

An Empire of Stupidity: On Dubravka Ugrešić’s “The Age of Skin”

By [Nina Herzog](#) February 23, 2021

IN 2018, Dubravka Ugrešić, preeminent cultural critic, political commentator, and longtime chronicler of humanity’s propensity to dupe ourselves, rereleased her 1993 book of essays, *American Fictionary*. That book was written at the beginning of the 1991–’95 war in the former Yugoslavia — the “recent” war, as Ugrešić terms it, in order to distinguish it from the two World Wars that preceded it — and was originally published in the United States under the title *Have A Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream*, in 1995.

Now, Ugrešić builds upon those observations in her new essay collection, *The Age of Skin*, published by Open Letter Books and skillfully translated from the Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać. Its 17 essays, born of the liminal period between the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the fall of the Berlin Wall, lament what might have been. During this time, Ugrešić left newly independent Croatia for Amsterdam: “I myself am no longer capable of saying how and why this all happened,” she writes, “though I have been tearing out my hair over it for a quarter century now.” While *Fictionary* takes as its object post-communist Europe, *The Age of Skin* observes the post-democratic emergence of a kind of retro-fascism. The essays, written between 2014 and 2018, overlap with the beginning of America’s own reckoning with the thinning skin of its democracy. Ugrešić is most fundamentally an observer, able to reveal the cracks and fissures in our thinking, organizations, and structures, often rearranging their pieces and putting them back together in a way that reveals something foreign — ugly or unexpectedly beautiful (sometimes both), a phenomenon we may have failed to notice. She continues her trademark fastidious and fascinating commentary on certain recurring themes: the intimate relationship between stupidity and nationalism; the slow creep of new (and in the case of the US, old) democracies toward fascism; and the adversity women writers (and women, in general) are unable to escape.

The titular essay introduces Ugrešić in classic form: guns drawn on page one, suggesting that “literature may be on its last legs,” with culpability laid at the feet of “the very people who propel the literary process: the avaricious publishers, laggardly editors, wishy-washy critics, unambitious readers, and authors lacking in talent but greedy for fame.” Thus, begins a theme that permeates much of the book, a through-line that connects and integrates disparate

interests: the vast cost and constant disappointment of human stupidity. Ugrešić's roles as observer and critic inevitably clash in sometimes long misanthropic diatribes. "Unhappiness," she says, echoing Sartre, "is other people." Democracy, of course, is the most reliable vehicle for assuring a voice to all, including the increasingly numerous idiots among us. And therein lies the dilemma.

By turns defender and accuser of "The Little Guys" (the title of a dazzling essay), Ugrešić charts the danger of democracy's unfettered alliance with capitalism, as she questions how it came to be, for example, that an old schoolmate, "the kid from the muddy village," is, today, not merely the head of a local factory but also the owner of a "massive villa" in London: "How did he pull it off?" she asks. "Why didn't I think of such a thing?" As is usual with Ugrešić, it's her tone — ironic, honest, sometimes earnest — that makes her brutal observations almost endearing. She says what we think, but in the service of compiling these thoughts into a more revealing, larger picture. Here she is, for example, on the power of digital communication and social media:

The result of this colossal self-liberation is mail (electronic), which no longer serves so the senders can ask you how you are, but to foist on you how they are. [...] The *little guys* have everything the former *big guys* had, their own media, blogs, websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, selfies, Instagram, text messages. The *big guy* is trying ever harder to catch the *little guy's* attention. [...] Spurred by the urge to be heard, seen and remembered, the *little guy* is ready for everything except a return to anonymity. [...] Communism, which promised years ago that people in the future would be able to engage in free activities, did not keep its promise, but technology has. It's thanks to digital technology, not Marx, that the *little guy* has ventured with one foot into Communism.

Ugrešić compiles detailed observations into broad, revealing analyses. Many of her best essays are divided into numbered vignettes, often interesting but seemingly gratuitous, until the final section brings them all precisely together. Suddenly, it's a story — we can see the forest! Like idiots, we were busy looking at the trees.

Democracy, she suggests, heralds a new form of corruption. "Democracy today is an umbrella term that encompasses many things: the praxis of merciless capitalist exploitation, the unfree media, media manipulation, the censorship of corporate capitalism, the production of lies, modern slavery." Meanwhile, she notes, a group based in Split, Croatia, called the Urban Right-Wing, pursue "their democratic right to protest by putting posters everywhere with the words: *Death to Communism!* Where is the Communism whose death they're demanding? Where's it hiding? In the salesrooms of Croatian IKEA?" Thanks to its partner, capitalism, democracy may

very well be the breeding ground of this destructive and proliferating stupidity. “Under Communism, a person could always blame the system, Communism itself; under capitalism we are all to blame for our own shortcomings.”

Ugrešić sees this 25-year reign of democratic stupidity and burgeoning fascism as “democracy’s nadir.” She is admittedly morose: “I am a dark-minded, urban human being and my moments of happiness are, indeed, few and far between.” In *The Age of Skin*, she is documenting “the last battle [...] being waged between banning the red star and fully destigmatizing the swastika. The swastika is winning the fight [...] black and swarming like cockroaches.” Ugrešić notes:

It doesn’t take long to see why the word ‘happiness’ vanished from my vocabulary. All because of stupidity! For years I have been dwelling in an empire of stupidity. Stupidity has become, over time, far too burdensome for me. [...] A quarter century ago, stupidity grabbed the microphone, gleeful with self-confidence, and hogged center stage.

In an essay on refugees and exiles called “Invisible Europe,” she wakes from a fever dream wherein her apartment is invaded by strangers. “A few months after I dreamed this,” she reports, “war broke out in Yugoslavia, my country. Tens of thousands of refugees dispersed across the globe, some even finding their way to Afghanistan. With a freshly issued, only just valid passport from the newly minted state of Croatia, I left my country. Or I should say my country left me.” She describes carrying this dream with her “for a quarter century now like mental baggage I can’t seem to shed.” And that’s the lingering sorrow: “Sure, if Yugoslavia hadn’t come apart at the seams, if a mob of brutal thugs, elected by the democratic majority, hadn’t grabbed hold of power, I wouldn’t have ended up in Amsterdam.”

She is especially damning of her native country when it comes to her treatment as a woman writer. Croatia, she observes, has never formally acknowledged her global literary standing, and continues to shun and ignore her in favor of its male offspring. Despite being a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Awards and the Man Booker International Prize, and despite her 2016 Neustadt International Prize for Literature (known as the “American Nobel”), she has received no offers from newspapers in Croatia or Serbia to publish her writing.

While Ugrešić’s writing is always crisp, witty, and exacting, her complicated subject matter is also lightened with well-timed humor, allowing the reader a laugh at the expense of those who sorely deserve it. In “Artists and Murderers,” all her brooding over how she’s been treated by her former Yugos makes her decide to end it all. But then she runs into an old schoolmate, an erstwhile contender for the Croatian presidency, complaining that he’d been left off the invite

list for a state reception. Ugrešić describes her moves on this “crook”: “Oozing with natural-born compassion, I stroked his injured ego with a verbal feather and he agreed to come by for coffee.” Suddenly, a bright idea — “I’ll cut to the chase: the rope I’d planned to use to string myself up I used instead to bind the wrists and ankles of my crook. [...] Suicide no longer has any appeal for me.” Ugrešić’s books betray the battering she has taken, the cost of her exile. Again and again, they focus on Croatia and the former Yugoslavia. Though she lives now in the Netherlands, often visiting New York, and speaks English, Dutch, and several other languages, she writes in her mother tongue, Croatian. I read parts of the book in both Croatian and English, and it was a noticeably more painful experience to read in the original, with its turns of phrase and idiomatic expressions that I, too, remember from my youth back then, before the “recent” war. Among Yugoslavs, it was complicated and long-winded to refer to the language as Serbo-Croatian (or *Srpsko-Hrvatski*), so we called it *naški*, a unifier of all our differences — simply, “ours.”

This phenomenon of “ours,” Ugrešić notes, can at times take on a masochistic flavor. In “Zelenko and His Missus,” the eponymous couple runs a Croatian grocery in Amsterdam, treating their customers with “our” familiar disdain. “Zelenko is always a curmudgeon, and his missus is always bleary, they eat breakfast all morning till noon, and when they converse with members of their community they brush the crumbs off their chins like flies.” Their store becomes a metaphor: “They are our democratic government [...] clearly dubious, and if not outright illegal then surely it’s semi-illegal.” Yet, she describes how loyal we, expatriates from all corners of the former Yugoslavia, remain to all things “ours,” as if those items — Vegeta seasoning, Kraš chocolate, *ajvar* — are superior by virtue of being ours. Our own little version of grocery store nationalism.

Several of the essays address “the particular vandalism by men aimed at women,” including right-wing “instrumentalizing” of women, noting, in particular, the fact that “the church has assumed a pivotal role in all the postcommunist democracies and [...] has returned the ‘women’s question’ to the patriarchal framework.” She laments, “Women had only just found their voices, but now they’ve gone silent.” Elsewhere in the book, Ugrešić tells of her encounter with one of her “countrymen with a New York address,” who proclaims: “I’m not a fan of women writers. [...] Not my cup of tea.” In a particularly apt pairing, Ugrešić points out that, in Croatia, both desecration of the flag and rape carry a sentence of three years in jail.

Ugrešić can be a complicated read for Americans, born into the simple notion that democracy is always golden. In her telling, democracy — and its sidekick, capitalism — have provided the engine for Croatia’s rising nationalism. But her books are nothing if not well-timed, dropping in the States — even after a period for translation — as if they are written for our moment. They

are cautionary tales, like letters from a wise relative who urges us to pay attention. She understands something we don't.

The final essay, "An Archeology of Resistance!?" reprinted in *The New York Review of Books* in November 2020, brings together the inquiries central to *The Age of Skin*, calling into question the dictum that democracies are always preferable to totalitarian systems. What, she asks, do we call those liminal spaces between good and evil, that transitional phase in which a democracy of the stupid mutates into a fascism of the mighty? As a self-described literary-political activist, Ugrešić questions whether all resistance, like all totalitarianism, is created equal. She notes the destruction of over 3,000 monuments to anti-fascist resistance since the fall of Yugoslavia. The essay takes its title from the name of a 2018 exhibit in Zagreb, *The Archeology of Resistance: Discovering Collections of Cultural Opposition in Socialist Croatia*, mounted as part of the EU project, "Cultural Opposition: Understanding the Cultural Heritage of Dissent in the Former Socialist Countries."

On December 16, 2020, exactly one month after the chapter's reprinting, *NYRB* published a "dispute" by Ulf Brunnbauer on behalf of the project, which prompted a response from Ugrešić. The word "insult" features prominently in their "exchange," as each accuses the other of willful ignorance. He claims that she did not read the project's work before writing about it; she says he didn't read her article before replying to it. Each suggests that the other's view of Eastern European history, and resistance itself, is not "nuanced." The tone of the "exchange" is sharp, and in her response Ugrešić compares Brunnbauer's criticism to the harassment she has received from Croatians for the last 30 years. Her final lines serve well to remind us that the bedrock of her work is sorrow: "But, being a woman writer (and an exile, too), I have no institution, academy, project, network, or state to back me up. I have borne and will bear all the consequences of my views alone."

Ultimately, *The Age of Skin* is a book about historical grief, about the trauma of war and separation, and, finally, the unbearable burden of watching from exile as "this whole 'glorious' struggle of ex-Yugoslav peoples and ethnicities for independence, freedom, statehood, national identity and so forth [...] a dynamic landscape of depravity, murder, the theft and expropriation of big and little houses, native soil and whole hillsides..." Ugrešić warns of the inevitable heartbreak heralded by stupidity, the cost of its violence, all the while reminding us of how fragile we are: "Skin is intimate," she writes, "and, as far as intimacy goes, it takes precedence over metaphors of the heart. While our heart is poised to love all of humanity, we are loved only by our skin."

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