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The Challenge of Plural Identity

Every aspect of a person's life is accompanied by a corresponding sense and awareness of his or her cultural, social and spiritual existence. The complexity and authenticity of that existence is reflected both in highlighting distinction from others, and in seeking to establish communication and achieve togetherness with others. The awareness that one belongs to a community implies the awareness of being different from other communities. If the profoundly antinomic human need for both distinctiveness and togetherness is considered from several perspectives, the issue of identity becomes placed in a broader context, which then requires an appropriate approach to the understanding and definition of identity as a complex determinant of a person's individual and collective existence. Thus, to identify crucial aspects of that complexity within the scope of a dynamic theoretical model seems to be especially relevant to understanding and solving the problem of each particular identity in a multiethnic and multinational cultural space.

Although individuals or communities tend to offer an embellished self-image, the reality of that image is always somewhat different. Our self-image clearly expresses our identity, but what we truly are is expressive not only of what we think of ourselves, but also of how we are perceived by others. The importance of others for a realistic self-image has its historical and anthropological dimensions. Ever since his appearance on the historical stage, by being what he is, man has shown the capacity for being something else. However, what man is, and the possibility of becoming something more by expanding the boundaries of his own potentials, has been overshadowed by regressive periods of his existence which warn that he can also be less than himself. The dynamic theoretical model of identity involves the examination of the interactional aspect of its major constituents which indicate a complex reality different from the one shown by idealized self-images.¹ In order to recognize the reality of any identity, it is necessary to

¹ Cf. V. Popović, "Zlo i strepnja u kulturi" in *Tamna strana ljudske prirode*, ed. B. Jovanović (Belgrade: Dom kulture Studentski grad, 1992), 49.

take into consideration the implicit diversity of its extant but frequently unacknowledged elements. As gender identity always involves the presence of the anima in masculine, or the animus in female identity, so do religious, ethnic and national identities involve the existence of an unacknowledged inner otherness.

Seen as a community's awareness of itself and a sense of sameness that it constantly expresses as continuous memory in spite of all change it may be subject to,² identity involves identification, and thus may be defined as a dynamic process rather than as a fixed and unchangeable category.³ For this reason, our inheritance is only a starting point for acquiring characteristics that make us what we are, and for rendering it possible for us to achieve determined goals in our lifetime. Life's response to existential qualms is our identity which entails our personal responsibility for what we are. The view of the process of identity formation as an increasing differentiation, the extent of which depends on the process of gaining awareness of relevant social, spiritual and cultural factors,⁴ shows that identity presupposes a considerably broader and deeper psycho-social reality associated with the existence of inner otherness. That reality is related to the fact that a community is not only what it assumes to be, but also what it does not admit, which is part of the negative aspect of its present and past experiences. The bright and dark sides of its being manifest themselves as the conscious and unconscious sides of its existence. Since the consciousness of contemporary man implies his previous experience in shedding light on the unconscious, the traditional contents of culture often represent the suppressed part of his actual cultural behaviour.

If some findings about individual identity were applied to collective identity within the outlined theoretical model, then it would be possible to delineate its hidden, suppressed and unacknowledged aspect more precisely. Jung's "unconscious identity"⁵ or Ronald Laing's "complementary identity" or "identity of the other"⁶ highlight the necessity for a more thorough understanding of identity which, in addition to its ego aspect and its rational dimension, also involves the other, insufficiently known side. Hence,

² Žan-Mari Domenak, *Evropa: kulturni izazov* [Jean-Marie Domenaque, Europe: Cultural Challenge], (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1991), 19.

³ *McMillan Dictionary of Anthropology*, ed. C. Seymour-Smith (London: McMillan 1986), 145.

⁴ E. Erikson, *Omladina, kriza, identifikacija* [Identity-Youth & Crisis] (Titograd: Grafički zavod, 1976), 180, 185.

⁵ K. G. Jung, *Psihološki tipovi* [Psychological Types], vol. 5 of *Selected Works* (Novi Sad, Matica srpska, 1977), 481.

⁶ R. D. Laing, *Jastvo i drugi* [*Self and Others*] (Novi Sad: Svetovi, 1989), 80-81.

what we believe we are is not identical with our real identity, the latter also comprising something we are unwilling to admit. This difference represents one's potential for coming closer to oneself, and the course of that process is characterized by a growing awareness of oneself and of connections established with others. Although identity has no power to generate differences, the contrast between the abovementioned aspects of identity is displayed in a potential which can be either positive or negative. If accompanied by a growing self-awareness, the negativity is manifested as a transformation factor. If suppressed, however, this negativity becomes a factor of its own unaccomplishment, and may turn into an impediment to a full self-confirmation.

Deep-rooted determinants of identity may be distinguished in the integral assessment of a collective being, which, apart from its manifest, idealized side, also comprises a hidden, insufficiently expressed content. While taking for granted various markers of identity, one should not lose sight of its concealed traits determining the reality of a community. Therefore a people, a nation or a state can be viewed from a broader anthropological perspective offering an insight into the significance of real identity. Constructed on the principle of demarcation from others, identity, or its construct, is relativized by the discovery of otherness within the self. Discovering and acknowledging one's own negativity and radical otherness is manifested in the need for a broader concept of identity, and in that sense its manifested reality displays only one important dimension.

If the complex image of collective identity is to be adequately comprehended in the context of realistic facts, then the possibility of perceiving its covert essence determines the wholeness and truthfulness of the image one is attempting to create. Although the acknowledgement of one's own otherness brings one closer to the Other at the level of plural identity, the suppressed and unacknowledged residue of historical and cultural experience frequently gives rise to anachronistic and reactionary occurrences. Negative experience, as our otherness, unconsciously confirms the former identity of a community constructed within the frame of a culture pattern, which is to be distinguished from the concept of cultural pattern.⁷ Raising this blind force of otherness to consciousness means taking control of it in the context of a particular cultural pattern in which the attitude towards the historical past is developed from the standpoint of the present. When that attitude is expressed by means of an inappropriate cult, then it becomes a vehicle for venerating the past, and the latter inevitably turns into an obstacle to the future. Being what you are also means becoming that through constant self-confirmation under changeable circumstances. Being the same in the same

⁷ B. Jovanović, *Karakter kao sudbina* (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 2004), 78.

manner in the course of constant change throughout lifetime amounts to being mummified, or dead. Since each new context brings into question the former meaning of identity markers, under new circumstances identity factors face the challenge of conformation and confirmation.

Although an implicit principle of human identity, plurality has become the evident basis of contemporary civilization. On that basis, everyone is acknowledged authenticity, or the possibility to exist in their own unique manner distinguishing them from others, in the same fashion as the existence of others confirms mutual differences. Differing from us, others become complementary to our common human experience displaying its real significance in the process of individuation of a person and a community. Seen as a factor of supplementation and completeness, the complementarity of identity involves the Other as a constituent of the Self. Acknowledging the Other in one's own Self is the basis for respecting the Other who is different from us. The importance of perceiving other significant factors of self-identity is reflected in the creation of a tolerant attitude towards others that we share our living space with but who are different from us. In that sense, it is important to shed light on, or raise awareness of, the unacknowledged, unknown aspect of identity. The consequences of negative historical experiences in the multiethnic Balkan region undoubtedly increase the difficulty of adequately determining collective identity within the context of current European and global integration processes. The outlined theoretical tenets bearing on the confirmation of collective identity, on the basis of which this problem is approached, can prove their effectiveness on the example of the Balkans.

The depth of the blurred Balkans

Given that every epoch establishes its own value system, the formation of a European identity in present times is a response to the issue of defining the profile of the Old World's civilization. That response is at the same time a solution to contradictions facing the European states in the global context, and a way of going beyond their negative historical heritages dating back from the periods of wars and intolerance. In integration processes, present-day Europe is consolidating in terms of civilization, and distancing itself from the negative past experiences. Economic stability rests upon real relations between the member states of the Union. However, in some parts of Europe, such as the Balkans or South-Eastern Europe, the past lingers on in a negative sense. As a result of ethnic enmities, this relatively small geographic region saw the creation of a large number of small states, latently in conflict with each other. Therefore, derived from the term "Balkans", the notion of "balkanization" acquired a negative connotation at the end of

World War One denoting the fragmentation of geographic and political entities along ethnic boundaries and the resultant emergence of small and potentially feuding states. Burdened by the Ottoman historical legacy,⁸ and fights over it, the reality of the twentieth-century Balkans was marked by a tendency towards national hegemonies or the unification of kindred nations.⁹ Self-confirmation of nationally homogenized entities through the achievement of state independence revealed limitations as regards the attitude towards the construction of a more general identity. The attempt at creating a Yugoslav identity is very telling in many respects. The period from the proclamation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to the so-called AVNOJ Yugoslavia to the so-called third Yugoslavia, has shown that the state unification was not sufficient to effect a real unification and form a common identity which could prevent negative separatist and nationalist processes. Those who saw the common state as a trans-historical formation or, more precisely, as a transitional state structure on their path towards their own national sovereignty, had sufficient initial motivation to dismantle it. Therefore, it was not realistic to expect that they would sincerely participate in the overcoming of shared difficulties in the period of transition.¹⁰ Although the notion of balkanization referred to regressive socio-cultural processes, it was also employed to denote a potential threat of disintegration that a region or a state might face. However, this term has become the most adequate designation of the processes which took place in the Balkans in the 1990s. With regard to the integration processes simultaneously evolving in Europe, the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and the creation of several smaller states can therefore be identified with events in a historical *camera obscura*. In view of this fundamental antithesis between Europe and the Balkans, the contrasting image could be supplemented by other opposite notions, such as order and chaos, organized and disorganized, rational and irrational. In order to overcome these contrasts and prevent the balkanization of Europe, it is necessary to make the Balkans European, that is, to implement European standards and criteria in this region.

From the perspective of historical experience as expressed in the formation of separate ethnic and national identities, Europe is defined as a sort

⁸ M. Todorova, *Imaginarni Balkan* [Imagining the Balkans] (Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 1999), 278.

⁹ T. Stojanović, *Balkanska civilizacija* (Belgrade: Geopoetika, 1995), 108.

¹⁰ The survival of the most recent state union "Serbia and Montenegro", created under the influence of European Union, is challenged by the aspirations of one member-state for independence. The Montenegrin separatist tendencies are instigated by pseudo-scientific arguments for ethnic distinctiveness, denying and annulling the common tradition, language, culture, history and religion.

of a collection of identities. Claiming that layers of past and present cultures are deposited in a constant flux between periods of crisis and tragic sublimity, Erik Kluitenberg stresses that in times of transition dilemmas about identity can turn into drama, especially in the regions where Europe is at its “deepest”, that is where most identities overlap and collide.¹¹ In the expression “deep Europe”, borrowed from Luchezar Boyadjiev, depth denotes the points of conflicting claims over a historical period, an event, a figure, a territory, cultural heritage, language or alphabet. For this reason, the Old World is deepest where several identities overlap.¹² It is, in fact, the space of “Other Europe”, as Czeslaw Milosz defined the entire East-European post-communist world,¹³ where the struggle for the European heritage has become especially prominent in the Balkans. According to these criteria, Europe is undoubtedly at its deepest in the Balkans. However, this depth is marked by a characteristic which, rather, creates an illusion of depth, or false depth.

The Balkans are a part of Europe marked by tragic national conflicts the consequence of which is a blurred reality. Although it is difficult to discern the bottom of that reality, its opacity is not an indicator of depth, but of the shallow waters of civilization in which anachronistic occurrences, such as secessions, wars and nation-states, emerged. Therefore, European civilization is at its shallowest in the Balkans, for it turns out that the Balkan blurredness is an obstacle to broader integration processes. The trauma of personal historical experience is highlighted as the fundamental factor in mutual differentiation; but not in order to overcome it by building a successful model of coexistence and multiethnic society; on the contrary, it is reproduced according to the pattern of mutual retribution.

The identity confusion caused by the change in, or dismantling of, the former state framework, has also contributed to the opacity of this region. The example of the destroyed Yugoslavia shows the consequences of the resulting confusion at the level of identity.¹⁴ The destruction of the original framework which gave meaning to both personal and collective identity, gives rise to confusion dominated by a sense of loss, apathy, diminished tolerance and increased aggressiveness. Attempting to find a way out of the state of indeterminacy as existential uncertainty, the individual or the

¹¹ E. Kluitenberg, “Politika kulturnog pamćenja” [The Politics of Cultural Memory], *Kulturtreger* 2 (Belgrade, 2001), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ C. Milosz, *Druga Evropa* [The Other Europe] (Gornji Milanovac: Dečje novine, 1982), 7.

¹⁴ D. Kecmanović, *Masovna psihologija nacionalizma* (Belgrade: Vreme knjige, 1995), 233–234.

community will accept the offered provisional national identity. However, seeking to found themselves ethnically as well, nations emerging within the new state frameworks are doing it on the oblivion of the cultural past of the population whose culture and tradition they have inherited. As a result, the confused identity emerges when in the process of a new state formation efforts are made to construct national entity as well as a confirmation of presumed ethnic roots.

The depicted opacity of the Balkans can be perceived as an unemancipated dark force marring the completion of rational plans. Although in the context of present-day integration processes every single particularity is anachronistic, obstacles slowing down and blocking the process are expressed in the negative aspect of unacknowledged identity. Beyond any doubt, in this day and age every community can survive by being open towards others and towards the world. In line with the integrative principle which is becoming dominant in Europe and the world, the understanding of collective identity entails that dimension. Being European amounts to assuming, not emphasizing, one's own uniqueness and diversity which is implied in a civilized community. The spirit of European tolerance is reflected in the harmonization of mutual relations, and the construction of a new profile of Europe.

In the process of common identity construction, special importance is attached to the synchronization of personal and common interests at the level of perceiving the identity of each part in relation to the others. As a matter of fact, in the presupposed hierarchy, or vertical structure, every aspect of identity is distinguished by its own different degree of generality. Within such an identity structure, less general factors do not question those more general,¹⁵ and for this reason the parallel, complementary existence of local, regional, national, religious, social, class, state, European and global identities is made possible. Identities at a higher level of generality are most acceptable for those who have confirmed their identity at a lower level. For identities not grounded and secure at a lower level, a very general identity can be a void concept. Transcending and erasing the former national and state frontiers rest on their voluntary rejection. However, the creation of a multicultural community can be accompanied by difficulties associated with the negative aspects of that process. Unlike the identities which on the assumed scale of generality have a more concrete sense, such as people, tribal unions, tribes, fraternities and clans, nations represent "imagined communities", or the ideal typical construct derived from ethnic foundations or founded on the state reality. In contrast with the ethnic model in which a

¹⁵ M. Prošić-Dvornić, "Modeli 'retradicionalizacije': put u budućnost vraćanjem u prošlost", *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* XLIV (Belgrade, 1995), 306.

nation is a community whose members share the same language, customs and tradition, the state model defines a nation as a community of all inhabitants regardless of their different national origins. The aforementioned models differ with regard to the prevailing dominant: the natural or the cultural within a nation as an “imagined community” by means of which the wholeness of a community as a historical subject is realized. From the aspect of identity, a nation is not a completed community in the context of its self-confirmation at a higher level of generality.

Since the life of each nation is determined by its relationship with other nations, it is within these relations that a nation confirms its identity. In that sense, complementary nations contribute to the distinctiveness of the European way of life, because living in his/her nation a European citizen lives within the order of nations.¹⁶ Aspiring to be a genuine part of a larger whole, the plurality of identities becomes a principle for establishing commonality. The latent, still unestablished and unemancipated unity has been manifested in history in a negative manner, through intolerance and conflicts. In the wake of the world wars it became evident that the collective display of one’s negativity, aggressiveness and destruction in a great armed conflict of nations can easily lead to joint destruction. Hence, the possibility of survival was recognized in the project of unification and joint life resting on the plural identity principle. The unity of the united Europe has become a way of overcoming mutual enmities and hatreds, and preserving one’s national and state particularities. However, faced with a challenge such as confirming a higher level of their identity, collectives are exposed to the temptation to regress downwards, towards lower levels.

Temptations of nationalism

Since the ethnic and the national are conveyed in distinction from others and in the capacity to connect with others, a true relation between various identity markers lies in their harmonization. The existing hierarchy and accord are challenged by increased inner conflicts. Their manifested aspects reveal the importance of one’s own identity and the ambition to dominate others. Problems arise when a community is closer to the common identity of a higher degree of generality than another community which has a need to confirm its identity at a lower level, and disputes the common identity on a higher and more general plane.

Although narrower than the concept of the cultural, the notion of the national becomes predominant in critical conditions of its affirmation

¹⁶ A. Thibaudet, “Ka jednoj definiciji Evrope” in *Čovek Evrope*, ed. T. Gavrić (Novi Sad: Prometej, 1994), 4, 12.

and expression: from cultural heritage to natural and geographic space. Primarily identified as a political rather than an ethnic category, the national is a means of mobilizing the population for goals surpassing the immediate national horizons. In that sense, the overemphasized importance of the national opens the issue of a nationalistic response as an indicator of the depth of the identity crisis and its inadequate solution. In order that a sense of national unity can be reinforced, identity is reduced to only one aspect the emphasis of which suppresses all other facets of the collective determination. The consequences of such reduction are evident at the level of specific pseudo-religious phenomena. When an idea, ideology or doctrine is overemphasized, so that it acquires a higher, indisputable meaning, then its supporters and advocates become its worshippers. With a tendency to overcompensate national non-affirmation, nationalism is primarily an indicator of a community's uncertainty about its own identity.

Aspirations for the affirmation of a nation and the policy of national emancipation produce nationalism as a religion of such ambitions. Nationalists are the believers in such national ideas. Nationalism may be confirmed by religious ideas, but its main focus is enchantment with itself. Founded only on itself, the sanctified nationalistic ideology becomes harmful and evil. Superficially liberating, nationalism imprisons and binds any community. Narrow-mindedness accompanied by a desire for the affirmation of one's own nationality at first displays its benign side, but inevitably ends in chauvinism. In the period of the awakening of national consciousness and cultural revival, the affirmation of national was imbued with a positive meaning. However, that meaning remained positive only for a short period during which the national question was raised in order to be solved. Therefore, a Herderian type of nationalism differs from its malignant forms imbuing this notion with a primarily negative sense in present times. There is no doubt that the consequences of both cultural and political nationalisms are negative, but some of them become obvious sooner, while others get to prominence later. Nationalism is a trap for the collective spirit which begins as an illusion of freedom, and locks up the nation within itself. In line with the definition as the "armed people", a nation expresses its aspirations in relation to another nation in a militant manner, perceiving it as a threat and impediment to its own self-confirmation. In nationalism, this readiness for fight is reflected in national homogenization which creates a strike force for liberation that ends up as an illusion of freedom.

An overemphasis on the national can also be a reaction to a period of identity suppression and denial. The process of coexistence between members of two ethnic communities is accompanied by the creation of a dual identity, just as the dominance of one component has as its consequence the suppression, melting and disappearance of the other. In that sense, iden-

tity complexity is reflected in an inner split which emerged because at one point certain identity aspects were considered mutually exclusive. Thus, for instance, to be a communist and a Yugoslav entailed the suppression of one's Serbian national component of identity. Such oblivion was ideologically or religiously programmed, so that even members of new nations, such as Muslims or Bosniaks, suppressed their ethnic roots and thus falsified history.

Hence, starting from this pluralistic concept of identity, it is possible to obtain a much clearer perspective of the consequences resulting from the rejection of the principle of complementariness and openness to the Other. The acceptance of an identity of a higher level of generality becomes difficult if the uniqueness of one's own identity is emphasized, exaggerated and overestimated. Since the reality of personal identity is manifested through attitudes towards the Other, the degree of openness towards the Other depends on the extent to which one is grounded in one's own identity. Those insufficiently grounded in their national and cultural identity feel insecure and endangered in contact with others. Dependence on others, a possibility of melting into others and thus annulling one's own being, is expressed by the fear of identity loss, manifested through anxiety and aggression. In precarious times marked by single-mindedness and coercion, when unification and acceptance of a single idea is required from community members, tolerance of others is diminished. The shallower and narrower the sense of identity, the stronger intolerance of others. Therefore, communities and individuals with a poorly-grounded and disturbed identity have great difficulties in establishing and maintaining genuine communication with others. The community's fears of losing self, of being used as ethnic material and melted into a different national entity, enhances the emphasis on local characteristics situated at a lower level of generality. Ethnocentrism is enhanced in relation to fear of global processes. Such fear is especially widespread among small nations. However, belonging to a common structure at a higher level of generality does not exclude a potential for rivalries and conflicts between some members at a lower level. In this context, perseverance and affirmation of minorities within larger ethnic and national wholes is of great importance. While people, nations and states establish mutual relations and manage to protect their integrity, smaller ethnic and national communities within these wholes are exposed to identity loss. In contrast with national majorities who express their identity in their own states, national minorities tend to hide their identity.¹⁷ This is that other, suppressed

¹⁷ Ch. Promitzer, "(In-)Visibility of Hidden Minorities in the Balkans. Some Theoretical Remarks" in *Hidden Minorities in the Balkans*, ed. B. Sikimić (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, Spec. Eds. 82, 2004), 14.

and unacknowledged identity which preserves the particularity of an ethnic community. The Other, as hidden and unacknowledged, is a potential object of assimilation and disappearance. Losing their identity, many nations, or their considerable portions, have melted into other nations.

The awareness of one's own particularity and difference from others is an important factor in preserving ethnic and national distinctiveness. An overemphasis on the assumed particularity, however, cannot pass without harmful consequences. In contrast with the consciousness perceiving its own identity as complementary to other identities, the consciousness emphasizing its own identity in order to put it in opposition to others, is a source of conflict. Although a need for communication and togetherness is vital for the survival of individuals and communities, attempts to fulfil the illusion of separation from others and a life lived in isolation always have a high price. The illusion becomes stronger if obstacles on the path of identity confirmation appear to be larger. If, in this process, more than possible is done, more than can be endured, going beyond the limit of one's own abilities results in hybris and brings on retribution in the form of forced confrontation with the reality that one has attempted to escape.

As diversity may be the cause both of accord, harmonization and integration, and of division and separation, plurality manifests itself as either complementariness or conflict. At the level of plural identity, it is the Other, the potential, what will be or might be, that seems to be of special significance. Instead of answering the question where we come from, it is much more important to find out where we are going to. From the standpoint of partial determination, the community is something much broader than what it asserts to be.

Different cultures in the Balkans constitute the reality of cultural diversity. Depicted as a source of danger to European civilization, the Balkans has frequently been a victim of the Great Powers' aspirations for dominance in the region. Causes of conflict in the Balkans partly reside in the opposed interests of the Great Powers and their ambition to preserve supremacy in this part of the world. In that sense, the important issue of the identity of nations and national minorities living in this part of Europe may be approached in a manner that entails complementariness in a democratic, tolerant and multiethnic society. In the postmodern age, every premodern solution aggravates the situation and closes up perspectives. The integration of parts offers a real insight into their interconnection and complementariness. Viewed as parts of a broader reality, they exist in a co-existence of diversities, alongside each other, united on the path to unification on a multicultural civilization level. In a projected common civilization entity, ethnic accord and social harmony will not be possible unless the principle of the complementariness of identities is respected. According to Buber, Us,

always preceding Me,¹⁸ is not a natural and spontaneous basis of identity any longer, but the aim – democratic freedom and tolerance. Seeking for the indispensable Us for one's own Me is not subsuming individual into general, but the preservation of individuality as a measure and criterion of the human universe in a broader sense which can be found in the harmonization of diversity. Affirming the reality of one's own identity amounts to building up the world together with others. In the process of integration every individual state or ethnic entity becomes part of the European legal, social, economic and civilization milieu that enables genuine belonging to the identity at a higher general level.

The complementariness of these different identities is clearly manifested on a vertical plane. As natural differences become reconciled over a long period of time, their cultural harmonization evolves in a shorter time span. Therefore, the awareness of plurality is manifested in the power to integrate diversities and overcome tendencies towards division and separation. Since the harmonization of diversity is the aim of individual and collective development, the awareness of the complementariness of individual identities faces the challenge of confirmation as a universal principle of human existence. Its fruitful influence is reflected today in the formation of a model dissolving inner contradictions. By creating a larger whole, former ethnic, state and regional parts, aware of mutual differences, are given an opportunity to achieve a greater integration, the objective of which is bringing some regions, such as the Balkans, into the state of optimal civilization clarity.

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¹⁸ M. Buber, *Ja i ti* [Ich und Du] (Belgrade: Vuk Karadžić, 1977).