INTERVIEW

JACQUELINE NIEßER

**Freedom of Culture in and after Yugoslavia.
An Interview with Branka Prpa**

Abstract. The historian Branka Prpa was the director of the Historical Archives of Belgrade after Slobodan Milošević's regime ended in 2000. Jacqueline Nießer spoke to Prpa about how she set about reforming Belgrade's Historical Archives during Serbia's democratic opening-up under Zoran Djindjić. Prpa has fostered preservation of the cultural history of socialist Yugoslavia, so the focus of the interview was cultural freedom in and after Yugoslavia. The historian elaborates on how culture both then and now has been in conflict with politics, her remarks leading on to a discussion about how a future may be imagined in the 21st century. The interview was conducted during the COURAGE project, which between 2016 and 2019 has researched the cultural heritage of dissent in the former state socialist countries of Eastern Europe.

Jacqueline Nießer is a Research Associate at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg and coordinator of the COURAGE project. COURAGE stands for 'Cultural Opposition – Understanding the Cultural Heritage of Dissent in the Former Socialist Countries'. It was funded by Horizon 2020, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

Introduction

Branka Prpa is a historian at the Institute for Modern History in Belgrade, Serbia. Her area of expertise is 20th century history, and she studied the intellectual history of Serbia particularly closely, as well as the history of ideas about Yugoslav statehood. When Slobodan Milošević's regime was brought to its end in 2000, the new prime minister of Serbia, Zoran Djindjić, asked Prpa to take over as director of the Historical Archives of Belgrade (*Istorijski Arhiv Beograda*, IAB).

Jacqueline Nießer asked Prpa what she had done to reform Belgrade's Historical Archives during the early years after Milošević and the beginnings of democracy, and about what freedom of culture meant both in those days and before that, in socialist Yugoslavia.

Nießer conducted the interview in the Serbian language on 24 October 2017 in Belgrade; the translation into English is her own. Nießer wished to focus on the main arguments covered and so took the decision to edit the material for clarity's sake.

The COURAGE project formed the framework of the interview. COURAGE is a cooperative effort by twelve research institutions from throughout Europe which have described collections highlighting cultural opposition during socialism and created an online database for them.¹ A crucial source for the COURAGE research was a series of interviews with nonconformist intellectuals.

Interview

Nießer: As Director of the Belgrade Archives you were a particularly strong supporter of the preservation of Yugoslavia's cultural history. Why was that?

Prpa: My entire approach is all about returning culture to history. You know, historians somehow always tend to avoid the question of culture. But right from the beginning I've been a different kind of historian. I've always identified with the social approach to history, or rather, with the total-history approach of the *Annales* School. Culture has always been extremely important to me and that's why I did what I did when I was Director of the Archives. For example, we published a monograph about Milorad Mišković, the greatest ballet dancer the Serbs ever produced and whose papers are in the municipal Archives.² So you see? It wasn't the National Theatre that published the monograph, it was the Belgrade Archives. At the Belgrade Archives I'd had to take over the role of the institution that should actually have done that. But—they didn't! I just thought it would be a pity if things like that just disappeared from view. To me it's a shame if individuals who were extremely important to the cultural history of this space are forgotten. And that's been my approach all along; it's part of my thinking as a historian. And then, of course, something absolutely unbelievable happened! The Historical Archives of Belgrade became one of the most important cultural spaces in the city, with exhibitions, book promotions, all that sort of thing. So the Archives weren't only somewhere researchers would come to, but became a venue for active cultural life in Belgrade.

¹ COURAGE, Cultural Opposition. Understanding the Cultural Heritage of Dissent in the Former Socialist Countries, www.cultural-opposition.eu. All internet references were accessed on 21 January 2019.

² Jovan Ćirilov / Marija Janković, eds, *Milorad Mišković – Igrati život* (Milorad Mišković – Dancing Life), Belgrade 2009.

N: Did you face resistance? What were the circumstances when you took over leadership of the Archives?

P: Do you know what? Well, how can I put this? Well, Zoran Djindjić was prime minister when I took the job.³ The choice of democracy had just won the elections, in the sense that it was democracy that defeated Milošević and removed him from power. So ended that awful agony which Serbia had lived through for ten years, during which it experienced the most horrific things. Zoran and I knew each other personally, but it never struck me that he might think of me as anything like the Director of an archive. I was fully active as an academic; I had my projects on the go and to me at the time, dealing with an archive was, well ...

N: Where were you working before you became Archive Director?

P: I was at the Institute for Modern History of Serbia.⁴ Doing research. And then Djindjić asked me to lead an institution that was part of—well, what was it?—part of my wider professional domain, really. I said, ‘What on Earth gave you that idea? I couldn’t do that! I shouldn’t know how to be the Director of anything!’ I told him I’d worked on my own all my life. I mean, historians tend to be loners. We tend to get together only at conferences, or other occasions; when we want to exchange bits of ideas with colleagues, you know? So, as a historian you grow apart from the others. Historians don’t tend to have any experience of working together. Or very little, anyway. And now I, having had nothing to do with anything of the kind, was to be Director of something! I said: ‘My dear good man, I shouldn’t even know how to organize an office party, let alone run a major institution with a staff of sixty people! I don’t know a thing about it! I don’t even know what a Director does. I’d have no idea.’ But then he said: ‘Yes, well; now you all want to wash your hands of it, you see? So how are we going to build this country up? You all think “Right, OK; we’ve fought the fight, we’ve won it: now it’s over to you, you politicians.

³ In the 1970s Zoran Djindjić had been active in radical left circles, which brought him into conflict with the communist authorities. He left Yugoslavia in 1977 after mediation by former German chancellor Willy Brandt. Djindjić studied philosophy under Jürgen Habermas at Frankfurt University, and earned a PhD in 1979 at the University of Konstanz. He returned to Serbia at the beginning of the 1990s, becoming one of the most important leaders of the opposition movement after Yugoslavia’s disintegration. From 2001 to 2003, Zoran Djindjić served as prime minister of Serbia. In March 2003 he was shot dead in front of the Serbian government building. His private papers and library are described in the COURAGE database, <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n8978>.

⁴ In Serbian *Institut za Noviju Istoriju Srbije* (Belgrade).

Kindly get on with it!", you say. Well, it won't work, I can tell you that right now. You've all now simply got to do your bit, too!

And that's how Zoran got us all on-side; and fitted me and a lot of other people, from the university and from the realms of wider culture, into the state infrastructure. Our task was to renew Serbia's institutions. He said: 'How do you think we're going to build democracy if we don't re-build the institutional infrastructure?' Now of course, all the institutions had been operating under sanctions and they'd gone through a regime of brainwashing. Imagine it! In my Archives there were two computers, and prehistoric ones at that, from somewhere at the end of the eighties! I shook everything up and built up a proper modern computer lab. With everything I did I said to the people working there: 'If you don't like it, I'll resign. Find somebody else if you like, and then everything will be all right. If all you want is some functionary who's just going to go along with whatever you want, then I'd rather you do get somebody else.' So because they were afraid I really might resign they would generally accept what I set out to do.

N: But it seems you did very well, wouldn't you say?

P: Yes, I think so. They even sent my project reports and annual reports to other cultural institutions, as a sort of model for 'how Directors should act'. But for my part, I'd taken the National Archives of Great Britain as the model for what I wanted to do. I wrote to the Director there and asked her if she could send me their annual reports to the UK Parliament so I could see how they were put together. And she was very nice and sent me them. Whatever dilemma I faced concerning management matters of whatever type, I put it on—well, not on paper, of course, but in an e-mail, and asked how they did it in Britain. And they were always willing to help. Then, everything was put on the website, all income, all expenses; everything went up onto the website. In short, I insisted on complete transparency about everything that went on, and about how it was done. By introducing all these things I ended up being a Director who transformed an institution that had been in a dreadful state into one of Belgrade's most important cultural spaces. With all the ideas I ended up generating, I'd have achieved my goal regardless of whatever government was in charge. *Everybody* thought that it was money well invested—taxpayer's money, of course. But it was as simple as that.

N: When was it you were the head of the Historical Archives of Belgrade?

P: I was there for eight years, so two terms. From 2002 to 2010. A long time ago, of course! When I took the position I thought a lot of people would soon

be gone; people who'd been extremely important figures there during the second half of the twentieth century, people who'd left their marks on the social, political, and cultural life of Belgrade, Serbia, and Yugoslavia. But I thought there wouldn't be any of their own authentic documents to help us understand why their ideas had had such an effect, towards the end of the twentieth century. There would only be indirect records of what they'd done. So that was why I started that initiative to collect records and bequests from the intellectuals and cultural workers of Belgrade.

I did it all with the mind of a historian who had researched intellectuals as a specific social group; that was actually the subject of my doctoral thesis.⁵ In fact in my research I'd had problems finding documents. When intellectuals are your focus, you usually have to ask their families whether there's anything left of an individual's history. In my own research, I was dealing with Serbian intellectuals between the two world wars, and as a rule they'd been *persona non grata* in socialist Yugoslavia. So of course their families were inclined to be very suspicious and not very cooperative in general. And that was why I made this lifetime decision: I thought, as long as I've got friends and acquaintances who have strongly marked the political and cultural life of the Yugoslav space, let's make sure their lives are documented. Then when each task was completed, I used to joke: 'Hey, you know what? Now I've archived your material, you're free to die!' And so that was how the collection of personal material of people who were extremely important for Yugoslav society started. It was very important.

N: Who were they exactly, these important people?

P: Well; for example, the sociologist Nebojša Popov was an extraordinarily important man in both Yugoslavia and Serbia.⁶ Under communism he was in the group called 'Praxis'.⁷ In fact, its members were the only dissidents under the Yugoslav regime. For we had leftist dissidents; we didn't have civic dissidents.⁸ In fact that was what distinguished the 'Praxis group'. In the 1970s

⁵ Branka Prpa, *Srpski intelektualci i Jugoslavija, 1918-1929* (Serbian intellectuals and Yugoslavia), Belgrade 2018.

⁶ Cf. the description of the Nebojša Popov collection in the Historical Archives of Belgrade in the COURAGE database, <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n12850>.

⁷ The Praxis and Korčula Summer School Collection includes significant books and articles by Praxis thinkers and a complete set of all editions of the journal *Praxis*, cf. COURAGE database, <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n31917> and Digitalni arhiv Praxisa i Korčulanske ljetne škole (Digital Archives of Praxis and the Korčula Summer School), <http://www.praxis-arhiva.net/digitalni-arhiv-praxisa-i-korculanske-ljetne-skole/>.

⁸ Briefly, the differentiation between 'civic' and 'leftist' dissidents refers to different streams on the left. It is used to stress that 'leftist dissidents' were striving for a real, and

they had assembled the best philosophers, sociologists and so on, and were exceptionally important in the second half of the twentieth century. As individuals? Well, I must mention Jovan Ćirilov. He created the space for alternative perceptions of theatre by launching BITEF [Belgrade International Theatre Festival, J. N.] in 1967 with Mira Trailović⁹ and Borka Pavičević [theatre directors, J. N.]. They gathered together all the avant-garde theatre tendencies from all over the world. Then there's Jelena Šantić. She was a ballet dancer and in the 1990s she was extraordinarily active in the antiwar movement. Her archive is significant. Other than that there's material from a group of symbolist artists who are worth remembering for their attempts to move beyond stereotypes, and to make progress in postmodernism.

N: So the Historical Archives of Belgrade now also preserves material from people like Nebojša Popov, Jovan Ćirilov, and Jelena Šantić as well as the BITEF fond. Can you say something about how their types of non-conformism were possible in socialist Yugoslavia?

P: Well; despite its one-party political system Yugoslavia was actually quite quick to turn towards cultural pluralism. As early as the 1950s, in fact. And they began to question the utilitarian role of art pretty soon, too. The start of it was the congress of writers in Ljubljana in 1952 when [Miroslav] Krleža renounced the utilitarian role of literature. Art was declared to have a purpose sufficient to itself: there was no requirement for it to be in the service of society and it absolutely must not be in the service of official politics. In fact, art need not be in anyone's service at all. Art is the individual act of a human being who is either in monologue with herself, or in dialogue with somebody else, whatever you wish. Art can of course be engaged, but that is a question of choice, not duty.

So as a result of that, modernism was embraced very quickly by all creative people, whether writers or artists. And despite the political monism artists were allowed to express themselves in ways that went completely beyond stereotypes. In fact they really were autonomous. And that's important, because of course it created the possibility that pluralistic thinking from the world inspired culture in the Yugoslav space too. So culture became the realm where

in their eyes better, socialism than the existing state socialism – whereas 'civic dissidents' strove to overcome socialism and to establish (liberal) democracies.

⁹ Mira Trailović (1924-1989) was one of the most distinguished theatre directors in the history of Serbian and Yugoslav theatre. A pioneer of the avant-garde theatre in Eastern Europe, she was one of the founders and a driving force behind the 'atelje212' and BITEF. Cf. Jacqueline Nießer et al., *Cultural Opposition as Transnational Practice*, in: Balázs Apór / Péter Apór / Sándor Horváth, eds, *The Handbook of COURAGE. Cultural Opposition and Its Heritage in Eastern Europe*, Budapest 2018, 551-571.

artists could take possession of spaces of freedom. Which of course is so crucial for human beings.

And this is where we should include the huge role of Yugoslav film, the so-called 'Black Wave' in the 1960s and early 1970s which corresponded to similar currents, for example in France.¹⁰ Rock music was another thing that was free, in the sense that it wasn't forbidden, nor was it limited. And then of course, if there was one place that was a hotbed of all cultural and political activities, it was the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade. That played one of the most important roles in creating spaces for cultural freedom; very important; very important! Miraculously, the authorities left it alone completely. It was led by an extraordinary woman, Dunja Blažević, perhaps you know her?¹¹ Her name crops up throughout the 1970s, and is connected with all its cultural alternatives.

So, you can say that until the 1980s, it wasn't only Serbia that was pretty much open when it came to culture but the whole of Yugoslavia. Other socialist countries didn't experience that. In the other countries culture was repressed, just like everything else. It's true there were some excesses in socialist Yugoslavia, but essentially, there wasn't any repression. There was creative freedom if not from the very beginning then certainly from the end of the 1950s onwards, until Yugoslavia was dissolved.

N: But didn't something change in the 1970s?

P: Well yes, indeed; there were incidents; particularly with members of Praxis. Nebojša Popov's books were banned, for instance, and a number of intellectuals were arrested. But there were no very great consequences. Well, now; how can I explain it? This kind of settling of scores with people of thought, and with creative types; you know it really never reached the kind of scale of what was happening in the other East European countries. It just never

¹⁰ The 'Black Wave' was a critical art movement that emerged in particular within the so called 'New Yugoslav Film' (1963-1972), a reaction from Yugoslav cinematography to the 'New Waves' in other European countries at that time, especially in France and Italy. At first employed as a pejorative term by the state to depreciate reactionary tendencies, 'Black Wave' quickly came to be used as the name for the modernist and nonconformist style of films with a critical attitude to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The films dealt primarily with marginalized individuals and groups, questioning the socialist revolution and whether personal freedom and freedom of expression really existed in Yugoslavia. Cf. Greg DeCuir, *Jugoslovenski crni talas. Polemički film od 1963 do 1972 u Socijalističkoj Federativnoj Republici Jugoslaviji* (Yugoslav Black Wave. Polemical cinema from 1963-1973 in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), Belgrade 2011.

¹¹ Dunja Blažević, an art historian and curator, was in charge of the Gallery of the Student Cultural Center between 1970 and 1976, and was the Center's Director from 1976 to 1979. From 1996 to 2010 she directed the 'Center for Contemporary Art' in Sarajevo.

did. And there was this tradition that people with 'big names' in the cultural sphere were in charge of important cultural institutions. It wasn't even all that important to be a member of the party. I mean, I was never a member of the League of Communists. Mira Trailović [the above-mentioned theatre director, J. N.] was never a member of the League of Communists. And nor were a lot of other people, who simply didn't want to join the party. When I refused to join, nothing happened to me. But it was a choice you had to make, all the same. They would look at you in a, well—a slightly intimidating way. But you could say 'I'm not going to [join]'.

N: Ah? So it wasn't any big deal for important cultural figures in Yugoslavia if they weren't members of the League of Communists? That's certainly interesting.

P: No; and in fact the dissolution of Yugoslavia through war and the destruction within tremendous realms was a much more alarming experience both for individuals and at the collective level. And all of that destruction originated in a totalitarian way of thinking which comes from chauvinism. That means one can conceive of totalitarianism as part of a worldview. The chauvinist worldview leads towards an 'Ueberschensch' culture, towards belief in the supremacy of one cultural model over another—and so of one nation over other nations. The sort of hatred that spreads from such a worldview is terribly destructive for the cultural sphere.

What we faced in the 1990s was totalitarianism—not only the political kind but cultural totalitarianism too. And of course it created new forms of cultural counter-activities. So from those peaceful activities, people passed to another form of cultural activism. And that then worked in two ways. It worked against the destruction caused by the war, and then it worked against hatred. And then those two worked together to produce a third form of activism, which was the affirmation of plurality as the key element of cultural content. Diversity as something to be treasured, not as something annoying to be flicked away, as a horse might flap away a fly with a swish of her tail. In fact, without diversity, there is no culture and there were groups that started to work in this sense during the war. One of the key initiatives and the best example of them is the 'Centre for Cultural Decontamination' [in Belgrade, founded by the theatre director Borka Pavičević, mentioned above, J. N.]. After what happened in the war, with so many victims, and so much blood and horror, cultural engagement has included working towards reconciliation. It has become an attempt to rehabilitate an entire society suffering from post-traumatic stress by restoring a value system that isn't derived from wartime ideas. You see, you obviously have to create a system of hatred and destruction in

order to make people go so far as to kill each other just because they are of another faith or nation, don't you? And beyond that you need to be sure what you're actually trying to destroy; and you need to know what iconography and symbols you need to apply. And for us the thing that was destroyed was the pluralist Yugoslav experience.

N: You make it sound like the war was also a cultural war?

P: Yes, well; they succeeded in destroying the idea of diversity as a treasured thing. They simply drove out the idea of tolerance as a constituent of not only their worldview, but of all artistic and cultural work. They destroyed the consensus that you should be open both to what pleases and what displeases. And the consensus that difference must be at least tolerated if not accepted, I mean different ideas and so on. Since the war we've seen a kind of third phase, in which we've been using cultural engagement to fight the lingering spirit of the war. We need to keep resisting all these ideas that were current during the war, because unfortunately they've remained all too real, until today. When we talk amongst ourselves we tend to say, 'We're the living proof that Einstein was absolutely correct. There is no such thing as Time; it doesn't exist, there's no past, no present, no future.' I mean, it's all the same time, because we really can't get out of this time, and it's been thirty years, now. And that's a long time. Today there are totalitarian systems. Of course, there's this quasi-political pluralism and quasi-democracy, but in reality they're all staged democracies.

N: What can a historian do about this state of things?

P: Well, for myself, as a historian and as someone who's been engaged in these matters personally and professionally, I saw my work as Director of the Archives as an opportunity to create a record, which would be a research source for future generations. I managed to do that, but unfortunately nobody has continued my work, and that's how it goes in this country. New political representatives have arrived, and they're not keen on the people I put in the archive; in fact they don't like them one little bit! And what's more, there are also the people who are currently engaged and who need to leave sources for future historians and for future generations who will be culturally active. However, those who've been active since the end of the twentieth century and into the first decades of the twenty-first century, are now also *persona non grata* for this current regime. So unfortunately I'm not at all sure whether any of it will be properly preserved.

N: You were the head of the Historical Archives of Belgrade for eight years. How did your time in office end?

P: I came into conflict with them [the political elite, J. N.] when they started to rehabilitate Serb nationalists from World War II, when the revision of World War II history began to unfold in a big way. The Historical Archives of Belgrade is one of the few archival institutions in Europe in possession of a complete documentation of the Gestapo [from the national socialist occupation of Serbia, J. N.] as well as complete documentation of the Banjica concentration camp, which held about 24,000 inmates.¹² And when I found myself involved in more and more political battles I decided the best thing to do would be to edit and publish the camp's documentation—everything available on the Banjica camp. It came to eight volumes in total. Have you seen it?¹³

N: Yes, of course, although I must admit I've never consulted it.

P: Well; I edited those eight volumes, and then I left. There were so many problems with getting public funding for a publication on Banjica that I eventually said to my husband, 'Can you please give me a donation if they refuse to fund the publication? It's the least we can do for the victims.' The youngest child who died in Banjica was no more than a few months old, and the oldest killed was nearly 100. This [the editing of the documentation of the Banjica camp, J. N.] was part of my work to establish the first chronology of the modern Serbian state between 1804 and 2004. These are all major editions. Now I know it looks like I'm blowing my own trumpet here, but we did all this in eight years! Look here; this is the chronology of the modern Serbian state; done in a year and a half. We had 32 people and institutions from all fields—politics, international relations, culture, economy, society. You can follow the history of 200 years of Serbian statehood, year by year.¹⁴

¹² Banjica was a large concentration camp established by the national socialists in occupied Serbia. The camp was run by the Gestapo and operated between 1941 and 1944. With the collaboration of the Serbian police, political opponents, particularly from the national liberation movement (Yugoslav partisans) were imprisoned or murdered, as were many Jews and Roma.

¹³ Evica Micković / Milena Radojčić, eds, *Logor Banjica. Logoraši – knjige zatočenika koncentracionog logora Beograd-Banjica (1941-1944)* (Concentration Camp Banjica. Inmates – books of the detainees of the Concentration Camp Belgrade-Banjica), Belgrade 2009. See also the English overview Ljubodrag Dimić et al., *Banjica Concentration Camp. Introduction to the Books of Evidence of Detainees*, Belgrade 2014.

¹⁴ Ljubodrag Dimić et al., *Moderna srpska država 1804-2004. Hronologija* (The modern Serbian state 1804-2004. Chronology), Belgrade 2004.

N: In the COURAGE project, we use the term 'cultural opposition'. What does 'cultural opposition' mean to you? Can we apply the term to culture in Yugoslavia?

P: The entire European culture evolved from self-critique. If anything characterizes the cultural sphere, then it's its never-ending critical stance. Without that there wouldn't really be any culture. For culture continuously questions itself. In whatever domain.

N: So opposition to mainstream politics isn't everything?

P: Well no, it isn't. By definition culture is in everlasting dialogue, as Edgar Morin said. With itself, and with the world. A key feature of culture is that it is dialogical.¹⁵ That's also why it's the most creative domain of human society. There can be no sacred essentialities which culture won't question; there simply isn't anything that culture will not problematize. In whatever domain. By the way, science is part of culture, too. So ceaseless problematization is culture's very character. When you say 'opposition', you must therefore ask, 'to what?'

N: So; opposition to what? (Laughter)

P: To everything! And anybody. And to itself. Essentially, that's the nucleus of the idea of progress. Even the most distinguished in their fields will, at some point, say, 'This is dear to me, but I want to go beyond it.' Culture shows a dynamic that is as enduring as the geology of the planet, the earth itself. It is continuously moving, questioning, destroying the old, creating the new, gushingly, and in dialogue. That is the definition of culture. So when culture is in opposition to any sort of politics, that's just one of its aspects.

N: But surely, only if politics allows culture such freedom?

P: Politics, even the most democratic in the world, does not appreciate this kind of cultural dialectics. Because essentially, politics in the social sphere functions based on stereotypes. It is these stereotypes that are actually the reason why culture has been being eroded. So the very methodology of these two social domains is in constant conflict.

¹⁵ 'Dialogical' (*dialogique*, in French) is a term coined by French philosopher Edgar Morin (*1921). 'Dialogical' combines the concepts 'dialogue' and 'dialectics'. It relies on unifying two or more antagonistic principles without overcoming their difference, suggesting that duality in unity is possible. Edgar Morin, *Science avec conscience*, Paris 1982; Edgar Morin, *Penser l'Europe*, Paris 1987.

N: I'm not sure I fully understand. Can you put what you're thinking of here into concrete terms?

P: Well, yes, I think so. For instance, if you're a politician, and you tell me that we're a great nation, we have a beautiful history, that we're—oh, I don't know—let's say that we're just better than others, our towns and cities are wonderful, our art's fantastic and phenomenal. Then along comes someone from the cultural sector and says, 'That's bullshit.' Culture strives for metaphysics, and politics strives for banalization, because it wants to reach out to everybody. Politics is banal even when it doesn't want to be. In practice, politics insults our intelligence, at least it does in Serbia and any thinking human being can hardly allow herself to tolerate a relationship with somebody who insults her intelligence. The banal and metaphysics can hardly go hand in hand, can they? Well now; I'm afraid culture and politics are such opposites that they can't co-exist, neither in a democracy nor in a dictatorship. There's really no system where they do co-exist. Of course, under democracy culture can be autonomous. But even there, you see, there is budgeting, and if you look carefully you can see who gets funding for what; you see who is privileged. You can see there will be advantages for those who appeal to politics, with its mainstream perspective.

N: Can you give me an example?

P: Well it might be, 'Hey, great! We're now researching the state socialist countries! Ah, but let's see: does democracy perhaps require courage, too?' Let's compare things. Why is culture so irritating to political systems? And what are the limits of freedom for culture under democracy? Because there too, space is limited. Rather than being a space of freedom, democracy is a space of limits. Wherever individuals transgress those limits, they find themselves alone under the blue sky.

N: True, that has been the fate of many non-conformists.

P: What I want to say is that essentially all stereotypes are made by politics, no matter how you look at it. Culture is universal. Not local, not national; it's universal. And it strives towards metaphysics. The limitations of perspectives that are pretending to be 'truths' are misleading. At the moment [with our example of researching state socialist cultures, J. N.] the stereotyping is based on the Cold War system; and it hints at how culture in Eastern Europe was exterminated, destroyed. Supposedly immediately, like in *The Gulag Archipelago* [the book by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, J. N.], and so on. In Western democracies,

on the other hand, everything, again supposedly, blossomed; everything was fantastic, it was a space of freedom, and so on and so forth. Except that Martin Luther King gets shot dead—in the world's most democratic state. And the documents linked to the murder of Kennedy are only now made public. Politics always strives to make people think in stereotypes. That way, part of the cultural universe is essentially destroyed. Politics doesn't like it that a cultural universe even exists—because it always implies that culture is stronger than politics.

N: So when we talk about Yugoslavia, can we even use the term 'dissident' at all?

P: Well, there is a serious problem here with the definition of dissidence. For one, Yugoslavia essentially didn't know dissidents in the way other Eastern European countries knew them. Secondly, our key dissidents were themselves leftists; so leftists worked against leftists. The 'Praxis school' was our dissident assembly. And then, on the other hand there were other dissident groups—mainly émigrés—that were extremely nationalist. And they were responsible for terrorist attacks. And you had nationalist dissidents who were prosecuted for nationalism in Yugoslavia.

So if you want to apply the term 'dissident' to the Yugoslav space you have to come up with a detailed explanation of how Yugoslav dissidence relates to the concept of 'dissidence' in the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century. Soviet dissidents would be sent to Siberia to be tortured and killed, or they ended up in the Gulag. It makes quite a difference whether you lose your life because you are a poet or all that happens is that your book gets banned, as happened with *When Pumpkins Blossomed*.¹⁶ And that was the worst that could happen to you in Yugoslavia. So Yugoslav 'dissidents' and Soviet 'dissidents' obviously aren't the same thing. In fact, they aren't remotely comparable.

¹⁶ The book *When Pumpkins Blossomed* (Serbian original *Kad su cvetale tikve*, 1968) by Dragoslav Mihailović was never banned, but a play based on the book performed at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade in 1969 caught Tito's attention. The play's plot, involving a Belgrade boxer, broke the public silence about the prison camp on Goli Otok (Bare Island) in the Adriatic, where opponents of the regime were imprisoned and tortured. Mihailović himself had been an inmate of the Goli Otok camp at the beginning of the 1950s. In his book, he did not directly articulate that fact, although in his adaptation of the story for the stage he did add a direct critique. At a party congress in Zrenjanin in October 1969, Tito vilified Mihailović in his speech and called for a 'decisive response' by the public. Soon after that, the Belgrade press began to attack the play and it was removed from the programme of the Yugoslav Drama Theatre. This case of indirect censorship is described in the COURAGE database, <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n21814>. Cf. Radina

N: But what about the case of the film director Lazar Stojanović? Wasn't he imprisoned for three years in 1971, for his film 'Plastic Jesus'?

P: Yes, Lazar suffered the most, but it was because he scorned Tito directly. I mean he had a direct political message, it wasn't metaphorical at all. And it's interesting that his case should have turned out to be an attempt by the Communist Party to return to a narrow path, which actually failed.¹⁷ When you look today at Stojanović's artistic impact, you see that he didn't really have any. 'Plastic Jesus' was his graduate film at the Academy. His impact actually derives from the fact that he suffered terribly because of it. I knew him personally, and he was a wonderful man, wholly admirable. However, paradoxically, while he suffered the most, he did the least actual film-making. The others worked systematically, they didn't stop after producing a film or a book. The majority continued in their roles as critical artists, but none finished up in prison. So it was also a question of luck, I suppose.

N: The writer Danilo Kiš also found himself in court, but the charges against him were dropped. Nevertheless, he decided to leave Yugoslavia and lived most of his life in France.

P: Well, not most of his life actually; it was a shorter period, just the last decade before he died. But this was a conflict of one literary stream in Serbia with another, of polemic interactions Kiš conducted with his colleagues. He answered them by writing *The Anatomy Lesson*, which we all read; and with it he ruined the rest of the literati forever.¹⁸ But that kind of polemic and interpersonal revenge is common in culture. When you look at literary magazines, or magazines of any other genre of art, you'll see that artists attack each other viciously. That was particularly noticeable in the first half of the twentieth century when the avant-garde appeared with its deadly, murderous power and no thought for how they expressed themselves. They buried everything behind them, and they didn't choose their words well, nor did they think about what their pronouncements would lead to. Kiš didn't suffer so much from the political establishment, but from this one group of writers who were bothered by only one thing, and that was Kiš's talent. It was essentially a literary conflict, when they accused him of plagiarism in *A Tomb for*

Vučetić, *Monopol na istinu. Partija, kultura i cenzura u Srbiji šezdesetih i sedamdesetih godina XX veka* (The monopoly on truth. The party, culture and censorship in Serbia in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century), Belgrade 2016.

¹⁷ Cf. the description of the collection on Lazar Stojanović and his trial in the COURAGE database, <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n9242>.

¹⁸ Danilo Kiš, *Čas anatomije* (The Anatomy Lesson), Belgrade 1978.

Boris Davidović.¹⁹ What I want to say is that you shouldn't call Kiš's trial an attack by the regime.

N: So the case of Danilo Kiš was nothing but a literary spat?

P: Well, the group of writers who attacked him had political links, like all bad artists! A real artist doesn't need to be 'established', and therefore subordinate to all corners of the world. A real artist just wouldn't do that. But then look at what happens today to Lordan Zafranović [the film director who early in his career also belonged to the 'Black Wave', J. N.]. He gets death threats, in Croatia; people send him menacing messages at international film festivals. So we should emphasize that such things never happened in socialist Yugoslavia. Nobody would threaten to kill you just because of adverse reception of an historical event like those of the concentration camp of Jasenovac during World War II, or what the Ustasha [the Croatian fascists, J. N.] did.

N: So what about freedom of culture today in the post-Yugoslav countries?

P: We have this paradox that we now live in democratic systems that are actually very dangerous. People don't shy away from anything, death threats included. But still those societies are all quasi-democracies, aren't they? Serious questions loom round the corner for anyone who sets out to think about the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. Very serious questions. What is cultural dissidence? What does it look like in a democracy? And what does it look like in a dictatorship? Why exactly is it that it is in culture that intolerance of a regime manifests itself, no matter whether we label it democratic or non-democratic?

This is one of the most essential things that marked the last century. But as I said just now: by definition culture happens in dialogue, so it will always cause problems. Whatever your attitude to it, however you support it, however much money you give it, or however you try to silence it, culture will always problematize. That is its nature. Or rather, such is human nature. Luckily!

N: I see. So—is there any utopia that would make sense for the twenty-first century?

P: I believe the biggest question for the twenty-first century is post-post-post-modernism. When you compare the beginning of the twentieth century with

¹⁹ Danilo Kiš, *Grobница za Borisa Davidoviča* (A Tomb for Boris Davidović), Belgrade 1976. Cf. the description of the Danilo Kiš case in the COURAGE database, <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n15367>.

the beginning of the twenty-first, you notice that we're in regression. Yes! We are! Wherever you look, you encounter this postmodernism that's an epigone of all artistic genres, and you rehash it; you regurgitate it, like a grazing cow. So what's eaten is re-used. This is what's happened from the second half of the twentieth century until today. So because of this incapability, this crucial lack of creativity and this lack of problematization, there is no utopia. None. However, a utopia of some sort is absolutely necessary for humankind, because it's the path towards eschaton [towards the final destiny of human being and the world, J. N.]. It is an eschatological category, saying that you consider yourself to be jumping into the future, towards something, some target. As things are today? There is no future. The future is non-existent and undefined. Purposeless. And I must admit that I find that frightening.

N: Are you saying there's no hope?

P: The only thing that I see happening today, with the new generation to which you belong, is that what we were imagining you don't have to only imagine, because for the first time in the history of the human race there is the possibility for humanity to act effectively as a collective mind. Your generation possesses a tool you can use to change the world, because the ways people communicate today were almost unimaginable fifty, thirty, even twenty years ago. It seems like you have to completely rid yourselves of your heritage, dispose of the world that preceded you. Your world is full of new possibilities, and they will function through collective humanity, or the collective mind of humanity. This is now a totally different world. You can collectively effect things that were unimaginable to former generations. Research has shown that with the internet, creativity is growing at a pace you simply can't compare with that of former eras. In the past, creativity was an individual matter, a matter of talent. Now, creativity becomes a matter of the collective. And that is a potential. Therefore, when it comes to futuristic thinking about an ideal world, then the answer is a world of *one* humanity. With diversity and all its beauties it will be like walking into a beautiful meadow and seeing all the various kinds of flowers, herbs, grass, insects ... So it is with people, with humankind, with their spirits, skills, thoughts, and ideas. Imagine how much inspiration there is, out there? Oceans of opportunities!

N: Yes, but don't you think it seems more like we're drowning in these oceans than sailing on them?

P: For now, it might be that it's all being wasted. But it's only what every generation has done so far, or at least once in every hundred years—it radically

dumped its heritage. But it's been done radically. And they said, 'Well, OK, great; we'll put you—the preceding generation—in a file marked "History". You're no longer our world. And you're not *allowed* to be our world in current time.' That's why postmodernism has to die. It has to vanish. For the twentieth century it was alright; it did some magnificent things. But in the twenty-first century postmodernism will simply have to perish.

N: So what do we need, if we're to imagine a future for the twenty-first century?

P: To create a utopia you need a category that Camus talked about: the 'insurgent human'.²⁰ Conformism won't change the world: postmodernism is conformist. There's no progress without revolt. I'll use a stereotype for the insurgent human, the October Revolution. That was a rebellion. In the twentieth century, there were revolts. Including the greatest revolt ever seen in art, and in culture generally. Isn't that so? For the first time, humankind came across psychoanalysis. For the first time, we talked openly about—well, everything! Sexuality, for example; and we finally problematized patriarchy in families. For the first time, we began to question all sacrosanct essentialities. And then? We entered into the two most horrific wars in the history of humankind. Still, conformism is a dead end, because there is no progress with it. So there it is ...

N: There it is, indeed! However, I'm afraid that the collective paves the way for stereotypes and even more conformism. For me, a collective always leads to conformism.

P: Indeed. If we look at today's experience and that from the past. Conformism is enforced by the capitalist ideology—or rather by the consumer society. It's consumer society that's developed this collective conformism. But there's something that's the biggest enemy of conformism, and that is—knowledge! Whether you want it or not, when you sit in front of the internet and interact with it, endless possibilities open up for you to know things you otherwise wouldn't have known. Physically you wouldn't have been able to know them. With the internet, even if you're the biggest idiot, you'll still learn something!

N: Yes, possibly. But you'll also come across things that aren't true, and you won't know what is true and what isn't.

²⁰ Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, Paris 1951 (English edition: Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, New York/NY 1992).

P: Correct, but when you're 'consuming' knowledge, you're influencing your brain in such a way that it continues to improve its functioning. In the beginning, you absorb knowledge like a sponge, sopping it up from all sides. Later it grows as you use the faculty of selection. When you start to sift information, and when you search for a focused domain of knowledge, then you're tapping into it. When you set up your brain like that, you can't become a part of the mob that shouts 'Heil Hitler!'. Once you start thinking, you can no longer be part of that kind of collective. You can only be part of the collective mind of humanity that corresponds with other minds in this world. Minds that search for a rational exchange with other people.

N: That sounds like, for us, utopia will really amount to living up to humanism?

P: It's not a given that any individual will become a truly human being. A dog is born a dog; but a human is born with the mission to become a human. All humans must work their entire lives on becoming human. A dog doesn't need to do that. But a human being must do it. And beyond that, there's one phenomenon of the twentieth century which is now entering into a critical phase, and that's the role of women in society. In this century, women will start on their final battle as part of the human population. You already have a spectre of possible objectives, reasons that differ from those in the twentieth century, and a variety of established facts. Not assumptions, but facts, which specify a future in which women will be a crucial factor of humanity. Very crucial. They won't be half-tolerated any more, like they were in the twentieth century and like they still were at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Within humanity there is a fight waiting to be fought, a fight for equality. And that battle will be joined.

N: I do agree ...

P: So those are questions which, how shall I put it, which your generation will take the lead in. And may God help you! Because we fought against everything, you will need to fight less. We brawled and mauled without pause; it was horrible! Sometimes we didn't know what we were grappling with anymore. Well, that was the 1960s! It was all miniskirts, Rock'n'Roll, Hippies; all that! The problematization of anything and everything!

N: I'll carry on this mission! (Laughter)

P: Glad to have you in the team! It's a relay race! Here's the baton—on you go; full speed ahead! Only, for God's sake break with this postmodernism, I do

ask you that! To get out of the twentieth century at last ... You've got to leave the twentieth century behind, these Cold War topics about culture in the Eastern bloc and 'The West'. This idea that the West is where culture blossoms—well that idea is actually totally nonsensical. It's a perception that has emptied itself. I mean: there have been no rebellions since 1968 ...

N: All right ...

P: Well, you tell me whether there have been any rebellion? Were there any?! One that was a key problematization of things, except perhaps when it comes to homosexuality? What crucial problematization has been addressed since 1968? Human rights? Which human rights? Men continue to assault women, and you as a woman will still probably not be in the driving seat of an enterprise. That's still the same, isn't it?

N: Yes, but some questions have at least been addressed, they're not—

P: And if they have been addressed? How did that happen? By rebellion, that's how! You've got to revolt, to open things up. If you don't revolt, they'll say, 'Good, stay asleep, it's all OK, nothing's amiss!' Now, isn't that true?

N: Well; that's certainly the way it is.

P: Well, yes. That is how it is ...