

Review: *Unbriable Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Fight for the Commons*. By Damir Arsenijević (Ed.). Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014. Pp. 182. €39 paper.

This slim edited volume is a collection of reflections and essays on the protests that swept Bosnia and other parts of the Balkans in early 2014. It speaks however to much larger issues. Whilst post-conflict peacebuilding is among them – particularly that led by Western nations who consider themselves examples for post-conflict states to mimic – here I seek to use this collection as a way of critically interrogating ideas around political transition and in particular asking deeper questions of what is meant mean by *justice in transition*.

Ideas of justice in political transition have become fixed in a narrow normatively-led political project that perceives a successful transition – typically from conflict or authoritarianism - as defined by the realization of liberal democracy. Whilst the discourse of transitional justice purports to be rights-based, justice is understood primarily as electoral democracy and respect for political and civil rights, accompanied by an opening of the economy to global markets. Damir Arsenijević's book challenges such practice by reporting on the protests and plenumsⁱ that exploded across Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014, shattering the illusion that all was well in a state created and maintained under the EU imperium. The protests and plenums combined a number of ideas – participation, direct democracy, and direct and sometimes violent action against symbols of the state – that brought the 'unruly' protests of the Arab spring and southern European anti-austerity demonstrations to the Balkans. In so doing they defined their target as the alliance between ethnic demagogues who had thrived as a result of Bosnia's war and a predatory capitalism that had withered the post-conflict opportunities of its people. In his introduction to the book, Arsenjevic sets the scene by outlining how the protests "rescued politics itself" from the "corruption, nepotism and clientelism" (p.7) that had driven the privatisation that had impoverished Bosnians.

The volume represents an onslaught on such ideological constructions of justice and transition, sharing activist perceptions from Bosnia that both reveal the deep flaws in the neo-liberal post-conflict project in the Balkans, and pointing the way to routes towards a more emancipatory vision for the region. Whilst critical scholars have long mourned the failures of transitional justice and peacebuilding led by Western states that see themselves as benevolent models for those less fortunate, there has been a lack of concrete templates of how to 'do' justice in transition differently. This book begins to address that, most notably through the articulation of a prefigurative politics that sees the basis on which activists organize as providing a model for a more just future.

The war is portrayed in the book as an opportunity for the powerful ethnic party elites who had both fomented the conflict and been rewarded with political power at its end. The corruption of both politics and business was supervised by an international community which empowered the strongest political parties and "imposed a multiculturalist apartheid" (p.45). In Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war all public-owned property became state-owned, positioning it for privatisation and ultimately control by a party-family nexus. The 'unbriability' of the title is an explicit reference to a popular will that cannot be bribed or coerced into servility, as well as seeking a return to common use of property stolen by privatization, and social life impoverished

by ethnic division. The book wears its politics openly, beginning with chapters that discuss the struggle of workers in factories threatened with closure, as a logical consequence of the asset stripping and corrupt privatization that characterized post-war Bosnia. Tuzla, where protests began, had been a significant industrial center but strong previously state-owned firms had been destroyed to serve the agendas of new owners, while those who continued to work in factories faced far worse conditions than under the Yugoslav state. Indeed, the entire book is tinged with nostalgia for Tito's socialism. This aims to be a story relevant not only to Bosnia, but to everywhere that has felt the impact of neo-liberalism. As such, the book sees the protests as emerging naturally from a series of strikes to keep factories open as unions were fragmented, articulating a highly traditional view of solidarity among workers to advance their interests against a class with other interests.

The justice the protests sought did not, however, solely challenge the new economic dispensation, but linked directly to legacies of the most egregious war crimes. Ethnic elites led the process of creating mass graves in Bosnia and, after the war, amassed huge wealth, by continuing to benefit from the ethnic divides that those murders fed. The new ethnicized states that emerged saw a silencing of any public language of equality deepened both by a submissive media and by what one contributor to the book calls "NGO compradors" (p.47), whose programs are obsessed with ethnic difference and which serve to strengthen the ethnicized bureaucracies

The protests that erupted in 2014 are seen as emerging directly from the confluence of ethnic conflict and corrupt neo-liberalism: "Out of rage and despair, the citizens, many left with no choice but to rummage through dustbins to survive, forced to give bribes for basic services, have finally stood up and are demanding an end to the everyday terror of ethnic privatized slavery" (p. 45). The protests articulated a solidarity that is operative in materializing and thinking equality, with people refusing to occupy the identitarian categories to which they had been assigned for two decades. The novelty of the protests was their refusal to use either the political repertoires or modes of action of what had become understood as politics, rather using public spaces and direct action and embracing confrontation with the authorities. In their initial phase this included burning down a cantonal government building in Tuzla. Protests spread to other towns in Bosnia-Herzegovina and beyond, while both Serb and Bosniak politicians appealed to nationalism to decry the protests, while the media dutifully report them as 'hooliganism'.

While the ethnic history of the region and the recent war gave the protests a unique perspective, both the drivers of discontent and the methods of protestors resonated with what had been seen in Greece and Spain as well as in the uprisings of the Arab spring, where similar excesses of neo-liberalism were seen as root causes. Protests were characterized by a spatial politics that saw the streets and government buildings as spaces for activism, in exactly the ways that the unruly protests of Syntagma Square, Tahrir Square, or Occupy had. Protestors sought to establish themselves as the political subject of the post-socialist transition, and their first success was to drive the resignation of the Cantonal Government. As with the other sites of protests, the protestors aim was not only to change how Bosnia was governed, but to create an active site for new social ties and solidarities to be forged, to challenge their identity as victims and regain agency.

The first plenum was held in Sarajevo and emerged from those involved in the protests, as a forum where anger could be articulated. The plenums were a space where anyone could join, speak and vote, representing direct participatory democracy, as well as a decision making mechanism. They became sites of education: spaces where people were radicalized by both action and the sharing of grievances and exchange of ideas. All current orthodoxies could be questioned, the plenums were: “A place where people care less about ethnicity and religion” (p.81). The book calls the plenums “an emancipatory spark” (p.94), providing the basis for the development of a notion of the commons distinct from the state, and appealing to ideals of self-management. In this sense the plenums moved beyond a challenge to hegemonic neo-liberal understandings and demands for a return to Yugoslav state socialism, by advancing a pre-figurative politics whose methods and perspectives were more important and better defined than its goals. This resonates with what has been understood as a ‘new politics’, exemplified by the protests of the Arab Spring and those in Spain and Greece that followed the economic crisis, in which unruly and spontaneous mobilizations prioritized direct action over the presentation of a coherent set of political demands, and see progress in terms of conscientization, radicalization and the imagining of new approaches rather than direct impacts on governance. The plenums reflected a commitment to a horizontal organization, rooted in autonomy and loose social networks rather than formal structures, which served to drive understandings of participatory citizenship. They sought to challenge the idea that politics was something exclusively done in elite spaces sanctioned by foreign powers, and saw the political as that which changes everyday life. Privileging citizen agency leads directly to a politics of unruly, disruptive and sometimes illegal direct action to challenge ideas of interests and a politics of representation. The plenums redefined activism beyond the ideological stance that there is no alternative, defining a novel emancipatory politics.

Contrasting the plenums and protests with the politics implicit in the transitional justice discourse reveals the potential for enriching understandings of both justice and change in transition. The liberal politics of transitional justice sees the institutions of courts and truth commissions as delivering justice: in contrast the plenums offer the possibility of a justice constructed in claimed spaces that ordinary people create themselves. One problem of the institutional approach – particularly in the Balkans – has been its inability to challenge narratives that emerge from tight-knit communities. Despite judgements of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, all ethnic communities largely continue to see themselves as the principle victims of the conflict, a perspective reinforced by ethnic politics. The plenums represent a grassroots approach to building a non-ethnic politics and as such represent a local space in which to challenge ethnic narratives and build solidarity across ethnic divides, including through shared truths about the past.

The protests and plenums offer an ideologically contrasting understanding of transition, driven not from above by neo-liberal dogma but from below by engaged citizens. This challenges Balkan transitions that were driven by the political goal of EU membership as a destination, now a less attractive option. Such a project however never had a clear direction, beyond the goals of a certain type of free-market economy and ethnic cantonization. What Bosnia’s plenums add to understandings of transitional justice is the idea of justice beyond a reflexive economic liberalism and narrow normative principles that restrict practice to addressing civil and political

rights. Justice is seen as emerging from everyday life and, as such, is also social and economic: impunity means no-one is immune from prosecution – both war criminals and corrupt ethnic oligarchs who dominate contemporary economic and political life, often the same people.

The big question that remains unanswered in the book is what the impact has been and will be of Bosnia's protests and plenums: an articulation of the fundamental tension between a movement that seeks to see solidarity and cooperative approaches replace the authorities in the lives of those engaged, and the need to impact on governance. The protests no longer make the news and it is unclear if the plenums are continuing to constitute a radical alternative politics in the region; they certainly have not led to the political changes for which they advocate. Was this just a brief outburst of anger that has now dissipated, and – if so - what is its legacy? What the protests and plenums may have done most successfully however is created a blueprint for a new type of transitional politics, able to challenge the ideological liberal approach to justice as something delivered by institutions with a participatory politics whose process is as important as its product.

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ⁱ Plenums here are understood to refer to a direct democratic 'general assembly', representing a pattern of horizontal organization in which all can participate equally.