

How *Klošar* Became Homeless Upon the Dissolution of Yugoslavia

Veselin Mitrović

[Translated by Edward Djordjevic]

Reminiscing about the homeless in Yugoslavia reminds me somewhat of a related term – *klošar*, that is the hobo.* The Serbian *klošar* comes from French *clochard*, meaning a person who limps, an etymology quite relevant here. To call one a hobo had a bohemian, almost sympathetic sound. It designated one who willingly withdrew to society's margin or turned away from Main Street's social scene, known as *čaršija* - the inherited Ottoman word for the urban and cultural core of a city or town.

The term hobo was rarely used to describe one who did not have a home in Yugoslavia. Hobo also evokes a romantic image of the French outsider who sleeps under bridges, lives off the charity of other members of the community, perhaps an alcoholic and often (although not necessarily) a (misunderstood) artist.

However, what exactly is the background of the word hobo? Along with all that has been already mentioned - poor, alcoholic, artistic soul, with no permanent residence - on top of all that, he is either physically or socially "lame" or "limping." Were such persons born "lame" or did they become part of the "lame" (hobo) social group? How does one become recognized as a "lame, marginalized" person? In order to answer these questions, I will have to glean beyond the veil of personal and collective memory to a country that held promise, yet is now dead.

* While the word vagrant is both more neutral in connotation and of more appropriate register than hobo, it contains an aspect of migration and movement that *klošar* in Serbian does not, which is relevant for this text - *translator's note*.

First, it would behoove us to describe what and who could be named a hobo and a homeless person in the social and political context of a socialist and federal south-eastern European country in the second half of the 20th century. The word homeless as it is used today did not exist in the jargon of Yugoslavia. I myself was born and came of age in a small town in north-eastern Bosnia (at a time when Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of six federal Yugoslav republics). During my childhood, I remember only two persons from the 1970s who could vaguely be seen as - in official parlance of the time - socially endangered persons, or colloquially, "hobos." The two men did have homes, usually provided by the community, although they were unemployed. One of them sold candy apples in the yard of my elementary school, Mitar Trifunović – Učo. (The school was named after a local pre-World War II communist leader of workers' strikes in 1920s and '30s in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. He was assassinated at the beginning of the war, along with some of my relatives, in the death camp Jasenovac, which served for the extermination of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and communists in the, Independent State of Croatia, a Nazi puppet state that with Croatia comprised the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.)

The other of the two "marginals" from my childhood worked as a season laborer. Regardless of their meager incomes, consisting in part of occasional jobs and small scale trading, and in part of social benefits, the local office for social protection assured for these men and their families the basic material means of subsistence. Part of their social welfare was free healthcare and treatment, as was the normal and legally guaranteed practice for all citizens.

The younger of the two particularly liked to watch kung-fu films, especially ones starring Bruce Lee. In accordance with an unwritten law of communal solidarity, he was always

allowed access to the one cinema in town. He was well known and perhaps even a favorite, although not always affable. Nor was it uncommon for the local boys, in keeping with the ways of the *čaršija*, to spend their idle hours by horsing around with him, but also finding ways to help out when he encountered an administrative or particular social problem (given that, it has to be mentioned, neither he nor the other marginal man had completed the eight mandatory years of elementary schooling). One of the basic social values was solidarity, especially given the socialist system. Apart from the state policy of free education, social and health protection, solidarity was in one way or another, the basis of communal life. In that sense, these two men were part of the community, while also leading independent lives. They took advantage of their right to basic material necessities: a roof over their heads, minimum income, healthcare and education for their children, etc. In such a way, these Yugoslav hobos were unburdened by the restrictions placed upon contemporary homeless people in developed countries.

A homeless person, in the social and linguistic sense, assumes relevance in the last decade of the 20th century, during the painful and bitter tearing apart of socialist Yugoslavia. Aside from the Roma, who were more or less nomadic in the former country, we encountered a large number of war refugees and veterans, as well as people who neither quickly nor easily (as if that were even possible) adjusted to the breakdown of the social and political system, or to the disappearance of their homeland.

Quickly, if unoriginally, politicians, along with a section of the intellectual elite, coined a term for these people: "losers in the post-socialist transition." While deeply opposed to a term that characterizes individuals and groups as "losers" at a given historical moment, I find citing this phrase an apt way to present the reader with the picture society (or the majority) can form

about someone who has lost everything but their life. The tragic loss of basic civil rights, not to mention the overnight disappearance of guaranteed benefits, was justified by way of a new "loser or victorious ethics" due to some evolutionary, well-nigh eugenicist, understanding of the incompatibility of some individuals and groups to the specific moment. It was as if the power of culture and yesterday's basic values, such as solidarity and tolerance, completely disappeared with the dissolution of way of life and the vanishing of a promised better future in the (nearly) ethnically clean former Yugoslav republics.

In the course of the wars at the end of the 20th century, the region of the west Balkans faced hundreds of thousands of refugees. Handling centers were rare, hastily built, poorly organized, and scarce of resources. These people were temporarily housed (some of whom remained permanently) in old motels, various resorts, and the like. They became homeless, even though they were now placed in collective centers, ghettoized from the rest of the "domestic" population. Thus, the social and political transformation that began in the late eighties, and the independence wars of the federal units of the nineties, created, among everything else, fertile ground for homelessness in the contemporary sense of the word.

What happened to the old, exotic image of the hobo? Did he disappear or has the homeless person (who is one of the losers of the transition) acquired one of the hobo's faces, the socially "lame" person? Looking at the overall statistics of homeless persons in Serbia, the number is not large: some five hundred persons, mostly centered in the inner circle of the country's capital and in northern Serbia. The number of homeless who were originally refugees, Roma, or impoverished groups is much larger—20,000 persons. However, a qualitative image of their lives offers a much more drastic picture of homelessness in Serbia, the largest federal

republic of former Yugoslavia. How, we might ask, does one today become a hobo or a socially "lame" person in this region?

Much as I have sketched out a picture of the hobo from my childhood, before the breakdown of socialism in Yugoslavia, I will attempt to use a specific example of Belgrade homelessness to describe what this means today. After a domestic tragedy, such as the violent breakup of a family, an average member of the middle class ends up in prison where he may spend a third of his life to that point. In the interim, the independence wars of former federal units have taken place and have concluded. His erstwhile homeland is not the only thing he has lost. The entire life he had prior to going to prison has vanished. He has lost his house, family, and of course his employment, the guarantor of middle class status. After a while he ends up on the street, in the city center, near the place of work of his son, who has practically grown up without either parent. He can be seen today, three sheets to the wind, slumped on the pavement between the home of the renowned Serbian daily *Politika* and Radio Belgrade.

More than one journalist, on more than one occasion, has tried, and some have even succeeded, in coaxing out of him his story and explanation of homelessness (*se non è vero, è ben trovato* – even if not true, it is well conceived). He told them that by choosing a life in the open, imbibing copious amounts of alcohol, he has chosen a sort of slow death. One particularly cold winter, he loses several toes and is left literally limping. He becomes recognizable socially and medically as lame, homeless, alcoholic, ex con, etc.

Even so, some of his acquaintances still bring him warm meals and some even alcoholic beverages (since it is often a prerequisite for eating or talking) in front of the newspaper

building where he spends his days. Obviously, certain people still regard him as a member of the community and accept his self-identification as a homeless person, who is not seeking to survive in the long run, but rather dissipate his life towards a slow death.

A few years later, Belgrade gets a homeless shelter, which usually happens to be full in the winter months. But with the first sunny days, the homeless prefer to be in the open, using the shelter only in the case of some necessity and perhaps to bathe (giving rise to a biting funny comment: "Whoever saw a cat bathing?")

On several significant occasions, I have seen this homeless man at the shelter, attempting to die his slow death. He looked quite old and weak, but was protected (*nolens-volens*) in the cold winter months. The institutionalization of homelessness that occurred with the social changes that followed the dissolution of socialism, did not only limit the way of life, but also the way in which a homeless people wished to die. In post-socialist, post-bellum circumstances, the poor socio-economic conditions of life, combined with individual acts of protection, could create an image of a "caring" or "altruistic" society, one that cares about its members, regardless of their social status. However, the basic social value of solidarity seems to have vanished along with the old political system and former state, leaving behind a vacuum to be filled by the invisible hand of "state altruism." That is, what was once a matter of right is now a matter of government charity.

The trend of Western European welfare societies to transform into what I like to call caring or altruistic societies, overlapped with social changes in former socialist, Eastern European countries. Nor should we forget that this blending is taking place in the melting pot of the European Union. But what is the flip side of all these protectionist, altruistic

manifestations of EU regulations that have even changed the Yugoslav hobo into a globalized image of a homeless person? Or, in other words, what lurks beneath the image of an altruistic society? Is there a dark side to the "altruism" that regulates not only the way of life but also the way of death?

Social history and psychology remind us of the possibility of measuring authoritarian behavior. It seems that prohibitions against ways of dying are one of the higher markers for authoritarian behavior than the prohibitions of ways of living. Government policy that removes the homeless from the streets and eyes of the majority, regardless of altruistic explanations, can be valued more as a caring activity in poor European countries, where around half the population possesses no short term plans according to which they might improve their life conditions. However, strict regulation that at first sight may appear as altruistic can be easily upended into a totalitarian type of ordering the daily life of citizens, regardless of whether they do or do not have a roof over their heads.

There is a thin line between sympathy with government policy that prohibits one's ways of living and dying, and cultural complicity with the state determining who lives and dies. For a whole host of reasons, changes in lives on the margins are most conspicuous in the life of a society. However, at the same time, the majority is rather inert when it comes to accepting a limiting reality. One reason for that can be the feeling that such change would not influence their way of life. Another could be the belief of the majority that they are in a certain sense privileged, and that advantages that have replaced social guarantees and rights have become commonplace. On the other hand, the reverse side of such an understanding of society is the acceptance of the lack of rights of homeless persons when it comes to shelter, health care and

social protection.

Looking through the lens of a sociological diary, the social and linguistic metamorphosis of the former Yugoslav hobo into a homeless person could be a social bellwether for much wider future socioeconomic and political change in this area of the world. The collapse of an old ossified political system taking place in the midst of the creation and harmonization of European Union regulation also transforms former social and health security into a new type of "altruism." Yet does that altruism carry more worry for the most precarious social groups? The answer to that question depends on the balance between the way in which, on the one hand, the majority sees its rights and achievements, and, on the other, the sympathy with the actions of government altruism that influences the lives of the homeless and other marginalized groups. In other words, the answer is in the sociological imagination of today's "altruism" in the most developed countries.

Social sympathies with some limits on how members of a marginal group will die, open not only the possibilities that the majority or the state decides who and when someone will die—above all the marginalized—but also the further step of social and ethical justification of measures that allow the majority its inertness and apathy in a situation that requires taking action. The transformation of basic social values, such as replacing solidarity with so-called "social altruism," is ultimately a transformation of social values of a community into what, despite its prefix "social," cannot be a value shared by a collective - social altruism.

On a lower level of abstraction, such a change potentially encourages the understanding that social achievements, as well as some basic rights, are the exclusive domain of certain social strata. The idea of a society that is altruistic does not bind its members to solidarity and

renders them apathetic in questions of injustice committed against marginal groups. If it is possible to have art without moral or social function (*L' Art pour L'Art*), is it also not possible to have the aforementioned form of altruism: value for value's sake?

Dr. Veselin L. Mitrovic is a Research Associate at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy, at the University of Belgrade. Mitrović's research activities are in Sociology of Culture, Social action in different strata (from marginal to elite), and Bioethics and Disaster study. He is working on a project of the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, "The Challenges of the New Social Integration: Concepts and Agents." His research in disaster studies includes: "Resilience: detecting vulnerability in marginal groups", *Disaster Prevention and Management*, Vol. 24 Iss 2 (2015) pp. 185 – 200) and in progress, "Assisted Reproduction Technologies and the Social and Procreative Altruism in Serbia." Mitrović is inter alia author of books written in Serbian : *The Stride of Bioethics, New Bio-Technologies and Social Aspects of the "Enhancement" of the Healthy* (2012), *Jazz as Socio-Cultural Improvisation – A Qualitative Research of Social Mobility* (2012) and *Apathetic Society* (2015). In addition, Mitrović has published a number of scientific articles, such as: "The Contingency of the 'Enhancement' Arguments: The Possible Transition From Ethical Debate to Social and Political Programs," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 13, issue 37 (Spring 2014): 93-124. SACRI, and has contributed to "Human Enhancement: Toward the Creation of Patterns of Injustice?" to *Theoretical and Applied Ethics*, (Aalborg University Press, 2013).

Dr. Veselin L. Mitrovic can be contacted at: mitrove@gmail.com or vmitrovi@f.bg.ac.rs