


T H E
ORACLE

Edited by Chus Martínez and Aida Ana Kocutar


**ON FANTASY
AND FREEDOM**


SternbergPress 



The Oracle: ON FANTASY AND FREEDOM

Edited by Chus Martínez and Ajda Ana Kocutar

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Visionaries
in Hiding:

FIGURING
AND
PREFIGURING

Maja

Petrović-
Šteger

Imaginative projection, including prefiguration and vaticination, has always designated an important set of ways to relate to the world, to make it. Historians, poets and warriors have described many contexts in which our predecessors and contemporaries have sought ways to anticipate and (perhaps relatedly) to bring about change.

In ancient Greece, Egypt, and the Middle East, in the Americas, in India, Tibet, Mongolia, Japan, Korea, and throughout Africa, knowing the world and bringing about change therein was often linked to mantic practices. Guidance was sought either through consulting mediums—channels of psychic information sent by ancestors or more-than-human agents—or by using other methods of divination—from reading patterns of cracks in oracular bones to patterns in dust, from examining the stars or the entrails of sacrificed animals to scrying, shamanic dreaming, fasting-induced trances, dancing, ingesting hallucinogens, and fixating on mirrors, *thangkas*, amulets, labyrinths, yarrow stems, and mandalas.¹ Divinatory enquiries looked into the future, but also raked over past catastrophes whose causes could not be explained; they sounded unknown things, hidden from view, or far away; appropriate behavior in critical situations, including the healing of illness, the determination of appropriate times and modes of religious worship, and decisions about particular tasks.²

1 See also Barbara Tedlock, "Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualization, Narrative, and Interpretation," *Folklore* 112 (2001): 189-97.

2 See Barbara Tedlock, "Toward a Theory of Divinatory Practice," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 17, no. 2 (2006): 65. See also Michael Winkelman and Philip M. Peek, *Divination and Healing: Potent Vision* (University of Arizona Press, 2004).

While divination continues to be practiced worldwide,³ today other ways of being, seeing, understanding, and imagining the world are made available for philosophical speculation and everyday use through science, economics, art, technology, AI, religion, and politics. Since 1789, prefiguration has been singularly tied to practical politics. Protest and revolutions have come to be understood as particularly effective in engendering transformations of social relations.⁴ To prefigure, then, is, in everyday parlance, often to reimagine society on a political level and allied with the strategies and practices of activists seeking to build alternative systems. The social and protest movements that have flourished since the 1960s, based on principles such as participatory democracy, strict horizontality, inclusivity, and direct action,

³ See Niels Bubandt, "Interview with an Ancestor: Spirits as Informants and the Politics of Possession in North Maluku," *Ethnography* 10, no. 3 (2009): 291-316; Patrick Curry, "Embodiment, Alterity, and Agency: Negotiating Antinomies in Divination," in *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium*, ed. Patrick Curry (Ashgate, 2010), 85-118; Martin Holbraad, *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Diana Espírito Santo, "Fluid Divination: Movement, Chaos and the Generation of 'Noise' in Afro-Cuban Spiritist Oracular Production," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 24, no. 1 (2013): 32-56.

⁴ See Charles Tilly and Lesley J. Wood, "Contentious Connections in Great Britain, 1828-34," in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (Oxford University Press, 2003), 147-72; Suzanne Staggenborg, *Social Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Vincent Bevins, *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution* (Wildfire, 2025).

are widely recognized as organized means of trying (and failing) to proactively project and change the future.⁵

Readers should not be misled into thinking that I am outlining two apparently opposed modes of prefiguration, indeed of metaphysical enquiry, as proxies for notions of the irrational and the rational. It does not seem entirely satisfactory to equate modern ways of imagining and shaping the world with rationality, and ancient and indigenous ways with unreasonable methods of prediction. Nor do I think that the assumption of a continuity between these two ways of acting in the world—one based on a notion of prophets and sensitives making sense of the inchoate, the other on organized community intervention—is unassailable. Rather, I want to draw readers' attention to ideas of imagination and conceivability, and to processes of divining immanent in the conditions and acts of prefiguration—in both the sybillic and political spheres. This contribution is an invitation to reflect on and move beyond received thinking as to how change comes into the world.

BIDDING FOR TRANSPARENCY

As an anthropologist, I have long been interested in the contexts in which people express a need for change, and the conditions, both societal and personal, under which they come to see the world differently. I began my main, long-term research in Serbia in early 2000. Ever since the country started to emerge from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s,

5 See Guilherme Fians, "Prefigurative Politics," in *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stein (2023), <http://doi.org/10.29164/22prefigpolitics>; Mathis Ebbinghaus, "Decoupling Social Movements from Modernity: A Critical Reappraisal of Charles Tilly's Theory on the Origins of Social Movements," *Theory and Society* 53 (2024): 1152, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-024-09569-0>.

Serbia has been predominantly, even stereotypically, portrayed in the media, academia, and popular culture as broken and in need of social and political restitution. I have also been documenting stories of people who feel stuck, out of place, alienated, in denial, and financially and emotionally troubled for too long (for them and possibly for me). My interlocutors often complain that in comparison to the immediate postwar period, the last twenty years have been even more precarious and unpredictable. Many feel they are running on empty, drained by the stagnant and treacherous political, economic, and psychological ecology of their nation. They insist that they live in a structurally compromised country run by exploitative leaders, where party patronage and political clientelism are naturalized and expected. All too aware of the politics of the past, many portray their prospects—political, economic, and moral—as boxed in, as a general rule. They are exhausted because their future has been preemptively preconceived by the expectations of both local and international policymakers.⁶

6 See Maja Petrović-Šteger, “Parasecurity and Paratime in Serbia: Neocortical Defence and National Consciousness,” in *Times of Security: Ethnographies of Fear, Protest and the Future*, ed. Morten Axel Pedersen and Martin Holbraad (Routledge, 2013), 141–62; Maja Petrović-Šteger, “Understanding Self-Care: Passing and Healing in Contemporary Serbia,” in *Materialities of Passing: Explorations in Transformation, Transition and Transience*, ed. Peter Bjerregaard et al. (Routledge, 2016), 113–29; Maja Petrović-Šteger, “O ‘Odprtem pogledu’. Miselne pokrajine in doživljanje časa družbenih podjetnikov in vizionarjev v današnji Srbiji,” *Glasnik slovenskega etnološkega društva* 58, no. 3–4 (2018): 7–23; Maja Petrović-Šteger, “Calling the Future into Being: Timescripting in Contemporary Serbia,” in *Biography – A Play? Poetological Experiments in a Genre Without Poetics*, ed. Günter Blumberger, Rüdiger Görner, and Adrian Robanus (Wilhelm Fink, 2020), 163–79; Maja Petrović-Šteger, “On the Side of Predictable: Visioning the Future in Serbia,” *Etnološka tribina: Godišnjak Hrvatskog etnološkog društva* 50, no. 43 (2020): 3–67.

Some of the people I work with seem politically apathetic and genuinely disengaged from everyday politics. Others, even those once feisty and articulate, have toned down their political views and retreated into private life. They often feel despondent because they see no way to alleviate the systemic exclusion and discrimination they face, the forms of which are constantly mutating. Many others, however, can be described as part of the hundreds of thousands of Serbs who have taken to the streets at one time or another since 2016 in a series of massive anti-government demonstrations against Aleksandar Vučić and his ideological set, to whose leadership they attribute Serbia's malaise. These demonstrators have demanded accountability from Serbia's leaders over a wide range of issues: e.g., the Belgrade waterfront construction project; alleged fraud in parliamentary elections; the government's greenlighting of plans for a controversial lithium mine; and gun violence connected to a school shooting. Most recently, the collapse of a concrete canopy over a railway station in Novi Sad, which killed fifteen people in November 2024, led to widespread protests calling for an end to corruption and genuine monitoring of spending and maintaining public infrastructure. Over the past four-and-a-half months, hundreds of thousands of people have marched across Serbia demanding the release of all documents related to the renovation of the station, the dismissal of charges against the demonstrators, and an increase in the budget for higher education. The protesters see their demands not as a call for revolution but for reform—as a fundamental plea for transparency, for respect for the rule of law and the constitution, and for holding public officials responsible and accountable for eliminating structural negligence. Despite the government's various strategies to quell the demonstrations, the protests are gaining momentum. Universities have been occupied and organized strikes, road blockades, and peaceful guerrilla actions have taken place

across the country. A number of large and small businesses, cultural institutions, theatres, libraries, museums, shops, and even nightclubs and bars have closed in support. The protesters organize themselves through student plenums and other assemblies, where everyone has the right to speak and all decisions are voted on. The movement survives on food donations and operates independently of university administrations and opposition parties. The energy that accompanies the protests—usually of highly articulate, calm, caring, young people, eager to show solidarity and mutual recognition, who clear the streets of rubbish and other traces when they're finished with a protest—is inspiring to many. One can also note, of course, a mounting impatience and aggression. As tensions rise between those who support the demands of the protesters and their opponents, there is a growing practice of filming the demonstrations. Social media offers hundreds of clips from multiple perspectives purporting to show the authorities' intimidation, but they are also used to publicly shame pro-government activists. The protests' hypervisibility is taken as a bid for transparency—an ideal invoked by both the government and the dissidents.

“GROWING IS INVISIBLE.”

Ana is a sixty-eight-year-old woman with a light grey bob that frames her dark, inquisitive eyes. She moves with noticeable grace in her loose, warm-colored clothes. She lives alone in a small flat in an apartment tower in the Novi Beograd (New Belgrade) district, near the Sava River. Over the past five years, I have spent considerable time with Ana in her cramped kitchen, decorated with plants and her amateur paintings. After retiring, Ana developed a naïve style, usually reserved for depicting folk and rural life, but applied it to urban, almost technical settings. Her paintings of concrete

halls, factory workshops, and laboratories are bathed in soft light, often suffused with burnt orange. Impressed by her reinterpretation of the industrial landscape as soft and luminous, I asked Ana several times what made her paint these scenes with such counterintuitive colors and technique. I knew she had worked for forty years as a chemical engineer, specializing in the protection of metals from corrosion, in a large company making paints and varnishes. Her work, though, clearly had other inspirations and sources. She never answered. Instead, she would turn around or look through the balcony doors, which were almost always ajar, and draw my attention to the birds, or children screaming with joy, or people passing by, or arguing over a parking space. Often, we would just continue to sit in pleasant silence. And sometimes she would pick up where we left off, talking about life, the family that raised her, her deteriorating health, her financial situation, her ideas about eternity, or the death of her son twenty-nine years ago. Ana is open, warm, direct, and responsive in the way she looks at you and moves her hands and body. But sometimes she chooses not to answer questions.

Tetka Ana, auntie Ana, as everyone affectionately calls her, is seen as the person to go to if someone needs advice, if an issue needs to be raised at the tenants' council, or if someone wants to learn about the neighborhood gardens. In all these exchanges I've seen, Ana's way of relating to people, whether peers, teens, or children, palpably makes a mark. People love to talk to her, to be recognized and greeted by her. I've seen people join us just to walk beside her in silence. Her rapport is always engaged, and the stability and vitality she exudes is much appreciated.

Marko, a friend who introduced me to Ana, said that everyone knows her as "the hood's spirit-keeper," as somebody who renewed and is deemed to sustain the unusually good atmosphere in the neighborhood. Twenty-six years

ago, she started planting roses, herbs, bushes, and trees in front of her block of flats, and later in the surrounding green spaces. At first, she was seen as an oddball, coming home from work in heels and work dresses, yet picking up litter or straightening rubbish bins on her way. It was known that she was a respected engineer. Some thought her to be haughty, over-proud of her superior cleanliness. Others were puzzled by such herb gardens in public places, or her stubborn protection of crab apple trees and particular plants such as mugwort, nettles, plantain, and fennel, which are barely distinguishable from weeds. But she never reprimanded anyone for stepping on her plants, littering, spraying graffiti, or trashing park equipment. Even when it would have been possible for her to finger culprits from the balcony windows of her kitchen, she just kept tidying up, planting, labelling herbs and trees, tending their foliage, and picking their leaves. There is an anecdote that for a while Ana regularly interrupted the late-night drug sales of a local small-time dealer. She would come and hang out by the same bush or in the same little corner where he had set up his makeshift "stall." Unfazed by him and his clients, Ana would appear, ask him something, offer him a cigarette, or just clean up the area while he tried to do his business. A few years later, another neighbor, a math teacher, arranged for the students in his class to join Ana and help her prepare and fertilize the soil around the fruit trees. Ana shared many stories about roots and stems, air, and light. The community's legends about her tend to be simple and short. They all more or less repeat that "planting is silent" and "growing invisible." That "what you see, and what is hidden from the view of others, make your ultimate resources," that "plants' spirits are always here and are timeless, but need to be related to and given a home in real turf to be felt." She neither preaches nor organizes. When members of the Green (Ecological) Party approached her a few years ago about joining them and standing as a local councilor, she

flatly turned them down. Whenever I tried to find out more about what motivates her devotion to plants, she ignored my questions. They were superfluous. Instead of answering, she would simply continue to smell the bark of the trees. Or offer me a tea from her herbal treasure trove. Or move her hands in a ceremonial way, which she often does, as if searching for something in the undergrowth and gathering something in the lower parts of the hedges. The environment Ana has created is not decorative, just exceptionally alive. Green islands that surround concrete blocks have become a refuge for birds and passersby who just go there to sit and rest, contemplate, tidy things up, plant something, serenade each other, or hide. As regards its atmosphere, this neighborhood truly differs from its surroundings.

PREFIGURING RENEWAL

The political as a mode of analysis enjoys a certain representational hegemony over Serbian life, both for Serbian citizens and observers thereof. It tends to trump all other possible analyses or ways of understanding their sociality and society's unfoldings. Obviously, the daily national and international politics have an enormous impact on the economic and mental well-being of Serbians. After years of the country's machinery refusing to acknowledge any war crimes, and then years of smaller and larger protests, as well as engineered apathy (motivated by a fear of retribution), the current student-led protests arguably mark a breakthrough in galvanizing massive numbers of people into action.

For some of the people I spend time with in Serbia, however, political action as a medium for genuine change seems hollow. Their sense of their past and future would imply that these interlocutors see formal politics—i.e., the government, formal institutions of power, the media

coverage of party politics, the state of emergency and its normalization, aspirations for change led by new political organizations—as not only trite, uncaring, and ineffective, but also empty. Their conception of the political is that of a machine that grinds down whatever is fed into it, then spits it out. By extension, they refuse to associate themselves or judge their own lives through a political or politicized lens. Fully aware that Serbian politics (even with its conflicts) has the effect of cynically invalidating any appeal to anything beyond politics to the extent that its interpreters could be wary of that call and find the concept of the “non-political” rather vacuous, they still refuse it. It is not that they claim to be “apolitical.” They lean towards one side or another, seek independence from orthodoxies, and, just by dint of their profession or activism, form part of various institutions and networks. Their social, intellectual, and (if they are lucky!) financial capital means they have to acknowledge the force of ideological and political endowments in their lives. However, all of them feel that systemic politics aims to impoverish them. It holds them too tightly and constrains their vision and actions. They avoid framing any criticism or aspiration in an untrustworthy political syntax, instead looking for other, more adequate, designations for a range of experiences and hopes vital to their lives and connection to larger interpersonal, social, and natural systems.⁷

Observing people’s frustration with standing restrictions on how they are officially invited to make sense of their times, my research over the last six years has moved away, ethnographically, from its earlier predominant themes of political and economic hope and hopelessness. I have begun to focus on individuals and collectives who refuse to be perceived or fully subsumed within left- or right-wing political

7 See Maja Petrović-Šteger, “On the Side of Predictable: Visioning the Future in Serbia,” *Etnološka tribina: Godišnjak Hrvatskog etnološkog društva* 50, no. 43 (2020): 3–67.

identities, and who are concerned with renewing their personal and social resources in alternative ways. I've begun to pay attention to practices, narratives, signs, and "visions" of social change that inform the collective consciousness in non-obviously political ways. Besides taking stock of what builds out of observable facts, I have sought to attune myself to what is hibernating (while seeking expression) in mindsets and social conditions.

I started to follow the work of a public health planner, an educator, a carpenter, a biological archaeologist, and a few inventors. Other interlocutors include traditional musicians, a gynecologist, athletes, herbalists, and painters. These individuals, of different ages and life experiences, transcend their vocational identities in thinking about how change in society might emerge and be conceptualized. The specific fieldwork cases that I work on include a project founding and financing orphanages across Serbia, set up to attract the best social and natural scientists and educators; a public education project offering tours of Belgrade's catacombs and underground public infrastructure as a way of rethinking what city resources are; a project devoted to creating unusual libraries of herbal medicine and thus the rethinking of environmental taxonomies; and a project using Orthodox sacred music in medicine. The research follows people who believe that prefigurative actions, as they bear on matters of societal reconditioning, should count for more than being political in the right way, and should extend into the realms of coherence, order, morality, aesthetics, the sacred, and inspiration. My visionaries seek society's psychological and structural transformation through individual investment, intentional community projects, and scientific and spiritual activism, oriented to a supposed renewal of Serbia's spiritual fabric and well-being.

Some of these visionaries, inspirers, and makers are highly accomplished in socially recognized ways, with

leading positions in their fields. Others are known for their imaginative and unexpected configurations of ideas about how social and state processes might align in new, unentrenched ways. Still others are recognized for their personal vitality or ability to carefully nurture the fragile relational threads in their communities. This is how I met Ana. Marko recommended that I meet and spend time with her, as she is regarded in some circles as a person whose actions, imagination, and force of mind have had a real impact on what people around her understand as possible and conceivable. Her imaginal practices, her vision of knitting the neighborhood together by single-handedly providing spaces where they can appreciate their surroundings, seem to be about finding sustenance and integrity. The fact that she does not compete for visibility, resources, or power, and does not seek to validate her vision and practices in political terms, is precisely why she is so respected.

THE REALM OF THE IMAGINAL

In social science and philosophy, imagination is usually conceived of as an individual's capacity to represent what is not there—the unreal, whether a hallucination or the projection of a scenario yet to come.⁸ The concept of the social imaginary (a derivative term), on the other hand, is understood to be socially embedded and constrained. The term “the social imaginary” claims our ability to project what is not there as socially embedded, introducing a limitation: a society can only imagine what its members have been socialized to regard as possible, as noted by Castoriadis, Árnason,

⁸ See Chiara Bottici, “Imagination, Imaginary, Imaginal: Towards a New Social Ontology?,” *Social Epistemology* 33, no. 5 (2019): 433.

La Caze, and Bottici.⁹ As Bottici notes, if the imagination is a faculty we possess as persons, the social imaginary, by contrast, possesses us.

Anthropologists, philosophers, and other social scientists¹⁰ have recently started to revisit the concept called the “imaginal.” In contrast to both “imagination” and “the imaginary,” the “imaginal,” designating what is made of images, may be the product of both an individual faculty and a social context, and of their mutual interactions. As a term or a concept, the imaginal ought to help overcome tensions between the social and the individual.¹¹ Furthermore, in contrast to the imaginary, which is often associated with the unreal and fictitious (something that is and remains outside of being and existence—in brief, something *utopian*), the imaginal makes no ontological assumptions as to the reality of the images that compose it, or the presence or absence of what its images represent.

As a concept, the imaginal was first coined by Henry Corbin, who in his writings critiqued the circumstance that the kind of consciousness that has increasingly dominated Western culture since about the twelfth century is characterized by a critical disconnection between thought and being. Corbin defined *l'imaginal* or *mundus imaginalis* in the context

⁹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (MIT Press, 1987); Jóhann Páll Árnason, “Reason, Imagination, Interpretation,” in *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity*, ed. G. Robinson and J. Rundell (Routledge, 1994), 155–70; Marguerite La Caze, *The Analytic Imaginary* (Cornell University Press, 1996); Chiara Bottici, *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ See Cynthia Fleury, ed., *Imagination, Imaginaire, Imaginal* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2006); Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); Jean Hunleth, “Zambian Children’s Imaginal Caring: On Fantasy, Play and Anticipation in an Epidemic,” *Cultural Anthropology* 34, no. 2 (2019): 155–86.

¹¹ See Bottici, “Imagination, Imaginary, Imaginal,” 433–41.

of Islamic Sufi traditions as a concept designating fantasies, meta-psychological representations, as self-sustaining and real. The *mundus imaginalis*, in his theory, is a world of “meta-physical images, having the same consistency and reality as the world of Platonic ideas.” It is “a world that is ontologically as real as the world of the senses and that of the intellect. This world requires its own faculty of perception, namely, imaginative power, a faculty with a cognitive function, a noetic value which is as real as that of sense perception or intellectual intuition.”¹² Imagination, as an organ of perception, is required to enact a mode of being and of consciousness. Corbin was not merely theorizing nor philosophizing: he was describing something that for him was real.

My work seeks to identify individual and societal visions and imaginal practices in a social context crying out for radical overhaul, transformation, and community healing. In portraying and analyzing alternative social scenarios in Serbia vouched for by “visions” bigger than political, my aim is not to put forward a study of otherworldly fantasies, but to show that they are real, or can have real effects. My ethnography is concerned with worldly, mundane strategies tied to historically specific ideas, actions, and people. Yet, visions are hard to pin down or follow, for they are usually recognized only after their social impact has been measured, after a certain “facticity” has been added to the images and imaginaries that compose them. I met Ana twenty-two years after she had started planting her herbs and trees, that is, years after her vision (of which she never really speaks) started to change her neighborhood, and only after she had been recognized as the originator of that change.

Indeed, there is a question of when visioning becomes visible enough to become analyzable. It is easy to be drawn to

12 Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson, Bollingen Series XCI: 2 (Princeton University Press, 1977).

objects and processes after they have appeared, and to movements or expressions of opinion after they have manifested themselves. But in what forms were they inchoate? And might we have seen and sensed them earlier? How do certain imaginal relationships with the future emerge and gain social recognition in the first place? Who is a “visionary”?

STEPPING OUT OF SHARED IMAGINARIES

Anthropological work strives to recognize, and then communicate, how the conditions under which something has been experienced become essential for understanding that experience. We do not seek new and novel findings as such. Rather, we aim to understand a phenomenon, an event, a relationship, people’s practices and ways of narrating the world in a given society. We do that by attending to the ways in which phenomena find their register and voice, and articulate themselves as, or in response to, the questions they find vital. By providing a context, we attempt to ensure that the phenomena we depict find their proper expression. We strive to find analytical methods that draw phenomena of different orders—discursive, material, or conceptual—into a coherent field of understanding.

I understand the visionary to require subjects to step out of the routines of group thinking, predictable responses, and the regimes of shared imaginaries. The visionaries I describe work not only with what is known—objects, people, things, beliefs—but also with what is partially known, unknown, and only incipiently realized. It is therefore all the more important to resist the premature “coding” of their ideas and actions politically (which typically means in terms of moral partisanship), as my interlocutors themselves do not perceive their actions and philosophies this way. Jumping to

conclusions about the sustainability of their visions will not make them more intelligible. Every time we reach an intellectual or emotional impasse, we would do better to just observe and listen. To wait. And to not ascribe political significance to an excess that, at that moment, cannot be contained in cognitive, social, perceptual, or emotional registers.

In the context of Serbia, what I have just proposed—consciously resisting the political as the focal resource for self-identification and making sense of the world—could be considered almost offensive. My analytical proposal, as well as the actions of some of the people I describe, could be seen as delusional and unpalatable. They could be understood even as morally wrong in a world continually remade by populist authoritarians, in which the credo of the left is to push back against their interventions.

Such moralizing calls have consequences. A few years ago, it was easier for me to start a conversation with people about those they admired as visionaries. Now the question of who has interesting ideas about societal revision often elicits cynical answers. My interlocutors now see these people as exceptionalists or obscurantists. Moreover, even some of the interviewees whose work I have been following for some time, and who seem (to me at least) to have the most interesting ideas, are themselves falling increasingly hushed. One interviewee, now a good friend, who was on the verge of implementing profound change in the Serbian preschool education system and then failed, has almost gone into hiding. Not because of the “failure,” but because she cannot explain to her friends, colleagues, and family the conditions under which her project failed. She feels incredibly isolated. More and more people I work with choose not to share their plans with others for fear of ridicule, or for fear of them being thought too grandiose and pie-in-the-sky. Their ideas are dismissed as unrealistic. As a result, some drift into quietism.

As Edwin Ardener wrote, a prophet is understood as incomprehensible or banal before the prophetic fulfilment (should any occur), and as intuitive and commonplace afterwards.¹³ The prophet speaks not of the future, but from it, so until that time arrives, he remains opaque, and when it does, he becomes *passé*. Similarly, Chapman comments that “in a situation of theoretical and conceptual innovation, statements from within a novel structure of understanding are always likely to be perceived, at worst, as laughably meaningless, and, at best, as oracular—an oracle spiced, perhaps, with the exciting hint of fulfilment.”¹⁴

In attending to how people in contemporary Serbia conceive their intimate and collective conditions, and how they foresee changing them while dealing constructively with their past, present, and future, I realized that one of the biggest changes they aspire to concerns proximity. Many speak of the need for proximity—to oneself and one’s society, as the most important component that their work of social criticism seeks to illuminate.

When documenting a society’s travails, and evolutions in the direction of change, one should not, I suggest, be too hasty to characterize the mediators of socio-historical transition. We should stay or tarry with the imaginal and not appropriate it too quickly to the language of the political. As Corbin wrote, the imaginal guides, anticipates, and molds sensory perception; it transmutes sensory data into symbols in ways that are vastly transformative. This applies to Serbia, but it could apply to other places too.

13 Edwin Ardener, *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays* (Berghahn Books, 2006).

14 Malcolm Chapman, “Introduction,” in *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays*, by Edwin Ardener (Berghahn Books, 2006), xxvii.

P.S. I spoke to Ana on the phone the other day and asked her if she was demonstrating. She said that she was not attending the protests, but had sent five batches of *orasnice* (soft walnut cookies) to two daughters of a neighbor, who are very active organizers. Later, at the end of our conversation, Ana added: “No, I did not go to the protest. I am very impressed by how articulate and spirited some of the youth are today But you can’t be in the streets all the time. At some point they will want to go home. They will need a place to recharge their batteries. And they will appreciate finding a new bench beneath the crab apple tree in full bloom.”¹⁵

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The Oracle names and honors the symbolic place from where all beings wonder about the course of life. Because we care about tomorrow, we should assume we care about staying alive, about a world in peaceful coexistence. Times of increasing insecurity and the experience of living in a world that refuses to acknowledge our needs give rise to various forms of escapism and misguided decision-making. Searching for big answers and expecting significant movements capable of undoing the damage of wars and dark forces seems unrealistic. Art assumes the existence of a tiny but meaningful spot from which to dream and demand freedom and peace. The Oracle is about this spot.

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