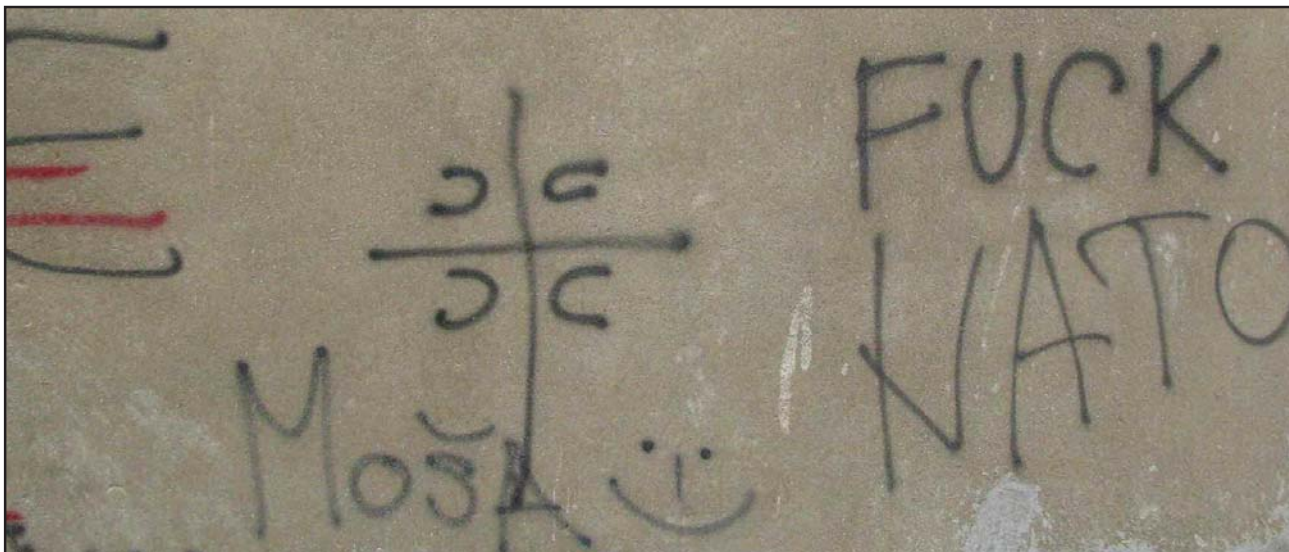


Philosophers and the Politics of Neighborhoods: Park East and Bosniak Mahala (2)



The neighborhood of Bosniak Mahala is an example of how evocative objects support ethnic enclaves, and the impact of enclaves on democracy and peace building in Kosovo

I have been to Mitrovica several times over the years, but only once was I in the vicinity of Bosniak Mahala in the city's Serb dominated north. Although the development and displacement of gentrification could be at work in this ethnically mixed (Albanian and Bosniak) neighborhood, the sputtering economy with its high unemployment rate and low wages may well mask its presence. Upscale shops like those that have popped up in Park East do not exist here. Instead of signs of intrusive affluence, the evocative objects that stand out and resonate with the residents of Bosniak Mahala and the surrounding neighborhoods are those that reflect their ethno-nationalist identities.

Using the main bridge to cross the River Ibar into North Mitrovica, one comes face-to-face with the state and civil flags of Serbia, photos of Serb leaders (such as Slobodan Milošević), and graffiti that denigrates NATO and the EU. The atmosphere is more like being in parts of Serbia than in Albanian dominated Kosovo.

Tale of Two Worlds

However, a right-hand turn takes you to Bosniak Mahala, recognizable by small ineffective barricades and Albanian flags. Strolling along the edge of this neighborhood, looking toward it and looking away from it, is a tale of two worlds. The ethnic non-Serb is the dominant majority within, whereas the ethnic Serb is the dominant majority without. Of course, none of this is hidden from plain sight. This is due, in part, to the

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centripetal and centrifugal forces of evocative objects of a nationalist sort that nudge people to stay within their respective enclaves. And these objects nudge in a unique way: one and the same object is often evocative in very different ways depending upon who is viewing it—ethnic Albanian or ethnic Serb, for example.

Take, for instance, the flags that are often displayed by nationalists. The Albanian flag seen next to a pile of debris blocking the road into Bosnian Mahala encourages fellow Albanian nationalists to come together in that neighborhood. The flag has a centripetal effect on them, eliciting in them a feeling of being welcomed in that place and prompting them to behave in certain ways. This same flag, however, is centrifugal for Serb nationalists, eliciting an unwelcoming feeling in them and discouraging them from being in that place, making it unlikely that they will interact and establish relationships with the Albanian residents.

But is this movement toward or away from Bosniak Mahala only a result of feelings? No, for whether a person moves toward or away from an object and its area is also a result of believing. If we agree with the American philosopher W.V. Quine that believing "is a disposition to respond in certain ways when the appropriate issue arises," then a person self-identifying as a nationalist may motivate that person to respond in

a particular manner. For example, for a person to believe that to live life as a Serb nationalist will preserve the Serb nation against its rivals is to be disposed, among other things, to respond by only living and interacting with fellow Serbs. Accordingly, seeing an Albanian flag dangling from a pole may be enough to motivate one to not venture into what is perceived to be an Albanian enclave.

Appropriate Distance

Feeling and believing, then, are not to be taken lightly—particularly in a place like Bosniak Mahala and its surrounding, where the sight of certain objects may motivate people to maintain an appropriate distance from one another. At first glance, the consequences of positioning evocative objects like flags and monuments might seem fairly inconsequential, being only "a neighborhood thing." But these objects are the emotional and epistemic companions of Albanian and Serb nationalists far and wide that have led to an ethnically segregated and minimally interactive society—a plural monoethnic Kosovo. Although it has the plurality of peoples required of a multiethnic society, it fails to qualify as one because it exhibits little integration (and, thus, little interaction) between peoples. This sort of society, however, strains the legitimacy and viability of Kosovo's democracy, as well as hampers peace building.

For all intents and purposes, Kosovo has been a sovereign democratic republic for a decade. It is structured along the

lines of a representative democracy, in which popular sovereignty—or popular will—is expressed by the aggregation of preferences achieved through the act of voting. However, the fact that Kosovo is predominantly ethnic Albanian and is fragmented into ethnic enclaves, and that ethno-nationalism as an ideology holds sway over how many people vote, places in jeopardy the degree to which its democracy is both legitimate and viable, at least in the eyes of its minority peoples.

Such dangers should be taken seriously, especially in a society where ethno-nationalisms' xenophobia and chauvinism run rampant. The English philosopher A.C. Grayling clarified the forces that might be imposed on people, and in this case, on those of an enclave rich plural monoethnic Kosovo. He said "the power of demagoguery, of manipulation of crowd sentiment by fiery rabble-rousing speeches ...which target those very things—emotion and prejudice—so inimical to producing sound government." In such a political environment, where the majority of people are nationalists nervously living in their own echo chambers, nationalist parties increase their ranks, thereby capturing a larger share of the electorate. Although Serb nationalist parties do well in Serb dominated municipalities like Leposavić and Zubin Potok, these parties barely make a ripple nationwide, leaving many Serbs to question not only the legitimacy and viability of the democratic state but the continuance of peace in Kosovo.

Dampening the Power

Even though representative democracy in Kosovo has been commandeered by ethno-nationalists, who have transformed "the will of the people" into something more like "the wills of the peoples," I am not arguing for the dismantling of Kosovo's democracy. Instead, I am opting for dampening the power of its ethno-nationalisms. Elsewhere I have argued for disproportionate representation with multiple votes as a way to make room for more moderate voices. Here, however, I suggest capturing the discursive, critical, and dialogical elements of deliberative democracy and using them against the fanaticism of nationalism. It is, more or less, a turn to what Grayling calls "the democracy of debate, discussion, the mutual giving of reasons with the aim of reaching agreement or consensus upon which decisions can then be based." Perhaps even more important for peace building is when, according to the American diplomat Harold Saunders, "one's mind opens to absorb

new views, enlarge perspectives, rethink assumptions and modify judgments." The point, however, is not to have only parliamentarians and negotiators make this turn, but also the ordinary people within neighborhoods. The hope is that these elements will end the unquestioning deference to nationalism, eventually extending outwards to greater and greater levels of social reality.



Unfortunately, such engagement is difficult to initiate because of the enclaves and the plural monoethnic nature of Kosovar society. Opportunities for the necessary interaction are few and far between because many people simply do not live, work, and socialize with members of other ethnic groups. And so one would be hard pressed at the moment to acknowledge a deliberative democracy in Kosovo that, as Grayling points out, "concentrates...on the discursive [and dialogical] process[es] in which views can be transformed and brought into fruitful mutual convergence by discussion."

So ways must be found to break down Kosovo's ethnic enclaves in order to create opportunities for interaction (sans gentrification). One way is to physically "tinker" with the evocative objects that influence how residents and non-residents move through and around neighborhoods. This tinkering can involve the reduction or total elimination of public evocative objects that are likely to be divisive along ethnic lines, as well as the placement of evocative objects that will engender shared positive experiences.

It does not take long to figure out which objects in Bosniak Mahala would be excellent candidates for reduction or elimination. The flags of Serbia and Albania are obvious ones. Getting people to agree to stop displaying these flags is another story. In fact, it would be next to impossible for some. Yet making the case for a derivative economic benefit could well persuade some to lower a flag. Making a market place less threatening could take on a new meaning for Serbs and Albanians alike, drawing them into a closer economic relationship and, perhaps, a more meaningful interpersonal relationship as well. Furthermore, introducing new objects

could well have the same effect on people. Perhaps public art in the form of abstract murals rather than those that are narrative driven, could have a centripetal effect on resident and non-resident, drawing them to the beautiful and the imaginative as a means to regenerate the economy and to establish relationships through art tourism. Such a project would itself be a political one, reshaping Mitrovica itself into a museum of contemporary abstraction, something like what the Canvases project did for Cleveland, Ohio.

Dismantling Ethnic Enclaves

Although making a profit is a motivator for some to tinker with objects and enclaves, those same people need to remember that they live in a post-conflict Kosovo, and so must embrace democracy and peace building. It is by dismantling ethnic enclaves within this larger context that Kosovars can better deal with the trauma of war and build a better future for themselves. Robert E. Lee, the general who commanded the Confederate States Army during the American Civil War, acknowledged the importance of dealing with the aftermath of conflict. In an 1869 letter, Lee expressed his disfavor of erecting statues and monuments commemorating combatants. "I think it wiser...not to keep open the sores of war," wrote Lee, "but to follow the examples of those nations who endeavored to obliterate the marks of civil strife & to commit to oblivion the feelings it engendered." Lee was right. The many statues of Adem Jashari (hero/terrorist), for example, are evocative objects that stir divisiveness and antagonism in some Kosovar Serbs. Perhaps it is time to heal the "open sores of war."

Grappling with such matters on the level of neighborhoods is difficult work, but it is work that can have immediate results. It can transform not only the lives of families and neighborhoods, but of whole countries through democracy and peace building. Those of us who insist on the centrality of such work are right up to a point. But there is much, much more. The sooner people can improve the social reality of Kosovo and elsewhere, the sooner they can focus their collective efforts to addressing crises that respect no neighborhood or national boundaries, such as climate change and the more menacing Anthropocene—a geologic epoch brought about by man's planet wide imprint. This is not to make light of the significance of what goes on within Mitrovica (or Omaha), but planetary wide crises do cast the local in a new light. **(end)**