



BALKAN PREDICAMENTS

Ethnicity, violence and place

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Belonging is conditioned by social and psychological concreteness: it is rooted in place, familiarity, sensual experience, human interaction and local knowledge. Inclusive identities resulting from a sharing of places are obvious in situations of crisis. However, they are always latently present, in war as in peace, in diasporic surroundings as well as among those who stayed behind, in different epochs and political systems. Research into war-related issues in Croatia and migration-related issues in Sweden may appear to be dealing with very different matters. Exploring the meanings of place in the contexts of military aggression and diasporic identifications, however, led me to handle ethnicity with great care. Both fields of interest helped me to understand the importance of taking the places in which people's positioning and ethnicity-related practices are situated into careful consideration. In scholarly analyses, as well as in a number of political and media contexts, the notion of the Balkans has been predominantly connected to the notion of ethnicity. It could be that, focused on the Balkans, theoretical considerations of ethnicity, violence and place have relevance for those interested in Communication for Development, particularly those who either plan to do their research in the region, or relate it to the region. Even if not directly dealing with those parts of the Balkans entangled in the wars of the 1990s, they will probably feel the need to challenge the still dominant stereotypes of the Balkan Others, for which the unruly and often fiercely nationalist character of ethnic mobilisation is central. Regardless of which definition of the Balkans is accepted, sweeping generalisations about Balkan predicaments seldom facilitate an understanding of the differences and the complexities as perceived and experienced by those people whose lives are implied. My plea is for research that transforms the notion of the Balkans through experience-related contents that reach beyond the political and cultural constructions that evoke orientalisating attitudes. As an ethnologist, I see both the strength of and the necessity for research based on ethnographic insights.

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On reading an “introduction to the theories and cases of violent conflicts” published by Routledge in 2004 (Conteh-Morgan 2004), I was particularly provoked by the sentence stating that the “post-Cold War era is fraught with the disruption of economic activity and societal security in many states (...) *because of* intense and protracted ethnopolitical conflicts” (ibid.: 193; italics added).

The author, an American professor of international studies, mentions “political, socioeconomic, and other sources of conflict between groups that manifest themselves along ethnic or identity lines”, but he devotes attention to “the exclusivist character of ethnicity” as “a powerful mobilizing symbol” (ibid.: 194). As his ultimate goal is the recognition of conditions for the outbreak of “ethnic wars” (ibid.: 200) – the potential “zones of turmoil” (ibid.: 197) – he focuses on ethnocommunal groups defined “by the shared perception that the defining traits, whatever they are, make the group exclusive” (ibid.: 195).

Although it is presented as a comprehensive overview of theorizing about collective violence in the social sciences, *including anthropology*, no anthropological or ethnological references engaging in the discussion of, e.g. the “post-Cold War ethnic conflict” in Yugoslavia (ibid.: 208-212), are quoted in the book. In using the phrase of the “legacy of centuries of interethnic violence and bloodletting”, the author is offering one more in a row of recurrent invocations of the ethnic hatred-paradigm, in which cause is equated with consequence.

No mention is made of a consolidation of ethnic identity *because of violence*. There is no regard for the processes which cannot be theoretically exhausted by either essentialist or constructivist explanations, since they are not defined by common origin, be it “primordial” or “discovered”, but by *common experiences shared in a particular place*. I believe that an interest in such processes is not only important, but necessary to an understanding of the war-related identity-formations in situ, from below.

Ethnicity may indeed be a “powerful mobilizing symbol” for people caught up in violent conflicts. However, it can also blur the vision of those trying to understand what is happening in the places with – as the Routledge author outlines – the “legacy of bloodletting” and in the situations when violence defines the context of identification. Many war commentators and compilers of “cases of violent conflict” have been more interested in media-promoted propaganda discourses than in life behind the symbols, in the ways people think and act beyond the official war-dichotomies and

in weapons as the “missing link” between discourse and dying (see Povrzanovic 2000).

As far as Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina are concerned, the work undertaken by the anthropologists Ivana Macek (2000), Torsten Kolind (2004), Tone Bringa (1993, 2001) and some of my colleagues at the Zagreb Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research (see the bibliography in Povrzanovic Frykman 2003), shows how ethnicity *happens* in different contexts, what its place-specific micro-dynamics are, and, importantly, the situations in which ethnicity becomes irrelevant. These scholars have revealed surprising gaps and clashes between the expected ethno-nationalism and the ways in which some war victims conceptualise and value ethnicity – their own and that of others.

ETHNICITY AND PLACE

As the war-related ethnographic examples informing this article are available elsewhere (Povrzanovic 1997, Povrzanovic Frykman 2002a), I will limit myself to pointing to the relations between ethnicity, place and group that provide a theoretical link to the central concerns in my current migration-related research.

While ethnicity paradigms concern boundary formation, social identity, the cultural contents of group identities and processes of disadvantage and exclusion, they also imply the danger of homogenising ethnic groups. In addition, in establishing realms of observation and analysis constructed by the researcher, they may impose group relations on people who only have something in common at the ascription level.

It does not really make sense to *presume* that people perceive themselves as part of a group (see Turner 2000). Instead, it makes more sense to ask how, why, where and for whom groups are constituted as significant, and what practices this implies.

The philosopher Edward S. Casey's claims that “however oblivious to place we may be in our thought and theory, and however much we may prefer to think of what happens in a place rather than of the place itself, we are tied to place undetachably and without reprieve” (Casey 1993: xiii). This might go without saying in the analyses of physical threat and destruction, but it does not only apply to the material aspects of places. A place can be defined as a set of social relations which interact at a particular location

(see Massey 1994). Since social relations are dynamic and changing, the identities of places are unfixed. The identity of any place is open to contestation. However, even in a discussion of diasporic positionings in the context of new technologies of communication that might engage different localities at the same time, it is worthwhile examining the power of the place “to direct and stabilise us, to memorialise and identify us, to tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are* (as well as where we are not)” (Casey 1993: xv; italics in the original).

If ethnicity “refers to the sense of difference and the image presented to the outsider that may be either repressed or elaborated” (Okely 1996: 60), it is also relevant to ask how people belong to places in ethnic terms. Who belongs, when and why? How do places belong to people? Which places belong to whom –when, why and how? In which circumstances does *being there* –sharing a place– qualify for inclusion in a category of “us”?

VIOLENCE AND PLACE

Violence intensifies the relationship between people and places and also provokes a pronounced feeling of self being fused with the sense of place. This is neither about the primordial nor the constructivist concepts of ethnic and national belonging. It is about a very different level of identification; one that is situated in *physical places* and *relying on practices*. The uniqueness of the place, based primarily on the social value it has for people, becomes visible and reflected upon. This is why war memories of shelters, food, water and hygiene, of helping others, of humiliation and resistance and so on, are always communicated in relation to place, in relation to what people did, how they behaved in significant places and in relation to the changed or re-discovered meanings of the familiar physical surroundings (see Povrzanovic Frykman 2002a).

In the course of my research, I discovered that the tendency to situate one's own identity in spatial terms was significantly intensified as a result of people's lived encounters of war-violence. People became aware of the importance of their physical position within, and physical dependency on, the surrounding landscape and urban structure. When talking about non-mediated experiences of the place, I therefore talk about *bodily experiences of the material world* in which places are not merely positions in space, but “concrete and at one with action and thought” (Casey 1993: xiii). In the experiential circumstances defined by violence, a pronounced feeling of belonging to the place is observed; something that seems to become people's main emotional concern, next to their concern

for survival.

These *place-related aspects of identities* alter as well as constitute the collective, for which ethnic categorisations and ethnic affiliations may neither be central nor relevant. The “classic” example concerns the difficulties in re-establishing prewar realms of community between people who stay behind in war zones and those who return from refuge – even among family members. Or, as an old peasant woman expressed it: “In war, everyone is ours”. She referred to it having felt like a family with all the people staying in the Dubrovnik region during the 1991 military attacks and siege (see Povrzanovic 1997).

In a war so often explained as an “ethnic conflict”, the first civilian killed in Dubrovnik was not a Croat, but a Serb. The shrapnel flew into his apartment, in his town, which he did not consider leaving for his ethnic affiliation. Like so many others, a young man in another Croatian town, Šibenik, wanted to “do something for his town” that was under attack. As the roof of the famous renaissance cathedral had been damaged by shelling and was now leaking, he used his alpinist competence and equipment to climb the roof and cover the holes. He was an ethnic Albanian, living there –in *his* town.

When people are shot at because of their ethnicity, it goes without saying that ethnicity gains in importance, both as an imposed and as a chosen (“reactive”) aspect of identity. Yet, ethnicity might also cease to matter when the shared lived experience of violence (or of any catastrophe) forms the basis of a feeling of belonging to a place, and of perceptions of a place as belonging to the people inhabiting it.

LABOUR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Between 1991 and 1993, more than 5 million citizens of the former Yugoslavia became refugees or internally displaced persons. Some 700,000 of them went to live in different parts of Western Europe (Fassmann and Münz 1995: 476). Around 74,000 people came to Sweden – Bosnian Croats and some Croats from Croatia among them. Most were granted Swedish citizenship after having spent five years in the country. They came in contact with some of the 25,000 Croats who had come to Sweden three or four decades earlier, mostly as labour migrants.

Research on their meetings in Sweden revealed positions of “old”, “immigrant” Croats that ranged from lack of interest, to silent disapproval and open antipathy and envy towards the refugees, e.g. for their “easy” entry into Sweden, or for their better education (see Povrzanovic Frykman 2001). That sometimes resulted in disputes and accusations about not staying behind, even among the relatives. On the other hand, a young refugee woman who told me that “no one hates us like our own people”, pretended not to see an older woman on the bus that she recognised from their time in a refugee camp. The older woman was a peasant, while the younger one came from a middle-class background and had struggled for her place in Sweden by means of education.

Such meetings have an “experimental” quality (Povrzanovic Frykman 2005) about them in that they reveal how gender, age, class and education, as well as the experience of life in different places, organise the perception of “us”. In questioning ethnic belonging as a going-without-saying or even the most important identity-defining category, these subtle aspects of intra-ethnic meetings facilitate access to the micro-levels of identity-formation processes. They indicate differences between people of the same ethnic affiliation who have diverse (long or short-term labour migrancy, exile-based or education-, generation- and gender-dependent) diasporic experiences and diverse strategies of identification (for the notion of *diasporic*, see Povrzanovic Frykman 2004).

Lives lived in different states, in different political systems, and localities in which their ethnicity was relevant in different ways, provide the main differentiations between Croatian labour migrants and Croatian refugees in Sweden. Their meetings reveal boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that make the limits of *ethnic* explanations of group making clear (for perceptions of “the Balkans within” in relation to the Croats coming from Bosnia, and the rejection of any connection to the latter part of the emotionally loaded dichotomy “Europe” vs. “the Balkans”, see Povrzanovic Frykman 2002b).

SHARING PLACES BEYOND ETHNICITY

Ethnicity, in diasporic contexts, is marked by great variations as to *if and how* people are perceived as members of immigrant “ethnic groups” from the majority position(s). It is also marked by a variation among the immigrants – of different as well as the same ethnic affiliation – in understanding, conceptualising and using ethnicity for both personal and broader political purposes of proving belonging (in the country of origin and in the country of immigration). Finally, there is also a variety of

mutual perceptions of difference within ethnicity, by co-ethnic individuals who form different (institutionalised as well as informal) groups in the same place. Some of these groups have no contact whatsoever, many overlap and maintain friendly relations, while others are in open dispute and opposition.

Ethnicity, then, can neither be seen as the only nor sufficient proof of (or reason for) the existence of the respective *ethnic communities*. Even if overarching ethnic values and interests are observable among immigrants of the same ethnic affiliation, the communitarian implications of the term *ethnic community* seem rather inadequate. The concept of *diaspora* can alternatively be considered as a framework for the study of specific processes of group and community formation. It therefore makes sense to talk about *diasporic communities* rather than *ethnic communities* – but only if they can be described and assessed in terms of group consciousness and engagement and communal activities and places in which they unfold (see Povrzanovic Frykman 2004). The analytical benefit lies in a clear distinction between the symbolic, ethnic identity of “being” and a diasporic identity requiring involvement. While ethnicity may be a precondition for diasporic social formations, discourses, self-perceptions and actions, diasporic communities always have educational, generational, political, as well as place-related, aspects.

Place matters in two ways. The three or more decades of life in Sweden make people perceive themselves as different from those who have just arrived. Furthermore, the diasporic *physical meeting places*, with all the memorabilia of common trips, festivities and football matches, talk about the shared experiences of *doing things together*. They are done not only “in Sweden”, but in a particular town, at a specific address, together with friends socialising in “one’s own” club and not in some other. There, just as in the very different circumstances of war and siege, belonging is rooted in place, familiarity, sensual experience, human interaction and local knowledge. It is conditioned by social and psychological concreteness – people, landscapes, sensory experiences and mental mappings of an immediate and familiar kind (see Hedetoft 2004).

Last but not least, it is important to keep in mind that many labour migrants and refugees (statistically members of an “ethnic minority group”) decide to abstain from diasporic contacts and activities altogether. People who do *not* take part in any ethnicity-related collective activities in a certain town or country may (and often do) form the majority when compared to those shaping and engaging in those activities. Yet, they may also remain invisible in research that is concerned first and foremost with ethnicity.

Why not let such people's identity preferences redefine research that has so far presumed conceptual ties between immigrants and ethnicity? (This becomes particularly pertinent if the so-called second generation is put to the fore.) I would strongly support the research proposals that avoid ethnicity as their keyword, and instead define the *shared places of everyday interactions* as their focus.

Even in the midst of a war-induced relevance of belonging to one of the three major ethnic groups in Sarajevo, a "fourth nation" was recognized, consisting of people who experienced and valued the multiethnic life in Bosnia, identified themselves as *Sarajevans*, and did not allow ethnic animosity to take over their personal social relations (see Macek 2000: 230-235). It is plausible to presume similar reasoning in less troubled places as well, with a warning against the tendency of inventing groups and communities for the purpose of research.

Inclusive identities resulting from a sharing of places may become more obvious in situations of crisis. They are always latently present, however, in war as in peace, in diasporic surroundings as well as among those who stayed behind, in different epochs and political systems, within or on the other side of the Schengen borders... Exploring contemporary modes of sharing places beyond ethnicity in some Balkan locale, in the context of transnational connections on the one hand and intra-ethnic differentiations on the other, might contribute to a decoupling of the notions of ethnicity and the Balkans.

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