On the Road to Normal: Negotiating Agency and State Sovereignty in Postsocialist Serbia

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ABSTRACT I examine how perceptions of state crisis and moral decay in Serbia (after the breakup of Yugoslavia) impact people’s belief that they are no longer normal agents capable of effective action. More specifically, I argue that a shift in Serbia’s geopolitical position and changing dynamics at international borders reveal the intimate links between people’s self-conception as moral, agentive subjects and the conditions that structure state power. Discourses of normalcy are about the loss (and possible restoration) of a historically specific form of citizen agency that emerged in relationship to a functioning, sovereign, and internationally respected socialist Yugoslav state. I focus on young people’s intimate experiences and narratives of everyday life and leisure. In exploring the intersection of forms of state sovereignty and the experience of citizen agency, I illuminate how young Serbian citizens experience changing configurations of state power as enabling conditions for their own moral and agentive capacities. [normal, agency, Serbia, sovereignty, postsocialism]

In December of 2009, the popular Serbian daily Blic ran an article headlined, “The Situation in Serbia Is Becoming Normal (Situacija u Srbiji postaje normalna)” (Krivokapić 2009). It was one of a wave of articles leading up to December 19, 2009, the date that Serbia was finally added to the list of countries whose citizens can travel without a visa in Europe. The date was greatly anticipated in Serbia as the culmination of the country’s painful transformation from an authoritarian pariah state to a democracy on the verge of European integration. After almost two decades during which Serbian citizens were subject to strict visa regimes, costly visa applications, humiliating lines at foreign embassies, intrusive interrogation by embassy staff, and embarrassing attention at foreign airports and borders, men and women with Serbian passports could once again freely travel to Europe. The article consisted of an interview with a Serbian economist now working for the World Bank who argued that the new visa policy marked Serbia’s “return to Europe.” December 19, he noted, will “symbolically mark the end of a decade which we might call ‘the decade-long restoration of normalcy’ (decenijom restauracije normalnosti)” (Krivokapić 2009). Serbia was one of six federal republics in the socialist state of Yugoslavia, until that country’s violent dissolution in 1991. Yugoslavia had defined itself through its unique blend of socialist and market-economic principles as well as by its permeable borders, which it kept open to goods, people, and ideas from across the world. According to the article in Blic, traveling without visas is a restitution of a political and cultural status that Serbia (as part of Yugoslavia) once had but lost.¹

Serbia’s isolation had been brought on by its central role in the breakup of Yugoslavia, including government support of paramilitary groups responsible for genocide and ethnic cleansing in the wars of Yugoslav succession, beginning in 1991. In an attempt to put pressure on Serbia’s nationalist leader, Slobodan Milošević, Serbia was subject to international sanctions throughout much of the 1990s. After Milošević’s democratic overthrow in 2000, Serbian citizens continued to be subject to strict visa regimes, as European Union countries feared a wave of young, unemployed men and women emigrating from the east as well as the flow of criminals and smuggled goods moving through the Balkans.

For many citizens in their twenties and older, abolition of visas restored the worldliness and mobility that defined Yugoslav citizenship during the socialist period. The Yugoslav passport was one of the few that allowed travel across Cold War borders. Throughout the former Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav red passport (crveni pasos) has become iconic with a high quality of life and the respected geopolitical position of the socialist Yugoslav state (Grandits and Taylor 2010; Jansen 2009). Stef Jansen has observed that “‘normal lives’ in the Yugoslav successor states are commonly defined not
only in terms of living standards, order, and social welfare but also the dignity of having “a place in the world” that characterized socialist Yugoslavia (Jansen 2009:14).

In large part, both mobility and “a place in the world” were enabled by Yugoslavia’s unique position as a Non-Aligned country. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was a network of nations, many postcolonial, which provided an alternative political geography in the strictly divided world of Cold War power politics. Pursuing policies of peace and security in the face of increasing global tension between the United States and the USSR, the movement was fundamentally internationalist, embracing countries with a range of ideological commitments and forms of political organization. Yugoslavia’s president, Josip Broz Tito, played a prominent role in the NAM, including serving as the first secretary general. Tito’s leadership in the NAM contributed greatly to Yugoslavia’s international status and its ability to negotiate an alternative position in the Cold War world. His break with the Soviet Union in 1948 also ensured massive financial support from Western nations interested in countering Soviet influence in the region. This support enabled two decades of rising living standards and fueled the consumer economy that defined everyday life for many Yugoslav citizens (Woodward 1995). By the 1960s, Yugoslav citizens became avid international travelers and consumers at home and internationally. Yugoslavia was also a popular destination for tourists from abroad (Patterson 2007). Yugoslavs showcased their modern, consumer lifestyles; thriving music, art, and intellectual scenes; and central role in international politics (Bracewell 2006; Patterson 2007). This was especially true in Yugoslavia’s urban centers, which became increasingly associated with the arts, culture, and urban sophistication.

In many ways, the “return to Europe” and to normalcy referenced in the Blic article means a return to a high standard of living, international respect, and a functioning Yugoslav state. Such aspirations are grounded in a vision of a good life defined by modern, Western, and European forms of consumption and belonging (Fehervary 2002; Humphrey 1995; Patico and Caldwell 2002; Verdery 1996). In postsocialist Serbia, aspirations of normalcy also oriented their subjects temporally toward socialist Yugoslavia. Scholars of postsocialism have also linked the term normal to people’s frustrated attempts to realize material and social aspirations under contemporary economic and political conditions (Galbraith 2003). Abnormal conditions produce abnormal people because they “force good people to behave unethically” (Fehervary 2002:390). Normal thus points to the gap between how people see themselves and how they must conform to conditions and realities not of their choosing. Normal serves as a diagnostic category for shifting social, political, and economic relations and the kind of agentive possibilities that emerge in those contexts.

In this article, I examine how perceptions of state crisis, moral decay, and international isolation of Serbia impact people’s belief that they are no longer normal agents capable of moral action in the world. As I show below, many young Serbian citizens believe Serbia to be a society without rules, a state without institutions and laws, and a national community without a moral compass. This article is based on fieldwork conducted in 2002–04 with student activists in three major cities in Serbia. Many young, urban, and educated people with whom I spoke also felt that outsider judgments of Serbia as barbaric, violent, and backward exacerbated feelings of shame and being out of control. I argue that discourses of normalcy, especially in relation to travel, are about the loss (and possible restoration) of a historically specific form of citizen agency that emerged in relationship to a functioning and sovereign Yugoslav state that was internationally respected. By looking at the everyday life of normalcy and its meanings in contemporary Serbia, I show how young Serbian citizens experience transformations in state sovereignty in terms of their intimate experiences navigating everyday life. When people complain that they or Serbia are “not normal,” they are trying to make sense of the fact that they no longer feel capable of agentive action or moral interiority in a crisis-ridden Serbian state. A loss of normalcy points to a loss of a particular understanding of agency, in which there is a correspondence between one’s desires, the effects one’s actions have in the world, and the ability to manage the reception of those actions by others (Ahearn 2001).

Ultimately, I explore in this article the intersection of forms of state sovereignty and the experience of citizen agency. I thus hope to illuminate how citizens understand and experience changing configurations of state power as enabling conditions for their own moral and agentive capacities. The desire for normalcy is one expression of particular forms of state power as they are lived and experienced by citizens. A shift in Serbia’s geopolitical position and changing dynamics at international borders reveal the intimate links between people’s sense of self as moral and agentive subjects and the conditions that structure state power. The meaning and experience of citizenship is mediated not only between state and citizen but also at international borders and through new geographies of European and global belonging.

Discourses of travel are expressions of this shift in agentive capacity because travel was a key site through which Yugoslav state sovereignty and citizen agency were constructed. Practices of travel are linked to a return to normalcy as Serbian citizens seek to insert themselves into regimes of scrutiny, judgment, and mediation that will produce them as agentive subjects who can effectively act in the world. Many Serbian citizens with whom I spoke felt that their state can no longer produce the economic, social, and political conditions in which subjects can translate desire into action. These experiences resonate strongly with what Elizabeth Dunn has argued about postsocialist Georgia, in which the state has lost “the capacity to order and regulate people and things” (2008:244). Although I do not address changing modes of governmentality (Foucault 1991) in Serbia, I take seriously the commonly held belief in Serbia that the Serbian state no longer has the capacity for ordering and regulating “people
and things.” Abnormalcy discourse describes a society without rules or systems of value. Talk about the restoration of normalcy is a register through which postsocialist citizens seek out and express a desire to be subject to disciplinary regimes of power—a state that works. Being normal becomes the basis for the active production of citizenship given perceptions of Serbia as a postdisciplinary state.

THE PARADOX OF YUGOSLAV STATE SOVEREIGNTY

The change in visa regimes does not mean permanent flight from Serbia but, rather, opportunities for short-term travel with the promise of a return to Serbia: multiple, temporary movements in and out of the country. Why would this kind of travel be credited with producing normalcy for Serbia? What kind of agency does this mobility back and forth across formerly closed European borders entail or reactivate for former Yugoslav citizens? Below I argue that the casual traveler in socialist Yugoslavia was an agent whose mobility reflected and produced Yugoslavia’s respected internationalist status. In addition, travel was a moment in which state authority, regulations, and rules—disciplinary modes of state power—produced citizens capable of mobility. This mobility was a realization of individual desire (to travel), forms of state governance (the regimes that produced mobile citizens), and the validation of Yugoslavia’s internationalist and cosmopolitan status by agents of other states at international borders.

Travel is enabled by a bundle of institutional, personal, and ideological relations that are both produced and signaled in the act of movement. Documents such as passports mediate the traveler’s relationship to forms of state power and categories of citizenship and can come to be experienced in deep bodily and affective ways (Jansen 2009). Jansen’s notion of an “everyday geopolitics” captures the ways in which the negotiation of state power and sovereignty becomes simultaneously an intimate and state-making experience produced by the examination, questioning, and review of state documents at international borders. Below I suggest that in crossing these boundaries, Yugoslav citizens enacted transnational relations and connections on which Yugoslav state sovereignty was dependent.

The specific nature of Yugoslav sovereignty is tied to its key role in the Non-Aligned Movement discussed above. Akhil Gupta has argued that the NAM provides an alternative lens to nationalism for understanding (transnational) imagined communities (Gupta 1992). He notes that “Non-alignment was differentiated from ‘neutrality,’ which implies a passive, isolationalist policy of noninvolvement in all conflicts. Indeed, it was an assertion of agency on the part of third world nation-states that defined what it meant to be ‘sovereign’ and ‘independent”’ (Gupta 1992:65). The NAM was an attempt to forge an alternative basis of sovereignty for those countries that struggled in the shadow of superpower politics during the Cold War. Gupta points to the ways that nation-state sovereignty can be paradoxically national and transnational. Indeed, in the case of the Non-Aligned countries embedded in Cold War divisions and negotiating complex relations to former colonizers, national sovereignty relied on a particular set of transnational relations and alliances to control political, military, and social borders and circulations (Gupta 1992:71). In addition to creating economic and political conditions for Yugoslav independence and sovereignty, Non-Aligned status also fostered a national imaginary linked to international belonging. Yugoslavia’s sovereignty as a Non-Aligned country was grounded in transnational affiliations made real by the circulation of goods, cultural artifacts, money, military support, and the mobility of its citizens across Cold War lines.

In other words, Yugoslavia was a state whose sovereignty was most apparent when its citizens were mobile. This exposed Yugoslav traveler-citizens to vulnerable moments of mediation and scrutiny at state borders and abroad and was not without the risk of negative judgment. It also exposed travelers to scrutiny at home because representations of travel were a site for managing and defining good socialist citizens. Wendy Bracewell (2006) has argued that narratives of travel were key ways in which Yugoslavia as a socialist consumer society negotiated the relationship between individual consumption and socialist principles of collectivity and equality. Bracewell shows how travel writing both extolled shopping but also commented on how good Yugoslav socialists ought to consume and travel, providing a pedagogy of proper consumption abroad. In addition, not all travel was good travel. Tourists and shoppers could be crass, selfish, and embarrassing. Gastenbajteri, or guestworkers, traveled for economic gain and to support the consumer lifestyles of family remaining in Yugoslavia. Although their wages and their work in the West carried a degree of cache, the menial and often difficult labor marked them quite differently from the leisure consumer tourist (Szerbhorvath 2002). Good travel was itself a relational category, juxtaposing certain kinds of mobility against the stasis of the Soviet bloc, the immorality of the black marketeer, and the crassness of the bargain-hunting shopper. Travel also put Yugoslavia on display, quite literally, as a modern state and an exemplar of market socialism and the good life.

Travel thus meant risk in the game of judgment and comparison—one could be denied at a border or negatively judged abroad or on one’s return—but it was a risk well worth taking. Given Yugoslavia’s unique position as a nation whose legitimacy straddled Cold War demarcations, being embedded in relational frames of value and judgment was not generally a problem for the traveling Yugoslav citizen. It was in fact necessary for the attainment of state sovereignty and the value of Yugoslav citizenship itself. Yugoslav citizenship was in part defined by the ability to move through alternative social and political geographies and to successfully negotiate moments of scrutiny necessary to cross borders. This mobility was an enactment of the paradoxically relational sovereign agency to which Gupta refers. In turn, sovereign-state agency enabled individual, agentive mobility for
Yugoslav citizens. This was expressed through the successful negotiation of moments of mediation at state borders. The Yugoslav state produced citizens capable of crossing borders without humiliation.

Travel was not available equally to all citizens in Yugoslavia, and the values associated with going abroad differed based on the reasons people were mobile as well as how and to where they travelled. Travel abroad, especially to other European capitals, signaled a certain kind of cosmopolitanism and urban belonging that was attractive to a professional, educated class in the country’s major cities. The idea that international mobility was a definitive experience for a modern, urban, socialist citizen went hand in glove with social and political geographies within Yugoslavia itself. The desire to “be European” through both acts of leisure travel and consumption was a way that urbanites marked themselves socially. Travel and study abroad was a particular rite of passage for university students, for example. The loss of this kind of travel from 1991 on thus had particular significance for the young, educated students with whom I conducted my fieldwork.

At some point, however, the mediated encounters that defined mobility became a problem for all citizens in Serbia. Such isolation hit particularly hard the urban, educated professional classes, the parents of many of the students I later interviewed during my research. The economic collapse in the face of international debt calls beginning in the late 1970s through the 1980s spelled a rapid change in the economic fortunes of many Yugoslavs (Woodward 1995). By the 1990s, with the beginning of violent conflict in the former Yugoslavia, the reversals were dramatic. Because of sanctions in Serbia and strict visa regimes throughout the region, state borders were effectively closed. Mobility could mean power or powerlessness, depending on one’s position as civilian or military. Movement was increasingly associated with refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) throughout the former Yugoslavia. Paramilitary units moved easily across borders, while civilians, particularly in Bosnia, stayed helplessly in place. Former Yugoslav citizens were increasingly isolated while capital and resources flowed across borders, often through criminal networks. Throughout the region, tourists from abroad were replaced with peacemaking troops. Once-cosmopolitan Yugoslavs were marked as backward and static in their own country by new traveling cosmopolitan elites known as “international” professionals (Coles 2007:63–84). As Yugoslav citizenship broke into distinct national states, former Yugoslav citizens were subject to different regimes of mobility and stasis that were enacted through new state policies, border controls, military and police regimes, and the violence of war. The breakup of Yugoslavia was tied to drastic shifts in the logics of national sovereignty, as constituent republics grounded citizen entitlements in territory, ethnicity, and national belonging (Hayden 2000). Indeed, the specific nature of the sovereignty that would define the post-Yugoslav successor states was a heated and at times violent source of contestation through-out the 1990s (and as late as 2008, in the case of Kosovo; see Brown 2009; Hozic 2009). At the same time that logics of sovereignty became grounded in (immobile) relations of ethnic territory, actual mobility became logistically and politically impossible. In turn, the logics of nationalist sovereignty and the accompanying politics of international recognition produced geopolitical relations that kept ethnically defined citizens in place. Moments of contestation over the meaning of people’s mobility still took place at the country’s borders, as people attempted to travel. Citizens were still embedded in relational frames of judgment and mediation, but these were no longer productive of a sense of control over the meaning and value of Yugoslav citizenship, state power, or authority.

GOOD AND BAD FORMS OF TRAVEL (OR WHEN GOOD MEDIATION GOES BAD)

The reversals in how people traveled in the Yugoslav successor states could be humiliating, as once-proud exemplars of modern socialism became the beggars of Eastern Europe. One’s ability to move across borders, and the ways in which one was allowed to move, became iconic with the status of one’s home state. In passionately recounting an early experience of travel in the 1990s, a friend, Bojan, recalled going to London when he was in secondary school. When they arrived at Heathrow, an agent yelled at them “Serbs over there,” ordering them to line up separately. It was “as if we were dogs,” he told me, still shaken ten years later by the experience. At the time, we were having a conversation about the strict visa regimes he still faced when trying to travel (Hungary had just instituted a visa for Serbian citizens). Bojan was studying and living in Novi Sad, and although his parents had encouraged him to study agriculture, his real passions were arts, media, and design. He enjoyed travel and meeting new people a great deal, and he was hungry for new experiences and perspectives from abroad. Lamenting Romania and Bulgaria’s likely accession to the EU (which at the time was still four years away), when once Yugoslavia had been far more economically advanced, he asked, “How can they be Western Europe?” (conversation with author, January 28, 2003). He said he remembered when Greece became part of Western Europe and joked that his father had asked him, “What kind of Europe is this, with Greece, and Romania?” (conversation with author, January 28, 2003). With grim skepticism, he said a professor at his faculty had predicted that Albania would be the next big tourist site. For Bojan, the idea that Albania, which for many years was the most closed country in Europe, could outpace former Yugoslavia in tourism was a bitter reversal of Yugoslavia’s former internationalist status. This reversal left Bojan struggling to make sense of new hierarchies of value built around mobility in Europe. In response, he framed Serbia’s diminished international status in terms of his own experience of humiliation at an international border.

For young, educated people like Bojan, Serbian citizens were no longer capable of “good travel” and were unable
to control the conditions of representation and mediation at international borders. In the 1990s and 2000s in Serbia, the flipside of good travel (leisure, legal consumption, and education or career opportunities) was either bad travel (smuggling, refugee status, criminality, or the trafficking of women) or immobility. With the onset of the wars in the region, and international sanctions against Serbia, travel became linked with criminality and smuggling—a perversion of the networks of movement and consumption that once marked a good Yugoslav citizen. Although travelers from the eastern bloc once came to the Yugoslav promise land to buy coveted consumer goods, Serbs now traveled to Hungarian border towns to buy soap and laundry detergent. The pathways and routes of good travel and illegality became confused. Like the postwar open-air market, site of both peasant authenticity and criminal contraband (Jašarević 2007), the middle-class, urban traveler in the postwar, post-Yugoslav period occupied spaces of moral and legal ambiguity.

In the case of postsocialist Yugoslav travel, a central marker of good versus bad mobility was the ability to manage the semiotic and moral ambiguity of the act of travel itself. The good traveler was an agent who not only had some control over her circulation but could also impact the way that others interpreted and gave meaning to those acts of mobility. While total control is an impossible task, there are conditions under which people have more or less ability to influence the direction, circulation, and recontextualization of semiotic forms and texts (Gal 2003), including representations of themselves. If one considers that agency is linked to the discursive and structural conditions that render forms of action practicable, moral, and conceivable (Mahmood 2005), then particular conditions will make it more likely that people can impact the ways in which they are able to signal that agency to others. In a world in which Serbia is a valued part of an international community, it is more likely that Serbian citizens can dictate the meaning of their circulation as both subjects and objects of scrutiny and judgment. A good experience of travel means that the traveler can successfully manage the field of relations that makes mobility possible. Others—from border guards to embassy paper pushers—see and acknowledge the positive value of that mobility. Being treated “as if we were dogs,” in Bojan’s words, is a moment in which control over signification is well out of reach.

The desire to be normal through mobility can be read against the ability of young citizens to manage vulnerable moments of mediation and judgment. In this context, a sense of agency is linked to both material practices in the world and the ability to control the representation of those practices. Even as they were unable to translate mediation at international borders into acts of mobility, Serbian citizens ceased to recognize themselves as agents in the perspective of others. For example, a day after the Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić was assassinated in March of 2003, I went to the offices of a student organization in Novi Sad. When I arrived, the sense of despair in the office was palpable. Biljana, a leader in the group who was distinguished by her bubbly enthusiasm, slumped alone in front of the computer, absentmindedly playing a computer game. Biljana was upset because everyone seemed to be going around acting totally “normal,” as if nothing had happened. But, she told me, “no one feels normal inside—no one has felt normal in this country for ten years” (conversation with author, March 13, 2003).

The story that Biljana related to me next revealed how she felt caught between multiple frames of judgment through which she experienced a lost sense of self. When she was in high school, her family had had some students from Western Europe visit. “They were actually scared of us,” she told me. They had come expecting Biljana and her peers not to be normal people, “as if we wanted war, as if we would all be walking around carrying guns” (conversation with author, March 13, 2003). Bitterly she told me that Serbia was a wonderful place for me as a writer because I would always have enough material. Indeed, she already understood herself to be a character in someone else’s (my) story, a narrative representation that she herself could not control.

For Biljana, being “normal” points to the unequal geopolitical, economic, and social relations that differently distribute people’s ability to dictate the meaning and representation of themselves as modern and agentive citizens, particularly on a world stage (Foster 2002; Mazzarella 2003). Serbia as a state is no longer embedded in international networks that allow Serbian citizens to meaningfully coconstitute recognized membership in a global order. Key, then, to being normal is a set of practices in which Serbian citizens can judge and manage the perceptions of who Serbs are in relation to the world. Biljana cannot imagine feeling normal if her deepest sense of self is already colonized by someone else’s perceptions of her. How then, can she act as individual agent, one who can survive vulnerable moments of mediation intact?

**NORMALAN ŽIVOT: MEANINGS OF NORMALCY IN SERBIA**

I argue that it is this anxiety produced in managing the relationship among intimate desires, a sense of elyci in the world, and the destabilizing effects of outside judgment and perspectives that has led young, educated, urban men and women to experience themselves as “not normal.” Over the course of my fieldwork with student activists in Serbia, young men and women told me time and again that they just wanted a *normalan život* (normal life). When pressed about the meaning of *normal*, they would go on to list a series of material goods and economic and social status markers: a car, a good job, and, most frequently, the ability to travel. Young men and women were especially likely to link the lack of opportunities—educational, career, consumer—to Serbia’s international political and economic isolation during the wars of the 1990s. People too young to have experienced “the good life” in socialist Yugoslavia nonetheless compared their fortunes to those of their parents and older siblings...
by noting how easy travel abroad had once been. Life in Serbia was too uncertain to work and to consume normally, let alone have long-term goals.

For example, on a September evening in 2003, I was sitting and chatting with a group of men and women of mixed ages in an English-language class that I occasionally observed. The discussion topic was education, and the students were eagerly explaining to me the current problems with the Serbian education system and the possibility of successful implementation of reforms. I asked a young man and a young woman in secondary school about their future plans. Both immediately declared that they wanted a “normal life.” When pressed for details, the young woman, Maja, told me that having a normal life meant a job and enough money for the things she needed and wanted: a small car and travel were the particular two goals she cited. The other student, Saša, asked Maja if she wanted those things here in Serbia or abroad, and Maja replied, a little sheepishly but without hesitation, abroad. She told us that it was not possible to have those things in Serbia because it was “too hard to live here” (conversation with author, November 12, 2003).

Maja’s definition of a normal life, and its direct link to living outside Serbia, was quite typical for young men and women I spoke with, as was the conviction that attaining these practical material markers of the good life was impossible within Serbia because of economic and political conditions. But to stop at a definition of normalcy that was about fulfilling consumer or lifestyle goals would miss the deeper stakes of the term. When I asked Saša what he thought normal meant, he had an answer immediately ready. Normal life was having a pattern, he told me. It was getting up going to work, coming home, and doing the same thing day after day. He described normalcy as predictability and stability. It was “being able to, you know, buy a car—maybe not tomorrow, but in a month’s time.” It was not going to work one day and finding out that you’ve lost your job. Normalcy was being able to say, “Well I can’t do this tonight, but I can do it tomorrow,” and having that be true” (conversation with author, November 12, 2003). For Saša, normalcy was not only about the material comforts and successes of a certain lifestyle but also a kind of predictability that would allow him to follow through on commitments made to oneself and others. Predictability was not just establishing a day-to-day routine grounded in consumer habits. It was about an external environment in which one has the agentive capacity to translate a promise or a wish into reality, whether it be planning to buy a car or making plans with others who might rely on you. As such, normalcy entailed an ability to render one’s desires or personal commitments into an actionable truth.

Why is the word normal the privileged shorthand for this discrepancy among desires, commitments, and the material realities that make everyday life in Serbia a struggle? Not being normal already has an everyday connotation of being out of step with the world or reality. “You’re not normal” (Nisi normalan) is a common way to mark disagreement or dis-

approval with someone in conversation, particularly among friends and age peers. “Nisi normalan” is best translated as “you’re crazy.” It signals disagreement with someone’s point of view, but more to the point, people accuse others of not being normal when they make a comment that seems nonsensical, impossible, or beyond commonsense understandings of the world and how one should act in it. Normal in everyday usage thus points to the gap between how one views the world and the cold hard realities of that world.

If friends casually tell each other all the time “you’re not normal,” the term has also taken on a larger social and political significance in relationship to Serbia as a country. Many people are quick to anger or despair about the lack of normalcy in Serbia. One day shortly before I left the field in 2004, I was talking to a friend on the phone about my trip home. The mundane conversation suddenly turned intense when my friend told me that on the day that I left I could finally tell everybody what I thought of them. He said that I could run through the halls of the university where I had been conducting research with student activists working on university reform yelling, “You, people, you are totally fucked up. Do you think you are normal? You will never be normal. Do you think you will reform your university? It’s never going to happen” (conversation with author, April 15, 2004). This exchange upset me deeply. As I wrote in my field notes: “I felt as if he was occupying my position as a foreigner to spew all the angry things he felt about Serbia, his hopelessness and disgust” (field notes, April 15, 2004). My friend’s critique of Serbia was more powerful in his eyes because it was voiced through an outside perspective, against which Serbia could never be normal. Indeed, only someone from the normal world—that is, the West—could even really see the ways in which Serbia was not normal.

Yet the logic underpinning my friend’s angry rant is telling. The move from “you will never be normal” to “you will never reform your university” points to an understanding of normalcy as the ability to take effective action in the world. The students my friend was critiquing (by appropriating my voice and outsider status) were not normal because they would never be able to achieve their goals. This friend had often expressed the sentiment to me that reform efforts were hopeless because of a lack of will, ability, or conditions for change in Serbia. But this time he chose to voice these critiques through the register of normalcy. In some ways, this was the strongest condemnation he could voice, and it was made more powerful by appropriation of an outsider perspective. The inability of the student activists to translate their goals into real-world effects was a symptom of how “totally fucked up” Serbia was. Like the casual use of normal among friends, normal here refers to a confused sense of reality and a naiveté about the limits of one’s actions. As in the case of Biljana discussed above, the true assessment of what was or was not normal could only come from an outsider: in Biljana’s case, it was the visiting students; in my friend’s case, it was the gaze of the outsider-anthropologist. The lack of normalcy came into sharp relief when outsiders
judged Serbs, revealing the discrepancy between desire and reality, and it was exacerbated by the inability to control an external judging gaze.

NORMALCY AND EVERYDAY LIFE
This tension between desire and agentive action is often experienced as a feature of Serbia’s political, social, and economic landscape. The unpredictability of everyday life is a common way that young people describe both coming of age in Milošević’s Serbia and life since the October of 2000 democratic revolution in which he was overthrown. During my time in the field, those in their twenties and younger often noted that, beginning in the 1990s, the social, economic, and professional expectations that their older siblings and parents had previously held in a more relatively stable socialist Yugoslavia were no longer possible. Rising debt, international sanctions, and one of the worst instances of hyperinflation in European history drove Serbia’s standard of living down dramatically. Hyperinflation in the early 1990s meant not only day-to-day deprivation but also a chaos that upended the rhythms of everyday life (Gordy 1999). People sold luxury items for basic necessities, as the trappings of material comfort gave way to the realities of poverty. Material value quite literally lost all stable grounding. Those who had been teenagers in the 1990s had a powerful sense that there was no predictable reality in which they could realize material, personal, or political aspirations. The relationships of cause and effect structuring everyday life and politics had been utterly “opaque” and often gave rise to conspiracy theories about who was really controlling life in Serbia (Živković in press).

Aleksandra, who had been in high school at the time of hyperinflation, recounted to me her memories of deprivation from that period. She remembered selling expensive household items to fund an evening out, a pack of cigarettes, or some beer. She summed up her experience of loss in that period with an old curse: “May you have wealth and lose it.” Although she told me she had since realized the extent of poverty in the world, Serbia’s poverty was somehow worse because you knew what were missing. For men and women who came of age during the 1990s like Aleksandra, experiences of leisure and consumption inevitably indexed loss, both of certain lifestyles but also of the link between aspirations and action, materiality and value. One might know what one was missing but be unable to translate those aspirations or desires into sustained and meaningful action. How could one trust value in a world in which a motorbike might suddenly be worth a few beers and a pack of cigarettes?

Despite the momentous events of October 5, in which Milošević was ousted in massive citizen-led protests, people complain that the changes in postrevolutionary Serbia have been merely cosmetic. Urban Serbia glitters with consumer temptations: shiny new boutiques in Belgrade’s center, fancy cars on the streets, the latest high-tech gear in store windows. Yet unemployment remains extremely high, and even those living urban, “middle-class” lifestyles struggle to get by. Krisztina Fehervary has argued that the concept of what is “normal” in postsocialist Hungary serves as a comment on the gap between the “the modesty of aspirations in contrast to the extraordinary difficulties... faced in obtaining them” (Fehervary 2002:382). Similarly, the difficulty of attaining any of the splendid goods on offer is part of what people mean when they say their lives still aren’t normal. Many first-time foreign visitors to Belgrade wonder how a country plagued by poverty and extremely high unemployment can support full cafes and impeccably dressed young men and women, all chatting on the latest cell phone models. The contradictions only become clear when you sit with people in cafes nursing one beer or coffee, for hours. Debt is becoming increasingly common in Serbia, as people use bank credit and payment plans to finance luxury goods and surprisingly frequent trips abroad. Such attempts to architect a consumer lifestyle out of limited means are defining experiences for Serbia’s aspiring urban youth. Like Aleksandra in the pre-Milošević period, young men and women after 2000 were well aware of the material, structural, institutional, and social conditions that would need to be in place for them to translate aspirations into realities.

THERE ARE NO “RULES”: NORMAL AS MORAL DISCIPLINE
These examples point to a definition of normalcy as the ability to translate goals into actions—such as realizing consumer desires or implementing institutional and political reform—given Serbia’s political, social, and economic circumstances. In light of its ties to agentive capacity, the idea of being normal has also taken on a key moral dimension. In my experience, normalcy talk typically began with references to consumption or lifestyle but often shifted to a language of material decay, corruption, and pathology. People attributed their and others’ lack of will or ability to realize goals to moral failure brought on by a corrupting environment. How could one develop a moral compass for action in the face of prevalent organized crime, a severely underfunded state, corruption in the judiciary and other key state sectors, and the looming shadow of the war and violence of the 1990s? People across generations complained to me that the criminalization of society in the Milošević era eliminated public figures with moral authority who could model clear distinctions between right and wrong. A number of studies about the “war generation” and their psychological state and social status were published after 2000. Such policy and scholarly analysis linked the instability of material life directly to a state of moral chaos and disintegration of a system of values (CPA 2003, 2004). In this way, the political and economic conditions of Serbia in the 1990s were expressed in a psychologizing register that pointed to the internal moral state of Serbian citizens—and youth in particular. Given a particular understanding of agency that correlates an inner state and outer actions, the discrepancy between the two can manifest...
The problem of war-generation youth and their isolation in Serbia is linked to popular beliefs about who was responsible for war, nationalist violence, and general moral degradation in Serbia during the Milošević period and after. This is especially true among urban, educated Serbs such as the students with whom I worked. Writers, academics, and young men and women themselves posed the chaos of everyday life and isolation in Serbia as a trap that prevented Serbia from moving forward as a modern democratic country. Thus, the stakes of not being normal were both individual and collective. Marko Vidojković is a celebrated and widely read Serbian writer in his mid-thirties who has turned the pathology discourse into an art form. His 2007 essay, “Pravila” (lit., “Rules”), published in Serbia’s popular and oldest daily Politika is exemplary of how people make direct links between social and political turmoil, the passivity of Serbian citizens, and the moral decay of Serbian youth. In this piece, Vidojković dramatizes the link between an ever-changing reality and the increasing criminality, loss of empathy, and irresponsibility of children born in 1990, who came of age during the disintegration of Yugoslavia. He refers to this group as “they,” a nameless and faceless entity that is nonetheless the site of popular moral panic, the “war generation” referred to in the policy documents above. “Rules” tracks Serbia’s political, social, and economic upheaval in a series of briefly noted events that include war, assassination, familial strife, emerging criminality, and sexual depravity.

Vidojković narrates major events in the 1990s through the eyes of those born in 1990. He begins with the wars that tore the former Yugoslavia apart and moves to hyper-inflation and unemployment in Serbia. As he moves through the 1990s, he describes the effects of rising insecurity and poverty through the actions and experiences of youth. Vidojković intersperses war and political upheaval with this generation’s slow descent into depravity, experimentation with drugs, and criminality. He directly links the values and role models of the period with political tragedies, such as the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in 2003, and in turn alludes to a loss of human empathy. Vidojković’s piece ends with a dire warning: “They are all around us. In front of them is the future. No one dares to set rules for them... No one explains to them why it’s commonly necessary to follow some kind of rules. They will make the new rules. Not one of them will ask us whether we agree with these rules.”

Vidojković takes the same political, social, and economic conditions that many of my interlocutors described as “not normal” and links them to the moral degradation of a generation and Serbia’s uncertain future. Intimate moments are bound up with massive political and economic shifts, as the banal and the historical, sacred and profane, all merge to form one backdrop against which it becomes impossible to judge good from bad. The displacement of responsibility and the blending of intimate and public, moral and immoral, and the lack of rules has produced a generation with no capacity to take responsibility for their own actions. Vidojković
defines rulelessness as a general failure of disciplinary forms—state, economic, parental, legal. A lack of rules has produced a generation incapable of either judging value in the world around them or taking moral responsibility for their actions. The resonance with the discourse of normalcy discussed above is striking. Here we find a generation that is incapable of either moral action or of maintaining perspective on the meaning of an unpredictable and chaotic social reality. Rules might have produced subjects capable of discerning moral meaning in the world and of acting accordingly.

Like the idea of a Serbia without rules, the loss of a system of values means that people, and young people especially, are outside of disciplinary regimes through which they might be produced as moral subjects. The stakes of normalcy extended beyond individual aspirations or life trajectories to people’s concern for the future of Serbia as a democratic country. Although the political views of the young men and women I worked with differed, all of them counted themselves, at least publically, as anti-Milošević and distanced themselves from the most explicitly nationalist politics of the 1990s and subsequent years. Many were invested in widespread and long-standing associations with civic cosmopolitanism, European belonging, and modernity. The majority were urban identified, even if their places of origin were smaller towns or rural areas. Political ideology and social class throughout the former Yugoslavia have long been inscribed through geographical metaphors that map levels of civilization and modernity to territory in a process Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden (1992) call “nesting orientalisms.” The internalization of these civilizational tropes and the idea of the Balkans as an exceptional space in divisions of East and West, and traditional and modern, has had a long-standing and powerful presence in literary, political, and everyday discourse in and about the region (Green 2005; Helms 2008; Rasza and Lindstrom 2004; Todorova 1997).

Of the complex social geographies that cross-cut Serbia (Živković in press), there is perhaps no more contested social terrain than that of urban versus rural belonging (Greenberg 2006; Jansen 2005; Simic 1973; van de Port 1998). Indeed, signaling urban belonging through “middle-class” consumer desires like contemporary fashion, rock music, and travel were also ways to mark social and political belonging (Gordy 1999). Modes of dress and vacationing in European capitals were ways to distance oneself from the nationalist, traditionalist, and rural elements that many educated, urban citizens saw as the primary cause of Serbia’s isolation, rising nationalist values, and moral decay. As I discuss elsewhere (Greenberg 2010), symbols of European belonging, and especially of generational difference, were ways that young people marked themselves as separate from, and not responsible for, Serbia’s violent history in the 1990s. Young people blamed politicians, or new urban “peasants,” tied to traditionalism, nationalist values, and backward social mores. Thus, moral responsibility for Serbia’s history was inseparable from not only political support for Milošević and his ilk but also from one’s place in a social geography that included cosmopolitan and urban practices, like travel and a “European” orientation.

NORMALCY AS THE RETURN TO EUROPE

On a fundamental level, travel was one of those consumer entitlements that marked frustrated aspirations for a middle-class lifestyle, to which urban, educated youth felt entitled. However, the stakes of travel were higher than access to some kind of good life. Travel became a key site in which people, young and old, tried to make sense of a broken system of values, changing material conditions, intergenerational relations, and the Serbian state’s changing position. It also became a powerful political discourse by which to both negotiate changing citizen entitlements and critique policies and positions associated with nationalism and international isolation.

As a politically relevant discourse, the student activists with whom I conducted field research took up the idea that isolation was both a product and potential future cause of political instability, nationalism, and violence. These students represented precisely the groups of citizens who were most invested in European belonging as a powerful alternative to the nationalist values that many saw as responsible for Serbia’s isolation in the 1990s. If travel produced the right kind of citizens, then surely it was critical for a future democratic Serbia. In a 2004 trip to Brussels to lobby EU officials to soften visa regimes for students, a delegation from one of Serbia’s largest student organizations mobilized precisely these kinds of links between circulation and European values. The head of the student delegation told the press, “Those representatives we talked to were horrified, as were we, by the statistic we presented to them, that 70 percent of students from Serbia have never been to a foreign country” (B92 2004). In Brussels, the group presented their position paper entitled “Isolation of the New Generation of Serbia and Montenegro from European Values and Culture” and noted in statements to the press that the lack of travel was one reason that the “academic elite suffered from xenophobia (akademska elita pati od ksenofobije),” posing a direct challenge to Serbia’s transition to Europe (Umičević 2004). Europeaness, educational and professional aspirations, and travel were tied to Serbia’s ability to become democratic. Serbian youth’s inability to travel easily throughout Europe could be mobilized in debates from university funding to visa regimes to fulfilling EU demands for the extradition of indicted war criminals to be tried at the Hague Tribunal. If Serbia didn’t meet conditions for EU accession, then closed borders would stay closed. Without easy access to travel, young men and women faced a future of moral degradation, increased ethnonationalism, or emigration.

At the same time, participation in higher-education mobility programs was explicitly tied to Serbia’s integration into EU institutions. EU policies and programs for youth were often framed in terms of student and youth mobility across European borders, in particular the creation of a European
Higher Education Space and the university-reform process known as Bologna, which initiated transferability of credits across participating European universities. The emphasis on student mobility emerged in response to the EU as an ideological project to forge common European identity as well as to aid the restructuring of labor markets and capital flows in Europe (Wright and Rabo 2010). Serbia’s inclusion as a member of this Higher Education Space (it signed on to Bologna in 2003) was a marker of its changing status in a larger international field of geopolitical relations, and EU accession became a central issue of Serbian politics after the 2000 revolution. As EU membership has become increasingly defined in terms of mobility and circulation, opportunities to travel, study, and work abroad became all the more important to those students who self-identified as European or oriented toward “pro-Europe” politics. Students thus tied older associations with travel in the socialist period to very new meanings of mobility as essential to European identity. In so doing, they mobilized and reformulated older tropes of travel and meanings of Non-Aligned state sovereignty to promote reform of state institutions. Normalcy thus became a bridge between very different geopolitical and social orders, both constitutive of a desired form of agency and sovereignty, under very different political and economic conditions. To this extent, the relationship between changing forms of Serbian state power and intimate experiences of moral and agentive selves was turned on its head. Students could use the lack of normalcy, and its primary expression in restrictive visa regimes, to push for reforms of state and new disciplinary regimes that they believed might produce normal, sovereign citizen-subjects.

CONCLUSION: THE POSTDISCIPLINARY STATE

“Normal” talk bundles the disciplinary capacities of state institutions, the perceptions and representations of national states on a world stage, and people’s intimate sense of themselves as agents and moral subjects. The nature of sociality as fundamentally mediated has been a staple of anthropological analysis (Mazzarella 2004) and certainly a foundational insight into studies of the nature of human communication and signification (Lee 1997; Mertz 1985; Peirce 1931–58). Indeed, all forms of identity are inherently unstable precisely because they emerge from a mix of social roles, perspectives, and registers that we can never fully inhabit (Bakthin 1981; Goffman 1983; Irvine 1996). However, at some point the conditions of intersubjective mediation became a problem for those Serbian citizens who were no longer able to manage the meanings of Serbian citizenship in a larger discursive field. The experience of opening oneself to judgment that travel entailed became a contested process in the context of unequal power relations. The act of travel highlighted the mismatch between individual subjective desire and the social and institutional relations that produced them. The visa—the fact one had to have it and the humiliation entailed in getting it—in turn came to stand in for the new vulnerability in managing semiotic mediation for Serbian citizens. Travel had once entailed interactions through which Yugoslavs understood themselves as—and knew others judged them to be—cosmopolitan and modern, the products of successful regimes of citizen production. Yugoslav citizens were subject to surveillance, scrutiny, and mediation at state borders. By passing through technologies of scrutiny, Yugoslav citizens enacted the modern, sovereign agency of their state. Global membership didn’t mean escape from regimes of scrutiny. It meant being subject to a productive power in which a moment of mediation or external judgment produced agentive capacity, rather than foreclosed it.

It is not a surprise, given the history detailed above, that young people would fixate on a set of practices once central to the constitution of Yugoslav state sovereignty and, in turn, to the agentive capacities of Yugoslav citizens. A desire to be “normal” points to the experience of chaos in Serbia and a breakdown of the disciplinary mechanisms that produce regulated and reliable subjects who can translate desire into action. How can a state defined by moral chaos and a lack of rules create citizen-subjects capable of action in the world? How in turn could these subjects incapable of action at home successfully negotiate international borders in which they were subject to judgment? Being normal for young Serbian men and women means, at least in part, putting into place social and economic conditions that might help them feel in control of their lives. For young Serbian citizens, travel—through which they might once have aligned desire, action, and representation—has produced its opposite. In moving out of Serbia, one was most subject to the kinds of judgments that render it impossible to control the meaning of that mobility. Such judgment becomes a problem in the context of an ideology of agency that links an interior self to the ability to control representations of one’s actions, intents, desires, and social worth. In turn, citizen agency is bound in complicated ways to state sovereignty, itself embedded in geopolitical relations and regimes of judgment. Moves such as the abolition of visas in 2009 may or may not bolster young people’s sense that they can act effectively in the world. Only time will tell whether Serbian citizens feel that they are on the road to being normal.

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NOTES

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Research Abroad Fellowship; and International Research and Exchanges Board Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Fellowship. Opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author, as are any errors.

1. Multiparty elections were held in Yugoslavia in 1990. Between 1991 and 1992, the Federal Republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia, beginning the violent wars of Yugoslav succession. Serbia, including the two autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, and Montenegro took the name the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, or Yugoslavia in 1992. This name was changed to Serbia and Montenegro in 2003. In 2006, Montenegro declared independence, and Serbia became the Republic of Serbia. Kosovo declared independence in 2008. Throughout this article, I refer to Serbia to cover the areas in which I conducted research during the period between 2002–04 (incl. the cities of Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš) partly for simplicity’s sake but also because that is largely how the young men and women I worked with referred to the country in which they lived. When referring to living conditions, politics, history, or personal memories of lives in the socialist period, most people used the name Yugoslavia, as I do here.

2. All names in this article have been changed.

3. Thanks to anthropologist Ildiko Erdei for bringing this piece to my attention.

4. This and all other translations in the article are my own.

5. Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this line of analysis.

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