

## **EXPERIMENTAL CITIZENS**

### **Ethical Dilemmas of Fieldwork in Post-War Sarajevo Civil Society**

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## **Introduction**

In October of 2008, on an unseasonably warm autumn day, I took a hike in the mountains above Sarajevo. I went with a group of several other “internationals” also working or doing research in Bosnia’s capital, a city still marked—thirteen years after the Dayton Accords—by a high population of foreign officials. The hiking group, led by a charismatic and experienced mountaineer from Sarajevo and catering almost exclusively to the staff of international organizations, had, in the course of my fieldwork, become a reliable weekly opportunity for me to meet and ask questions of employees from institutions like the Office of the High Representative (OHR—Bosnia-Herzegovina’s highest international authority), USAID, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Attempts to solicit interviews as a researcher from these officials via e-mail might take weeks of exchanges, or be ignored entirely; but on weekend hikes, huffing and puffing through the spectacular landscapes surrounding Sarajevo, I could listen to the international powers-that-be in Bosnia talk shop about their policies and portfolios and slide in plenty of questions of my own.

This October occasion was no exception, as I found myself walking with staff from the UNDP’s (United Nations Development Program) Sarajevo office, two international judges from the local war crimes court, police officers working for the European Union Police Mission, representatives of several Western European embassies, and a high-level official at the OHR. My conversation with the OHR staff member, Karen, struck me the most that day. After having worked in Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter, following the standard local abbreviation, BiH) for five years—she had arrived during the tenure of High Representative Paddy Ashdown—she was

to leave shortly for a new post in Afghanistan. I asked her for her parting prediction regarding the future of BiH. Sighing heavily, she said, “there will be no more Bosnia.” After over a dozen years of projects, policy-making (and -imposing), and the investment of millions of dollars of resources and labor by the “international community,” Karen’s sense was that BiH remained a precarious and unviable state with a very gloomy future, including the probable secession of the Serbian sub-entity *Republika Srpska* (RS), with Croats in Herzegovina possibly following suit shortly thereafter. This is a scenario that it is difficult to imagine would lead to anything but renewed warfare between Bosniaks (Muslims), Croats, and Serbs, especially over highly contested, strategic, and symbolic locations like Brčko (a de facto “third entity” bridging two sections of RS territory) and Srebrenica (site of the 1995 genocide of roughly 8000 Bosniak men and boys, now located deep within the RS).

After all of her hard work and emotional investment in Bosnia, Karen felt incredibly disappointed over the apparent impending failure of the international community’s decade-long experiment at state-, democracy-, and peace-building in this fragile postwar society. What was refreshing about her grim assessment, however, was her awareness of the incredible cost of this failure for ordinary people in BiH, for whom *the stakes* of the internationals’ use of their country as a laboratory for post-conflict policy-making have been and continue to be incredibly high. She directed her sharpest criticism at the disproportionate power and influence of the High Representative, jointly appointed by the UN and EU, and periodically replaced over the years: it amazes me, she said, how the day-to-day wellbeing of so many ordinary people in this country can depend on the personality and ideology of just one person, chosen behind closed doors by a handful of foreign diplomats. Karen’s critique demonstrated a keen sense of the tragic dimensions for Bosnians of what might unfold in their country in the relatively near future: of

their outrage, that is, at having borne over a dozen years of political and technocratic tinkering by unelected foreign powers, only to see all that tinkering amount to nothing—or even to further bloodshed.

Like policy-makers, diplomats, and international NGO staff, researchers, too, are unavoidably implicated in the costs, failures, and ethical ambiguities of international intervention in post-war Bosnia, and in what follows I reflect on the way this implicated-ness (for lack of a better term), and concomitant methodological and ethical challenges, shaped my ethnographic research, conducted over the span of 20 months from 2006 to 2008. Along the way I will also evoke some of the more general difficulties, sure to be familiar to colleagues with similar experiences, of conducting research in post-conflict communities. From the outset I found Bosnia-Herzegovina to be a challenging “fieldsite:” contemporary social and political problems are complicated and easily misunderstood, confounding simple efforts of diagnosis and prescription; and social contexts across the country are highly emotionally charged, fraught with unresolved grief, anger, and disappointment. War brought such massive destruction and violent social change to BiH that the end of open hostilities in 1995 was merely the beginning, for most Bosnians, of new day-to-day struggles to get by.

Meanwhile, as my opening anecdote indicates, foreign governments and NGOs have played a key role in the political process and in the provision of services, making BiH the object of a series of international experiments, still ongoing, in post-war, post-socialist state-building and market reforms. This “experimentation” contributes to a sense among Bosnians that for the last 15 years their country has been a laboratory for foreign powers, with little consideration given to the fact that the stakes and unintended consequences of these experiments, for local people, can be enormous. The sense of being “lab rats” dovetails with the experience of having

been photographed, filmed, and written-up, in all their struggle and suffering, for three years—watched passively by the world, like animals in a zoo—before effective intervention to halt the slaughter finally came.

The fact that BiH, and Sarajevo in particular, have been deluged by foreign researchers since war's end—young master's and doctoral candidates, confident of the value of their fieldwork and resulting knowledge—further compounds the problem. In short order following my arrival I found that as a foreign researcher, I was often initially perceived (and resented)—like the war photographer and foreign policy-maker—as yet another kind of international zookeeper or lab scientist, come to casually study, offering nothing in return, Bosnian lives and communities already under enormous strain. It did not help that many of the people in Sarajevo civil society whom I initially approached had, as it turned out, already been interviewed by researchers (and journalists) as many as *dozens* of times—only to never hear from their interviewers again, much less receive any resulting publications or gain anything concrete for their organizations.

In the following pages, I reflect on my experience of this pre-scripted researcher-informant encounter and subsequent efforts to re-craft the role of foreign researcher. I discuss what might be learned from my attempts to ensure that my fieldwork became not just another exercise in knowledge acquisition (so easily, and often rightly, perceived as exploitative or condescending) but a mode of ethical, humble engagement with people who have for too long been simply observed, recorded, and experimented with in the course of their wartime and post-war struggles. In the process of examining my own experiences and self-doubts, I aim to illuminate some of the ethical concerns particular to fieldwork in post-conflict situations in general, and ultimately to argue for the value and urgency, in such settings, of the kind of

listening that characterizes ethnographic research at its best: listening, that is, which is sustained over long periods, grounded in local communities of “ordinary” people (i.e., not just policy-makers and civil servants), and which takes seriously people’s own explanations of their day-to-day problems, needs, and aspirations (cf. Borneman 2002 on the particular value of listening after conflict).

My reflections about my experiences as a researcher in Sarajevo remain tentative and far from systematic, and so (by way of opening caveat) the tone and substance of this paper often differ from standard academic style. In the following initial sections, I begin by setting the scene, briefly outlining my research project and painting a general picture of contemporary Bosnia and its capital, Sarajevo—places still deeply troubled by conflicts past and present, yet now almost totally overshadowed by wars and disasters elsewhere in the world.

### **The Research: Mental Health in the Aftermath of War**

I came to Sarajevo to study the long-term impact and sustainability of foreign psychosocial projects, which (in my view) were—in seeking to build peace through intervention in individual minds—among the most ambitious new forms of international tinkering with post-war health, citizenship, and subjectivity. Prior to the 1990s, health components of humanitarian aid responses to wars and disasters were dominated by a narrowly biomedical approach, emphasizing biological and physiological needs and pharmaceutical treatments (Powell 2000: 19; Richters 1997; Pupavac 2004b). In the last two decades, however, beginning especially with humanitarian engagements in war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, aid projects targeting the mental health consequences of violence and disaster—commonly known as “psychosocial support”—have become key elements of international post-crisis remediation efforts (Pupavac

2001, 2003, 2004; Summerfield 1998, 1999). Advocates argue that post-traumatic stress constitutes a deeply threatening “hidden epidemic,” affecting large portions—if not all—of crisis-affected populations (Summerfield 1998: 30; Mollica 2000), and thus represents one of the most urgent public health problems facing post-crisis reconstruction and recovery projects. One leading practitioner in the field, for example, maintains that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) will be the most significant health problem in the former Yugoslavia for at least a generation to come (Agger et al. 1995).

The timing and philosophical underpinnings of this development can be understood historically as emerging from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century evolution of the Western mental health sciences (Pupavac 2004b) and the invention and politics of PTSD in particular (Young 1995, Bracken 2002). The recent and remarkably large-scale incorporation of psychosocial services into post-crisis interventions means, however, that empirical knowledge of the impacts—and unintended consequences—of this form of aid is limited (Powell 2000: 20). Such an understanding is all the more needed given the relatively brief time-scale of most humanitarian interventions. In the Balkans, for example, the rapid reduction in foreign psychosocial projects is as impressive as the original number and scale of interventions claiming a mental health component. The European Union recorded 185 psychosocial projects conducted by 117 organizations in the former Yugoslavia in 1995; projects implemented in the region in subsequent years numbered in the thousands, costing millions of dollars (Summerfield 1999: 1452; Pupavac 2003: 163). This engagement—as well as humanitarian aid and social services more generally—quickly declined following the turn of the century, even as key social and political problems in the region went unresolved.

My fieldwork in Sarajevo was guided by key questions raised by this set of circumstances: what remains, for example, when psychosocial projects, along with entire humanitarian apparatuses, withdraw in order to address new crises elsewhere in the world? How have post-crisis mental health needs and outcomes—along with local conceptions of well-being and forms of resilience—been transformed? And what can these transformations tell us about the nature of war trauma and social recovery?

In my dissertation (in progress), I examine some of the long-term after-effects of psychosocial work in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter, following the standard local abbreviation, BiH), drawing on ethnographic research with local psychosocial NGOs conducted just over a decade after the Dayton Accords ended three years of warfare in 1995. I situate post-war mental health services, along with attempted reforms in institutions and protocols of psychiatric care, in the broader context of the public health, socioeconomic, political, and interpersonal consequences of war and the international management of Bosnia's fraught post-war "transition" (see Lagerkvist et.al. 2003). Examining patterns of mental health care on the ground and how ordinary Sarajevo families relate to services, I explore how one local NGO in particular (called "Wings of Hope") has adapted psychosocial models to the specific needs and grievances of its beneficiaries. By recounting how the staff of "Wings" has come to address trauma in the context of the socioeconomic hardships and under-recognized political values of those it serves, I highlight the limits of psychiatric diagnostics to grasp the subjective meaning and motivation of post-war anguish in Sarajevo. Finally, I suggest that ethnographic forms of listening and engagement compel a more holistic approach to social recovery, mental health care, and the interpretation of symptoms in the aftermath of war.



## **The Setting: Bosnia-Herzegovina, a Dozen Years after Dayton**

The war in BiH (population roughly 4 million) saw approximately 100,000 dead and at least one million displaced. Bosnia's infrastructure, economy, and civic institutions remain deeply compromised. The Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended hostilities in 1995, divided the country into two semi-autonomous entities, the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska. The end of the war brought an enormous international apparatus of governance, monitoring, peacekeeping, and humanitarian aid—a kind of “mobile sovereignty,” to borrow anthropologist of Kosovo Mariella Pandolfi's apt terminology (2003). Renewed warfare has been held at bay, but otherwise progress has been spotty and fitful, with frustration building steadily over the years. Local nationalist politicians, who have a stake in maintaining fear and insecurity in the electorate, frequently stymie the efforts of international authorities to stimulate political reform. It does not help that the Dayton constitution entrenches the role of divisive ethnic identifications in the political process. In 2008, over 12 years after the end of the war, BiH remains in essence an international protectorate, and the “High Representative” (who jointly represents the UN and EU, and whose mandate was originally intended to last only one year) retains, though now rarely invokes, the capacity to exercise near-absolute political authority.

In economic domains, international organizations' neoliberal market ideology and “structural adjustment” policies have led to by-now familiar outcomes—corrupt privatization, the auctioning off of once-public assets, and the dismantling of social welfare services. Political scientist Timothy Donais argues that “many current reform efforts have been directed more at addressing the worst distortions of Bosnia's constitutional and political structures than at creating the social and economic foundations of human security” (Donais: 15). Poverty and

unemployment are substantial: in 2006, 30% of Bosnians had no work, and in 2004 18% lived below the poverty line—that is, they earned an income of less than 185 convertible marks, or 125 US dollars, a month (ibid.: 33). Another 30% have been estimated to be hovering just above this line, living with constant financial insecurity and “supporting themselves in various and unsustainable ways of survival” (ibid.: 76). For Bosnians, this condition is especially difficult to bear in light of the relatively high standard of living most enjoyed prior to the war. While BiH authorities spend roughly the same percentage of GDP on social protection as EU countries, nationalist politics and posturing have caused pension and disability payments to war veterans to massively outweigh all other forms of support, meaning that many of Bosnia’s neediest must get by with little to no assistance (ibid.: 124). What help is available is made difficult to access by labyrinthine administrative and bureaucratic procedures, leading many who are eligible for government support to give up trying to attain it.

The dysfunction and inequalities of Bosnia’s social services extend to the health care sector. Despite a policy of 100 percent coverage by nationalized health insurance, about 17% of citizens were not covered in 2005 (ibid.: 114). Over 70 percent of Bosnians have reported substantial difficulties in accessing health services, due, again, and among other problems, to bewildering bureaucratic obstacles. The complexity of administrative tasks required to obtain care legitimately, coupled with poor pay for public health care employees, means that bribery—or at least a strong personal connection—is a standard requirement for nearly any medical procedure. Recent and reliable statistics about health problems are difficult to obtain—Bosnia’s last official census was in 1991, before war propelled massive and irrevocable demographic and socioeconomic transformations—but according to a recent UN Development Program (UNDP) assessment, health quality in BiH is “some way below that of EU countries” (ibid.: 111). One-

fifth of Bosnians polled by the UNDP consider their health to be “bad” or “very bad,” and 35 percent said they do not receive treatment for their conditions (ibid.: 203).

During the course of hostilities, nearly every Bosnian experienced what mental health professionals would call “traumatic events,” many severe, including rape, imprisonment and extreme abuse in concentration camps, loss of home and property and internment in refugee centers, death of family and friends, and direct involvement in military violence. Residents of Sarajevo endured three years of shelling and sniping—indiscriminately targeting civilians—by Bosnian Serb forces, strategically positioned on the mountains that surround the town like the rim of a bowl. One 1998 study found that nearly twenty percent of Sarajevo residents met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD (Rosner, Powell, and Butullo 2002). “Neuro-psychiatric conditions” represent the second highest cause of death (20%) in BiH (after cardiovascular diseases)—a fact the UNDP attributes to “the legacy of the conflict, including stress and impoverishment, and the impact of transition on the socialized health sector” (UNDP 2007: 111). War veterans, unsurprisingly, are especially troubled, and commit suicide at a high rate—1,260 between 2005 and 2007 (Panjeta 2007).

### **Sarajevo, Under Siege and Today**

Residents of Sarajevo endured the longest military siege in modern history, lasting officially from April 5, 1992, to February 29, 1996 (though this period was punctuated by gaps, sometimes lasting months, in direct violence; and a cease-fire took effect in October 1995 in the lead-up to the Dayton Accords). Sarajevo rests in a valley surrounded by rough, mountainous terrain, where Serb forces of the Republika Srpska and the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) set up positions as hostilities began. From their vantage points on the hills, the Serbs effectively

encircled and isolated Sarajevo, cutting off electricity and water and blocking all transport in and out. They fired mortar shells into the city and shot at civilians with snipers. An average of 329 shells hit the city daily, with an estimated high of nearly 4,000 impacts one summer day in 1993. Serb forces targeted hospitals, open-air markets, people waiting in line for bread and water, and cultural and political landmarks like the National Library and the presidency and parliament buildings. The attacks took an enormous toll in civilian lives—the worst event occurred on February 5, 1994, when a shell struck the Markale market in the city center and killed 68 people. An estimated total of 10,000 people, including members of all BiH ethnic groups, died during the siege.

Irregular militias struggled throughout the war to defend the city and prevent the Serbs from advancing their positions. Initially cut off, Sarajevans regained connection with the outside world—and supply routes for humanitarian goods and black-market trade—when the UN took control of the airport in June 1992 and, roughly a year later, local volunteers completed an 800-meter-long tunnel under the runways to free territory. Sarajevans became almost totally dependent on the humanitarian goods—food and other basic supplies—that arrived on UN planes or passed through the tunnel. More than supplies arrived in this manner: journalists from foreign media came to Sarajevo by the dozens, creating an improvised headquarters in the (in)famous mustard-yellow Holiday Inn (built for the 1984 Winter Olympics) along Sarajevo’s main drag—called “Sniper Alley” at the time, due to its extreme exposure to the hills. From there they chronicled the siege throughout its entire duration, venturing out with cameramen in the wake of especially deadly mortar impacts to transmit stories and images of the brutality to audiences the world over—audiences who quickly became inured to the nightly dose of blood and tragedy (see Sontag 2002; Cohen 1998; Winterbottom 1997; Shepherd 2007).

The “international community,” thus, provided Sarajevans with just enough to survive day-to-day during the siege, while doing little to nothing—at least until the end—to protect them from or bring a halt to the indiscriminate death raining down from the hills; and all the while, foreign journalists documented Sarajevans in their suffering and struggle. Several people with whom I spoke during the course of my fieldwork referred to wartime Sarajevo as “the world’s largest concentration camp;” but unlike camps of the WWII era, the international community was a full part of daily existence in Sarajevo, keeping its citizens barely alive—as if, said many of my interlocutors, they were lab rats being tested and observed for their behaviors under extreme conditions.

Bosnia, and the siege of Sarajevo, were powerful tests of universalizing, globalized discourses of ethics and human rights and of international will to put this rhetoric into action. To Bosnians—bitter and world-weary after two decades of violence, corruption, intractable political division, economic stagnation, and bungled, superficial, fleeting attempts by foreign powers to do something about it—this is a test that the world has resoundingly failed. A deeply ironic monument, erected during the time of my fieldwork near the beat-up, bullet-ridden shell of Sarajevo’s “National History Museum” just across from the Holiday Inn—says it all. A large model of a can of humanitarian aid food, emblazoned with the circle of stars on a blue field representing the European Union, rests atop a marble base engraved with the words “*Spomenik Medunarodnoj Zajednici*” (Memorial to the International Community). And just



beneath, twisting the knife, is a biting sarcastic tagline: “From the Grateful Citizens of Sarajevo.”

The siege of Sarajevo effectively came to an end with the October 1995 cease-fire, though authorities did not officially declare it over until early 1996. War and its aftermath irrevocably transformed Sarajevo. Nearly all structures had been damaged and thousands destroyed; thousands



of people were killed or wounded, and additional tens of thousands fled as refugees to safer parts of BiH or to “third countries,” many never to return. Population demographics were transformed: when the Dayton Accords granted Sarajevo to the Muslim-Croat Federation, most Serbs left for the other side of the nearby inter-entity border, forming a new municipality—so-called “Srpsko Sarajevo”—of their own. While an estimated 30 percent of Sarajevo’s pre-war population was Serb, in 2002 no more than 10 percent so identified. Sarajevo became an overwhelmingly Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) city, dominated by Bosniak politicians and other public figures, Bosniak nationalist ideology, and former Bosniak militia leaders, now turned organized crime bosses and shady businessmen. Symbols of Sarajevo’s vaunted multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan past remain, and those that were damaged have been reconstructed—Orthodox and Catholic cathedrals, Ottoman-era mosques, architecturally distinct neighborhoods dating from Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and communist periods. But the common life behind these symbols—the diversity of creeds and backgrounds, as well as the cross-ethnic friendships and marriages that so characterized past eras—has been markedly diminished by the conflict, perhaps irreparably so.

My own experience of post-war Sarajevo was shaped less by concerns about ethnicity and nationalism, however, than by encounters and conversations instigated and shaped by my research topic: once I explained my purpose, that is, exchanges often led into lay diagnoses of the emotional and mental condition of Sarajevans, coupled (or confused) with bitter assessments of Bosnia's socioeconomic and political circumstances. In late July 2008, for example, a few days after the long-awaited capture of Radovan Karadžić, the wartime leader of the Bosnian Serbs, I took a taxi to the central bus station. I wanted to talk about Karadžić, but the driver asked about my research. He thought I had picked the hardest possible topic, because what I am looking for is, in his view, mostly hidden: everything, at first glance, looks relatively “normal” here; people socialize, work, spend time in cafes with their friends, study at the university, take



buses to the Adriatic coast in July. But under the surface, he continued, “*nešto nije u redu*”—something is not right. People are “explosive” and “temperamental,” flying into a rage at the little irritations of daily life, in a way that they were not before the war. But “war trauma” is not the only reason for this half-buried malaise: “*nema posla*,” said the driver. There are no jobs. He began to recite a familiar litany of social ills: unemployment, corruption, poor social services, a country emptied of compassion and

solidarity. “This is not a normal society. This is not what I fought for.” He had been in the militias defending Sarajevo during the siege.

Sarajevo is layered with paradox and produces contradictory impressions—the taxi driver noted, for example, that on the surface things and people seem “normal” now, but underneath something feels wrong. Similarly a BBC reporter stationed in Sarajevo for years recently told a *New York Times* travel reporter that “[t]here’s a lot of pain just under the surface—a lot of pain” (Solomon 2006). The city landscape itself is largely gray, shrapnel-scarred, bullet-holed Austro-Hungarian and communist-era facades under perpetual restoration—leading the *Times* writer to remark wryly that “the predominant color of Sarajevo is spackle” (ibid.)—but it is punctuated by gleaming new modern structures and shopping centers, like the recently rebuilt Council of Ministers building or the stunning, if out-of-place, Avaz “Twist” tower, now the highest building in the Balkans. Reminders of grief, war-related and everyday, are so omnipresent that they often blend unnoticed into the scenery: underfoot, the “Sarajevo Roses,” mortar impact craters filled in with red paint; and on trees, walls, and bus stop shelters, death notices (*smrtovnice*), posted both at the time of passing and at repeating intervals in subsequent years, printed on standard A4 paper, with pictures of the deceased and short poems or expressions of loss—“beloved father, brother, and friend: death does not end our love, nor time our sadness.”



Standards of hospitality are high and greetings between friends on the street are enthusiastic. Popular night-spots fill with energy and young people dressed to the nines. But there is often an undercurrent of anger to street scenes. People complain about the inconsiderateness of others, recalling better manners and more gentle dispositions before the war,



and seem to have very low patience for daily irritations and rudenesses. Drivers are extremely aggressive and take no heed of pedestrians. Arguments explode on hot, crowded trams over whether to open a window (Bosnians are uncommonly afraid of drafts). In February 2008 three teenagers stabbed a fourth to death on a tram for looking at them the wrong way—prompting thousands of Sarajevans to take to the streets in a rare display of coordinated outrage against city officials (in this case for doing too little about juvenile delinquency.)

Undertones (sometimes, clearly, not-so-under) of anger dovetail with a prevailing sense of stagnancy and anxious, even desperate, waiting-things-out for the possible advent of better days. One of the first things Maja—a key informant of mine, the director of a local psychosocial organization called “Wings of Hope”—said to me, as we stepped aside together at a supervision seminar for her staff on a bleak December morning, was “I am always angry.” She is angry in part because of what she sees as the inertia of her fellow Sarajevans—many unemployed, spending their time in cafés complaining and indulging their own irritation about the state of things in their world. The anger of waiting provokes another level of anger *about* the supposed “passivity” of those waiting.

This, then, is something of the world into which I stumbled when I began my fieldwork: fraught with undercurrents of frustration, grief, and tension, some generated by the long-term ramifications of experiences of the siege, many connected to present-day socioeconomic and political problems. Disappointment over the shape of the society that emerged from the war—fragmented on both ethnic and economic lines, riven by growing inequalities, devoid of the social safety nets (and the compassion they symbolized) of the communist era—is almost palpable. In conversation, Sarajevans direct their anger at (among other targets) international

authorities, local politicians, and “villagers” from rural BiH and from the Sandžak region of Serbia; and now and again, especially in NGOs, at foreign researchers.

### **Researchers and Post-War Civil Society**

Current Bosnian civil society was born through the engagement of an array of international agencies—political, humanitarian, and military—during and after the war. Most NGOs began as local offices of foreign organizations, then established themselves independently as their international partners disengaged. From 1995 the non-government sector rapidly expanded and diversified; in 2005, over 9,000 NGOs were registered in Bosnia—though just half are considered to be active (UNDP 135). Considering only the latter, there is one NGO to every 820 citizens of BiH (ibid.). These NGOs have been guided by a diverse and changing array of missions and principles: “democratization,” peace-building, microcredit schemes, dealing with the past, war veterans’ issues, support for women and/or vulnerable children, eco-tourism and environmental conservation—and so on.

My own research object, psychosocial support, was “in fashion” in local civil society at least until 2000, vital to securing grant funding from international donors. “For a time,” notes one Sarajevo-based psychologist and researcher, “it seemed that everything anyone ever did had to be accompanied by a ‘psychosocial program’” (Powell 2000: 20). But donor interests shift—the psychosocial trend, a few NGO workers told me, gave way to a concern for gender rights and inequalities, followed shortly by an emphasis on Bosnia’s extremely marginalized Roma communities. Since NGOs understandably tailor their plans to what is fundable, psychosocial projects rapidly faded from the agenda of BiH civil society.

This is something I had to learn, of course, through locating and visiting various civil society organizations shortly after my arrival in Sarajevo, a process that was both illuminating for my research and often personally very discouraging, inspiring waves of self-doubt about the value and impact of my work—still in the very early stages—as an anthropologist in BiH. Once I had settled in (in early November 2006), I found an umbrella organization for BiH NGOs called ICVA that sold me a thick spiral-bound book, updated yearly, listing civil society organizations in the country, including their objectives and contact information. I jotted down the several that still included psychosocial support in their missions and started the nerve-racking process of cold-calling. (I e-mailed when possible, though this method had a much lower rate of success.) Finally—a handful of initial interview appointments successfully scheduled—I headed off to NGO offices to try to make what I hoped would be my first key research connections.

One of my first meetings was with the director—a Sarajevan named Željko—of a small peace-building NGO, affiliated with and partly funded through a Christian religious group in the U.S. It was an abrupt awakening: he had little time for me, he said, and in response to most of my questions—at this early stage in my research, primarily oriented toward trying to get a grip on what might still be going on in terms of psychosocial projects in Sarajevo—he asked me to e-mail him later. I got the point, and in making my apologies for taking up his time and stuffing pen and (still blank) paper back into my bag, asked him if he had been approached by many researchers before. Of course, he told me, and I am so, so tired of them—no offense—and have no patience for helping them anymore, especially as I have so little time already for what I need to accomplish here.

This encounter shaped the way I approached the next several appointments—overflowing with apologies and gratitude from the outset, brief and to-the-point in my questions, but also curious to find out whether others in Sarajevo civil society had been as inundated, and were as fed up, with researchers. Željko's attitude was not universal (more on this below), but it was common enough: many civil society workers, in both local and international organizations, had been approached for interviews many, many times in the past several years, both by journalists and researchers. The latter group (I got the impression) was mainly comprised of political science and/or conflict resolution master's students working on theses, making whirlwind tours of Sarajevo NGOs in the course of quick one- to two-month summer visits between the first and second years of their programs. Undergraduates doing research for senior theses, as well, were not unheard of, and I met a handful over the course of my fieldwork. And, of course, there were doctoral students like myself: during several months of my time in Sarajevo, there were enough of us around—anthropologists, historians, political scientists, an ethnomusicologist—that we met most weeks for a “PhD student happy hour” at various local watering holes.

It quickly became clear to me—the meeting with Željko was enough—that many of my scholarly predecessors, especially those on short-term visits targeting the NGO scene, had not prepared the ground well for the rest of us. Rachel, another doctoral student I knew in Sarajevo, came to earn Željko's trust and to conduct a great deal of her participant-observation with his organization; she told me that he had had enough of losing hours to answering the questions of poorly-informed interviewers, questions that often had little to do with his own concerns, values, and plans as a citizen of Sarajevo and of BiH, but were instead narrowly targeted to fill in the blanks of specific research topics—topics that he regularly considered irrelevant. His sense of their irrelevance aside, Željko was still galled that he never—despite promises—received copies

of the theses or publications presumably produced later by his interviewees, and possibly including some of his own words and thoughts. Rachel also told me that she had met other NGO workers who had tracked down articles written by researchers who had interviewed them, only to find they disagreed entirely with the way their words and thoughts were used and the way that their work had been portrayed. This disagreement, of course, would not be such a problem—observers often see and interpret things differently than the actors themselves—if the researchers had kept in touch with their interlocutors and continued a conversation with them about their respective assessments and perspectives.

I found that many of the people I spoke with were frustrated, moreover, with the condescension implicit in the approach of many researchers—the presumption, that is, that simply as Westerners and as graduate students, they possessed, and had the capacity to further develop through research, a kind of expertise that their interviewees did not. This is a feeling that evoked and reinforced the Sarajevan sense of being test subjects, lab rats, or zoo animals for Western powers. The expert-informant, observer-observed dynamic produced, for many Sarajevans, the sense of an “ontological inequality” (Fassin 2005) between two categories of people: those who study and those who are studied, those who take pictures and those photographed, those who end wars (and examine their aftermaths) and those who endure them (cf. Fassin 2005 and Pandolfi 2003 for critiques of parallel ontological inequalities in humanitarian aid work).

Sarajevans have felt this inequality in their engagements with a range of foreign actors. Maja told me once of a foreign aid worker she had met in the late 1990s who had been surprised when Maja mentioned Hermann Hesse as her favorite author—surprised, that is, that Bosnians were aware of and read Western authors like Hesse (or perhaps even books in general, so great,

said Maja, was the aid worker's condescension). When Maja's organization, "Wings of Hope," receives summer interns from psychology master's programs in the U.S., everyone—both staff and interns—seems to assume that the interns can lead workshops in (for example) "post-war trauma and recovery" for NGO staff and volunteers, ignoring the fact that the latter, as both trauma survivors and trained trauma counselors themselves, certainly have more direct experience and expertise in the topic. At a 2008 Wings of Hope summer camp for struggling middle and high school students that I visited, a group of young (20-something) volunteers from the Netherlands was given half of each day to conduct "creative workshops," despite the fact that the volunteers spoke no Bosnian and, as it turned out, knew next to nothing about the country itself, only the vaguest outlines of its recent history (wait—who was fighting whom? one of them asked), and very little about the backgrounds and actual day-to-day problems of the children with whom they were working.

Maja struggles constantly with the head of the German branch, based in Munich, of Wings of Hope—while the Bosnian branch was initially founded by members of the Dutch and German offices of Wings, it is now, technically, on an equal level with respect to the NGO Board of Directors. Nevertheless the German director consistently treats Maja and her Sarajevo staff as his subordinates, flying in periodically to offer "expert advice" and to insist that they are not yet ready to fundraise and carry out projects independently and on an equal footing with the other branches—even as they do so on a day-to-day basis. In e-mail exchanges that Maja allowed me to read, the Munich official consistently twists language to take credit for Maja's own accomplishments—all achievements must, directly or indirectly, flow from the leadership and tutelage of the European patron. In this way he represents an extreme, perhaps, someone who in fact *needs* the inequality between expert and trainee, aid giver and recipient, hero and victim, to

persist indefinitely—but he nevertheless indexes something that also resonates with Željko's complaints about researchers, a semi-consciously enacted assumption of inequality that implicates scholars, “humanitarians,” and foreign policy-makers alike.

### **Open-ended Listening and Fieldwork Relationships**

As I hinted above, not everyone I approached during my time in BiH reacted to me in the way that Željko did. The shape of my fieldwork and the set of relationships upon which my research came to depend was partly determined, in fact, simply by *who was nice to me*. Anthropological fieldwork requires incredible impositions upon people's time and patience—we follow our interlocutors around, shadow them as they go about their daily activities, and pester them with ceaseless questions, many of which, at least in the beginning, are embarrassingly naïve and ill-informed. For people to put up with us, they must value our practices of listening, our receptiveness and concern for their day-to-day lives, struggles, and thoughts; in this way, acting as open vessels for our “informants” to convey what is most important to them, we earn their trust and offer something, however limited, in return for sharing their time and for the knowledge they transmit to us. This imperative—to make the research process *itself*, the act of my listening, somehow valuable to my interlocutors—felt especially acute to me in Sarajevo, as I became increasingly aware of the widespread local sense of having been so casually observed and tinkered with, amidst real suffering and strife, for so many years. The fact that Rachel was able to earn Željko's trust, and that her presence and practices of listening became valuable to him over time, illustrated to me that a different kind of relationship was possible between researchers and Sarajevans.

I chose to work extensively with Maja and Wings of Hope in part because of Maja's enthusiasm—surprising, after my previous encounters—at the prospect of her organization and work becoming the object of research. Maja recognized early on that I came not with a checklist of blanks to fill in, a set of structured interview questions to be answered and recorded in the span of a dull hour, but with a willingness to hang around for *months* and just listen to what she had to say, about *anything*. She came to value our almost daily, multi-hour conversations, in which she finally had an opportunity to tell all the stories about her experiences and her work, and to communicate all the thoughts and opinions about the state of her city and her country, that few others—Bosnian or foreign—had ever asked to hear, much less listened to with evident interest and appreciation. Moreover, my ultimate interest was as much or more in the beneficiaries of Wings—the struggling families and children to whom they provided a range of services ill-encompassed by the term “psychosocial support”—as in the staff of the organization. In this regard I took a step that, it seemed to me, the majority of researchers in BiH, especially those conducting only short-term fieldwork (and anthropologists aside), rarely took: I solicited information and stories from “ordinary people”—not just civil society workers and international officials. In interviews with Wings beneficiaries, I found that they, like Maja, appreciated the opportunity to communicate to someone their actual everyday struggles and grievances in an open-ended manner.

I began to interpret reactions opposite to Željko's—that is, keen interest in taking the time to speak with me or to record an interview—as an indicator that the person had something important or urgent to say about their lives that they felt had been inadequately heard and/or taken into account by the powers-that-be; enough, certainly, to warrant the attention and appreciation of an anthropologist. Civil society workers, trying to implement processes highly



fashionable among and valued by Western powers—democratization, market reforms, “individual empowerment,” trauma counseling, and so on—had been inundated with researchers and reporters, but others, the people whom such processes and related policies actually impact, had not been so exposed, nor their thoughts and experiences so valued. In this way the distribution of reactions to me also tells a story about an unsettling skew in the way—and *from whom*—internationals in places like Bosnia seek out knowledge. I visited an organization for war veterans diagnosed with PTSD in the northeastern provincial center of Tuzla, for example, and found that members there felt totally abandoned and ignored by their government and their communities—not to mention scholars and journalists—and thus were profoundly appreciative of anyone who would listen to their stories and their grievances in depth. Without any pushing or insistence on my part, many members offered to record lengthy interviews with me about their wartime and post-war experiences coming to grips with the mental health consequences of what they had survived, and I spent several days doing so.

### **The Ethics of Research and Representation**

In the recent Croatian film *Armin* (Sviličić 2007), the title character is an adolescent boy from a small Bosnian village, taken to Croatia’s capital, Zagreb, by his father (Ibro) to audition for a film to be made by Germans about Bosnia’s war. Armin is an excellent accordionist, and Ibro hopes that his son will be able to play with other musicians in the background of a scene to take place in a bar. Armin is shy, a little awkward, and early in the movie we see his father insisting that he take his nightly medication for an unspecified ailment. The moment for the audition comes; before the German director, his assistant, and a translator, Armin begins to play, as his father looks on, nervous and proud. But a few moments into his piece Armin, who is

evidently becoming increasingly uncomfortable, faints. Perhaps he has had a seizure resulting from his medical condition, or has simply passed out from nervousness—at any rate, the audition is ruined.

Later we see Armin and Ibro, bags packed, leaving the hotel. The director's assistant stops them in the parking lot and convinces them—Ibro is skeptical—to return. Back in the director's office, the director's assistant explains that he also wants to make a documentary film about the war, and that he might like to interview Ibro and Armin about “their case.” (Ibro is puzzled—“what case?”) The assistant asks, hesitantly, whether Armin's “condition” is the result of a “war trauma.” Armin, without missing a beat, thanks them but says that he is not interested. Ibro adds that “that is our business” (*to je naša stvar*). There is an uncomfortable silence. After Ibro sends Armin to wait outside, the assistant emphasizes that they will be well-compensated for participating and offers a contract. Ibro glances at it, says that Armin is “no longer a child”—implying that his initial decision should stand—and leaves as well.

The fictional encounter is illuminating, a microcosm of larger relationships between Bosnians and foreign observers. Armin, with his father's support and encouragement, wants to be recognized for his talents and his aspirations; temporally, by the ways in which he attempts to imagine and project himself into a better future. The foreign director, however, sees Armin only in terms of, and thereby keeps him chained to, his past as a survivor (or more passively, *victim*) of the war in Bosnia, and thus the likelihood that Armin's fainting spell is caused by some kind of “traumatic” event. The director, that is, reads Armin and his father, recognizes them, values them only through the lens of the potential *damage* inflicted by their experiences. The film as a whole carries an implied critique of inequalities and reductionisms in the telling and ownership of Bosnian stories (and, by extension, of stories emerging from poverty- and/or conflict-affected

places the world over): two Bosnians must travel to Croatia to audition before Germans to have their own history told by someone else, a film director from a more prosperous, politically stable country, who reads their lives only through the preconceived, reductive, pathologizing lenses of trauma and war.

There is an evident disjuncture between what Armin and Ibro, on the one hand, and the German director, on the other, feel is important, worth communicating to a wide audience, about their lives. Bosnia overflows with parallel, and highly consequential, disconnections between actual problems and aspirations on the ground and the interests, assessments, and policy initiatives of international authorities and researchers: from Željko's feeling that many of the researchers who interviewed him never asked about what was actually important to him, to the continuing slant of academic literature on the region toward questions of ethnicity and reconciliation in political structures and processes, to the international community's neglect of social services and bottom-up economic rebuilding—what most Bosnians I encountered say should be first priorities—in favor of magic bullets like “democratization” and privatization (Donais 2005). Outside observers read Bosnia through restricted lenses and sets of presuppositions, shaping research and policy alike (cf. Coles 2007).

Shortly after returning to the U.S. in January 2008 for a period of several months, I gave a presentation to my department about my fieldwork. Even as I insisted, in my remarks, on the centrality of the socialist-capitalist “transition” and economic challenges—rather than exclusively war-related issues—to everyday struggles and suffering, some audience members consistently brought the discussion back to the only themes through which they seemed able to imagine the Balkans: trauma and ethnic hatred. One person suggested that my approach was a kind of “unreconstructed Marxism” and that the economic concerns voiced by my interlocutors

were likely just displacements or masks of war trauma. Like the German director's interpretation of Armin's fainting spell, this response sees the war as *the* over-determining force in Bosnian lives, the etiology of all symptoms, in a way that forecloses listening for alternative relations of causality, as well as possibilities for Bosnians to exceed, escape, or positively transform the force of their history.

It is a challenge for researchers in places like Bosnia, I want to suggest, simply to shake loose from this pattern, to relate and listen to people in a way that captures the dynamism and potential, the openings into unexpected futures, of their hopes and aspirations, however minor (Deleuze 1997; Biehl and Locke 2008). Both ethics and "objectivity," the empirical accuracy of our knowledge, are at stake in our enterprise, utterly interdependent: the German director not only traps Armin and Ibro in the role of damaged victims, thereby reinforcing an inequality between war survivors like them and well-meaning Western chroniclers and aid workers like himself; he understands their lives *inaccurately*, or at least incompletely, and therefore will represent them so.

## **Conclusion**

Modes of knowledge acquisition are part of a single complex with modes of intervention and assistance, the limitations and ethical shortcomings of the one shaping those of the other, and vice versa. What do the ethics of modern humanitarianism—that quintessentially "ethical" enterprise—amount to, when seen through the lens of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where interventions were narrowly-targeted, short-lived, and utterly unsustainable? Where aid organizations fed Sarajevo citizens during the siege, while doing little to address the fact that they were daily subject to arbitrary murder by shells and snipers' bullets; and tried to counsel them on how to

deal with their “war trauma” when open violence ended, while ignoring the fact that they no longer had jobs—to earn enough money to eat? In this context, what does it mean to maintain “human dignity” and address “psychological suffering”—the professed aims of most post-crisis psychosocial projects? What are the values guiding international modes of governance when the EU and the UN, obsessed with creating political structures for “multiethnic” balance and cooperation in Bosnia, ignore the everyday poverty, despair, and social alienation that allow nationalist politicians to perpetuate fear and maintain their grip on power?

Ordinary Bosnians, faced with the steady withdrawal of both local and international authorities from the provision of social services, are left to find, on their own, modes of survival and new kinds of solidarity and support in a context of scarcity, deepening inequality, and festering injustices. Their trajectories reveal the limits of global, neoliberal forms of governmentality and humanitarianism when confronted with the actual needs and problems of people coping with the aftermath of war. And they challenge us to anchor both the ethics of our research practices and our scholarly discussions of ethics, our visions of the kind of values we might strive for in a world of interconnected inequalities, in the dynamic and painful struggles of the *governed* rather than the abstract models of the *governing*. Treating our interlocutors as the experts—in survival, resilience, the actual on-the-ground needs and problems of post-conflict communities—rather than automatically assuming that expertise and authority for ourselves, or deriving it exclusively from civil society workers and policy-makers, is, I suggest, a key to improving our understanding of the complicated social realities in places like Bosnia and, thereby, the forms of intervention and assistance delivered by our governments and by humanitarian organizations.

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