

A Review of Larisa Jasarevic's – *Three Lights on the Queen's Face: On Mixing, Muddle, and Mêlée*

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At the start of this article “mixture,” “mêlée,” and “muddle” are invoked as possible terms by which to capture the dynamics of national, ethnic, religious, political, and family bonds and boundary negotiation processes in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina. This “mixture,” “mêlée,” and/or “muddle” has been hard to explain to the external audiences, which most often expect in the modernist Western-centric way that citizenship is the same as nationality, which corresponds to the ethnic identity of the majority in a state, to put it very simplified. Anthropologists and other scholars of Bosnia and Herzegovina who are closely involved with the region – for example Hayden, Bringa, Sorabji, Bougarel, Jansen, Stefansson, Markowitz, and myself – have tried to describe this phenomenon in different ways. Larisa Jasarevic's use of “muddle” to capture something essential about this complexity and the necessity of constructive dealing with similarities and differences between ourselves and our family, neighbors and friends, as well as of imagined co-nationals, is a good way of conceptually framing it, but even more so of communicating something that seems to resist communication within the Western (academic) discourse.

Through the vivid ethnography that follows, Jasarevic's “muddle” is expanded even further, as it seems to encompass the totality of everyday life in its political, economic, social, and spiritual aspects. The collective and the individual, the surface and the depth, the ethnographer and the interlocutor, the powerful and the powerless – all are caught up in this state and process characterized by the contradictions, uncertainties, brutally realistic pragmatism, sense of disorientation and helplessness, as well as defiance, obstinacy, and humor, so characteristic of Bosnians, our interlocutors, but in Jasarevic's case also of the anthropologist herself. During the war in Sarajevo, I witnessed how categorization and understanding are “muddled,” how ontology and epistemology are challenged, and that they should be left that way, if we are to embark on this new shift in ethnographic writing and knowledge. In *Sarajevo Under Siege* (2009), I proposed two dynamic models in order to capture this “muddle”: the process of “negotiating normality” and the blend of three contradictory but coexistent positions towards the destruction of war (“civilian,” “soldier,” and “deserter”). The “muddle,” however, is by its nature not possible to capture, and thus, probably, Jasarevic chose to portray it in more evocative terms.

After setting the nationally, ethnically, religiously, and politically “muddled” terrain, Jasarevic takes us to the existentially most important sphere in life, namely health. Here we enter the world of healers who are often blended in the post-modern medial representations with the fortune tellers and fortune seekers of the grand TV shows. The borders are blurred, but what is obvious is that people need this - the audiences are huge. More importantly and outside of medial spot-lights, we meet Nerka, the eccentric healer in one of Bosnia's back-yards. And here, through the ethnography of her practice, we gradually start to understand the REAL problems that Bosnians need to face and deal with these days: economic hardships, and the “muddled” ethno-religious-national identities and war traumas that, although not a priority, are nevertheless embodied and need to be also cognitively, socially, politically, and morally integrated by each and every person in the waiting room (e.g. the meeting of the “real Chetnik” and the ex-prisoner of Chetniks on p.1, or the treatment of Dragica on p.9).

But when words and cognition cannot deal with the world around us and our life-reality, the body takes over on its own. (This is no place to go into specifics of psycho-somatization, suffice it only to say that our bodies react in accordance to our earliest – pre-symbolic – memories and experiences of relating to others in our immediate surroundings. The silences are usually pregnant with body-language. Even in the cases of the unspeakable, such as experiences of Holocaust, the body-language is present, if nothing else, as a frozen absence of affects that is more telling than a thousand words.) Some of Nerka's interventions– for example disclosing how imams and priests economically exploit their parishioners, in order to heal the little boy Nebojša (p.8) – and her reported good results, made me think that through addressing the economic and socio-political hardships, tensions, contradictions, and uncertainties, Nerka deals with the psychic strains of her clients that are caught up in their bodies because they have no socially acceptable and politically unambiguous ways of putting them into words. (This, again, in my mind, is closely connected to the experiences of a war that was – at least on the surface – led in the name of national interests and security.)

If I am to translate Nerka's healing practices into a more socio-political analysis, there are three aspects that are "at the stake":

Firstly, the population is poor. The economic crisis of the 1980s which, it can be said, was the beginning of the end of the former Yugoslavia, went over to the destruction and criminal economy of the war. This was succeeded by a continued crisis in neoliberal free-market capitalism, which rocketed the economic-standard distance between the richest and the poor, and sustains the 40-50% unemployment up to this date.

Secondly, the churches (the priest in the ethnography of Nerka's healing) have been used by nationalistic politicians to mobilize deep loyalties and sensitivities of large segments of the population; and the churches have in their turn used nationalistic politicians to get back the (political-economic) power that was taken from them in the Socialist Yugoslavia.

Thirdly, the "muddle" of the Bosnian population – that provocative national blend that still exists and that Jasarevic so nicely captures through Nerka's words – is the reason why the country cannot be divided into different political territories, but rather needs to deal with both similarities and differences in its population, the way that has not been achieved in the Dayton Peace Agreement and the 17 following years of its implementation. One of the reasons for this failure is the constitutional cementing of the national quota, without simultaneously providing for a constitutional structure that promotes the unifying forces. One way of doing the latter could be through formalizing a common Bosnian national identity, such as existed in former Yugoslavia for Yugoslavs, and such as some of its citizens promote today. But, this would only be a politically symbolic expression of something more profound: "The Queen's face is the iconic surface of intimate contact that preserves distance and gives rise to the harsh play of difference, which just could be love," to put it in Jasarevic's words (p.11). As a metaphor of Bosnia, the social and political (sur)face must provide for both contact and distance; it needs to recognize the force of solidarity of its citizens and at the same time allow for their free negotiation of all their differences, not only the national ones.

In her article, Larisa Jasarevic exemplifies the power of good ethnography. Through the narrative of Nerka's healing practices, the complexity of contemporary life in Bosnia and Herzegovina comes alive in an immediate way that escaped so many earlier expert analyses.