

If Reconciliation Is the Answer, Are We Asking the Right Questions?

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ABSTRACT This article critically examines the normative, liberal assumptions that most frequently underlie scholarly, activist, and policy calls for reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rather than measuring how reconciliation is progressing, I suggest we ask ourselves whose reconciliation is being desired here: by whom, for whom, and for what? Which important alternative questions remain unasked and which latent answers are ignored or downplayed in the process? Particular attention is paid to the ways in which liberal reconciliation discourse tends to depoliticize questions of justice.

Introduction

The concerns most frequently underlying scholarly, activist, and policy approaches to justice in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) presume a normative, liberal notion of inter-national reconciliation: “How to reconcile people in BiH?” or, “How is reconciliation in BiH advancing?” The urgency with which such concerns are formulated, and their visibility in domestic and outside public spheres, reflect programmatic and funding priorities of foreign intervention. Ever since I began ethnographic research in the post-Yugoslav states in 1996—first in Serbia, then in Croatia, and then in BiH, where most of my work has been conducted during the last decade—I have felt uncomfortable with these priorities, even if I have sometimes actively taken part in initiatives that could be classified as reconciliation work. It is not just that the ways in which reconciliation is promoted demand the downplaying of pain, anger and desire for retribution in ways I find hard to swallow, but I have always sensed that this approach also constitutes a particular problematic

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and depoliticizing liberal political project. Thus, while I sympathize with the sincere and noble intentions of many people who are working towards international reconciliation—and while I sometimes join them in their efforts—I have long felt uneasy with the long-term implications I discerned for the politics of justice in BiH and beyond.

As the words “felt” and “sensed” above indicate, my engagement with these questions remained on a largely unarticulated level. First, I cannot claim expertise on justice or reconciliation, and my ethnographic investigations—on antinationalism, on home-making and displacement, on remembering and forgetting after violence, on masculinity, on borders, and on statecraft—have never focussed explicitly on either. Neither can I properly claim to speak for people in the post-Yugoslav states, or even in BiH when it comes to questions of justice. In fact, I can state confidently that very few people in the region and very few of my research participants share my interest in the explicitly political dimension of justice, nor in my personal-political belief that a juster future would be served by active politicization and a reinvigoration of ideological debate. This brings me to the second reason why I have not articulated such concerns explicitly before: politics [*politika*], as we shall see, has an extremely bad name in the region and any association with it is likely to be experienced as the kiss of death for any activist effort towards a better future, including projects seeking to foster inter-national reconciliation. In such a context, perhaps an insistence on re-politicization would do more damage than good. In any case, the seething resentment any mention of politics in BiH elicits is such that one wonders if it is at all possible to salvage anything from the term after disentangling it from its connotation of a sleazy universe of cynical, corrupted and self-interested power games.

While I have never tackled justice as a central concern in my research or writings, my ethnographic studies have always touched upon questions of justice, partly precisely because of my commitment to foreground domestic and global political dimensions. In this article,¹ I attempt to systematize retrospectively some reflections on justice arising from that research, especially my work on experiences of home-making and return on both sides of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line in North-East BiH (2000–2001). I also try to learn from my activist engagements in dialogue projects, meetings and trainings in the post-Yugoslav “civil sector” and from my social interactions and exposure to the media as someone who spends much of his life—workwise and otherwise—in the BiH capital Sarajevo. Without denying the value and urgency of many efforts to foster “reconciliation,” my main objective is to draw attention to negative feedback effects they may entail and to open up questions of justice beyond their particular focus. So, rather than presenting conclusions drawn from a specific research project, I try to ask better and perhaps much more vexing questions with regard to justice in BiH. Rather than measuring the progress of reconciliation in BiH, I suggest we ask ourselves whose reconciliation is being desired here: by whom, for whom, and for what. This reformulation then leads me to discern a tentative route to a renewal of debates over the politics of justice. At the

core of my effort lies this provocative and hopefully productive question: if reconciliation is the answer, are we asking the right questions? Which important alternative questions remain unasked and which latent answers are ignored or downplayed in the process?

Defining the “Sides” of Reconciliation

If to reconcile means “to render no longer opposed” (Borneman, 2002, p. 281), it is important to point out that the currently dominant liberal approaches to reconciliation in BiH as well as elsewhere are usually normative. They start from the presupposition that reconciliation is by definition beneficial for all involved. Taking a step back implies asking why dissolving opposition is considered desirable. The beneficial character of reconciliation, then, is not accepted as self-evident. Instead, it requires argument and we should try to understand the basis on which people argue for it. Next, if and where it is considered desirable, the question is *which* opposition should be considered as the key one to be dissolved. If people argue for reconciliation in a certain context, if they work towards the dissolution of an opposition, this always implies a political exercise of defining the opposing “sides.” This means it can have rather diverse implications, depending on who advocates it and for what ends.

If we look at it this way, it is important to remind ourselves that reconciliation has actually been a major priority for post-Yugoslav nationalist elites since the late 1980s. Their focus was squarely on the *intra*-national level. Often aimed at dissolving oppositions between fellow-nationals associated with opposed ideologies in World War II, these efforts effectively amounted to programmes of national homogenization. They can be understood as attempts to erase antagonisms that exist within national groups. As is well-documented, all those *intra*-national reconciliation efforts have served to exacerbate *inter*-national relations—indeed, they became part of the 1990s wars.

After those wars *inter*-national reconciliation became a major preoccupation for the foreign intervention agencies in BiH, whose funding and support was important to its promotion. In their approach, the different sides that needed to be rendered no longer opposed were conceived of as *nations*. Notwithstanding the tendency of nationalist elites to use this matrix, and despite the noble intentions of many of those working for reconciliation, this reductionist definition of the sides in the war remains disputable. Its suggestion of symmetry fails to account for the fact that while two of the main sides explicitly proclaimed themselves, and exclusively functioned, as ethnonational (Serbian and Croatian) collectives, the third included ethnonational (Bosniak) dimensions, but also incorporative BiH ones.² Moreover, reducing the war in BiH to a simple three-way fight among Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats obscures the fact that the violence encompassed, for example, a scramble for resources between party political elites from within and from outside BiH, and an opportunity for looters and other businessmen.

It neglects the fact that the war was to a large extent the crystallisation of a conflict over state formation and citizenship—namely, over whether BiH should exist as a polity or not, and how its inhabitants should be represented institutionally. It clouds vast power differentials, diverging war aims and legitimacy claims of different orders (Bougarel, 1996). Unsurprisingly, as in so many other conflicts, political party elites sought to represent themselves as organically encompassing “their” respective undivided nations (although, as mentioned, not entirely symmetrically), and these efforts did have real effects. Studying such elite self-representations and their relative resonance amongst the population is important to understand the course of the violence, yet *reproducing* them by speaking simply of a “war between Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats” precludes such understanding: such a “groupist” (Brubaker, 2002) imposition of an exclusively national matrix on the war is itself a depoliticising intervention pretending to name neutrally existing categories.

This has implications for reconciliation discourse too. The predominantly national definition of the “sides” in liberal reconciliation discourse in BiH reinforces a version of history, both wartime and pre-war, that is itself nationalist (Jansen, 2003, 2005). Underplaying the complexities of belonging, including national belonging, in the region, it disambiguates history into discrete collective actors—nations—who fell out with each other in the 1990s and must now be ushered towards a renewal of harmonious neighbourly relations in a mosaic-like “national order of things” (Jansen, 2002; Malkki, 1995). National belonging is, and has long been, important to many people in BiH, but to accept such a reductionist definition of sides in an identitarian matrix would represent the ultimate crown on the nationalist hegemonizing projects of the 1990s.

When is an Encounter a Reconciliation, and for Whom?

During the first post-war decade, the ambitions of inter-national reconciliation efforts in BiH were modest by necessity. With the 1990s conflict, which had radically unmixed the population in terms of nationality, very real national boundaries had emerged even for those who had not previously considered them to be of determining significance. Indeed, people had come to be understood as nationals first, to a high degree and in many contexts, and the relationships between those of different nationalities now required navigation of socially-sanctioned segregation and often, former frontlines. Reconciliation efforts such as those promoted by the foreign intervention agencies in divided BiH thus usually simply attempted to bring about some degree of rapprochement between people of different nationalities. Reconciling *nations* (since that is how the sides were conceived) concretely required encounters between persons defined as *nationals*, but the significance of national divisions had intensified so much that this was not self-evident for most people in most parts of this now deeply segregated polity. Still, in one way or another even relatively shortly after the war, hundreds of thousands

of people in BiH engaged in some inter-national encounters, in everyday life and through initial steps towards return and repossession. Yet, did they see such interactions as moral acts in a reconciliation process?

The liberal and normative view dominant in most foreign scholarly and geopolitical-humanitarian discourses on BiH during the first post-war decade tended to consider inter-national encounters—the crossing of boundaries between presumably clearly demarcated groups—to be morally commendable acts. Far from rendering the different sides no longer opposed, most initiatives of inter-national reconciliation were thus aimed at merely allowing people to cross the boundaries between those “sides” and thereby rendering them slightly less actively opposed as nationals. Hence, reconciliation was framed in a mosaic model, which—like liberal multiculturalism—tended to solidify national-cultural dividing lines and to represent them as discrete at the expense of other differences and struggles. As we saw, the idea then, was to return the conflicting “sides” to their presumed pre-war status of coexisting “peoples.” In this framework, inter-national interactions were portrayed as more desirable than intra-national ones—and, as every non-governmental organization (NGO) worker in BiH knows, a project proposal that included beneficiaries with different nationalities was on average much more likely to attract foreign funding than one that did not.

There were, of course, rather obvious reasons for this, and it is not my intention here to criticise such funding prioritizations. What I aim to highlight is that inter-national encounters came to be seen as a vanguard for reconciliation in the foreign gaze. But what about the people engaging in them? Remembered mundane pre-war inter-national encounters—if they had been experienced as such at all—had normally not been self-consciously reconciliatory acts but practical dimensions of everyday life. This has implications for the post-war situation too, since the sides engaged in the violence cannot be simply nationally defined and for some people—predominantly in a few larger cities—post-war inter-national interaction was simply a continuation of everyday practice that had not disappeared during the 1990s, although it had been drastically reduced due to war-related population movements. For them, radical changes in context had led *others* to impose the national matrix onto life practices they still considered to be oblivious to it. For example, it was not uncommon for persons who before the war married someone who did not share their family’s national background to emphasise that their marriage had apparently *become* “mixed” during the 1990s. Indeed, as we shall see below, the focus on the special bridging value of inter-national encounters after the war in BiH glossed over the way in which other-than-national differences were sometimes more difficult to bridge (and, apparently, bridging them was considered less urgent anyway).

But even in other cases, where encounters did involve crossing former frontlines (for example, in initiatives for the return of displaced persons), were they necessarily experienced as geared toward reconciliation? I found that many people in BiH treated inter-national reconciliation first of all as a Western-imposed idea. Regardless of their particular positionings, even

many of those who argued in favour of reconciliation believed it should be preceded by apologies, punishment and compensation. Some, of course, rejected reconciliation altogether. Others incorporated it in an effort to avoid discussions of wartime responsibility. In such a context, can reconciliation be legitimized by invoking a higher goal such as BiH, Euro-Atlantic Integration, God or Peace (see Brudholm, 2006)? Should we not acknowledge instead that, from the perspective of those who would be reconciled, the desirability of reconciliation did not emerge as a fact but as an open question?

Importantly such different views should not be reduced simplistically to people's background in national "sides", but must be seen in terms of possible futures too. From my research it emerged in the first decade after the 1990s war that, the main preoccupations for most people in BiH were perhaps best summarized as justice and survival [*preživljavanje*]. Yet for many, including myself, justice is rather difficult to pin down, even when specifically related to the post-war situation in BiH. Justice may concern judiciary procedures leading to punishment, retribution, restitution and compensation, but it may also evoke much broader notions of utopian balance and fullness. Ultimately, and importantly, I suggest that to many people who lived through the war in BiH, justice would be a world, a life, a history, in which the war had not happened.

In any case, because justice was both hard to define and since most people considered its establishment out of their reach, everyday practice largely focused on securing an immediate future. Even people who explicitly agitated for justice often tended to formulate their demands in relatively concrete and locally-specific ways, far removed from the dizzy heights of reconciliation (e.g. Delpa, 2010; Helms, 2010). As I have argued elsewhere (Jansen, 2008, 2013), I have found that the object of hope for many ordinary people was a "normal life." Of course, past "normal lives" (a key reference point) had included inter-national coexistence, but with regard to hopes for the future this aspect was much less prominent. So, if people now associated with opposing national "sides" met, why would they define this as an example of a crossing of national boundaries in a mosaic that was good in and by itself? Why would they reinterpret previous interactions as such? Previously, life with people who were positioned differently with regard to nationality had been just one part of "normal life", and it was that normal life which featured as their main object of desire. After the war, insofar as crossing former frontlines might further the continuation or, more frequently, the re-establishment of some dimensions of "normal life" for themselves and their households, some were prepared to engage in such encounters. Reconciliation, then, seemed to appear on people's horizon if at all, not as a priority but as a side effect of a desire for reducing "abnormal" precariousness. Some embraced this potential, some rejected it, and most never felt called upon to acknowledge it, preoccupied as they were with what they considered the far more pressing concerns of re-establishing a degree of "normal life."

Which Socially Sanctioned Positionings Allow Mutual Recognition?

With such evocations of “normal life” as the common ground on which many cross-frontline encounters existed, how can people find common ground to engage with each other? I ask this not in a metaphysical way, but as a very practical question that I believe is relevant to any attempts to facilitate rapprochement between ordinary people. Reconciliation projects in the Abrahamic tradition (Derrida, 1999) are grounded in the assumption that the various sides share equal and inalienable humanity. They require that those who seek reconciliation mutually recognize each other as full and worthy human beings. As Derrida points out, this approach is rooted in the religious traditions that share Abraham as a key figure (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), in which all people are ultimately equal before God. Its impact, however, goes far beyond the religious domain. Early after the 1990s war in BiH, I found that such a universal humanistic framework underpinned much antinationalist activism and religious and non-religious efforts to restore some form of rapprochement and coexistence. It underpinned theoretical writings; it structured possible meetings, summer schools, and campaigns, and it ran through the expression with which post-war encounters across former frontlines were often justified on the most elementary level: we are all people!

Yet people do not engage with each other based on some abstract common humanity. Any concrete form of reconciliation, however we understand it, requires encounters on the ground between actual persons. And on that practical level, encounters across former frontlines, regardless of whether they are seen as reconciliatory efforts by those involved, necessarily rely on mutual recognition between persons of specific social positionings. This implies that we must expect stark differences between such encounters: for example, persons associated with the different sides of the war could meet as young daughters from urban middle-class families at a Sarajevo art exhibition, or as middle-aged, unemployed fathers who trade pirate CDs on the Arizona market in North BiH. As has been pointed out, gender and kinship are crucial here (Focaal, 2010; Helms, 2007). People establish some degree of mutual recognition not as unmarked human beings, but for example, as fathers who experience similar difficulties in taking responsibility for their families. Common humanity is thus not lived as an abstract principle, but it is given specific, socially-sanctioned (here: patriarchal) shapes in particular contexts.

This is not only relevant to actual encounters between persons but also on the more general level of people’s attitudes towards imagined others, and therefore, of broader discourses of reconciliation. Social positionings also channelled the ways in which people did or did not express some degree of empathy during the early post-war years, when the freshness of war suffering and related tensions made concrete encounters less likely for most. For example, during my research on both sides of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line in North-East BiH, many women expressed a degree of empathy for their counterparts associated with the enemy army. While retaining physical

distance, they established a degree of mutual recognition as mothers, pointing out that they understood the suffering of “their” mothers too. For men who had fought in the conflict, one possible post-war ground for mutual recognition could be a reconstruction of their war experience as lack of choice in extraordinary circumstances, where men, especially as fathers, were forced to take responsibility to protect their families (Bašić, 2004). In any case, we cannot expect people to simply meet as human being X and human being Y; they are always multiply positioned persons. Thus, from the perspective of reconciliation efforts, one may ask: which socially-sanctioned subject positions (in terms of gender, class, urban/rural divisions, etc.) allow people to engage in mutual recognition across former frontlines? And which ones are more likely than other ones to do so in a just manner?

Reconciliation, Restoration and Emancipation

The fact that mutual recognition requires individuals to be socially positioned, together with the power of the notion of “normal life”, provide a glimpse of the particular social order that such encounters presupposed. Men and women establishing mutual recognition through reference to patriarchal kinship thus may reinforce existing social patterns of inequality. From my observations, it emerges that the “shared presents” that Borneman (2002, p. 291) considers central to successful reconciliation, can often be rather closed, and display little tendency for transformation. I do not suggest that they were always conservative, nor that all reconciliation efforts must intrinsically be so, but, if a politics of justice is to be developed, it seems to me that this is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

While Borneman (2002) argues that these “shared presents” should acknowledge “the heterogeneity of life projects” and explore “new experiences of sociality” (p. 291), we should be open to the possibility that they more frequently reinforce existing inequalities in terms of gender, class, urban/rural differences, among others. While aiming to overcome war-related oppositions, they may actually strengthen other inequalities and divisions. Some studies of how this works in gendered terms are included in a special issue of the *Journal Focaal* (2010). Another example is the much-documented tendency amongst many people in post-Yugoslav cities to compare the way of life of their prewar fellow-citizens of different nationalities positively with the “primitivism” of their fellow-nationals who moved into the cities during and after the war. Here, an expression of respect for national Others (i.e. a reduction of national antagonism) is achieved through negative judgments of co-nationals from villages (i.e. a reinforcement of urban/rural antagonism).

Perhaps the conservative potential of reconciliation discourse is not so surprising. After all, in English at least, the very term *reconciliation* indicates a restorative movement, a reconstruction of a past situation. The term *pomirenje* in BiH too evokes peaceful acceptance rather than mobilization or action. Reconciliation projects in other parts of the world (such as Guatemala

or Cyprus), similarly have been found to confirm existing social patterns that crosscut the sides involved. The most famous example, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is often praised for its facilitation of a transition from Apartheid to a democratic South Africa without recourse to revenge, has been criticized for leaving the structures of socio-economic and gender inequality that underlay Apartheid relatively untouched (e.g. Feldman, 2002; Ross, 2003; Wilson, 2001).

This introduces a pressing question for emancipatory understandings of politics of justice: which social practices and relations of inequality are consolidated by particular definitions of sides to be reconciled? Sides can be constituted as claim-making parties in a struggle over material and other resources, and the way they are configured and legitimized in a particular set-up is an important dimension of justice with wide-ranging implications. Here I suggest a potentially productive route of scholarly investigation is indicated by the feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser (2007). In her work on the political philosophy of justice, spanning over two decades, Fraser traces particular intersections of, and tensions between, claims for recognition, for redistribution, and most recently, for representation. It seems to me that a fruitful encounter could be constructed between such writings and the study of post-war BiH, in a context in which the preoccupation with ethnonational identity privileges questions of recognition and representation to a large extent. The resulting relative absence of questions of redistribution from both domestic and foreign policy-making, public discourse, and scholarly work is, I believe, a particularly sharp indication of how the insistence on the identitarian matrix renders invisible other inequalities.

Interestingly, I have found in my research on BiH that questions and answers about justice do not always match in expected ways. To put it schematically, when asking questions focused on issues of recognition, one is likely to get answers that emphasise maldistribution as much as misrecognition. And, when asking about distribution, people are likely to launch into a litany that targets misrecognition as much as it does maldistribution. Both dimensions, then, are present and important in people's concerns. Yet, domestic and foreign dominant discourses strongly favour the voicing of recognition-related issues, and there is virtually no public register available that facilitates the reasoned articulation of concerns with maldistribution, let alone the manner in which they intersect with questions of recognition and representation. Here, angry and cynical anti-political dismissals tend to be as good as can be expected.

In this respect, I think, scholars undertaking empirical social scientific research in BiH may learn from developments and debates in the political philosophy of justice, and in return, their insights may contribute to the difficult task of articulating an emancipatory politics of justice in a world marked by globalizing, neoliberalizing trends.

Reconciliation, Politics and the Future

The generally short-lived and partial cross-frontline encounters I have observed in the first post-war decade in BiH relied not only on the consolidation of certain existing social patterns, but they also tended to display a relative absence of discussions of politics. For those concerned with reconciliation, this consensual silencing, in line with the liberal multiculturalist desire to flatten out any social antagonism that cannot be understood as “cultural” (Žižek, 1997), begs the question to what extent such meetings may be developed into less superficial bonds.

The examples mentioned earlier, of men and women finding a degree of mutual recognition in terms of fatherhood and motherhood, not only involve deeply gendered notions of common humanity, but both also rest on a representation of the war as a catastrophe that suddenly and violently overcame people. Ordinary people, in this view, were only pawns in a cynical struggle for power and wealth by politicians, who carry exclusive responsibility for the war. This perspective seemed overwhelmingly dominant in my observations, and it is of course supported by quite a lot of historical documentation. Steps towards mutual recognition based on such a shared view were perhaps more dependent on what was *not* said than on what was said. I have found that an important way to avoid controversial issues was to emphasise precisely the extraordinariness of wartime, contrasting it with the “normal life” one recalled from before the war. In actual encounters across former frontlines, matters of wartime responsibility, justice and a collective future were avoided, and mutual recognition was often established on a shared aversion of *politika*.

For most people in BiH, the word *politika* expresses an almost universal disgust with the corruption and cynical hunger for power of individual politicians (for an ethnographic discussion of how the term functions in everyday contexts in BiH, see e.g. Kolind, 2008). I do not claim that this is unique to BiH, nor, unfortunately, do I think that its depiction of the actual behaviour of many politicians is far off the mark as a diagnosis in this country or in many others. Yet what may be particular to BiH is the extreme difficulty of discerning any alternative conceptions of politics, let alone any attempts to reclaim political debate as something that transcends self-interested machinations. One could say that the figure of *politika* has absorbed politics in its entirety. This has serious implications for reconciliation efforts, and indeed for any other forms of transformatory action.

First, it hinders mobilization, as the visceral rejection of *politika* spills over into many other collective initiatives. There is widespread suspicion that many participants in the “civil sector,” including those engaged in efforts to foster reconciliation, are themselves irredeemably contaminated by *politika*. Unfortunately, the occasional emergence of evidence of self-interested collusions between major NGO players and leading politicians does little to convince people of the opposite. Other activists find themselves struggling to motivate people to engage in any social activity that goes beyond the realm

of their own family. No doubt this is difficult anywhere, but the levels of cynicism in BiH today appear to make it particularly challenging to persuade people to contribute to organized socio-political activity for a common good, however it is defined.

Second, in addition to distancing the speaker from immorality, greed, and lack of scruples, the blanket use of the term *politika* seems to imply something else too. It evokes some kind of Pandora's box containing knowledge, feelings, practices, and processes that are seen to be crucial to the suffering of the last two decades but that have to be boxed up in order to attain a sufficient degree of mutual recognition to even start talking across former frontlines. Since there is broad consensus amongst domestic and foreign actors that this box must remain closed at any price, one cannot address many issues that are, by general agreement, crucial to any understanding of the war as well as to any possible improvement. I believe that we must ask ourselves if this pattern does not represent a risk for many activities that work towards some form of rapprochement and reconciliation. *Politika* is blamed for the outbreak of war, for all the suffering it brought, for the fact that things are not getting any better and for the feeling that there are no signs that "normal life" is about to re-emerge. In most people's view, *politika* is represented as the source of all evil: it has caused everything that is wrong in BiH today. In response, many of the efforts to promote reconciliation—or at least some degree of rapprochement, coexistence, or reduction of tensions—rely on mutual recognition precisely through a shared aversion to *politika* and through an unspoken agreement to silence anything deemed political. While this represents a common distancing from the filthy machinations of *politicians*, it also entails a much more incisive and far-going process of *depoliticization*. Yet how can a situation that is widely seen to be caused by politics, be overcome or even improved without recourse to politics?

I suggest we can detect processes of depoliticization of two different orders. The first concerns the reach and form of administration over the territory of BiH. We could call this its anatomy of government. The current institutional arrangement, a foreign-supervised and—enforced labyrinth of nationally organized collective representation, is considered to be unsatisfactory by virtually everyone in BiH. In institutional terms, some would like to see more decentralization or separation (in the national key), whereas others would like to see the downgrading or dismantling of war-produced sub-polities (Entities and Cantons). This stalemate has characterized the existence of BiH since the 1995 signing of the US-brokered Dayton Agreement. Reconciliation initiatives tend to sweep such issues under the carpet as part of *politika*, leaving untouched glaring disagreements between people associated with different sides." As mentioned earlier, at the most basic level opposing sides in the war crystallized around the question of the very existence of a BiH polity and on the modalities of its citizenship regime. Wartime lives in contexts marked by their differential implementation structured people's contrasting experiences of that period and their views of the legitimacy of war aims and actions. Unlike the situation in South Africa, for example, there is no broad

agreement over the relevant polity unit in BiH reconciliation initiatives, and this complicates the raising of key questions of wartime responsibility, legitimacy, and the desired future anatomy of government in BiH.

This silencing is understandable: if a topic associated with the anatomy of government in BiH is addressed, it could result in heated disputes on wartime responsibility and legitimacy, and ultimately, deadlock along national or non-national lines (Jansen, 2007). So this may be counterproductive for activist purposes. Moreover, the anatomy of government gets plenty of airtime in the largely separate public spheres in BiH. Politicians regularly launch monologues about it, sometimes addressing opponents, but usually seeking legitimacy from amongst “their own.” As many analysts have pointed out, the ethnopolitical rhetoric that permeates BiH is largely existential: it represents questions of government as questions of national survival (Mujkić, 2007). Ideologically bare, such monologues are organized almost exclusively within the identitarian matrix, and in this configuration it is extremely difficult to develop an alternative political register for the articulation of questions of the anatomy of government. Yet if today, the legitimacy of BiH’s anatomy of government is still a matter of dispute, does not *this* division, rather than a “groupist” model of competing nations, form the key antagonism to be addressed by reconciliation efforts? If so, how can one even begin to think of how to render those sides no longer opposed?

This brings us to the second order of depoliticization that, in my view, bedevils reconciliation efforts. Authors like Borneman (2002), who see a remedy in rendering different sides no longer opposed, may interpret the “Pandora-boxing” of politics as a grassroots replication of Titoist top-down selective silencing of World War II memories, so often blamed for the outbreak of 1990s violence. More important than this possible similarity, in my view, is a radical difference. Yugoslav socialist reconstruction after World War II was an integral part of a revolutionary project of social transformation. Practical collective tasks of building a new society were legitimized, often through authoritarian means, with regard not to purity, tradition, and continuity (as in the current nationalist discourses), nor to individual enterprise, property, and liberal rights in a mosaic (as in the current foreign intervention), but to a common, qualitatively different future-to-be-built. This, of course, included a radical rethinking of the *stakes* of politics, and therefore of the ways in which sides were to be conceived of in the first place.

In this light, the most challenging questions, I believe, concern the imagination of a societal future *beyond* reconciliation across former frontlines. With understandings of politics reduced to the figure of *politika*, everyday conversations in BiH leave no place for a conception of politics as the collective development of a future-oriented societal project, as ideological debate, as vocation or as responsibility. What kind of future do reconciliation efforts project for society, not only in terms of the anatomy of government, but also of economic policy, social welfare, or sustainability, and so on? Even if there was consensus on the reach and form of the polity, how do they imagine freedom, equality and, above all, solidarity in the future society to

which reconciliation is supposed to contribute? I believe this is particularly important in current times, when certain neoliberalizing societal models are globally presented as if they need no justification, as if they are a natural order for which no alternatives exist. Reconciliation efforts often reproduce depoliticization through the consensual silencing of sensitive wartime issues and questions of the anatomy of government, through ritual confirmations of the importance of “normal life,” but also through a belief, in tune with neoliberalism, that the sphere of politics should be as small as possible. Does not the shared reluctance to address politics, through its reduction to *politika*, carry enormous risks? Namely, does it not leave the definition of the societal future in the hands of those who have no interest to work towards any change at all? This would be a pity, because if there is one point of broad agreement in the exasperated litanies of people across BiH beyond the attribution of blame to *politika*, it is the belief that things should not stay the way they are today. Such dissatisfaction concerns recognition, representation and redistribution, although the dominance of the identitarian matrix renders the latter largely invisible in the public spheres.

If dominant discourses of reconciliation assume that less politics will make the world more just, this resonates nicely both with current local public opinion in BiH and with the neoliberally-framed foreign intervention. Scholarly studies of BiH should take up the responsibility, I suggest, to ask questions that go beyond the framework set by such domestic and foreign policy priorities. When exploring which processes of social change can turn ceasefires into starting points for better futures, reconciliation may, of course play a role, but we should dare to go beyond questions that elicit reconciliation as the answer. We would do well to exploit responsibly the privilege of scholarly reflection to think provocatively against the tide and to recalibrate questions of the politics of justice in BiH and beyond.

Notes

- ¹ This text elaborates some questions developed in a short text published in Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian under the title, “Pet teških pitanja o pomirenju” (transl. A Semić & M Ostojić) in *Trauma i pomirenje*, an in-house publication of the Sarajevo-based *Trauma centar*, part of the NGO *Kruh Svetog Ante*.
- ² In addition to paramilitary units closely related to political parties in BiH, Croatia, and Serbia/Montenegro, three main armies fought in the war. HVO (Croatian Defence Council) was controlled by the Croatian nationalist HDZ and, to a large degree, by its mother party and army in Croatia. VRS (Army of *Republika Srpska*) was controlled by the Serbian nationalist SDS and, to a large degree, by its mentors in the government of Serbia (or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and its army (the main inheritor of the Yugoslav People’s Army). The stated war aims of HDZ and SDS, which had gained large aggregate majorities of the vote amongst “their” respective nationals in 1990, were to defend “the Croats” and “the Serbs” from each other and, increasingly over time, from the consolidation of the Republic of BiH (RBiH), in which those who declared Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) nationality in the 1991 census would form a relative majority. They established military control over large territories, “cleansed” their populations and sought adhesion to their “mother states.” Yet a minority of people who they sought to interpellate as Croats or Serbs actually favoured RBiH sovereignty,

which had been supported by 62.68% of the electorate in a 1992 referendum. These people continued to live in territories controlled by ARBiH (Army of the Republic of BiH). Some fought in that army and others occupied positions of responsibility in RBiH institutions. Over time, however, ARBiH's struggle to defend RBiH increasingly came to imply a defence of Bosniaks. This was a result of population movements, of the military strategies of their opponents which caused disproportional numbers of victims, especially civilian ones, amongst Bosniaks, and of increasing control by the Bosniak nationalist party SDA. Still, against a three-way symmetrical picture, the rhetoric and practice of SDA and ARBiH always remained ambiguous, including Bosniak ethnonationalism and BiH inclusivism. Note also that North-West BiH saw heavy fighting between ARBiH and a separate Bosniak-dominated army controlled by a local political-economic patron, formerly a top figure in SDA, and that elsewhere too alliances and factions emerged on the local level that blurred a straightforward national definition of "sides."

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