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NATIONALISM AND HISTORIOGRAPHY IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIA:

**Kosovo Issues as a Historical
Question**

The issues about Kosovo were one of the most crucial topics of discussion in socialist Yugoslavia, especially during the 1980s. Originally, the problem referred to the status of the Kosovo province and of the Albanians who lived there as the ethnic majority. In brief, starting in the beginning of the 1980s, numerous riots occurred, with some occurring even now. After the disintegration against Yugoslavia, the NATO forces carried out a disputable bombardment against Serbia due to the ethnic conflicts in Kosovo in 1999, and the Kosovo regime declared its independence from Serbia in 2008. These topics have greatly attracted the attention of researchers because they provoke discussion in several ways.

In addition, the events which happened in the 1980s also spur the interest of many researchers. For example, Nebojša Vladislavljević published a comprehensive work on the anti bureaucratic revolution. His work is dedicated mainly to the role of the grass-roots movements in Kosovo during the rise of Serbian nationalism,¹ while Julie Mertus focuses on the cognitive gap between the Serbs and Albanians regarding several influential events that occurred in Kosovo during the 1980s, described as incendiary and war-provoking.² Jasna Dragović-Soso, on the other hand, points out the importance of the actions of the dissident intellectuals in Serbia, demonstrating a long tradition of their movements through the Socialist era, tying in this with her commentary on the Kosovo issues.³

The above-mentioned works are all interested in the real or practical events in Kosovo and what happened in Yugoslav and Serb society during the 1980s. The incidents in the 1980s are currently becoming a focal point for a more profound understanding of the Yugoslav civil wars, but a number of topics still remain to be examined, among which the historical consciousness regarding the Kosovo problem could be counted. When the focus is directed to the origins, the historical arguments surrounding Kosovo clearly also become crucial. The Kosovo problem was dealt with by historians and influenced by a clash of historical consciousness, especially when it emerged at the beginning of the 1980s. History played a crucial role as an authorizing idea behind the issues.

From this point of view, this article attempts to show a relationship between the rise of nationalism and the role of historiography in Serbia during the 1980s, focusing on the Kosovo issues.

NATIONALISM AND HISTORY

Nationalism or national identity seems to be one of the common themes of the volumes that were published more than 15 years after the conclusion of the Dayton Agreement in order to reflect back upon the situation of the research on the Yugoslav wars during the 1990s or Yugoslavia in general.⁴ A book edited by Dejan

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- 1 Nebojša Vladislavljević, *Serbia's Antibureaucratic Revolution: Milošević, the Fall of Communism and Nationalist Mobilization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
 - 2 Julie A. Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999.
 - 3 Jasna Dragović-Soso, 'Saviours of the Nation': *Serbia's Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.
 - 4 For example, Sabrina Ramet, *Thinking about Yugoslavia: Scholarly Debates about the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Lenard J. Cohen and Jasna Dragović-Soso (eds.), *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008; Charles Ingrao and Thomas A. Emmert (eds.), *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative*.

Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay, which is one of the newest review publications, openly shows concern for this issue. According to them, the volume tries to tackle crucial questions such as the emergence of Yugoslavia, its development and its failure, by addressing the topics to which less attention have been paid so far, again with regard to nationalism. In the introduction to the book, the authors took up the issues of nationalism and national identity as a common theme shared with the authors of almost all chapters of the book. The question of nationalism and national identity was paraphrased in the introduction: “How were the people of Yugoslavia told to see themselves? And how did they actually see themselves?”⁵

A substantial number of works has been written on nationalism, but first of all, a classical volume on the nationalism of Eastern Europe, which was edited by Peter F. Sugar and Ivo John Lederer, is referred to here. In the introduction to the volume, the first version of which was published in 1969, Sugar discusses the characteristics of the nationalism in the region. Citing arguments by George Weill, Sugar points out that an approach to nationalism from the aspect of “historic rights” was common in Eastern Europe and Germany. This approach was intended to revive the “good old days” of a nation, during which significant institutional factors such as constitutions and religion had developed into a part of its integral form. This process was intended to prove that nations had their own creative potential, which had been suppressed by foreign regimes. The nationalists in Eastern Europe claimed that in order to fulfill the potentiality of the nation, the external influences ranging from language to politics had to be eradicated, and the people should be made cognizant of their integrity and past brilliance to make certain they had that potential. By being reminded of the brilliant past and reviving the nation as a symbol for the future, in other words: linking the past and the future at a connecting point - that is creating the nation that was just revived - their century-long backwardness could be overcome. As a result of this assertion of the nationalists, according to Sugar, “xenophobia, historicism, and a forced feeling of superiority emerged as decisive forces in eastern Europe.”⁶

Here, historicism represents only one of the three key elements of nationalism in Eastern Europe. As Sugar argued referring to Weill's idea, however, the nationalism in Eastern Europe regarded “historic rights” as its fundamental element and was inspired by the past golden ages, which would mean that historicism, or history itself, could trigger the rise of nationalism. In this sense, it could be

West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009; Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay (eds.), *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011.

5 Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay, “Introduction”, in Djokić and Ker-Lindsay, *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia*, p. 3.

6 Peter F. Sugar, “Introduction”, in Peter F. Sugar and Ivo John Lederer (eds.), *Nationalism in Eastern Europe*, with a new introduction by Peter F. Sugar. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994, pp. 34-35.

rather important to discuss the role of history when examining the nationalism in Eastern Europe. Sugar also comments on the role of history as follows:

... [P]leas and hopes for a future justified by past greatness and services were addressed by all [people]... [T]he eastern Europeans did not think of themselves as simply the men of the future, they were also those of the past, and the place they claimed was theirs by historic right. For this reason, history served not only as the proof of the validity but also as the justification of their claims. *Soon it became a weapon*... Almost every nationality discovered its own "civilizing mission" through historical studies and based certain rights on this activity.⁷ (Emphasizing italics added by the author.)

History was not only merely *a weapon* when the nationalists yearned for their nation - it could be one of the most essential ones for them.

This attention to the relation between history and nationalism seems to be shared with historians after the turn of the century, especially in the field of history education. History teaching might not directly relate to historiography, but it could be somehow influenced by historiography. In fact, history textbooks in the Balkan states have been written or supervised by historians, a number of whom lean towards an ethnocentric historical perspective. As a result of this, the interpretations in the textbooks of the Balkan countries have tended to be in opposition to each other.⁸ While some historians turned their activities towards making nationalistic discourses in the textbooks, other historians began to sense the critical nature of the fact. These historians from the Balkan countries launched a project to publish alternative educational materials for the teaching of history.⁹ Christina Koulouri, the general coordinator of the project, stated that "school history textbooks have been identified as one of the potential causes for intolerance between different nations or ethnic communities and, consequently, as a reason for conflict,"¹⁰ and "the interpretation of the collective past and the

7 Ibid., p. 40.

8 This was examined exhaustively by a four-year project "A Comparative Study of History Textbooks in the Balkan States," by Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research of the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science. The project was launched by Nobuhiro Shiba, one of the leading experts on Balkan studies in Japan. The author of this text also participated in it. The details of this project can be found in the proceedings of the International Symposium held at the University of Tokyo, 2005.

9 This project received support from the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE) in Thessaloniki. The materials were finally published as a four-volume series. They were originally written in English, then translated into several languages used in the Balkans, also even into Japanese. Almost all texts can be downloaded from the website of the CDRSEE.

10 Christina Koulouri, "History Teaching and Peace Education in Southeast Europe," *Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 50, No. 1, 2009, p. 55.

content of history, as it is taught in schools, cause heated disputes, not only between neighboring countries but also within the same country.”¹¹ Koulouri also more directly criticizes the ideological use of history and history teaching in the Balkans as a culprit in the formation of negative stereotypes of neighbors and the growth of nationalism, in spite of the fact that similar examples can be discovered in the whole Europe.¹² Her comments show that the historians in Southeastern Europe, at least who have participated in that project, have shared the idea that history could cause both annihilation and reconciliation among nations, and historians could be one of the key elements when considering questions related to nationalism.¹³

Last, but not least, I would like to present an example from my home region, East Asia. The problem of nationalism is also a matter of concern in East Asia, in its encouraging of nationalistic or ethno-centric feelings among peoples in China, South Korea and Japan. The arguments over historical consciousness seem to be one of the most complicated conundrums in East Asia, even though, seen objectively, all problems could be equally difficult to solve. In particular, one of the most controversial themes could be the memories of Japanese Colonialism and wars in East and Southeastern Asia: the number of casualties and atrocities in the Nanking Massacre, the involvement of the Japanese Imperial Army in the recruitment of “Comfort Women”, and so forth. These arguments over modern contemporary history have developed not only among academicians, but have also influenced the general population,¹⁴ which can also cause negative feelings towards the respective neighboring countries and sometimes even provoke large demonstrations. In order to ameliorate this condition, a number of official and grass-root attempts to bridge the gaps between historians from the three countries have been made and although some of them have succeeded, conflicts are still ongoing between them.

11 Koulouri, “General Introduction,” in *Workbook 1, The Ottoman Empire*, Teaching Modern Southeast European History: Alternative Educational Materials, vol. 1, Thessaloniki: CDRSEE, 2009, p. 9.

12 Koulouri, “History Teaching...”, p. 55.

13 In the context of the increase in modern nationalism in Eastern Europe, another key element could be the scholars of letters, such as linguists, poets, writers, and so on. These were also actors in the contemporary case, like the historians.

14 A history textbook with “revisionist” tendencies has been published in Japan since 2001. It was written and supervised by a group of historians and intellectuals whose political colours are conservative, or nationalistic. It was not only approved by the Ministry of Education for use in teaching junior high school students, but was also placed on the market. This was a rare case in Japan, because textbooks are in principle distributed to pupils and students for free by the schools during the years of compulsory education. This textbook also attracted public attention.

THE TRADITION OF SERBIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

The origins of Serbian historical studies can be found in the end of the 18th century. From this point onwards, the modern Serbian historical studies were modeled after the then current leading historical studies in Western European countries, like Germany. The characteristics of the Serbian historical studies could be summarized in the following two points: institutional developments and methodological backwardness.

At the dawn of modern Serbian historical studies, it was the teachers at theological schools that played a leading role. Jovan Rajić can be mentioned as the most important figure among them. Rajić authored a four-volume book entitled "The History of the Different Slavic Peoples, Particularly the Bulgarians, Croatians and Serbians", which was published between 1794 and 1795. His work provided the foundation for further historical studies conducted in the first half of the 19th century in Serbia.¹⁵

The historical studies developed in Serbia went in stride with the expansion of the new-born Serbian state. In that period, the Serbian state aimed at gaining its complete independence and the emancipation of its nation. While these goals were made clear by their advocates, a number of "brothers" remained outside the state. The Serbian state was located between the two great empires, Ottoman and Habsburg, with the Serbs divided by their borders. In these circumstances, the Serbian state and Serbian people looked to the historical studies to make a model of a Serbian state as a united nation state.

In Serbia at that time, social disturbances occurred intermittently, so that it was difficult to establish a modern education system or a highly organized bureaucracy. These institutions, though, were decisive for the development of historical studies. However, with support from Serbs in the Habsburg region, the Lyceum was established in Serbia in the first half of the 19th century. As regards history education in the Lyceum, at first only common history was taught, because the "History of the Serbian nation" didn't exist yet. There were also problems in writing and teaching. From 1844 onwards, though, national history was officially taught.

In the second half of the 19th century, the infrastructures necessary for historical education rapidly became organized. First of all, institutions for continually and systematically producing professional historians were founded. An important figure who contributed to this institutional development was Pantelija Srećković, who received a professorship at the Lyceum in 1859 and worked for the Lyceum

15 Мирослав Јовановић, "Историографија и криза," in Мирослав Јовановић и Радивој Радић, *Криза историје: Српска историографија и друштвени изазови краја 20. и почетка 21. века*. Београд: Удружење за друштвену историју, 2009, p. 44.

for over 30 years until his retirement. During his career, the Lyceum was transformed into the Velika škola (Higher School) with three faculties in 1863, the Department of History was founded within the Faculty of Philosophy in 1873, and the four-year study system was introduced in the Faculty of Philosophy in 1880. All of these also led to the establishment of historical studies as an academic field. Srećković was also active as a politician and made efforts for the progress of the educational system in Serbia. As part of this, he formed a basic infrastructure which would produce the personnel and media which would later lead to the founding of historical studies in Serbia.

His historical perspective is evaluated as a nationalistic one. He was trained as a theologian in Kiev, meaning he was not a professional historian. Srećković had not had the opportunity to be trained as a historian in Serbia, because the first Serbian higher education facility was founded as late as in 1828 in Kragujevac. What is of note, though, is the attitude of Srećković as a politician toward history. As mentioned above, he was eager to organize the higher education system in Serbia. Nor did he hesitate to utilize history to serve the nation state, regarding history as one of the tools for stimulating the national consciousness of the Serbs. As a result, despite his many efforts in other fields, he is evaluated as having contributed nothing to the methodological development of Serbian historical studies.¹⁶

On the other hand, two prominent figures who largely contributed to the development of Serbian historical studies, especially from the methodological point of view, were Ilarion Ruvarac and Ljubomir Kovačević. They criticized Srećković and his school and advocated historical studies based on the critical interpretation of materials. Disputes arose around the methodology of history between the two schools during the 1880s. In the end, the school of Ruvarac and Kovačević won. The methodological development of Serbian historical studies was realized in a way through these disputes, as when Srećković retired, Kovačević took over his position as Professor of the Department of History. After that, the newest achievements in the field of historical studies began to influence historical teaching in the Velika škola. When the Velika škola was reorganized into the University of Belgrade, many from the generation which was trained both under the circumstances Srećković had arranged and in institutions of foreign countries such as Germany, Austria, and Russia, returned to Serbia and became professional historians. A learned society was soon to be formed based upon classical historicism.¹⁷

Simultaneously, an Academy was also being established. The Academy originally emerged as an association of teachers in the Lyceum who wanted

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

to standardize the terminology for education. The association made efforts to develop the circumstances necessary for historical research; it began publishing academic journals, introducing a departmental system, and so on. After several changes of name and clashes of opinions within the association, the Royal Serbian Academy of Sciences was established in 1886. The Academy naturally engaged in research activities, as well as the organization of other institutions, academic meetings and extensive projects such as dictionary compilation.

Classical historicism took root in the historical studies in Serbia after the First World War, because it was regarded as excellent for the writing of national history. Around this period, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch issued their "Annales" in France, yet historicism still remained influential in Serbia.

After the Second World War, Serbian historical studies were exposed to pressure from Stalinism. The external pressure made Serbian historians stick to the existing methodology, as it enabled them to be independent from these external political influences. However, at the same time, it also prevented them from fundamentally rethinking their methodology. On the other hand, institutional development also progressed after the Second World War. A Department of History was established at three universities in Serbia: in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Priština. A number of institutions for historical research were also founded under the leadership of the Academy, and at least 15 journals about history were published.

HISTORY AND NATIONALISM IN THE 1980S: KOSOVO ISSUES AS A HISTORICAL QUESTION

After Tito died in 1980, the consequences for historical research were radically changed: roughly speaking, no taboo subjects existed any more. The most symbolical violation of the previous taboos was committed against Tito himself. For example, a book by Vladimir Dedijer divulged several heretofore undisclosed aspects of their late charismatic leader.¹⁸

As private aspects of Tito became one of the focal points after his death, "brand-new" discussions broke out in the 1980s - partly because the mighty leader had passed away, of course, but another reason was the unstable conditions of the state. Yugoslav society was shaken by the financial crises from both inside and outside. This resulted in a change of the existing values, including historical perspectives. Serbian historians began to focus on the following topics: the

¹⁸ See Vladimir Dedijer, *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita*, 1-2. Beograd: Udruženi izdavači, 1981.

Chetnik movements, pre-communist Yugoslavia, the Serb casualties during the Second World War, and communist repression after 1944.¹⁹ These topics, which were related to the relatively recent past, had been cautiously avoided by and/or kept away from the focus of historical research until then.²⁰ Yet we could say that another trait common to them was that they related to the evaluation or re-description of the Serb national identity.

The Kosovo issues can also be considered in this context – related as they were to the problems in relation to the status of the province and the Albanians who lived there. At the same time, though, they were also related to the historical perception regarding the region. Subsequently, Serb-Albanian relations in Kosovo were re-examined during the 1980s - including the historical rights to the province.

From the Serbian point of view, it was necessary to legitimize their historical and ethnic rights to Kosovo, because the province was inhabited by an Albanian majority. As the historians in modern Serbia did so, the Serb historians during the 1980s also took the Medieval Kingdom as a model, focusing on the ethnic component in the Medieval Era and Islamization and Albanization of the inhabitants under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. In order to further this understanding of Kosovo, the Special Department for Research of Kosovo was established in the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in 1982. This Department was organized mainly by historians, but other specialists also participated in it, such as philologists, linguists, forensic scientists, archaeologists, and so on. They were encouraged to demonstrate a link between the Serbs in medieval Kosovo and the contemporary Serbs through comprehensive inter-disciplinary studies.

Regarding the Albanian side, according to Shukri Rahimi, a Kosovar Albanian historian, contemporary Kosovo historiography started in the 1950s. First, a newer generation of Albanian historians began to be active, obtaining degrees in specializations at the universities in various cities of Yugoslavia. In the meantime, academic historical magazines were published for the first time in this decade. Through these new media, the new generation of historians launched their criticism against the “unscientific and fallacious” views of the Serbian historians.²¹

19 Predrag J. Marković, Miloš Ković and Nataša Milićević, “Developments in Serbian Historiography since 1989”, in Ulf Brunnbauer (ed.), *(Re)Writing History: Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*, Studies on South East Europe, Vol. 4, Munster: LIT Verlag, 2004, pp. 281-286.

20 In addition, Marković et al. describe that “historic-centered” writings by non-professional historians, like Dedijer’s work, came to attract wider public attention in this decade. This was another characteristic of historical studies at that time. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

21 Shukri Rahimi, “Zhvillimi i historiografisë së kosovës në dy deceniet e fundit (1965-1985)”, in *Çështje të studimeve albanologjike: Materijale nga Simoziumi shkencor i mbajtur në Prishtinë më 20 dhe 21 dhjetor 1985*, II, p. 12.

On the Albanian side, the most important point they based their claims on was a demonstration of continuity between the ancient Illyrians and the medieval Albanians. Like their Serb counterparts, they also launched inter-disciplinary research to prove this continuity. According to the most radical ones among them, the Great Serb Migrations never happened, but Serbs just sporadically and voluntarily left the province instead. In addition, they claimed that the Albanian territory should be expanded to Niš at least, and the decision of the Berlin Congress in 1878 had basically ceded some of their ancestral lands to Serbia. They also insisted on their victimization, especially in the context of the modern era. The arguments from both sides are very typical of nationalist discourses, and quite similar to each other in that both of them attempted to affirm their indigenesness and status as victim.²²

It was Dimitrije Bogdanović who took a leading part in Serbia regarding the formation of historical discourses about Kosovo. He had studied the languages and literature of the Medieval Serbs as jurist or Slavist, but turned his attention to the Kosovo issues from the early 1980s onwards. He was one of the founders of the Special Department for Research on Kosovo. After its founding, he published *Knjiga o Kosovu* (A Book about Kosovo) in 1985, as the *de facto* first complete history of the region. According to his book, the Illyrian theory which the Albanian academic advocated was strictly denied both scientifically and politically. Albanians emerged in the first time during Balkan history when they started to make contact with Serbs,²³ who immigrated into the region between the Sava River and the Dinar mountains in the first half of the 7th century.²⁴ The Serbs and Albanians had coexisted from the beginning of the Middle Ages, but after the Albanian Migration into Serb lands, including Kosovo, violence was committed by Albanians against Serbs, and such a situation has continued until now.²⁵

His book seemed to be widely received by society, as it was reprinted several times after the first publication. While it was highly praised by some contemporary historians and the Serbian Orthodox Church, it provoked arguments even among Serbian historians, some of whom severely criticized his work. In reply, Bogdanović stated in an interview that he was not a professional historian and his book was not a history book, yet his views on Kosovo - stated as an academic authority whose opinions resonated with the discourses of a number

22 Коста Николић, *Прошлост без историје: Полемике у југословенској историографији 1961-1991*. Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2003, pp. 174-178.

23 Димитрије Богдановић, *Књига о Косову*. Београд: Српска академија науке и уметности, 1986, p. 15.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 111-118.

of ideologues from the Serbian Orthodox Church, supported a stereotype which loomed behind the Kosovo issues. His work may not have been written by a professional historian, but was supported by the public nonetheless.

Other than *Knjiga o Kosovu*, a lot of stories and discourses emerged like so many mushrooms in the second half of the 1980s, but most of them were not categorized as genuine historical researches. Some of them were not even academic one. What was seen in these works was something like “ethnohistory”. This terminology was applied by Anthony D. Smith in his 2003 year work. The term “ethnohistory” doesn’t mean history as a discipline, which was specialized, professionalized, and kept away from any kind of utilization of history to achieve some goals; it means selective and collective memory which has been shared and inherited over several generations by members of a community, instead.²⁶ The media through which “ethnohistory” is distributed among people tend to be located outside the sphere of academic historical research. In recent Serbian context, these media could be found: a commemorating trip tour to Kosovo Polje, historical novels and movies about the Battle of Kosovo, banners flying in soccer stadiums, and so on. Ordinary people could have easier access to these media than to serious historical monographs. It would be proper to say that *Knjiga o Kosovu* was not a book of history. But this could be the very reason why the book was widely exposed to public in Serbia.

CONCLUSION

When dealing with ethnic/national questions in South-Eastern Europe, two types of borders should be considered: one is the “actual border,” and the second is the “ideal border.” The former one loosely existed between peoples, and did not necessarily divide them. The self-identification by these peoples was ambiguous. The latter one was more solid. This border was projected by a small number of people, for example an intellectual elites, who thought that certain peoples “should” be divided or unified by that border. In modern Kosovar history, the “actual border” was replaced by the “ideal border” in the political and armed conflict between the two newly forming nation states of Serbia and Albania. In these conflicts, various kinds of ethnic violence were committed against citizens - regardless of their sense of ethnic belonging. As a result, the “ideal border” has actually functioned more than the “actual” one.

26 Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen People: National Identity, Religion and History*. Tokyo: Aoki Shoten (アントニー・D・スミス (一條都子訳) 『選ばれた民——ナショナル・アイデンティティ、宗教、歴史』青木書店), 2007, pp. 220-221 (Translation of Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen People: Sacred Sources of National Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

From the contemporary perspective, more attention should be paid to the process through which the “ideal border” achieves the support of the public. In the Kosovo case, when political and ethnic questions regarding Kosovo came to be shared in the entire Serbian society, academics - including historians - assumed a critical role. Critical in that their authorized status, at least in part, was able to persuade the people into believing that their discourse was correct, whereas in actual fact, their arguments can be criticized as counterproductive. This criticism could be considered proper, but it is also true that such counterproductive opinions were widely supported. When examining contemporary questions in the Balkans, it would be useful to deal with these historical discourses, including their origins and logic, as they have the potential to deeply influence and shape people's thinking and behavior.