

Two Serbias and their Vision of Europe: A Discursive Perspective

Jelena Đureinović

Abstract:

In her recent book *Divided We Stand: Discourses on Identity in 'First' and 'Other' Serbia* Ana Russell-Omaljev offers a study of the political discourses and divisions within contemporary Serbian society while referencing the discursive construction of Europe and Serbian identity. Employing discourse analysis and the concepts of 'Self' and 'Other' from critical constructivist theory, the book's aim is to contribute to an understanding of 'othering' within Serbia and in relation to Europe. Encompassing a long time span, from 1987 to 2012, the book provides an insight into the dynamics of politics and identity in Serbian society.

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Since the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, Serbian society has been facing many challenges in its process of the delayed transition. Dealing with the past, more precisely with guilt and responsibility for the wars of the Yugoslav succession, and the path towards the European Union membership have been the prominent subjects of the public discourses. These topics have also been the points of division between the so-called 'First' and 'Other' Serbias, representing different perspectives on Serbian politics, history, and identity, which emerged during the 1990s but remain relevant to this day.

Defining the 'First' and the 'Other' Serbia as “two responses to the idea of the modern political community, which offer two different narratives of Serbian collective identity” (p.1), this recent monograph by Ana Russell-Omaljev examines these two types of discourses and the interrelationships between them. Placing Serbia in a wider international context, Russell-Omaljev is also interested in the perceptions and discursive constructions of Europe originating in the discourses of 'First' and 'Other' Serbia. She connects these with the discursive construction of Serbian identity and argues that “contestation of Europe results in the extreme contestation of national identity” (p.8).

The opening chapter outlines the main aims of the book, providing concise introduction to the complex dynamics of the contemporary discourses on Europe and national identity in Serbia. Although the introduction awakens very high expectations, it also clearly presents the limitations of the book and what it does not take into consideration. Acknowledging the value of the bottom-up approach to her research problem, the book focuses rather on the public sphere. More importantly, the author clearly separates her research from the topics touching on the wars in Yugoslavia or the origins of Serbian nationalism, which is what a reader might expect in the relation to 'First' and 'Other' Serbia.

The first chapter is dedicated to the more detailed elaboration of the theoretical and methodological approach. Concerned with the public sphere, Russell-Omaljev employs critical discourse analysis and combines it with the concept of the 'Self' and the 'Other' from critical constructivist theory. The main primary sources are the publications, namely the political journals and newspapers representing 'First' or 'Other' Serbia and their relevant actors, rather

than official government documents and discourses. Russell-Omaljev understands relevant actors as those who have held important social, political, or group positions and are prominent in media, publishing regularly on the topics related to the book's main subject, belonging to what she calls political and cultural elites. Although the actors are defined very clearly, she focuses on their texts, limiting the research solely to their publishing rather than their activities and roles in the society or the state.

Chapter two offers a brief historical context, starting with Slobodan Milošević's coming to power in 1987 and ending with 2012. Primarily directed to those not familiar with Serbian history and politics, the chapter is concerned with the period of Milošević's rule, the opposition to it, and the problem of the 'delayed transition' in post-Milošević Serbia.

The chapters that follow deal with the empirical segment of her research. Chapter three goes deeper in the origins and the evolution of discourses since the beginning of Yugoslavia's dissolution, at the same time analysing the vocabulary, prevailing themes, and historical narratives within 'First' and 'Other' Serbia discourses. The author rightfully recognizes two main topics of dispute between the two in the post-Milošević era, the first being the victimhood of Serbia versus its responsibility and guilt for the Yugoslav wars and the second the opposing attitudes towards Europe and the West.

Chapter four focuses on the construction of Europe in the identity narratives in Serbia and the notion of inclusive and exclusive discourses. In this chapter, Russell-Omaljev first covers the representations of Europe by 'First' Serbia, as Eurosceptic and regarding Russia as Serbia's closest ally and then she moves on to the meanings of Europe as promoted by the 'Other' Serbia. The chapter reveals very interesting interrelations between the idea of Europe and Serbian identity. In this sense, the author shows the 'othering' of the West as directly related to the notion of superiority and positive self-presentation of Serbia. As opposed to that, the dominant discourses of 'Other' Serbia could be defined in terms of a negative self-presentation, portraying Serbia as inferior and assigning positive attributes to the idea of Europe.

Chapter five moves on to two specific case studies. The media debates in 2002 and 2003 serve as examples of the fractions within 'Other' Serbia and the reference to 'Other' Serbia actors in the 'First' Serbia discourses. The chapter does not depart from the main aims of the book, so the analysis refers to political and cultural identities, which arose from the debates. Russell-Omaljev argues that there is a highly negative identification in the discourses of 'First' and 'Other' Serbia when they refer to the 'Other'. As she summarizes it in the introduction to the following chapter, the two strategies of attributing positive values to the 'Self' and negative values to the 'Other' play important roles in identity formation (p.209). Chapter six analyses these strategies in their radical manifestation.

Although the book is concerned only with the period ending in 2012, the conclusion provides the update to what has been occurring since the Serbian Progressive Party coming to power in 2012. She summarizes the developments, showing how the discourse on Europe changed,

interpreting the EU accession pragmatically as a reality, which can serve Serbian national interests. Finally, Russell-Omaljev finishes with the outlook in the potential research perspectives on the topic.

Throughout the book, Russell-Omaljev perceives the debates and divisions in Serbia as a unique case, but the book lacks a comparative perspective at least with the other post-Yugoslav countries in order to support the exceptionalist argument. Nevertheless, in the analysis of the very complex issue, Russell-Omaljev includes diverse aspects of the 'othering' within Serbia and in relation to Europe, such as gender, the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Kosovo, and Serbian foreign policy. Although there are overlaps and repetitions between the book segments, the structure is made clearer by repeatedly outlining the main aims and referring to the previous chapters to avoid confusion. The historical background and explanations provided by each chapter will help those not familiar with the issue understand the empirical analysis.

In her analysis of the discourses and interrelations of First and Other Serbia, Russell-Omaljev successfully avoids the trap of understanding and constructing 'First' and 'Other' Serbias as containing fixed identities, meanings, and actors. Instead, the book examines how these are discursively framed. Moreover, the book addresses the symbiosis of 'First' and 'Other' Serbia and the overlaps between the two as well as their actors and how they have positioned themselves within different discourses at different times. Encompassing a wider time span, this study is also a valuable resource for those interested in the development of these discourses and the existing continuities with and differences between the 1990s.