

POLITICS BETWEEN ILLUSIONS AND REALITY

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The book *Politics as an Art of Illusion*, written by academician Dragan Simeunović¹, was published in times of comprehensive and deep social changes, geopolitical turmoil, and dizzying digital acceleration. Multi-layered, intellectually diverse, and theoretically grounded, with an encyclopaedic approach and analyticity that offer a synthesised and conceptually grounded approach to the contemporary interpretation of politics, this scientific study represents a significant novelty in the field of political science and the contemporary study of political practice. As an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade, and the acting director of the National Security Academy, professor Simeunović has been asserting himself for decades as one of the best connoisseurs of changes in the landscape of European political architecture. However, with this book, Simeunović takes a step forward in proving how the complex phenomena of interstate and internal politics can be understood through camouflaged mechanisms and techniques for the realization of political ideas and programmes. At the centre of his interest is the concept of illusions, by which human thought is creatively shaped into the garb of seductive efforts to rule over others. Simeunović explains it sophisticatedly and unobtrusively, through a series of intentions that shape political practice in these areas, making the content attractive and interesting at all times. Everything starts with political illusions, leading to the state as a great illusion, to further emphasise the illusions spread by political elites, which was most visible in our country through the illusion of the ideology of Yugoslavism. Political opinion is further configured through current events – the illusion of a world without borders, or of media freedom belonging to all citizens.

Comparing history, sociology, law, literature, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, security, and other sciences, the author weaves a picture of the lost meaning of democracy, skilfully pointing out the exhaustion of the great narratives characteristic of the 20th century, but also of the crisis shaking modern society with major changes. That is why this new book is much more than a textbook retrospective of political theories. On 485 pages of beautifully structured text, it shows the pragmatic, ideologically sterile side of the illusion of political action in which the state, under the guise of serving the citizens, actually betrays them and their freedoms. Tirelessly active, searchingly stimulating, theoretically referen-

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¹ Dragan Simeunović, “Politics as an Art of Illusion”, Prometej, Matica Srpska, Center for Cultural Integration, Novi Sad, 2022, p. 485.

tial, and authorially grounded, Simeunović wanders through the labyrinths of political ideas and programmes, showing how democratic institutions turned into alienated oligarchic centres that constructed a new order of values by forcing profit and a consumerist philosophy. Illustrative examples that can be found on the pages of the book help to better understand the trajectory of changes from the classical to the modern understanding of politics.

Professor Simeunović is known in our academic community as the leading researcher of national political theory, history, and philosophy; therefore, it is not surprising that, at a mature age, he left generations of future political scientists, and all those interested in the sphere of social change, a theoretically comprehensive and well-founded work indispensable for understanding the way social collectives function. Linguistically adept with rhetorical ease and stylistic opulence, he shows how society has transformed, betraying the traditional postulates of democracy, which has, in modern communities, in contrast to Aristotle's concept of public action in the agora, moved into the arcane of hidden cabinets in which the networks of causing crises and economic-military shock therapies are woven to replace disobedient elites.

The presented book is recognised as an academically rich source, because in its conceptual search, it cites the opinions of almost all relevant scholars in this field. Thus, in addition to Socrates', Plato's, Aristotle's, and Cicero's thoughts on the state and politics, the pages of this book can also trace the development trajectory of numerous philosophers and religious interpreters of social phenomena and processes through time – from Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, and Thomas More, through Thomas Hobbes, Max Weber, Karl Schmidt, Lenin, Marx, Habermas, Bloch, Horkheimer, Adorno, Easton, Luhmann, Hannah Arendt, and Lukács, complemented by a wide range of quoted thoughts of our famous authors – from Vladimir Jovanović and Radomir Lukić to Mihailo Marković, Vladeta Jerotić and Milan Matić. To give the presented definitions a scientific character, Simeunović explains them thoroughly and systematically, precisely listing the characteristic properties and connections that distinguish them from similar social phenomena. Therefore, the authentic and clear definitions of politics represent an exceptional aspect of this book, because they give it a specific and unique identity, whereby the author seemingly imperceptibly creates the doctrine of contemporary political action.

In terms of content and structure, the book *Politics as an Art of Illusion* consists of two thematically close and coherent units. The first unit is theoretically focused on the state as a common good in constant interrelation with the concepts of power, authority, force, and violence, which are its support mechanisms. It consists of nine chapters that gradually, methodologically, academically precisely, and theoretically indicate the importance of the state, legitimising its concept of functioning, with special reference to its legal, national, democratic, and social framework. The conceptual entanglement and distinction of power, authority, force, and violence are only inducements for the further explanation of the foundations and causes of violence in politics, which is skilfully linked to numerous forms of conquest and retention of power. The author's interpretation of the origin of the term ideology is also remarkable, where, in addition to the basic definitions and functions, he singles out the importance of manipulations by which the truth is sacrificed for the sake of some illusion. "Obscuring the truth through illusions then appears as an important means of ideologising political reality, if

not as the main goal”, claims Simeunović, stating that ideologies are not aimed at solving problems “but at mass political mobilisation with the aim of effective political action to influence the government, or for the sake of winning or staying in power” (p. 201). This is where political parties and political leaders come to the fore, notes the author, highlighting the importance of political culture and political style in the art of governance. Political illusions rely on emotions, and the more primitive the social environment is, the easier it is to establish and maintain them, which the author rightly states, relying on Gadamer’s interpretation of the existence of style in political action. In a comprehensive and detailed manner, Simeunović theoretically breaks down the dilemmas of the existence and interpretation of elites, summarising in one place a number of the most valuable and influential ones, and marking the perceived shortcomings and strong points of the cited theorists. This is the virtue of this book, which, pointing to the transformation of the elites in our environment, does not fail to recognise their quasi-elitism legitimised by the purchase of university diplomas, doctorates, or social recognitions that enable them to climb the ladder of the social hierarchy.

The second part of the book, titled *The Great Scene*, figuratively refers to Yugoslavism as the great political illusion of the unification of all South Slavs. Through a narratively moving and historically precise chronicle of the creation, realisation, and expansion of a new state union composed of distinctly related ethnic identities, the author reveals the flame of the burning romantic dreams of Ljudevit Gaj, and later Mihailo Obrenović, as the trailblazer of a vision that will become the greatest utopia for Serbs. Each of the nations that entered the new state union envisioned it in its way, whereby Slovenes and Croats insisted more on the preservation of ethnic, religious, and cultural-civilizational diversity, while Serbs blithely accepted the ideological veil and become the flag bearers of Yugoslavism. The seemingly romantically receptive theoretical setting of the ideology of Yugoslavism was ‘brutally rejected’ in practice at the end of the same century, remaining only in the memories of dreamers who, although observing political reality with open eyes, are still in a state of spiritual delirium.

Among the great Serbian illusions, Professor Simeunović includes the Serbian myth and belief ‘in brotherly Russia’, based on ‘belonging and adhering to Orthodoxy’. Elaborating historical points as the strongholds of the myth, from the Nemanjić dynasty and Byzantium to the present day, in detail and argumentatively, he tirelessly, skilfully, and diligently points out the hidden state-political and military interests that secretly influenced political practice and the shaping of collective ideas about a ‘century-old friendship’. For each of the Serbs who adopt it, the myth “provides at least an illusory participation in something grand, all too well-known and confirmed as historically relevant, while political reality is often mundane and very limiting in terms of political creativity” (p. 347).

It is rationally explained why each chapter of the book is within its covers. Thus, the theoretically impeccable reflection on the tradition of collective guilt is followed by an example of the Serbian trauma of collective punishment, which traces its roots back to both the Balkan Wars and the two Great Wars. Professor Simeunović, a renowned researcher of these events, singles out the phenomenon of the disruption of European political harmony and Serbian ignorance of realpolitik, political blindness, and misunderstanding of changes as reasons which, like houses of cards, destroyed traditional relations between major states. As Simeunović emphasises, “the trouble of the Serbs is that the Americans are also

prone to all kinds of imitation of the European tradition, taking from it the concept of the tradition of European guilt and that its interests of globalisation were opposite to the interests of the Serbian great-state uniqueness” (p. 366).

Books like *Politics as an Art of Illusion* are rare in the recent practice of political science. Although it was primarily intended for political scientists and sociologists, it can also be recommended as essential reading for future lawyers, historians, and pedagogues, as well as a wider audience interested in the area of political ideas, programmes, and practices. Professor Dragan Simeunović, having collected his best and most seasoned thoughts in one place, offers readers a codebook of the contemporary understanding of politics, which makes this book an indispensable source for the study of political practice. Finally, attention should also be drawn to the great effort of the publishers, who contributed to the high evaluation of the overall edition by utilising excellent and high-quality text editing.