

COMMENTS ON LARISA JASAREVIC, “THREE LIGHTS ON THE QUEEN’S FACE”

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These short comments cannot do justice to Larisa Jasarevic’s evocative rendering of the ways in which the post-conflict politics of Bosnia are translated into the healing practices of “Queen” Nerka. Because of her rich account, I strongly sympathize with Jasarevic’s reluctance to reduce Nerka’s dealings with Bosnian religious and ethnic identities to an analysis that, while trying to exorcise ethnicities, in fact reinstates them. She employs Jean-Luc Nancy’s eulogy for *melée* to critically question the “mixing” of ethnic and religious identity going on in Bosnia today – suspecting that the discourse of “mixing”, once more, reaffirms these identities as being the origins of the “mix”. Yet Nancy’s *melée*, which is meant to avoid the frenzy of identification, does not do justice to Nerka’s provocative and frenzied mixing of religions and ethnicities. If I understand her rightly, Jasarevic approves of Nerka’s attempt to stay on the surface (or “skin”) of identities because it refuses *any* withdrawal into “deeper” ethnic or religious essences – which, in the history of Bosnia, all turned out to be lethal.

I want to question, however, the implicit assumption that a philosopher like Nancy has something to contribute to this debate, and the equally implicit suggestion that anthropological theory on magic and healing has little to say about it. Jasarevic renders Nancy as saying that “Melée is the originary and necessary condition of life”. That is, I think, plain nonsense from an anthropological point of view. In modern societies at least, and in most other societies I know of, origin and necessity are two of the main categories of purity and authenticity, and however imaginary they are, these imaginations form some of the main anchors of all people’s everyday lives. In a modern society like Bosnia, two historical sources of purification seem, at least to a layman like me, to stand out: a history of modernist purification under the Yugoslavian regime, which had a strong emphasis on internationalism and universalist rationality as exemplified by Tito’s central position among the non-aligned nations; and a much more violent and notorious “post-modern” emphasis on ethnic purification in the Balkan civil wars. While the essay pays much attention to the aftermath of the latter, I find the absence of the former dimension puzzling.

Both Nerka and her clients seem to refer to a universalism outside the grasp of ethnic or religious particularities; this is evident in Nerka’s use of biomedical diagnostic categories and references to medical technology, as well as in her clients’ stress that Nerka’s ‘power’ is different from that of sorcerers and fortune tellers. This, to me, raises the question how modern Nerka’s practices are. In the introduction to *Magic and Modernity* (2003) I have argued that, in modern societies, magic (or sorcery, or alternative healing) is primarily regarded as an antithesis to modernity – that is, it provides a form of identification that allows modern people to portray themselves as modern. Yet at the same time, modern thinking reinvents magic in its own image, by making it universal, individual, and psychotherapeutic (we call much of this ‘New Age’, whether believers like it or not). A typically modern attitude to magical (or alternative healing) practices is, therefore, to both deny and affirm it (sometimes, but not usually, even in the same terms). Such reasoning often takes a gnostic experiential form: “I don’t believe in any (magical or religious) thing; but *this* thing *works!*” I would like to know how much of Nerka’s clientele affirm a similar attitude: it is decidedly modern.

Here is where classical anthropological theory may come in: Mauss argued for the central role of the “act of prestidigitation” (when the healer conjures “bad substance” out of the patient’s body); likewise, Malinowski stressed the magical act as a quasi-scientific experiment or experience that resonated with childhood memories of uttering a sound and getting satisfaction in response. Michael Taussig, in an essay cited by Jasarevic, argued that when we focus on the magical act, even the skeptic doing it (in this case, Boas’s key informant George Hunt) can be convinced of the efficacy of magic by its results – even when the skeptic knows that what his audience experiences as revelation is, in fact, based on a trick of concealment. Evans-Pritchard’s classic account of the unmasking of Azande “witch-doctors” through his research assistant Kamanga – who reverted to belief after a period of doubt – is another example of this.

The history of the anthropology of magic, therefore, provides us with two important hypotheses: the first says that no magic or sorcery is possible without an *alternation* of trust and fraud, or faith and skepticism (or, putting it in more modern terms, of secularism and sacrality). Nerka clearly plays with these alternations. The second says that *any* type of magic or alternative healing works by juxtaposing multiple identities – if only the identity of the believer and the skeptic, but usually more: as Nerka’s cases show, we deal with both modernist universalism (biomedicine), ethnic essentialism in the Bosnian context, and the individual problem of the patient, all mediated by the unique personality of Nerka – at least four different possible subject positions. So why do we need Nancy expostulating on what is already demonstrated in almost any anthropological account of magic (or ritual: think of Van Gennep’s argument about rites of passage)?

In my perspective, the ethnographic account of Nerka stands out by her emphasis on her skin (the “three lights” of Bosnian religion on her face, as well as the “heart-shaped mark” that emerged on her cheek recently) and her practice of “absolute giving” – a gift of healing without reciprocity, denying both monetary as well as affective exchanges. Jasarevic’s account marks them as two refusals that seem to be related: a refusal to acknowledge “depth” beyond the skin (ethnic being, biomedical truth, individual essence – but in different measures), and a refusal to acknowledge reciprocity (both modern, or alienable by money, as well as non-modern, alienable by personal obligation – Mauss again). Isn’t Nerka’s total negation of both modern exchange values (in her scorn of monetary exchange) as well as postmodern ethnic values a logical consequence of the historical predicament of Bosnia, of an experience of alienation from both modern and postmodern ethnic essentializations? Put differently, is a “work of reluctance” based on Nancy sufficient for analysis, if that means it pulls the punches of the powerful potential of classical anthropology for the modern present?