

People who grew up in nations that no longer exist (Yugoslavia, Zaire, etc.): How was your personal identity affected by the change in politics?

I read this question of yours the other day. It was so exciting that skipping it felt like self-betrayal. I feel I could write a book about it. People write great books on much less important topics than losing a country. The country in my case was Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia started to disintegrate in the late 1960s: see Dejan Jovic (2008). So, even before I was born, the change of politics already affected my identity. While I was a baby, I was transformed from a citizen of a unified country to a country where each federal unit conducted its own foreign economic relations.

I knew nothing about that during my most formative period: the first six years of my life. NO one then drummed into me an identity that is ethnic or otherwise geopolitical. My attention was caught by other things, among which especially pertinent is this scene: I sat on the kindergarten fence, and looked how a group of boys engaged in a conflict with another group of boys. It made me puzzled. How come everyone my age is in one of those two groups while I'm out? How come I missed completely to even *notice* that they grouped themselves? I couldn't even conceive how they could have done that, and had no idea what made them fight each other. ... Hmmm.

My education at school was in one language. My extracurricular education was by and large in another language. My entertainment was with kids that spoke one language. My entertainment via TV and magazines was in another language. Yugoslav ethnicities differed greatly in how they used the resources and their autonomies for cultural production. For example, the TV Zagreb's children program was like watching paint dry. Whatever the reasons for such things, the result was certain: it made it emotionally impossible for me to be loyal to just one language or ethnic culture.

Protection of the group members is one of the defining functions of most groups. The groups called "family," "nation" and "state" did badly in protecting me from stresses that greatly worsened my health as a school pupil. Of course, such things happen everywhere, which makes it all the more concerning about the basic social fabric. It's difficult to be patriotic and thoughtful member of groups that don't care about what is most important to you.

Readiness to fight for a collective comes naturally. The trouble with that natural drive was translating it in everyday life. The consensual aspirations and standards of behaviour, simple rules like keeping your word, being a good neighbour, - were being abandoned. In such circumstances, national identities are being more-or-less emptied of meaning.

The most dramatic identity transformation for me happened when a series of unpleasant experiences became so long that I had to move it from the category of mere anecdotes to the class of data useful for making judgements about the collectives I was a member of.

Before I finish, I'm adding three anecdotes:

In the winter 1989-1990, two students in the high school geography class chatted in front of the map of South-Eastern Europe. The son of an ultra nationalist military officer said, "Look! A handful of soil! You can traverse the whole country in several hours!"

The member of the youth wing of the most nationalist party approved.

"No chance that we could be viably independent!" – was their categorical conclusion. Those attitudes were under pressure to change under the new geopolitical circumstances some 18 months later.

On a fine September day in 1991, as I got out of home, I experienced a singular social phenomenon: everyone, everywhere, had the same question on their lips:

* When will they recognise us? When we'll get recognised? *

The question was absent from *my* lips. It was also absent from my mind, and without an imprint on my heart. Realising that I've somehow slipped into a mini-minority, I kept silent.

It so happens that I have a name that's usual in Central Europe, including Serbia, while it is puzzling and alien to many, perhaps most people in Macedonia. Among my professors, there are those who constantly stumbled upon and mispronounced my name through all the years they gave me classes. That is to say.... There are Macedonians outraged that their national name is not recognised by a neighboring country, while they fail to recognise the name of their compatriot that they had a duty to attend to.

If I should be more explicit: I identify far more with certain aspirations, codes of conduct & aesthetics than with any geopolitical collective. With the withering away of the country I was born in, I gained freedom from identifying myself with the actions of a mass of people, I found out I'm without freedom to express many of my feelings and thoughts, and I got imprisoned into ethnic and state identities that mean little. I gained freedom to be a patriot for a future community, utilising dreams from the past.

Short of writing a book, these sketches are pretty much the best I can come up with on one page.

Cheers,