

# An Image of the Present

Miloš Trakilović

11.07.2020

I want you to take a look at this image:

## 1958

### Yugoslavia



A group of African students in front of a restaurant in Students Town in Novi Beograd.

### Belgium



An exhibition at the Expo 58 was the Congolese village that was branded a human zoo.

Sources:

Yugoslavia: *Educating students from developing countries as part of the foreign policy of Yugoslavia 1950-1961*, Dragomir BONDŽIĆ (<https://zdjp.si/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/bondzic.pdf>)

Belgian zoo: *Deep Racism: The Forgotten History Of Human Zoos* (<https://popularresistance.org/deep-racism-the-forgotten-history-of-human-zoos/>)

Whilst trying to navigate the overall distress in the recent period, the avalanche of ever-growing tumultuous events across the globe (and subsequent shitstorms on social networks) I often felt it was not my time and place to speak, instead I continue taking it as my duty to try and listen; to detect, determine and deactivate whatever systems lie embedded in and around me that comply and perpetuate oppressive architectures of the beastly system we inhabit -- a daunting and never-ending task.

There is, however, this one image that has been widely circulated among the cacophony of content and carousel-activism online, I feel the need to address. In part because it speaks directly to both my Balkan and Benelux heritage but mostly because it is rather misleading, or has been instrumentalized in miseducational ways.

This image was montaged, modulated and subsequently disseminated online amidst the ongoing #BlackLivesMatter movement to illustrate how there is 'no history of racism in the Balkans'. This is incorrect. There is, like in all corners of this world, still, a pronounced presence of racism. In the Balkans it persists most notably toward the Romani population, but it manifests in many, many forms of oppression and aggression toward any minority, migrant or misfit.

The life captured in these images is not representative of any absolute truth. The fabric of everyday life simply cannot have been entirely anti-racist on the left or eminently racists on the right. The effectiveness and power of such forms of representation -- of images -- is never asserted by the candour of the life captured in them but by their ability to wield identification and spawn ever deeper attachments to concepts of being and belonging. To identity.

But beyond the surface level these two pictures reveal something other than just the chronicles of the particular social realities they captured. They are representative of very divergent political and economic frameworks as well as wider historicities to which they belong.

Yugoslavia was certainly no utopia, but its constitution was constructed on serious anti-fascist, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist foundations. What the image on the left encapsulates is not merely an aspiration for a diverse commonality, but a consistent socio-political program supporting that; under which its institutions, its internal politics as well as its foreign policies were governed, most notably exemplified through the formation of the non-aligned movement founded in Yugoslavia amidst the cold war era, which included huge parts of Africa, South-America and Indo-Asia. This was a large-scale attempt to organize life differently, to assemble and belong differently. A history and legacy largely wiped out and dispelled from our Western imaginary.

The image above is not a single frame image but a montage of two pictures on a grey surface sent into the world as one. Merely aligning these two pictures reduces the full scope of the complexities they carry and antagonizes their politics as separate and opposing realities; principles that easily pave the way toward perpetual forms of exclusion, aggression and delusive dissociation. It also upholds imaginary projections and forceful categorizations such as 'East' and 'West' 'black' and 'white'. Truth is, no matter how imaginary or constructed, the realities and identities such categorizations have consolidated over time, cannot be denied.

I'm aware of this, but in all honesty, I do not want to "do *my* research" or "educate *myself*" -- the fact that right now we must, testifies to what extent we have been left to our own devices by the systems that are supposed to govern us. To what extent our institutions, politics and policies still rest on colonial apparatuses of conquest and conquestship. And while we are rightfully and inescapably disassembling and disowning elements from this barbed history by bringing down monuments erected on the premises of a tyrannical past, our own stories of history-in-the-making are being actively erased by instruments of global domination.

Algorithmic shadow banning, AI racial bias and predictive pattern behaviors are all programmed and embedded in the very tools and technologies we use to rival power. They are often imperceptible, just as the systems and structures that curb the wealth of the world to harbour

growingly disproportionate and unprecedented dimensions of inequality. What is oppression other than a product of inequality?

The frightening and consoling part lies perhaps in the fact that all systems can tower to collapse.

But today's crisis is not only contained by an awakening to the fact that things have collapsed or are ruined, it is instead the cruel realization that we continue living through such ruins. Antonio Gramsci described this state as an *Interregnum*: a state in which crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this *Interregnum*, he says, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear. How to cope?

To this day I haven't formulated an answer but I continue living in the acknowledgement that, despite the overwhelming power of all the systems of domination which are continually trying to kill us, they never quite become us. There are lessons to be learned from history. Historic recurrence is a concept, not a modality. History can, but mustn't repeat itself. Solidarity is what can affect the difference.

Why solidarity?

For compassion to thrive it can often be enough to align different perspectives. To draw parallels between experiences and points of view in order to make feelings and histories, not compatible, but transparent. Solidarity, I believe, is more than just assembly and transparency. For solidarity, it is not enough to montage different perspectives and assemble lived experiences. There is the persisting challenge to recognize differences as part of a bigger whole, in all their painful and fragmentary differentiations.

Solidarity therefore isn't emitted from a clean slate by simply putting things aside or by assuming that we could ever experience the extent of each other's pain. It is a binding awareness that requires adjustments in depth of field, in how we look at and engage with one another. Not a blank page but a colorless grey zone that surfaces each time we choose depth over distance.

The surface on which the above images are montaged is hard to identify at first. It is a carefully composed colorless gray tone designed to have minimal effect in how we perceive images. A spectral presence that has no opposite color because this tone doesn't exist on the color wheel. The surface on which this montage took place is not just a neutral zone or a blank page. It is the binding wheel; a political field, a potentiality from which to act and organize. Right now.

Take another look at the image above.

This image is not an image of the past. It is an image of the present. It speaks to the here and now. It does not merely represent how things once were, it anticipates how they still can be. This image is an image of today: it shows two pictures from 1958.

Father was 3 years old. Our mothers were not yet born.

\*

This text was published online via Kara Agora 'Future of Solidarity' 2020

[http://www.karaagora.center/future-of-solidarity-milos-trakilovic/?fbclid=IwAR1p5ZTW3uvl0C71g2o4Yas84wIPlwQmAoOWAG4ON6j\\_N68pHwmUjzxiOrc](http://www.karaagora.center/future-of-solidarity-milos-trakilovic/?fbclid=IwAR1p5ZTW3uvl0C71g2o4Yas84wIPlwQmAoOWAG4ON6j_N68pHwmUjzxiOrc)