

Miladin Životić: An Alternative to Oblivion¹

The Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade established the award for critical engagement *Miladin Životić*. It is a well-known fact that the history of the Institute has been [intertwined](#) with the history of Yugoslav and Serbian society. Just like those societies, the Institute produced very diverse, sometimes even contradictory ideas and tendencies. In addition to making their mark in the scientific and cultural life of the country, the members of the Institute left an enduring legacy in its political and social life, by imprinting their socio-political beliefs on the politics they advocated and fought for. The history of the Institute is therefore not only a reflection of the history of our society – the ideas that evolved there themselves shaped and produced our differing social histories.

To decide upon a single individual who will represent an acceptable tendency of the today's generation of engaged social thinkers, has not been an easy task under the present circumstances. Yet, it is the right of the contemporaries to choose from the multitude of pasts the one that will represent some kind of a legacy for the future. This is particularly true today when oblivions are carefully crafted and safeguarded far more painstakingly than memories. So, why was it so important not to forget the name of Miladin Životić? In the midst of war, Radomir Konstantinović described him as follows: “He lived as if in a fire, fever even. We all lived off of his enthusiasm and nurtured ourselves with it; got ecstatic. We admired Životić.” Firmly believing that for critical engagement the fiery ecstasy, as the direct opposite to apathy and dull indifference, is crucial in all times, the Institute decided that precisely Životić's name ought to be rescued from oblivion.

As a philosopher, Miladin Životić (1930–1997) successfully synthesized theoretical thought and intellectual engagement. Following the positive tradition of ethics of responsibility that is required of an intellectual endeavour, he consistently lived the values that he postulated in his theoretical works. His thought and his insistence on public engagement were also put to the test when, in the 1960s and 1970s, he derogated political monopoly and fought for the right to speak critically, for which he was removed from the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade. Equally so, when in his public appearances during the post-Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, he openly and devotedly confronted violence and crimes and focused on civilian victims.

Being an advocate of freedom and ethics of responsibility, Životić criticized Yugoslav society and its ideological exclusiveness. He feared the destruction of critical consciousness and free spirit, and bitterly opposed the tendency to treat different opinions as hostile with the purpose of generating social tensions or reaching ideological homogenization. After the shift in the legitimating paradigm in the late 1980s, nationalism becomes the ruling ideology. Miladin Životić put equal effort to oppose identitarian antagonisation through his critical engagement. He did so as an engaged thinker for whom critique is praxis, which juxtaposes him to intellectuals who wished to use their ideas to gain political power: “We did not lack intellectuals who wished

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to project, model and design the future: that indeed is the great fault of our spiritual reality.“ He defended the right to protest, in the spirit of Praxis philosophy, guided by the belief in the universal human emancipation that cannot in any way transform itself into small, local, national emancipations. In this spiritual transformation he saw the “provincial pretentiousness of those philosophers, the self-proclaimed creators of truths about the nation, era, history of their people“. Životić rejected to align himself with the majority of national metaphysicians, and also with philosophers-kings and thinkers-planners/designers, advocating instead ironic distance, certain “antimetaphysical relaxation, tendency to build an alternative scene of social life without big projects of changing the world on a global scale“ – an alternative that in this country never became part of the mainstream.

Yet, his critical engagement involved more than theory. Central to Životić’s engagement was Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the war was fought not just for territorial gains, but also with the aim of destroying the very possibility of a common life. With that in mind, Životić stated that, if living together was impossible, then the life itself was not possible. He first-handedly experienced barbarism and meaninglessness of war, visiting the front line (Sarajevo, Tuzla, Mostar) and facing the victims, the gestures he considered inseparable from the ethics of responsibility in the times when the muses were muted, silenced by the fires of cannons and snipers. He warned that war serves to prevent dissatisfaction over social injustices and social unfreedoms, and to shift it over to hostile identitarian Otherness. His last book, both a testament and a memento, entitled *Contra bellum* (Against the War), remains to this day a powerful reminder about the tragic fall to barbarism, as well as a lesson that evil can be resisted nonetheless.

So far, this prize, awarded for the first time to Judith Butler, a leading international theoretical figure, has been mostly [overlooked](#). Only one media, Radio Free Europe, [covered](#) the topic about this award and the man whose name it bears, labeling him as “the forgotten hero of antiwar Serbia“. Perhaps it is a good time to ask ourselves how heroes are actually made and why the voices that oppose violence and demand freedom, radical democracy and universal emancipation, the voice supporting the right to protest – Životić’s voice that unexpectedly echoes in the works of Judith Butler – become so easily muffled? How did it happen that no one nowadays knows who Miladin Životić was? A sad fact that speaks volumes about our society is that war antiheroes, protagonists of horrible crimes and dehumanization are so recognizable and even serve as role models, while vigorous antiwar activists are forgotten. We wonder if such oblivion serves a purpose. To current political structures, to the protagonists and epigones of previous war leaders, the name of Miladin Životić and the narrative of antiwar movement is an unpleasant reminder of the fact that warmongering politics and nationalist ideology *had an alternative* in Serbia. Fragile, no doubt, but nonetheless a potent one. Oblivions are not so much random or accidental as they are part of active silencing of new social alternatives.

Translated into English by Aleksandar Pavlović