

What is a nationalist? Some Thoughts on the Question from Bosnia-Herzegovina

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This short piece offers an ethnographic analysis of political dynamics in a small, divided town in central Bosnia¹, while also reflecting on some recurrent assumptions about the nature of nationalist politics and belonging in the Balkans. When it comes to this country, researchers and political reformists face a serious conundrum: despite 16 years of internationally sponsored reconciliation and rebuilding purportedly aimed at creating a unified state, the country's voters continue to give their preference to rival nationalist parties. Subsequently, many analyses suggest that Bosnian Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks (Muslims) remain convinced of the saliency of nationalism, its categories and the forms of political organization it offers. The conclusion that seems to follow is that because the majority of country's citizens choose nationalists as their "legitimate" representatives, they are themselves nationalists. Even some anthropologists, such as Hayden (2007), argue that electoral numbers in the region reflect the "true" native's point of view—that of a nationalist—which may make us uncomfortable but will also give access to some kind of a "real" that must be a starting point for both analysis and political intervention. On the other hand, international "humanitarians" and liberal reformists in Bosnia will make abundant use of the same conundrum to insist that nationalism is a form of false consciousness that can be eradicated through education, increase in political literacy, and confrontation with cold, hard facts (about corruption, inefficiency, poverty, etc.)

I want to complicate this view of nationalism as a "matter of conviction" by narrating the story of Zlata², a young woman in town who was rumored, despite her repeated rebuttals, to be a member of a nationalist party. In the course of this move, I turn towards the processes whereby people come to enact, reproduce and make real nationalist frameworks irrespective of their values or intentions. In my analysis, the very figure of the nationalist becomes a theoretical, ethical and political problem rather than an empirical reality.³

One snowy February morning in 2009, after seesawing on a small brown bus for over a half an hour, I made my way to a village adjacent to the Bosnian town of Jajce where I had been living since early fall. I journeyed up the hill and through the thick snow to meet my new friend and informant, Zlata, a land surveyor in her mid-twenties, who was working in the field. At that time, Zlata was an employee of the local government agency; on this particular day, upon learning I had not spent much time in the villages, she had invited me to tag along while she was doing some inspections. On the way back to the town in the municipal vehicle, she began telling me how fortunate she felt to get this job after returning to her hometown with a college degree earned in the capital city. She proudly recounted to me that at the time of her applying for the position, she was the only candidate with the degree specified in the job announcement. This unique convergence of circumstance helped her secure a coveted government job that provided security and a guaranteed paycheck not many of her neighbors could boast in the declining town economy.

My contact with Zlata provided me with a unique perspective on the political life of the town I was studying that had over the course of the previous 20 years gone from being a symbolic heartland of Yugoslav socialism⁴ to becoming one of Bosnia's infamous ethnically

divided communities. Zlata's story of impoverished exile and return to her hometown made specific the general chronology of events. During the war, Jajce underwent two separate military takeovers, the first in 1992 by Serb and the second in 1995 by Croat armies. This wartime experience had, at one point or another, made refugees out of almost all of the town's residents, whose composition according to the 1991 census consisted of 28% Serbs, 14% Croats, 38.9% Bosniaks and 16.3% of Yugoslavs. Due to the war, Jajce lost an estimated 55% of its original inhabitants, who today live scattered around the world, with a large number in diasporic communities in Northern Europe.

Because of this wartime history, its microgeography and the very character of the Dayton Peace Agreement (upon which I subsequently elaborate), in the postwar period Jajce became an ethnically divided town administered by cadres from Croat and Bosniak nationalist parties and privatized by patrons loyal to them. While the majority of returnees are Bosniak and Croat, very few Serb families have returned; meanwhile, other refugees from elsewhere have replaced some of the exiled population. After returning to their hometown, people like Zlata had to make a life amidst these ruins and according to new rules of the game. During the initial postwar period, this process was especially difficult for Bosniak and Serb returnees, who had to face an unfriendly and unyielding postwar government controlled by the Croat nationalist party HDZ (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica—Croatian democratic community)⁵. Croat nationalists emphasized that Croat fighters had "liberated" Jajce by defeating the Serb army and because of this, laid claim to it. Meanwhile, Bosniaks were prevented from returning, claiming their property and taking their jobs back. Hence, new conflicts and new sorts of resentment between Bosniaks and Croats in Jajce became possible in the early stages of the postwar period.

Over the next eight years in light of pressures exerted by international overseeing organizations, the population of returnees grew and political and demographic balance shifted. In 2004, residents of Jajce elected their first postwar Bosniak mayor. When I arrived in the fall of 2008, the town had been "recovering" from another round of local elections, which gave another mandate to that same mayor, a cadre of the largest Bosniak nationalist party, the SDA (Stranka demokratske akcije: Party of Democratic Action)⁶. His reelection was not without controversy. Many people I talked to in those early weeks said very critical things about the mayor's penchant for favoring his kin and neighbors in distributing resources, jobs and perks. Such criticism was widespread among Bosniaks, some of whom confided in me that they personally preferred the Croat candidate as an individual but chose to invalidate their ballots rather than vote for a Croat nationalist party that had victimized them. Indeed, when it came to the ballot box, residents of Jajce, as many other citizens of Bosnia I talked to during my fieldwork, did not simply "vote for" candidates but engaged in many other alternative practices including "voting against," partial voting, ballot invalidation, drawing and writing profanities on the ballot, adding names of absurd candidates and so on⁷. Moreover, it was thanks to Zlata that I first learned of various types of organized political intimidation in town, such as that of "terrain teams"—pairs of nationalist parties' members who paid townspeople "reminder visits" on election day.

Through such stories and encounters, I began to question the tacit link between the continued electoral successes of nationalist parties and questions of political convictions among the town's residents. But a few weeks after my visit to the villages, I mentioned Zlata's employment history casually in a conversation with a mutual friend, who quickly declared that Zlata had gotten her position not on account of her qualifications, but as a member of the SDA, which had just secured a majority in the town council. I protested at this accusation, explaining

that Zlata already told me she did not belong to any political party, and had expressed views that in my mind made her SDA affiliation unlikely. Nevertheless, my friend insisted that Zlata was lying to me and everyone else, concealing her party affiliation from the public, because she wanted to eschew criticism. Her reluctance to admit where she stood in relation to SDA testified to the fact such an affiliation *posed a problem* in this context, irrespectively of whether the primary motivator was personal concordance with SDA's political program and nationalist ideology or opportunism. Notably, my interlocutors in Jajce often conflated the figure of a nationalist with that of an opportunist, underlining the fact that both orientations were morally compromising, socially undesirable and seemingly constitutive of each other.

Over the next few days, I asked several of my other informants whether they thought Zlata belonged to the SDA, and all of them told me that she was almost certainly a member, citing as evidence her job and her allegedly close working relationship with the nationalist mayor. Zlata's structural position and the work she was doing provided all the necessary proof for turning a rumor into fact; in this context holding a public sector job was understood to be the ultimate index of one's political affiliation. But there were other things to consider as well: one informant told me Zlata herself was a member of one of those terrain teams formed to "encourage" people to vote. In light of these conversations, I too began to wonder whether I had been duped. When I eventually asked Zlata about all this, she briefly denied the rumors, and quickly changed the subject. A few subsequent interactions that I examine here produced more doubt over whether my informant was indeed concealing a part of the story. To this day, I cannot say with certainty whether or not Zlata had been telling the truth in rebutting others' accusations⁸.

In what follows, I dwell on the case of this puzzling ethnographic interlocutor, not in order to ascertain whether or not Zlata was deceiving me⁹, but to consider what her ambiguous situation may help us understand about the conditions under which one comes into being as a political subject in post-war Bosnia. While asking questions about Zlata's unclear position with respect to SDA, and everyone else's investment in resolving it, I suggest that in contemporary Bosnia, a person's nationalist (or otherwise political) stance should not be thought simply as a reflection of ideological conviction and intention. As these forms of interiority remain both publicly inaccessible and possibly also internally fraught with inconsistencies, it may be more productive to study political positionality in terms of what people actually do. My informants evaluated political stance of others in terms of concrete behaviors; these behaviors in turn made sense only in relation to structural position of these persons in the context of specific activities. The conscripting, disciplining character of this context which sets the conditions of possibility for action often remains invisible to those who believe loyalty to nationalist elites is a product of indoctrination, trans-historical group attributes and deeply held beliefs (which may be seen as either justifiable or irrational). Resisting the urge to label Zlata *merely* an opportunist, in closing I suggest that her ambiguity is both a reflection and a product of unfinished consolidation of nationalist order of things and people.

With that point in mind, I show how some forms of uncertainty create ambiguous forms of politics and personhoods that are at once sites of surrender and room for maneuver in modern day Bosnia. By focusing on Zlata and the rumors that followed her, I provide a more analytically rigorous view of how some residents of postwar Bosnia negotiate limits and possibilities of political belonging. Ultimately, I seek to both problematize the notion of the "native's point of view" and facile representations of Bosnian political subjectivities as completely caught within the matrices of "old" and "new" nationalisms. In the first part, I describe the political grid

created by wartime campaigns of ethnic cleansing and postwar efforts to create an ethnic democracy, showing how efforts to clearly demarcate difference, political loyalty and belonging produce their own contradictions and ambivalences. Next, by considering notions of ethical personhood deployed by my informants, I look at how political ambiguity, and purposeful incoherence of political actions and motifs, enables one's simultaneous existence in multiple worlds, and leaves open the possibility for multiple personal and collective futures.

Political subjectification in post-war Bosnia: from violence to the Dayton Accords and back

Since the early 1990s, Bosnia-Herzegovina has become a place defined by narratives of ethnic persecution, which in turn helped shape understandings of politics and notions of loyalty among Bosnian citizens as being primarily defined in ethno-nationalist terms. The Dayton Agreement, signed in November 1995, ended the war and preserved the Bosnian state, while also partitioning the country into two large ethno-territorial units¹⁰: the Federation (controlled by Bosniaks and Croats) and the Serb Republic. As a result of wartime population expulsions and the unrealized process of refugee return and post-war informal exchanges of real estate property, for the first time in history, ethnic difference was clearly mapped onto territory, with Serbs, Croats and Muslims now living in ethnically homogenous communities (see Ćurak 2002). The uneasy alliance brokered by the US in March 1994 between Muslims and Croats (following military confrontations in Herzegovina and Central Bosnia during '93-'94) was mitigated by further administrative division of the Federation into ten cantons, seven of which are dominated by a single national group, and another three which are "mixed." Because of their complex governance, these mixed cantons and their towns and municipalities, have in the post-war period come to represent the immoralities, contradictions and absurdities of ethno-nationalist politics.

While patterns of ethnic identification have a complex and much longer history in Bosnia than I can examine in this paper, contemporary Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks face a new set of institutional and legal arrangements. The nationalist grid, its forms of belonging, legitimation, and claims to truth are not just a product of war, but of postwar transformations enforced through the Dayton Accords. By inscribing ethnic difference in the law, and mapping it onto territory, the provisions of Dayton helped preserve the power of nationalist elites who organized the bloodshed in the first place. This power became especially salient in small towns like Jajce, where the mixed character of the population and limited resources in turn create the perfect conditions for reinforcement of ethnic difference. Clientelist networks, party patronage, careful distribution of resources and job assignments further reinforce these divisions¹¹. My informants in Sarajevo, who blamed the population "in the provinces" for the continued electoral victories of incompetent and corrupt nationalist parties, often remained blind to these dimensions of political life in towns like Jajce. While underscoring alleged political ignorance, lack of sophistication and inherent nationalism of these "provincial," small-town populations, Sarajevans were ignoring the distinct ways in which these spatialized communities were offering themselves to exercises of power¹².

In Jajce, like in many other divided towns in mixed cantons, the dominance of nationalist "elites" and the echoes of experienced traumas, have since 1995 led to the emergence of social segregation among Muslims and Croats, most powerfully illustrated in the case of ethnically segregated schools. Yet from the very beginning, up until today, such forms of separation remained incomplete and contested. A number of my informants proclaimed that that Jajce *was not like* Mostar, never having become segregated to the same extent, ostensibly due to the fact

that no actual wartime fighting between Muslims and Croats took place in the town proper. Moreover, material limitations stood in the way of realization of ideological projects. For example, while schools were indeed ethnically segregated at the K-8 level, Croat and Muslim children were generally placed back together during high school, because there simply were not enough students or funds to keep in place a parallel system of ethnic gymnasiums and vocational secondary schools. By the time of my arrival, all cafés in Jajce were being frequented by both Croats and Bosniaks, which had not been the case in earlier years. Private firms hired workers from both “groups;” Bosniaks worked during Croat (Catholic) holidays and vice versa. As I discovered in the course of my research, divided towns, despite being demonized in the eyes of the Sarajevan cosmopolitans and foreign emissaries, produced unique sites for interethnic intimacy, which were becoming less available in the ethnically homogenized, non-divided communities. Moreover, the proximity of “others” shaped the desired forms of belonging in distinct ways.

Ethical personhood and the trouble with being a nationalist

Although wartime and postwar experiences dramatically altered political and social conditions in Jajce, individual actions also remained subject to long standing ideas about how one ought to act in relation to the realm of official politics. Such normative understandings of proper forms of personhood, I argue, are not only a product of unique socialist era histories but are also at the heart of discussions surrounding Zlata’s alleged affiliation with the Bosniak nationalist party. In the Bosnian context, the act of entering the realm of official politics tends to be seen as abandonment of personal ethics and a resignation to becoming a jaded and morally corrupted subject—a point well captured by Elissa Helms’s (2007) discussion of Bosnian politics through the metaphor of the whore. What is more, entering a nationalist party that was seen as responsible for the ongoing political crisis meant one was not only abandoning moral values, but doing it either out of nationalist conviction or opportunistic desires. In the context of post-war Jajce, such decisions were scrutinized with particular force, given the robust presence of nationalist parties in everyday life and the forms of intimacy characteristic of a small town. Upon my arrival, many residents of Jajce told me that yes, indeed, Jajce was a divided town: divided by the line between those who had a party membership and those who did not¹³.

Some older residents were particularly worried about recruitment of the town’s young people into these parties, a process they felt had already begun by placing children in ethnically exclusive or divided schools where they were learning languages, literatures and histories as defined by nationalistic interests. Their fears rendered visible the existence of surviving ethical sensibilities that had been shaped by a different era and politics of difference particularly significant in Jajce, which bore the honor of being the birthplace of socialist Yugoslavia. Although interethnic conviviality has a much longer history in this area of Bosnia, during the socialist era it gained a new articulation through policies of socialist multinationalism, known officially as “brotherhood and unity.” Despite the violence of war, most residents of Jajce remembered this period fondly; many also lamented the destruction of interethnic trust that had helped make possible “a shared life” (*zajednički život*). As a consequence, being (seen as) a nationalist inevitably painted a person in negative moral hues. Dijana, a social worker in her early thirties, observed that for those reasons no one admits in public that he is a nationalist, even though people say and do other things that make them appear as precisely that. Erol, a Bosniak coffee shop owner, was himself very critical of people who make inflammatory nationalist

statements in public, without thinking about how such words will impact Muslim-Croat relations. As a small business owner, he was particularly critical of members of the Bosniak diaspora who were calling for the removal of the nationalist monument to Croat liberators, which had been erected in the center of the town by HDZ in the early years following the war. "It is easy *for them* in diaspora to be critical, nationalistic and demand such things, but I have to live and work here...these people [i.e. Croats in Jajce] are my neighbors and customers." Publicly making nationalist demands was seen by many residents of Jajce as socially undesirable and threatening to the repair of social relations between Croats and Muslims.

"Turncoat" nationalists and opportunists posed an additional problem in Jajce. Nusreta, a Muslim woman in her fifties married to a local Croat, told me she was disgusted by the speed and willingness with which some of her neighbors had adopted nationalist colors. Speaking of one former neighbor in particular, she exclaimed: "Give me a break! Yesterday, he was an avid communist, and today, he is prancing around with the nationalists. I'd understand it if he were from the village, *where they have always thought of the world in this way*, but he knows better!" In Nusreta's terms, what was problematic was not the nationalist affiliation itself, but the sinister way in which her "urban" friend acted in order to seize new opportunities¹⁴. Indeed, narrations about strength of character and moral consistency were at the heart of postwar imaginings of ethical personhood. In this idealized picture, remaining the same despite cataclysmic shifts in one's surroundings was the condition of being seen as a moral individual. For example, a moral resident of Jajce did not stop greeting, standing up for or helping his fellow citizens after the war just because they were of different ethnicity from him. In times of uncertainty, when on the ruins of one political system another one was being built, a person had to pick a side, and stick to it.

Yet these idealized perceptions obscured the fact that for a young person like Zlata, Jajce offered few opportunities, as was evidenced by the mass out-migration of youth from the town. Opting to return to one's hometown with a college degree often did not yield employment. While older residents of Jajce lamented in passing that Jajce was a town "without a future," others were looking for pragmatic ways of improving their circumstances. This pragmatism was in part driven by a perception that a) one had to carve out a place for oneself in this context and b) that nationalist parties had the means of distributing scarce resources and opportunities. Katarina, an unemployed schoolteacher in her late twenties, hoped that becoming a member of the Croat nationalist party, the HDZ, would help her find a job. Alma, another college graduate from an adjacent village, told me she had no problem joining the SDA, since "if she did not seize the opportunity, someone else would."

Although incentives to join political parties seemed strong, some of my younger informants held strong convictions against such decisions, opting to instead work in the non-governmental sector or at least join one of the non-nationalist parties, like the Social Democrats¹⁵. Yet, Social Democrats, though non-nationalists, were also not exempt from scrutiny. Rumors abounded in town that one of their key cadres hired her under-qualified brother in a position that should have been filled through a more thorough job search, based on expertise. Yet residents of Jajce sympathetic of Social Democrats were also the most fearless critics of clientelist networks. Tanja, a small business owner in her early thirties, openly expressed criticism of several of her friends who had joined the Muslim nationalist party in hope of obtaining a job. Yet she was even more critical of those among her friends who joined out of political naiveté, such as her friend Mirza, a professor of music, who wanted to make a difference in the SDA by offering a youthful and forward-looking perspective. Whatever

progressive ideas Mirza had, Tanja said, had been silenced by the party internally, turning him into a mere serf.

Ironically, Tanja was one of Zlata's best friends. Both were children born out of ethnically mixed relationships and had ethnically ambiguous names. While Tanja did not claim to belong to any "community" in particular, Zlata was during my stay in Jajce becoming increasingly interested in Islam and in this way asserting her Bosniak identity¹⁶. Moreover, Tanja was extremely outspoken about her criticisms of the town's mayor, who she believed was a crook, a chauvinist and a hillbilly. Zlata, on the other hand, repeated a mantra I heard a lot among the mayor's supporters, insisting that, as the first Bosniak mayor of Jajce after the war, he had succeeded in "returning Bosnia to Jajce" by removing Croat nationalist insignia and flags and replacing them with symbols of independent Bosnia. Such proclamations made Tanja suspicious of Zlata's political position; despite being her friend, she too believed Zlata was lying about the true status of her relationship with the SDA. And yet, the two of them, as I discovered, rarely talked about this. It was precisely this silence, the unspoken nature of their political differences, and the uncertainty of Zlata's status with regard to the SDA that made their friendship possible.

Moreover, despite being aware of rumors, Zlata never bothered to once and for all resolve the dilemma among her friends and acquaintances, because revealing her possible relationship with the SDA would most certainly taint her image among her antinationalist buddies. Instead, she too took part in critical conversations about the political situation over coffee, often providing empirical proof for their suspicions of misdoings in the municipal government and agencies¹⁷. And yet, by also partaking in the activities of the local government, holding on to her job, and fulfilling her duties as a municipal employee, she seemed to be exhibiting loyalty to the nationalist mayor and his party. The fact that Zlata was reluctant to publicly announce where she stood proved that she not only understood the unique advantage of her ambiguous position but that she also was aware of the moral caveats which made everyone else suspicious of her. One evening, as we walked home together, she came as close as she ever did to coming clean, explaining to me that she understood why some young people were joining the party. "It's not like the nationalists are ever going to leave. Perhaps the best we can hope for is for a new generation to take over, and reform it from within." In listening to her words, I realized she might have been talking about herself, present or future, and her own motivations to become part of something that in others' eyes turned her into a jaded, corrupted person.

I return now to the claim I made in the beginning: that certain forms of ambiguity like the ones displayed in Zlata's indecipherable political positioning made for forms of politics and types of personhood that were at once both discouraging and hopeful about the future. The fact that Zlata possibly willingly became part of a group engaged in problematic and at times quite destructive forms of politics testified to the growing hegemonic power of nationalist projects to co-opt and integrate even the best of political intentions. Undoubtedly, the war had made this nationalist order possible; Dayton legalized it, and everything that has come afterwards continues to reinforce it. Today's nationalist divisions do not simply supply proof that residents of Bosnia have always seen themselves as having irreconcilable political goals—increasingly throughout Bosnian and Herzegovinian towns, these divisions form the grid for allocation of access to resources, jobs and desired private futures. They organize life in such a way that almost invalidates the question of whether or not they are based in deeply held convictions. In that sense, telling people in cities or in provinces just how corrupt their nationalist representatives are won't make much difference. Chances are they already know it, but that knowledge does not

liberate them. Instead it further convinces them of the immutability of the new layout within which they must make their lives. This fact alone will be a cause of despair to some Bosnians and some anthropologists alike.

However, nationalist projects, like all other world-making ambitions, never fully subsume the forms of life which they produce through their own contradictions. If the very possibility of being a political subject in Bosnia is predicated upon having to engage with this figure of the nationalist—as I argue above—this political subjectivity is also caught in the ethical conundrum emergent in the same figure. As we see in the case of Zlata, the trouble arises when those new types of political subjectification, repeated each day through disciplinary institutions, the work of government and distribution of resources, encounter residual normative prescriptions and forms of affect, i.e. commitment to moral consistency, skepticism of party politics, and even the virtuousness of certain forms of interethnic conviviality. Zlata for a period of time cultivated (among at least one part of the public) her own ambiguity with respect to the SDA affiliation, which in and of itself provided proof that there was nothing normal or naturalized about taking part in nationalist politics. The risk and possibly shame that seemed to be a part of being associated with the governing nationalists (which may or may not have been codified through party membership), suggested that her political positionality was a product of complex negotiations, tactics, and desires, which had a stake in multiple loyalties. Certain inassimilable excess lies in this space of ambiguity, marked by a tension between complex historical experiences and the acute exigencies of the present. While uncertainty and risk fill this space, (which may well have already been co-opted by post-Dayton politics), its very existence also points to just how fragile this new order is. Indeed, ethical conundrums like the one I describe here make known that rival forms of political imagination still exist, even if there is no framework in which they can be fully realized.

¹ Throughout this text, I will use Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bosnia interchangeably.

² The names of informants and other identifying markers have been changed to protect confidentiality.

³ The same kind of a claim could be made for the figure out the “antinationalist.” In that sense, I fold mine into Stef Jansen’s argument (2005) that nationalism as well as antinationalism form sets of discursive practices that become enacted by but also remain unevenly available to different people.

⁴ Jajce gained its socialist era significance as the birthplace of Second Yugoslavia, owing to the fact that it hosted the second meeting of the Antifascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia (in Bosnia referred to as AVNOJ) during which the new Yugoslav Federation was created on November 29, 1943. After WWII, Jajce developed into an industrial town with a burgeoning tourism industry and a well integrated, ethnically mixed population. This is not Jajce’s only claim to historical fame: in the 14th century, it had been a site of coronation of Bosnian kings.

⁵ Owing to the postwar factionalism within dominant political parties (which has brought into existence a number of new parties, both nationalist and “social-democratic”), there are now two HDZs in Bosnia-Herzegovina: HDZ BiH and HDZ 1990.

⁶ In 2008, the mayor won 52% of the vote as a representative of the coalition of Bosniak nationalist parties, headed by his own party, the SDA. His opponent, the representative of Croat coalition lead by HDZ BIH won 44% of votes. Even though SDA received the largest number of votes, it still had to form a government with the Croat nationalists, Social Democrats and a few other, smaller Bosniak parties. The municipal government functions on the account of this delicate balance.

⁷ These practices are familiar to anthropologists working in many postsocialist and postcolonial contexts, and have gotten some public attention in the press (recent example of Russia). These alternative forms of voting that have been sprouting up across the globe can perhaps serve as a starting point for thinking critically about the limits of formal politics in the contemporary era.

⁸ And as I will subsequently argue, whether or not she was lying or being truthful made little difference.

⁹ In framing my focus in this way, I sidestep for a moment the conventional methodological debates regarding claims of objectivity and validity, which also form a part of my ethnographic puzzle about an informant that may not be telling the truth. I follow Charles Briggs (1986) in arguing that focusing only on such concerns tends to obscure the inherent dialogical, relational and contextual character of ethnographic encounters. The only thing I learned for certain during my fieldwork, was that uncertainty was a constitutive part of doing research, not only because—to deploy the language of Erving Goffman (1990 [1959])—my informants would put up fronts, attempt to mislead me or evade my questions, but also because they themselves were hesitant, self-contradicting and unsure about their claims or outcomes of their actions. So, instead of becoming alarmed over the possible “corruption” of my ethnographic interlocutor (a figure invested among anthropologists still with a great deal of significance, desire and hope) I confess I secretly relished in the possibilities this mystery could provide for thinking through methodological and epistemological problems. What made Zlata interesting to me, moreover, was the fact that I did not seem to be the only person she was willingly deceiving. If she was indeed lying, she was lying to the entire town.

¹⁰ In addition to creating a high degree of territorial and administrative fragmentation, the legal provisions of the Dayton Agreement also served to further entrench ethnonationalist identities and peg them to political representation. Citizenship remains to a large extent defined in terms of ethnic membership through the notion of “constitutive peoples”; in practice, modern Bosnians are first and foremost defined as primarily Serbs, Croats or Bosniaks (Bosnian-Muslims). The national category “Bosnian” does not exist internally as a political identifier, while political representation remains tied to the ethnic identity of the majority group. Although the Bosnian presidency is tripartite, with a representative from each of the three “nations,” Muslim and Croat representatives must be elected from the Federation, while the Serb must be from the Serb Republic. Jews, Roma and other ethnic minorities are barred from taking these positions, something that has recently come to the attention of the EU Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg, which ruled the Bosnian constitution to be discriminatory.

¹¹ Other anthropologists and field researchers in Bosnia report similar findings in various parts of the country. There exists a growing literature on national relations in Bosnia based on ethnographic research, which illustrates the complexities of identification and belonging, and in so doing supports the claim I am making here. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to adequately engage with this work. A good starting point is the edited volume *The New Bosnian Mosaic* (Bougarel et al., 2007).

¹² Ironically, the nationalist grid and the redistributive networks I describe here also operate in the capital. Access to high-ranking positions in business, government, higher education and many other fields in the capital is also tied to party membership or protection. However, as the largest and most prosperous city, Sarajevo simultaneously seems to offer more opportunities to create lives outside of these networks, making urban elites less cognizant of the economic and social constraints in small communities.

¹³ In a personal correspondence, Elissa Helms reports that her informants in Zenica often talked about whether or not someone was in a political party, without mentioning which one, helping render more visible the continuity between the socialist and postwar period. Yet, I would suggest important differences exist between the role of League of Communists in distributing access to opportunities and perks during socialism and what is happening today. The Communist Party in its early postwar years faced a growing economy, whereas the size of the “cake” available for redistribution has become smaller today. Before, a person had to enter the Party in order to become a manager (direktor) or to take some other prestigious position. In Jajce today, owing to the recession and the sheer number of parties, one has to have an affiliation to get a job as a custodian, a driver or an administrative assistant.

¹⁴ The discourses that frame the war and “return” of nationalism in terms of “revenge of the countryside” (see critique by Bougarel 1999) abound in former Yugoslavia. I do not have the space to adequately analyze them here, except to say that they fit nicely into the understanding of nationalist loyalty as a matter of false, unenlightened consciousness. Nusreta herself replicates this view, arguing that nationalism in the village is to be expected, and proposing it is only a problem and aberration in the urban area where people are supposed to be better educated.

¹⁵ Interestingly, I got to know among this group several Bosniaks and Croats that regularly attended the mosques and churches, taking part in the religious ceremonies while being outspoken in their opposition to nationalist parties in power.

¹⁶ In her comments to me, Sabrina Perić has suggested that one could make an argument that Zlata’s decision is a form of strategic essentialism and structurally related to the underlying Dayton principle where everything is “ethnically” determined. Significantly, as a person born out of a “mixed marriage”, Zlata had to pick a side, and she picked the “dominant” one; part of her effort to reassert her Bosniak identity then may have had something to do with the fact she was not simply and “organically” a Bosniak. But as Perić persuasively put forth to me, Zlata’s case renders visible a paradoxical aspect of Dayton that is already part of its makeup: ethnic identity is not proscribed by birth and descent (blood) and so one can, in some cases “choose” one’s ethnicity. In that sense, ethnicity and national belonging is determined through one’s

declaration of oneself as belonging to a nation (Perić brilliantly points out that the problem with Finčević and Sejdinović is not that they are a Jew and a Roma but that they were unwilling to declare themselves as Serb, Bosniak or Croat). The question is: what are the limits of this self-declaration in practice?

¹⁷ Of course, I have to acknowledge the possibility that she was also performing in front of me, in order to appear more critical (and hence more cosmopolitan) in the eyes of a researcher who had come from Sarajevo and from the U.S. The question of to what extent our informants give us—and to what extent we hear—what we want, is an important and open one.

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