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Governing communities: performing ethnic conflict from Sarajevo to Fallujah.

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Introduction¹

In an article published in the aftermath of the conflict in former Yugoslavia in 1996, ethnic war scholar Stuart J. Kaufman remarked that ‘the continuing spread of ethnic violence seems set to replace the spread of communism as the central security concern in western capitals. [...] and when top American officials say that ‘instability’ is the major worldwide threat to American national security, ethnic wars are largely what they have in mind’ (Stuart J. Kaufman 1996:108). If this statement would have felt a little *démodé* in the face of the complete change of situation created by 9-11 up until a few months ago, ‘civil war’ is on top of newspapers headlines again².

As the regularity of killings in Iraq has stopped making them breaking news, more and more commentators predict the inevitability of a full-fledged ‘sectarian war’. If the keyword of the war in Yugoslavia was *ethnic* (as in ethnic conflict, ethnic violence, ethnic cleansing) the new buzzword of this violence seems to be “sectarian”. As in Yugoslavia for Croats, Serbs and Muslims, the western audience is encouraged to learn the colourfully designed maps of the different groups geographies, yellow for the Kurds, dark green for the Sunnis, light green for the Shi’ites³. As for Yugoslavia, the average western audience is not properly informed about the nature of these differentiations, but is encouraged to think of them as so substantial that they are the very cause of the conflict. Except from slight lexical differentiations, official positions and media productions present the bitter taste of a discursive *déjà vu*, the political violence currently taking place in Iraq being in fact mainly portrayed, again, through the narrative of confrontation of radically incompatible ‘communities’.

As Benedict Anderson shrewdly noted, during period of the Cold War Kaufman refers to, very few in the West were taking seriously any claims from communist guerrilla organizations in Vietnam or Nicaragua that they were the avant-garde of the proletarian classes (Anderson 1991:add exact page). But in the same way that Serbian

¹ (1248) words

² ‘Civil War’ Is Uttered, and White House’s Iraq Strategy Is Dealt a Blow’, *The New York Times*, August 4th, 2006

³ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/images/iraq-map-group1.gif> [visited September 9, 2006]

Democratic Party's leader Slobodan Milosevic or Croatian Democratic Union's Franjo Tudjman seemed to have successfully convinced that the war in Yugoslavia was more than anything between 'Serbs', 'Croats' and 'Muslims' (as *communities* and as *nations*, not as political organisations speaking in their name) the various ethnic and religious entrepreneurs have, for mysterious reasons, achieved to convince leaders, journalists and scholars in the United States and in Europe not only that they represent, but that *are* the 'Sunni', 'Kurdish' and 'Shi'a' *communities* in their commitment to vigorously destroy each other.

But the comparison with Bosnia does not stop here. It is not only about what is happening, but also what is to be done. The possible resurgence of communal confrontation has pushed many commentators, think tank analysts and scholars to draw comparisons from Yugoslavia with contemporary Iraq. What have we learned about ethnic conflict, and how can this help us to see what to do in Iraq, asks prominent 'ethnic conflict' specialist Chaim Kaufmann (Kaufmann 2007). Apparently, quite a lot: 'Before Bosnia, the conventional wisdom was that multi-communal states that had torn themselves apart by war should be put back together by means such as power-sharing between *communities* or electoral reform to compel politicians to appeal to all *communities*, not just their own, and 3rd party aid or intervention to assist these efforts.'⁴ (Kaufmann 2007:2). After Bosnia, the paper goes, it now seems evident that this solution does not work: ethnic wars create suspicion between communities and harden identities. For Bosnia, the most viable solution therefore lied in 'engaging seriously with the logics of communal wars themselves – especially the importance of population geography and of hardening of identities. This meant accepting a very loose federal arrangement that amounted to *de facto* partition' (Kaufmann 2007:4). If we follow this logic, even if it is currently opposed by most of the actors including the Bush administration, the Iraq Crisis Group, and most of the Iraqi population, the idea that the best solution to the so-called sectarian conflict in Iraq lies in creating ethnically clean territories through transfer of populations – is after all not so bad. This idea is starting to gain resonance in Washington, as symbolized by a recent report from the Brookings Institute (Joseph, O'Hanlon, et al. 2007), supported by Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del) and former President of the Council on Foreign Relations Leslie Gelb. In the face of the – to say the least – mixed record of the Dayton agreement in setting the ground for a viable, pluralistic, democratic political system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in front of the political deadlock the confessional system seems to lead at in Lebanon and in the light of the horrors of mass forced movements of population of the XXth century, it can be asked if we have learned anything at all from the drama of the former Yugoslavia.

This article will argue that it seems we have not. It seems that the main dynamics of the conflict in Yugoslavia have not yet been understood (and this is not due to a lack of precise historical and sociological empirical work on the question⁵) and that a thorough reflection over the social and political stakes of 'ethnic' or 'sectarian' conflicts are unable to travel from certain academic circles to centres of decision: the very mistakes of evaluation that have led to the problematic end of the conflict in Yugoslavia are currently being made regarding Iraq. Contrarily to common ideas about the above mentioned nature of ethnic conflicts, this paper will argue that, just as in former

⁴ Emphasis added.

⁵ Mettre en vrac un million de livres

Yugoslavia, it is not because of ‘ancient hatreds’ that Iraq is collapsing into civil war: the dominant visions of *communities* fighting each other, which plays so well into the game of the various sectarian entrepreneurs, is factually and theoretically biased. This is the object of my first section. In the second section, I go one step further, arguing that these misrepresentations have had deep consequences: because the occupation has reinforced and framed the political and social alternatives in ethnic and sectarian terms, it has created the conditions of possibility for a ‘sectarian confrontation’: in this sense, the current civil war is a self-fulfilling prophecy that is heavily dependent upon the biased vision of the Iraqi society and political stakes preceding the invasion. What needs to be looked at is therefore the original *matrix* that promotes the vision of society divided into incompatible ethnicities. This is what I look at in a more speculative third section, where I argue that the effects of the US occupation are not the result of a deliberate plan, of a conspiracy or a lack of competence, but the result of an increasingly communitarian framing of the ‘advanced liberal’ modality of government: the discourses and practices in Europe and in the US match those in Yugoslavia and in Iraq because they share a common assumption about the demise of a political project for society and the rise of *communities* as a way of living and being governed.

I. Understanding Irak: no lessons learned from Yugoslavia ?

Similarly to what happened during the war in Yugoslavia, current violence in Iraq is predominantly ‘framed’ in terms of ethnic or sectarian conflict⁶. Factual arguments are advanced in order to depict the present conflict between rival political and paramilitary organizations exclusively in terms of ‘ancient hatreds’, i.e. between historically incompatible communities. Both for Yugoslavia and Iraq, these arguments are not only weak, they also preclude from grasping a variety of alternative political processes. If the reasons of this particular framing are to be found in the practices of a variety of actors, from professionals of politics to professionals of security and media producers⁷, academics also play an important role in the construction of this discourse. In this section I focus on the similarity of the discourses of professionals of politics as they have been and currently are relayed in the media for Yugoslavia and for Iraq. I then move to the academic discourse in order to show that the ‘ethnic war’ frame relies on epistemological assumptions which can be found in a certain literature of international relations and nationalism. This state of affairs therefore calls for theoretical propositions for a reflexive theorization of ethnic conflict, which I elaborate drawing on the current literature of critical approaches to security (c.a.s.e. collective 2006).

⁶ I here refer to Goffman’s concept of ‘frames’, developed in (Goffman 1974:21), nicely defined by Gitlin as ‘principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters’ (Gitlin 1980:6).

⁷ See the framework of analysis proposed by Murray Edelman (1988)