

Workshop 084: "Balkan cities, Balkan dreams: exploring the future(s) of the city"

And now what? Analyzing the transition from a socialist city in postwar Sarajevo

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Sarajevo, capital of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is said to be the place where the XX^o century began and ended. Having survived the tragic years of the siege by Bosnian-Serbs forces in the 90's, the city is now facing the most intense operations of reconstruction ever seen. Along these lines we can identify in Sarajevo the same material, social and cognitive transformations characterizing most of the cities in Eastern Europe and in the former USSR since the fall of their socialist regimes. As indicated by Catherine Alexander and Victor Buchli¹, such changes include: new relations of property and ownership and spaces recently restricted after privatization; the blurring of the borders between the urban and the rural due to the massive migration from the countryside; the emergence of new sites of religious significance, parallel to the marketization of the urban space; the physical wear, when not the total ruin, of ancient and modern buildings.

In a context marked by structural instability and crossed by latent tensions and conflicts, the implementation of the socioeconomic dynamics of advanced capitalism in its neoliberal version raises questions about which model of society is developing; instead of taking for granted that Bosnia and Herzegovina is heading unequivocally to a capitalist type of society, and taking into account that the changes in the economic, social and cultural spheres aren't yet consolidated, it seems more prudent to talk about the current stage in terms of "post-socialism". The present research therefore follows the line of those anthropological studies about the transition in Eastern Europe which, while stressing out the specificities of each local context among the former Eastern Bloc (we include, for affinity more than for historical reasons, Yugoslavia), identify features common to all these societies, both before the fall of the Berlin Wall and during the transit process towards news forms of political and economic organization. The main topics in such literature are usually civil society, privatization, markets, consumer goods, labor organization, nationalism; nevertheless,

¹ In their introduction to the volume edited by C. Alexander, V. Buchli and C. Humphrey, *Urban life in post-soviet Asia*, London: University College London Press, 2007

this research focuses on urban spaces, both public and built, and the transformations they're undergoing as a consequence of this particular historical moment, in the specific case of a city and a country which didn't have the opportunity to live peacefully through the end of communism. The transition between socialist and capitalist society, therefore, started late and is now occurring in a sudden and chaotic way.

The weight of the socialist legacy and the ravages of war radically mark the actual contingency, something that reflects on the main issues that local planners and citizens have to face nowadays. First of all, there is the question of centrality/polarity: a lot of the problems of urban development in Sarajevo depend on the shape of the city (elongated, with the historical core situated at one end) and on the fact that almost the totality of the administrative, commercial, cultural and leisure activities are concentrated in the city centre, while the suburbs lack almost any kind of services (according to the socialist vision of the sectorial city).

Second, the chronic scarcity of public funds and political will to carry out the interventions envisaged by the regulation plans results in an impossibility to carry out projects of public usefulness; on the other hand, the only projects which eventually see the light are those promoted by private investors (often foreigners), who receive almost no restriction when it comes to building since they are the only ones who possess the necessary capital to build whatever they want (usually banks, shopping malls, business centres, hotels or mosques).

A common phenomenon in many country across Eastern Europe, widespread urban sprawl is another urgent issue in the administrators' agenda: Sarajevo boasts entire neighbourhoods built illegally around the city centre or in the green belts by the rural population which moved to the city, first in the 70's following the industrialization of Yugoslavia and later, more dramatically, with the war and the consequent arrival of thousands of refugees from all over the country. It is important to emphasize, however, that big private investors also build with no respect for rules and legislations. In both cases impunity reigns supreme, since in most cases the municipality eventually legalizes illegal or irregular constructions.

Finally, the endemic lack of public space: there are almost no public squares in Sarajevo, and most of the few that do exist have been converted (by the Administration or by spontaneous use by citizens) into parking lots; the pedestrian areas are located only in the limited perimeter of Baščaršija; in the rest of the road network motorized vehicles prevail in a overwhelming and anarchic way. Available public spaces are generally places of transit more than places of quiet enjoyment, and are being more and more privatized, as shown by entire streets being physically, visually

and acoustically occupied by terrace cafés.

One last issue that may not be so urgent right now, but nevertheless to be taken into account by the researcher if he is to draw a complete picture of the situation: is there gentrification in Sarajevo? Probably not, at least not in the strict sense of the word; nonetheless, somebody is already speaking of *business gentrification*, stressing the role played especially by embassies and banks in the dynamics of local real estate market. Others (architects, urban planners) call for it as a way to reclaim those illegally developed suburban areas.

Going back to the questions raised at the beginning, in order to talk about post-socialism, why do we focus on the urban environment? First of all, because of the fundamental role played by cities in this process of material, systemic and cognitive dismantling and reconnection. All across Eastern Europe, from Yugoslavia to the USSR, cities were considered as the cradle of progress, a place of modernity, much different from the rural way of life. In the same way that their sovietization (or in the case we're dealing with, their yugoslavization, along with the process of industrialization) turned them into generative junctions of transforming modernity, today they represent the engine of the transition to a capitalist society.

In the second place, and precisely due to the increasing divergence between the city and the countryside produced by the process of modernization, in the case of the Bosnian war a recurrent use has been done of the term "urbicide", that is an attack of the countryside - representing here nationalism and particularism - against the city - embodying an allegedly tolerant and cosmopolitan spirit. This dichotomy emphasizes even more the iconic importance of cities in the studied context. At the present time, after the massive arrival of rural population to the capital, we behold a symbolic contraposition between old Sarajevans - the *gradska raja* - and the *seljaci*, a derogatory term used to identify those who hail from the countryside. This ruralization of urbanity imposes the need to analyze, as a result of the changes in social composition of the urban environment, the mutation in social relationships at neighborhood level, meant here as that specifically Bosnian institution which is the *komšiluk*. This term, of Turk origin, designates neighbours' relationships as a whole, but as Xavier Bougarel points out as well², in the pluri-communitarian Bosnian context it has been used to identify good connections between neighbours belonging to different ethnic communities, and therefore it indicates the system of daily coexistence between the different groups. This research aims to deepen into the crisis of *komšiluk* which followed the last war, a crisis caused not so much by the

² See chapter III^o, "Bon voisinage et crime intime", in Bougarel, X., *Bosnie anatomie d'un conflit*, Paris: La Découverte, 1996

conflict *per se* but more by the consequences of social and economic restructuring currently happening in the city and the country.

The neighbourhood is therefore the analytical unit chosen at the micro level in order to elucidate the ongoing social changes at the medium and macro level. The field selected for the ethnographic work is the district of Marijin Dvor which, being urbanized under Austro-Hungarian rule, used to be the westernmost limit of Sarajevo until the 60's. When the government of Marshall Tito began building the dormitory towns for blue collars, a fact that determined the exponential expansion of Yugoslavian cities, Marijin Dvor gained new importance thanks to its strategic position near the city centre, but in an area where it was still possible to build. Lots of political, economical and cultural activities settled in this area: the Parliament of the Republic, the Revolution Museum (now Historical Museum) close to the National Museum from the Austro-Hungarian period, the Unitic towers, the Technical School, new university buildings, and, right before the 1984 Winter Olympic Games, a Holiday Inn Hotel.

At the present time, after partially recovering from the devastation caused by the siege, the district was again the focus of city planners and investors' attention. Due to the hostile morphology of Sarajevo, which doesn't allow urban expansion in every direction, but only along the east-west axis, Marijin Dvor is still the most attractive area for new projects, given that the centre is saturated and the socialist neighbourhoods lie too far away. Furthermore, we have to consider that 3 and a half years of shelling free up land whose value, for the aforementioned reasons, is now quickly rising. In the last years new buildings are multiplying: inside the perimeter of Marijin Dvor we can now count the Avaz tower, the highest in all of the Balkans, a nearly finished new shopping mall and another one under construction, a new business centre close to the Museums and the brand new American embassy (the biggest in Europe), also almost completed. Finally, this is the place where the Renzo Piano project for the Museum of Contemporary Art Ars Aevi is planned. All these elements were crucial when it came to choose the field for the ethnographic work. Without any doubt, Marijin Dvor is a privileged place for observing the changes taking place in the city.

The field work is based on an ethnographic model which is to be considered emblematic, in the sense that it would offer meaningful witnesses of the Sarajevo way of life before the war, a way of life that now, due to the conflict but most of all to the political and socioeconomic transformations which followed it, appears to be in danger of disappearing. In particular I am working with the tenants of an old building that, according to the Regulation Plan, was supposed to be demolished but, following protests from the neighbourhood, was set to be preserved. The building, as many in Sarajevo, has received no public funding (it was

heavily damaged during the war), even if the residents can't afford the rehabilitation costs since they all have low incomes (many receive civil or military disability pensions). Through the information collected from them and other inhabitants of the neighbourhood, the aim is to establish which used to be the main characteristics of the daily culture in Sarajevo before war, which changes happened in the last 15 years in the social and economic fabric of the city and which trends are consolidating right now. The assumption supporting this kind of analysis is that such changes reflect, to a greater or lesser extent, taking less or more time to become evident, in the physical form of the city and in the image that its inhabitants have of it.