
 Review

Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik

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Crimes in the Balkans. The Narratives of Denial in Post-Conflict Serbia

I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2013, 272 pp.

The concept of “coming to terms with the past” or “dealing with the past” usually refers to a full range of processes associated with a society’s attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past human rights abuses, the roles played by different actors in such events and the consequences these events have for a post-conflict society. This process usually needs to occur on a number of different levels, from the micro level of an individual in a small community, to the macro level of national, regional and global political bodies (Stubbs, Paul. 2003, September 4. *Dealing with the Past in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia & Montenegro*. Regional synthesis report. Quaker peace and social witness programme in post-Yugoslav countries. London). This micro or individual level of dealing with the past is at the centre of inquiry in Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik’s new book, *Ethnic Conflict and War Crimes in the Balkans*.

The book is interested in knowing, acknowledging, and speaking (or remaining silent) about atrocities which happened during the 1991-1999 wars in the former Yugoslavia. It considers how a group of

Serbia’s citizens, who were themselves not directly involved in the conflicts, but still suffered consequences of these wars (because they had to live during sanctions

into the army), understand and discuss crimes that happened in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo during the 1990s. The book is a relatively small ethnographic study ‘from below’ and includes a set of thirty-six semi-structured interviews, but as Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik explains, quantity does not have much relevance in research where the purpose is a description of cultures and the book does not aim to make absolute conclusions, but rather to explore possibilities of interpretation (2013: 12). The book focuses on two main issues: first, how ‘ordinary’ citizens understand, speak about and come to terms with violent conflicts and crimes committed in these conflicts during the 1990s; and second, what implications their strategies of coming to terms with these atrocities might have for transitional justice projects in Serbia. Both of these issues have not become the subject of much academic interest in Serbia (or any other post-Yugoslav country) so far.¹

¹ To my knowledge, the only projects/publications which included personal recollections of Serbia’s citizens about the 1990s conflicts in former Yugoslavia are those conducted by the Centre for Non-Violent Action Sarajevo/Belgrade, which included interviews with war veterans from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the project conducted by Documentation Centre – Wars 1991-1999, “People in War. Oral History of 1991-1999 Wars”, as part of which war veterans, refugees/displaced persons and other civilians were interviewed in all war-torn post-Yugoslav countries. Both projects,

brought to

The main argument of Obradovic-Wochnik's book is that transitional justice projects which have been undertaken (mostly) by civil society organizations in Serbia have created a narrow framework for dealing with the past, which does not take into consideration and does not include voices of 'ordinary' citizens. The book, on the other hand, considers how narratives about the violent past are manifest in private spheres, not immediately visible to, but not completely separate from the public sphere (2013: 7). The author also argues that individuals in Serbia do not express their opinions and views about the past in a way suitable to and demanded from transitional justice projects, but that their narratives are marked with an inability to speak about the violence of the past. What seems problematic, however, is the author's insistence on this 'inability to speak about the violence' although her respondents do address issues such as genocide committed in Srebrenica or other mass crimes, as the one committed during the war in Vukovar, and examples of violence are discussed throughout the conducted interviews. Moreover, the author claims that respondents do not explicitly mention violence, due to the horror of committed crimes, but use different metaphors instead, although words such as killings, torture, death and phrases such as decapitated heads are repeatedly used by her respondents. Even when metaphors are used

however, include a relatively small number of interviews. See Rill, H. and Šmidling, T. (eds.) (2010). *Slike tih vremena [Images of Those Times]*. Belgrade and Sarajevo: Centre for Non-Violent Action. See also <http://web.archive.org/web/20090824115522/http://dcwmemory.nb.rs/07/open.php?pg=11>

instead of explicit references to violence, this still does not necessarily imply the inability to speak about horrors. At some points in the book, the author, thus, seems to fall in the same trap as do transitional justice projects which ask for public discussions about the past in a clear, uniform and direct way, forgetting that language is often messy and that its usage is conditioned with various social and psychological factors, as well as with social relations. What seems rather to be the case in point is that, as the author suggests, individuals in Serbia do not express beliefs and ideas about the past in coherent and unequivocal ways but instead produce narratives which are fragmented, contradictory, "ambiguous, confused and impossible to quantify, generalise or homogenise" (2013: 8), which proves that coping with and talking (or remaining silent) about horrors of committed violence is just as individual and private as is the entire process of dealing with the past.

The author, thus, rightly points out that looking for a particular and clearly expressed narrative as an indication that 'dealing with the past' has taken place is a misguided and inadequate approach, because confrontations with the past are individual experiences happening in different stages, and because this process does not really ever reach an end point. This, the author suggests, should be kept in mind when conducting transitional justice projects which ask for a society to come to terms with the past, because this coming to terms is never a singular or homogenous process. Another interesting discussion for transitional justice literature which this book opens up is the one on 'distant audiences', i.e. populations which do not fit into clear-

cut categories of victims and perpetrators, which transitional justice projects usually operate with. The literature on transitional justice has recently moved from a retribution-centred approach towards a more restorative one, focusing less on perpetrators and more on the explicit goal of 'healing' the victims (Andrieu, Kora. 2010, January 18. Transitional justice: A new discipline in human rights. On-line Encyclopedia of Mass Violence, retrieved from: <http://www.massviolence.org/> (last accessed on December 9, 2013)). Some authors argue that "recently the focus has shifted to the micro level of transitional justice. The macro level (i.e. initial transitional justice research) was more concerned with major political and organisational questions, while victims and their concerns (i.e. micro political forum) were rarely considered. (...) Victims and reparation for victims have become quintessential elements in the debate on transitional justice and how to deal with the past" (Rombouts, Heidi. 2002. Importance and difficulties of victim-based research in post-conflict societies. *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice*, (10) 2-3: 216-232). Thus, transitional justice is still divided along the victim-perpetrator line, and such division is difficult to apply to the Serbian society, in which individuals occupied, during the wars, different and sometimes contradicting roles. The population which Obradovic-Wochnik interviewed fits into neither of these two categories exclusively, while some of them can be said to fit into overlapping categories. For this reason, the interviews and respondents in this book are interesting for the field of transitional justice, because they clearly show that people can take multiple posi-

tions towards and have multiple roles in a conflict and that categories such as 'victims' and 'perpetrators' are often negotiated in a way that fits into people's understanding of what happened in the past.

Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik's book is an important contribution to the literature on dealing with the past, because it points to certain problems that transitional justice projects face today. One of these problems is the fact that transitional justice often ignores the fact that dealing with the past does not happen at the level of society as a whole (because there is no such thing as homogenous society which would face the past in a unique and clear way), but that it happens on a private and individual level and on an every-day basis. She warns of the invisibility of certain voices from public debates about the past, which should be taken into account when discussing acknowledgement, regret and denial of violent past events. Their invisibility does not mean that they have nothing to say, but rather points to the problem that people are not being asked about what they think, know and remember or how they deal with this knowledge. Thus, the book contributes to the field of transitional justice 'from below' and warns of not enough empirical research on how transitional justice is received by those who it targets. For transitional justice scholars dealing with the region of former Yugoslavia, this book should serve as a reminder that there is still plenty of work to be done in the field, which could certainly benefit from additional research about personal narratives and private strategies of acknowledgement and denial of recent violent events. *Ethnic Conflict and War Crimes in the Balkans. The Narratives of Denial in Post-Conflict*

Serbia is, thus, a welcome contribution to the field and a much-needed warning of an often forgotten fact that the effects and impact of transitional justice cannot be fully understood without the inclusion of a grassroots perspective and without analysing the empirical data.

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Review

Dorothee Bohle
and Béla Greskovits
**Capitalist Diversity on Europe's
Periphery**

Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York,
2012, 304 pp.

With the collapse of the socialist regimes and the accompanying environment of radical uncertainty, countries of East-Central Europe had to form a new political and economic order by incorporating institutions of liberal democracy and market economy. In *Capitalist Diversity on Europe's Periphery*, Bohle and Greskovits are showing the variance of capitalism that resulted from the transition process beginning in the 1990s and continuing to the current economic crisis. The theoretical framework of the analysis is inspired by Karl Polanyi's work. Accordingly, the authors placed particular importance on the political elites' efforts to maintain the fragile balance in the triangular relation-

ship between market efficiency, social cohesion and political legitimacy during the transition phase. According to Bohle and Greskovits, postsocialist countries developed three basic types of capitalist political economy: neoliberal (Baltic countries), embedded neoliberal (Visegrad countries) and neocorporatist (Slovenia). In addition, the authors included the category of 'laggard' countries (Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia), which demonstrate a mixture of the first two models and a weak state.

Neoliberal Regime in Baltic Countries

The Baltic countries (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia) followed a radical path to transition by applying rapid privatization and low capital controls primarily in order to attract foreign investment. At the same time the government constrained the influence of citizens on the process of political decision-making and minimized social compensations for the transition losses. By neglecting its industrial capacities, these countries opened the road to the financial, communication and real estate sector. Here the economic strategy was enabled by its attachment to the idea of nation state building and national identity implying a decisive break with the former socialist regime. Estonia, as the leader of the group, distinguished itself in the international community by introducing neoliberal solutions *par excellence* like the currency board and the flat tax regime. By tying its hands in the industrial, fiscal and social policy the government signaled to foreign capital that money has been isolated from the daily political turmoil. Pensioners, followed by other recipients of social benefits, suffered the most adverse consequences of these policies. A nation-