

## **DISCUSSIONS AND COMMENTS**

### ***On Classical Ethnography: A Comment Inspired by Leslie Bank's Home, Spaces, Street Styles***

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As the anthropologists Eriksen and Low mention on the back cover of Leslie Bank's *Home, Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South African City* (Pluto Press 2011), this book certainly exemplifies the significance of classical ethnography in urban anthropology. It offers a very deep and well documented ethnographic analysis, dealing with apartheid and post-apartheid South-Africa. It is classical in the sense that it prioritises fieldwork. Deep and wholesome, since it considers the conurbation of East London not only as the framework for participant observation in a changing environment, but also as a built (as a matter of fact, destroyed and reconstructed) environment in a broader sense, that is, composed of houses, hostels, shacks or shanty towns and even significant courtyards. The book should be identified as belonging to the general anthropological trend of *revisiting* classical fields of ethnography which has occupied many anthropologists in the aftermath of decolonization. Here Leslie Bank brings us back to East London, to revisit a famous series of ethnographies published in the 1950s by Philip and Iona Mayer (*Xhosa in Town*). Through the study of the transformation of these 'places', the author builds a map which can be read through different keys. Spatial, socio-economic and political interpretations add to the comprehension of the setting. However in the late 1960s Mayers came under criticism by a 'humanitarian' movement in urban anthropology which tended to focus on the social deficits rather than on the organization of space and life in the urban areas. Hence Bank's scope does not just add another ethnographical flash-back to a fashionable critical anthropology, but attempts to restore and empirically update the whole history of East London and, above all, its social life; as he points out 'it is a historical anthropology of urbanism in an "ordinary" South African city'(p. viii). This gives the reader a chance to evaluate the changes that occurred there at diverse historical moments throughout the

second half of the twentieth century. Quite importantly, Bank does not try, as too often is the case of iconoclasts, to discredit previous research in an anachronistic critique of the past generation of scholars. Instead, he aptly softens the opposition between two groups, identified by his predecessors, the traditional (rural) *Red* people and the modern *School* people to show the changes which are happening among them during the considered period of time.

The book starts with a very extensive presentation of the author's point of view and position towards the existing ethnographies of the place he chooses to study and more general theoretical positions in urban anthropology. Then Bank describes what he calls the 'political mood' in the city after the urban riots that took place in 1952 and discusses how these events and moods affected the urban landscape. The results were the erection of Duncan Village, a new township on which he focuses his attention, which took place throughout the rest of the century. Political measures to control better the place as well as the transfer of entire populations transformed the urban fabric as well as the former social and gender roles. Bank speaks of a feminist city going back to patriarchy. A full reversal of the situation occurred when, in the 1980s, young residents took control of the site and made what the author calls 'apartheid modernism' implode. As a result, the township turned into a slum under the new cultural style called 'the comrades', which was introduced by young men choosing to live in shacks. The analysis then addresses specific places and the changes that affected them. For example, Bank examines 'single-sex hostels' made into family housing, matrifocal households transformed into hetero-patriarchal township houses and backyard shacks occupied by migrants now being occupied by single women, showing how the old and new users make up the reputation of places.

And this is how the book ends: Duncan village has become a 'dishonoured urban locality'. It is hard to find clear causes for its decay: Bank speaks of 'fractured urbanism', sticking to his refusal of considering people as mere victims of macro factors but rather as agents of their lives. One can only applaud such an empirical and *emic* approach. However the reason Bank gives for introducing the concept of fractured urbanism is purely rhetorical and could be used to develop any argument, including 'a more complex understanding of the space of the post-apartheid township as socially compact, culturally complex and internally diverse' (p. 241). Regrettably, this kind of rhetoric is not infrequent in 'Home, spaces, street styles' — perhaps a mere sign of the times. Similarly, on a theoretical level, the discussion constantly complies with

the ‘ethnographically correct’ grid of post-structuralist concepts and methods, which makes it a bit too conventional.

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### ***Bosnia-Herzegovina: Connecting the Dots***

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From afar, the European Union seems to be the place they all rush to get into. And that was the misconception I first came to Sarajevo with. But for those deciding Bosnia’s future, the EU is much like heaven: everyone wants to go to heaven but doesn’t want to die to get there. A flimsy analogy saying but one thing: the perks and privileges that come with European Union membership are favoured by all, not so much the painful reforms and social transformation demanded by the accession process. This may be a bitter pill to swallow for EU officials and enlargement enthusiasts alike. Realising that the Balkans are not longer passionately yearning for Europe, not willing to do whatever it takes to get there, is for many a malaise hard to whisk away. With last month’s low turnout for Croatia EU referendum, this purely intellectual concept sported only in conference halls, gains more ground. It shows the carrot- and- stick approach the EU assertively used in the Balkans as obsolete. This is something the European Union has to get a grip on, as well as understanding that Balkan countries cannot be all dealt with in a similar fashion. The region is simply too complex, with local enmities and expedient political interests chipping away at an ever vagrant trans-regional consensus towards the EU. Out of all Balkan states, only Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo have yet to submit their EU membership application. If Kosovo is still a young state, highly contested internationally and on life support from Washington, the same can’t be said about Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet, Bosnia has shown little national consensus in pushing for reforms and furthering the process of EU integration.

**Keywords:** urban, civil society, Bosnia, Sarajevo

Early this year, as bitterly cold weather and snow was yet to sweep across much of the Balkans, I flew into the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina to attend a conference on the country’s future and challenges of EU membership. Nothing uncanny, so far; rather, just another debate between students and specialists around the difficulties ahead. One might say a commonplace event in a country so bound to European institutions via the key role the EU special representative to Bosnia plays.

The conference started with the usual praising arguments, stressing the importance of becoming an EU member state and the expected benefits. Yet, as the debate rolled on and students began voicing their opinions, a different mindset slowly began to dawn. It shifted from an unabated consensus on the EU accession to a cautious, sceptical, less enthusiastic approach. It was new ground I was stepping on.

### **Misgivings over the EU Bid**

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I imagine this as a bitter pill to swallow for EU officials and enlargement enthusiasts alike. Realising that the Balkans are not longer passionately yearning for Europe, not willing to do whatever it takes to get there, is for many a malaise hard to whisk away. With last month's low turnout for Croatia EU referendum, this purely intellectual concept sported only in conference halls, gains more ground. It shows the carrot- and- stick approach the EU assertively used in the Balkans as obsolete.

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### **The Status-quo**

Again, for an onlooker such as myself the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina appears dire. Since the Dayton Agreement was signed, little has been done to prepare the country for peace. It simply appears that sixteen years have been wasted, and also has not prevented the country from disintegrating along ethnic lines. Meanwhile, people became disenchanted with what was supposed to be their unifying goal — EU and NATO accession, whilst politicians continue to foster ethnic tensions for electoral gains. Attesting to this lingering ethnic strife is the current political deadlock — Bosnia still has no government a year and a half after the last elections were held.

This current state of affairs has but two culprits: the International Community and Bosnia- Herzegovina itself.

### **The International Community**

As in most post-war societies, the involvement of the International Community was instrumental in preventing further bloodshed and helping rebuild the country. What sets Bosnia a cut above other post-war societies is that sixteen years after the war ended an international envoy, called the High Representative, still holds powers above the local constitution, parliament and governments. This was possible because both the EU and the United States agreed upon a reconstruction strategy foregrounding the principles of multiculturalism, in order to maintain peace, ethnic communities should maintain their separateness and avoid negative interactions. Not only did the Constitution framed at Dayton legitimise the territorial divisions of Bosnia but created separate institutions for each of the three ethnic groups: Serbs, Croats and Bosnians. As expected, this made the country ungovernable, with only one exception: The High Representative for Bosnia, who still enjoys veto power, has the ability to amend all laws and to revoke any elected official if deemed necessary.

The western leaders who drew up the accords failed to insist on a mechanism to adapt *Dayton* to future developments on the ground in Bosnia. The Constitution left ethnic national groups too much room for blockades should they see their interests at risk. In other words, the existing constitution actually impedes the development of a culture of compromise.

It is this reality that has kept Bosnia in a limbo for almost two decades now, and looking back, sixteen years later, we realise how faulty this approach was to begin with. At that time it seemed the reasonable thing to do but this painful status-quo should not have lasted this long.

### **Bosnia-Herzegovina**

A divided country may be by the fallout of Dayton, but Bosnia is equally responsible for fuelling this ethnic segregation. With the exception of the army, Bosnia keeps ethnic divisions a focus for any administrative and institutional organization. Serbs, Croats and Bosnians vote only for their own, as politicians foment ethnic nationalism and use religion as a primary tool in their electoral battles. Likewise, the infamous *two schools under one roof* system, which separates pupils based on their ethnicity, has seen little popular support for its removal. Sarajevo, blending in an

Ottoman past with a strong European heritage, was once dubbed the ‘Jerusalem of the Balkans’ for its religious and ethnic diversity. Today, out of its 550.000 inhabitants only 18.000 are ethnic Serbs. For all it counts, the only thing people of Bosnia, whatever their ethnicity, clearly agreed upon is that direct external intervention has to be reduced.

There’s no silver bullet for Bosnia’s problems. But the failure to spark a constitutional debate on the devolution of powers from the High Representative to the local level will hamstring the government in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and render it even more powerless than it is now. Also, the EU has to have a clearer policy toward Bosnia and stop sending mixed messages, as was the case when it allowed Serbs and Croats to travel without a visa but not Bosniaks.

Mistakes were made as it was hard to connect the dots looking forward. But now, looking back, they must be amended. The final decision is with the people of Bosnia. Only Bosnians can say if they are willing to take up the challenge, make difficult reforms and join the EU, or keep the status quo, which will only widen the existing gap between Bosnia and the rest of Europe, and in turn reduce the likelihood of a better life in the foreseeable future.

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### *Visual Approaches to Urban Ethnography<sup>1</sup>*

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The visual tells about the city: its history, its social and spatial forms, and its characters. Ethnography helps us understand the meaning, identifying the processes. Visual language has in fact the potential to uncover meanings and representation that reflect an interesting micro perspective on phenomenon under study; a connection that, however, today it is still restrained by a mutual shyness. Both ethnographic photography and film may be the place where the work

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<sup>1</sup> This commentary is part of my ongoing reflection on ethnographic experience and visual methodologies. Some of the issues addressed here were discussed during a workshop (co-authored with Jerome Krase) held in Buenos Aires during the last ISA Visual Sociology Thematic Group conference of August 2012.

of urban research encounters audio-visual skills and competences. The visual, in fact, provides a way for social scientists to explore various kinds of representations applied to the field of ethnographic research.

This commentary gives a snapshot on visual sociological methods, spatial semiotics, and visual culture to study the urban scene. Moreover, it would underline that we could treat observations and photographs as we do other information, such as interviews or demographic data which are specific to areas, neighbourhoods, streets, organizational boundaries and census tracts. We should note here that our snapshots attempt to be as close as we can get to what an ordinary person might see as they traverse a space. They are not attempts at artistic representation but are intended to document visual surveys. Indeed, visual sociology and attention to vernacular landscapes in the inner city allow us to see conflict, competition and dominance at a level not usually noticed and which can easily be related to the theories and descriptions of Lefebvre and Bourdieu.

As Krase (2012) states, explaining how urban spaces are used, contested and transformed by different social groups is a crucial task. It is suggested here that a visual approach to the study of gentrification in ethnic neighbourhoods could encourage a synthesis of old and new approaches to the pre- to post- modern urban scenes. This could also provide insights as to how visible cultural resources are commodified. Given that rapidly changing metropolitan landscapes are often the venues for sociological reconnaissance of globalization and de-industrialization, visual sociology can be a valuable adjunct to 'normal' urban research and reportage. For example, we can use photographic surveys in comparison with historical photographic archives to see and record how differing constructions of space and spatial practices in the landscape of new immigrants transform the city. We can photograph, film or video ethnic enclaves in order to both document and illustrate how particular spaces are changed by their new occupants. Of special interest might be the ways by which public areas are used. Visual methods make it easier to examine new constructions, as well as the alterations of existing spaces.

On Sunday February 10<sup>th</sup>, for instance, the Chinese New Year Parade with the ethnic spectacles of Chinese dragon dances, live musical performances and more took place in the so called Milan's Chinatown, in Paolo Sarpi street. I could not stay still in one place, so I took one chance to shoot some photographs of people interacting in the area. I am using this as an example of how the built environment may be used as an empirical source beginning from the



social relations? How do we visually build stereotypes? In the process of constructing reality, how can visual methods allow us to understand the social constructions of meaning? Or, again, is semiotics a way to understand different systems working in the construction of meaning?

Drawing up the legacy of documentary, fine art and social critique, the Visual applied in Urban Research is an interdisciplinary field of practice which develops a deeper dialogue on urban sense-making processes. By encouraging contributions from scholars around the world and promoting a discussion on this topic, *Urbanities* may contribute to develop answers to the above questions.

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