

## Interview with Bogdan Bogdanović

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« FLOWER OF STONE », BELGRADE, SERBIA



**Bogdan Bogdanović** was born in 1922 in Belgrade.

He was involved in the Yugoslav resistance from 1941. During his long post-war career, Bogdanović was commissioned by Tito as architect of more than 20 monuments to the victims of war and fascism. Among his major works, Jasenovac's «Flower of Stone» and the Vukovar memorial (destroyed during the Serb-Croat conflict) were recognised internationally.

As well as an architect of Yugoslav national memory, Bogdan Bogdanović is an original thinker on cities. He taught «urbanology» at the University of Belgrade and has published several essays on the aesthetic, historical and philosophical aspects of cities. Most of these have been translated into German (Wieser / Zsolnay Verlag).

Bogdanović became mayor of Belgrade in 1982. His mandate ended during the rise of Slobodan Milosevic, and he later became a dissident. His frequent denunciations of nationalism, and in particular its violent and «anti-urban» face, earned him hostility from the government. At the outbreak of war he was forced into exile.

Alexandre Mirlesse met him in the working class neighbourhood of Favoriten, in Vienna, where he has lived with his wife since 1993.

**Alexandre Mirlesse** has completed an internship at *Notre Europe*. He is a student at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris.

Interview conducted for *Notre Europe*'s research program on European identity, within the frame of which Alexandre has embarked upon a long trip across Europe.

A stranger arriving in Mitrovica, an industrial town in the north of Kosovo, will likely not notice the odd form of the “Monument to Serb and Albanian partisans”, perched on a distant hill. It was built by the architect Bogdan Bogdanovic more than thirty years ago.

The construction is not without interest. Designed to represent the overcoming of national divisions in the struggle for a shared ideal, it was meant to bear witness to the peaceful coexistence of two communities in post-war Yugoslavia. Mitrovica was perfectly suited to such symbolism. Once a medieval citadel of the young kingdom of Serbia, later a prosperous Ottoman stronghold, the town attracted a multinational labour force in the 19th century; descendants of these immigrants won glory in the anti-fascist resistance of the second world war.

The architect of Mitrovica’s monument could surely not imagine that the peaceful course of the Ibar river, today declared a “trust zone” by UNMIK, would one day become a sort of no-man’s land, dividing northern Serb neighbourhoods from southern Albanian ones; nor that the rich mining area of Zvečan -- in former days the motor of industrial development across the region -- would become a point of contention between Serbia and Kosovo, each anxious to assure its economic independence.

When asked about the mysterious concrete arch, which all but casts its immense shadow over their heads, Mitrovica’s inhabitants are unsure of themselves. At times seen as a “communist memorial”, at others as a “monument to the glory of Milosevic”, the “barbecue” (as it is known) is above all an object of indifference on both sides of town. It is clear that the monument is no longer a symbol of the times; for this, look instead to the silent face-off between the Albanian eagles and Yugoslav tricolours on apartment buildings either side of the river.

In this faintly absurd situation, one searches in vain for the “urbanity” praised - mournfully - by Bogdan Bogdanovic in the following pages. The promenades of the Serb quarter, once known as “Dolce Vita”, are now deserted: the era when snipers lurked on the other side of the river is clearly too recent a memory.

Even the French Gendarmerie, which patrols the sector for KFOR, barely disturbs the silence after nightfall. And conversations, begun amicably enough over local wine, always risk degenerating, at the expense of civility, good faith and tolerance - those “urbane” virtues par excellence.

Leaving Mitrovica, one is perhaps tempted to look up again at the strange monument stuck to the mountainside, a fossil of the 20th century and a relic of lost unity. Obsolete, yet intact. Or almost: the monument’s copper plating has mysteriously disappeared, probably ripped off and sold by weight in one of the area’s flea markets...

## **In your mind is there something that binds Europeans together?**

I often wonder. To me, at the present moment, Europe is still a collection of French people, Germans, Italians; the classic civilisations. Do the new Europeans understand what Europe is, in a general sense? And what should we make of the Polish President and his outdated nationalist fantasies?

## **These “new Europeans” are sometimes also the most enthusiastic.**

I must explain my thinking. In Europe there are Romanians, Bulgarians, who, emotionally, all feel very European – but to belong to Europe demands a compromise between memories, between old national ideologies.

Take the example of Serbia. If you ask anyone in the street: “Are you for Europe?”, you will inevitably get a “yes”. But if you go on and ask: “Should Ratko Mladic be delivered<sup>1</sup>?”, in that case the answer will be “no”!

Europe is a jumble of nationalisms, and these have not yet been tamed. The work of constructing a new Europe is honourable, but difficult...

## **Perhaps, as a way of getting round the “national” prism, we might think in terms of cities and their history? Many Central European cities were meeting places for different nationalities.**

One thing is certain: providence destined Belgrade to become a town of this kind.

I think that a desirable Europe is a Europe of mixture: of languages, nations, traditions. This is something that is not understood in Serbia. Belgrade is quite a large city, in population – currently two million inhabitants – and size, but it has become uni-national. That is not right.

A town with such ethnic and geographic qualities was made to be a great European metropolis. Look at the map of Europe: a large city is needed at this exact location. The Serbs have never understood their luck: this part of their territory, where five great rivers come together, is their greatest asset.

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<sup>1</sup> To the tribunal at the Hague, an EU demand.

They have wasted this asset by allowing it to become mono-national. An exclusively Serb Belgrade is unnatural. Belgrade was Turkish and then Austrian; it has the history of an international city. To have such a town on its territory is really good fortune for a small country like Serbia; it's a gift from the Gods! And yet...

## **And yet?**

And yet many of my Belgrade friends do not understand this. And I'm not talking about nationalists, who are disturbed.

## **Other towns of the former Yugoslavia were “destined” to be multicultural...**

Yes this was the case of Sarajevo, even if the communities lived –alas- in a permanent state of rivalry.

Recently I met a couple of young people in the street in Sarajevo –former students. The girl refused to shake my hand, as this was forbidden by the rules of Islam. This type of thing is absolutely new for us, as our Yugoslavian Muslims were actually Slavs, with a European mentality and a civil spirit. In fact, they were even more European than, for instance, the Serbs, as they had spent a century inside the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The influence of the Eastern Orthodox church has increased, too. However, neither Belgrade nor Serbia has ever been home to the religiously-inspired sort of nationalism. The local Orthodox church has always been rather moderate, even homely. But now a terrible new phenomenon has appeared in Belgrade: a new version of Orthodox culture, similar to that in Russia – even if the Russian are themselves truly deeply devout.

I don't know what caused this development. But now, at the theatre, ladies cover their legs...

In any case, my Yugoslavian patriotism was a multinational patriotism: the beauty and the richness of that country was its multiculturalism. As architect of monuments across the country, I had the opportunity to get to know, the situation of Macedonians, Croats, Bosnian, and the Hungarian and Slovak minorities...

**Yes, in your case multiculturalism was also pluralism – a conflict of memories, even. How did you go about designing commemorative monuments to speak equally to different national groups which had fought each other during the war?**

Above all, the majority of my monuments were in honour of victims, not victors. As they commemorated the pain of a country's civil war, there was little risk that they would be hijacked by national triumphalism.

Beyond that, my philosophy was very abstract, inspired by the ancient dualist thinking of good and evil. My constructions represented the struggle of these two principles, something that everyone could interpret differently: it was not for me to define good or evil.

And to be perfectly frank, I must say that my monuments... were not real monuments. At least, they did not have the appearance of monuments. Rather, they were stories, interesting objects, fantastical ones, and much visited, especially by young people.

There were always children playing on these constructions, even when it was dangerous. One day, a young Bosniak paid me the most wonderful compliment I could receive, when she admitted – a little embarrassed – that her parents had conceived her on my monument.

How was this possible? Well, because my monuments were very archaic.

**What do you mean by that?**

They are archaic. They might as well be Mesopotamian. To get around the finer points of nationalism, which always wants to know if such-and-such a shape is its own or not, I designed my work in such a way that it might have been artefacts from the origins of civilisation. I think that this was the winning recipe for these monuments: I always avoided national imperatives.

**Could you imagine a European commemorative monument?**

I prefer not to imagine it. I dream of a Europe without monuments. By that I mean: without monuments of death and disaster. Perhaps philosophical constructions: monuments to love, to joy, to jokes and laughter... or else

symbolic constructions... and everything that expresses the desire for a civilisation without monuments.

It's also difficult to say it, but I must admit: I didn't enjoy building these monuments. I did it because it was my duty, and because I saw that I could meet the challenge in an anti-monumental way. I would not have been able to do this in another socialist country.

Tito, in all truth, did not have much artistic discernment. But he understood that my monuments were not Russian monuments (at the time, unfortunately, all the best sculptors had adopted the Russian formula: headless bodies, wounded figures, stretchers...). When he saw me, a bizarre man with a surrealist biography, ready to build him constructions which weren't Russian, he said, "*Let him*".

### **What do you think of the situation in Kosovo? Should Serbia accept its independence?**

My family, on both sides, comes from there. But when my ancestors left their land in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for them there was no question of going back one day. A lot of Serbs left Kosovo in this way, selling their land to Albanians for a good price, and many of today's nationalists have never set a foot in the place.

Serbs must not forget that when Kosovo was the cradle of the Serb Kingdom, Belgrade was Hungarian! Since then, Serbs have moved towards the north. There is nothing tragic in that.

The only problem is these Byzantine churches, really beautiful and interesting. But this difficulty could be settled with an international solution – just what the Serbs have never wanted to accept. And this in the name of the Orthodox church, which now demands that Serbs dominate a country they have abandoned!

Besides, there is a whole mythology surrounding this subject. As an architecture student, I travelled in Kosovo. I saw a good number of these monasteries: they are beautiful, certainly, but nothing more than that.

### **Your opinion is not shared by the majority of Serbs.**

You know, I've always been a free-thinker. And when the former communists metamorphosed into long-bearded Orthodox nationalists, they accused me

of being cosmopolitan. Milosevic's propaganda was unleashed against me. Two or three times a week there were attacks on me in the press, accompanied by big photos. People recognised me in the street and insulted me: "You're a traitor to Serbia!"

### **You chose to go into exile at the beginning of the 1990s. How did you come to settle in Vienna, where you have lived for nearly fifteen years now?**

My first idea was to head to Paris, which is almost natural for a Serb. But we had very difficult relations with the nationalist Serb emigration officials, who were terrible, pro-fascist.

In Vienna I found a "Yugoslav" community. There are a lot of Croats, Macedonians, Bosniaks and Serbs (a few less of these). Most of them have stayed Yugoslav here. Even if there are a few war veterans.

And then there is another link between Vienna and Belgrade: the Danube, which I am in love with.

### **Do you think that a Danubian Europe exists?**

There is probably no Danubian Europe. But the Danube is certainly a European river, the European river.

### **What does the Danube evoke for you?**

When I was three or four years old, I only ever asked two questions: "*What is it?*" and "*Where am I?*" One day my parents took me up to the fortress of Belgrade and showed me the two rivers which joined: "*Look, my son, that's the Sava, that's the Danube*". And I wondered, "*What's a Sava? What's a Danube?*"

Later I understood that a river could move, when at the age of four, I went fishing with my father and I felt the current when dipping my hand in the water. It was cold, and my father scolded me. That was when I understood that a river could also be dangerous.

Then there was the *Donauschiff*. This was a luxury boat for Western tourists, which went down the Danube. We would see it pass every second night, from

left to right – that’s to say, from Europe towards the Black Sea and Asia- all lit up and lavishly decorated. Under the lanterns we could see the faces of the rich Europeans of the day, coming from countries that we didn’t know.

I could go on and on. But all that means nothing to the new Belgraders, who have arrived en masse in the last twenty years. They cannot even distinguish the Sava from the Danube!

The Serbs are not an urban people. And what was urban in Belgrade has today emigrated or gone into exile, in Paris, London or New York.

The Serbs cannot be a part of an urban Europe.

### **What is urbanity?**

It is one of the highest abstractions of the human spirit. One can be urban in a little village. To me, to be an urban man means to be neither a Serb nor a Croat, and instead to behave as though these distinctions no longer matter, as if they stopped at the gates of the city.

### **In your book *Die Stadt und der Tod*, you describe Europe as the “civilisation of towns”.**

Yes. It’s the whole world, even, that is becoming a world of towns. Last year, for the first time, the urban population overtook that of the countryside. Cities are the future of the world.

But the future of the world is also a “civilisation of cities”... without the cities. Today towns join together: look at Japan. The classic town, with its edges can no longer exist. And there are no longer differences from one town to another. I think that the era of distinct, individual cities has ended.

The cities of the future will also be great metropolitan areas; it will no longer be possible for them to be mono-national. A city of twenty million people is by definition inclusive! We could perhaps look for parallels in High Antiquity and the Roman world, which assimilated a large number of languages and culture.

## **Can urbanity survive in such cities?**

That's a very important, and difficult, question. In the Far East we are seeing the appearance of very large cities. I was lucky enough to see Shanghai in the 1960s, when it was still a Chinese and European town – the Shanghai of Marlene Dietrich. Now Shanghai is entirely modernised, fantastically cosmopolitan, with a unified style of architecture; beautiful buildings and very interesting ideas. But you no longer feel the cultural heterogeneity with regard to tradition and past.

Is this a good or bad thing? I don't presume to judge. Perhaps it really is our future. But what will happen in these cities of twenty million people? What cultural and mental models will emerge? How will these towns see themselves? What will become of the mythology of the town in a globalised world? I don't know and I don't wish to get mixed up in these questions. But in any case, das klingt nicht besonders schön<sup>2</sup>...

## **Do you think that European cities are really affected by these phenomena?**

Most of them are escaping it, in particular the towns of Germanic Europe. European towns are no longer growing exponentially. And I think that Europe will manage, for another generation or two, to keep its towns relatively small and culturally specific, each with its historic profile and psychological profile, many of which are already defined in great literature. Because European self-fantasizing really does exist: a town can tell its own story, it has memories, dreams, myths.

We must set about ensuring that this situation continues. We Europeans have, with good reason, a sentimental attachment to the history of our towns, to their traditions, their specialities: towns of fashions, towns of commerce, etc. European urbanity is better preserved in Europe than that of China, and this allows us to continue conceiving the town and shape it rationally.

## **Is it still possible to imagine a utopian ideal of the city?**

It is difficult to think an ideal town, more beautiful, more elegant, more rational and functional than the others, in this globalising world.

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<sup>2</sup> « I don't like the look of it » in German in the text.

The solution is perhaps the *Stadtstädte*, these towns within towns. In the middle of an urban area, there are always certain places where one can find more shared features, shared memories.

But the main problem of civilisation is cars, and the madness of travelling tens of kilometres, hundreds even, to go to work each day. If only we could find rational ways to reduce these distances, that would be a real improvement. Perhaps the oil crisis will make this inevitable.

To think like the utopians of the past, you would have to imagine a civilisation driven by the needs of human feet, where civilised people can live in a confined space without needing to travel every day.

### **More generally, what do you wish for Europe's younger generations?**

To rediscover the history of Rome, and to try to answer the question, "How did the Roman world manage to die over a period of three centuries?"

Now that things have returned to quiet normality in Europe, we must try to preserve this situation for as long as possible by preventing the appearance of new ogres.

I note with great pleasure that young Europeans do not know much history. A little while ago at a conference I met a young man, dressed like a hippie. He approached me and asked, "*Do you know who I am? I am the great-grandson of Potiorek.*"

Potiorek was the Austrian general who triggered the First World War by attacking Serbia. He was beaten in a few short months, which remains to this day a great glory for the Serb army. And the great-grandson adds, "*You did a great job of kicking him out!*"

We laughed together, and I felt as if I were witnessing a new Europe. This story of ours, which could after all happen all over again, had suddenly been transformed into farce.

But this conversation would have been absolutely impossible in Belgrade, where bookshop windows still sport photographs of Serb military heroes. It's pathological and outdated, this cult of military glory. Can you imagine living in

a civilisation which is prisoner to the twentieth century? We cannot contemplate that in Europe.

Over there, most young people live in a closed world. They have not seen foreign cities. My generation, which went through four years of German occupation and then three years of Stalinism, needed a decade to get back to reality. Today's young people have lived through twenty years of lies. For them, the return to reality will be a very long process.

### **And how do you see the future of Europe?**

I remain a man of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I don't try to understand the 21<sup>st</sup>. I hardly have the right to think about what will happen; I didn't even understand what happened in my own century.

### **Can one define “Man of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”?**

It is difficult to come up with a single formula to describe the Europe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – except that it was a monstrous century.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a sad, dangerous century. In that time, Europe was chopped up into national boxes, with hermetic front lines. Half of my school friends perished in the war; the rest, in becoming communists or anti-communists, fought each other.

All that I can say is this: I saw it, I lived it, and I didn't understand it.

### **Those evils all have a European origin...**

I dare say that all the world's evils are European. But today Europe must have it to other to invent evils. As Racine said: *“Plût aux Dieux que ce fût le dernier de ses crimes!”*