Humor as Social Coping: Serbian Political Aphorisms

"Why shouldn't we be proud of our past, when each new day is worse than the previous one?"

An aphorism is a sharp proverb with a negative twist; it represents an intellectually satisfying, if macabre, form of humor that summarizes desperate times and helps people come to terms with circumstances they cannot control.

Aphorisms are well illustrated by the Serbian people who, after years of repressive rule, civil war and ethnic conflict, have sore need for emotional relief. They have developed a tradition of writing aphorisms to restore a sense of individuality, dignity and psychological integrity for a confused and misled population. As Aleksandar Cotric explained, "We have had wars, hyperinflation, cult of personalities, censorship, nationalism, ethnic cleansing, and if it weren't for this self-defensive humor, these crazy people in power would have turned us into crazy people." Characteristically, he adds: "Serbia is not a twilight zone. Here you can see nothing at all." Mitic noted that aphorisms had been used throughout Serbia's history "to enrage Tito and the communists, ridicule Milosevic and the nationalists, and soothe the country's way though the transition after the war."

Slobodan Simic, a psychiatrist, recalled "I started to write aphorisms because I was angry. I am a Serbian doctor and I give all kinds of therapy, including linguistic therapy." "The safest way to break up the fear of something is to make fun of it, to laugh at it and make it ridiculous. If you tell someone they are fat, it can be construed as an insult. But if you say, 'lose extra weight, get rid of your brain,' then you can get your message across without causing offense."

The political power of the aphorism has been demonstrated by the frequent arrest of their authors. After Tito died, Rastko Zacic published a book of aphorisms: "When our Father died, it turned out he abused us and he abused our mother as well" (referring to the mother country). Zacic was tried and convicted for sedition and then, in 1984, he produced a sequel in which the aphorisms were all inverted: "When our Father died, the court determined that he didn't abuse us..." Again he was brought to trial, and argued (unsuccessfully) that he could not be tried twice for saying opposite things.

Most of the aphorisms are political. Some refer to local issues: "Kosovo will belong to Albanians only over our dead bodies. That means all the conditions have been met" (Slobodian Simic). But many have universal appeal:

"The working class is the skeleton of our system" (Rastko Zakic)

“Learning from our mistakes, we made mistakes”

“The conflict was impossible to resolve: we were fighting for peace while they were struggling against war”

“Oh God, if you exist, help us. If you don’t exist, tell us not to expect anything”

“We will do our best not to have any more fratricide. We will stop being brothers”

Aleksandar Baljak, one of Serbia’s most prominent aphorists, cynically observed: “Our best aphorisms were created in difficult times, and for this modern satire - better days lie ahead.”