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From the inside out. Understanding citizenship through fiction

Andrew Wachtel



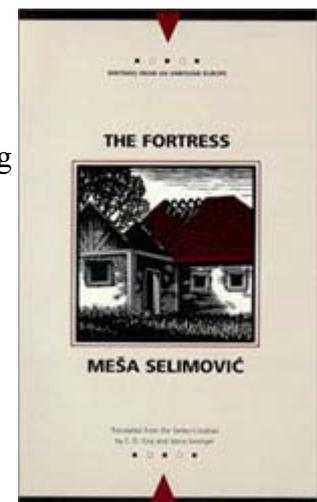
This is an extended summary of a longer paper that was originally published in the [CITSEE Working Paper Series](#) and is available for download [here](#).

Can literature deepen our appreciation of citizenship? From the perspective of the state, citizenship is

about identifying who its citizens should be, categorizing them, and defining their collective rights and responsibilities. As such, the appropriate genre for discussing citizenship would appear to be the legal document. Literature is a highly individualistic affair, and we tend to value literary works (at least since Romanticism, the period that roughly corresponds to the introduction of modern citizenship regimes), precisely for their ability to grasp the particular. With rare exceptions, they are not conceived as mouthpieces of state policy, and when they are, literature's basic properties make it difficult for a work conceived in this way to succeed. So literary works would seem at first blush to be a poor medium in which to examine issues of citizenship.

At the same time, citizenship can be viewed not merely as an abstract legal concept or a concrete set of norms and laws, but also from the perspective of the citizen, from the inside out as it were. Insofar as literary works touch on the question of how individuals imagine their relationship to a community, be it strictly speaking political/legal, or more generally, they can allow us to understand attitudes toward citizenship and in this sense can conceivably provide a counterbalance to more top down approaches to studying issues of citizenship. As a test case to consider how the insights of a novelist could enliven our understanding of citizenship, let us examine one of the most famous novels written in communist-era Yugoslavia, *The Fortress* (1970) by Meša Selimović. As is also the case with Selimović's more celebrated *Death and the Dervish*, *The Fortress* is generally and properly understood to be an existential novel. Nevertheless, it can also be read as an extended meditation on the nature of the modern quasi-totalitarian state and the various possible relations of the individual to that state.

The novel begins with Ahmet Šabo's recollections of his service in the Ottoman Army during one of the many wars against the Russian Empire in the 18th century. However, the way in which the war is described and in particular the attitude of the soldiers toward the war and their country is anachronistic, reflecting a 20th rather than an 18th-century sensibility; as a result, it quickly becomes apparent that the novel is a fairly transparent allegory of the situation in Yugoslavia in the 1950s and 60s.^[1] Its apparent historicity is important, not because the author had anything to say about the period in which the novel is ostensibly set, but rather because it gave Selimović the necessary cover to ruminate on issues concerning the relationship between the individual and the modern state in ways that would not have been possible had he been writing a novel set in the present.^[2]



Šabo describes himself and his fellow soldiers as classic imperial subjects. Invoking his own false consciousness, as well as that of his comrades in arms, Šabo recounts:

And so, these some dozen men from Sarajevo, like thousands of others, were possessed by something they didn't need, and fought for an empire, without thinking that the empire had nothing to do with them, nor they with it.^[3]

The state failed to create the feeling (or the illusion) of a reciprocal relationship between itself and the individual. Alienated by the violence and misery of war, Šabo returns home to discover that his entire family has died of the plague. He finds some measure of solace through a relationship that immediately places him in an ambiguous position in Sarajevo society—he meets, and falls in love with Tijana, a young Christian orphan girl. The overtly political dimension of Šabo's alienation from the state becomes apparent in a scene that takes place soon after his marriage. He is working as a scribe for Mula Ibrahim, who asks him to help decorate his shop in honor of the Sultan's birthday. The scene reveals the extent to which Šabo does not understand (or refuses to accept) his duties as a citizen and hints at one way in which Yugoslavia fails as a modern state. They adorn the shop with “a crescent moon, stars, and paper chains out of colored paper... we stuck a picture of the sultan Abdul Hamid with the words ‘May God grant you

long life,' together with a picture of a *janissary* unit departing joyfully to war, under which we wrote, 'Allah has given us an unconquerable army'" (26). The actions described are flamboyantly anachronistic; images of Ottoman sultans were not displayed in late 18th-century Sarajevo shop windows, but images of Tito, along with stars and paeans to the unconquerable Yugoslav army were a stock in trade of Communist-era Yugoslavia. [4] Of course, the very existence of a cult of the charismatic leader was also an illustration of the extent to which Yugoslavia was not a truly modern democratic state.

Šabo is unable to reconcile what he knows about the injustices of his society with the symbolism of the happy hierarchy of which he is supposed to be a part.

It was pathetic, it was funny, it was ugly. It would have been no surprise had I wept or ground my teeth. Instead I laughed, both at my friend's enthusiasm and my own disgust (26).

A later scene again brings issues of citizenship to the fore, this time in a tragicomic vein. Šabo is talking with another war veteran, Ferid, who had been captured in fighting and spent nine years in Austrian prisons. During his long disappearance he had been declared dead and his wife had remarried. Upon his return, the bureaucratic state finds itself unable to readmit him to membership in the polity, for the new husband "claimed the following: It's true the man's alive; that the lands were his, there's no question. But had it not been for the *kadi's* death certificate, in the writing of which he's had no part, he wouldn't have married the man's wife ... Was it his fault that the man had remained alive when the *kadi* had proclaimed him dead?" [5] (59-60) Ferid can neither reclaim his wife nor his property because citizenship is not exclusively a question of belonging, it is also a bureaucratic procedure with its own logic, which can defy even the most corporeal evidence.

As the novel proceeds, it divides into two parallel, but related stories. At the center of one is Šabo, dismissed from his job after some incautious drunken words spoken at a party for war veterans. Having offended the authorities, he is unable to find employment, becoming a sort of double of Ferid—he is alive and in the midst of the polity, yet potential employers regard him as a living corpse. The other plot strand concerns the arrest and rescue of Ramiz, a firebrand young revolutionary whose willingness to speak out for social justice and political transformation earns him Šabo's admiration.

A variety of secondary characters illustrate various attitudes to citizenship in the modern state. At one extreme is Mula Ibrahim, Šabo's former employer. A traumatized war veteran, he is terrified of those in power, recognizing their ability and willingness to step on anyone who might get in their way. He understands his obligations as a citizen to be obedience to the demands of those in power, and sees himself as a pawn, at the mercy of the hierarchical state but expecting nothing from it in return. He justifies the status quo through his fear of what would happen should the authoritarian state weaken:

The sultan is an almost supernatural concept that unites our many aspirations. He is the absolute who holds us together, like the force of gravity. Without him we'd fly off in all directions like a stone from a catapult. (44).

At the other extreme is Ramiz, who, like Mula Ibrahim, expects nothing from the state, but refuses to accept his position of powerlessness. He is in revolt against the state as such and preaches a kind of revolutionary populism. His opinions about those in power, filtered through Šabo's retelling, sound surprisingly close to the thoughts of Milovan Djilas in *The New Class*.

He said... that there were three great passions: alcohol, gambling, and power. People could be cured of the first two, but of the third never. Power was the worst vice. For its sake, people killed, people perished... There was no such thing as honest and wise government, for the lust for power was limitless... No one in power was wise, for the wise quickly lost their reason, and no one was tolerant, for they hated change. They immediately created eternal laws, eternal principles, an eternal order, and by liking their

power to God thus affirmed their might (149).

The cure Ramiz proposes is, however, flawed, for he never explains how the brand of naïve populist anarchism he advocates could break the cycle of power he perceives.

A number of other characters and scenes round out Selimović's portrait of the relationship of individuals to the modern state. Prominent among them is the police official Serdar-Avdaga. Avdaga, like Mula Ibrahim, is unwavering in his support of the existing state apparatus. But Avdaga works within the system and indeed is an important cog in its operations. Although he does not benefit enormously from the existing order of things, he pursues all who have the temerity to advocate change.

He didn't hate those he pursued, nor had he any clear idea where their guilt lay... He was a fanatical believer in law and order, whose sense he never questioned... He knew not what he served, but he served it well. He knew not why he punished, but he punished severely. Maybe he'd grown accustomed to one law, but he'd have scarcely noticed had it been replaced by another. (353, 359).

Avdaga is an example of the pure bureaucratic mind, attached to the Rechtsstaat for its own sake. Another feature of the modern semi-totalitarian state which Selimović explores in *The Fortress* is the way in which the citizenry, always fearful of denunciation and therefore of a fall into non-personhood, band together to attack individuals deemed to have transgressed the norms of political behavior. Šabo describes a town meeting at which a variety of people are encouraged to denounce Ramiz, in advance of his arrest. Again, the meeting is a pure anachronism. It has nothing to do with 18th-century Sarajevo, but rather reflects the brand of public denunciation which came to be a specialty of communist states (but which can also be found in democratic states at times of crisis).

Ilijaz-effendi said that he felt regret and shame that we gave so much freedom to those who did not deserve it... Himzi-effendi, the naib, saw the aim of the meeting as the necessary intensification of the struggle against the enemy... And Ramiz was not the only one. It was easy to deal with him. There were hundreds of young Ramizes, one had to say this, who were constantly sabotaging us, thwarting us in our efforts to carry out the sacred task, to strengthen the faith and the empire. And this at a time when the enemies on our frontiers were keeping a firm watch on us and were awaiting a chance to attack us... They then began to compete in their severity, in the rigor of their comments, in their attacks on various culprits, of whom there seemed to be ever more. (207-08)



Outside the state apparatus described in the novel are the rich merchant Šehaga Sočo and his right-hand man, Osman Vuk. Šehaga is sufficiently wealthy to subvert state structures whenever he wishes to do so. He concocts the plot to free Ramiz, not because he believes in what Ramiz stands for, but simply to demonstrate his independence from state power. Nominally a citizen of his country, he considers the place and its inhabitants to be beneath his

dignity. Šehaga considers himself a citizen of the world, equally at home in Venice, it would seem, as in Sarajevo, at least until he finds himself on his deathbed, There he comes to recognize the limits of cosmopolitan belonging and yearns for the sound of his native Bosnian. In the end, Selimović implies, one must belong to a society, which is for better or worse a linguistic and cultural community as well as a political entity.

And what of the novel's hero? A scribe and a poet, he can be viewed as the author's alter ego and we could thus expect that his search for a community to which he could belong would stand at the center of the novel. Does he propose a citizenship model of his own? Unable to find work, and seemingly in hopeless conflict with the world around him, Šabo ponders:

Was any link possible between a man and the world, other than through necessity? I didn't choose what I had. Indeed, I didn't choose anything, not birth, family, name, town, nationality; it was all imposed on me. Still stranger was that I turned this necessity into love. For something had to be mine, for all else was alien, and I'd adopted the street, the town, the country, the sky above, which I'd looked at since childhood, out of fear of emptiness, of not belonging to the world (142-43).

Unlike the novel's other characters, Šabo ultimately chooses to embrace his flawed community even as he recognizes its flaws. He is not a revolutionary like Ramiz, though he sympathizes with Ramiz's passionate desire to make things better. Neither will he remove himself from the body politic as do Šehaga and Osman Vuk, though he sometimes wishes he possessed their independent streak. Yet he will not work for a state he sees to be corrupt.

Šabo's desire, for himself and his progeny, seems to be to live in a "normal" liberal state, which does not place extraordinary demands on its citizens, allows them the space to live and think as they wish, and in return asks them to contribute in their own modest way to its further development. In 1970, it was possible to dream that Yugoslavia was on its way to becoming such a state. The excesses of the early communist years were a thing of the past, censorship was at a low ebb, nationalism was seemingly in check, the economy was expanding, and writers like Selimović were for the most part free to produce meditations on the immediate past and present without fear of harassment as long as they hid them in plain view under a fig leaf of anachronistic history. Within a few years, however, this would all change, and the worst fears of Šabo, and likely his creator, would be realized.

Insofar as *The Fortress* presents a panoramic and psychologically nuanced description of various possible attitudes to citizenship in the modern state, it can help us to recreate, from the inside out, perspectives on citizenship in a given polity that a more top down legalistic approach cannot capture. Taken together with documents illustrating the attitude of the state toward its citizens, it can provide, as it were, a three-dimensional portrait and in this case an appreciation for the yearning of at least one sensitive observer for a state whose relationship toward its citizens was quite different than that of Communist-era Yugoslavia, even in its most liberal phase.

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* Photo by Alf Thomas

** The cover of "The fortress", a novel by Mesa Selimovic, published by Northwestern University Press

*** Meša Selimović on the 5 convertible marks bank note (Bosnia-Herzegovina)

[1] It is not merely that the novel depicts the senseless cruelty of war rather than its glory and heroism, a topic of many novels since *War and Peace*. What marks Selimović's work as a 20th-century novel is his graphic depiction of the suffering of the civilian population that finds itself caught in the war zone.

[2] In his author's foreword, Selimović insisted that "*The Fortress* is every person, every society, every state, every ideology," a pronouncement that was clearly meant to deflect possible attacks on the novel as a critique of the Yugoslav state in particular. Of course, insofar as Yugoslavia was a reasonably typical modern state, Selimović's claim to universality is not wholly without foundation.

[3] Meša Selimović, *The Fortress*. trans. E.D. Goy and Jasna Levinger. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1999, 6. Further references to this novel will be made in the main text by page number

of this edition.

[4]The willingness of ordinary citizens to place a picture of Communist leaders in their shop windows would be identified by Vaclav Havel as the ultimate symbol of the dishonest and dishonorable pact between the Communists and the people in East European societies (see his essay “The Power of the Powerless”).

[5]Stories, usually incorporating elements of the grotesque, based around the inability of the modern bureaucratic state to deal with those who have, in a variety of ways, “returned from the dead” are quite common in the literature of Eastern Europe. Perhaps the most elaborate example is Iuri Tynianov’s “Lieutenant Kizhe.”

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