After the Revolution: Youth, Democracy, and the Politics of Disappointment in Serbia


Jessica Greenberg is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Illinois. Her research focuses on the anthropology of democracy in the Balkans and Europe, post-revolutionary politics, youth, and post-socialist studies more broadly. Prior to coming to Illinois, she was an Academy Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, and an assistant professor in Communication Studies at Northwestern University. She received her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Chicago in 2007. Her work has appeared in *American Anthropologist*, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* (PoLAR), *Eastern European Politics and Societies*, *Slavic Review*, *Language and Communication*, and *Nationalities Papers*.

Prof. Greenberg started her lecture by raising a thought-provoking question: “What happens the day after a revolution?” Her response to this question began with a brief summary of the historical events that she analyzes in her project. Namely, on October 5, 2000, Serbia began the democratic revolution in which tens of thousands of people protested against the totalitarian rule of Slobodan Milošević, demanding the overthrow of his regime. Prof. Greenberg’s analysis begins in the aftermath of these protests. She argues that the youth activists experienced a shift in their orientation from a future-oriented revolutionary project toward a pragmatic politics of the present.

In both the book and lecture, Prof. Greenberg examines the experiences of student protesters who, after the October revolution in Serbia, began engaging in everyday politics, assuming a more pragmatic stance. Immediately after the revolution, Serbia’s youth confronted the politics of disappointment, but as Prof. Greenberg asserts, the feeling of disappointment became a place for activism. Democratic youth activism was constructed through an embrace of pragmatism in the present, rather than an idealism of the future. The student activists felt that the older generation, the generation of their parents, had betrayed them. They became disillusioned with the previous generation’s saying “Biće bolje” (“It will be better”), which was repeated over and over in socialist Yugoslavia to point toward a better, utopian future.

According to Prof. Greenberg, the student activists anticipated disappointment by blaming the idealism and utopianism of the socialist regime. In refusing to accept the “it will be better” attitude, they rejected a socialist conception of revolutionary time – the socialist state’s insistence on the idea of permanent revolution configured through images of youth and labor. Their rejection was also a commentary on a more recent nationalist past embodied in the politics of Slobodan Milošević’s regime.

By spurning the socialist-time-mantra “Biće bolje” (“It will be better”), the student activists opted for a more pragmatic approach grounded in the politics of the present. They became involved with
technocratic politics, issues of expertise, and demanded university reform. This pragmatic stance represented the call for normalcy that included the language of responsibility and mandate.

Prof. Greenberg’s lecture was enriched by a reading of several personal narratives and experiences from her recent book, which represented a significant part of her fieldwork in Serbia. Various student activists from Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, and other cities in Serbia told the narratives. Prof. Greenberg’s analysis of these personal experiences illustrates the feelings of immediacy and urgency among the youth activists, and demonstrates the various ways of maneuvering through semiotic ambiguities that the pitfalls of democratic practice opened up.

In conclusion, Prof. Greenberg’s analysis of the politics of disappointment in Serbia shows her remarkable expertise and understanding of the incredibly complicated and confusing times after the October Revolution. Additionally, her analysis offers a liberating feeling to the generation who personally experienced these political shifts, including the authors of this post. After reading Prof. Greenberg’s book and attending her lecture, we feel grateful and enriched with a new and inspiring understanding of the post-revolutionary time and practices in democratic Serbia.

*Marina Filipovic and Jasmina Savic are graduate students in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois, majoring in Russian literature. As they were both undergraduate students of Belgrade University in Serbia at the exact same time which Prof. Jessica Greenberg analyzes in her book, they feel especially honored to be invited to contribute to this blog.*