BLEJA, BEER, AND BOMBS: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE INHABITED SPACES AND PROLONGED YOUTH OF A GROUP OF SERBIAN YOUNG ADULTS FROM A GENERATION BORN INTO A DECADE OF CONFLICT AND CRITICAL EVENTS

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Abstract: ***This paper aims to explore the worldview of young people in Serbia (defined here as roughly those aged 18–30) who are experiencing prolonged youth due to the repercussions of critical events that shaped their formative years, from the viewpoint of one particular friendship group. By documenting the "nodal points" and rituals of a group of young people in a small Serbian city, utilizing research gathered through a variety of methods, including direct observation, ethnographic participation, and formal interviews, this paper seeks to open a window of understanding to the liminal space occupied by youth in the face of the material and economic forces shaping the sociopolitical background of their lives. This paper also aims to contextualize the current social and economic climate that young Serbians are facing.***

Keywords: ***Brain drain; Communitas; Critical Events; Serbian Youth; Alcohol***

Introduction

Stepping out of the arrivals terminal of Nikola Tesla airport, I am greeted with the familiar babble of the Belgrade accent and the smell of Pall Mall cigarettes, the midday 40-degree sun almost knocking me flat, hot air refracting from the asphalt. A familiar face smiles at me through the crowd with half a head of missing teeth. Dejan, a family friend, has come to collect me. Getting into his

car, I notice that in true Serbian fashion, he has hidden the seatbelts behind the seats. "Don't worry. There are no seatbelt checkpoints on our journey," he says to me. "Their pointless rules are forcing me to not buckle up in *inat* ("defiance/spite")! How was your flight? Parents all good? Are they visiting soon too?" The torrent of questions begins to flood in, and he starts showing me photos on his phone whilst speeding down the motorway at 80 mph. The frightening game of twenty-one questions continues as we hurtle out of Belgrade, past acres of lush green trees dotted with the red roofs of unfinished houses – a view I never get bored of. "Making a film, are you? Why the hell do you wanna do that in Smederevo? Go film Belgrade instead!" I wonder for a moment about his question. Why does Smederevo interest me?

Born in the UK to Serbian parents who emigrated at the turn of the 1990s in the face of social and political unrest in what was then Yugoslavia, I was strongly encouraged to maintain a bond with my homeland. My parents had left at 21, originally intending to stay in the UK for a short few months, and I always sensed that my mother's heart had never left Yugoslavia. She firmly believed the greatest gift in life would be a second language and a relationship with our roots, so I spent every summer and winter in Serbia at my grandparents' houses, left to my own devices to explore and forge friendships. Smederevo, my hometown, is a relatively small city located on the Danube 40 km away from the capital Belgrade. The city's history dates back to the 1st century BCE, and it is colloquially known as the city of *gvožđe i grožđe* ("iron and grapes"); urban legend says that upon asking what the city does best, Yugoslavian President Josip Tito's misheard the word *gvožđe* instead of *grožđe*, and this is supposedly what launched the city's steel and iron industry. Currently, the city is economically dependent on the volatile, polluting, and unpredictable steel industry, rather than the arguably more sustainable agriculture or tourism sectors. This dependency, coupled with the turbulence of the 1990s and bureaucratic inefficiency, has meant that despite vineyards, beautiful vistas, and ancient history, the town has been polluted by industry and has begun dying economically, a slow death that is apparent in every facet of life in the town. For many, it has become a metaphor for the dysfunction in the country caused by decades of political instability.

This article investigates how the lives of Serbian youth (defined within this paper as roughly those aged 18–30) are entwined with the repercussions of political, social, and economic events of their formative years, most predominantly the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. For this paper, focusing on the ethnographic research I compiled in Smederevo with one specific group of people, I will

Fig. 1 The participants of this research greet and embrace each other in front of the steps of Dom Kulture, a key urban space discussed within this paper.

explore the liminal space occupied by Serbian youth in the face of the material and economic forces shaping the sociopolitical background of their lives through the lens of this group. This is done by exploring the urban spaces they inhabited and their rituals, such as the culture of "*bleja*", utilizing ethnographic research collected from direct observation, ethnographic participation, and formal video interviews. I will contextualize the history and ethnographic research within wider theoretical frameworks, with a specific focus on "critical events" (Das 1995), Kevin Lynch's model for ordering urban spaces (Lynch 1960), Doreen Massey's "Spatial Construction of Youth Cultures" (Massey 1998), and "Communitas" (Turner 1969).

The article is structured as follows. Firstly I will introduce my research methods. I will then explore the wider historical and current sociopolitical context surrounding Serbian youth, and discuss how "critical events" (Das 1995) can result in decades of personal, political, and social repercussions. Following this, I will introduce the participants I am focusing on. Next, I will explore the spatial element of this research, how "nodal points" (Lynch 1960) service the group, and how spatial constructions affect and contribute to the complexity of social relations (Massey 1998). Then, I will explore how "critical events" and spatial organization can result in "communitas" (Turner 1969) between those experiencing "liminality" together (ibid.) as a response to times of crisis. In presenting this ethnographic research alongside these theoretical frameworks, I aim to open a window of understanding to the liminal space occupied by youth in the face of the material and economic forces shaping the sociopolitical background of their lives.

Research Methods

In the summer of 2015, between late-May and mid-September, I went to my hometown in central Serbia for a four-month ethnographic research period centred around the loose topic of "the repercussions of conflict for those born into it" for my MA in Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester. The intention was to create a documentary film, but I did not yet have a concrete direction. Using my network of family and friends, I reached out to a diverse pool of people between the ages of 18–30 living in various cities and towns around Serbia to interview them about their current lives in Serbia and their thoughts on the wider social and economic climate in Serbia. Whilst conducting this research, I noticed an interesting case study for my area of study

within the leisure time I spent in my hometown, and so I began to shift and narrow my focus and research towards my group of friends and Smederevo. Video interviews were conducted, as I was not at this point planning to shift away from documentary film. The video interviews were conducted one-on-one, during the daytime, in spaces chosen by the participants where they felt comfortable. Photographs were taken throughout the fieldwork period. Readers will note that the photographs were taken in black-and-white, which was an intentional choice. I wished to place my work stylistically amongst that of documentarists whose work I admire, predominantly Martin Parr's and Chris Killip's work in working-class Britain. In my mind, black-and-white differentiates the image from the "everyday taken for granted", giving pause for both the author and viewer to investigate the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of the "everyday ordinary". This stylistic choice gives rise to an array of wider issues concerning objectivity; however, all ethnographic data is subject to a myriad of issues concerning representation, privilege, permission, ethics, funding, intent, and auteurship. Whilst I am aware, as the author of this work, that this is a hugely important aspect of presenting the data, I note that there is not enough scope within this paper to delve too deeply into such discussions.

The interlocutors of this ethnographic research are a city-wide network of friends. Roughly forty people make up the wider group, with approximately fifteen people making the "core" group that consented to be formally interviewed, all of them males born between the years 1989 and 1995. The ethnographic data used to inform this paper consisted of thirteen video interviews, four additional conversations recorded as audio, ten casual conversations where only notes were taken, photographs taken over four months, ethnographic participation, and a lifetime of lived context. This data represents a rich range of information, mixing formal and casual.

A weakness in the data concerns the "performative" nature of photographing social situations and the self-reflexivity involved in video interviews. However, this data is also informed by the wider context in which I have experienced it as the researcher; I have known the subjects for many years and have been photographing them throughout our friendship, which both aided me in identifying anomalies in their behaviour as well as minimizing the novelty of being researched. The group is also often engaged in photographing themselves as part of their social gatherings, which further reduces the "abnormality" of being photographed for research.

On the question of gender roles, I, the author, am a female operating in and researching what is a predominantly male space, and I am also a child of the diaspora predominantly living abroad. These factors beg several questions, such as "How much of what I am researching applies only to men in Serbia?" and "How much of this recorded behaviour is performative and geared towards me as both a female and an insider/outsider in their space?" I have chosen not to focus on myself in this paper; however, my role as a "semi-foreign" female researcher in a male-dominated monocultural space is a factor that is perhaps worthy of further anthropological scrutiny.

Whilst consent to use the photographs, video material, and interviews was given and signed for at the time of the research, all photographs and names included in this photo essay have been censored to respect and protect the current confidentiality of the individuals.

Critical Events

The "political" in Serbia permeates the lives of everyone. We begin to understand how "political" can be understood as a power relation between private and public realms by exploring the interface between public discourse and internal experience (Jackson 2002), for example here, the wider international narrative concerning politics (such as sanctions, war, diplomatic relations, etc.) versus the everyday lived experiences of those affected by it. To begin thinking of the conflict of the 1990s in relation to individual human experience, in this case the youth raised amongst such conflict, we can look at these events as critical events (Das 1995) and redescribe them to understand their implications within broader narratives and in the framework of anthropological thought. "Critical events" usually involve the exploitation of people and resources, famine, environmental degradation, or political and ethnic conflicts that result in the dismantling of the state and civil order (Long 2000, 194). The events of the 1990s, the decade in which my participants and I were born and raised, can be categorized as a decade of "critical events", as outlined by Das. Prior to the nineties, the entire institution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was broken down from within by external and internal political forces, following the death of Yugoslavian President Josip Tito. June 1992 was a culmination of political turmoil following this disintegration and the six former republics all experienced a period of unrest and uncertainty, facing decisions about future developments, which more often than not provoked further conflicts with their neighbouring

Fig. 2 Posters reading "DVERI [a political party] ARE CALLING YOU TO WAKE UP! PROTEST AGAINST BLAIR'S GOVERNMENT. SAT 21 MAR 13:00 IN FRONT OF THE SERBIAN GOVERNMENT, BELGRADE".

former fellow countrymen (Prosic-Dvornic 1992, 127). At this time, internal ethnic conflicts as well as international political involvement, which was both part of the cause as well as a response to these conflicts, led to the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Wars. With a shift in focus towards the "everyman" in Serbia specifically, the immediate effects of these critical events were various. Sanctions brought in place due to the then-ongoing wars affected people's ability to buy food and essentials, as well as migrate, travel, and do business. Mass inflation left many people in a state of abject poverty, whilst unregulated markets allowed a small number of opportunistic magnates to amass great wealth. The power vacuum in Serbia, coupled with the desperately spiralling poverty, created a space for aggressive media propaganda and populist movements, including that of Slobodan Milošević, which invoked the revival of nationalist sentiments, the glorification of national history, and the selective promotion of traditional values, which only led to a worsening of foreign relations and tensions within domestic affairs (Prosic-Dvornic 1992, 127). The 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia (then Yugoslavia) during the Kosovo War was perceived by the Serbian people as an illegal attack specifically targeting civilians, which left behind an indelible scar in the form of deep distrust towards Western politicians and political agendas (Fig. 2).

The bombing caused environmental degradation to cities and infrastructure, especially in the south, where depleted uranium bombs were dropped, the biological fallout of which is likely still there today. The list of repercussions both small and large is arguably endless.

Conflict and political unrest are not simply a discourse that takes place between politicians in boardrooms – they are felt by the civilians in a multitude of ways, and often those who are furthest away from the decisions made by those in power are the ones who must deal with the repercussions. For those born into or raised in this turbulent time, these critical events have been at the very centre of their every experience. Beyond the immediate implications of critical events lays the realm of decades-later repercussions, which are evident in every aspect of current Serbian life, most notably in the tumultuous political landscape of current-day Serbia. Whilst I was out for a walk with Boris, a 23-year-old jobseeker, we touched upon the subject of critical events and why he has little hope that anything will change:

> My generation has seen that fighting just isn't worth it. History shows us that when you get rid of someone, somebody even worse comes along. When I was a kid, I was out there shouting and screaming because my dad wouldn't take me to Belgrade to protest with everyone... I then catch myself 15 years later thinking "Hey, that Milošević wasn't so bad in comparison." That doesn't feel good. We demonstrated for 10 years, and nothing. Everything is the same, if not worse. Demonstrations and protests should last two months, but here you had people constantly demonstrating every day, every night, and nothing changed. You can't expect to pull some fighting spirit out of anyone after that. People should just look after themselves and their own happiness.

Boris refers to the many protests that were held in Serbia throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the most notable of which is the 5 October 2000 protest that toppled the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević. Young people and students (namely *Otpor!*,[1] "Resistance!") played a large role in this revolution, which came with the hope of wiping the slate clean of corruption. But many young

[1] *Otpor!* was a political organization in Serbia formed in 1998, which started life as a civic movement against the policies of the Serbian authorities under the influence of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević. *Otpor* at its conception consisted Serbia's Democratic Party's youth wing members, activists from various NGOs, and students from the University of Belgrade and the University of Arts. Soon after the 2003 elections, *Otpor* merged into the Democratic Party (DS).

Serbians found that democracy in practice was not the same as democracy in theory, and they failed to shift the momentum of the revolution into rebuilding corrupt democratic institutions. Miodrag, a student of political science born in 1993, explained to me why he believes this to be the case:

> What everybody achieved in 2000 is massive, but nothing fundamentally changed because the underlying structures didn't change. The ones that arrived in power in 1944 – their children are now the ones in government. They racked up capital masquerading as socialists; the only difference now is that they don't have to hide their capitalist principles. When they arrived in Belgrade, they didn't arrive to "liberate" it; they saw it as their warplane. A liberator doesn't intend to exploit; otherwise, everything just falls apart.

Once the dust had settled on the explosive overthrowing of Milošević's regime, it became evident to many that nothing crucial had changed. A figurehead had been toppled, but many of the same people who were part of the regime had stayed, unchanged except in party name. Disappointment is a fundamental feature of living in the wake of turmoil (Greenberg 2014) and thus many of the young people who had lived through the student-led protests and the wider push to remove Milošević became doubtful that they could bring about meaningful change, a despondency that no doubt has been passed onto their children. Many of the people I spoke to mentioned either that they did not remember the Yugoslav Wars or that they had fond memories of camaraderie and strong neighbourhood unity but that the war had affected their parents and has no doubt been passed onto them in a multitude of subconscious ways. Whilst we sat in his garden with a cup of coffee, I asked Miodrag whether he himself had any memories of the nineties:

> I don't remember the bad parts of the war… perhaps a few segments here and there. My parents sent me to stay with my grandparents for the majority of that time, so all I recall is playing with other children.
>
> Our parents, however… For them, the stress of the war is not something easily forgotten and it no doubt affected them and the ways they raised us. But we are a crazy nation used to chaos. We learn to live with it and move on.

On the same walk where we discussed protests, Boris was posed with the same question:

> I remember the bombings very well. I was six or seven and lived in town. Nobody was working, all the factories were closed, and the shops were empty because of sanctions. Everybody was in their garden. Every night my friends and I would hang out in my garage. We often talk about how unified everyone was then – it seems people need a common enemy. I remember my parents taking me to "community meetings" every night, and on the walk there we would wear targets on our back, like "Go on, aim here, we dare you!"

General discussions about the history of the revolution, *Otpor!*, their techniques that culminated in the overthrow of Milošević, and their eventual dissipation are various and can be found in the works of Sombatpoonsiri (2015a) and (2015b), Mrvos (2010), Greenburg (2014), Prosić-Dvornić (1993), Bujošević and Radovanović (2003) and Nikolayenko (2007).

Mock Labour and the Brain Drain

Inescapably, the prospects and opportunities afforded to citizens begin and end with their country's economic footing. Serbia's economic transition was delayed and stunted due to critical events, with sanctions, trade shocks, and economic uncertainty resulting in Serbia's GDP falling in 2000 to one-half of its value in 1989 (Marjanovic 2006, 4). The political and economic landscape has since been in a state of continuous flux, and those wishing to "do business" face obstacles in the form of corruption, inefficiencies in the state bureaucracy, lack of financing, and political instability (Marjanovic 2006, 5). Even if a person is qualified and well educated, the central control over state institutions, in particular over public administrations (Pavićević 2017a, 12), means that often one of the only ways to gain significant employment is through political patronage (Pavićević 2017b, 33), an employment strategy that makes sense in job-scarce economies such as those of the former SFRY, where privatization processes have consolidated elite power (Kurtović 2017). This is a phenomenon that few are willing to openly discuss, both socially and academically, a point also observed by Đorđe Pavićević in his 2017 paper (2017b, 34). I asked Zoran, a currently unemployed university graduate, what he felt was stunting his job-seeking efforts:

> I don't particularly want to talk too much about this, but you're pretty much only going to get a job if you join a political party. For example, one of my friends had to join the town's party and hand out their flyers for a month to get his job, flyers

> for a party that at the last election "campaigned against" political discrimination and nepotism in employment. Another friend who was recently hired, I won't say where, the conditions for the job were that they and their whole family join the party and vote for them, even though they have a degree in the field and have every right to the position. This stuff happens every day. It's completely normal to be employed through "connections" here. And no one protests it. No one is grabbing their head and asking "Oh my god, how is this possible?" The opposite really – we laugh about it. But it isn't funny. It's just sad.

A further predicament faced by prospective workers is the inefficiency with which many businesses are run, a result of policies financing unprofitable employment due to both this practice of political cronyism and decades of chaotic decision-making on a national scale. A decade of international isolation and war compounded by waves of privatization led to unregulated conditions that allowed unprincipled business moguls to accumulate fortunes as inequality swelled all around the former SFRY, with Serbia experiencing the most extreme income inequality in Europe (Johnson 2019, 662).

Many people work for the *minimalac* (minimum wage), which is one of the lowest in Europe. I spent some time with Dušan in Belgrade, where he lives during the working week before returning to Smederevo on Friday evenings. He works the night shift at a call centre for minimum wage, and shares a cramped one-bedroom apartment with two other friends from Smederevo in order to save money on rent. I asked him why he works for minimum wage:

> Whether you're a young guy or a parent, it's enough for a lot of us to have the minimum to survive, to hang out a bit with our friends, to have just enough to do some fun activity or whatever. People here are used to not having a lot and I think many people find freedom in that. As long as they can pay for food, shelter, coffee, or beer with friends, they don't want huge responsibilities at work.

In what Ivan Rajković calls "mock-labour" (Rajković, I. 2018), many workers employed at these inefficient businesses engage in ritualized performances of productivity with no meaningful work to fulfil, in exchange for a source of fiscal security, abandoning their creative capacities in the process (ibid., 47). Rajković explored, through the lens of one particular firm involved in selling spare car parts, "a firm without property, using a sister firm's premises, with no work to do, relying on state provision of wages until eventual final closure" (ibid.). The employees

spend their days drinking coffee and shooting the breeze, waiting for the workday to end and "doing nothing, because nothing could be done", likening their situation to that of limbo, where nothing happens for the rest of eternity (ibid.). Dana Johnson argues that, unlike Western societies such as the USA, Serbia is in fact "(anti-)meritocratic" (2019, 662), an interesting notion that for me speaks volumes to Serbian blasé attitude towards the "abnormal normality" of their everyday life.

Much like Dana Johnson's interlocutors, mine also use the term *perspektiva* ("perspectives") when reflecting on their current and projected exceptions for work and life. In this context, *perspektiva* is often used to mean "having options"; in work and life, with the chance of self-development and fulfilment of ambitions that are not pre-emptively shut down (ibid., 660). As Johnson found in her study, oftentimes enthusiasm and ambition are pre-emptively extinguished by those in "safe" positions of security, who have adopted an attitude of keeping their heads below the parapets in order to not rock the status quo. Johnson goes on to argue that Serbian society systematically chooses "negative selection" – anybody with ambitions of "bettering" either themselves or the institutions they work for experiences tamping of ambition, non-recognition of hard work, and devaluing of expertise, losing out positions that they are qualified to fulfil to "safer" candidates who are less likely to seek change, by which the unqualified and morally suspect can rise to the top (ibid., 655–656). In this "(anti-)meritocracy", competency is punished and apathy applauded. This is a sentiment that was echoed by my interlocutors many times over the four-month period I spent with them, although many were tentative to elaborate in too much detail. Dragan managed to secure employment in a subsidised Smederevo company several years ago, and explained to me his experiences at work:

> There is no work to do here; it is an endless coffee break. But it doesn't matter; everyone is here as a sock puppet. Whether they're on a temporary contract or employed full-time, they're safe. My colleague doesn't even have to come in anymore. The little work that has to be done falls to those who wouldn't do the crony dance. I've had so many ideas about how to make this space great, but it falls on deaf ears. I don't get paid enough to push it.

In the face of this, many with higher ambitions for themselves chose to migrate and invest their skills in other countries in what has been dubbed the "brain drain" (Vuković 2005, 142). Sanctions and the international community's aversion towards Serbia throughout Milošević's presidency saw extreme

limitations to travel and social mobility. Freedoms that had been enjoyed in former Yugoslavia disintegrated and social entrapment became a reality for many people desiring "escape" (Johnson 2011, 656–657). The reinstatement of visa-free travel to the EU was monumental for Serbian citizens, a change that can be aptly described in Jessica Greenberg's words as a symbolic "road to normal" (Greenburg 2011). Those born into or coming of age in the new millennium had no real memory of the mobility of former Yugoslavia (Johnson 2011, 568); they travel to pursue their ambitions and escape the limbo of mock labour rather than the entrapment of sanctions.

Serbia's significant brain drain, despite its large number of highly educated young people, alongside high youth unemployment, is of great concern.[2] While the Serbian government has made efforts to allow people under 29 years of age to readily enter the labour market, the rate of youth unemployment has remained high (Pavlović, Bjelica and Domazet 2019, 36) due to negative demographic trends, brain drain, and a relatively large grey economy (ibid., 36). According to research by Gordana Bjelobrk (2018),[3] over half of the students expressing a wish to leave say they would not do so if they were offered a job with fair pay in their profession of choice (ibid., 4). Many young people believe that the painful choice to move away from their family, friends, and country is necessary to gain independence and financial stability, but would prefer the option of staying and building a better future for Serbia (ibid., 4). Out of the fifteen people who actively took part in my research, all but one of them explicitly expressed that, despite frustrations on a systemic level, they have no desire to move away other than for urgent monetary reasons.

> I'm proud of my country and hometown! We have everything here! History, nature, good-humoured people, punk bands. Why should I have to move away? We just need to make it better for ourselves. One afternoon in Belgrade is enough to realize I despise the rat race… Imagine what the West must be like.

[2] As discussed by Pavlović, Bjelica, and Domazet in their 2019 paper written as part of research financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, "youth" is internationally defined as being between the ages of 15–24. In the Republic of Serbia, for the purposes of youth employment/unemployment and the country's "National Youth Strategy from 2015 to 2025", it is defined as 15–30. This paper, taking into account both the emic and etic accounts of what constitutes youth, also considers "young people" to be defined as roughly 15–30.

[3] *Istraživanje o migracijama studenata* ("Research on student migration") for *Demografski pregled* ("Democratic Review") conducted by Gordana Bjelobrk from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. The research includes 110,131 students from public and private higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia, to examine the plans of young people for future migration trends.

Grasping at Rotting Straw

The age-dependency ratio in Serbia amounts to almost half the population (Lukić et al. 2013), an important touchstone for socioeconomic prospects, as an increasing number of people in retirement and education are supported by a small working-age population (Marjanović 2006, 6). In addition, Serbia's pension spending is amongst the highest in Europe, principally due to the disproportionate number of beneficiaries (World Bank 2015), a problem in the form of taxes and wage contributions for those of working age (Marjanović 2006, 6). Despite the concerning number of unemployed youths, Serbian politicians have been more interested in courting retired people than in supporting younger citizens, predominantly due to the relative size of the former and the effectiveness of leveraging strong party support from this particular demographic (Petrović 2011, 147). This translates to a predicament for those of working age hoping to find employment in their smaller towns: Do they move to the capital or to a different country in the hope of more prospects? Or do they stay and become members of a political party they may not support for the sake of accessing the majority of public sector positions? Boris, after telling me about the 5 October protests, reflected on Serbia's attitude towards youth and its unwillingness to repair the broken system:

> We as a collective society keep clinging on to things that don't function and acting as though it is easier to reanimate a corpse than it is to nurture a small child and make something of them. We keep grasping for the rotting straw and neglecting the new grass that is yet to grow. No, no one is looking after it, because ignoring the rot is just easier.

Young Serbs have encountered a phenomenon of forcibly prolonged youth, for the most part, due to their inability to establish economic independence (Ramet 2011, 11). With their economic opportunities in disarray, young adults who have surpassed their teenage years and have entered a realm wherein they would traditionally be expected to have incomes and responsibilities now occupy a liminal space wherein they are "betwixt and between" the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony (Turner 1969, 95). Without the economic independence and social stability required to buy their own houses and start their own families in their country of birth, they are left to spend their days in limbo, turning to each other and their surrounding environment, which I will discuss in the following sections.

The Secret Society

Smederevo, although classified as a "city", is relatively small, and often people joke that you cannot run an errand without being obligated to stop for coffee four times with people you've bumped into along the way. Serbian culture is relatively communal, and many people in Smederevo go outside in the evening to take a walk through the local *trg* ("town square") to the many *kafići* ("cafes") and *kafane* ("taverns/pubs"), many of which are situated in Ulica Kralja Petra ("King Peter's Street", the main walkway that connects the square to the quay) (Fig. 17 [10] and [11]). *Kafići* and *kafane* play a large role in Serbian social life, typically used as a destination to catch up with a friend, a cathartic space in which to vent the problems in one's life or to while away several hours whilst people watching. For this reason, most of them stay open from early morning to late into the night. Many young people, however, choose not to patronize *kafići* and *kafane* at night, and instead they congregate outdoors to drink and socialize until the small morning hours (Fig. 3, 16) – something many refer to as *bleja* ("hanging out", or more literally, "empty staring"). This culture of outdoor *bleja* can be described as what Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands call "nightlife on the margins" (2003). Margins play an important role in social and spatial ordering through a binary relationship with the "mainstream" centre – without margins, there is no centre, and vice versa (ibid., 198), both spatially and conceptually.

Fig 3 Friends drinking a *bomba* ("bomb"/2L plastic bottle of beer) and climbing trees as the sun rises after a night of drinking.

Bleja is a slang term known throughout Serbia, but is more accurately a social concept that is at once a verb, noun, adjective, and adverb. *Bleja* can refer to both an empty afternoon alone spent looking at the ceiling, or a full day spent camping with twenty people. It can be used to describe the way an activity is done, e.g., "casually without haste", and can be used to describe the essence of a thing. Its use is deeply rooted in context, but for the most part is used the same way "hanging out" is in English, and the group mostly use the term to refer to night-time meet-ups (*"Ko je za bleju večeras?",* "Who is up for hanging out tonight?"). For those on the outside, it may appear at first glance as though youths engaged in *bleja* are sitting and not doing very much, which is not always the case. For example, on one evening during *bleja*, I found myself amidst a pair attempting (and failing) to land a risky skate trick on my left, another pair holding a bluetooth speaker between their ears whilst singing along to a medley of songs behind me, and to my right an unnecessarily loud debate between three people which eventually snowballed into a torrent of expletive-laden jokes involving the day's political breaking news, turbo folk, and old anecdotes, to which Boris turned to me and said, "We are hanging out. *Bleja.".* The interlocutor's rituals are referred to as *bleja* often within this paper, and it is important to distinguish it as a concept that refers not only to the practice of binge drinking.

During this research period, the people I was researching had a secret group that existed on Facebook, a "safe space" for those within it to talk amongst themselves, make jokes, post drunken photos deemed inappropriate for the public domain, and organize *bleja*. The Facebook group comprises roughly forty people, mostly male, with a handful of females. The lack of female members may be attributed to several factors, such as the origin of core members' friendships stemming from school days, the lack of meaningful long-term friendships with females pre-dating young adulthood, and a perceived societal "inappropriateness" for females to binge drink outdoors until the early hours of the morning with men. The members referred to themselves as the demonym of the Facebook group's name (omitted for confidentiality reasons), wrote a satirical "manifesto", and have held "birthday parties" on the group's inception day since 2013 and continuing beyond the year this ethnographic research was done. The group's behaviour during *bleja* is often performative as a consequence of this Facebook group, and thus the performative nature of their *bleja* forms a basis of their kinship. The group's social activities are generally centred around several key urban spaces, most prominently a building called Dom Kulture ("House of Culture), which I will discuss in the next section.

Fig. 4 A group of friends congregate on the steps of the Dom Kulture ("House of Culture") on a hot Sunday night.

Nodal Points

Using Kevin Lynch's (1960) model for the ordering of urban spaces, the spaces that my participants occupy include several "nodal points" (Fig. 17). These spaces are situated throughout Smederevo in relative proximity to one another, where people meet, rendezvous, and socialize. These nodal points function as social nerve centres that accommodate certain social dynamics (Lynch 1960). In addition to Lynch's model, we can also look at spaces in terms of Doreen Massey's spatial construction of youth cultures (1998) by beginning to conceptualize space in terms of the complexity of interacting social relations. Massey suggests that the "construction of spatiality" is an important element in building a social identity (ibid., 129) and that within the complexity of building identity, individuals and social groups are constantly engaged in efforts to territorialize and claim spaces (Massey 1998, 127), points which I will go back to further in this paper. Serbia's afore-discussed historical context, the urban "nodal points" of Smederevo that the group occupies, and the group "communitas" discussed later in this paper are interrelated as a "particular articulation of contacts and

influences" (ibid., 125). As Massey further discusses, spaces are not necessarily organized by "scale" ("body, home, community, urban, region, nation, global") (Smith 1993, 101) but through a complexity of interconnections (Massey 1998, 125). A "local" youth culture, such as the group we are researching, isn't necessarily a "closed system of social relations" but rather a "particular articulation of contacts and influences" pulled from a variety of places, such as fashion, habits, and power relations from different parts of the globe (ibid., 125). In this instance, examples of these "contacts and influences" for this group and the spaces they choose to occupy may be habits formed in early childhood through their shared experience of unity through the wider conflict in childhood (e.g., playing outdoors and neighbourhood camaraderie), the influence of outside global opinion towards the former SFRY and their critical events, the historic use of local spaces by previous generations in their "youth", as well as online global trends and international music.

The Home of Culture and Subculture

One particular "nodal point", the Dom Kulture ("House of Culture"), which was officially renamed Centar Za Kulturu ("Centre for Culture") in 2001 but is still widely referred to by its original name (Fig. 17 [1]), holds particular precedence and significance within the group as well as others in the city. The Dom (*dom* being Serbian for "home") is the town's centre and venue for all cultural events, such as theatre, seminars, and cinema. Its location, wherein it is central, close to the 24/7 supermarket and within walking distance of other "nodal points", and its architectural shape, which hosts concrete steps, a ramp leading to a sub-basement cafe and seating area, various tunnels and hidden spaces, and a covered area for when it is raining, which Lynch would describe as "Paths" and "Edges", makes it the most significant meeting point in the town (Fig. 4, 5, 14, 15, 16). There are many incidental tunnels and covered areas around the Dom, which some people use to hide from CCTV, security, and the general public to smoke and have private conversations. Anyone unsure of the evening's "crowd" can casually walk by to see who is out, without committing to staying or having to contact anybody beforehand.

More so than being "just" a convenient space to sit, the Dom is an institution unto itself. It is often referred to in conversation as a sentient being rather than a place ("*taj Dom"* / "that Dom"), a metaphor and symbol for a certain way of life, a place that many generations before mine have used and

Fig. 5 Two friends sit on the top steps of the Dom Kulture and look over the group.

inhabited. My mother, for example, often reminds me that people have been "hanging out" on the steps of the Dom since the day it was built in 1982. In "The Spatial Construction of Youth Cultures" (1998), Massey discusses Beatrix Campbell's book *Goliath: Britain's Dangerous Places* (1993) and the case of the TWOCers, where an ordinary shopping centre becomes "young men's territory" after 10:00 p.m., a place everyone else keeps well clear of. The TWOCers claim on this space is fundamental to the identity that the young men involved were striving to establish. However, despite being "young men's territory", it is not simply a closed space, but also a meeting place of cultural references drawn from a wide range of other places, evident in the music and fashion represented at these meetings (Massey 1998, 129). In the same way, the Dom, which is a "regular" building during the day, is claimed by the group at night. And yet, others are still able to approach – and indeed other people with different interests, musical tastes, and rituals do use – the Dom to socialize, albeit in different "sections" of the Dom itself (some sit on the steps, some sit under the canopy, and others occupy the entrance) (Fig. 6). In this way, individuals and social groups are constantly engaged in efforts to territorialize the Dom and exclude

Fig. 6 A different group of young people are sat in a different section of the Dom, whilst a member of "the group" (foreground) poses for a photo that they think is being taken of them.

other groups from particular areas they have claimed for the night. However, these other groups still have, in some regards, similar touchpoints to those who also claim the Dom, most commonly in generation and interests in "marginal culture", away from the "mainstream centre". It is worth noting, however, that this "claim" over the Dom is not one gained through aggression or hostility, but rather through a common need of the group and a disregard of the "mainstream centre" for sitting outside without comfort or amenities. The group is not hostile and welcomes anybody willing enough to approach them. I have witnessed on more than a handful of occasions the group welcoming a motley crew of fleeting companions, ranging from middle-aged taxi drivers, older uncles, and random tourists who happened to be walking home from a local *kafana* that had closed. Many who frequent this location often express exasperation with the Dom, in this context the culture and people rather than the physical building, and wish to rid themselves of it ("I need a break from Dom"), yet continue to congregate there – perhaps for "fear of missing out".

Fig. 7 Buying beer, vodka, sparkling water, and snacks with the communally collected cash at the 24/7 supermarket. An EXIT Festival wristband can be seen in the middle photo. The music festival takes place in early July, and was founded in the year 2000 after the Yugoslavian general election "as a student movement fighting for democracy and freedom in Serbia and the Balkans" (www.exitfest.org/en/about-us, accessed 29 August 2023).

The Wider Network of Nodes

The capacity for a nodal point to accommodate certain social dynamics is evident in the Dom and other nodal points around town. The locations service the needs of the group, but having observed the group closely, I have seen how the locations and physical landscape of the town also lend themselves to the perceived needs and behaviours of the group. The Dom is near a 24/7 supermarket called Ideja (Fig. 17 [3] and 4), which is arguably the most crucial nodal point for nightlife in Smederevo.

One of many "drink runs" to Ideja was documented by attaching a camera to an interlocutor in a POV-style video, offering a rich ethnographic account of this important ritual for the group. In this clip (Fig. 7) we see four out of a group of fourteen gathering money and walking for five minutes to the supermarket, bantering and joking along the way. One member sticks stickers from their bag to the other members' foreheads. In the supermarket, we see them debating which snacks to buy; being excited that their preferred vodka is finally back in stock after a week of being sold out; counting the collected money and putting items back on shelves; greeting other familiar people from around town on their own drink runs; and high-fiving the security guard, who shows familiarity and asks them how they are. Visits to Ideja are a ritualistic extension of bleja, and its presence in the town is arguably the key proponent for allowing social gatherings to comfortably exist, by both servicing and creating the needs of the group in the form of provisions.

The *vinski park* ("wine park") (Fig. 17 [2]) is opposite the Dom. Surrounded by huts selling local wines and delicacies by the day (another spatial construction whose purpose changes with the night) several benches allow a decent number of people to gather at night, usually accompanied by plastic cups filled with white wine spritzers. The wine park has a view of those sitting at the Dom without being seen in return and is usually reserved for calmer evenings or for those who don't wish to sit with a larger crowd. The wine park is situated alongside a residential building with shops and a bank on the ground floor, whose wall the group occasionally uses as a bench. Next to the wine park is the town square, where the church, town hall, fountains, and *trafike* ("kiosks") are located (Fig. 8).

Next to the church (Fig. 17 [4]) is a drinking fountain and benches, where some choose to relocate (Fig. 9) whenever they have been asked to move along from the Dom because tenants in the neighbouring apartments have complained about the noise (Fig. 15).

Fig. 8 Buying Cigarettes And Plastic Cups At A *Trafika* ("Kiosk")

The *spomenik* ("memorial statue") by the train tracks and fortress (Fig. 17 [8])(Fig. 12) is another nodal point that is suited to accommodating certain social dynamics. Surrounded by trees, its structure of tiers lends itself to being suitable for sitting and climbing and is a location used for large-scale binge drinking sessions organized via the Facebook group (Fig. 10).

The "official birthday parties" commemorating the creation of the Facebook group in July 2013 are held at the *spomenik*, and an image of the *spomenik* is used as the Facebook group's profile photo. It is interesting to observe this use of the *spomenik* as a symbol, not only for its role in the inception of the current group dynamic but for its wider meaning as a symbol of Smederevo. The *spomenik* was created as a memorial for the 5 June 1941 Smederevo Fortress Explosion. The occupying German army stockpiled ammunition and gasoline belonging to the defeated Royal Yugoslav Army, but the ammunition exploded due to unknown reasons killing anywhere from several hundred to several thousand people. The shadow of Smederevo's history with war, conflict, and disaster looms every day, and it is both interesting and ironic that such reminders are both interwoven and embraced in everyday life – critical events from the past become spatially reoccupied by a new generation. As we can see in Fig. 10, the group sit and play on the *spomenik*, alongside wreaths that have been laid there in memory of the disaster. Whether this behaviour is indifferent disrespect or a stoic embrace of life's bitter moments is debatable; I believe it to be the latter.

Fig. 9 Friends gather next to the church (Fig. 17 [4]) using an abandoned shopping trolley to push members of the group around the area next to the church. A fake "car reg" has been spraypainted onto the front and says RG–026 *Keš Kolica* ("RG–026 Cash Cart"). "*Keš Kolica*" was a pop-rap song from 2002, "RG" is a code for the Facebook group's name, and "026" is Smederevo's telephone prefix, often used in Serbian online screen names to denote pride for where one is from.

Fig. 10 A group gathers on the *spomenik*. In the top photo, one of the group offers me a sip from the communal "beer bomb". In the bottom photo, the same person has fallen from the top of the statue and is nursing their ankle, whilst their friends look on with varying degrees of judgement and interest. Memorial wreaths laid earlier that month in memory of the disaster can be seen in the bottom photo, sitting alongside the group.

The playground/basketball court of the Tehnička Škola ("Technical Highschool") (Fig. 17 [5]) has no gate, and is often used throughout the summer for basketball sessions (Fig. 11). Many of the interlocutors went to this high school in their teenage years, and continue to claim this space on their own terms.

Various other nodal points, located on the map in Fig. 17*,* all provide a stadium for social dynamics. The fact that the group spends their time outdoors is often a reflexive topic of conversation, and many times I have been asked about my thoughts on the culture of *bleja* and how it relates to my own experiences of the social terrain in the UK. Mile, during a session on the *spomenik,* asked me:

> Does this exist in the UK? *Bleja?* Do they not hang out outside? They're missing out! We'll start a campaign to take *bleja* abroad and the slogan will be "*NEĆEMO KAFIĆE, HOĆEMO PARKIĆE!"*[4]

The group rejects cafes on a monetary premise (drinking all night on a bar tab as a large group is an expensive endeavour), but this rejection also stems from the culture and values attached to them – *kafići* are "the mainstream centre", and the outdoors is "the alternative margin" (Chatterton and Hollands 2003). The location of most of the cafes and bars on Kralja Petra on either side of the walkway means that it is often referred to as a runway on which people go to be seen and to watch others. The group, however, lives their nightlife "on the margins" and encapsulates both play and resistance, which evoke a strong "sense of place" beyond the bricks and mortar of a cafe (Chatterton and Hollands 2003, 197/198). Whilst sitting on the steps of the Dom, I asked Miodrag what he thought kept this large group of personalities together:

> [The group] is a connection between all those people who find each other through shared experiences, both good and bad, to enjoy or cry through it all together.

As Massey (1998) points out, the construction of spatiality can be an important element in building a social identity – youth cultures claim their own spaces and may be as excluding and defensive about them as any nation-state (ibid., 129). As previously discussed, the "nodal points" that the group occupies, and the group "communitas" which I discuss in the next section, are intrinsically related

[4] ("WE DON'T WANT CAFES, WE WANT PARKS!")

Fig. 11 A group gathers on the playground of the Tehnička Škola ("Technical Highschool") to play basketball for a few hours before moving on to the Dom.

to one another, as well as to the overarching sociopolitical and historical context of the group through their "particular articulation of contacts and influences" (Massey 1998, 125). The group is connected by their shared experience of "critical events", which everybody in Serbia born in the 1990s or earlier experienced in one way or another. As noted by Boris earlier, on a neighbourhood level, one of the responses to the crisis in the 1990s was unity: sitting together in gardens, gathering in garages, sharing resources, exchanging jokes, and unanimously agreeing to protest together in solidarity. Coming together in shared urban spaces and sharing resources may be a learned response from a time of crisis, and this new type of unity may be a response to the current crisis of prolonged youth and economic instability.

Fig. 12 A group walking between the fortress and the old *železnička stanica* ("train station").

Communitas

One way we can view "the group" is as a "communitas" (Turner 1969): an unstructured state in which all members of a community are equally allowed to share a common experience, usually through a rite of passage. Communitas is characteristic of people experiencing liminality together, and Turner calls this liberation from the constraints of ordinary life "anti-structure" and the experience of ritual camaraderie "communitas". A spontaneous eruption of communitas "abolishes status, and people encounter each other directly" (Schechner and Brady 2012, 70). Within this communitas is the formation of practices and rituals: meeting at 10:00 p.m. onwards at the Dom, making the round of

small change collection to go on drink runs (Fig. 7), purchasing specific drinks favoured by the majority such as *vinjak* and cola, (Fig. 13, 14 and 15), having white wine and soda water or a *bomba* (Fig. 3, 10, 14 and 15) of beer which can easily be passed around or poured into individual plastic cups (Fig. 13), passing drinks around the circle, and sharing cigarettes. Sharing resources is an unspoken but strictly abided-by rule. Thomas Widlok discusses the "economy of sharing" (2017), and suggests that sharing is often about "leaving things for others to take" rather than giving (ibid., 7). Rather than a calculated "back-and-forth" gift exchange, sharing is an indiscriminate, undirected, and random act that produces reciprocal effects over time without it being the guiding principle of the act (Krige 2020, 213). Within the group, spare change is shared, drinks are shared (often from a single receptacle),[5] snacks are shared, and even T-shirts are swapped and shared. Discussion as to what will be shared are not necessary, and there is no obligation to "owe" one another in response to sharing. However, holding back resources (e.g., buying a snack and withholding it from the group) is frowned upon and deemed to be highly anti-social. Sharing is not only limited to consumable resources but to other arenas of life, such as the previously mentioned Belgrade apartment where Dušan currently lives, which has been rented by an older Smederevo resident for ten years. They have sublet the apartment at various times to many people from Smederevo in need of a tenancy in the city, saving many the expense of long-term contracts and deposits.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, liminality is a phase in social life in which "activity which has no structure" confronts its "structured results" (Sartre 1974, 255). This "art of doing nothing" forms a structured result where certain practices are carried out every night.

Inside jokes are held in prestige and act as a form of group solidarity; ironic idolization of cult 1980s pop-folk singers; the running joke of playing the same "bad" song all summer ("I'm going to make this the summer hit of 2015!"); keeping each other informed at all times of every small occurrence (ranging from "Tomorrow I have a driving test" to "I went to the shop to buy salami earlier"); the semi-ironic worship of Rubinov Vinjak, a strong Serbian brandy that has been dubbed "liquid cocaine" (Fig. 13); engagement in thrilling and childish behaviour, such as skating from risky heights and riding in abandoned

[5] For context, this ethnographic research was done prior to the COVID–19 pandemic and the group often drank from the same bottles and cups, which was not at the time a point of concern for many of the group.

Fig. 13 A bottle of vinjak, a type of Serbian brandy. Disposable cups and a bottle of cola can be seen, ready to be mixed.

shopping trolleys (Fig. 9); conversations that juxtapose silly jokes with deeply introspective conversations about personal struggles. During his interview, Vuk told me about the significance that time spent on the Dom has in his daily life:

> Everyone runs away from themselves and their lives to the Dom, and then through all that alcohol and other things, they listen to other stories and other people and live through them. It's good that we have that, and some people are willing to help one another, at least through conversation. A person lightens their soul when they speak to someone that understands them because they are going through the same experiences. Everything is easier when you have somebody next to you.

Whilst observing this group through the lens of "communitas" is helpful, internal differences and micro-power relations may often undermine the underpinning concept of an unstructured state in which all members of a community are equally allowed to share a common experience. Within "the group", several members have their own secret online "subgroups" on messenger services with individuals they have been friends with since childhood. This rift in the communal dynamic is also helpful in highlighting the weakness of the "communitas" concept, as internal differences and micro-power relations still come into play.

Fig. 14 Two friends sitting on the steps of the Dom, smoking and drinking *vinjak* and from a *bomba*. The person on the left had just arrived from a family member's wedding, and the person on the right had been playing football earlier.

Moreover, rather than a "spontaneous eruption that abolishes status where people encounter each other directly" (Schechner and Brady 2012, 70), the group is rather structured in that almost all members were of roughly the same age, class, ethnicity and gender before the group was formed. If there were greater diversity of lived experiences within the group, there may have been a different "structured result", or none at all. The commonality of gender, class, ethnicity, age and early-childhood experiences is precisely the glue that keeps the group together. Other groups sharing commonalities (e.g., women or minority groups such as the Roma community) are also affected by the economic and political context surrounding this group, as well as additional factors with regard to their gender, class, religion, and ethnicity that may result in a different type of social bond with others. There is an argument to be had here that camaraderie and community is an inherent trait in people from the Balkans – if the patronage of the busy cafes in town, filled to the brink with people of every age, class, and gender, is anything to go by, it would suggest that had the group not found their place in the "marginal community" of the Dom, or if they were to shift their

fundamental life arenas, they would still be frequenting some form of communal space to see their friends and community. In this regard, we cannot observe the lived experiences and repercussions of critical events of all Serbian youth through this particular group, but instead, use it as a lens through which to view the larger social and political landscape and how formations of community and identity are formed in response to shared experiences of crisis and uncertainty.

A Toast to Laughing at the Misery

"Bleja" can mean many things for many different people, and for the group, it is a practice that is simultaneously entertaining, helpful, and undoing. This is something that the interlocutors are acutely aware of and often discuss, with many of them mentioning both in their video interviews and in casual conversation with each other the often hedonistic nature of the group's *bleja*. Zoran, a group "ringleader", attempted to succinctly describe this:

> ["The group"] represents alcoholism and decay elevated to another level. I love it, and I wouldn't recommend it to anybody [laughter].

The importance of self-mocking, as well as the oftentimes inappropriate, brutal, and offensive humour that populates their banter, can be seen to resonate with the wider experiences of Serbia's "abnormality". This use of dark humour extends beyond youth groups and can be observed as a shared intergenerational practice for Serbs as a whole, such as the demoralized workers using violent metaphors and dark humour to laugh at their own misfortunes in Rajkovic's study of state pay, mock-labour, and unfreedom in a Serbian firm (2018). Intuitive and dark humour have long been staples of Serbian film, music, theatre, and literature, and the Serbian comedic culture of "Laughing at the Misery" (Sombatpoonsiri 2015, 33) extends to everyday conversations too. Many conversations centre around political and historical debate, and a humorous approach to past violence peppers conversations. An example is one interlocutor's response after I asked why the 2L plastic bottles of beer are called *bombe* ("bombs"), "Of course somebody looked at the bottle and thought of a bomb! It makes your bladder explode like a NATO bomb hitting RTS!" Violence, as Veena Das puts it, "descends into the ordinary" (2014), and critical events such as bombing and/or widespread unemployment are gradually normalized. A broader exploration of how humour and nonviolent struggle relate to the lived

experience of 1990s Serbia can be found in Janjira Sombatpoonsiri's 2015 book "Humor and Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia".

Alcohol consumption is an extremely common practice and a large factor in this group's dynamic. I have mentioned its presence many times throughout the paper so far, something that should not be overlooked or taken for granted. Many, if not most, of the members of the group binge drink regularly, with binge drinking defined as the consumption of five or more drinks in a row (Haines M., Spear S. F., 1996; Nezlek J. B., Pilkington C. J., Bilbro K. G., 1994; Schulenberg J., Wadsworth K. N., O'Malley P. M., Bachman J. G., Johnston L. D., 1996). Throughout my data, both in the formal interviews and casually observed conversation, most of the group self-reflexively talks about their drinking habits, and the perceived toxicity of their habits is often joked about among themselves. Many have expressed that they are dissatisfied with many aspects of their lives and admit to heavy binge drinking to feel better. Filip, an unemployed university graduate, explained how drinking makes him feel better:

> I like drinking. I especially like the state it puts me in, a state of numbness where I don't care about what's going on around me. Either that or it makes it easier to talk about and understand our situation. All in all, drinking makes it easier to bear it all.

Moderate amounts of alcohol consumed in a social setting can enhance positive emotions and social bonding,[6] and drinking behaviour is often influenced by knowledge of the effect it will have (see Callas P. W., Flynn B. S., Worden J. K., 2004; Schulte M. T., Ramo D., Brown S. A., 2009; Urban, R., Kokonyei, G., Demetrovics, Z., 2008; Bensley, L. S., Spieker, S. J., Van Eenwyk, J., Schoder, J., 1999). Binge drinking is an issue of huge concern to public health in the rest of the country. A study of Serbian students in central Serbia aged 18 reported that 97.4% of them consumed alcohol, with 34.9% having their first experience with alcohol at the age of 14 or less (Đorđević N., Bogojević J., Kostić M., 2001, 363). It is hard to say with certainty, without further ethnographic research, whether the relationship between Serbian youth and alcohol stems from nature or nurture, but it is an interesting precursor to the topic "performance", both within this research and their social behaviour away from the camera and researcher.

[6] University of Pittsburgh. "Moderate doses of alcohol increase social bonding in groups." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 29 June 2012. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/ 2012/06/120629211854.htm>.

Performance

Whilst there may be an element of performance to my data, as touched on in the introduction, I also believe that performance plays a huge role in the group dynamic whether there is a researcher present or not.

This can be illustrated through Đorđe, who is loud, witty, and jovial. He is very popular, and many of his friends look first to his reaction before deciding whether a joke, song, or person has merit. I attempted to formally interview Đorđe several times, but a severe case of camera shyness and a dismissal of his own value to the discussion resulted in footage comprising laughter, self-dismissal of any idea or answer halfway through, and an overcompensation of jokes. During a more lucid conversation away from the camera and microphone, we discussed his heavy drinking and the role of alcohol in his life:

> All the best ideas I've had, all the funniest songs and jokes I've made up, were done when I was drunk. Everybody thinks of me as a great guy, but they don't realize that it's because I'm always socially drunk. Sober, I can't imagine socializing and stomaching other people because I can barely stand myself. Alcohol helps me loosen up and be a better person.

Despite being, by my estimations, highly intelligent and widely liked by his peers, Đorđe does not see himself as valuable or worthy of dialogue, an attribute that is perhaps linked to the "negative selection" experienced by young people in Serbia. For Đorđe, this translates to substance abuse as a way of presenting himself as naturally entertaining and anxiety-free. I asked Đorđe, since he "can't stomach other people", whether he has any other specific aspirations in life:

> I can't stomach other people, but I do also love my friends. I suppose that I should grow up and start a family, but who the f*** is going to raise a child here, in this economy, in this collective insanity, on minimum wage? But I also don't want a better job or children. I wouldn't have the freedoms I do now.

It is difficult to weigh up whether my interlocutors are frustrated by their inability to "grow up", or whether they enjoy their perceived freedom to engage in a hedonistic lifestyle with friends. Are marriage and children a death sentence for one's own pleasure, or are they an escape car to a happier life? At the time of this research, none of the interlocutors were parents or in long-term relationships/

Fig. 15 Friends gather on the steps of the Dom, drinking *vinjak* with cola. One person is posing for the photo whilst several others are mid-conversation. In the middle, one jokingly threatens to throw a *bomba* (the bottle in his hand) at me.

Fig. 16 Friends talking and drinking from a *bomba* on the steps of the Dom Kulture as the sun rises.

marriages. Many of them, both male and the females I didn't formally interview, express that they altogether don't see the point in bothering, and those who do wish to start a family feel they do not have the *perspektive* and economic security to do so.

What's New In Town?

The youth of Smederevo are indeed "betwixt and between", but the shift from "child" to "adult" as arrayed in Western culture cannot occur due to the many economic, political, and social factors at play – be this navigating the complex politics of the workplace, the cost of living, generational trauma, the ever-shifting international relations between the East and the West, national identity, global crisis, etc. Whilst conducting this research, my mind kept going back to the cult Serbian film *Munje* (*Lightning Storms!*, Andrić 2001), an urban comedy set in post-NATO bombing turn-of- the-century Belgrade following a group of "young" unemployed thirty-somethings on a night of escapades where the

urban spatial landscape is their playground. The film is a celebration of nihilism, underground music, and urban nightlife, whilst simultaneously poking fun at the fallout that war has had on the social and political landscape in Serbia and the ever-expanding age range that the term *youth* encompasses. It is hard not to see the parallels between the fictional characters and the reality of young people now, where not much has changed in the twenty years since the film's release.

Young people are experiencing a prolonged period of instability, and their modes of expression are an answer to that instability; if they can't move on to starting their own careers and families, they may as well have fun. This behaviour is not incidental, but a direct repercussion of larger forces at play discussed earlier in this paper. The liminal experience of Serbian youth in the face of critical events has for this group resulted in their own community and rituals, and has no doubt manifested in some other, slightly different, if not entirely similar, ways for other young people in the former SFRY experiencing prolonged youth and economic instability. In the film *Munje*, the "young" thirty-somethings (accompanied by their new friends: a middle-aged, hoodie-wearing drug dealer nicknamed Santa and a frustrated pot-smoking policeman still living with his doting mother) accidentally find themselves at a house party hosted by "young" middle-aged Bohemians and junkies, who proceed to ask them "What's new in town?" Will this betwixt-and-between generation, too, prolong their youth well into middle age? Or will they try to navigate the society they have inherited into a more prosperous and fulfilling future? As the "young" Bohemian in *Munje* points out, they have to "locate their place in the coordinate system of confusion!" Although "the group" is a small and fleeting subculture[7] comprised mostly of white, ethnically Serbian cis men, it illustrates on a micro-level the wider sociopolitical factors at play for young people in Serbia, and the deeper economic, historic, and political context that has shaped and continues to shape the Serbian youth of today and tomorrow.

Acknowledgements: Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in the summer of 2015, and all references to the present refer to that period, unless otherwise stated. All photographs included in this photo essay have been censored and names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of individuals.

[7] As of August 2023, the date on which this paper was edited, the Facebook group has been inactive for several years. The friendship group, however, is still largely intact and socializes often.

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