly constructed train station collapsed, killing 16 people and seriously injuring one more. Students organised directly democratic bodies at the occupied faculties and carried out numerous decentralized actions and protests that attracted more than 300,000 people (15 March 2025), supported by the general population, emigrant communities, and an international solidarity network (for more information see https://blokade.org/en/). This was met with increased state repression: students were beaten and imprisoned, employees were dismissed, foreign citizens were expelled, the wages of workers in educational institutions were suspended, and institutions were threatened through inspections and legal action.

and social structures, the conditions for collective action, the possibilities for imagining social change, and the role of psychologies in inhibiting or facilitating change. Although none of the contributions directly addresses the student protests, the issue was developed in a moment when the overall chaos and turmoil was accompanied with surges of radical hope that echoed throughout the region.

The movement halted the process of assembling this special issue, but, more importantly, once again made us reflect on what it means to engage in critical psychology under such conditions, and on the most productive ways of doing so. As this question remains open, and our answers to it necessarily provisional and situated, we conclude with some observations arising from revisiting the final selection and the category of Yugoslav critical psychologies that was intended to delimit it.

The dynamic of rupture, and the difficulty of tracing a direct lineage of influences, make it hard to present this collection of five papers as instances of a clearly distinguishable, standalone category. Yet this very unease at being unable to confidently delineate 'Yugoslav critical psychology' is itself revealing of the contemporary condition of the region and its psychologies. It is precisely in this unsettled mix of influences, traditions, and forces, permeated by locally specific contradictions, that critical psychological work must find its place.

The creation of this special issue is itself a new instance of that same dynamic. It is tied to the historical and material conditions of regional critical psychology, and echoes previous generations' efforts to sustain this tradition within university settings. Members of the editorial board came from two independent, self-organised critical psychology collectives in Ljubljana (Slovenia) and Belgrade (Serbia), both formed through and in response to contemporary local struggles. Both groups drew on the historical continuity of revolutionary student movements and on their present forms, while also being connected through shared participation in the international networks of critical (e.g. Discourse Unit) and theoretical (e.g. International Society for Theoretical Psychology) psychologists. The issue is therefore not simply an account of this history; its own production is also an outcome of it.

Perhaps the question this special issue ultimately raises is not only what Yugoslav critical psychologies were, but where the concepts we use to think about them come from. Rebuilding a local tradition after the discontinuity that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia has proved difficult: contemporary Western conceptualisations have increasingly provided the dominant vocabulary through which we think about what critical psychology is and what it can be. Most of the papers collected here necessarily engage with established critical frameworks, while the local tradition appears as a history still to be reconstructed. The task for future Yugoslav critical psychologies may therefore be not simply to recover an interrupted local tradition, but to reconstruct and continue it critically through forming new connections and developing new forms of critical psychology grounded in the specific historical, social, and political experiences of the region.

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