

# Biljana Jovanović, a Rebel with a Cause or: On ‘a General Revision of Your Possibilities’

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## ABSTRACT:

By analysing Yugoslav writer Biljana Jovanović’s early novels, the essay follows her possible literary speculations on the capacity of the Yugoslav society to fulfil the promises of the revolution, together with her imagining of an alternative form of sociability, as that which could result in universal, human emancipation. Offering a peculiar portrait of the urban society of the late seventies in Yugoslavia, in her novels Jovanović tests if and how the problem of women’s emancipation is connected to the problems of class. Yet, a failure of class emancipation, an ‘impossibility to revise’ the society is antagonized from the scrupulous and self-confident feminist standpoint.

U pokušajima mišljenja subjekta ‘proletera’ i subjekta ‘žena’, čini se, sam subjekt nekako izmiče, nije univokno određen. Nije jednostavno opisati ova heterogena mnoštva, u čiju odredbu je upisan paradoks.

(Maja Solar)<sup>1</sup>

## Yugoslav society and the promise of the universal emancipation

Though theorizing Marxist and socialist feminism without a reference to the particular case of Yugoslav feminism<sup>2</sup>, Cinzia Arruzza's book on feminism and Marxism offers an important view that within "our struggle for universal emancipation we need to open up a permanent laboratory of questioning and experimentation" (Arruzza, 2013, p. 21). My essay is written in response to this proposal, as a reminder that such a laboratory did exist in Yugoslavia, founded on singularities (Suvin, 2014), but also as a reminder of one of its most resourceful experimenters, the author Biljana Jovanović. While her rarely studied prose reflects on and critiques Yugoslav society, it is a piece of women's writing that despite "marginalization of socialist heritage in memorial timescapes has an effect on the constitution of an autonomous female subject in contemporary societies, especially at the time of the neo-liberal backlash" (Kašić & Prlenda, 2015, p. 28). Following the philosopher and cultural theorist Boris Buden's insight about postcommunism as the crossing zone we have already come back from, realizing that it served the purpose of the deligitimization of the society as such (Buden, 2012, pp. 10-15), reading Biljana Jovanović's literature today could be a means of reconstructing the fundamentals of the singular Yugoslav society, thought of and demystified in her experimental and feminist writing.

For that reason, in this paper I will follow Biljana Jovanović's literary speculations on the capacity of this society to fulfil the promises of the Yugoslav revolution, that is, her imagining of an alternative form of sociability, as that which could result in universal, human emancipation. Marxist feminist philosopher Maja Solar's theorizing of the notions of class and sex as the 'struggle concepts' which could lead to a universal emancipation have been integrated

into this analysis, as the protagonists in Biljana Jovanović's novels embody the antagonism of class and sex relations. Just as class is not a category of identity, but rather a *structure* that expresses the “asymmetric relationship of exploitation, therefore, a conflicting relationship” (Solar, 2012, p. 84), sexual difference indicates “not sexual identities, but sexual relations” (Solar, 2012, p. 85). Moreover, proletarian and female subjects—and their counterparts in Biljana Jovanović's fiction—qualify to be the ‘universal revolutionary subjects’ owing to their non-particularistic and non-identity disposition, and the analogous non-naturalized yet underprivileged positions, constituted by the absence of coherence, autonomy, rights, possessions, homeland, etc. (Solar, 2012, p. 95)

In this paper I will analyse Jovanović's early novels *Pada Avala* [Avala is Falling, 1978] and *Psi i ostali* [Dogs and Others, 1980] for their “particular importance”: they are purportedly “peppered with references to everyday life under former Yugoslav ‘soft communism’” (Lukić, 2006, p. 193). However, since there are in fact not very many references to ‘Yugoslav soft communism’ in the two novels, this ‘referentiality’ does not so much relate to the represented reality, but rather occurs as a discursive authorial intervention, or a deliberation about the Yugoslav ‘communist society.’ This modifies the initial search for the ‘non-existent’ references into an attempt to reconstruct a society thought and imagined in Jovanović's writings as that which is ‘historically real,’ but also that which had been *possible* (and is, accordingly, still possible). The focus will be on Jovanović's first novel *Pada Avala* for its narrativization of an alternative sociability, a type of a classless society possible to achieve in an antagonising questioning of given class and sex identities which infer the desired emancipation. The second novel *Psi i ostali* is yet interpreted as an epilogue of an attempt to emancipate, a pessimistic response to the possibility of setting free from the petit-bourgeois mundanity. Yet, surrendering to this society is in the second novel

challenged by a female and feminist rebellion, which could be read both affirmatively (and in accordance with the global feminist efforts of the time), but also as a sort of ‘mainstreaming’ of the promises of emancipation, as the only ‘tolerable’ *domain* of the claim to freedom.

Biljana Jovanović is “among the first women writers to introduce a new kind of self-conscious female character to South-Slavic literature” (Lukić, 2006, p. 193) and to narrativize the second wave feminist topoi of women’s sexualities, their bodies, family, inequality, together with introducing lesbian characters to regional modern literature (Lukić, 2006, p. 194). Jovanović’s feminism, and her thinking generally, is about the rejection of all authorities and hierarchies. Yet, the critiquing and questioning of the limits of emancipation in the Yugoslav society, as well as her focus on the society and one particular type of sociability, make her writings resonate with the work of the Yugoslav group of philosophers gathered around the journal *Praxis* and the Korčula Summer School (1964-1974)—the Praxis circle. The Praxis circle—based predominantly in Zagreb and Belgrade—was a globally relevant and influential nondogmatic school of Marxist philosophy, which insisted on the ‘criticism of all that exists,’ and focused on questions of the individual and society, humanism, human creativity, freedom of speech and others. In Yugoslavia, though tolerated, the group also faced different repercussions for their critique, which was perceived as a threat to the establishment (from banning the journal to the group members’ expulsion from the University). The Korčula Summer School holds a particular place in Yugoslav history as the confluence of the philosophical and critical debates (together with the Praxis philosophers Petrović, Kangrga, Supek and others, Fromm, Fink, Bloch, Marcuse, Habermas and many others participated in the program of the School).<sup>3</sup>

The Praxis represented “a true novelty in the history of philosophy” (Lešaja, 2014, p. 269), enabled by the singularity of Yugoslavia which was Praxis’ “laboratory” (Lešaja, 2014, p. 269). They were above all interested in the “most quotidian” (Petrović, 1964, p. 4), by exploring the possibilities of making socialism truly be “the only human way out from the difficulties in which humanity has been entrapped” (Petrović, 1964, p. 3). While exploring the possible connections exceeds the limits of the present text, I want to touch on Jovanović’s writing as coinciding with the Praxis’ belief in the effectiveness of philosophical thinking and its inseparability from thinking a better society.

The Praxis represented the “critical consciousness in the Yugoslav society ... which was based on the search for the emancipatory possibilities of the epoch” (Lešaja, 2014, p. 266), believing that changes are possible only through active practice in concrete societal reality. The objects of their criticism were “the current contradictions of modern life and the possibilities of overcoming them, including even the possibility of a revolutionary (socialist) alternative, which the twentieth century called for powerfully” (Lešaja, 2014, p. 247). One of the founders of the group, Gajo Petrović, had defined their philosophy as the “thought of the revolution” [misao revolucije] which is an “unrelenting criticism of all that exists, a humanist vision of a truly human world and an inspiring power of revolutionary agency” (Petrović, 1964, p. 4). Biljana Jovanović’s own project of ‘general revision of societal possibilities,’ not only echoes a (generational) disappointment with the Yugoslav revolution, but also delineates an alternative sociability, and its withering, against the backdrop of the new Yugoslav feminism. Together with proposing the Praxis to be an exploratory philosophical, or discursive, background of Biljana Jovanović’s writing, it is important to emphasize that the process of women’s emancipation, its legal, cultural and societal consequences are central to her work, emerging against the

ambivalent and unfulfilled project of women's emancipation in Yugoslavia. Also, her writing communicates with the radical and post-war anarchist movements and arts advancing in the West by the end of the 1960s, though an attempt to read Biljana Jovanović not within but next to the all listed discourses arguably allows for a better understanding of her proposal for a broader kind of emancipation.

## Biljana Jovanović and the new Yugoslav feminism

Biljana Jovanović was born in Belgrade in 1953. She graduated from the Department of Philosophy at the Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy. In 1977 Jovanović published her first book, a collection of poetry entitled *Čuvar* [Keeper], and the following year her first novel *Pada Avala*, which gave her “a name among the younger generation of writers and it was at this time when she decided in favour of a professional writing career” (Lukić, 2006, p. 192). In 1980 Jovanović published her second novel *Psi i ostali*<sup>4</sup> and in 1984 the third one *Duša, jedinica moja* [My soul, my one and only]. She is the author of four plays: *Ulrike Meinhof* (1976), *Leti u goru kao ptica* [Flying off to mountains like a bird, 1983], *Centralni zatvor* [The central prison, 1990] and *Soba na Bosforu* [A room on the Bosphorus, 1995]<sup>5</sup>. Biljana Jovanović's anti-war and feminist activism in the period between 1991-92 was documented in the book written together with three other feminist authors: Radmila Lazić, Maruša Krese and Rada Iveković, and first published by the German Suhrkamp in 1993 as *Briefe von Frauen über Krieg und Nationalismus* [Women's letters on war and nationalism], and a year later in Belgrade as *Vjetar ide na jug i okreće se na sjever/Vjetar gre, proti poldnevu in se obraća proti polnoči* [The Wind Blows toward the South and Shifts toward the North]. In her theorizing of post-Yugoslav literature as a transnational feminist literature, Jasmina Lukić locates this book on the threshold between the Yugoslav and the post-Yugoslav literatures as a collective project “which undermines any kinds of borders and di-

visions, from state to generic ones” (Lukić, 2018, p. 336). The “subversively open structure and mixture of languages [appear] as a local version of Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, a mestiza text which promotes mestiza consciousness during a time when monolithic and simplistic readings of identity overtake a region already plunged into a series of local wars” (Lukić, 2018, p. 336). Jovanović’s last, posthumously published book is again a joint piece, her correspondence with the Slovenian author Josip Osti published under the title *Non omnis moriar* (1996). Besides Jovanović’s unpublished poetry and prose fragments, her writings could be found in various Yugoslav newspapers and journals, together with reports and statements she had written as representative and activist of different committees and organizations, from the Committee for the Defence of Artistic Freedoms (1982), the first nongovernmental organization, the Committee for the Defence of Man and Environment (1984), to the Association for the Yugoslav Democratic Initiative (1989), and other significant civic movements against the war: Helsinki Parliament, Civil Resistance Movement, Belgrade Circle, and feminist groups Women in Black and Women’s Lobby. She was the prime instigator of the *Leteća učionica radionica* [Flying classroom-workshop], an all-Yugoslav project organized in the midst of war, still connecting different parts of the country by organizing events in the Yugoslav capitals and in different Yugoslav languages from 1992 to 1994. Biljana Jovanović died in 1996 in Ljubljana. Originally established in 1996 by the journal *ProFemina* as the prize for the best unpublished manuscript by a female author, the *Biljana Jovanović* prize for best literary work has been awarded yearly in Belgrade since 2006 by the Serbian Literary Society (SKD).<sup>6</sup> Next to the preceding feminist generation represented by Blaženka Despot (1930-2001), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women’s Movements and Feminisms* (2006) lists Biljana Jovanović as a prominent name among the new Yugoslav feminists together with Lydia Sklevicky (1952-1990) and

Žarana Papić (1949-2002).<sup>7</sup> Yet, this extraordinary creative and political engagement and its meaning for (post-Yugoslav cultures and societies remain almost unknown in the post-Yugoslav public sphere. Nevertheless, the 2016 triple publication of her work in Belgrade on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death can be seen as a sign of rereading and a paradoxical reintroduction of this already cult-favorite author into the contemporary cultural scene.<sup>8</sup>

Though recognising the wide-ranging effects of women's emancipation "defined and understood primarily through proclaimed legal equality and economic independence" (Gudac Dodić, 2018, p. 27), the majority of feminist authors studying the relationship between Yugoslav state socialism and feminism caution against "the resistance of the patriarchal order that could reconcile both the ideology of the Left and the liberal tendencies in order to preserve the gender status quo" (Kašić & Prlenda, 2015, p. 28). Some authors document the "antifeminist treatment of women" (Kirin, 2019, pp. 179-80), by researching particularly the destinies of women intellectuals during the Informbiro period (the period after the Yugoslav-Soviet Split, 1948-1955) whereas the fact remains that women as a social group "were considered not to have ... special needs and rights other than as members of the working class" (Antic & Vidmar, 2006, p. 224). This very argument was used to dissolve the Antifascist Women's Association (AFŽ) in 1953, when the feminist objectives of women's organizing had been pacified by transforming the AFŽ into women's organizations primarily focusing on women's reproductive labour (the League of Women's Associations, and later the Conference for the Social Activity of Women). This principally befitted "a post-revolutionary patriarchal anxiety [over] ambitious women ('quality staff')" (Kirin, 2019, p. 194).

In the early seventies, the new Yugoslav feminism "took a critical, counter-discursive, dissenting stance within the Yugoslav sys-



tem” (Lóránd, 2018, p. 2), corresponding to the mobilisation of the new feminist movement in the West which was “born out of a disappointment with the promises of the Left” (Lóránd, 2018, p. 18). In view of “the Yugoslav partisan tradition as an emancipatory ideology for women” (Lóránd, 2018, p. 2), Yugoslav feminist discourse had been progressing precisely depending upon the perceived success of the socialist state in endorsing women’s equality and emancipation—that is, the interdependence between ‘the woman question’ and the question of social class. As the feminist scholar Adriana Zaharijević has shown, the post-war emancipationists believed that the woman question had been decided together and through the question of class, while socialist feminists “assumed that there is no better social, legal and political framework for women’s liberation [than socialism], and that only in socialism—more humane, more sensitive, more thorough in its attempts to revolutionize itself—such liberation can be achieved” (Zaharijević, 2017, p. 272). Finally, liberationists thought that “socialism had not become feminist yet” (Zaharijević, 2017, p. 273), focusing not solely on the emancipation, but also on the “liberation of consciousness” (Zaharijević, 2017, p. 274), a concept that Biljana Jovanović had voiced throughout her writings.

However, this negotiating of not only the limits of emancipation, but also freedom, had itself quite real effects on legislation, which therefore not only determined, but “was [also] the product of a series of different manifestations of women’s newly acquired freedoms” (Gudac Dodić, 2018, p. 27). A flow of different ideological, cultural and political possibilities in Yugoslavia (i.e. the above mentioned ‘Left/liberal’ tendencies as an inner political dynamic), together with this society-state ‘agitation’ might be explained by a somewhat partial view about the inbuilt antiauthoritarianism, which

“was seen as deeply humanist at its core and therefore ever more disposed to the emancipation of women” (Zaharijević, 2017, p. 270). In line with the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav authors’ emphasis on the antifascist foundations of socialist Yugoslavia (Suvin, 2014; Markovina, 2017; Bešlin, n.d.), Buden asserts that “a common struggle against fascism [and] not some common or similar ethnic identity, is what constitutes a single Yugoslav people,” concluding that “socialist Yugoslavia is therefore a purely emancipatory—and not an identity[-based] community” (as cited in Močnik, 2018). Močnik further explains that ‘the people of Yugoslavia’ is this new form of sociability formed in the antifascist struggle, and that the Yugoslav “sovereignty is deduced from that historically novel form of sociability” (Močnik, 2018). The Praxis is also unthinkable without a ‘new human community,’ based in the revolutionary thinking about an alternative society: “philosophy which is the *thought of revolution*, is at the same time *thought as revolution*, a constitutive moment in the creation and development of a new, socialist society, the true human community” (Petrović, 1974, p. 55). It is suggestive that, back in 1978, Yugoslav feminist theoretician Nada Ler-Sofronić articulated women’s agency as that which “remained in opposition [while women] managed to preserve an inner, a different sociability” (as cited in Lóránd, 2018, p. 7).<sup>9</sup> Though voiced inside the discourse of sexual difference, this view is important for its agency—rather than solely identity-defined alliance, together with the subversive potentials of the women’s “relatively autonomous position” (as cited in Lóránd, 2018, p. 7).

## Pada Avala: a feminist in a society of no spectacle

Neither Jelena Belovuk, the protagonist of *Pada Avala*, nor Lidija, the protagonist of *Psi i ostali* fits the “socialist emblem of emancipation”—the woman who is a “worker, self-manager and

mother” (Zaharijević, 2017, p. 271). As already stated, women were not really recognised outside the category of the working class, apart from their role as mothers. Josip Broz Tito himself said that “communists ought to be at the forefront of the struggle for affirmation of women’s social position, and their unique and socially responsible role as working mothers” (as cited in Zaharijević, p. 266).<sup>10</sup> Jelena Belovuk is a musician, a flutist, while Lidija works in a library; yet their vocations, together with their places of work, remain only scarcely narrated (with the exception of the episode with Lidija’s boss, in which she experiences sexual harassment at work). Their professions involve artistic and intellectual work, politically and economically marginal, but to an extent corresponding to the aforementioned positions of women in the higher social ranks and their antifeminist treatment. The autofictional narration—understood as a textual sign of the above-stated authorial intervention—in particular indicates the tension surrounding publicly expressed feminist criticism. Yet, information about ‘labor’ remains merely a part of the protagonists’ characterization, and functions as the authorial statement about the socialist ideals of work and a worker. The emphasis on work signals “the first difficulties in realising socialist ideals in Yugoslavia. From subjects of revolution and revolutionary subjects, women became citizen-owners (of their own labour-power). With this, the revolution was effectively stopped, processes of general social emancipation slowed down, and the question of the emancipation of women was postponed to some distant future time.” (Okić, 2018, p. 186). The protagonists of the two novels do not merely betray the ideal of the working mother, but sabotage it: woman as ‘mother, self-manager and worker’ is here replaced by woman as ‘queer, rebel and dropout.’

*Pada Avala* is a reflective, rebellious and playful chronicle about the young musician Jelena Belovuk, at the heart of the class and sex relations in the novel that offers a peculiar portrait of the urban soci-

ety of the late seventies in Yugoslavia. There are no self-absorbed accounts of Jelena Belovuk's character, appearance or her psychology, which can be more generally seen as a lack of self-legitimization, or simply "lack of love for herself," as Jasmina Lukić has put it (1996, p. 130). While not being a "typical feminist novel which programmatically tends to help form the self-consciousness of its potential readers" (Lukić, 1996, p. 130), Jelena's intersections with other characters, her developing always in relation, form a specific kind of a feminist protagonist, significant even beyond the *neofeminist* context it arose from. While the poststructuralist theory also sees the subject as "*always already* produced through the *relationship with the other*, understood as the *other* language, *other* person, *other* culture etc.—but also *the other sex*" (Blagojević. 2006, p. 48), in the imagination of this novel the othering is materialized as a permanent struggle – and class and sex are 'struggle concepts'—an antagonism which is a lasting feature of any relationship in the novel (including that toward the self), always already incompatible, conflicting. Jelena's buried romantic longing for her friend and flatmate Marijana is interrupted by the detailed accounts of her sexual affairs with different men, who simultaneously feel estrangement from and attraction towards Jelena who was so flirtatious "with her boyish looks, with her girlish figure" (Jovanović, 2020, p. 145), a woman "off-beat [...] 'out of the ordinary' or 'outside the norm'" (134).<sup>11</sup> The deprecating accounts of her looks bear the antagonistic character of her relationships with others:

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Jelena, you have freckles on your face, small breasts [...]; your hands are rough, like a manual laborer's, they're cracked, and they're larger than mine (50); all the teeth in her upper jaw were bad, the bags under her eyes were gray-purple-blue and took up half of her face, her fingers trembled conspicuously, and her pupils were a bit slow to respond (110).

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A share of Jelena's general sense of, and an entitlement to, freedom are her own remarks about her non-normative looks, e.g. her dirty hair and nails (68), some of those statements pertaining to "how divisive and how ultimately destructive is this myth of the special woman, who is also the token woman" (Rich, 1972, p. 21). An attempt at societal regulation of women's bodies and behaviour, summarized in Jelena's aunt Maša's house rules, is ridiculed ("Don't use gaudy make up. It's not natural"; "Stuff cotton in your bra"; "Wear smaller shoes!", *Avala*, p. 64). Yet, Jelena's non-normativity leads to the negation of herself as a woman, particularly when this womanhood is required to materialize in a heteronormative interaction:

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[Y]ou're not going to believe me on this, M, I felt precisely nothing at that moment, apart from this symbiotic organism, which being double, and therefore his too, was not sufficiently mine. Emptiness! Nothing in between! A man who comes in through me, enters like through a balloon that is alternately inflating and deflating. I'm not in the balloon, nor am I outside of it, nor am I on the back of this lumberjack (like a trailing vine)... nowhere... that balloon is something different and not me, that balloon is my swollen viscera but not me! (p. 167).

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Although torn by disillusionment and isolation, Jelena's resilient opting for a possibility of an individual feeling of one's own self—"My issue is that I feel like a hermaphrodite and not like a contemporary woman." (p. 204)—is a precondition of her unconstrained, though conflicting, exchange with the people she comes across. Almost all the men she encounters and is in some peculiar way attracted to, are repulsive; their allure is saturated with their violent behaviour, bad manners and messiness: "Really, he was pretty

good-looking, and that was despite the fact that he reeked of vinegar, ammonia, sweat, garlic, heavy-duty *rakija* [plum brandy], all mixed together [...]; the stinky grocery boy (yes, that can draw attention)” (p. 55). These men are odious and philistine, yet Jelena accepts even their unconcealed misogyny and aggressiveness, making her affection appear as abject, in which one joys “[v]iolently and painfully” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9). Kristeva’s theorization of the abject as that which is caused by the “jouissance alone” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9) clarifies Jelena’s paradoxical attraction which turns scandalous after she recounts the rapist history of more than a few of them.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand this functions as the voicing of unnoticed male violence, but on the other hand it is a point at which the feminist subject is irreconcilable with its other. For, the difference is “not a ‘quiet’ difference among the sexual positions (because then we would not act as feminists), but is a tense relationship of domination and repression, [generating] a radical gap. Therefore, since the sexual matrix is also asymmetrical, sex must be defined as a (sexual) antagonism” (Solar, 2012, pp. 85-86). Yet, while the ‘abject attraction’ could be psychologically explained by the fact that Jelena is lesbian, it seems that her allowing the (incompatible, antagonizing) other to intrude, parallels the ‘Kristevan’ relationship between self and other, in Jovanović’s writing possible to interpret in relation to the (promised) revolutionary society “as the radical negation of all that we can characterize as civic, and not only bourgeois, and capitalist” (Vranicki, 1974, p. 24).

The men Jelena comes across are common working-class people, underprivileged dwellers of small unpresentable flats in and around the shabby city centre. Apart from a few exceptions (her friend Vladica the photographer, Martin the conductor), it is window cleaners, waiters, taxi drivers, grocers, neighbours, and users of public transport who constitute the community of Jelena’s fellow-citizens and lovers. These men and their environments, their

routines, even their misery and unremarkableness, construct the social ambiance which Jelena dwells in and is part of: “I’m also a street-car—a whole crowd of people is squatting in my stomach” (*Avala*, p. 9). The world of women is likewise that of the working class—a flower-girl, a hairstylist, a cleaning woman, a janitor, and neighbours in their modest flats.

Jelena and her acquaintances often spend their time doing nothing in particular and drinking, which can be read as not only a desolate idleness, but also as a provocative gesture against more acceptable socially productive behavior. Their unproductive way of spending time, which is hence wasted, spent in vain, bears some subversive qualities, resembling at once the motto “Ne travaillez jamais!” [Never work!] of the Situationist International. Biljana Jovanović wrote elsewhere about this particular kind of laziness which fuses lethargy, melancholia and ataraxy, and which “one can enjoy solely when repeatedly practising the art of being lazy” (Jovanović, 2016a, p. 57). A frivolous sabotage of the working-class ideals is expanded, by living a banal and poor everyday life, into a ‘society of no spectacle.’

While today it might appear as a nostalgic mention, Jelena’s route around the Belgrade of the time is not a sentimental description of her hometown, but a topography of bare everydayness: the main post office, the Tašmajdan park, the Karađorđe park, Voždovac, the Yugoslav Drama Theatre (JDP), numerous little streets in the city centre, together with the legendary *kafanas* [taverns] of the time: *Bosna*, *Lipa*, *Žagubica*, *Orač*, *Kosovski božur*, *Madera*. In the same way a reference to the Yugoslav department store *Robna kuća Beograd*, well-known *Napolitanke* cookies, the grocery store called ‘samoposluga’ (self-service), and street snack vendors are the everyday details of the familiar, yet unremarkable world. There are no nostalgic literary souvenirs, perhaps because the narrator is

not attached to possessions, and sees no value in a commodity: “*And dressers live longer than we do repulsive idiotic things objects that should be destroyed systematically, methodically like with this knife*” (Avala, p. 139). An episode with Jelena’s friend Vladica, whom she marries as a favour, so that he would be entitled to a student loan, ends with him selling all of her belongings, while she doesn’t seem to care much. Jovanović’s fictionalized society functions differently from the society of advanced capitalism theorized by Guy Debord, in which being is exchanged for having (Debord, 2014, p. 41), and all that is left of societal interactions is a commodified image: “The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life.” (Debord, 2014, p. 16)

The fetishism of commodities could be read in conjunction with Irigarayan ‘female economy’ as a lack of feeling for possession and property, or, if we move from the terrain of sexual difference to feminist politics, with the gender aspect of capitalist oppression: “What will liberate women, therefore, from male control is the total elimination of the money-work system, not the attainment of economic equality with men within it” (Solanas, 2004, p. 6). Indeed, Jelena doesn’t speak from the position of a victim, but instead joins in with those men by maintaining animosity comparable to that articulated in Valerie Solanas’s *Scum Manifesto* (2004). Jelena’s experiences portray men as having “no compassion or ability to empathize or identify [with others]” (Solanas & Ronell, 2004, p. 4), but what is essential is that the rebellion against male oppression is integral to the critique of the capitalist system. The fundamental thing is, again, that the commodified life and working prevent true sociability from developing, for “it requires complete economic as well as personal freedom, leisure time and the opportunity to engage in intensely absorbing, emotionally satisfying activities which, when shared with those you respect, lead to



deep friendship” (Solanas, 2004, p. 14). Instead, the society of the time has been “an utter bore,” and none of its aspects have been “at all relevant to women,” which is why a revolution is needed: “there remains for the civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation, and destroy the male sex” (Solanas, 2004, p. 3). Yet, while in Jovanović’s novel an antagonizing relationship between the sexes does not lead to destruction, but rather culminates in ambiguity, the yearning for a revolutionary change is pervasive. The unspectacular everyday life maintains the link to the revolutionary action, undone precisely owing to its suppression and a lack of access to the official culture. The ‘bare’ everyday lives of the protagonists which appear as a void prove to be precisely the opposite of the imposing imagery of the unauthentic ‘society of the spectacle’ in which individual experience is “[un]communicated, misunderstood and forgotten” (Debord, 2014, p. 85). Far from being spectacular, the irrelevance of the protagonists, and the void they live in, fit the emancipatory capacities of the proletariat:

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As a class [proletarians] are now nothing (as Marx says: they are nothing, but they want to be everything), and in the future, when there will be no classes—they will not be positively class-defined again! This paradox is essential for the logic of the revolutionary subject, which is the logic of universality (of the subject who is nothing, and wants to be everything)” (Solar, 2012, p. 92).

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Representing the proletariat of the late seventies in the humble urban neighbourhoods of Belgrade, the people’s particular ‘identities’ embody an “inconsistent and endless plurality, universality meant for all, no matter what one is entitled to or not according to the law” (Solar, 2012, p. 99). Jelena is one of ‘the equals,’ as if testing if and how the

problem of women's emancipation is connected to the problems of the class struggle, as both the female and the proletarian subject is "a paradoxical subject, heterogeneous plurality, a universality that can only lead to a universal emancipation" (Solar, 2012, p. 93).

Those 'subjects that are nothing' in the novel live free from middle-class routines and rituals, their relationships are relationships of freedom, with no expectations or demands. Yet, there is no 'deep friendship' here, that is to say, no "faculty of encounter" (Debord, 2014, p. 116) enabling everyone to be recognized by others hence recognizing their own reality (Debord, 2014, p. 116). This reality of the other is possible to grasp solely when life is "directly lived" (Debord, 2014, p. 2). The tools to rip down a spectacular appearance, a mere representation of society, begins with a 'critique of all that exists' that is absent from this world captured in a nominal egalitarianism, but emptied of agency, of revolutionary potential. While this circumstance in reality portrays Jelena's associates as *lumpenproletariat*, to a paradoxical extent their powerlessness is a part of the modernization matrix, that is, a belief in the progress and the achieved freedom which pacifies disappointment and acts in effect against the revolution. The time the protagonists live in is "continuous, and all-encompassing [...]; nothing less than the totality of the epoch itself" (Anderson as cited in Okić, 2018, p. 68). The void they are fixed in suggests that their time is a non-revolutionary time, for "the act of revolution is broken, discontinuous, a moment of condensed political transformations that opens up a revolutionary space" (Okić, 2018, pp. 183-184).

Exactly this kind of rupture was staged by Jelena's imaginary *encounter* with Bautista van Schouwen, a historical personality, Chilean revolutionary, and member of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, a guerrilla organization which fought against the military government. He was captured, tortured, and murdered in 1973.

Bautista is the single man depicted in the novel not only as an enjoyable presence, but also as a person inspiring awe. Unlike the other common baddies, he is a true hero, as if moulded in stone: his face is ‘stationary blue-grey,’ he has got an “unmoving body” (*Avala*, p. 38), he is “an unmoving monument; a statue from an unknown sculptor” (p. 42). Yet, though the encounter happens, it doesn’t produce a recognition of each other’s realities: the fact that Bautista is depicted like a sculpture in stone—while also being a figure of admiration and remembering—signals the attitude about unsuccessful, or uncompleted revolutions. An important fact, though not historically confirmed, but significant for the narrator, is that Bautista underwent a lobotomy during the torture. The failed attempt of ‘the act of revolution’ amounts to insanity: while Bautista’s rebelliousness was treated as a mental disorder in an act of political revenge, Jelena ends up in a mental hospital herself, arguably not succeeding in fighting either class or sex struggle. Since “class emancipation is not necessarily sexual emancipation, but is impossible without the latter” (Solar, 2012, p. 96), the desired ‘universal emancipation’ is cancelled. Yet insanity, radically asocial and apolitical, appears to be constitutive to that universal ‘subject who is nothing,’ opening the possibility of an alternative emancipation. That this nothingness could be read as a doubtful possibility of emancipation, but also as the radical critique of the established order constitutes Jelena as the narrating subject.

## Plural subject or insanity: on incomplete emancipation

Although told in the first person, Jelena Belovuk’s story is mediated by her biographer, hidden behind an expressive autofictional sign, the initials ‘B.J.’ The initial travesty of the realistic validating introduction at the same time embodies the anxiety of authorship,

and the non-privileged status of single authorship, the narrator's duality. Her exposed position produces all relationships and protagonists—including herself—outside the standard identity norms:

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[B]efore beginning to form judgments about Jelena Belovuk, throw out all your assumptions about her body or her mind. Investigate all of the feelings that could be both love and hatred, including in her person (as if the point here were a general revision of your possibilities) and investigate yourself! That is, look into yourself in Jelena Belovuk; and check yourself over against Jelena Belovuk. (*Avala*, pp. 1-2)

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Jelena's own antagonism is exposed by her narrator's persona, "unable to avoid arbitrariness and contradictions, as well as lies" (*Avala*, "Biographer's Introduction"). Also, she as the narrator is unconceivable without another constitutionally different position: that of a listener. The initial account of a failed love affair—one of many organizing Jelena's love life—is narrated as her confession to Marijana, the covert crush of Jelena's, the listener and sceptical witness to Jelena's sexual affairs: "Marijana, my accomplice in the first experiences of body and soul, doesn't believe a single word I say" (*Avala*, p. 15). By discrediting what Jelena is saying—"You thought of everything!" (19)—Marijana controls and subverts the storytelling, along the way also producing it. By authorizing the discourse, she becomes entitled to authorship herself, turning out to be Jelena's double. She also soon moves out, leaving Jelena to her romantic fantasies, inseparable from the relationship with the writer's alter-ego, concluded in the title of the chapter "Jelena's Siamese twin", when the narration moves into the third person and Jelena's story is seemingly told by her former lover, a fellow musician, the conductor Martin. He tells the story of Jelena's insanity, her ripping apart as a result of the impossibility to be 'double':

[T]he nonexistence of ‘the other,’ actually ‘the other me’... but not because of that, it’s all in the physical sense... do you follow... the meaning of this is the Greek word, physis, nature... these are Jelena’s ideas... everything relates to the body... to the nonexistence of another body right next to me hard by me that could be like this body of mine (p. 144).

Jelena returns as the narrator’s voice in her two letters addressed to Marijana that close out the novel. Marijana, who is by that time the lover of their common friend Vladica, only in passing mentions that she got some bizarre letters from Jelena, but clearly never writes back, cutting off the fundamental connection necessary for the story to be complete. Hence, the novel has an open, double ending, maintaining the (necessary) duality. Vagueness is intensified by the inversion of the order of the letters: we first read the second letter in which Jelena’s romance novel ends happily with her new lover on a romantic boat trip, presumably “parodying the genre of trivial romance” (Lukić, 2006, p. 194), while the second closure of the novel is presented by the first letter describing Jelena’s stay in the mental hospital. A tragic ending—owing not only to Jelena’s mental breakdown, but also to Marijana’s (and everybody else’s) abandonment—conveys a disenchantment about the possibility of emancipation from social and cultural conventions (including the literary ones), the symptom of which is Jelena’s mental illness.<sup>13</sup> While Marijana as a companion and a listener was part of a feminist (narrating) subject, which, instead of the “subject ‘woman’ [ ... ], would include various sexual subjectivizations in fighting sexual oppression” (Solar, 2012, p. 101), she also signified a possibility of a plural female sexuality: “Woman always remains several, but she is kept from dispersion because the other is already within her and is autoerotically familiar to her” (Irigaray, 1997, p. 254). While this ‘multiple sameness’ is in part embodied through the motifs of lesbian love,<sup>14</sup> it also articulates the possibilities of Irigaray’s (female) *plural subject*, in

this novel manifested in the structuring of the narration, but also as a response to the cultural and political hierarchies and the established order. Nevertheless, the *plural subject* also suggests an inner split: “she is double... no, no, it’s not being two-faced that I have in mind, but some kind of duality in everything” (*Avala*, p. 138). The confusing ending is a suitable representation of insanity. Yet, materializing in hallucinatory and fragmented images, Jelena’s mental condition is not solely individual, psychological, but also social:

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The more powerful the class, the more it claims not to exist, and its power is employed above all to enforce this claim. [...] Though its existence is everywhere in evidence, the bureaucracy must be invisible as a class. As a result, all social life becomes insane. The social organization of total falsehood stems from this fundamental contradiction. (Debord, 2014, p. 53)

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Hindrance of the act of revolution drives “individuals who passively accept their subjection to an alien everyday reality [...] toward a madness that reacts to that fate by resorting to illusory magical techniques.” (Debord, 2014, p. 116). Yet, while insanity could be read as the critique of the lost class and sexual struggles, as a possible ‘structure’ it is even more paradoxical than the structures of sex and class, and possibly more universal: it disavows the fields of the social and the political, and what is more, the very epistemological and common cognitive possibility of knowing, theorizing and critiquing the world. Universality needed for emancipation is universality beyond the rational—the insanity—that at once suggests a senseless rebellion, for the critique of all that exists is replaced by the detachment from all that exists. Read more affirmatively, insanity expresses social and political ‘eccentricity,’ ‘freedom from all that exists,’ including institutions, conventions and identities, and their forceful enactment.

## Dogs and Others: normalization and the feminist response

In place of the emancipatory propensity of a ‘proletarian nothingness,’ the disillusioned protagonist Lidija of the novel *Psi i ostali* realizes that “the imagined freedom of emptiness has the shape and the sizzle of a lie” (Jovanović, 2018, p. 19).<sup>15</sup> Corresponding to *Pada Avala*, the narrator and protagonist of this novel Lidija—a young library administrator—tells her intimate life and struggles, this time situated in a family milieu and her ever more complicated relationships with a dominant grandmother and an unstable brother. While Lidija’s disbelief in the likelihood of breaking free is declared from the outset, her brother Danilo ends up in a mental hospital, taking his own life by the end of the story. Lidija rebels against, but Danilo gives in to “the totality of the epoch,” an oppressive, non-revolutionary society, whose optimal embodiment in this novel is the petty bourgeois standard of living. Family, the *mise-en-scène* of the story, though unconventional and dysfunctional, is narrativized as the source of the petit-bourgeois compulsion. The main ideologues of the ‘everyday dogmatism’ are the demanding grandmother Jaglika, and the ever-absent mother Marina: “I answered kindly, with a smile even, because of the good breeding I inherited from Jaglika and Marina – two fine city freaks” (*Dogs*, pp. 57-58).<sup>16</sup> These two women—a traditional Montenegrin grandmother and a frivolous, but unavailable and hostile mother—are the two ends maintaining the victory of the non- or even anti-revolutionary society, that is, its ‘spectacular representation.’ They reproduce the common desire to go “zurück zu bürgerliche Gesellschaft [*sic*]” [back to the bourgeois society; as cited in Lešaja, 2014, p. 21, footnote 3], the ‘invisible’ ambiance of Danilo’s forthcoming insanity. Danilo would chase and disperse flocks of pigeons, to the outrage of “the people out for a Sunday stroll, casting crumbs with such ludicrous care and all their

Sunday refinement, taking pictures of themselves” (*Dogs*, p. 101). Yet, interrupted in their tedious habits, these people “got mad as hornets. To whom were they shouting, without any trace of refinement, all of a sudden: ‘Watch out for the little monster! He belongs in an institution, not on the street...’” (*Dogs*, p. 101) Danilo is singled out as the monstrous, insane other, who has to be excluded from the sphere of the social, quite like the drug addicts in the novel, about whom a doctor published “fascist articles” (*Dogs*, p. 155)<sup>17</sup>. Lidija’s attitude towards the ‘fascisoid society’ premised on the distinction among the strong and the weak is unambiguous, and her idea of fighting it no less explicit: “Damn it, bombs are the most effective when they begin to drop” (*Dogs*, p. 163). Her ‘terrorist’ approach is in fact encouraged by similar revolutionary attempts of the 1970s and 1980s, whose status remain quite ambiguous in public, but not in the reality of this storyteller: “If I’d only had a bomb. I know where I would have placed it, with no malice in my heart, as though I were carrying out a holy obligation ... As for bombs, I could get them from Italy via Marina and the Red Brigade, no joke” (*Dogs*, p. 168).<sup>18</sup> Though her anger is directed to those “phenomena of the old world, the world of the bourgeoisie” (Vranicki, 1974, p. 24) which has outlived the proclaimed elimination of the class itself, a revolution could become possible either as parody, or as an insurrection of the ridiculous, both staged inside the anarchic communities of various dropouts and misfits. In the ‘Friday Circle’ she attends a few times, a group of obscure activists discuss the possibilities of a “parapsychological revolution, the principle of irrationality” (*Dogs*, p. 159), together with other peculiar items on the agenda. Lidija apparently gives up on preparations for this revolution, but does not renounce her non-normative sexuality, and generally, her non-normative sociability.

The femme fatale in this novel is—compared to Marijana from *Pada Avala*—a much more physical and present Milena, whom



both siblings fall in love with. While this is the initial signal of their identification and one possible progressing of the motif of the doppelgänger, Lidija becomes Milena's lover, but she eventually also vanishes. Lidija's coping with this troubling relationship is counteracted by a correspondence, again, in the form of letters that remain unanswered, which Lidija allegedly receives from an ambivalent admirer Vespazijan, in truth Lidija's writing alter-ego. This narrator's double adds to the critical feminist second wave motifs by writing a small antifeminist manifesto, a stereotypical misogynist view on the "idiocies connected with the so-called 'woman question'" (*Dogs*, p. 144). The effect of co-opting the antifeminist subject further exacerbates the sexual and gender rupture, a reiteration of the second wave separatist leaning—a belief that women would achieve their liberty by separating from men and masculinist institutions. Unlike the attempt at identification and a union with the 'impossible other' in the first novel, here the other is more unambiguously delineated, formulating the impossibility of identification. The very title of the novel clarifies this stance, organizing the relationships among the protagonists as the conflicting relationships of inequality: "Dogs always believe that they belong to Others (whom they consider to be, for unknown reasons enduring right up to our day, better than they are)" (*Dogs*, p. 13).

The possibility of the emancipatory universal subject has been outdone by the particularity of the experience of the other. As already stated, the failure of class emancipation conditions the standstill of the sexual one, which makes the more distinguished feminist second wave agenda in the subsequent novel, at first glance, appear not solely as an effect of partial universal liberation, but maybe even as a 'tolerable' emancipation. On the other hand, this negative reading of a 'possibility to revise' the society is in *Psi i ostali* antagonized by the more scrupulous and self-confident feminist standpoint of the protagonist. By the very end of the novel the narration goes ret-

respectively back to Lidija's childhood, offering the key to unlock the pessimism of the tragic closing episode and the sense of her own surrender. Lidija remembers how her petty bourgeois and patriarchal ideologue grandmother Jaglika, used to respond to her disobedience: She "said she was going to tell Marina everything, and Marina was going to beat the daylight out of me so I'd remember what's allowed and what's possible and, for God's sake, what is just not ever allowed and not at all possible..." (*Dogs*, p. 177). By going back to the past, at the source and the beginning of her 'rebellion with a cause', the narrator places the 'original ban' at the very end, thus turning the sequence of events upside down. The prohibition becomes the confirmation of her 'programmatic' adhering to 'what is simply never allowed and not at all possible'.

While the unsuccessful 'emancipatory subjectivations' of Biljana Jovanović's protagonists do not "undermine the norm itself" (Solar, 2012, p. 91), they do expose the reactionary foundations of a domineering universalism. Building on Balibar's notion of 'fictive universality', Cinzia Arruzza maintains that "the subjectivity it requires and develops is one that is compatible with normality" (Arruzza, 2017, p. 3), meaning that a possible inclusion into a society could take place through normalization. Biljana Jovanović and her protagonists remain rebels, left out, but also impossible to normalize.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “While attempting to think the subject ‘proletarian’ and the subject ‘woman,’ it appears that the subject itself evades, that it is not univocally defined. It is not easy to describe these heterogeneous pluralities, which have the paradox inscribed inside their definition. (Solar, 2012, pp. 91–92) Unless stated otherwise, the translations to English are mine.
- <sup>2</sup> As the feminist scholar Adriana Zaharijević has put it: “How did everything Western—its variant of feminism included—in a relatively short time-span, come to signify everything progressive, authentic, almost universal in nature? How did we (ourselves) come to believe—against the patent variety of approaches described—that there was either only ‘Socialist Patriarchy’ or that the supposed unofficial islands of feminism were only simulating Western-type feminism? How do nearly all comprehensive feminist theory textbooks so neatly categorize Marxist feminism or socialist feminism without even mentioning possible feminisms groomed in socialist spaces in the very recent past, such as the Yugoslav one?” (Zaharijević, 2017, p. 277-278)
- <sup>3</sup> A history of the school, its contemporary interpretations and the collected bibliography could be found in the two Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung editions: Ante Lešaja’s *Praksis orijentacija, časopis Praxis i Korčulanska ljetna škola (građa)* [Praksis Orientation, Journal Praxis and the Korčula Summer School (collection)] (2014); and the volume *Praxis. Društvena kritika i humanistički socijalizam*, edited by Dragomir Olujić Oluja i Krunoslav Stojaković (2012). Both volumes are available online.
- <sup>4</sup> *Pada avala* has 6 editions (1978, 1979, 1981, 2006, 2016, 2017), while *Psi i ostali* has all together 5 editions (1980, 2007, 2016, 2017 and the 1982 edition in Braille). John K. Cox’s translation of *Psi i ostali* [*Dogs and Oth-*

ers] was published in 2018 by London's Istrosbooks, while his translation of *Pada Avala* [*Avala Is Falling*] was published in 2020 by the CEU Press (see Works cited).

- <sup>5</sup> The play was published in the first number of the journal *ProFemina* in winter issue 1994/1995.
- <sup>6</sup> I thank Dubravka Đurić and Danica Vukićević for their help in clarifying the prize history.
- <sup>7</sup> The bio-bibliographical information is collected from the 2016 anthology (Jovanović, 2016), the Dictionary entry (Lukić, 2006) and the catalogue of the National Library of Serbia.
- <sup>8</sup> *Buntovnica s razlogom* [Rebel with a Cause], *Pada Avala* (5th ed.); *Psi i ostali* (4th ed.). See Works cited for the full reference.
- <sup>9</sup> Source: Ler-Sofronić, Nada. "Odiseja ljudskog identiteta žene" [The Odyssey of the Human Identity of Women]. *Pitanja*, no. 7-8, 1978, pp. 11-28. Transl.: Lóránd, Z.
- <sup>10</sup> Source: Tito, Josip Broz. "Šezdeset godina revolucionarne borbe Saveza Komunističke Jugoslavije" [Sixty years of the revolutionary struggle of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia]. *Žena*, vol. 35, no. 2-3), 1979, p. 2.
- <sup>11</sup> All the quotations from *Pada Avala* are from the 2020 English edition *Avala is Falling* (translated by John K. Cox; see Works cited). The quotations from the novel will be henceforth referenced with: *Avala*.
- <sup>12</sup> The logic of the abject attraction explains this impossibility: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).
- <sup>13</sup> The ending is structured also on the mother-daughter relationship, as a variation of the doppelgänger possibility. Jasmina Lukić has highlighted the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in this novel as theorized by psychoanalytical feminists, for whom the female identity materializes "in the space of the *same*, that enables identification, and not in the space of difference, where the key term of reference is the notion of a lack" (Lukić, 1996, p. 131). Moreover, "there are parallels between the

concept of femininity in our society and the character of depressive illness, and [...] the seeds of depression are already present in the development of the feminine” (Zeul, 1998, p. 60).

- <sup>14</sup> However, the next novel *Psi i ostali* is commonly credited for introducing descriptions of lesbian intercourse into high culture (Lukić, 1996, p. 132).
- <sup>15</sup> All the quotations from the novel *Psi i ostali* are from the 2018 English edition *Dogs and Others* (translated by John K. Cox; see Works cited). For purposes of clarity, the quotations from it will be henceforth referenced with: *Dogs*.
- <sup>16</sup> In the 2018 English edition the original “spodobe” [freaks] is translated into the more favourable “ladies.”
- <sup>17</sup> Also, the direct “fašistički” [fascist] is translated into a more moderate “fascistoid”.
- <sup>18</sup> Her first play *Ulrike Meinhof* (1976) was dedicated to this RAF member.