David Watson

On Keeping Our Critical Faculties: a response to an "ultraleft" critic

2003

I wonder if anyone else feels the same nausea and despair I experi-ence when reading missives like R. Tate's. Apparently, such jumbled, simple-minded invective, with its breathless disre-gard for the requirement to present serious evidence to support an argument, is what now passes for de-bate, for reasoning, in the so-called anti-authoritarian milieu. Was it always like this? Do any of these people even bother to learn anything about a subject anymore before applying their one-size-fits-all tem-plate?

In debate, political or otherwise, one is generally expected (or should be) to cite books and serious historical evidence. In the best cases, there is an attempt to confront the breadth of the argument one is challenging, to address its strongest points, and to do so with some precision and sensitivity to the complexi-ties and inevitable ambigu-ities of the historical record. This is particularly crucial in a sub-ject as complicated as the history of the Yugoslav wars of dissolution.

There is evidence and there is evidence, to be sure, and therefore it is not quite enough to "keep one's critical faculties." (Given how little Tate appears to know, how could he discern just how critical his faculties are or are not?) There is no royal road to knowledge about complex matters; one might actually have to read some books.[1]

My article was in no way "trying to pre-vent [people] from making [their] own minds up." And readers are free to rake through the sewage Tate recommends, such as the right-wing, pro-Serb nationalist antiwar.com, with its semi-literate, crudely manipulative denials of the Srebrenica massacre, and its other equally worthless dia-tribes, or the WorldSoc website, produced by a trotskyoid cult.

---

[1] One might even start with Human Rights Watch's report on the pogrom and war in Kosovo (which also examines NATO war crimes), *Un-der Orders: War Crimes in Kosovo* (2001).
In passing, I might add that whatever its flaws, Human Rights Watch has done infinitely more good in the world than *Wildcat*, the ultraleft groupuscule and publication with which Tate is associated, and so I am hardly offended by Tate's attempt at an insult by associating me with them. The HRW report is sound.
Of course, to understand the background and chronology, it is not enough. One might start with Brank Magas's *The Destruction of Yugoslavia: Tracking the Breakup 1980–92* (Verso, 1993), Noel Malcolm's histories of Bosnia and Kosovo, and Ivo Banac's impressive *The Na-tional Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, His-tory, Politics* (1988).
Writers like Christopher Bennett, Tim Judah, David Rieff, David Rohde, and Chuck Sudetic and others I have mentioned in previous articles also offer credible and nuanced journalistic treat-ments of the Balkan wars that include ample history. Branka Magas has recently edited, with Ivo Zanac, *The War in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina 1991–1995* (2001), which will, I think, prove to be indispensable.
At a minimum, one might read the series Marie Danner wrote in the late 1990s in *The New York Review of Books*, including "America and the Bosnian Genocide," in the December 4, 1997 issue. It is possible to read the Danner series in an afternoon at the local library. It is unfortunate that he has not yet turned it into a book.

They do diverge from the official line, there is no doubt. But that alone hardly recommends them as serious sources for understanding.

Such "sources" bring to mind a passage from Julie Mertus's useful *Kosovo: How Myths am Truths Started a War*, (1999):

> "An old Balkan tale tellin of a man leafing madly through one newspaper after another. 'Father, father can I help you?' his son asks. 'No,' the man brushes the boy aside and the other papers on the floor and continues skimming only the headlines of the papers. At last, he jabs his finger at one crumpled page and cries 'Here it is! I knew it all along.' He throws the other papers on the floor and clings to his one headline. That the other papers contradict this story is irrelevant: He has found the Truth."

This is how much of the left has functioned on th< Balkan wars — citing one another citing one another and selectively culling, cafeteria-style, from the media. And most people who consider themselves dissident go to the handful of leftist luminaries, pundits and conspiracy-theorists to re-ceive their wafer of understanding the way that true believers flock to the high priest of a cult. This is the contemporary equivalent of reading the Communist Party's *Daily Worker* to obtain the Pavlovian signals as to which line to follow this week. A radical understanding demands more.

Rather than offering reasoned debate on serious evidence, Tate fulminates. I urge people to examine the leftist dogmas and am accused of trying to prevent them from thinking for themselves. It doesn't matter that I presented serious evidence and cited serious studies and highly credible testi-mony to support my argument that Milosevic's defense and the diatribe printed with it are garbage; Tate simply ignores evidence and argument.

Thus, according to this ideologue, if one happens to accept the obvious (as I do) that however transparent the hypocrisy of the Great Powers, and whatever the "iota of truth" in Milosevic's denunciations of West-ern domination (all stated explicitly in my article), the public record is abundantly suf-ficient to prove Milosevic's guilt, one is therefore guilty of supporting NATO's depleted-uranium diplomacy. But even the APR editors acknowledged Milosevic is a war criminal — so what is the problem?

Such hapless Manicheanism should demonstrate clearly and painfully that for all their pretensions, most of the vestiges of the ultraleft and the anarchist milieu

have fallen into the same decline and confusion that the marxist-leninists have since their wall fell down.[2]

Despite its ultra-radical pretensions (or perhaps because of them), *Wildcat* is an es-pecially poignant example of confusion. In the Spring 1994 issue of the journal, for example, the chaos, starvation and warlordism in Somalia in the early-mid 1990s, and the battles these petty gangsters wound up fighting with the US militaty, are depicted as the work of "the heroic prole-tariat of Somalia," and they declare, "So-malia shows the way."

In the same article, one also learns that since they are businesses, food aid organi-zations actually "creat[e] dispossession and the means of maintaining it" in order to promote starvation and subsequently better compete for international funding.

The UN offensive in 1994 to capture warlord Mohammed Farah Aideed after his militias killed twenty-four UN soldiers was, we are told, carried out in order "to strengthen support for Aideed in the same way [that] the US bombings of Baghdad were designed to strengthen support for Saddam."

This kind of paranoia, with its tiny leav-ening of truth and its rigid, though absurd, logic, is what substitutes for critical think-ing among certain "revolution-aries."

It is no exaggeration to say that nearly every line in Tate's letter is either uninformed, visibly confused or both. In the one paragraph in which he comes closest to presenting an historical argument about the Yugoslav collapse, Tate evades my evi-dence that there was no Western European or German conspiracy to carve up Yugoslavia, preferring merely to repeat what I already refuted.

The defenders of Milosevic do present evidence that NATO countries were be-hind the Yugoslav breakup, he insists, but he doesn't bother to provide any. In the pro-cess he quickly reveals his ignorance about the history of Serb-Albanian rela-tions in Kosovo, and the chronology and causality of the Yugoslav breakup — as if, for ex-ample, secession didn't come when Yugo-slavia had already been wrecked by Milosevic's Serb ethno-fascist counter-revolution, and after Milosevic's war had already begun.

---

[2] This is the point made by *New Left Re-view* editor Tariq Ali in an infuriatingly wretched collection he has edited, *Masters of the Uni-verse? NATO's Balkan Crusade* (2000). Writes Ali, "Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the triumph of capital, the interna-tional left has been in a state of great demoralisation. This is only natural. The scale of the defeat has been enormous and its effects have been disorienting. Some on the left have lost confidence in the capacity of people to eman-cipate themselves" (358).
That Ali thinks the collapse of the gulag empire should explain the decline in a belief that people are incapable of emancipating themselves is as laughable as it revealing. Does it need to be said that this fondness for the Berlin Wall is hardly consonant with a philosophy of libera-tion?

Thus, secession was no "act of war." Tate's complacent formulation, a typical leftist trope, turns active agents of ethnic cleansing, conquest, and plunder into au-tomata. More importantly, it conceals the stark reality that the attack on Bosnia in particular was nothing like a war; it was an out-and-out massacre until late l992, when the Bosnians began finding the meager means to resist. The vast majority of casu-alties and conquest of territory had by then occurred: When people began fighting back, it became a war. Tate does not remotely understand this crucial distinction.

Similarly, the "class analysis" Tate rec-ommends, which readers are welcome to peruse if they have unlimited amounts of time to squander, is staggeringly uninformed, despite its veneer of historical knowledge. (As is typical of this kind of literature, they went looking for disembodied "facts" that fit their template, and, not surprisingly, they found some.)

Briefly, among other inanities too nu-merous to mention, the text submerges the Serb-Albanian national conflict (and yes, the colonial relationship, which is why the Albanian Kosovars have been justifiably compared to the Palestinians) and the Al-banian resistance against Belgrade into a kind of decontextualized workerist fantasy.[3]

Less forgivably, they also repeat the lie that the "competing sides" were equally na-tionalist and equally guilty. The reality, of course, is that one side — the Bosnian side, not the "Muslim side," which is a contemptible mystification — defended a multicultural, multiethnic society, and in fact was supported by significant numbers of all ethnic groups, and all ethnically mixed-families, of which there were and are significant numbers. In contrast, the Serb nationalists, as well as the Croatian nation-alists, fought for fascist ethnic "purity."

For all its revolutionary posturing, *Wild-cat* evinces no understanding that this fun-damental difference made all the difference: the Bosnian ideal was, and remains, worth defending, and it was vital to resist the murderous Serb and Croat ethno-nationalist projects. This principle is essential to a radical vision because it represents the ba-sic minimum for a possibility of a viable future for all of us, a basic minimum with-out which no radical transformation will be possible, and ethnocidal bloodletting is in-evitable.

Thus, as a number of radicals are gradu-ally realizing, tiie entire for-or-against-intervention fetish over the Balkans is a kind of red herring. What is far more important is that we learn to articulate and to put into practice what it is we are

[3] In fact, Fredy Perlman wrote his doctoral diesis at the University of Belgrade in Yugosla-via in 1966 on the very subject of the exploita-tion and unequal development of Kosovo, as a kind of internal colony, by the Yugoslav regime, a thesis that was disputed by the apparatchiks, but eventually accepted after his doctoral aca-demic adviser advocated strongly for him.

for, the kind of social relations we desire. And the tragic fate of the Serbs, the struggle of the Alba-nian Kosovars, and particularly the prom-ise of a multiethnic Bosnia, are at the cen-ter of that crucial question.

I believe it imperative to pay particular, and detailed, attention to the history of the Yugoslav breakup; this is not only because that conflict has been in important ways paradigmatic of the contemporary in-ternational chaos, with its spreading whirl-wind of nationalist bloodbath, but because the failure to understand the breakup of Yugoslavia and its implications has been equally paradigmatic.

Tate chooses to "make [his] own mind up" about such matters — including taking even the claims of holocaust revisionists se-riously, which suggests how little prepared he is for the task he has set for himself. He approves of self-styled radicals publishing Milosevic and similar ilk because they "have much to tell us." This, again, is the lame rationalization the APR editors made.

Without bothering to respond to my article's critique of this specious claim, Tate thinks it sufficient to repeat it doggedly, though he adds, as a particularly odious example, that Serb pogromists can en-lighten us about the relationship between the KLA and islamic fascists — a statement that is roughly equivalent to arguing that printing Goebbels might have provided in-sight into the relationship between Jews and the international communist conspiracy. I imagine he'll find a way to make up his mind about UFOs when he has done with the Balkans.

As I argued in my article, except per-haps as a case study in fascism, *radicals have nothing to learn from publishing or reading Milosevic*; everything that comes out of his mouth is a self-serving lie. Worse, it is steeped in fascist political myths that continue to poison any possibility of sort-ing out the collapse of Yugoslavia — most of all for the Serbs, who have a very long way to go collectively to honestly face the crimes committed in their name, and by brutes still moving about freely in their midst.

This is also true in Croatia, where there is similar resistance to the Hague tribunal. By reducing the complex matter of histori-cal justice to the idea that the tribunal is nothing more than a "kangaroo court," Tate and the APR essentially affirm these reac-tionary forces, and indirectly legitimize Tudjman, Milosevic and their fascist sup-porters. The leninist text APR chose to ex-plain Milosevic repeats the old same shib-boleths, and largely legitimizes his lies.[4]

---

[4] As for the paradoxes of justice I tried to illuminate in my article, Tate's letter is particu-larly ironic; elsewhere in the 1994 issue of *Wildcat* cited above, the editors propose a notion of justice as cocksure as it is peculiar. Next to critiques of "libertarian prejudices" that fail to recognize "the necessity for organization," one can read self-assured declarations that the "D.o.P. (the dictatorship of the proletariat, no less) must "impose its needs despotically against its enemies."
"Repressive measures," they explain, "will be carried out on the basis of expediency rather than justice . . ."

Tate does not seem to have read any of this; I do not intend; to repeat it all here. People will have to read my article and judge for themselves. The undecided would do well to read the admirable book, *Tak-ing Sides Against Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia: The story of the Workers Aid Con-voys*, for much of the real story (including a very succinct refutation of the canard about German conspiracy, on page 34, and a moving repudiation of the political myth that all sides were to blame, on page 142). Readers can send twenty-five dollars to the FE in Detroit and I will send them the book. Money raised continues to go to support Workers Aid projects with Kosova miners.

Taking Sides and the convoys were as-sembled by people who were able to break from their ideological blinders — to learn from what was best in their radical tradi-tions — and then to actually do something concretely to aid the beleaguered people of the fiercely antinationalist enclave at Tuzla, which was defending itself against Milosevic's horde. *Wildcat* ridiculed their effort — and thus has earned its humble place in history's great hall of shame for that gesture alone.

Finally, I have seen little evidence that "increasing ranks" of FE readers consider this publication liberal, though it would not change my views if this were true. I'd look for new comrades; I happen to respect the truth more than any label. But judging from the many brief notes on subscription renew-als and conversations we have had, the material we have published on the Balkans has struck a chord with a lot of long-time readers who are sick of the bad faith, will-ful ignorance and inhumanity of the left on this issue.[5]

Now, one might make a reasonable argument for organization; one might also argue, with less credibility, I think, for untrammeled revolutionary violence. But to combine the two, and to insist gleefully on expedience over justice, is to propose an old and familiar recipe — a "spicy stew," as one precursor of *Wildcat* famously called it, of authoritarian nihilism.

5 In an email (which was later forwarded me) explaining he wasn't even going to read a letter critical of his publication of Milosevic's APR editor Jason McQuinn commented that was clear this reader had been recruited to a *Fifth Estate* "hate campaign" against APR, a theme he takes up in the Fall-Winter 2002–03 issue *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* in an article, "Contempt for anarchists: Contemporary hate campaigns in the anarchist milieu."

Here, McQuinn writes of a tendency in tlhe anarchist milieu for "pronouncements of contempt" with "a holier-than-thou attitude of political correctness reflecting their true belief in the one true correct line of their various ideologies. Any other anarchists who fail to uncritically believe in the same ideological lines with the same fervor are simply ridiculed and denounced."

In fact, the APR editors reacted with pointed scorn and defensiveness when FE staff members first brought the issue up to them. When McQuinn and his friends critique others, they are simply offering "more thorough logic and critique." When others criticize them, it is a "hate campaign." This is Humpty Dumptyism, not debate.

And McQuinn doesn't mind dishing it out. Refusing to respond substantively to my criticisms, he resorts to the most petulant, evasive attacks. In the same issue, one can read, in what is ostensibly a review of recent issues of *Fifth Estate*, *Anarchy* editor McQuinn's noble defense of APR — of which

It used to be common in this movement to say that one's opponent, whom one might be accusing of showing bad faith or political hypocrisy, spoke "with a corpse in his mouth." The genocide denial of *Wild-cat* and APR should remind us that the corpses in question are not always mere metaphors.

— February 28, 2003

---

he also happens to be editor. According to McQuinn, I wrote my "pathetic diatribe" because APR has had "the temerity to consistently oppose the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia," and because — I am not making it up — APR had not asked my permission to publish Milosevic.

Predictably, I am then accused of supporting NATO. Now *that's* an argument. This is more like armed projection — or perhaps passive aggression — than "armed desire."

David Watson
On Keeping Our Critical Faculties: a response to an "ultraleft" critic
2003

From *Fifth Estate* #360, Spring 2003