
“(Post-)Yugoslav Anti-War and LGBT activism”

On May 27, Dr. Bojan Bilić gave the penultimate talk in the MIREES open lecture series, focusing on the genesis of anti-war activist groups in the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav space. Bilić tracked the evolution of these groups from three primary activist groups operating in Yugoslavia in the late 1960s and early 1970s: student movements, environmental activists, and feminist groups. Bilić also touched upon the development of LGBT activism in the Yugoslav space, a topic which will be the primary focus of his research this coming academic year at the University of Amsterdam. Perhaps in an extension of his current role as an academic tutor for the University of Bologna’s MIREES program, Bilić interwove his insights on the methodological and personal challenges of sociological research with the more empirical and analytical aspects of his presentation to provide a sort of send-off to those students who will soon be leaving Forlì to travel and to write their theses.

Throughout the course of the lecture Bilić enumerated five methodological tenets of sociological research that he follows in the attempt remain a responsible and thorough scholar in a field that often lacks hard empirical data. Through an oscillation between the empirical and the methodological, the subjective and the unequivocal, Dr. Bilić presented ideas and information that went beyond talking about either product or practice in isolation; he demonstrated good scholarship by vivisectioning his own research for his students. Permeating this process was an intense sense of personal commitment and passion, attributes necessary for the type of intimate, empathetic engagement essential to successful on-the-ground sociological research. Bilić emphasized the essentiality of discussion and honesty to research, learning, and life, even opening the floor to questions and comments in the middle of his lecture. Bilić’s unique structural approach revealed the essence of thorough collaborative scholarship, which intermingles facts, methods, and the contributions and criticisms of others to great effect. However, in the interest of clarity, this report will first present Bilić’s theoretical and methodological suggestions in order to provide a framework for the further discussion of the research that lent the lecture its title.

In his discussion of methods for research, Bilić focused heavily on the question of voice, looking at it from many angles: we can give voice to something and we can take it away; we can decide to listen to a voice or ignore it; we can skew another’s voice for our own ends. Bilić argued that the role of much of sociology is to make audible those voices that are weak, silent, marginalized, or afraid in order to reveal the true state of affairs. Considering this concept and the others previously mentioned, Bilić proposed the following five imperatives for those carrying out research in sociology:

1. We must always acknowledge and engage with doubts and biases; in order to do this thoroughly we must also disclose and discuss our own motivations for our research.

2. As social scientists, we must ask ourselves who and what has been repressed and marginalized. In doing this, we take responsibility and give voice to those who cannot speak.
3. It is important recognize that politically-focused enterprises (and others, for that matter) never occur in a vacuum.
4. To avoid exoticizing and one-sided interpretations of cultural, political, and historical phenomena, we should carry out comparative research whenever possible.
5. It is crucial to avoid thinking in terms of binary opposites; especially when considering social engagement, criticism of one paradigm should not be equated with the support of its opposite.

In considering these five stipulations as well as his personal experience as a researcher, Bilić introduced a variety of metaphors for sociology, from Bourdieu's conception of sociology as a martial art to Bilić's own understanding of sociology as a type of therapy, a form of coping. Through these five core methodological principles, he also introduced his research on anti-war activism, a topic on which he recently wrote a book entitled *We Were Gasping for Air: (Post-)Yugoslav Anti-War Activism and its Legacy*.

Engaging with his first point – *the necessity of acknowledging doubts and biases*, Bilić urged his students to “own their research” – to appear “vulnerable and resilient and curious” as they move forward in their academic exploration in spite of and thanks to the doubts that arise. He went so far as to suggest that doubts and uncertainties actually enrich research, becoming integral parts of the work that stimulate discussion and communication with others. Bilić used this framework of considering doubts and uncertainties to set the stage for his research. He first established his connection to the topic of research, revealing that biases and personal connections to research are often not only positive, but necessary to really engaging with a topic. As someone who lived through the Yugoslav wars, he felt better equipped to understand the difficulty of sharing experiences that persists when discussing such a recent traumatic event. As a member of a Yugoslavian family – that is to say, a family that was not defined by a single national or ethnic background – he felt to be in a position to raise questions about recent representations of the post-Yugoslavian space.

An underlying assumption of much of the research literature on the post-Yugoslav space that Bilić's background led him to question was the notion of the impossibility of a peaceful Yugoslavian people (the perpetuation of the “ancient hatreds” argument). He argued that much of the literature has been limited by the boundaries of relatively newly formed nation states, producing a kind of “methodological nationalism” – a new focus on borders – in the way we understand the post-Yugoslavian space. Bilić sees this to be a trend in both academia and in politics, where national governments' revisionist reinterpretations of the past only serve to generate confusion and instability among such a newly compartmentalized people. This is clearly a problem of representation; Bilić suggested that these pessimistic outlooks are the result of ignoring the majority of the common people and focusing on the elite.

From this concept, we move to the second essential consideration: *who and what has been repressed?* It is through this lens that Bilić truly introduced the focus of his research. According to Bilić, due to the focus on big people (politicians) and big concepts (statehood, national identity), grassroots organizing among smaller communities has frequently been ignored in Eastern European studies. Taking representation into consideration, these community activists have been repressed for far too long. It was with this view that Bilić undertook to write an alternative history, an analysis of a community and an ethos from the bottom up, exploring a topic that neither academia nor the

media have addressed in a satisfying manner, namely the cross-national collaboration of anti-war activism. In his exploration, Bilić sought not to analyze the development of any particular groups, but rather to find the places from which anti war groups arose.

We have reached a crux of the argument; *these political groups did not begin in a vacuum*, but rather arose, as Bilić's third point would suggest, from existing activist groups. The protests of pro-socialist student groups rallying against the injustices of the Yugoslav regime in 1968 led to the formation of the Praxis school, famous for organizing the famous Korčula Summer School. This collaboration evolved into a small but relevant transnational anti-war effort both before and during the wars of the 1990s. Environmental activists followed a similar pattern, campaigning against nuclear energy and failures to maintain constitutional standards for the protection of the environment, joining the anti-war effort, in particular carrying out anti-eviction solidarity actions. Already, we can see that Bilić is committed to the *comparative research approach*, his fourth imperative for sociological research. Presented with examples of disparate groups drawn to work toward the same goal in the circumstances preceding the Yugoslav Wars forces us to realize the possibility of transnational collaboration in the Balkans, while also taking note of their many differences.

Feminist movements, too, became involved with anti-war activism while also coping with significant changes following the breakup of Yugoslavia. Under the Communist ideology of Yugoslavia, great strides had been made in gender equality and women's rights; constitutional rights were guaranteed to women in 1946, and abortions legalized in 1951. In this environment, women activists began to address the shortcomings and hypocrisy of the Socialist regime, campaigning for government reform. Here it is important to note Bilić's fifth point; *disagreeing with one point of view does not mean supporting the other*. In fact, these women were campaigning for a more truly socialist government. In any case, following the breakup of Yugoslavia, national governments perpetrated severe patriarchal backlash, robbing women of the rights they had previously enjoyed. As feminist organizing continued, anti-war initiatives such as the Belgrade-based Women in Black arose. Groups such as these carried out some extremely brave actions; Women in Black (from Serbia) stood in solidarity, unarmed, with the victims of the Srebrenica massacre.

Their motivations may have diverged in some places, but there is no denying the fact that these three disparate groups all joined the same effort against what is today one of the most scarring, difficult-to-overcome conflicts of our age. Their efforts, though unsuccessful, are still significant in the way they represent a portion of the population that, contrary to popular and academic expectation, was indeed able to collaborate across national and ethnic boundaries in the post-Yugoslav space.

The collaborative, tolerant atmosphere of anti-war groups operated as a refuge for people who were "different in some way." This included members of the LGBT community, who in such an environment began to form activist groups of their own. Dr. Bilić did not spend long on this topic, as it will be the focus of his upcoming research, although he did define his primary questions, hoping to explore the groups' emergence as well as their representation, both by countries in troubled social and economic times and by NGOs. Bilić also aims to investigate the relationship between LGBT activism and the Europeanization process, considering what we currently think of as the collective values of the EU.

In his continual evaluation of the role of sociological research in the world, much of Bilić's lecture culminated in the suggestion that academic work in fields such as his own can constitute a sort of continuation of activism. In this process, activism and academia enter into a sort of symbiotic

relationship, in which one fuels and stimulates while the other reflects and analyzes. Carrying out research of this sort, Bilić noted, can be incredibly difficult. In order to gather a diverse array of information and to have a sufficiently comparative perspective, Bilić relied on a “triangulating” research approach, combining many types of research methods, from interviews to activist communications to archival research. Of these types of research, Bilić noted that finding the type of intimacy necessary to conduct an interview was often difficult, as researchers, having less experience than those they interview, can often seem detached from the subject they are researching. In light of this difficulty, Bilić offered two encouraging ideas: all evidence, even a snubbed interview request, is valuable and meaningful; and in the end, if you can find a way to demonstrate your passion for what you research, it will not only enable you to connect with the people you are studying, but to yourself and your concerns – sociology as therapy, in practice.

Bojan Bilić very clearly wove an interesting narrative and shed light on the oft-ignored Yugoslav anti-war movement. But perhaps more importantly, in doing so, he revealed himself and offered invaluable lessons to the scholars of MIREES who are preparing to enter the world of academia (and perhaps, for some, activism) more or less on their own. The multiple benefits were not lost on lecture attendees, who asked engaging questions, ranging from the personal to the conceptual. One student sparked the conversation about the difficulty of interviews while another considered the ethical conundrum created by appropriating another person’s struggle for different purposes. Lively discussion followed, comprising topics including the importance and difficulty of collective and individual memory of the Yugoslav wars in attempts at reconciliation, as well as the discussion of growing solidarity in the region.

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