A CONCEPT THAT IS EVERYTHING AND NOTHING: WHY NOT TO STUDY (POST-)YUGOSLAV ANTI-WAR AND PACIFIST CONTENTION FROM A CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT This paper draws upon a variety of empirical sources to start critically examining the concept of civil society in the context of both (post-)Yugoslav anti-war and pacifist contention and the civic engagement stemming from it in the nationally fragmented post-Yugoslav space. I argue that civil society can no longer be meaningfully used for understanding the complex geometry of social, political and personal interactions, cooperations and resistances within the regional civic spheres characterised by appreciable power asymmetries. Its definitional volatility and logical incoherence allow civil society to incorporate ideologically and historically extremely divergent phenomena. Due to its conceptual elasticity, civil society is a cognitively easily available device and a de-politicised theoretical paradigm convenient for masking power networks frequently conditioned by foreign political agendas. This paper points to possible alternative perspectives that might prove more productive for analysing (post-)Yugoslav bottom-up civic engagement.

KEY WORDS Civil society, post-Yugoslav anti-war engagement

APSTRAKT Ovaj rad se poziva na veći broj empirijskih izvora kako bi kritički ispitao pojam civilnog društva u kontekstu (post)jugoslovenskog antiratnog i mirovnog aktivizma, kao i civilnog angažmana koji je iz njega izrastao na nacionalno fragmentisanom postjugoslovenskom prostoru. Tvrdim da se pojam civilno društvo više ne može smisleno koristiti za razumevanje složene geometrije društvenih, političkih i ličnih interakcija i otpora u okviru regionalne civilne sfere koju bitno karakteriše asimetrična prerapodela moći. Definiciona neuhvatljivost i logička nekoherentnost ovog pojma omogućavaju civilnom društvu da u sebe uključi ideološki i istorijski ekstremno divergente fenome. Zahvaljujući

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svojoj konceptualnoj elastičnosti, civilno društvo se pojavljuje kao kognitivno vrlo dostupno sredstvo i depolitizovana teorijska paradigma pogodna za maskiranje mreža moći koje su često uslovljene stranim političkim agentama. Ovaj rad ukazuje na moguće alternativne perspektive koje bi se mogle pokazati produktivnijim za analizu (post)jugoslovenskog antiratnog angažmana.

KLJUČNE REČI Civilno društvo, (post)jugoslovenski antiratni angažman

Civil society: Not only the opposite of military society, although many think it is. It is not either politics, the social, the economy, neither is it only urban; what is it – nobody knows, but it sounds good.²

There is hardly any other concept in recent social theory that has generated such an enormous intellectual production, accompanied by controversies and misunderstandings, as civil society³. The last couple of decades have witnessed a sudden revival of interest in this term, which has led to an avalanche of civil society publications going beyond the possibility of an exhaustive overview (e.g., Alexander, 1998; Allen, 1997; Cohen & Arato, 1992; Diamond, 1994; Edwards & Foley, 1998; Gellner, 1994; Glenn, 2001, 2008; Kaldor, 2003; Keane, 1988; Licht, 2000; Stubbs, 1996, 2007). Civility has been rediscovered on a global scale for different reasons and sometimes disparate political purposes. On the one hand, with the sweeping implosion of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the concept was embraced by liberal elites who found in it theoretical support for their civic efforts (Hackmann, 2003). In Western capitalist societies, on the other hand, many people became concerned about the implications of ‘unbridled’ capitalism for the already present social inequalities and malfunctions of the welfare system (Pavlović, 2006). It was thought that a more engaged and critical public could perhaps subvert uncontrolled capitalist expansion (c.f., Cohen & Arato, 1992; Kaviraj & Khilnani, 2002).

Civil society has been theoretically productive because it dynamically synthesises two constitutive societal spheres, namely the private and the public (Pavlović, 2006). The concept has a long historical evolution through which it has come to represent one pole of the dichotomy civil society – political state that has been present in the continental and Anglo-Saxon political philosophy for a few centuries (Pavlović, 2006). The idea of civil society originated in classical political theory engaging with the rise of well-organised small communities in Western

³ I italicise civil society when I refer to it as a social science concept. All translations from the Serbo-Croatian are mine.
Europe.⁴ Thanks to technological advancement and the exchange of goods and information, these communities witnessed a rapid accumulation of financial capital which accelerated market formation and pointed to the need for political participation, the rule of law and the more general rights to property and freedom.

Throughout its development within Western philosophical framework, *civil society* was a matter of fundamentally different articulations. The leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith, saw it as a community of free citizens able to govern their own social life through associations and self-organisations (the view that is nowadays most closely associated with Tocqueville). The Germanic tradition highlighted the role of the state, the importance of institutional order and society’s collectivist orientation. Given these divergent interpretations, the analytical potency of the concept has been quite frequently questioned (Beyme, 2000; Heins, 2002; Stubbs, 2007). Recurrent definitional imprecisions have prevented the integration of the concept into a political explanation for change. Allen (1997, p. 336), for instance, argued that *civil society* is “too vague, difficult to define, and empirically elusive, to contribute to analysis or description”.

However, the force of resistance to the use of *civil society* has never reached the magnitude of its tempting cognitive “easiness” and the popularity of theoretical models that have been promoting it. It is no longer helpful to approach the concept and its potential advantages or shortcomings from a purely philosophical perspective. This would be yet another ivory tower exercise (Kocka, 2004; Kumar, 1993) in recovering its long career and following its development in the Western social theory from Aristotle to Habermas (1991). It is more useful to position the critique of the concept in a specific research context with its own set of geographical, historical and cultural characteristics. Like *democracy*, *totalitarianism* or *transition*, which are themselves highly contentious concepts frequently (ab)used by both academics and policy makers, *civil society* and the ways in which it is articulated, ‘built’ or ‘strengthened’ have practical implications for peoples’ lives.

In the East European political landscape, *civil society* has been often used for denoting a set of groups, organisations (NGOs) and initiatives, nominally separated from direct state impact and financially supported by Western countries and/or private foundations, whose aim is to facilitate the transition to democracy (Miller, 1992; Szakolczai & Horvath, 1990; Taras, 2005). In the wake of the wars of

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⁴ It was the Florentine historian Leonardo Bruni who used the term *societas civilis* when translating Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Aristotelian concept of polis, encompassing both civil society and political community (state) is different, if not antithetical to the ways in which civil society will be understood in later times. Nevertheless, by opting for the term *civitas* when translating the ancient Greek *polis*, Bruni paved the semantic path for the genesis of civil society discourse in subsequent political writings (see more on this in Pavlović, 2006).
Yugoslav succession (1991-1995) civil society in the post-Yugoslav space has mostly referred to the sphere of politically-oriented civic engagement stemming from anti-war and pacifist efforts. These groups have been marginal in terms of numbers, but quite vocal, persistent and heterogeneous in their political orientations, strategic options and developmental trajectories. “Transition” processes taking place in the volatile post-Yugoslav political milieu – frequently mediated through “civil society” – have proved painful and protracted. They might have even been intentionally perpetuated by “civil society” actors for whom civic engagement has become a means of support and career advancement.

By drawing upon recent (post-)Yugoslav sociological scholarship and various empirical sources (in-depth interviews with post-Yugoslav anti-war activists, newspaper articles, NGO publications), this paper examines how the concept of civil society behaves in the context of (post-)Yugoslav anti-war and pacifist engagement. Does it encourage politico-sociological analysis that penetrates into and renders visible ideological conflicts, power asymmetries and value orientations? Can it help us to understand where these conflicts come from? Is it useful for rooting ideological tensions in specific social environments or does it rather obscure them or simplify them by reducing them to binary oppositions? Can civil society meaningfully adhere to empirical substance or is it just a normative repository of democratic values which would go beyond the methodological grasp and epistemological nature of political sociology? This paper argues that civil society, both for its historically specific determinants as well as for its widespread scholarly and pseudo-scholarly uncritical exploitation, is no longer useful as a theoretical device for assisting us to appreciate the complex political and social dynamics of post-Yugoslav societies. The analytical impotency of the concept for critical political sociology research could be showed

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5 Anti-war and pacifist activism(s) represent distinct forms of civic engagement and differentiating between them is particularly relevant in the context of (post-)Yugoslav civic engagement. A peace activist (or a pacifist) is by default an anti-war activist, whereas an anti-war activist need not necessarily be a pacifist. Anti-war activism often has a personal and local dimension (in the sense of private war-related grievances stimulating resistance to a particular war happening here and now), whereas peace activism is informed by a broader, globally-oriented set of values and orientations according to which war or any kind of military means must never be used for conflict resolution. Peace activism is propelled by community-oriented practices and it often stems from a clear political stance (Bilić, 2010). Spontaneously gathered activists, of course, do not cluster in one or the other group at the beginning of their public engagement. Specific profiles become salient in concrete political circumstances and developments, such as, for example, foreign military interventions, like the ones which took place in Bosnia (1994) or Serbia (1999).

6 Understood as an area of studies and not as a geographical location or national affiliation of those engaging with it.

7 Here I have in mind a flurry of NGO projects, books and material in the post-Yugoslav space that do not respect elementary requirements of research methodology.
on, at least, three levels: logical, historical and ideological. These levels are normally nested within each other and can be separated only for analytical purposes.

**Logical Incoherence of the Concept of Civil Society**

The most visible disadvantage of the concept of *civil society* is its logical incoherence. Studies of post-Yugoslav “civil societies” tend to subsume under the “civil society” label both “civil” and “uncivil” associative initiatives. There is a constant conflation and confusion of the severely de-politicised pseudo-Tocquevillean orientation towards “civil society” as a space of extra-institutional groups and associations of any political orientation and strategic option, on the one hand, and a more Gramscian view where civil society is a platform for confronting different opinions, values and identifications that construct social reality by using intellectual and cultural rather than military means, on the other (Gramsci, 1977). *Uncivil society* has been recently promoted by Kopecky (2003), but like its antipode, it tends to be used without much precision. The concept draws our attention to the fact that any organisation/group that struggles to monopolise political space by advocating its own as the only legitimate option contradicts the pluralistic nature of civil/civilised society and becomes *uncivil* by negating ideological variety and reducing the totality of community’s interests to a single cause (Diamond, 1994). It is, then, only paradoxical that, some of this political one-mindedness also characterises the post-Yugoslav supposedly “civil” scene. While it is problematic to talk about “civil society” in the midst of war, it is equally dubious to talk about “uncivil society” in the absence of war. Every society at any point of its development has its both “civil” and “uncivil” components. Their relative numbers, strength or impact vary enormously and hinge on a set of economic, political and social factors. Therefore, the relationship between the two is far away from being linear or one-dimensional.

Moreover, the notion of *civil society* becomes particularly problematic in the political space that appears in the wake of war and gruesome violence. The problem does not pertain primarily to the inappropriateness of the word *society* – which conjures up images of a great number of people – to designate what usually are marginal groups of activists. It, rather, has to do with the fact that war is the ultimate negation of civility. By the same token, the term *civil society* is frequently used to designate the forces that are perceived as pro-democratic and that mobilise against those that are xenophobic (e.g., Tismaneanu, 1998). However, the conceptualisation

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8 Where, for example, right-wing Serbian organisations like *Obraz* or *Dveri srpske* are perceived as “uncivil” parts of the Serbian “civil society”.

9 See also Bieber (2003) on “other civil society”.
of civil society as the antithesis of totalitarianism automatically regards all associations and individual actions, independently from their nature, size or content, as instances that challenge state power. By doing this, many authors tend to conflate civil society with political opposition that would clearly have pacifist orientations. Suffice it to take a better look, for example, at a whole decade of student protests in Belgrade. Although indisputably civic in nature (in the sense of not being violent, aggressive or destructive), they never quite managed to articulate an anti-war stance or a consistent political program which would have opposed the regime for its micro-imperialistic attitudes rather than for its greediness or the international odium that it brought upon their country.\(^{10}\)

Another example would be the movement of the mothers whose sons were in the Yugoslav People’s Army at the beginning of the armed conflict in the summer of 1991. These women stormed the Serbian Parliament asking for their children to be released from military duties as many of them felt that the Army was putting Milošević’s political objectives into practice. This event illustrates the above-mentioned difference between anti-war and pacifist engagement and it also combines “civil” and “uncivil” elements. Many of these women wanted to prevent the Yugoslav People’s Army from obstructing their countries’ independence rather than to oppose war as such. Some of them even encouraged their sons to take part in the war on a non-Serbian side (Hughes et al., 1995). Thus, the movement of mothers, although an instance of civic engagement, cannot be meaningfully approached from either a civil society or uncivil society perspective, given that some of its participants actually supported (but did not themselves resort to) the employment of arms, violence and destructive nationalism, all of which undermine the foundation not only of civil society but of civility and civilisation.

Thus, the use of violence seems to be the most important criterion on the basis of which a distinction between civil and uncivil is drawn (Keane, 1998).\(^{11}\) Uncivil society supposedly does not comply with the constraints of legal or pre-established rules and lacks the spirit of civility in interpersonal behaviour (Whitehead, 1997). Civil society, it is generally understood, consists of people with a sense of obligation

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10 In relation to this see Lazić (1999) and Fridman (2006).
11 How is one, then, to evaluate the act of Nataša Kandić (one of the most well-known anti-war activists in the post-Yugoslav space (co-founder of the Belgrade-based Civil Resistance Movement) and one of the most prominent representatives of the Serbian “civil society”) who slapped an older man who verbally reacted against her presence at the protest of the Association for Missing Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija which took place at the Belgrade Republic Square on 30 August 2003? The incident can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01Z-549wQqw&feature=related. Nataša Kandić, the founder and Executive Director of the Humanitarian Law Fund, was sued and eventually acquitted of the charges with the explanation that she reacted in such a way because she felt threatened by the crowd. The court expert, however, established that Kandić did not show any signs of fear which would have prompted her to leave the protest. See Derikonjić (2007).
and responsibility towards society as a whole, but (as various social groups often do) also “uncivil” actors would always legitimise their actions by referring to a much bigger group of people (nation?) on behalf of which they are active in the public space. Thus, civil society cannot be used to comprise both of these orientations. This is further complicated by the fact that in highly volatile pre- and post-war environments restrictive definitions of “uncivil society” might become problematic given that even those groups and organisations that one would normally consider civil have to oppose the legal order to achieve their goals. As Alexander notes (1998, p. 107) “the discourse of repression is inherent in the discourse of liberty. This is the irony at the heart of civil society”.

**Historical Specificity of the Concept of Civil Society**

Civil society is a concept whose long historical evolution is inextricably interwoven with the development of Western European social and political thought. In that sense, the concept resists an easy transfer from the cultural sphere in which it was conceived and continues to evolve and where it has its full theoretical potency backed up by a political tradition which keeps the spheres of the state and the society clearly circumscribed. What, on the other hand, belongs to “civil society” and to the corpus of financial and intellectual means for sustaining it is a much more dubious question in those political climates in which the state and the society cannot be easily demarcated or have been only recently formally separated. “Transplanting” “civil society” to a volatile political environment from which it should actually stem, fundamentally changes the intrinsically Western idea of it as a democratisation agent that is supposed to be independent from the state and prevent its intrusion in all aspects of public life.

Contemporary political scholarship has generally recognised that, in spite of its democratic potential necessary for supporting democratisation processes, civil society is not sufficient for generating and consolidating democracy (Schmitter, 1997). Democratic regimes, instead, tend to be established as a result of a set of structural circumstances. Civil society itself can thrive only if embedded in a range of stable economic, political and cultural conditions that it reinforces (Kocka, 2004). Frequent political impotency of civil society in democratically unconsolidated settings is nicely reflected by the words of many (post-)Yugoslav anti-war and peace activists who were active since the very beginning of the wars of Yugoslav succession and who were not included in a single instance of peace negotiations either within the country or with numerous foreign diplomats. A perusal of the early numbers of the Belgrade independent newspaper Republika, the beacon of critical thought and civic courage in the Milošević Serbia, shows how consistently the
activists asked for their voice to be incorporated in tailoring the country’s destiny. They were, however, always disregarded and marginalised. Speaking about the activities of the Centre for Anti-War Actions which she founded in Belgrade in 1991, Vesna Pešić (as cited in Rosandić et al., 2005, p. 26) said:

We were writing anti-war statements which were published in daily newspapers. [...] we were making peace plans and we were lobbying for them. We were especially in favour of the 1993 Vance-Owen peace plan for Bosnia-Herzegovina which was then rejected by the United States and Warren Christopher. That plan was much better than the plan of the Contact Group which appeared in 1994 and which practically meant a division of Bosnia that was then achieved with the Dayton Peace Agreement. But peace organisations were never asked about any of this.

Moreover, Pavlović (2006) argues that civil society is to be perceived as a birthplace of actions and movements that are directed towards both the state as a political community and to the society as a social community. He claims that social movements tend to mobilise a substantive portion of civil society’s forces and they aspire to bring about a societal change. Social movements point to the plurality of ideological orientations existing within a societal community, but they can be generally seen as progressive agents striving to push the society forward (Pavlović, 2006). However, in the post-Yugoslav space, the question is whether it would be more meaningful to reverse the causal arrow. Does “civil society” here precede and repeatedly monopolise and disable public life instead of stemming from it? Is it not more plausible to suggest that it is movements, protests and various forms of civic engagement that continually (re-)create and rejuvenate “civil society”? Civil society can appear in any given social and historical frame in which a set of collectively shared private grievances become strong enough and clearly articulated to usher into public space from different societal positions. In his book Actors without society, the Croatian sociologist Srđan Dvornik (2009) argues that the earliest instances of (post-)Yugoslav anti-war and pacifist engagement cannot be nested within broader/social movement civic formations. Often socially marginalised – but consistently done – civic actions have, nevertheless, led to incremental changes in the political environment. This process is very slow and it always develops in interaction with the already existent societal structures and dynamics that go beyond any single civic actor.

Thus, regardless of innumerable seminars and frequent trips abroad, it seems that “civil society” actors in the post-Yugoslav space cannot help reflecting deeply

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12 See, for example, Popov (1991).
entrenched values of their intrinsically poor civic political culture. When they are the “real” representatives of “civil society” and the most passionate defenders of tolerance, anti-militarism, anti-authoritarianism, heterogeneity, legal equality, democracy, education and dignity, how is it, then, possible that, particularly in Serbia, and to a certain extent in Croatia, there are the same people in leading NGO positions for two decades now, many of whom feel quite competent to pronounce themselves on a whole range of complex matters ranging from law and transitional justice to economics? Vetta (2009) has recently found that political actors, once (maybe only temporarily) out of office, establish their own NGOs to continue with their access to money and power. It appears difficult to authentically rebuff the authoritarian cloth and wriggle out of the “leader discourse” which so pervasively covers post-Yugoslav political culture.

I ideological obscuration of the concept of civil society

Probably the most serious disadvantage of the concept of civil society is that it obscures ideological orientations of its actors. When we say “civil society”, we are far away from saying anything politically. This conceptual deficit might be less pronounced in more stable political systems of (relatively) consolidated

13 It is indicative, in this regard, to take a closer look at what is happening with the Coalition for RECOM which defines itself as “a non-political regional gathering of civil society organisations” (Coalition for RECOM, 2011, online). This coalition is a wide and rather loose network of “civil society” organisations and individuals working towards the foundation of a regional commission (RECOM) that should establish the facts about the victims of all war crimes and other serious human rights violations committed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia during the wars of Yugoslav succession. An intricate delegate system was supposed to rest on three ‘carrier’ organisations: the Humanitarian Law Fund (Belgrade), Documenta (Zagreb) and the Research and Documentation Centre (Sarajevo). However, even before the commission has been constituted, some member-organisations started to leave the initiative (e.g., the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia in May 2010, the Research and Documentation Centre already in 2009, etc). The main argument was that the RECOM approach “although methodologically legitimate is not sufficiently encompassing” (statement of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2010; interestingly enough, the Novi Sad and Zrenjanin youth groups of the Helsinki Committee in Serbia are members of the Coalition for RECOM from 28 April 2011, www.zarekom.org/documents/clanice-koalicije.sr.html). However, tensions have actually arisen due to the controversial leadership style of Nataša Kandić who has “privatised the project” (Durmanović, 2010, online) as well as due to misunderstandings regarding the distribution of the initiative’s funding to which I will turn below. Moreover, Vesna Teršelič, for instance, has been for, at least, two decades now professionally engaged in leading various civic initiatives in Croatia: she was the leader of the Anti-war Campaign of Croatia, the leader of the Zagreb Centre for Peace Studies and she is currently leading a documentation centre Documenta. She is also a co-founder of the Zagreb-based Centre for Women Studies, Svarun and Green Action. Staša Zajović has been for twenty years now leading the Belgrade activist group Women in Black.
democracies, but it is crucial in a still highly volatile and contentious post-Yugoslav space which has witnessed the most unusual ideological conversions from one side of the political spectrum to the other. It is not enough to say that civil society is a fluid framework in which different political options are articulated. It is more important to see what options there are, how they are represented and who has the right and the power to express them. It is, similarly, relevant to examine what kind of advantages a position of a well-recognized “civil society” person or institution can bring, particularly in the context in which the state has practically delegated many of its social service functions to NGOs.

“Civil society” actors in the (post-)Yugoslav milieu are not free of political agendas and they do not operate in a political vacuum. They are, as a matter of fact, often promoting a certain set of politically related values or they are even interested in political power. The well-known Slovenian sociologist and political scientist Tomaž Mastnak edited a volume entitled Socialist civil society (Socialistična civilna družba) in 1985, which provided a platform for Yugoslav scholarly discussions on the topic of civic engagement. Is it not, then, inspiring to observe that seven years later the same author published a chapter called Civil society in Slovenia – from opposition to power? Rarely has there been such a telling, smooth and almost non-residual translation from the alternative and civic scene to political establishment as in the Slovenian case. As Mastnak (1994, p. 107) argued:

[...] while the homogenisation of politics in Slovenia took place on a democratic basis, it still could not fail to influence the nature of that basis. The homogenisation was necessary in order to protect, not to advance, the democratic movement and this kind of protection actually impoverished democracy. The democratic movement became less alternative and more oppositionist, less pluralist and more efficiency oriented, and neglectful of ideas for the sake of expediency. Some made a virtue of necessity, and in its prevalent Demos version, democracy was reduced in the internal proceedings of this coalition to unanimous party discipline, and in its dealings with the world outside, to anti-communism (when communism had already ceased to exist) and incantations of national sovereignty.

14 On ideological conversions in the Serbian political context, see Kuljić (2009).
15 One of the most telling examples in this regard is the case of Janez Janša, one of the Slovenian youth leaders of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, a critic of the Yugoslav People’s Army and a journalist of the Slovenian weekly Mladina who, after Slovenia’s independence, became the country’s minister of defense and prime minister. Equally interesting is the case of Gregor Tomc – a member of the widely popular alternative and towards the end of the 1980s subversive Slovenian punk bend Pankrti (among the very first punk bands in a communist country) who was one of the authors of the Contributions for a Slovenian National Program.
On the other hand, the Belgrade-based organisation *Women in Black* has assumed a particularly marginal and precarious position on the Serbian political scene while advocating radical anti-nationalism. Active for exactly two decades, since the very beginning of the wars of Yugoslav succession, the members of this group have staged more than 700 pacifist street performances, campaigns and demonstrations in Serbia and throughout the post-Yugoslav space – an extraordinary achievement even for environments with much longer activist traditions and more liberal political culture. The members of this group since the very early on unequivocally perceive Serbian nationalism as the central engine behind Yugoslavia’s dissolution\(^\text{16}\):

We say that the Serbian regime and its repressive structures (Federal Army and paramilitary formations) are responsible for all three wars, in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Serbian regime leads wars in the name of all citizens of Serbia. This way all the citizens become the hostages of their imperialistic politics (*Women for Peace*, 1993, p. 50).

However, by positioning the responsibility for the wars exclusively with the Serbian regime, these women provide a rather simplistic interpretation of the Yugoslav conflict which prevents them from having a stronger impact on their own social environment. It seems that it is actually there constant political failure which keeps them alive (Bilić, under review). They do not appreciate the complexity of mutually perpetuating anti-thetical forces operating within the post-Yugoslav political arena which have their long-term trajectories\(^\text{17}\).

Nevertheless, between these ‘extreme’ options, there is a societal field in which complex interactions between the state and the (semi-)extra-institutional sphere take place. Whereas in Slovenia almost the whole “civil society” spilt into the political establishment, this happened “partially” in Serbia after Slobodan

\(^\text{16}\) In her thesis which concentrates on *Women in Black* and nicely maps the tensions between various “civil society actors” in Serbia, Fridman (2006) uses the concepts of civil society/civil opposition/civil initiatives/alternative voices/alternative scene interchangeably without ever specifying them.

\(^\text{17}\) The need for maintaining unquestionable ideological consistency has sometimes made *Women in Black* choose rather problematic strategic options. For example, in the summer of 2010 the leader of the organisation along with a few other members took part in the Peace March (from the Bosnian village of Nezuk to the Memorial Centre in Potočari) which takes place every year to commemorate the victims of the Srebrenica genocide. The March participants, however, were greeted by Naser Orić, a Bosnian military officer sentenced by the International Crime Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for the death of five and mistreatment of other eleven Bosnian Serb detainees. The judgment is available here: http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?docid=48ad36912. The programme of the 2010 Peace March is available here: http://www.marsmira.org/bs_program.php. On the issue of *false alternatives* (e.g. the supposed necessity to side with Tuđman while opposing Milošević and, thus, failing to appreciate their possible mutually perpetuating interactions) see Veljak (2010).
Milošević’s removal and it has not happened almost at all in Croatia where the two spheres seem to be most clearly demarcated to the present day. For lack of space suffice it to consider two women organisations in these two countries, both of which are called Centre for Women Studies [Centar za ženske studije]. After the end of their nationally-oriented regimes in 2000, both Serbia and Croatia opted for the painful process of becoming members of the European Union. This meant that the improvement of the legal and social status of women became an issue of state concern, yet another item on a long list of legal and political measures that the ascending countries would need to undertake before they could assume their place in the community of European nations. Such a development ‘united’ state bureaucrats and feminist activists in their goal of advancing women’s social conditions.

On the other hand, this trend put the subversive character of women engagement at stake and reduced the space for autonomous women organising. In these new circumstances, some Belgrade feminists without a substantive activist experience, benefited from the appreciable amount of intellectual capital accrued throughout the previous two decades within the framework of Yugoslav feminism. In the post-war regroupings on the civic scene, some of these women managed to position themselves within the new system of power relations in which state institutions, which have recovered their influence and legitimacy, are in need of ‘expert knowledge’. The Belgrade Centre for Women Studies [Centar za ženske studije] which was founded in 1991 by the feminist group Woman and Society acted

18 The Citizens’ Initiatives (Građanske incijative) and the Centre for Political Excellence (Centar za političku izuzetnost) – two NGOs dealing with appreciable amounts of money in today’s Serbia – are definitely closer to the centres of political power and the ruling political parties than, for example, the Belgrade-based Women in Black. Sonja Licht, a participant in the 1968 student protest against the “red bourgeoisie”, is the director of the Belgrade-based Centre for Political Excellence. She was the president of the Soros financed Open Society Fund in Serbia, pretty much deciding the destiny of many civic initiatives in the country. She was also the president of the Executive Board of the daily Politika. She is concurrently serving as the Chair of the Foreign Policy Council of the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs! On the other hand, Sonja Biserko is the founder of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia (1994) [The Yugoslav Helsinki Committee was founded in 1986 by a group of Yugoslav intellectuals, among whom the Belgrade lawyer Tanja Petovar played a particularly important role]. While leading one of the most influential non-governmental organisations in the post-Yugoslav space, devoted to the protection of human rights, Sonja Biserko is at the same time a member of the Political Council of the Liberal Democratic Party, a parliamentary party led by Čedomir Jovanović. The names of the members of the Political Council can be seen here: http://www.ldp.rs/o_nama/struktura/politicki_savet.46.html.

19 One should mention here Ivo Banac and Ivan Zvonimir Čičak, the former and the current president of the Croatian Helsinki Committee (Hrvatski helsinški odbor), who have been also politically active: Banac in the Croatian Social Liberal Party (Hrvatska socijalno liberalna stranka) [and later in the Liberal Party (Liberalna stranka) and Čičak in the Croatian Peasant Party (Hrvatska seljačka stranka). Vesna Pusić has been a prominent feminist activist and a member of the Croatian Parliament.

20 I have written elsewhere in more depth about the differences in Croatian and Serbian civic organising in the second half of the 20th century, see Bilić (2011).
both as an alternative educational institution offering programs in the field of feminist and gender theory as well as an independent women activist group. It represented an important place of women gathering, both socially and intellectually. However, the Centre has recently decided to incorporate itself into the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Belgrade. The Zagreb Centre has managed to resist the pressures to integrate itself into the state educational system because it wanted to preserve its autonomous stance, but perhaps also because its personnel was not qualified enough to assume teaching positions at the university level.

The intricate geometry of cooperations and competitions within the post-Yugoslav civic sphere cannot be understood without paying closer attention to its interaction with foreign donors. Foreign donors could actually be held responsible for such a thriving “civil society” in the post-Yugoslav space. Millions of dollars have been by now invested in the region for a myriad of reconciliation and peace building “projects”. Along with the money came a particular vocabulary of fundraising, project writing, capacity building, reports and retreats. Many post-Yugoslav civil society actors have made a long way from small donations of private persons to large institutional grants. Ružica Rosandić, an anti-war activist at the Belgrade-based Centre for Anti-War Actions reminisces (as cited in Rosandić et al., 2005, p. 13):

21 Vesna Pešić argues (as cited in Rosandić et al., 2005, p. 36): We did not know anything about civil society in the practical sense of the word. We knew about it theoretically, because it was discussed in the journals in the 1980s [...] here in Serbia, 10 of us tried to register an organisation for fighting death penalty, but we did not succeed because the association was declared anti-constitutional. So, if it had not been for that cooperation with foreign donors, we would have hardly had so many NGOs. They (the donors, BB) practically put that whole enterprise in motion and it is nowadays covering all important problems.

22 The total expected costs of the abovementioned Regional Commission (RECOM) are 3 544 741.92 euros. This initiative plans to spend 1 182 070.00 euros only on the two-month long campaign One million signatures for RECOM which is supposed to take place on the whole ex-Yugoslav territory. 27 470 euros will be spent, for example, on stationery material. The detailed budget of the initiative can be accessed here: http://www.zarekom.org/documents/Budzet-Koalicije-za-REKOM.sr.html. See, in this regard, also a satirical text by Predrag Azdejković (2010), a Belgrade-based gay rights activist. The Humanitarian Law Fund, the principal organiser of the initiative, received a grant of 960 700 euros from the Dutch Government as well as 1 002 847 euros from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, an EU funded institution for strengthening “the role of civil society in promoting human rights and democratic reform, in supporting the peaceful conciliation of group interests and in consolidating political participation and representation” (http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/how/finance/eidhr_en.htm). The Research and Documentation Centre from Sarajevo abandoned the project, among other reasons, also because the granted money could not be shared and independently managed by the three ‘carrier organisations’ (see footnote 12), but is distributed exclusively by the Humanitarian Law Fund.

For more information on NGO-isation processes and foreign influence on these in Croatia, see e.g., Stubbs (2004); in Bosnia, see Helms (forthcoming); in Kosovo, see Dević (2006).
I remember that [...] a man came to the Centre (he introduced himself as Ted Herman, Quaker) and offered 100 dollars to us ‘to do something for the young’. Those were the first resources that we used for our project The classroom of good will.

However, foreign donations are not free of specific political agendas that domestic civic actors must take into account when applying for them. Very often domestic activists/professionals cannot undertake an initiative which might suit their society’s needs if this is not in accordance with the overarching trend in the donor’s industry:

Serbia: The most disturbing thing was that the donors often had their own ideas about what we should do and these were imposed on us. Maybe something that was actually more important was left uncovered because the donors were not interested in it. There was a lot of routinising, money wasting and empty actions simply because “it was written in the project” (Vesna Pešić as cited in Rosandić et al., 2005, p. 38).

Bosnia: There were times when we had to behave according to the donor’s trends; ideas and projects were imposed from the outside instead of stemming from the needs and consultations with local experts (Association Prijateljice as cited in Rosandić et al., 2005, p. 38).

Given that communication with foreign donors had to be established in times of isolation and severely disrupted communication channels, the concept of “civil society” was structurally and ideologically more proximate and practical for certain thin layers of (post-)Yugoslav societies who could already count on appreciable amounts of social and symbolic capital. The Slovenian sociologist Vlasta Jalušić (2006) argues that in many instances “civil society” has become one of the most potent strategies for preserving (during the war) or moving into (after the war) the precarious middle class in the post-Yugoslav environment characterised by social inequality, widespread impoverishment and moral degradation. “Civil society” in the post-Yugoslav space may also serve as a polygon for professional training which might be useful to have before assuming a more stable post within the state bureaucracy. Sampson (1998) captures this process when claiming that:

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23 While this is a plausible argument, one must keep in mind that, especially in the very early stages of the armed conflict, many civic actors made a decision to stay in their countries in spite of the fact that, exactly due to the abovementioned forms of capital, they could have found work abroad.
A final aspect of identity formation occurs via those NGOs and democracy building projects. It is the emergence of a pan-European, cosmopolitan identity among certain Western-democracy specialists and local East-European staff as they become totally immersed in what we would call ‘project society’ (emphasis mine). Such individuals spend their working and leisure hours in the company of fellow project actors, planning and executing projects, making applications, attending or carrying out training courses at home and abroad, eating and partying together, sometimes having shorter or more stable personal relations, getting married, travelling to conferences, utilising project resources informally, and having a living standard somewhere between rich diplomats and poorer locals (Sampson, 1998).

Given that many of these “civil society actors” are involved in an intricate tapestry of private-public-government interactions\(^\text{24}\) that secure them a relatively easy access to state institutions and diplomatic parties, instead of talking about *civil society*, it would be better to talk about a *parallel society* which has perpetuated an accumulation of various sorts of capital, while at the same time marginalising authentic grassroots initiatives. Such bottom-up actions, mostly undertaken further away from the capitals, are generally unable to compete for scarce resources as they do not have at their disposal the necessary linguistic and professional skills which would make them a legitimate partner in the international “development and democratisation” machinery (Stubbs, 1996; Vetta, 2009).

### Analytical Impotency of the Concept of Civil Society

Going through at least three of its problematic aspects, I have demonstrated that the concept of *civil society* owes a lot of its popularity to its remarkable volatility and definitional flexibility which allow it to incorporate ideologically and historically extremely divergent phenomena or to remain completely empty of any political content. The elasticity of the concept is convenient for masking elitist networks of power and asymmetric power distributions which authentic citizens’ contention should reveal and criticise. Because of the multiplicity of possible argumentative and ideological options that it encompasses, the concept requires a definitional clarification tailored to any particular geographical and historical setting in which the research topic is positioned. This clarification can become so specific and sophisticated to render the employment of the concept of *civil society* superfluous and meaningless. As Aziz Choudry (2002) claims:

\(^{24}\)There are instances of marital partners independently leading two NGOs with similar objectives.
...other than general agreement that it spans all forms of organizations between the household and the state, the notion seems to mean all things to all people. I cannot see how uncritical adoption and use of this term advances people’s struggle for basic rights, for self-determination, liberation, and decolonisation, and against imperialism and the neo-liberal agenda in all their various guises.

It is clear that civil society is a dynamic concept that simultaneously operates at a couple of levels and repeatedly combines normative and descriptive elements. As John Keane (1988) suggests, the idea of civil society can be employed as: (a) empirical-analytical and descriptive for the purposes of interpreting the relationship between the state and society in a certain historical period; (b) normative-mobilisational which is closely associated with the practical issues of social change comprising social movements and political strategies; and (c) value-ethical postulating the benefits of civility and advocating civil society in favour to other types of political regimes. The above discussion indicates that the concept of civil society, monopolised by elitist actors with specific “civic missions”

25, has lost a lot of its moral legitimacy. These “missions” are so painful, slow and sometimes even counter-productive because they have been uncritically transported to the post-Yugoslav space as supposedly the most “effective” solutions that were – one must not forget – carved for centuries in completely different cultural milieus. In this regard, civil society in the post-Yugoslav context cannot be detached from the fascination of the self-centered “West” with the sweeping democratisation processes in Eastern Europe, which it saw as a reflection of its own attentively cherished values.

For Europe is not only a place where we have always been, but also an aim towards which we are moving. Its presence in us is experienced just as powerfully as its absence. It is the territory of the most sublime values of justice, liberty and equality, but at the same time the place where these values are perverted. It is as much the object of our adoration and desire as the object of disillusion and abomination. As its chosen people who save it now from its fiercest enemies, now from itself, we are more European than Europe itself, but also more anti-European. For not only do we sacrifice ourselves for it, we are also its victim. As the altar of our sacrifice, it is the gleaming monument of our glory, but also a festering sewer down which our hopes ebb away like illusions. So how is it possible that all these unbearable contradictions should exist in our Croatian identity in harmonious symbiosis, as in a legal system of madness? So that Europe is nothing other than a figment of our imagination? (Buden, 1996, p. 139).

The social processes that have been taking place in the former Yugoslavia in the last three decades are far away from suggesting that the republics/states have been set on a linear trajectory leading to a predetermined “democratisation” outcome. Such an idea wrongfully reifies “Europe” as a stable and permanently peaceful political space to which post-Yugoslav states should somehow aspire. It obscures the need for post-Yugoslav people to critically and civicly engage for their rights and freedoms. Suffice it to take Bosnia as an example, which in spite of twenty years of foreign political, financial and military interventions – with a neo-colonialist attitude allowing one externally appointed person to abolish popular decisions, impose legislation and undermine political process as well as citizens’ political agency – hardly manages to keep itself together while concurrently witnessing an explosion of heavily subsidised “civil society” reconciliation and “mastering the past” seminars and projects. The content of these initiatives is meticulously translated in all possible directions within the spurious Serbian-Bosnian-Croatian politico-linguistic triangle.

The current post-Yugoslav political and social landscape cannot be properly understood without appreciating a gigantic scope of cultural, social and political backlash that took place on the Yugoslav territory in the early 1990s. Post-Yugoslav societies moved away from their socialist legacies to step into a political emptiness which was quickly filled by socially devastating free market policies.

26 Note, for example, the current problems that Belgium has to preserve the unity of the country, the victory of the right-wing forces in the Netherlands, the way in which France has dealt with Roma immigrants or the recent statement of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel that the German “multiculturalism” has failed (Spiegel Online, 2010).

27 The so-called Bonn powers were conferred upon the High Representative at an international conference of the Bosnia Peace Implementation Council which took place in Bonn, Germany, in 1997. Could one, then, meaningfully talk about “civil society” (which is actually supposed to challenge the state) in a “democracy without choices” (Krastev, 2002, p. 39)?

28 The right to abortion was guaranteed to Yugoslav women by the law passed in 1951. Upon the disintegration of Yugoslavia, this law was substituted by the more restrictive ones in both Serbia and Croatia (see Drežić, 2010). Also, in her thesis on the feminist conference Drug-ca žena, which took place in Belgrade in 1978, Bonfiglioli (2008) shows that a lot of misunderstandings between Yugoslav and foreign feminists arose because many topics relevant for women in the West (abortion, divorce etc) were not on the agenda in the socialist Yugoslavia due to its progressive legislation. French and Italian feminists were very critical about the participation of men in the conference, whereas Yugoslav feminists were arguing against any discrimination based on sex. Note that one of the first theoretical studies of Yugoslav feminism was written by a man: Katunarić (1984).

29 It is impossible to understand Yugoslav achievements in the areas of public health, literacy or education as well as a vast and influential Yugoslav production in the areas of music, film, architecture or sport without taking into consideration the intricate and mostly non-profit-oriented Yugoslav socialist infra-structure for educating the youth and encouraging their creative expression (access to concert and gathering halls, system of competitions and exhibitions from the single school to the federal level, youth press, festivals, cultural associations, Narodna tehnika network etc). For example,
This state salto mortale, which was supported by Western diplomacy, gave prominence to the most retrograde societal elements that resorted to nationalism as a strategy for securing positions of power. It led to a whole decade of armed conflicts with thousands of victims and a colossal material damage which followed 50 years of a relatively peaceful co-existence that was (politically) conflictual on social rather than ethnic basis. In the wake of the Yugoslav conflict there are resurrected instances of ethnic segregation – a practice that was to a considerable extent interrupted by the Yugoslav ideology of “brotherhood and unity”. Olivera Milosavljević (2008), a prominent Belgrade historian, argues that the history of Yugoslavia was erased along with the disintegration of the country. To produce an impression that it is somehow natural for the newly created and still not fully consolidated nation states to exercise their sovereignty in the name of ethnic affiliations, the emancipatory achievements of Yugoslav socialism have been substituted by a set of liberal multiculturalism discourses, interpretations and policies creating a “democratisation/civil society” image that repeatedly jumps out of its socio-historical frame. Commenting on the implications of this for feminist civic engagement in the post-Yugoslav space, Nada Ler Sofronić, a professor at the University of Sarajevo and one of the organisers of the 1978 feminist gathering in Belgrade, argues (as cited in Radović, 2008, online):

[...] More or less all of that [feminist activist] charge has now been reduced to ‘respect differences so that you do not to hurt anyone’ or ‘be careful not be a eurocentrist’. My impression is that the right question nowadays is: what is the left doing? Today’s context requires feminist activism and a theory which would be critical of that quasi human rights concept, which would ask what cultural relativism means, how far should this relativisation go without

the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) in Belgrade, a place of vibrant cultural events throughout the 1970s, was financed by the state.

30 This was supposedly done in the name of the national self-determination right which seems to be promoted or restricted by the Western states in relation to their own political and economic interests. On Germany’s quick recognition of Croatia and Slovenia’s independence, see Genscher (1995).

31 This, however, does not pertain to recurrent issues that were there in both Yugoslav federation and, subsequently, Serbia in relation with Kosovo Albanians.

32 Here I have in mind ethnically-divided Kosovska Mitrovica or, for example, elementary schools in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Croat students use a school building in the morning and Bosnian Muslim students use the same building in the afternoon. A similar situation is also in Gornji Vakuf/Uškoplje. Note the double Croatian-Bosnian name of this small town. On the issue of inter-ethnic marriage in Yugoslavia, see Simić (1996).

33 “Given that there is no communism anymore, and there is no Yugoslavia, their history has also been erased” (Milosavljević, 2008, p. 13).

34 See also Terzić (2006) for a discussion of the present-day feminist engagement in Bosnia.

35 See, for example, Helms (2003) who claims that some Sarajevo NGO women professionals declined to talk to her when they realised that she was not a donor (p. 13).
opening the space up for traditionalism, conservatism and – I dare say – for a fascisation of contemporary societies in which women and minorities, of course, are victims. There are so many great tasks ahead of the women movement. I would say even more serious tasks than the ones we had thirty years ago.

How to Move Forward in Exploring (Post-)Yugoslav Civic Activisms

While uncritical and inflated employment of civil society confuses much more than it explains, the rich conceptual apparatus of contemporary political sociology can offer a range of opportunities for constructing fluid theoretical models applicable to the multiplicities and inconsistencies of (post-)Yugoslav extra-institutional politically-oriented anti-war and peace activism and its offspring. I have already proposed a potentially fruitful conceptual cross-fertilisation between various social movement theories and Bourdieu’s sociology of practice (Bilić, 2010). This theoretical hybridisation could accommodate many threads of political contention research that otherwise would not cohere into a rounded theory. Bourdieu’s powerful conceptual armoury is both parsimonious and flexible and seems particularly well-suited to address the problematic issues pertaining to agency and structure in the field of social movements. Such an approach could be useful because its social movement component may account for the mobilisation aspect of anti-war and peace activism, whereas its Bourdieuan orientation could help us to recover and socially root a multiplicity of political options propelling this engagement. Social movement studies have paid a lot of attention to the processes of mobilisation and resource management, but they have not been equally interested in the vital question of political attitudes underlying collective enterprises (Walder, 2009). Staying closer to the field of social movements and combining it with what is nowadays known in the areas of political science, social psychology, criminology or public policy, could further illuminate the operation of those mostly right-wing, fundamentalist and armed groups. Just calling them “uncivil society” and thus perceiving them as some kind of a “negative counter-part” to “civil” initiatives does not contribute anything to our understanding of the social conditions propitious to their generation and survival. This research is, of course, methodologically challenging (Polletta, 2006) as it raises numerous ethical and practical issues, but the knowledge derived from it could have profound policy consequences.

Moreover, in her preface to the book Aktivistkinje (Women Activists), an interesting collage of life-story interviews and feminist social theory, Biljana Kašić (2001), a well-known Croatian sociologist and peace activist, also notes that the concept of civil society can no longer capture “contemporary events, performative acts and political auto-creations...and it is boring, uninventive and hardly
imaginative or appropriate” (p. 12). Multi-level civic vibrations, networks and identification processes go far beyond the scope of this concept. As a possible remedy, Kašić turns our attention to the book by Michel Maffesoli (1996) devoted to the new ways of societal interactivities (postmodern or pseudo-tribes) resulting in innovative collective forms that question the legitimacy of the deeply-rooted living styles and practices.

Finally, Stubbs (2007) posits that Alfred Hirschman’s idea of social energy can assist us with appreciating a range of means, motivations and strategies that collective actors employ to address their grievances and realise their objectives. Hirschman (1984) suggests that social energy is produced as an interaction between friendship, ideas, and ideals. This proposal deserves more empirical attention in the post-Yugoslav space because, as Stubbs (2007, p. 226) himself claims:

the concept helps in understanding the shift in social energy...away from ‘grassroots nationalists’ and the smaller group of ‘elitist anti-nationalists’ towards a renewed grassroots community development and mobilisation which brings together smaller informal groups, some older representational/identity organisations, and informal community leaders.

Hirschman’s approach is useful because it tries to track what is actually crucial in every society – the mobilisational energy of its population and its transformative capacity. Drawing more upon such and similar models, critical sociological theorisations would much better capture the present-day political dynamics among the post-Yugoslav youth. While learning from their predecessors, they slowly start to diagonally cut across national civic spheres and class layers to recover and re-dis-cover the common cultural space and gather around shared grievances. Employment of such concepts would at the same time constitute a refreshing distancing away from the firmly positioned “civil society actors” where “civil society” is an alienated and hardly permeable elite circle for career

\[36\] Note the affinities that these concepts have with Bourdieu’s notion of illusio which I touched upon in my previous work (Bilić, 2010)

\[37\] It is, for example, no wonder that Boris Buden wrote the preface to the interesting and inventive Cookbook written by the students who in 2009 kept the Zagreb Philosophy Faculty “free” for 35 days. As a philosophy student in the socialist Yugoslavia, Buden was a student activist with an influence on the student sub-committee that, along with other sub-committees consisting of both teaching and administrative staff, was running the Faculty. This student sub-committee was for a period of time preventing Stipe Šuvar from becoming a full-time professor. Šuvar was a well-known promoter of adapting the Yugoslav educational system to market needs – an interesting “socialist” precursor to today’s Bologna process. Note how the protest of Zagreb students shares affinities with the 1968 declaration of the Belgrade University Red University Karl Marx. See www.slobodnifilozofski.hr.

\[38\] See in this regard the Novi Sad-based Alternative Cultural Organisation AKO www.ako.rs.
advancement within the newly created national borders rather than a constantly rejuvenated source of critically oriented social energy.

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