

The Scapegoater's Fate

The West deludes itself if it thinks it can safely use Milosevic's approach against the defeated leader himself

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An ancient ritual was acted out this week. On St Vitus Day, twelve years to the day since Slobodan Milosevic breathed fresh life into the great Serbian founding myth, he was himself the scapegoat—traded to The Hague's tribunal for the modern equivalent of 30 pieces of silver.

Milosevic seemed to know something about how societies work.

He knew he had to create social cohesion. He knew that the quickest way to create social cohesion is to identify a scapegoat. This is how the sacrificial violence of ancient societies operated. To some extent, it continues to work today.

Identifying the scapegoat gives the community the opportunity to say "J'accuse." Once the community's leader points the accusing finger, the enormous human power of imitation takes over. We jump on the band-wagon of accusation. Few things are more attractive or as powerfully seductive as the opportunity to accuse the common enemy.

And few things are as powerful in creating social cohesion among the accusers. This is how ancient societies first formed—by finding and murdering the scapegoat.

But what Milosevic seems not to have understood is that this scapegoating mechanism is running out of steam.

In the beginning, the scapegoating mechanism could be supported by myth and religion for centuries. Societies were formed. They developed institutions such as religion, justice, and art that kept the culture together through the power of myths. Regular scapegoating events took place to commemorate and to revive the catharsis of the original event. Human sacrifices at first. Then animal sacrifice. Then more sophisticated sacrifices—witches, heretics, kings. And lately, Milosevic.

His demise, a mere twelve years after he got the thing going, is a warning to all leaders who rely on the power of scapegoating. The Hapsburg's Austrian-Hungarian empire lasted for hundreds of years. The Communist empire for less than a hundred. Milosevic's for a decade.

Whether it will be a lesson to the leaders in the victorious West, who now gloat over having scapegoated the scapegoater, is perhaps the more important and interesting question.

You see, the problem with culture is that you cannot see your own. Just as we all assume that everyone else has an accent, but it is we who talk proper: so it is with culture. You only see the culture of other people. One's own culture is a thing hidden since the foundation of the world.

And from a cultural, or anthropological point of view, the Milosevic saga offers us some things to worry about.

For example, who were the people waging war against Milosevic? Are they also war criminals? Or is it only losers who get indicted?

A clue to answering this question lies in the indictment of Milosevic. He has been declared a war criminal only since January 1999. Why not before that date? The answer is that before that date the self-styled "international community" was giving legitimacy to this alleged war criminal in the Dayton accords. He was one of us before then. The implication that we were one like him is too dangerous to let loose.

Who caused the most suffering in Kosovo? This is a bit like asking whether Hiroshima should have been atom bombed. And, if so, who was responsible for the deaths and suffering that followed. The person pushing the button that released the bomb? Or the pilot flying the plane? Or the general commanding the air force? Or the President of the United States?

The facts are that before the NATO bombing started there was less bloodshed in Kosovo than after the bombs fell. The bombing created the context for ethnic cleansing. And, once NATO won their war, a reverse ethnic cleansing occurred in Kosovo with most of the Serbs departing.

The official NATO line was that "we have no argument with the Serbian people." But most of the bombing damage in Serbia was inflicted on civilians. The army was damaged much less than industry, public facilities, education institutions, employment, hospitals, churches, and forests. Collective punishment is condemned in the West Bank as a violation of the Geneva Convention, but approved of against the people of Serbia?

Also, somehow along the way the Kosovo resistance group, the KLA, got armed. This could only have occurred by somebody violating the arms embargo against Yugoslavia in 1991.

The persons responsible for these acts of war will not be cited as war criminals, because these people are on the winning side. The myths that make it hard for us to see the scapegoating mechanism at work in our own culture prevent most of us from even raising the question of whether Clinton and Blair are also war criminals. It seems a plainly outrageous idea. But only to us.

But perhaps the most important message in the disaster that was the Milosevic years is that the scapegoating mechanism doesn't work as well as it used to. Even though he was a thoroughgoing bad egg, it is getting easier to see that Milosevic is still a scapegoat who has been accused to effect social cohesion in Western Europe (particularly Britain) and the United States.

In that regard he is in bad company with other modern scapegoats like the Chechens, Saddam Hussein, and Sharon/Arafat (depending on which side you're on).

The significant moral is that in the end, all scapegoaters get scapegoated. Winners may be grinners, but the smile doesn't last as long as it used to.