

**MILOŠ JOVANOVIĆ**  
Max Planck Institute

# **Bourgeois worlds and urban nightmares: The post-Ottoman Balkan City through the lens of Milutin Uskoković's *Newcomers***

## **ABSTRACT**

*In the nineteenth century, the bourgeois elites of newly minted national capitals Belgrade and Sofia sought to produce 'European' urban space, their first step on a path to industrial modernity and a new relationship with the world. When such designs failed, their execution left real, devastating material consequences. This article explores the underside of elite dreams through Milutin Uskoković's *Newcomers* (1910). Set in 1906 Belgrade, the novel's tragic form emphasizes the futility of bourgeois aspirations on the periphery of global capital. I expand on such themes through archival sources, which consistently describe the post-Ottoman city as a landscape of dispossession. Ultimately, I argue that urban modernity has historically been informed by failed elite dreams and their resulting urban nightmares, particularly in spaces off-centre to capitalist flows.*

## **KEYWORDS**

urban modernity  
literature  
bourgeois culture  
failure  
Balkan cities  
capitalism  
periphery

1. Between 1904 and 1910, Uskoković published several of his short stories in literary magazines and Belgrade dailies such as *Politika*, *Brankovo kolo*, *Nova iskra* and *Delo*.

Before him, Belgrade was lost and a fictitious town appeared.

(Uskoković 1910: 209)

In 1910, Milutin Uskoković, an upstart 26-year-old from Belgrade, seemed to have it all. He defended his doctorate in Geneva, married his Swiss girlfriend of three years, Babette, and slowly rose in the ranks of the Serbian clerk class. Uskoković's sentimental, lyrical writing had begun to develop a captive audience in Belgrade's newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Yet that same year, he published a bleak, depressing novel about the city with the enigmatic title *Newcomers*. The genre-defining book employed the city both as character and as backdrop, a technique that would later become known as 'Belgrade prose' (Norris 2008: 117). The city of *Newcomers* is a dark *mise en scène* of ambition and failure, structural obstacles and unachievable dreams. The novel's focus is on things slipping away after being just within one's grasp, of dream-like ambitions and nightmares where 'each day harried from our hearts another illusion' (Uskoković 1910: 282).

This article takes *Newcomers*' bleak attitude towards the promises of urban modernity as a critical entry point into the urban worlds of the Balkan bourgeoisie. The novel's primary themes mark the urban experience through disappointment and loss: the futility of bourgeois ambition, inevitable change for the worse and the experience of unstoppable time. If these characteristics share an affinity to Marx's oft-quoted adage of everything solid melting into air, they do so without the progressive optimism of modernist interpretations. Here, I expand upon Mark Steinberg's articulation of a 'Petersburg difference' in the culture and society of Russia's *fin de siècle* capital, 'marked with greater emotional and interpretive intensity, and shaded with greater darkness' than its western counterparts (2011: 268). By reading *Newcomers* in conversation with urban plans, literary, newspaper and archival sources, my purpose is to explore this difference, the darker assessment of bourgeois world-making in the Balkan context. As Birdsall and Kalkman point out in the introduction to this issue, urban cultural imaginaries are not removed from conditions of historical difference. If modern life had a more tragic hue in St. Petersburg, a massive metropolis and the reservoir of imperial accumulation (however 'backward' for some of its observers), then how did urban modernity appear in even smaller cities, the capitals of much smaller states?

In Western Europe and North America, the destruction wrought by the modern age was mitigated by its technological and spectacular wonders, facilitating an ambiguous assessment of modernity in cultural production (Berman 1982). For Baudelaire, Paris was both marked by tragedy and 'an immense reservoir of electric energy' (Baudelaire and Payne 1964: 9). In *fin de siècle* Vienna, the majestic facades of the Ringstraße served as a political monument of bourgeois success (Schorske 1979; Moravánszky 1998), even as unruly masses hid behind this 'external illusion' (Maderthaner and Musner 2008: 2). In the brave new world conjured up by increasing forces of production, the growing weight of dead labour could be conceived both as morbidity and as momentum.

Yet modern wonders have always been unevenly distributed, carrying within horrors far removed from the gaze of the *flâneur*. In the global periphery, modernity was characterized by new forms of colonial and racial violence, bringing forth an explicit denial of its spoils for the subjected population (Bayoumi 2000). Urban spaces were produced through difference and exclusion, their contested transformation linked to global processes of trade,

extraction and exploitation (Dossal 2010). Claims to modernity by local elites thus necessarily contended with and subverted the imposition of difference, producing what Swati Chattopadhyay (2006) has called the 'colonial uncanny'. From the (post)colonial perspective, the 'darker side of modernity' (Mignolo 2011) remains inextricable from histories of imperial violence.

For many Balkan residents, the lighter side of modernity likewise remained elusive. Unlike their colonial counterparts, cities of the (post)Ottoman lands remained 'off-centre' to capital and commodity flows in the mid-nineteenth century, contending with de-industrialization and reduced living standards (Pamuk 2009; Palairat 2003). On the sidelines of global mechanisms that moved people and commodities, Balkan urban elites confronted growing insignificance in the world economy. Akin to their contemporaries in Egypt, China and Ethiopia (Mestyan 2017; Carroll 2006; Gulema 2013) the persistent threat of European imperialism added an acute sense of self-preservation to elites' modernizing efforts. Within this context of ambition, necessity and limited capabilities, Milutin Uskoković's novel explores the urban fantasies of the Balkan bourgeoisie, highlighting the inescapable consequences and human costs of their world-making efforts.

While my focus is on Belgrade, the capital of Serbia and the setting of *Newcomers*, this article will also refer to similar conditions in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia. The two cities have corresponding historical trajectories as provincial capitals of independent nation states carved out of the Ottoman Empire by Christian merchant elites after a period of autonomy. My purpose in making this comparison is not to flatten the historical differences between these and other cities in the region, many circumscribed by different relations to empire, nation and capital (Gunzburger Makaš and Damljanović Conley 2010). The term 'Balkan city' is thus not an ideal type to be applied across a diverse peninsula. Rather, it refers to a specific cultural arsenal through which Balkan urban residents understood urban transformation. Importantly, such transformation was necessarily framed within the context of unequal global relations. Like elsewhere, bourgeois elites in late and post Ottoman cities looked to the remaking of social space in their search for 'world recognition in the midst of intercity rivalry and globalized contingency' (Roy and Ong 2011: 3). Their continued failure to achieve such goals produced a bleak social landscape that manifested itself in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century cultural production.

This article begins by discussing the changing urban geography of the late Ottoman Empire and its successor states, noting the role of local merchant capital in the socio-spatial transformations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using Milutin Uskoković's novel, it proceeds to explore the cultural landscape of such 'elite dreams' (Roy and Ong 2011: 33), emphasizing the crucial role of fantasy in bourgeois world-making. As I argue, world-making efforts based on fantastical premises were central to the urban aspirations of the Balkan bourgeoisie. The main themes of *Newcomers* highlight the contentious negotiation between bourgeois fantasy and the lived experience of the Balkan city.

My employment of 'fantasy' does not follow interpretations common to literary studies, which interrogate the term as genre or mode (Todorov 1973; Jackson 1981). Rather, I see fantasy as an integral part of ideology under capitalism, an ambivalent form co-constitutive of the material conditions in which it operates (Berlant 1991; Žižek 1997). In a world dominated by capitalist modes of production, relations between people take on what Marx calls

2. For a more thorough engagement of the relationship between fantasy, Marxist theory and history, see the special edition of *Historical Materialism* (Miéville 2002).

a 'fantastical form' of relations between things (Marx and Engels 1996: 83).<sup>2</sup> Fantasy is thus not merely a lens through which capitalism can be observed or its contradictions reflected (Monleón 1990), but part of its functioning apparatus. As China Miéville points out 'under capitalism, real life *is a fantasy*' (2002: 42, original emphasis).

Juxtaposing urban plans, archival sources, literary and newspaper texts of the period, the article proceeds to contextualize Uskoković's novel by placing it within the broader social landscape of urban failure. Troubled by their inability to transform the world, bourgeois dreams were continuously confronted with the bleak reality of their making. It is this contradiction that haunted the collective predicament of Belgraders and Sofiaites, bringing forth a sense that change was outside one's control, that its costs were high and its triumphs hollow. Ultimately, I argue, the urban experience of the *fin de siècle* Balkans was a nightmarish landscape of expanded suffering and unfulfillable promises.

## POST-OTTOMAN URBAN GEOGRAPHIES

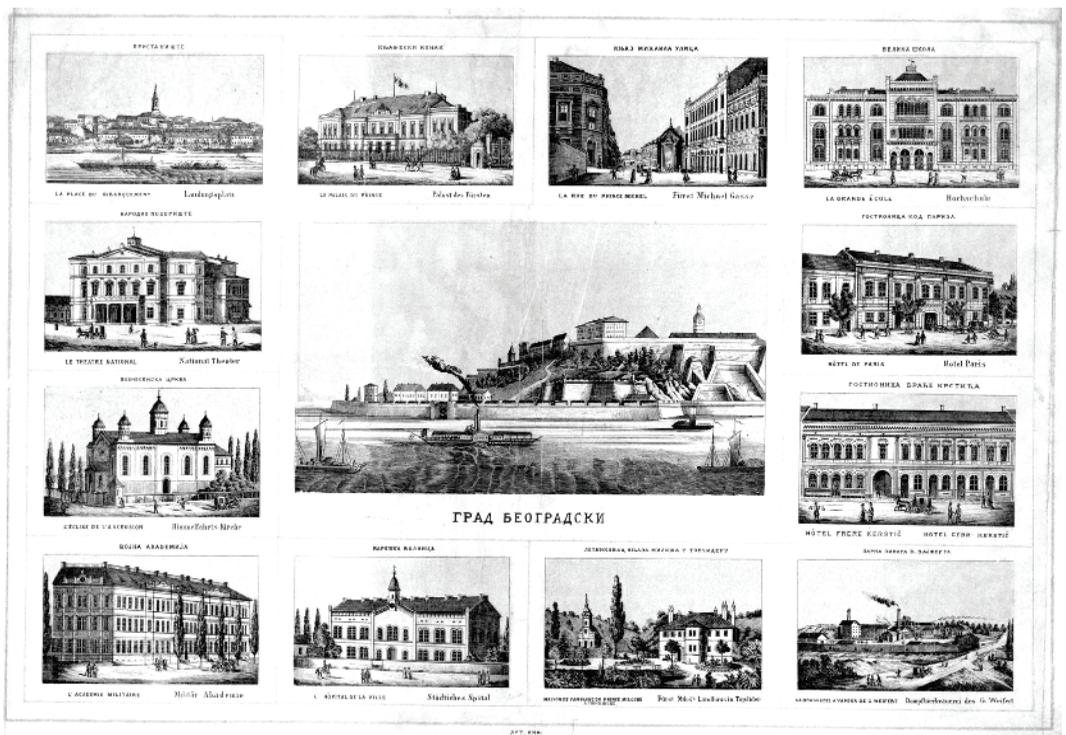
In the nineteenth century, Ottoman cities in the Balkans underwent a tremendous urban transformation. Many cities, such as Belgrade, Sofia, Bucharest and Athens, did so under the auspices of newly minted nation states (Yerolympos 1993; Mišković 2008; Velinova and Nachev 2016). Others, such as Salonica, Skopje or Sarajevo, changed under Ottoman or Habsburg imperial rule (Mazower 2006; Donia 2006). New buildings, streets and social relations fundamentally transformed cityscapes to an unrecognizable extent. The people, buildings and neighbourhoods had 'all vanished!', wrote Belgraders in their memoirs. (Ilić n.d. 10644) Sofiaites remembered nostalgically how everyone 'melted in this flood of new people' and stopped 'dancing the circle dance (*horó*) on the squares' (Kanazirski-Verin 1947: 26) More than a mere descriptor of a changing cityscape, their memories of dusty unpaved streets, crumbling brick and rotting wood symbolized the changing social relations of the nineteenth-century Balkans.

The bourgeoisie played a key role in these transformations, both in the Ottoman Empire and in its successor states. While the role of elites in creating a modern state apparatus has been given extensive attention by scholars (Mardin 1962, 1974; Findley 1980; Göçek 1996; Meeker 2002; Ceylan 2011), comparatively less attention has been paid to the city. In American and West European metropolises, urban historians have studied the bourgeois city primarily as a product of advanced finance capital (Beckert 2003; Seigel 1999). The effects of merchant and early industrial capital more commonly found outside global centres of colonial power are far less studied (Todorov 1983; Parusheva 2007). In former socialist countries, the transition to market capitalism after 1989 has further closed off the critical legacy of Marxist urban history and its focus on class formation (Vučo 1954; Georgiev 1983). In the case of late and post Ottoman cities, urban historians have largely focused on processes of modernization and the legacy of urban cosmopolitanism (Freitag et al. 2011; Eldem et al. 1999; Zandi-Sayek 2012; Velinova and Nachev 2016). While scholars have explored the consequences of 'elite dreaming' in a number of (post-) colonial settings (Mazumdar 2007; Ghannam 2008; Roy and Ong 2011), cities off-centre to the global flows of capital have remained on the sidelines of understanding how class formation and urban culture relate to one another.

Excising class because it appears differently from an off-centre vantage point reproduces a number of Eurocentric dogmas – namely, that finance

capital takes precedence over merchant, that the state and economic interests are sharply divided, and that urban modernity can be sufficiently theorized solely through references to the West. From the perspective of large metropolitan capitals, modern urban society can be interpreted as contradictory sites of progress, the simultaneous promise of adventure and power juxtaposed to the potential destruction of everything known (Berman 1982: 101). Such a thesis, however, foregoes the conditions of spatial difference that necessitate various and uneven experiences of modern urbanity.

Global capitalism both upsets the fixity of place and produces uneven relations between spaces, a point shared by scholars of both the 'global' and 'world city' (Massey 2007; Sassen 1991). Certainly, the unequal distribution of labour, commodities and violence around the world has marked varied possible roles for local elites and various consequences for their actions across the social spectrum. Taking heed Jennifer Robinson's call for scholarship that effects a 'spirit of attentiveness to the possibility that cities elsewhere might perhaps be different and shed stronger light on [...] processes being studied' (Robinson 2006: 168), this article gestures towards distinct experiences of bourgeois urbanization, reflected in the cultural imaginary of the city. What is the meaning of urbanization and progress in small cities left on the margins of global flows, presiding over predominantly agrarian economies?



Source: Narodna Biblioteka Srbije, Gravire, GR 0646.

Figure 1: This 1878 woodcut advertises Belgrade as a European city of new buildings, industries and steamship transportation.

In the Balkan city, urban transformation relied on fantasy to weave cohesive stories about the changing world. Mayors, planners, doctors and intellectuals envisioned progressive social transformation through political and economic institutions based on expertise. In electoral posters, Belgraders were told to go 'on the right path, the road of unitary and honest work' (Anon. 1905a). In Sofia, new institutions were meant to turn the city into a 'mirror of Bulgarian culture and a pattern of all progress' (Kermekchiev 1907: 9). Engineers, municipal officials, policemen and prison wardens all saw the city as a space where new visions of the social order could be articulated. Bourgeois doctors reported that the city's dispossessed danced gleefully on the rubble of their burned homes, delighted for the future (Kunibert 1901: 364). Such elite dreams were based upon holistic fantasies of progress by an upstart bourgeoisie, whose efforts structured the immense transformation of (post)Ottoman cities and societies.

### ELITE DREAMS AND BALKAN URBAN CHANGE

In 1867, Belgrade's urban planner Emilijan Josimović developed the first comprehensive plan to reconstruct the Ottoman core of the city. Coming on the foot-heels of a more gradual process of urban transformation outside the city's retrenchments (M. Jovanović 2013; Aytekin 2016), the 1867 plan was mostly meant for the historic centre. For the Vienna-educated Josimović, reconstruction was an opportunity to break 'with the dark Asiatic customs and prejudices, so that all that is advanced, beautiful and good should cling on to us' (1997: 32). To his counterparts in the Balkan bourgeoisie, destroying the Ottoman city to build national capitals was not a goal in itself, but rather a first step on the path towards increased accumulation and industrial modernity. In Sofia, the same logic would come to pass with the implementation of the so-called Battenberg plan under the mayor Dimitür Petkov, resulting in the destruction of the entire city core by the late 1890s. In Belgrade, Josimović had seen the potential future of 'one of the most important trading towns on the eastern dry land of Europe', a city without its 'Oriental' characteristics (Josimović 1997: 175). The shared dream of planners and merchants, experts and heads of state was a city wholly remade.

The object of Josimović's interest was the central neighbourhood of Dorćol, whose Ottoman character came to hold multiple meanings in Serbian literature as a symbol of the changing city and a metonymy of the past (Norris 1994). After the riots of 1862, which expelled its majority-Muslim population, large swathes of Dorćol comprised of abandoned and squatted properties acquired by the Serbian state at bargain prices (Özkan 2011). A central setting of Uskoković's *Newcomers*, the neighbourhood plays multiple roles as a memory-space of the Ottoman past ('little Istanbul'), a space of the Orientalized carnivalesque (the street celebrations of Purim by its Sephardic community) and a landscape of poverty and urban change (Banatska street, where much of the plot takes place) (Uskoković 1910: 35, 42–43, 13). Exemplifying the dissociating changes of Belgrade's urban geography, Dorćol appears to echo the dream-like dissociation of the protagonist from the city and its dispossessions.

The plot of *Newcomers* is deceptively simple. It tells the tale of socially unacceptable love between two Dorćol residents – an upstart writer in his early 20s and an impoverished woman ten years his senior. The story is bookended with two suicides by drowning, the former allowing the couple to meet, the latter tragically freeing the male protagonist Miloš Kremić from

obligation to his lover Zorka. Kremić is a migrant from the decaying provincial town of Užice, a bohemian journalist who yearns for fame and recognition of his talents. Zorka, his lover, is the daughter of a clerk family that has fallen on hard times, who now lives with her widowed mother in the poorest part of Dorćol. The novel follows Kremić's inner conflict with social expectations, ambition and propriety as he takes in the urban landscape on long walks with Zorka and their friends. The couple make a brief attempt at flaunting social norms by cohabiting, and yet Miloš' concern with success overshadows the family-like idyll. In a play that he writes under a pseudonym, Miloš articulates a subconscious desire for Zorka to clear his path for success by killing herself, which she selflessly complies with. Broken by her suicide, Miloš rejects urban life and moves back to his provincial hometown by the end of the book.

Opposite the cohesive, holistic world of bourgeois fantasy, Miloš Kremić encounters the incongruities of everyday life in the Balkan city. The cityscape is 'gap-toothed', the electric lights shut off on their own, streets remain without cobblestones with 'ample grass growing on them' and houses appear deserted or without people (Uskoković 1910: 89, 99–100, 50). When Kremić sees the busy streets of Dorćol during Purim, he Orientalizes and dissociates from its population: 'the half-weathered houses of the Jewish neighbourhood [*ma'ala*, a Turkish word], looking like a town robbed by the Turks, had come alive tonight and *took upon themselves the appearance of human residences*' (original emphasis). Belgrade was 'muddy', its few well-built houses were 'already derelict' with 'simple folk' living there (Uskoković 1910: 60–61). Living across the river from the Habsburg Monarchy, Kremić even fantasizes briefly about taking the train to 'foreign, cultured lands' (Uskoković 1910: 94). His



Source: Historical Archive of Belgrade, IAB ZB 1165-A-1-0110.

*Figure 2: Beth Israel, a modern, Moorish-style synagogue built in 1908, is framed between the wooden buildings and winding streets of Dorćol. The neighbourhood's dilapidated Ottoman houses served as figures of Belgrade's Oriental past in turn-of-the-century art and literature.*

view of the urban landscape reflects a common view among both upstarts with bourgeois ambitions and those excluded from the benefits of urban transformation – a dissatisfaction with the city and its failure in fulfilling the promises of modernity.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, professional authors and urban residents used the metaphors of dust and mud to reflect upon this failing world. Dust and mud was what Sofiaites ‘deserved’, for relying on corrupt municipal leaders to pave their streets and build sewers (Anon. 1906). Belgraders were stuck in mud so deep that ‘the Moon itself couldn’t pull them out’ (Anon. 1885a). Reflecting upon possible urban futures, the 1889 play *Posle milijon godina* (*A Million Years After*) asked ‘[...] where is this glorious city now? Where did the eternal truths hide? Dust and dust alone!’ (Ilić 1988: 9). In public articles and latter memoirs, dust and mud remained on the mind of architects and engineers (Nestorović 1972: 72). Writing for a journal of Bulgarian architects and engineers, the Sofiaite L. H. noted sarcastically that ‘the citizen of the capital, *so to speak*, cannot see a clean street even for a minute’ (Anon. 1911a, original emphasis). In municipal debates, Belgrade councilmen described the city as ‘ugly and mutilated’ (Anon. 1911b). Such visions of failure have inspired urban and economic historians to speak of failed modernization (Stojanović 2013; Avramov 2007). Yet, as *Newcomers* elucidates, bourgeois actors wrestled not with local ignorance and provincialism that failed to transform lived reality, but rather their collective inability to do so.

Several elements in Uskoković’s novel gesture beyond bourgeois frustration of ‘too little, too late’, countering the melancholic logic of lament over modernity’s inescapable propensity for destruction. Throughout the text, the protagonist Kremić is troubled by his inability to achieve success as a wealthy man of letters. To Zorka, he complains: ‘I need, like the rest of the world, something more than mere words. I need secure earnings, a position in society, the same as those editors, critics and the audience’ (Uskoković 1910: 226). Dissatisfied with their life together and his job as a customs’ clerk that is ‘worse than any of [his] friends’, Kremić expresses his gripe with the city: ‘Poor [...] to stay forever poor, such humiliation! [...] I love you, Zorka, but this is stronger than me: I cannot go back to poverty’ (Uskoković 1910: 244). The frustration experienced by Uskoković’s protagonist echoes the sentiments of the Balkan bourgeoisie, whose anxieties were fuelled by the incapacity of their ambitions and an inability to make their place in the world.

On the surface, the novel employs the pathetic mode to elicit compassion for Miloš Kremić and other migrants to the city. Like many nineteenth-century cities, Balkan capitals grew through a large influx of migrants. Yet unlike their British, German or American counterparts, migrants to Belgrade and Sofia mostly became clerks, servants, apprentices, domestic workers, day labourers and jobless instead of industrial workers. If by the early twentieth century factories came to be more frequently established in the two capitals, they still remained on the margins of an economic system whose primary purpose was the export of agricultural products to Western Europe (Vučo 1955: 184–85; Daskalov 2005: 339–41). In the words of Miloš Kremić, this city of migrants was ‘a pack of large and small dogs fighting over the same bone’ (Uskoković 1910: 258). What newcomers sought to accomplish remained circumscribed by limited opportunities, in which enchantment with urban life was mixed with disappointment.

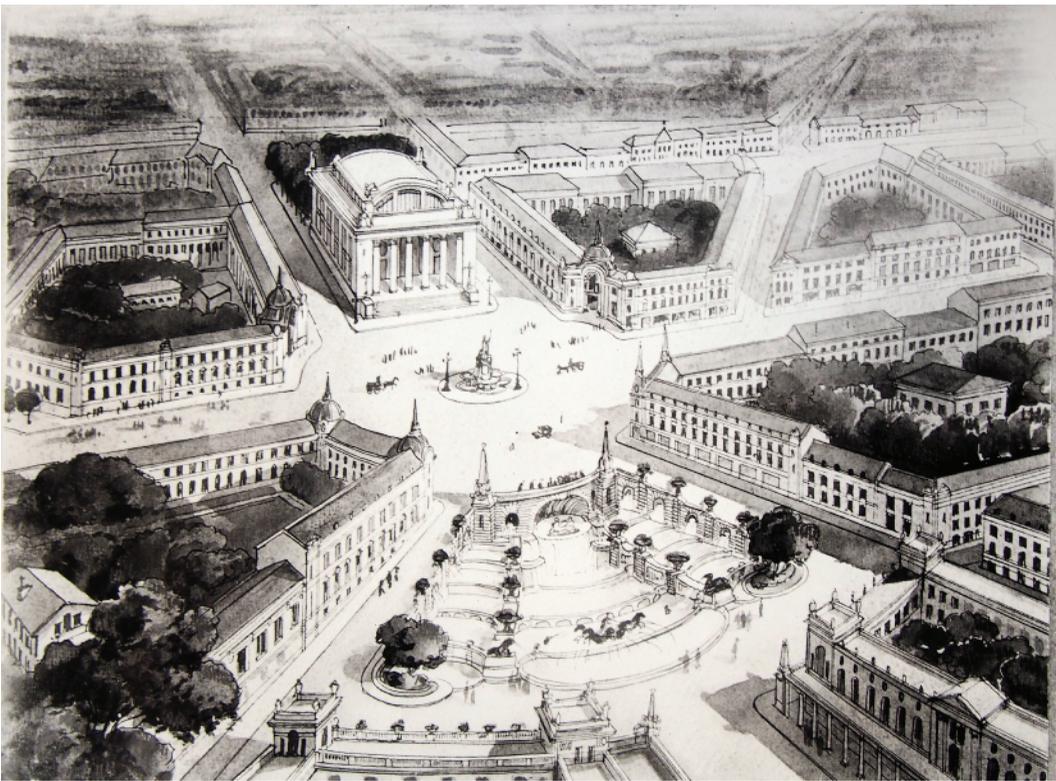
Kreмиć’s inability to fulfil his bourgeois ambitions is the principal theme of the novel, his inner struggle juxtaposed to the multiplicity of narratives offered

by the city. Despite its title, newcomers' plight is never elaborated upon fully in the book, serving as a red herring before the internal struggle of its ambitious subject (Nedić 1981: 221). The narrator frames Kremić's actions with a detached, seemingly objective tone, creating lacunae that invite critique from the reader (J. V. Jovanović 2014: 226). At several points, the narrator even notes hypothetical paths for the protagonist that might produce a less tragic outcome through the rejection of bourgeois ambition (Uskoković 1910: 42, 61). Such signposts towards alternative futures are integral to the novel's broader theme of disenchantment, contextualizing the inner world of the protagonist. The cityscape of *Newcomers* critically assesses the frustrations of bourgeois ambition by juxtaposing them to the social context of their development.

To reconcile his inner struggle between bourgeois desire and everyday disappointment, the protagonist of *Newcomers* turns towards the fantastical as a tool of self-fashioning. Kremić is largely involved in the weaving of fiction, an obsessive attempt to construct a narrative self against the dizzying multitude of betrayals that represents urban life. Much of these transforming moments take place in the oneiric realm. Kremić dreams of dressing his lover in fancy clothing and jewellery, building a romantic villa in 'Vračar, those quiet streets without grocery shops', where he could decorate the rooms with 'luscious flower vases, golden chandeliers and soft divans', his mind bringing forth 'entire throngs of servants' (Uskoković 1910: 37). Expressing more than bourgeois desire for the acquisition of commodities and the exploitation of labour, this fantastical passage reflects the protagonist's general method of relating to himself. Through fantasy, Miloš Kremić makes real his identity, social position and world-view. Many of these sequences push the plot forward, serving as the impetus for further tragic outcomes. In *Newcomers*, the protagonist's daydreams and fantasies play a foundational role in piecing the world together.

Unfulfilled urban plans reflect most clearly the vision of the Balkan bourgeoisie, whose holistic fantasies of the city circumvented the upsetting incursions of 'gap-toothed' lived space. Designed by the Brussels-based imperial architect Alban Chambon, the 1913 Belgrade plan exemplifies the guiding role of the fantastical in bourgeois world-making. Chambon envisioned a victorious Serbian capital with triumphal gates, majestic palaces, university buildings and museums without much reference to the local context. Drawn in thin pen over a nondescript cityscape shaded in grey ink, the Chambon plan invokes a dream-like space in which new buildings appear as signature objects independent from their spatial surroundings. Featured on the front page of the daily *Štampa*, the plan was publicized two months after Serbia's victory against Bulgaria in the Second Balkan War, a conflict fought between the former allies over Ottoman Macedonia. The monumental squares, statues and palaces of the 1913 plan project Belgrade as a full member of the imperial metropolitan European family. Here lay fantasies of a Serbian Ringstraße, a spatial performance of grandeur meant to exonerate great state projects of violence before an imagined national public. A paradigmatic example of elite dreaming, Chambon's ambitious plans remained wholly unfulfilled.

The instability of fantasy and the precariousness of bourgeois dreams is an important guiding thread for the plot of *Newcomers*. In a central part of the novel, Miloš Kremić returns from a sobering stay in his provincial hometown determined to do the right thing – marry Zorka and pursue his goal to be a writer. Soon, he is faced with obstacles to upward mobility, forced to bribe a servant and beg a government official for employment as a customs'



Source: Chambon, Alban (1913), *Projets d'embellissement de la ville de Belgrade en Serbie*, Brussels: Archives d'architecture moderne. INV 3804.

Figure 3: The existing city appears as a grey, cloudy landscape in Alban Chambon's 1913 project for the Terazije terrace. Only the future imperial-style spatial arrangement and its majestic new buildings are depicted in clear detail.

clerk. Waiting in the government office to meet the official, Krečić becomes confronted with an image of Belgrade as a 'fictitious town', the capital of a 'fictitious country' (Uskoković 1910: 209). His contemplation on the futile, but 'intoxicating' charm of state officials is dreamlike, an ominous seduction of a well-oiled machine for the making of nothingness.

### **BOURGEOIS FANTASY AS LIVING NIGHTMARE**

If the (post)Ottoman city was articulated through unfulfilled bourgeois fantasy, then what can we make of the dreamlike space of *Newcomers* in light of its critical perspective? The ending of the novel problematizes the upstart desires and frustrations of bourgeois urban culture, the subjectivity of a protagonist 'who once had big ideas and flew high' (Uskoković 1910: 285). Leaving the city after his lover's suicide, Krečić gives his counterpoint in an emotional diatribe: 'The few who succeeded shouldn't be seen. We should look at the piles of those homeless, who go from bad to worse, who are killed by disease, poverty and evildoing [...]' (Uskoković 1910: 283). Following the dichotomy

posed by Watson (2014) – when new urban worlds are made on the basis of elite dreams, at what point do we call them nightmares?

In what follows, I contextualize Kremić's disenchantment with the modern city through contemporary literary, archival and newspaper sources. My purpose is not merely to highlight the 'dark side' of modernity, but also to point to its inseparable relationship with bourgeois fantasy. In the Balkans, the world-making process constituted by elite dreaming was continuously faced with the difficulty of its articulation, the incongruities and impossibilities of its fulfilment. The 'gap-toothed' geography of the Balkan city, as described in *Newcomers*, was thus an intimate metaphor for disappointment, loss and social decay through novelty. I proceed to explore two significant themes of loss and decay in the novel, the suicides that bookend the narrative and the gendered violence that produces them. Through examining the socio-economic circumstances of their cultural production, I follow Kremić's gaze at those who went 'from bad to worse'. Ultimately, I contend that the fantasies of the Balkan bourgeoisie required worlds of expanding suffering, inescapable and without control, in which elite dreams are better categorized as nightmares.

Like elsewhere around the globe, resettlement, dispossession and profit circumscribed the conditions under which (post)Ottoman cities were to become part of the modern world. This was a multifaceted process that bound different social visions, state institutions, governmental techniques and forces of violence. Uskoković's interpretation of that transformative process brings forth a growing awareness that fantasies of progress necessarily crumble when they offset their costs onto others. Foreseeing Walter Benjamin's ruminations on the 'Angel of History' ([1940] 1974), Miloš Kremić rejects the proposition of novelty, framing modernity as a continuous extrapolation of existing structures of suffering. This is the riddle of human agency in the world for the protagonist, 'the eternal and the one that always needs solving'. 'Usually', he continues, '[the riddle] is solved by reaching for a better piece of bread, the sweeter thing, a piece of shiny metal, without ever wondering: is any left for the person next to us?' (Uskoković 1910: 283). Kremić explicitly condemns bourgeois progress as a 'meaningless race for the better', the maker of inequality. The nightmare of the Balkan city was not the novelty of its urban transformation, but the ways in which it channelled age-old human debasement. The narrative space of *Newcomers* thus points beyond bourgeois disappointment, towards the changing Balkan city as an urban landscape of suffering.

Alongside the physical transformation of urban space, suicide, gendered violence and material inequality highlighted the contradictions of progress. Describing his hometown, Miloš Kremić noted that 'there are no palaces like in Belgrade, but no shacks are raised next to those palaces either' (Uskoković 1910: 182). For the realist writer Svetolik Ranković, whose 1897 novel *The Mountain King* (Gorski Car) features several Belgrade scenes, the city's damp muddy winter revealed the horrors embedded in the cityscape 'where even the cleaner part of the city has sunk in the viscid filthy mass [...] The putrefying, damp fog [...] washed from [the city's] dirty face traces of horrible crimes, torments, and throes [...]' (Ranković 1914: 132). In what follows, I discuss the social circumstances of urban change that informed this bleak cultural imaginary.

Suicide entered the collective imaginary of the Balkan city in the late nineteenth century, attached to discourses of modernity and urbanization. For Tasa Milenković, a police official and advocate of scientific policing, 'the arrival of new modern life' meant the 'manifold multiplication of evil in this country'

(1899: 11). An ardent anti-Semite who enjoyed reading Sherlock Holmes and Cesare Lombroso's theories of innate criminality, Milenković's statistics on four decades of suicide in Belgrade were meant to showcase the moral degradation of the modern city. Belgrade had averaged twenty suicides per year in the four decades prior, most being committed by wage labourers, servants and craftsmen between the years 1896 and 1898. Beyond Milenković's intention to showcase the moral degradation of the poor, his record of the class origin of suicides reveals a moribund proletarian cityscape.

In newspaper reports on suicides, the condescension of boulevard press is mixed with candid reflections on the social weight of economic pressures. Immediately after being rescued from an attempt to drown himself in the river, a shoemaker from the working-class outskirts Čukarica cut his own throat while exclaiming that he 'began to hate life because of weakness and poverty' (Anon. 1909). A 'maiden-worker' had drunk poison because she did not want to be forced to work in a printing press (Anon. 1912a). An impoverished clerk hung himself 'unable to live among dishonest folk' (Anon. 1905b). An unemployed apprentice lay waiting for death on the railroad tracks (Anon. 1910). A 65-year-old shoemaker shot himself on his mother's grave after being let go from a municipal home for the elderly (Anon. 1911c). These brief snippets of city life dotted the newspapers, contributing towards a shared image of suffering and poverty that characterized new urban worlds.

In the nineteenth century, urban public culture likewise presented the city as a site of male sexual adventure, a place to seek pleasure, fulfilment and individual success. Satirical newspapers such as *Brka* (The Mustachioed Man), *Pishtalka* (Whistle), *Bič* (Whip) and *Smyah i sülzi* (Laughter and Tears) printed cartoons, songs and opinion pieces that celebrated heterosexual bourgeois desire as a structural part of urban life. While expressing scandal over the immorality of city life, such descriptions in fact affirmed the intersection between public space and sexuality. The theatre was a 'den of immorality' (Anon. 1885b) and the city a place where fathers kissed nannies (Anon. 1885c), where boys picked out sex workers from street windows (Anon. 1893a). Newly installed electric lights foiled the plans of older men who used to pick up young girls under the cover of darkness (Anon. 1893b). In London, the 'city of dreadful delight' (Walkowitz 1992), the potential to transgress class distinctions defined the dangers of modern urbanity. In the Balkans, however, the modern city of was a space where class differences were made manifest.

In turn-of-the-century literary fiction, urban space was represented as a landscape of social distinction and sexual conquest. Violence and erotic domination structurally informed such works as the 1892 *Ljubi, al' neveru ubi!* (Kiss, but kill the unfaithful!) penned under the pseudonym Vuk M. Under the pretence of a moral lesson, the novel offers a tantalizing description of the 'lower nooks and neighborhoods of the city' and the sexual adventures of two generations of men (Vuk M. 1892: 19). In common with other fantasy adventures of the period, such as the 1889 *Sofiyskite potaynosti* (Sofia secrets) and the 1891 *More bez primorja* (A sea without its littoral), Vuk M's writing depicted Belgrade as a site of immense wealth disparity, sexual exploitation and male adventure (Rettcliffe 1991; Veselinović 1900). Such mastery over other actors on a purportedly free socio-sexual stage reflected the fantasy of political economic organization in the urban bourgeois world.

Miloš Krečić's enchantment with Zorka, an impoverished woman from Dorćol, references a broader culture of masculinity that fetishized material

inequality and linked it to dilapidated urban space. A generation prior, the lawyer, politician and professor, Nikola Krstić, painstakingly recorded his many visits to the abandoned Muslim homes in Dorćol, where he preyed on poor women for sex. (Krstić n.d.: 207, 209, 213, 226) Unlike the character of Kremić, the bourgeois Krstić had been candid about his fetish for social inequality. After an encounter, he describes a woman he had paid for sex as 'a lower class girl, and naivety, and childhood; that is what a man must love about her' (Krstić n.d.: 230). For the bourgeois male subject, the exploitation of wealth disparity in the city necessitated a fantasy world in which such differentials were beneficial. Speaking of another paid encounter with his seamstress, Krstić notes that if he had more money he 'would go to houses like this and would help the poor, to get out of the mud in which it is' (Krstić n.d.: 297–98). The urban male fantasy of privileged access to working-class bodies depended both on a fascination with power and a disavowal of its effects.

The lived consequences of bourgeois masculinity were more macabre than adventurous. Increased class stratification in processes of social reproduction meant that infanticide and child abandonment became part of the urban cultural landscape. Sexual harassment and rape, illegal abortion and low wages pushed pregnant servants to choose between suicide and infanticide (Vuletić 2009) (Anon. 1912b, 1910b). While unemployed men were rounded up as vagrants, women out of work also contended with the accusation of unlicensed sex work and the precarity of jail time or banishment (Pavličević 1901). Police repression against women walking alone in the streets included forced medical examination on the basis of public health, expanding attacks on the street presence of working-class women. For example, the 1904 Belgrade police manual included cashierwomen, maids and servants under the category 'prostitutes' (Alimpić 1904: 84, 91). Certainly, many of these structures found resistance from below through petitions or escape (Stojković 1911). Yet such forms of resistance were likewise met by force from policemen who protected clerks from jilted lovers, priests from accusations of rape and masters from answering for the sudden death of their pregnant servants (Mitrašinić 1900, Gudović 1900). Through its social and legal systems, regimes of public health and social stigmatization, the city was a landscape of gendered violence meant to accommodate male fantasy.

The intimate consequences of this urban patriarchal regime are reflected in the lopsided nature of Miloš and Zorka's relationship. The plot of *Newcomers* depends on Miloš' anxiety over Zorka, whose age and low stature in society mark her as an inopportune match. The constant tension of their romance is in the unsaid impossibility of such a match, the unimaginable choice of love against a city circumscribed by profit and status. In the nineteenth century, Belgrade's urban elite 'emerged through marriage arrangements' cementing political and financial ties (Bataković 2002: 344). The increasing commodification of marriage was satirized by the press, who proposed that contemporary life required single persons to wear price tags (Anon. 1893). Perhaps drawing from his marriage to a woman ten years his senior, Uskoković explores in detail how the commodification of intimacy dooms individual happiness. The novel reaches its climax on the riverbanks of Dorćol, as Zorka selflessly fulfils Miloš' subconscious desires by drowning in the Danube and clearing his future path. Her act pushes Kremić to reject his ambitions and the city out of guilt for the violence that his fantasies have caused to those around him.

3. The actual lengths are four hvats and eight aršins. Conversion by author.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting upon the making of bourgeois urban worlds in the Balkans requires considering the multiple points of co-constitution between fantasy and reality. From the perspective of Josimović and Chambon, the city is captured by the urban plan and its holistic vision of the world, where social reform and transformation can be conceptualized and effected onto urban space. The (post)Ottoman world of the Balkan city was marked by such dreams of social reordering, executed through street regulation, real-estate speculation and dispossession. This was indeed a fantasy world based upon the needs and ideologies of managing bodies. In glistening new boulevards, from which undesirable populations were excised by new urban institutions, policemen surveilled, detained, arrested and beat people. Yet, the lived experience of the street remained muddy and disappointing, the city's development lopsided and cruel. In the first decades of the twentieth century, satirical newspapers continued to describe the city as 'seven meters of mud and five meters of dust' (Anon. 1911d).<sup>3</sup> Experts and municipal leaders justified their tearing of the urban fabric through promises of order and prosperity, and yet their actions multiplied disorder and poverty.

Such collective dreams emerged themselves in a material realm in which the 'conquering Balkan Orthodox merchants' sought to find their place vis-a-vis global capital (Stoianovich 1960). Cut off by their historical geographic position from colonial exploitation, merchant and money-lending elites of the Ottoman Empire had few paths for expansion. On the pages of the leftist



Source: Historical Archive of Belgrade, IAB ZB 1165-A-4-0272.

*Figure 4: Belgrade residents experienced urban modernity in a 'gap-toothed' cityscape of muddy, rectilinear streets, where occasional European buildings emerged between the curvy lanes of Ottoman structures. Newcomers takes place in a street adjacent to Dunavska, the Dorćol thoroughfare depicted in this early twentieth-century image.*

journal *Lücha* (Light), the Bulgarian socialist Dimitür Blagoev argued that the Bulgarian bourgeoisie could only turn inward, towards internal social transformation and local accumulation by dispossession (Blagoev 1976: 366–74). Bourgeois fantasy was part of the material conditions that formed the living world, in which profits of colonial exploitation could be reaped by certain elites and not others. In the Balkan city, fantasy and reality thus intersected through disappointment, the extraordinary incapacity of urban worlds to deliver on their promises.

Deconstructing the disappointment of its protagonist, Milutin Uskoković's *Newcomers* looks towards the incapacity of bourgeois fantasy from a critical perspective. The city is a dangerous place – neither a glistening success nor a disappointing failure, but a 'brindled serpent', its main train station appearing as the jaws of a hungry monster (Uskoković 1910: 152). The title of the novel could therefore be read as a reference both to arriving migrants *and* the upstart Balkan bourgeois, who attempt to make their place in the world. Unlike nineteenth-century satirists Aleko Kostantinov and Branislav Nušić, whose literary interventions saw farce in the urbanite *arrivistes*, Uskoković had read them as tragedy. If the self-fashioning of bourgeois worlds was based on the weaving of social fantasy, its thread could not avoid the friction of the material that it bound together, could not help but rip against its folds.

The pessimist perspective brought forward in this article was certainly not unique to the Balkans. As Steinberg notes, many Russians saw progress in modernity as an illusion itself (2011: 13). Yet, what differentiates Balkan bourgeois world-making is the experience of failure, borne out of elites' relatively marginal position in respect to global flows. Such positions both fuelled the production of elaborate fantasy and simultaneously limited the terms of its articulation. This nightmarish world of bourgeois dreaming did not predicate a homogenous response from below. The concerns of those subaltern subjects of history whose lived nightmares are circumscribed by individual and collective struggles warrant further study beyond the scope of this article. Read in the social context of its production, *Newcomers* may, however, point us towards a critical reading of bourgeois engagement with the city, the trials and limits of its world-making project. In the cultural history of the Balkan urbanity, the holistic fantasy of a bourgeois world remained elusive, ever juxtaposed to the expanding violence of its production.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Miloš Jovanović is a research fellow at the 'Empires of Memory' research group in the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen. His current project foregoes the bounded nature

of individual urban histories to highlight the common structural tensions of urban transformation, contemporary capitalism and the production of 'European' space on the banks of the Danube. Miloš's primary research interests include urban history and theory, the history of capitalism 'off-center' and Balkan studies. He holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

E-mail: [jovanovic@mmg.mpg.de](mailto:jovanovic@mmg.mpg.de)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8528-1013>

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