

MASS MEDIA AND COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

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Introduction

The discourse about the fall of Yugoslavia can be summarised in the following proverb: One death, a hundred prophets! This popular wisdom displays an intrinsic human need to “explain” events, in which we find ourselves inextricably and often unwittingly entangled, and to infuse them with meaning. For that reason, a flood of “theories” appears in the wake of troubled and confusing times. They can be classified into three groups: (1) mythological interpretations which attribute these events to “evil forces”; (2) scientific explanations based on accepted sociological theories, with the proviso that should those theories be lacking or be inadequate, a new theoretical direction may be suggested; (3) a rainbow of “plausible” theories between these two extremes, which may claim a scientific status although, in fact, they are merely common sense explanations supported by *ad hoc* arguments.

The task of this essay is not to provide an extensive examination of these theories. Nevertheless, various theories concerning international conspiracy belong to the first category. They are quite prominent in Serbia (uniting Freemasons, the Komintern and the Vatican as a composite agent against Serbhood), as well as in Croatia (an international anti-Croatian conspiracy). These conspiracy theories are modernised versions of “primitive,” tribal beliefs that the universe is being ruled by demons and evil magic. Similar beliefs can also be found in high-tech, western countries. We can still remember that the Soviet Union, for example, was bluntly called an “evil empire” by President Reagan and the western world.

Among the theories of the second group belongs the contemporary re-examination of the classical theory of modernisation, which proved to be incapable of predicting and making sense out of the Balkan hell, and which calls for an alternative explanation, taken from the theory of ethnic resource competition, and formulated beforehand in a somewhat different context (Hodson, Sekulić and Massey 1994).

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From the third and largest group I will single out one theory, which claims that violence was a direct product of the mass media “under control of nationalist leaders” (Thompson 1994). Although, at first glance, this theory corresponds to observed facts, it is, actually, deduced from another theory of a “higher order,” a “theory of equal guilt,” which is an “article of faith,” trying to pass for Kuhn’s paradigm of a “normal” science (Popović 1994).

How to approach these theories? The easiest way to deal with mythological interpretations is to ignore them. There is no sense in trying to prove whether they are right or wrong, just as there is no need to verify the Hopi Indian beliefs in the efficiency of the rain dance ritual. However, even if the belief in the rain dance is ridiculous from a meteorological point of view, it is not meaningless from a sociological standpoint. Robert K. Merton has drawn our attention to the fact that this ritual was important for strengthening the social cohesion of a given group. It was its “latent function” (Merton 1957). Along this line, mythological and mythomaniac theories should be examined primarily in view of their latent functions for the actors in the conflict.

As for scientific theories, let us leave them for sociologists to debate at conferences and in professional publications. For them it is “business as usual.”

But what about plausible and common-sense theories? Are we to verify them as if they were “real” scientific theories, or should we only consider their possible functions? What I suggest is a two-step procedure concerning the theory of media-induced violence: first, we should submit them to rigorous empirical verification; if they fail this test (which is very likely), we can apply functional analysis. This is how I intend to proceed in the following text.

Formulation and Testing of the Theory

To test this theory, we need to propose a more rigorous and precise definition. **Ipsa facto**, it is not a formal theory but an interpretative model of the “Balkan crisis,” defined as a system of two propositions and two implicit assumptions.

- Proposition 1: Media production and dissemination of negative contents concerning other national and ethnic groups will necessarily provoke a high level of intolerance and hatred towards these groups among the recipients of these messages.
- Proposition 2: High levels of intolerance and hatred will necessarily result in collective violence among these groups.
- The first implicit assumption: all media in the former Yugoslavia fabricated and disseminated, equally, messages of intolerance and hatred. Even today, the media of the newly independent states, involved in the conflict, continue this practice.
- The second implicit assumption: the recipients of these messages were subjected solely to the influence of their own national media.

Both of these implicit assumptions are inaccurate. However, what are their implications, omitting for a moment, questions of various degrees of “virulence” of individual national media and of counter-effects produced by one republic in the territory of another? Considering differences in intensity of propaganda and its counter-effects (even if we had available empirical data which we, unfortunately, do

