

FRAN MARKOWITZ**Sarajevo: A Bosnian Kaleidoscope**

Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010, 240 pp.

Living Inbetweenness in Sarajevo

“The Balkans have been ill served by discovery and invention. Balkanism and its subject are imprisoned in a field of discourse in which ‘Balkans’ is paired in opposition to ‘West’ and ‘Europe’, while ‘Balkanism’ is the dark other of ‘western civilization’...With the rediscovery of the east and orientalism as independent semantic values, the Balkans are left in Europe’s thrall, anti-civilization, alter-ego, the dark side within” (Todorova, 1994: 482).

Maria Todorova, in her paper *The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention* (1994) argues that although Balkans are inextricable from the geography of Europe, yet they were constructed in time as the “other” of Europe. In spite of the Anglo-Saxon travelers’ novel’s tradition and the German Romanticism’s fascination with the folklore and languages of the Balkan people, they have always been juxtaposed to the “Western Europe”. As well summarized by Rebecca West, in her legendary book (1941) *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, the Balkans are seen through the lens of the linear evolutionary thinking (mainly of the nineteenth century) and their perception/image one might say is to this day grounded on dichotomies like: “advanced/backward, rational/irrational, progressive/reactionary, urban/rural”.

What is mostly known about the Balkans, Bosnia or Sarajevo besides the stereotypical topics of backwardness, ethnic hatred and ethno-national conflicts? Sarajevo has repeatedly been identified as the Balkan emblematic microcosmos since it encapsulates the multiplicity of languages, cultures, religions, political legacies, ethnic groups,

and nations that are conflicting and competing with each other in the Balkans. The states of former Yugoslavia, which up to 1990 belonged to one federal state and were therefore part of the same political and economic entity, have gone by now their separate ways. Each republic/state muddled through challenges of both political and socio-economic restructuring, following also a violent conflict. As a consequence, the demise of former Yugoslavia involved complex reconfiguration of the social and political paradigm. The struggle to move to a multiparty system, the efforts to establish the democratic legitimacy, the major international interventions, the restructuring of civil society, the ethnic, cultural and religious challenges - are all issues of great theoretical and empirical concern to this day. This book not only captures the richness and diversity of Sarajevo, but by abandoning the typical condemnatory writing about the “Balkans ghosts”, it also brings to life its subjects, presenting thus the reader with a variety of personal accounts which aim to melt “the frozen image of the Balkans” to use Todorova’s words.

The book starts with the description of the urban architecture of Sarajevo. By depicting the richness of the cultural and historical legacies as enliven and engraved in the diverse architecture throughout the city, Markowitz moves at a snail’s pace from the macro-living to the micro-life, from the public realm to the private alcoves. But one should be aware of the fact that this is not a one-way move, it is neither a linear passage nor a spectrum of going back and forth between two end-points. In fact this is a “journey” as multi-way as the paths of the multicolored beads until their final position within the Bosnian kaleidoscope, showing thus the writer’s awareness of the interdependence between daily practices, cultural



legacies, collective memories and political processes. The author refuses to accept the hegemony of the ethnic cleansing. And in Markowitz's words: "Instead, it strives to illuminate the competing yet dialectically engaged stances of tolerance, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and hostility, ethnic exclusivity, nationalism, and their ever-changing results specific to the re-configuration of geographies, politics, and identities, that for lack of better names, we call postwar Sarajevo and post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina" (2010: 14).

The way I read it, this book is about the Balkan subject and his/her inbetweenness. This book sheds light on the changing conditions of Sarajevo which produce/shape the multi-layered realities, interpretations and identities of its people. Traditionally, both in academic research and politics, we are used to treating social reality as constituted by analytical categories, e. g. of ethnicity, nation, class or gender. As such, social groups are seen and see themselves as having a limited collective identity. This identity is exclusive, this identity sets boundaries: you are either "in" or "out". Due to the current conditions of the political contexts in the Balkans, which have been dictated by the international intervention, global-local interconnectivity has emerged with various political, economic, cultural and interpersonal consequences. In those new "liquid" social settings as Zygmunt Bauman would call them, a new kind of thinking is in need, in order to face the collapse in social cohesion caused by the fear of otherness.

This book has managed to capture this interdependence and the inbetweenness it constructs, by depicting the subjects that in their daily practices cross and disregard, blur and polish, resist and follow the myriad of boundaries and divides. To borrow Touraine's definition in his latest book *Thinking Differently*, the subject is the "individual's encounter with himself or herself, and the individual's self-consciousness. The subject's basis is the tension and union between the 'I' [je] that names and the 'me' [moi] that is named. Rather than accepting that the *moi* is constituted only through its insertion into social life, life at work, economic life or any other life, the subject speaks loudly of 'I and me' [*moi et je*]" (Touraine, 2009: 130).

Inbetweenness is the occurrence of "I and me" here and there, being this and that, is a double presence and double absence at the same time. And in the context of Sarajevo (and the Balkans for that matter) is a simultaneous multi presence and absence since the self is pulled in differ-

ent directions by norms, practices and beliefs that originate in different worlds. For Mead and Blumer, the self is process "contingent upon language, communications, role taking and interaction with others". Thus, the subject can be understood as being in-between views, values and conceptions that the individual has to negotiate daily. Inbetweenness means that the subject intentionally builds to him/herself a set of values, norms and practices from a pool of different cultural heritages, which are not necessarily consistent with each-other, consequently experiencing fragmentation and contradictions. In this context, I would like to refer shortly to three arguments that stand out in this text:

1. First, the constant passage between boundaries elucidates and blurs them at the same time since the subjects are very much aware of those ethnic, linguistic, cultural and geopolitical boundaries and their movement between them. And as Markowitz repeatedly points in her book, the negotiation process "of the ethnically marked and marking social actors" is always in relation to the representation and the political forces that emerge from the specific social context. While Markowitz establishes the basis of understanding the Sarajevan "habitus", her study ambiguously pursues the exploration of how does a subject choose and desire the negotiable multiple identities? More analytical clarity is in need when referring to those identities' negotiations as ranging between the decision to act and the mere reaction to the structures of powers and oppression.
2. Second, living inbetweenness is a constant, dynamic and never-ending process of choices and thus of identity-narration. Meaning that, this is a continuous and persistent process of negotiation that relentlessly fuels the pool of identities from which choose the people in Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It empowers the subject since it opens up various possibilities of interpretations, representations and belongings. Inbetweenness provides the subject with a source of resistance to the very nationalistic structures that try to erase him/her from the social maps. The daily negotiations of the identities go against the hegemonic project of their unification and reduction into the neat scheme of B-C-S, which aims to delete inbetweenness and to make it invisible. Vedran and Damir, the brothers born in Sarajevo, that have lived and studied in US, now working and living again

in Sarajevo, offer a valuable illustration in understanding this resistance to the categories imposed by the state:

“After hearing their parents identify as Muslim and Serb, I asked the twenty-five and twenty-seven-year-old brothers how they define themselves. They looked at me as if I had asked a totally idiotic question and did not answer. I followed up: ‘Don’t you have to choose a category like Serb, Croat, or Bosniac?’ ‘White’, answered the younger one, flashing a grin. ‘I just tell them I’m white.’ Klara and the boy’s parents laughed uproariously at this answer. ‘And they accept it?’ I asked, somewhat stunned. Everyone was laughing and ignoring my query, but I wanted to know: What about all the pressure to identify as Bosniac, Croat, or Serb? Where they are treating me the same way they deal with all those who ask, ‘but what are you really?’” (Markowitz, 2010: 100).

3. Third, living in inbetweenness constructs the symbolic “other” such as the different *Ostali* (Others) (Jews, Roma, etc) thus one might suggest that crafting the “otherness” is the twin-project of the simultaneous presence and absence. This process entails empowerment through various practices of inclusion and exclusion between the scheme of B-C-S-Ostali. Furthermore, in times of individualism such as ours, it presents the hidden danger of the collapse of collectivity. The author’s attempt to extract the contentious subjects of: Vesna, Jasna, Miroslav, Amar, Liljana, Greta, Jovan, Moric and more others from the lake of social muteness and invisibility, makes me reflect on the communication practices between those individuals and their consequences, since from my research in Kosovo it is clear that the social ties between sub-

jects hold the potential for a collective resistance and social change. This insight might considerably add to the understanding of the Sarajevan socio-political complexity.

The other side of the coin of “otherness” which emerges from Markowitz’s analysis is the recognition of the multiplicity of identities, and identification of ways to deal with the complexity of our presents. Here Giddens’ idea of reflexivity as discursive consciousness comes in handy. He claims that “in the context of the post-traditional order the self becomes a reflexive project” (Giddens, 1991: 32). Living in inbetweenness presents us with more opportunities to experience the ruptures of multiplicity and multiple boundaries of daily life, thus providing the individuals with greater possibilities to reflect on their construction, and on the importance of these ruptures to cultivating a critical thinking of our identity projects. In this note, I will conclude by quoting Castells’ advice from his book: *The Power of Identity*: “Our world, and our lives, are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity (...) And yet, this is our world, this is us, in our contradictory plurality, and this is what we have to understand, if necessarily to face it, and to overcome it. As for the meaning of this and us, please dare to read on” (Castells, 2004: 1, 4).

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