

Review of Edin Hajdarasic, *Whose Bosnia. Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans, 1840-1914*, Ithaca/London 2015

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The book under review is a considerably revised and chronologically extended version of Edin Hajdarasic' outstanding dissertation accepted at University of Michigan in 2008.¹ The author focuses on nationalistic and patriotic discourses in, around and about Bosnia and its "peoples" ("an impossible subject", p. 51) from 1840 to 1914. Many scholars consider the nineteenth century the formative period of nation-states and nations respectively that went hand in hand with the demise of empires. To "liberate" its "own" people from "alien rule", to get rid of early-modern, imperial "yokes", and to vault the nationally "re-birtherd" societies into modern times were the stated aims of all national activists in the Balkans. These kind of (his)stories usually end either with the success or failure in creating a nation and a corresponding nation-state. Hajdarasic challenges such traditional notions of nation-formation as a "completist paradigm" (p. 4), advocating instead to perceive nationalism/patriotism (he justifiably uses the two terms interchangeably) as open-ended, dynamic and adaptable. He thinks of nationalism as a political project impossible to bring to a close, thus making it a potentially hazardous idea. Hajdarasic applies in his work the "grounded theory" as put forward by Claudio Lomnitz², hence taking provincial findings and "parochial" knowledge as an empirical ground for the theoretical analysis of nationalist politics and nationalism (p. 5). This is indeed a strong analytical tool, although Hajdarasic does not consequently make use of it. His theoretical and methodological settings are further based on the ground-breaking and influential works of Eugen Weber, Benedict Anderson, Rogers Brubaker, Pieter Judson, Jeremy King, Tara Zahra, Theodora Dragostinova, and others. Hajdarasic resists temptation to deliver "totalizing perspectives" and "universalizing theories" (with these models usually being very Eurocentric), but rather intends to scrutinize nationalism and nationalistic behaviour "from below" (endnote 18, p. 209). By turning to „the

¹ Edin Hajdarasic, *Whose Bosnia? National Movements, Imperial Reforms, and the Political Re-ordering of the Late Ottoman Balkans, 1840-1875* (unpublished Dissertation, University of Michigan, USA, 2008). See also: Edin Hajdarasic, *Out of the Ruins of the Ottoman Empire: Reflections on the Ottoman Legacy in South-Eastern Europe*. In: *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (September 2008), 715-734.

² Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism*, Minneapolis 2011.

activists and their activism“³ as the subjects of studies of nationalism and nationalization, Hajdarpasic successfully demonstrates the ambiguity and arbitrariness of both nationalism and nation-making.

Hajdarpasic draws upon a broad range and different types of sources (e.g. poetry, literature, private correspondence, travel guides, artworks, political tracts, and more) from many archives and libraries in Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Austria, and Turkey. He raises the voices of numerous nationalistic activists such as intellectual patriots, patriotic scholars, romantic writers, venturesome travellers, ambitious politicians, loyal officials, national agents, boisterous revolutionaries, juvenile “rabble-rousers” (p. 90) and ignorant storytellers – some of them being a bit of all at the same time. Hajdarpasic’s elitist and “ethnically heterogeneous” choir of vocalists is composed of Dositej Obradović, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, Ivan Franjo Jukić, Antun Radić, Ilija Garašanin, Velimir Gaj, Mate Topalović, Ognjeslav Utješenović (Ostrožinski), Toma (Bartol) Kovačević, Matija Mažuranić, Ivan Mažuranić, and Jovan Cvijić – to name but the most prominent ones. His study is “thus a contribution to understanding the cultural and intellectual production of nationalism.” (p. 5) Indeed: All these activists produced nationalism – whether on purpose or out of ignorance. First-time author Hajdarpasic shows how these men eagerly contributed to lay imperial projects to rest and give birth to “modern” nations and nation states.

Taking a closer look at the “proliferation and compulsion of patriotic desires” (p. 1) in Ottoman and Habsburg Bosnia turned out to be a wise choice for several reasons. Bosnia as a “classical” contested borderland in the period under scrutiny has still much to offer: The province stands for an imperial order that was tackled by different national aspirations (“Serbian”, “Croatian”, “Yugoslav”, “Bosnian”, “Bosniac”). However, national activists not only fought against their imperial enemies but also against claims staking from their “(br)others” – “a character signifying at the same time the potential of being both ‘brother’ and ‘Other’” (p. 16). Hajdarpasic makes extensive use of this new interpretative device in order to elaborate “Serbian-Croatian attempts to nationalize Bosnian Muslims” (p. 17) but also to illustrate how “national indifference” (Tara Zahra)⁴ and “non-national” loyalties of many Bosnian Serbs/Croats/Bosniacs-in-the-making drove national activists to despair.

³ Edin Hajdarpasic, *Whose Bosnia? National Movements, Imperial Reforms, and the Political Re-ordering of the Late Ottoman Balkans, 1840-1875* (unpublished Dissertation, University of Michigan, USA, 2008), p. 138.

⁴ Tara Zahra, ‘Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis’, *Slavic Review*, vol. 69, no. 1 (2010), 93–119.

Furthermore, Hajdarpasic applies this innovative analytical strategy in order to pose *the* crucial question when it comes to nation-making: “How and when does one come to know who are, who are not, one’s “own people”? Especially for Serbian nationalists (the “self-proclaimed enemies of the Turks”, p. 115), Bosnian Muslims were indeed a subject of constant change and dispute: sometimes being “brothers”, sometimes being “others”. Hajdarpasic provides the reader with ample evidence that not even the most ardent national “freedom fighters” found a definite answer to this question (and – of course – they never will).

It might have been precisely for that reason why Hajdarpasic chose to begin with “the people” in chapter 1 (“The Land of the People”). Although “the people” literally personifies the “body” of any nation, it remains an “elusive subject” (p. 51), a volatile perception, an emotional idea and thus an “imagined community” (Benedict Anderson). One of the first “Serbians” to discover “its people” was the linguistic reformer Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1864). Although not questioning Vuk’s philologist merits, Hajdarpasic still reveals how emotions rather than academic thinking impinged on this “man from the people” (p. 20) and “patriotic scholar”. His romantic aspiration to “collect our nationality” clearly belongs to the field of “ethnographic populism” (p. 45). At the end of the nineteenth century, even scholars from the Balkans heavily criticised the works of Vuk and his first followers: Jovan Cvijić – the founder of modern geography in Serbia and president of the Serbian Royal Academy of Science – “found their work to be lacking ‘even the slightest bit of scientific perspective.’” (p. 46) The afore-mentioned elusiveness of “the people” (and its land) is best symbolized by the fact that Vuk had actually never visited Bosnia and Herzegovina (“the core lands of the Serbian nation”, as he called it) that he kept praising so much in his writings!

In chapter 2 (“The Land of the Suffering”) Hajdarpasic turns to one of the most pivotal elements of nationalism, i.e. the (alleged) suffering of one’s “own people”. This national suffering would only end with the “liberation” of land and people. According to Hajdarpasic, “poetry had a privileged place in the romantic conception of the nation.” (p. 68). The writers of “sad poetry” and “poetic-political fantasy” intended to reinforce existing stereotypes, to create negative images of the “Others”, and even to stimulate “the (Serbian-Croatian) hatred of the Turk”, as the Encyclopaedia Britannica characterized the famous poem *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* (*Smrt Smail-age Čengića*, 1846) written by Ivan Mažuranić (1814-1890) in the 1890s (p. 80). Many national activists dwelled on the “aggrieved national subject” (p. 84)

during the Habsburg period, depicting the Austrian “alien rule” as even more despicable than the Ottoman times (p. 81-83). The combination of wallowing in national self-pity, playing around with history and spreading religious and national hatred was (and still is) a highly explosive mixture for provoking violent reactions among the ones (allegedly) “suffering”.

Chapter 3 (“Nationalization and Its Discontents”) is devoted to the somewhat paradox problem many national activists experienced at some point during the nineteenth century: On the one hand, national awakeners credited peasants and shepherds of being the most “honest”, the “real”, and the “true” representatives of the nation-in-the-making; on the other hand, precisely these idealized peasants and shepherds often proved to be reluctant for quite some time to live and act “nationally” as envisaged by their national teachers. Or as Hajdarpasic aptly puts it: “The work of nationalizing people was always accompanied by foundational disappointments and failures.” (p. 90) To nationalize people as a historical process was also a question of money and organization skills: According to Hajdarpasic, “Serbia’s nationalizing mission” (p. 92) in Bosnia (and elsewhere) was mainly concerned with three issues: secrecy, insurrection, and expansion to potential co-nationals “shaped the formative visions of state-building in the modern Balkans” (p. 93). High-ranking officials prepared secret “liberation” plans, paid national agents taught patriotism, and young revolutionaries (heroes or terrorists?) stirred up rebellions and unrests in Bosnia from outside of the province. Hence, Hajdarpasic concludes with much apropos in chapter 4 (“Year X, or 1914?”), that “youth holds a special status in histories of nationalism” (p. 160). As a matter of fact, the notion of “juvenileness” had a double meaning: On the one hand, it referred to the youth of the nation as a quasi biological “thing”, and on the other it meant the younger people who were willing to sacrifice their lives for the nation. Their “new visions of violence” (p. 147) directed against imperial representatives in and of Habsburg Bosnia eventually triggered the outbreak of the First World War.

In chapter 5 (“Another Problem”) the author aptly demonstrates how “Ottoman and Habsburg officials not only tried to repress the emerging forces of nationalism but also began to adopt many of the basic forms, idioms, and strategies of nationalist movements.” (p. 163) Hajdarpasic suggests not posing “some essential difference between ‘national’ and ‘imperial’ politics” but instead analysing their “deeply intertwined relationships” (p. 163). Along these lines, Hajdarpasic characterizes both empires as nationalizing “latecomers” using journals and

newspapers as imperial projects to “nationalize” the population in Bosnia (“The Empire Writes Back”, p. 186).

In the epilogue (“Another Bosnia) Hajdarpasic compares nationalism to the once very popular computer game “Tetris”: “No matter how adept a player is at unifying rows, the game eventually and always ends the same way: the mounting obstacles overwhelm and topple the entire construction, until one starts over again.” (p. 206). This is a very original comparison, although Tetris was invented in the “East”, modern nationalism in the “West”.

Hajdarpasic’s engagingly written book is a welcomed contribution to the studies of nationalism in general and late imperial Bosnia in particular. He successfully demonstrates how the writings of many national activists are studded with inconsistencies, contradictions, half-knowledge, insults, irrational eruptions, expressions of hatred, calls for violent actions, and absurdities.

However, his work is not free of flaws: First, taking the grounded theory as theoretical basis seems to somewhat hypocritical to me as Hajdarpasic does not actually apply it. He let speak just a few elitist nationalists and ignores the voices from the “ordinary” people, from the people “on the ground”. How did these people respond (or not) to the patriotic claims of their “teachers” in the period under scrutiny? What about the “battle for children” (Tara Zahra)? It would have been most intriguing to see how the (successful?) transformation from “traditional” (non-imagined) loyalties to “modern” (imagined) ones affected the Bosnian society. Second, some clearer verdicts on the altogether problematic “achievements” of nationalistic activists cited in his book would not have gone amiss. Last but not least, the publishing house did not do the best job: Endnotes (especially when referring to pages) instead of footnotes make it difficult to use the book for academic purposes. However, this drawback is far outweighed by the fact that there is neither a bibliography nor a list of references. It is difficult to understand why the publisher chose to omit such useful tools.

Despite these shortages, Hajdarpasic’s book makes a good reading. If nationalism (or better: groupism) indeed has no end – and I would agree with that – then we might call it what it actually is: a dead end. Having illustrated this is the most deserving credit of his work.