

## SERBIA BETWEEN WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM AND ORTHODOX COLLECTIVISM

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the problems that come with the contradictions between individualism and collectivism. Discussions about these contradictions are still present in academic circles today. In Eastern European countries, individualism became relevant after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Up to then, the collectivist spirit prevailed. By accepting neoliberalism, post-socialist Eastern European countries began economic reform, including further educational reform, health reform, cultural reform, etc. This reform also meant the transition from collectivism to individualism because modern neoliberal capitalism belongs to individualism, in which the main focus is on the individual as the largest consumer. The transition to neoliberal capitalism led to a considerable number of workers losing their jobs after the liberalization, deregulation, and privatization of the Serbian economy, resulting in the lifeless demographic image of Serbia, which worsens significantly yearly. Today, Serbia remains without a working-age population, which, in addition to young and highly educated workers, also consists of artisans of various occupations. For the Serbian political elites, the path to the EU does not lead to the question. We've been on that road for twenty years, and it doesn't seem like we've moved much since the beginning. According to the principle, "one step forward, two steps back."

**Keywords:** individualism, collectivism, neoliberalism, Serbia

## **1. Introduction**

Over the last 100 years and more, the constructs of individualism and collectivism have exerted a significant influence on the social sciences. Some authors emphasize that this influence has been growing over the years and that these constructs remain popular (Gelfand, Bhawuk, Nishii & Bechtold, 2004). Historically, one could say that human society has been divided between two poles: individualistic and collectivistic. In collectivistic societies, the spirit of rural communities and cooperatives, mutual aid, workplace democracy, and local self-governance prevail, whereas individualism is characterized by the desire to pursue personal ambitions, freedom of choice, and so on. (Mamontov, Kozhevnikova, & Radyukova, 2014).

In his work "The Fate of Man in the Modern World", Nikolai Berdyaev emphasizes that "collectivism and collective consciousness are not new phenomena in history," stating that collectivism has always existed, and history itself began with collectivism. He argues that "throughout the entirety of human history, individuals have belonged to various collectives: family, tribal, religious, professional." On the other hand, Berdyaev believed that individualism

"did not signify personal originality, personal thought, personal creativity," but rather "signified egoism, selfishness, isolation, asocial behavior, a wolfish attitude towards one's neighbor" (Berdyaev, 2006, pp. 51-52).

Today, in the 21st century, when we've become captives of neoliberal dogma or the catastrophes of capitalist imperialism, which, with its greedy imperialistic ambitions, has managed to create enormous inequalities in the world, we are left to ask ourselves: Have we preserved collective consciousness, or is it, as Berdyaev (2006, p. 52) would say, "the impersonal and inhuman power of money that has determined people's thinking"?

Namely, post-socialist Eastern European countries leaped into the "embrace of the neoliberal octopus" (J. Dušanić) by transitioning to a neoliberal economic model. The transition to a neoliberal model entailed a complete overhaul of the economic system, achieved through the implementation of shock therapy. Guided by the principles of the neoliberal "holy scripture," the Washington Consensus, post-socialist Eastern European countries accepted to implement economic reforms devised by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and

the World Bank. This led to the rise of what Naomi Klein explains as "disaster capitalism," which she describes as follows: "the planned looting of the public sphere post-disaster, combined with the treatment of crises as exciting market opportunities, I call 'disaster capitalism'" (Klein, 2008, p. 14).

The acceptance of the neoliberal doctrine didn't just entail a change in the economic system; it also extended to other sectors like education, healthcare, and so on. However, the most complex task was the imposition of the Protestant work ethic and the ideas of individualism on Eastern European countries, especially Orthodox ones like Russia and Serbia, which traditionally held a more collectivist view of life.

## **2. The importance of protestant ethics for the development of capitalism**

One of Max Weber's most significant works, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," was first published in 1904/05. From that time until the present day, this work continues to occupy the thoughts of many authors engaged in social sciences, especially in the fields of economics and sociology. Max Weber, as one of the founding figures of modern social science

alongside Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim, has had a substantial influence on many authors in the fields of economics and sociology. His impact extends to scholars like Joseph Schumpeter, as well as representatives of the Austrian School of Economics such as Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek (considered the fathers of neoliberalism), and sociologist Talcott Parsons, among many others.

Protestantism first emerged in history in the 16th century when the reform movement opposed the pope's authority. The proponents of this movement believed that one form of governance should replace another, rejecting the traditionalism that was considered the greatest adversary of the "spirit of capitalism," as emphasized by Max Weber (2018, p. 39). Weber's primary thesis in the Protestant ethic was that in the modern capitalism of his time, the "economic order is a vast cosmos," and that "modern capitalism nurtures and creates itself through economic selection of the business entities it requires" (2018, p. 36). It should be noted that the focus of the Protestant ethic is more oriented toward the "spirit of capitalism" rather than its outward form (Kirby, 2019), as for Weber, the "spirit of capitalism" was present

long before "capitalistic development" (Weber, 2018, p. 37).

The spirit of modern capitalism is best defined through the work ethic. An ethic that regards labor as something to be done for oneself rather than solely for consumption, according to Weber. He noticed the best formulation of the work ethic in "ascetic" Protestantism, especially in Calvinism. In fact, Weber believed that religion could have both positive and negative effects on economic development. If a religion has a positive view of the accumulation of material wealth, he thought that economic growth would also be positive. He found the solution in Calvinism, which emerged during the Reformation in Western Europe (McCleary & Barro, 2006).

Weber argued that Protestantism is responsible for the rise of the "spirit of capitalism" if not Capitalism itself. (Nelson, 2010). In this context, Weber's primary analysis of the Protestant ethic considered religiosity as an independent variable capable of exerting a significant influence on economic dynamics. Weber believed that the cultivation of virtues rooted in religious beliefs, such as work ethic, honesty, frugality, philanthropy, and hospitality to strangers, had a direct impact on the economy. However, Weber also

believed that the relationship between economics and religion would weaken over time as the capitalist mode of work and production became established and that with the introduction of the Protestant ethic into social and legal institutions, the influence of religious practices and customs would diminish (McCleary & Barro, 2006).

Based on research developed by Max Weber in the early 20th century, the concept of the work ethic arose, which had a significant impact on the development of capitalism in Western countries. Weber did not dismiss other social and economic factors that influenced the development of capitalism, but he regarded Protestants as the "chosen." Apologists of the Protestant work ethic believed that hard work was the foundation of success, as without diligent effort and ascetic living, it could have negative consequences. The essence of this understanding of work is that strenuous labor leads to a desire for even greater labor. Today's work ethic is closer to ideological beliefs than moral life values because work has become a duty and a sign of personal satisfaction for individuals in modern society (Rusu, 2018).

Contrary to Protestantism, in Orthodox Christianity, work is

directed towards the "inner person," meaning it is "work on one's spiritual health and balance through inner spiritual activities" (Bulgakov in Vratuša-Žunjić, 1995: p. 66). Vladimir Solovyov, a Russian philosopher and theologian, believed that thanks to Protestantism, Western civilization liberated the individual's personality, a person's "self," in comparison to the medieval era (Solovjov, 2010, p. 22). In such a world where the individual "self" became more important than the collective "we," egoism has taken hold of humanity. As highlighted by Anđelković: "The person of our time, who has entrenched themselves in the shell of egoism, takes 'having and being' as their ideal, while humanity is engaged in an unceasing struggle for capital, which determines all ideologies, politics, state behaviors, and the conduct of nations" (2017, p. 176).

### **3. Modern capitalism**

The reason Protestantism is significant for modern society is that Protestantism has a deep inclination toward individualism (Nelson, 2010), as "Western-style capitalism nurtures individualism, which develops in market competition, primarily focused on material values, dominated by personal gain"

(Anđelković, 2016, p. 83). When discussing social structures and their cultural determinants, it's important to emphasize that culturally, the West is more oriented toward individualism, while the East is more oriented toward collectivism. Debates in academic circles about individualism and collectivism can occur in various contexts, such as social systems, cultural patterns, religion, morality, economic development, and modernity. Culturally, we can define individualism and collectivism as follows: in an individualistic society, the personal interests of individuals are emphasized, while in a collectivistic society, loyalty to the group is emphasized (Darwish & Huber, 2003). This suggests that for an individualist, personal interests and personal benefits are more important than the interests and benefits of the group to which they belong (Gajda & Oie, 2017).

Many authors who have explored the differences between Western individualism and Eastern collectivism view these phenomena as "key oppositions that mutually exclude each other" (Mamontov et al., 2014). Accordingly, Anđelković regards the West as the "representative of vulgar materialism, which places the

profit principle above humans." According to the same author, the East is a "proponent and defender of state, national, religious, and cultural identity, as well as traditional values on which people and nations have relied and persisted" (Anđelković, 2017, p. 197). The Western way of life, where profit predominates, has turned individuals into lonely beings, spiritually destroyed, detached from nature, and solely focused on satisfying their material needs.

The difference between a collectivist Eastern society and an individualist Western society lies in the fact that moral virtues are objective social laws defining a collectivist society. On the other hand, Western society criticizes collectivism as an obstacle to the development of a free individual living by the fundamental concepts of liberalism, which are equality and freedom (Mamontov et al., 2014, pp. 200-201). However, as even Nikolai Berdyaev pointed out in his work "Philosophy of Inequality," the word "liberalism" has long lost its charm despite its origin in the beautiful word "freedom" (Berđajev, 2001, p. 119).

Namely, Berdyaev believed that political and economic freedoms were on the decline and that liberalism and democracy as ideologies no longer interested the youth. When

he spoke of freedom, Berdyaev considered it to be distorted, with its formal understanding concealing human bondage and leading to unfreedom (Berđajev, 2006, pp. 27-28). If we draw a parallel and compare the present time with the era described in Berdyaev's works, we can see many similarities, which means that Marx was correct when, to Hegel's observation, "history always repeats itself twice," added, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." When we talk about modern society, we can say that it is far from democratic because without "economic freedom," which has "turned out to be a mockery" (Berđajev, 2006, p. 28), there are only "dependent societies on the periphery of the world capitalist system" (Lj. Mitrović).

Today's form of capitalism, characterized by neoliberalism, is based precisely on individualism, i.e., individual freedoms and criticism of collectivism. The most significant theorists of neoliberalism, like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman believed that the free market is the only correct model in economics, which all states should follow. By embracing the neoliberal economic doctrine and entering the "free" market, countries have capitulated to multinational corporations.

"Free markets don't exist" (Ha-Joon Chang), there are only markets that play by the rules of multinational corporations, and countries that have consciously embraced such an economic model have surrendered to the interests of big capital, in which "profit has become more significant than people" (Noam Chomsky). Working in large corporations is not the same as the work we understand. Work is a noble thing that gives a person a sense of satisfaction because it contributes equally, both to the community in which one lives and to oneself on a personal level. However, working in large corporations is something entirely different because it evokes feelings of competition and aggression in people. In large corporations, a person loses their identity and becomes a bloodthirsty beast, like in the scariest movie. They don't see a friend in another person but an enemy because "in the struggle for self-preservation, the Machiavellian principle reigns, where all means are allowed. European culture has, through the mouth of its sciences, proclaimed the main principle of life as a fight for self-preservation. What is that if not a call for cannibalism? Life becomes a slaughter, 'man is a wolf to man'... A person without a soul is a thing among things, a beast among beasts, and in

the animal world and the struggle for survival, everything is permitted" (Anđelković, 2017, pp. 199-200). Working in large corporations is a battle for survival.

Multinational corporations have fostered such an environment for a straightforward reason: it's far more convenient to maintain control over people. Be it the laborers on the production floors or the executives in leadership positions, both groups are compelled to earn their permanent job security and, ultimately, their wages. This brings us to the significance of the Protestant work ethic in modern society. Nowadays, it has become a prevailing narrative among governmental leaders, emphasizing that there's no room for relaxation if we aspire for societal advancement. While disparities have emerged in this society, where workers often bear the label of cheap labor, most tend to overlook this issue, persuading us that our current standard of living stands as the most prosperous in recent history.

With the help of the mass media, which they mainly control, multinational corporations have succeeded in determining and shaping life trends. In the study "Pink Transition in Serbia," S. Antičić analyzes the messages sent to us by large companies (such as Coca-Cola)

through their advertisements. These messages generally contain ideas like "follow your instincts," "take care of yourself," "you deserve this," "let all your senses enjoy," "seize and go," and so on. Thus, the message is primarily directed toward individuals rather than the collective, which implies that "we should primarily focus on ourselves, not thinking about others, but also not considering our long-term interests" (Antonić, 2013, p. 276).

Modern society is a consumer society where the primary goal of each individual is to "produce more and consume more" because the "market-driven and acquisitive character" has come to the fore during the era from which it emerged and selfishness triumphed. For modern individuals with consumer-oriented attitudes, personal wealth is more important than spiritual and cultural wealth. Due to the grueling workplace conditions, people fall into the trap of consumer society, where they find solace. Modern individuals address their dissatisfaction and frustrations on personal and business levels by spending their free time in shopping centers, satisfying their needs through shopping. Naomi Klein, in her work "No Logo," emphasizes that "branded multinational companies may talk

about diversity, but the visible result of their actions is a legion of teenage clones marching through the global shopping center" (Klein, 2002, p. 101).

Jovan Dušanić, in his work "Economics of Postmodernity," reexamines the "idea of modern civilization based on individual freedoms." He points out that the era of "so-called metanarratives (grand narratives) that explain the origin of the universe, life, and purpose" has come to an end. Dušanić also criticizes the material world where everything revolves around money and consumerism, in which people have detached themselves from family, friends, work colleagues, religion, nationality, and state, and have become "egocentric and self-centered beings" (Dušanić, 2014, pp. 10-11). Anđelković takes his criticism of modern individuals further. For him, people have become "slaves of matter, slaves of things," and their "tendency to idolize is particularly noticeable in their relationship with nature." He argues that nature has reduced and confined humans to mere material beings, instead of humans elevating and humanizing nature (Anđelković, 2017, p. 199). In the work "Development, Religion, War" by Vera Vratuša-Žunjić, the analysis focuses



on the writings of Sergei Bulgakov, who is considered one of the most significant theorists of Eastern Orthodoxy. He emphasizes that the "distinctiveness of the Christian relationship to the world is expressed in religiously motivated free ascetic work, which combines previously opposed principles of accepting separation from the world." Furthermore, he highlights that in Christianity, "human labor is rehabilitated as part of the divine logos" and that its purpose is not only "satisfying basic needs but also involving humans in God's work, in the transformation of the world" (Vratuša-Žunjić, 1995, p. 65).

The relentless march of technological progress, undeniably one of the most remarkable feats of humanity, has paradoxically entrapped individuals in the clutches of technology. Initially, there was hope that the evolution of digital technologies heralded as the third industrial revolution, would streamline labor, supplanting traditional analog and electronic methods. Nonetheless, these emerging technologies have boosted productivity while concurrently diminishing the demand for human labor.

"In addition to its rejection of tradition and the relativization of moral principles, postmodernism is built

upon the concept of surplus people. Instead of technological progress and increased productivity leading to reduced working hours and more leisure time for individuals to cultivate their personalities, foster personal relationships, and return to true values, working hours have increased, leaving employees with little to no free time. Simultaneously, a vast number of people have become surplus, exerting pressure on those employed and offering their labor force for virtually nothing" (Dušanić, 2014, p. 18).

Technologies have so thoroughly permeated our lives that they have created a form of dependence, diverting people's attention from everyday issues and occurrences and leading them into the virtual realm of a fantasy, a "networked society" (M. Castells). This sensation can make it seem as though we are living in a reality show where privacy no longer exists.

#### **4. The case of Serbia**

From a historical perspective, Serbia has always found itself at a crossroads due to its geographical location, situated between various empires coming from the East or the West. This has significantly shaped the destiny of the Serbian people, who, throughout their history, have

endured numerous injustices but have proudly fought and rebelled against those who oppressed them. Serbs are a patriarchal nation, inclined toward tradition and possess a collectivist spirit, persistently striving to preserve their national identity until today.

Upon adopting the neoliberal economic model, significant changes unfolded. Serbia committed to market liberalization, deregulation, and privatization, anticipating that, over fifteen years, it would foster "increased competition, rational resource accumulation, and improved economic efficiency. However, reality diverged from these expectations" (Drašković, 2015, str. 23). As Drašković underscores, "A misguided economic policy doctrine has proven to be ineffective" (Drašković, 2015, str. 23). This stems from the intrinsic proclivity of Serbia and other Slavic nations towards a collectivist economic outlook, spiritual unity, and a strong sense of solidarity. This collective spirit is exemplified by one of the primary Orthodox commandments - love for one's neighbor (Mamontov et al., 2014, p. 200).

Orthodoxy lacks an elaborate theory around which to organize its economy, as well as its politics. Nevertheless, it endeavors to strike a balance between poverty and we-

alth. Hence, one could say that "certain Orthodox societies have, throughout history, embraced positions akin to socialist economies" (Dobrijević, 2006). In his work "Serbia in the East," Svetozar Marković provides a fascinating study of patriarchal societies, elucidating the significance of families and communes in economics. Marković highlights that "From an economic perspective, the commune is a primitive association for production and consumption simultaneously," distinct from other societies as it "generates all its needs independently" (Marković, 2021, p. 57). Therefore, the spirit of freedom within a nation is reflected in its self-reliant economy, safeguarding the liberty and sovereignty of a state.

Serbia is anything but a free country following the opening of its markets and acceptance of the neoliberal economic model. With the arrival of foreign "investors" who receive subsidies from the Government of the Republic of Serbia to establish their manufacturing facilities, Serbia has fallen into a neo-colonial status and become a nation of cheap labor. It is essential to keep in mind that "owners and managers of multinational companies choose to open their branches only in countries that are rich in raw materials,

have inexpensive labor, the ability to finance a portion of investments, and a sufficiently broad domestic market" (Vratuša-Žunjić, 1995: p. 108). In this manner, they "secure a continuous flow of strategic resources, enhance competitiveness in the global market, avoid customs barriers, and establish a monopoly on the protected local market" (Ibid, p. 108). Turning to foreign "investors," Serbia has dealt a severe blow to its domestic entrepreneurs, resulting in a significant challenge not only for the present generation but also for future generations, who now primarily seek to leave their country in pursuit of a better life. In the words of Bishop Grigorije, "In the past, people sought their livelihood, but today they seek dignity" (Danas, 04.10.2019).

The Serbian people saw their dignity erode when rapid privatization dismantled domestic production, leaving workers unemployed, insulted, and degraded. This process led to a pronounced societal inequality between the rich and the poor, a divide that continues to widen until today. Labor laws, which have undergone substantial changes, bear a considerable share of the responsibility for the current state, characterized by a quasi-slavery status.

The Labor Law stands as one of the first legislations enacted after the democratic changes, bringing significant alterations to workers' rights. As Dušanić emphasizes, "Workers who lose their jobs, especially those in their mature years, practically have no chance of finding new employment." On the other hand, "young women often must commit to postponing having children for several upcoming years, and so forth" (Dušanić, 2013b, p. 25). Whether consciously or not, such a labor law has stripped workers of their rights, leaving them at the mercy of capital owners. Furthermore, this labor law has directly influenced Serbia's demographic landscape, which worsens year by year.

The issue of Serbia's poor demographic outlook has been a longstanding concern. However, in recent years, there has been a notable increase in the disparity between mortality and natality. It is estimated that around 15,000 people emigrate from Serbia each year. When combined with the negative natural population growth, which is estimated at 30,000 to 35,000 inhabitants (as in 2005, 2007, and 2010), the total reaches figures of 45,000 to 50,000 inhabitants. Based on these statistics, it becomes evident that almost an entire town leaves Serbia

each year. The primary challenges contributing to Serbia's poor demographic outlook include emigration, declining fertility rates, an increase in the average age at first marriage for both men and women, a rise in the average age of women at the birth of their first child, and a significant number of abortions (Geotesla, 02.02.2020).

Serbia's challenge extends beyond the emigration of young and highly educated individuals. The country faces a broader labor drain as people of varying skill levels are leaving Serbia, resulting in a significant labor shortage. Skilled workers have departed for Western European countries in pursuit of better opportunities. The Chamber of Construction Industry of Serbia has calculated that Serbia has a deficit of 30,000 craftsmen of various profiles, creating a substantial deficiency, with electricians, welders, and plumbers in high demand (Noizz, 03.01.2021).

To address this pressing demographic issue, a fundamental shift in the nation's economic policies is imperative. Many citizens leave the country due to their inability to secure employment within their respective fields or due to inadequate compensation and working conditions. "Serbia's inherent character and spi-

rit are better suited to smaller enterprises with fewer employees, family-owned businesses, and family farming" (Anđelković, 2016, p. 33). Hence, for sustained viability and economic recovery, our focus must shift towards increased support for domestic entrepreneurs and farmers, along with safeguarding local production and consumer interests. Subsidizing foreign investors is an economic practice that warrants reevaluation if we aspire to break free from the constraints imposed by neoliberal ideology.

## **5. Towards the conclusion**

Serbian society, since it has "built its house on the crossroads" (Cvijić), has always found itself at the "watershed of cultures" (Anđelković), stretched between the East and the West. Since the October 5th changes, Serbia's "long journey to Europe" has accelerated. However, it seems that even after twenty years of negotiations (based on the principle of "carrots and sticks" by the EU) and various concessions to the EU, the dream remains unfulfilled. Despite its historical, cultural, and geographical ties, Serbia's path to European integration appears to be an elusive goal.

Europe has undergone a substantial transformation since its inception.

In the past, Europe upheld the ideals of social democracy, where the essence of its culture was deeply rooted in the "dignity of the human being" and the "strength of its values" (Bodson, 1994, p. 17). However, in the present day, it has evolved into a domain dominated by technocrats headquartered in Brussels (Bodson, 1994, p. 93). It appears that Europe has relinquished both its vigor and its sense of honor, as "bankers, traders, and the pursuit of wealth have taken precedence in the value system of European societies" (Bodson, 1994, p. 17). Fundamental values such as freedom, equality, and fraternity, which emanated from the ideals of the French Revolution, have been overshadowed by newer principles. This transformation has engendered a crisis in democratic ideals with the rise of populism, an exacerbation of social inequalities, and a growing sense of alienation among people.

In seeking inspiration from Western European nations, Serbia endeavored to shift its identity from a traditional collectivist perspective towards individualism, with hopes of achieving societal, political, and economic development. However, Serbia inherently carries a cultural legacy of collectivism. Therefore,

Serbia should consider emulating countries like Japan, which successfully reconciled two seemingly incompatible aspects-tradition and modernization. Japan notably emphasizes the practices of socialization, cooperation, and compromise (Gajda & Oie, 2017). These principles did not hinder Japan from becoming one of the most developed nations in the world.

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## **SRBIJA IZMEĐU ZAPADNOG INDIVIDUALIZMA I PRAVOSLAVNOG KOLEKTIVIZMA**

**Rezime:** U radu se govori o problemima koje sa sobom nose suprotnosti između individualizma i kolektivizma. Rasprave o ovim suprotnostima su i danas prisutne u akademskim krugovima. U Istočnim evropskim zemljama individualizam je postao aktuelan nakon pada Berlinskog zida, do tada je preovladavao kolektivistički duh. Postsocijalističke istočnoevropske zemlje su prihvatanjem neoliberalizma započele, ne samo ekonomsku reformu, već i obrazovnu, zdravstvenu, kulturnu itd. Ta reforma je značila i prelazak iz kolektivizma u individualizam, jer savremeni neoliberalni kapitalizam pripada individualizmu u kojem je glavni fokus usmeren ka pojedincu kao najvećem potrošaču. Prelazak na neoliberalni kapitalizam doveo je do toga da je značajan broj radnika ostao bez posla nakon liberalizacije, deregulacije i privatizacije srpske privrede, što je rezultiralo anemičnom demografskom slikom Srbije, koja se iz godine u godinu značajno pogoršava. Srbija danas ostaje bez radno sposobnog stanovništva koje, pored mladih i visokoobrazovanih radnika, čine i zanatlije različitih zanimanja. Za Srpske političke elite put u EU se ne dovodi u pitanje. Na tom putu smo već dvadeset godina i čini se da se nismo mnogo pomakli od početka. Po principu, „korak napred nazad dva“.

**Ključne reči:** individualizam, kolektivizam, neoliberalizam, Srbija