The Town of Široki Brijeg: Between Hills, Stigmas and Hegemonies

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The findings of an ethnographic fieldwork in Bosnian-Herzegovina (BiH) are presented in this article to examine the formation of cultural stigmas and the relationship between people and governance. The analysis focuses on the 29,000-person town of Široki Brijeg (SB, meaning Wide Hills), located in the regional political entity called West-Herzegovina Canton of the Federation that makes-up today's Bosnia-Herzegovina. The canton is inhabited mostly by Herzegovinian-Croats, with Bosnian-Muslims (Bosniaks) and Serbs living separately from Croats in the few villages and towns where they can be found. This ethnic segregation, also visible elsewhere in the country, can be attributed in part to reciprocal stigmas between ethnicities, which affects the social relationships and economies of both Široki Brijeg citizens and town outsiders. The SB and BiH population's view of ethno-political power, and the practical difficulties of deconstructing them for the purpose of reducing the so called 'ethnic-divide', are central to the analysis that follows. It is argued that divisions, stigmas, wealth inequalities and political powers are the products of historical processes that began in the Middle Ages and have continued to this day, and of political interest in keeping BiH in a state of perpetual liminality.
Keywords: Urban relations, stigmas, power reproduction, hegemonies.

Introduction: The Historical Context and Ancient Hegemonies

The town that is the focus of this article owed its origins in part to the Italians, via Roman Catholicism. In 1846, the Catholic Order of the Franciscans placed the first stone of their Monastery on top of one local hill. Thus, they symbolically gave birth to the town, which they called 'Široki Brijeg' (henceforth SB) on account of the area's topography. Long before the Franciscans' foundation of this city, it was probably the ancient Romans who brought Christianity in the region, as testified by the ruins of a 5th century Basilica located in Duboko Mokro (a village in the SB Municipality). Roman-Catholicism was the exclusive faith of the region, until a theological — hegemonic — challenge arose in Medieval times. Conquering Turks, in the shape of the Ottoman Empire, appeared between 1483 and the late 19th century. As a result, BiH is today one of the few European countries with a majority Muslim population.

The Ottomans, however, did not achieve a solid presence in the SB area, due to the hostile farming conditions of the rocky West-Herzegovina's terrain. The absence of Mosques and Islamic architecture witnesses the Ottomans' scarce presence in this zone. Regardless of their timid presence, the Turks are not favourably 'remembered' in SB. Croats from neighbouring cities and villages, which were more subject to Ottoman rule, have passed down to SB citizens through transgenerational oral narratives how the Ottomans attempted to convert the locals to Islam, usually through violence but also through economic sanctions such as tax increases and restrictions on property ownership. Some Croat-Catholics fought the Ottomans with bullets, while others engaged in what cultural anthropologists would define a Gandhi-style peaceful disobedience (Flynn and Tinius 2015). By the end of the 19th century, the majority of Croats had retained their Catholic faith. Those who converted to Islam became known as Bosniaks, and for some people they carried the stigma of new 'Turks'.

Things were to change in 1878, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire (henceforth A-H) took over BiH and established a new political system and hegemony. Today's SB citizens hold a Janus-faced attitude towards the Austro-Hungarians. Some state that the Vienna government

treated Herzegovina as a colony but, commendably, built mills, roads, industries and churches and allowed Catholicism to flourish (Bougarel 2017). The same Austro-Hungarians are also remembered for taking away local resources of iron, tobacco, quarry stones and water. In spite of this duality, many Croats were to join the A-H Empire's troops and praised the Vienna government for instilling in the Croatian culture a hard-working and industrial mentality which has contributed to economic development.

Croatian nationalism gradually increased in the early 20th century. Many in SB engaged in the project of establishing a Croatian Independent State with Zagreb as the capital. Further political turmoil confirmed this resolve. The collapse of the Habsburgs Empire in 1918 saw the town of SB come under the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In 1939, the Croats attained some independence with the autonomous Banovina of Croatia. In 1941, the Independent State of Croatia became a de facto puppet state of the Italian Fascists and German Nazis. Around this time, the town celebrated Croat nationalism fervently and formed a strong alliance with the Ustashas.[1] These historical events contributed to SB's reputation as a fascist stronghold. This label is still used today and is deeply ingrained in the minds of citizens in other municipalities of BiH. The fascist reputation was bolstered further by SB citizens' historical resistance against the Communist Army of Yugoslavia even after World War II ended, and by the fact that during the 1991-95 Yugoslav conflict groups of Croat soldiers in the HVO (the Croatian Army) defined themselves as the new Ustashas while fighting both the Serbian and Bosniak armies.

Yugoslav Malfunctioning Solutions: 'The Big-Reset'

Stigmas and power-economic imbalances have profound historical roots in BiH. The Yugoslavia authorities attempted to solve these imbalances as early as 1945, when the state was founded. At that time, the new nation had to deal with inherent social influences of localism, stigmas and tradition that impeded any feeling of national unification. The fledgling state was deeply divided economically and culturally; the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled the Balkan Peninsula for decades and hundreds of years respectively, had left different traditional influences, diverse formal and informal institutions and disproportional economic mentalities. Cumulatively, these factors resulted in significant inequalities and an absence of equal opportunities that survived in the present day BiH (Rojek and Wilson 1987).

Social class and cultural stigmas were a problem for the Communists as they are for contemporary BiH; the problem lies in Imperial practices, both Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman. The former A-H lands (primarily Croatia, Slovenia, West Bosnia-Herzegovina and Northern Serbia) exhibited a bourgeoisie cultural capital alongside an industrial/entrepreneurial mind-set. There, industrial development and infrastructural modernization policies began as early as

[1] The Ustashas were a Croatian nationalist military organization that campaigned for the establishment of a Croatian Independent State. They promoted Croat nationalism and fascism. The group, led by Croat fascist dictator Ante Pavelić, was associated with genocide and terrorism against Serbs, Jews and Roma, and with resistance against Tito's communist troops. Thousands of Ustashas were recruited from SB.

1878, when A-H troops appeared on BiH soil (Komlos 2014). During their domination, the A-H authorities instilled in the populace an ethos of learning and service, which celebrated self-achievement and a meritocratic attitude to social status.

SB citizens inherited the social capital around productivity, income and entrepreneurial spirit. Today's BiH-Croats argue that such spirit contrasts with their neighbours who lived under the Ottomans. The former Yugoslavia's southern-eastern and central regions resented then as they do now what they see as an Ottoman mentality which, whilst not shy of constructing bridges, houses and other structures, also wiped out the pre-existing local aristocracy to eradicate local sources of power. In the reasoning of the SB and BiH-Croats, such administrative engineering provided for a homogeneous society of peasants — often with small land holdings — somewhat impervious to (or denied access to) intellectual novelty and technological innovation (Wachtel 2008). The aesthetics of the divergent influences of the two Empire governances remained evident throughout the 20st century; territories that were once A-H provinces were more urbanized, had lower levels of unemployment and corruption and paid more taxes that contributed to social welfare than territories where the Ottomans left strong social influences (Business Review 2018).

Aware of such divisions, the Socialist Party attempted to address through economic reforms the fiscal and social disparities and the hegemony of ethnic groups (Uvalić 2018; Musić 2021). Tito proposed the '*Big Re-Set*' in order to create a sense of national unity specifically for Janus-faced regions like BiH, where the A-H and Ottoman legacies existed in proximity. The 're-set' was based on the modes of production. In the 1950s, Tito introduced the 'workers self-management' scheme. This allowed employees to run companies and thus separated the management of industry from state control (Grandits and Taylor 2010). This economic strategy held two objectives; one was to establish a unique economic system, the other was to address internal fragmentation and fashion a new Yugoslav nationalism by 'un-doing' historical legacies which prevented the formation of a shared Yugoslav identity (Wilson 1978).

The self-management system initially appeared to be successful. Its failures, which become evident in the 1970s, were considered to be the result of a variety of socio-economic, organizational and historical factors (Archer and Musić 2017, Wilson 1978). Social disparities, and economic entrepreneurship tend to reproduce historical experiences as well as mono-urban social realities. These processes are difficult to break in a short period (Hall 2014; McCarthy 2000). In the first 20 years of Yugoslavia, those former A-H regions and towns that had industrial traditions strengthened their production and social capital at the expense of the one-time Ottoman territories. Horizontal self-management assignments and the atomization of work exacerbated ethnic differences and the differential economic cultures. The wages of workers with the same occupational positions in different enterprises located in the same region (and sometimes in the same city) varied because some enterprises were able to produce more due to better equipment and pre-existing industrial infrastructures. In spite of the professed goal of overcoming inherited regional inequalities, the gap in terms of economic development across the republics widened (Archer and Musić 2017). Workers became defensive. A 'this is our industry' mentality, evident still in contemporary SB and other BiH cities, became part of the local pride and informed the

collective mentality of some urbanities and regions. In this milieu, a subtle envy for other more prosperous municipalities and regions developed, which carried ramifications both then and today for social relations (Estrin 1991). The difficult goal of self-management was faced with the ever-present ethno-political factions and pressure groups that consistently put their own interests ahead of the nation's (Rojek and Wilson 1987). This reality frustrated the pursuit of a common Yugoslav goal and resulted in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, the most atrocious conflict in Europe since the end of World War II (Vucinich 2021).

New States of Affairs

The crisis in Yugoslavia was also linked to the weakening of Communist states in Eastern Europe towards the end of the Cold War, which led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The state's inefficient economic management caused widespread dissatisfaction among the populace (Baker 2015). Foreign debt and bankruptcy as a result of the 1970s oil crisis had a significant impact on Yugoslavia's economy. This resulted in a revival of ethno-nationalist rhetoric and populist political sentiment. Leaders of nationalist political parties began to celebrate divergent ethnic interests and promoted Yugoslavia's demise in favour of mono-ethnic states (ibid 2015). Unlike other socialist countries, such as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia did not disintegrate peacefully. After four years of conflict (1991-1995) that included a massive genocide, BiH was established as an independent political entity (Cushman 2014). This newly formed state faced not only economic challenges as it transitioned from socialism to capitalism, but also the additional challenge of developing a democracy that transcended the region's historical ethnic divides and embraced a common sense of citizenship (Pardo and Prato 2011).

In 1995, the Dayton Peace Agreement (henceforth DPA) brought an end to the Bosnian-Herzegovinian War. Today, the country operates on a complex rotation system based on power sharing among its three constituent peoples — Croats (the smallest of the three demographic), Bosniaks and Serbs — which is similar to the system described by Weingrod (2011) in some contemporary Israeli cities. BiH is divided into two autonomous political entities: the Republika Srpska (Serbian Republic – RS), where the majority of people identify as Serbian-Orthodox, and the Federation, where Croats and Bosniaks coexist in uneasy peace. As a result of this arrangement, there are de facto separate armies, police, postal offices and, in the past, sport associations. This inevitably leads to the formation of segregated mono-ethnic communities, negative stigmas based on a lack of awareness due to a shortage of interaction with the 'other', loss of social cohesion and loss of trust, all of which have an economic impact, particularly in towns far from BiH's major cities. In spite of its peaceful intentions, the DPA bolstered the 'local ethno-nationalist vote', promoted clan loyalty and fostered inner nationalism. The outcome of the DPA did not satisfy everyone, and there is no single vision for how the post-conflict state should be organized. Since 1996, in BiH, Serbs promoted an independent RS, while Bosniaks wanted further centralization of powers and a BiH without internal borders. The citizens of Široki Brijeg, like other Croats in the region, lack a distinct nationalist vision. Some

wanted an independent Croatia-Republic of Herzegovina (HRHB),[2] with the capital in either SB or Mostar, some 30 kilometres away. A minority wanted to stay within BiH's borders, but in their own newly formed Croat political entity in areas where Croatians were the majority. Another minority hoped to include Croat-majority areas within the borders of the Republic of Croatia.

Few BiH constituents believe that the political system under which they live is effective in providing a sense of ethnic equality. How the DPA could be revised to produce ethno-political stability and governmental efficiency remains a major question. The visible sociological effect is that SB citizens and those from other ethno-urban centres have articulated resentments, and have defined their co-national neighbours of different ethnicities as 'others' and, in some cases, as enemies. Such definitions have inevitably brought cultural stigmas associated with both past and recent socio-political events, as well as wealth productivity.

The Tongue as a Sharp Sword: Stigma as Violence

It is important to understand how one learns or generates stigmas through primary and secondary resources, such as word of mouth, movies, video games, television, or social media. A 'triangulation' research method was used to collect data from the perspective of the participants. The strategy included techniques for observing people in various locations, interviews, examining story-telling and document analysis both online and offline (Przybylski 2020, Agar 1986, Casagrande et al. 2022). This was done to determine where and how stigmas and stereotypes were generated and conceptualized inside and outside SB. Simultaneously, ethnographic research investigated how and who was capable of deconstructing stigmas, and whether SB citizens saw the stigma as a result of the pervasive injustice of the political system in which they lived (Gonzalez 2017).

Social scientists identified stigma as the most common form of violence in both democratic societies and in dictatorial regimes (Andersen 2019, Jump 2021, Quinn 2019). The American sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) offered a detailed analysis of the term 'stigma' and the process of stigmatisation. He associated stigmas with negative images, stereotypes and prejudice intended to disqualify the person or group to whom the stigma was applied. For him, the successful application of a stigma on a person or group establishes their deviation. Their codes of behaviour are portrayed as not normal and, at times, their physical appearance is cast as strange. According to Goffman, such 'undesired differentness' is a mean for destroying the identity of those to whom it is applied. The more 'tribal' stigma of race, nation and religion can be passed through lineages and can contaminate all members (Goffman 1963: 4).

According to Burgess (1974), stigmas (or stereotypes) also contain distorted information and may contribute to the exaggeration of some existing characteristics. For him, stigma can be applied to people and urban places, but two dominant images must be considered. One is given by the residents of a town, while the other is held by people who have no direct experience with the location. Some have a reputation that has been built — and applied — by outsiders, which

[2] From 1991 to 1994, the HRHB acted as a proto-state; that is, as an independent political, cultural and economic entity.

can become a stigma and a mechanism for the reproduction of inequalities, poverty and the prevention of peace-building in conflict-affected areas. A strong supporter of this view was the sociologist Sampson, who stated 'stigmatization becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and shared perceptions of disorders appear to be a mechanism of durable inequality' (2012: 146). Once a location is stigmatized in the collective mind, it becomes difficult to construct and sustain any common positive perceptions of the location (Tyler and Slater 2018). In this context, Wacquant sees stigma as a form of 'violence from above' (2008: 24), drawing on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power. According to Wacquant, such stigmatization frequently contributes to the poverty of a specific region, city, or neighbourhood, and can impede membership in larger political entities as well as economic opportunities. Stigmas, it should be noted, can be transient as a result of social oscillations and 'affiliation cycles' and can contribute to inter-ethnic violence (Goffman 1963).

Intolerant Stereotypes and 'Positive' Stigmas

The SB residents were frequently stigmatized as fascists because of the town's historical credentials. Amongst various reasons, some mentioned earlier in this article, this label stems in part from the fact that anti-communist sentiment is still visible at public and religious events, particularly in sport stadiums and weddings, where anti-communist songs are sung and Ustashas flags are carried by attendees. When outsiders attempt to impose a stereotype on a location, there is a counter 'defence' by those who receive it. The contemporary SB citizens attribute their antipathy toward communism to the belief that Yugoslavia's Communist governments purposefully under-resourced their forefathers because of the strong Croatian nationalist and anti-Yugoslavia identity of the town. They admit that many of their city residents have a warrior spirit, but they are not fascist or Nazi warriors, and they deny that this defence entails deep ideological leanings like those expressed at Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi rallies; specifically, white supremacism and antisemitism (Reid and Valasik 2020). Like any other Croats around the world, their occasional display of Ustashas flags at public events should, therefore, be seen as a form of resistance to Communist ideology rather than as a genuine commitment to a far-right political ideology (Armstrong and Giulianotti 1999). SB citizens further respond to fascist accusations by claiming that their history is sacred and that everything they desire and celebrate will be fought for if they are provoked.

Apart from being thought to be fascists, they are also thought to be deeply anti-Islam in places such as Sarajevo, East-Mostar and Tuzla — or broadly in cantons where Bosniaks are the majority. They refute such stigmas arguing that they are God-fearing, hospitable and tolerant people who respect outsiders who are not corrupt and bring honest money to the town. SB citizen — regardless of personal political ideology — explained to me that when seeking employment in Sarajevo or other Bosniak cantons their job applications are rejected presumably because of the aforementioned historical associations. On occasion, SB residents have been denied entry to bars in Sarajevo because of the stigma that their town carries. What Wacquant (2008) articulates as the 'spatial taint' is a distinguishing feature of what he termed advanced marginality, 'arguably the single most protrusive feature of the lived experience of those trapped in these sulphurous

zones'. Furthermore, Wacquant reasons, certain areas of disrepute become renowned and can be racialized and portrayed as emblems and vectors of disintegration.

The expression 'urban stigmatization' can be considered as having various origins. These can be historical, an abnormal event, or a perception that a certain place is somehow different from normalised (civilised?) behaviours. A series of micro-events at different points in time might cumulatively contribute to the formation of a locational stigma. As a result, we can see how SB has become a symbol of disintegration for some outsiders, viewed by Bosniaks, some Serbs and Western European neo-liberals as a place incompatible with the reconstruction of post-conflict BiH. The random incidents of ethnic-inspired football hooliganism (some which involved guns-shootings and killings) and several local enterprises operating 'only-Croats' hiring policies confirm this sense of a defiant BiH-Croat identity. In return, the town celebrates itself as a symbol of ethno-urban resistance to the project of multi-culturalism (and an 'integrated' BiH), as well as an enduring symbol of Croatian nationalism.

Hatred or overt hostility towards the ethnic other is not a pervasive feature of SB. However, when acts of violence (also outside of sport contexts) occur between SB citizens and people from other cities, or when the local supporters chant anti-Serbian or anti-Bosniak slogans at sport events, such mundane hostilities can contribute to the stigma of SB as an intolerant place. Stigma might thus result from the convergence of four factors: the differentiation and labelling of various segments of society; the labelling of various social demographics to prejudices about individuals; the development of an us-versus-them ethic; and the disadvantaging of people who are thus labelled and placed in the 'them' category (Link and Phelan 2001).

However, not all stigmas carry unfavourable consequences. The stigma of SB citizens of being 'jackals' — people willing to take financial advantage over others — is one of the few instances where they agree a stigma can be beneficial. This stigma arose during the 1991-1995 Yugoslav conflict and was applied in particular to SB soldiers, entrepreneurs and politicians who took advantage of various adverse situations for their own profit and that of the people belonging to their town. Surprisingly, even for the so-called ethnic other the stigma of 'jackals' indicates that SB citizens understand how to run a successful business a result of the town's hardworking and industrious mentality. Such 'prejudice' can attract investors, which contributes to good living standards. It must be noted that various efforts are being made by the Municipal Office and the Mayor of SB to reduce stigmas and promote civic unity. Their hosting of cultural and food festivals, which attract people of all ethnicities, helps to deconstruct stereotypes of SB and BiH-Croats and, in some ways, promote inter-ethnic business. However, it is not always random citizens who contribute to the formation of stigmas, labelling and stereotypes. Those in charge of running the country are frequently held accountable.

Inbound and Outbound Stigmas: The Labelling Processes

Stigmas are also associated with power structures. Politicians with extensive media coverage can shape place identities and the boundaries of knowledge through the elaboration of their stereotypes (Pardo 2017 and 2018). In and around BiH electoral campaigns, stigmas and

stereotypes about events in the Yugoslav war appear, alongside accusations of genocide, allegations of governmental corruption and, in some extreme cases, allegations of Bosniak politicians collaborating with Islamic Terrorism. All of these factors contribute to a climate of fear, which leads to ethno-polarized voting.

Time and meaning are ever-pertinent issues in contemporary SB. As we saw earlier, Croatian fascism was evident in the distant past. It is, thus, more easily idealised. Any sense of Ustashas' atrocities has vanished from the collective memory of SB citizens, the majority of whom regard the fascist stigma as inappropriate and accuse those applying it of lacking any understanding of the town's history. However, the display of fascist salutes and symbols at random Široki Brijeg Football Club (henceforth SBNK) in the immediate post-conflict years matches increased the historical association. Also, the presence of far-right 'ultras tourists' evident during some SBNK matches, as well as the stigmatization of SB as a fascist city, were in part influenced by Škripari semantics, and history. The Škripari are the SBNK's most organized and devoted fan base, as well as the city's largest and most influential sub-culture. The group's nomenclature commemorates a violent militia with fascist leanings and ties to the Ustashas. While leaning toward nationalist and conservative policies, the current group ideology opposes any celebration of dictatorship or racism. As a result, for the group's members, the name Škripari implies resistance to any communist ideology or any Serbian or Bosniak invasion, whether cultural or armed.

The perpetuation of stigmas is evident in SB and applies both to outsiders and insiders. Some stigmas become more pronounced around football fixtures. For SB citizens many Bosniaks are generally labelled lazy, unproductive, untrustworthy oppressors, and in some cases are associated with Islamic terrorism. For Croats, the culture of the Bosniaks is the product of transmitted behaviours and attitudes from the Ottoman Empire administrators, while Serbs are generally considered to be hyper-nationalist, intolerant and malicious people who always know better than anybody else. They would argue that the stigma of having 'we know better' attitudes dates back to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, when Croats and Serbs coexisted in the same nation, and the Belgrade government bureaucrats aspired to have a say in all government and social matters.

There are stigmas among the SB citizens, the place is not always a happy fortress. Affluent individuals, prominent entrepreneurs and politicians are frequently stigmatized as corrupt, their wealth and status believed to have been earned through criminal activities or nepotism. SB citizens have also been accused of being hostile people who are not interested in promoting inter-ethnic relations or building a civil society. In 2018, the BiH Public Roads Company and the Minister of the Interior discussed the reintroduction of Cyrillic road signs (Serbian characters) in areas where Serbian is not spoken in order to facilitate the driving for Serb tourists and truck drivers. When Cyrillic signs were introduced, a group of SB citizens erased the lettering, leaving visible only the Latin characters (used by Croats). The Mayor of SB condemned the 'obscuration', saying that his generation learned both alphabets and that the post-conflict population should do the same because they live in a multi-cultural country. In response, more radical Croat nationalist politicians stated that until Croats were given equal

representation and political power in the country, Cyrillic signs would not last longer than one night (Aljazeera 2017).

Hegemonic Powers and Liminal Situations

Power is a complex phenomenon. How it is acquired, manifested and challenged is of huge significance in any study of BiH. In exploring power in post-conflict BiH, this analysis of power draws on Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Turner's (1974) concept of liminality (intended as a state of transition). The former is best understood as a relationship between *dominio* (coercion) which is usually exercised by the state or local government and *direzione* (consensus) as represented by civil society (Gramsci 1971). Ideally, hegemonic ideologies are formed in a way that connects people, giving them identities and meanings that provide them with a variety of emotional gratifications, such as pride and joy (Langman 2015). Hegemony, on the other hand, can appear in relationships where one group seeks to establish moral and ideological leadership over the other (McNally 2009). Because of existing political structures and procedures, a dominant group may be able to maintain their hegemony (Hargreaves 1986). Such competitions are the root of many problems in BiH.

In BiH, power can be derived from the politically liminal. According to anthropologist Turner (1969), state-level liminalities have a beginning and an end. He argued that individuals or organisms capable of guiding a nation out of the state of liminality should be viewed positively because a country would be able to obtain ethno-political stability after a phase of transition. In the BiH context, however, there is no single vision among those in power of what a post-liminal state should look like; BiH lacks any socio-political (and post-liminal) 'guide'. This is because the pervading sense and fear inspired by suspicions of the ethnic other sees the ethno-political factions blame those not like them as a threat to their community security/safety and as responsible for past, present and emerging hostilities. As political scientist Guelke (2012) reminds us, violent conflict is a reliable yardstick as to whether a deeply divided society exists. In such a setting, the trickster typically appears in the shape of an ethno-nationalist Machiavellian politician, who promises to have solutions to problems and a clear vision of a post-conflict BiH but in reality deceives the population and perpetuates the country's state of chaos, often by antagonising people belonging to different civic identities. The trickster is indeed both liminal and hegemonic, in that BiH has not transited through the chaos of the liminal and is, therefore, not fully a post-conflict nation state. Be they tricksters or conmen, such individuals play with the basic beliefs of humanity and exploit people's desire for narratives of meaning and of overcoming doubt; the con artist may be deluded but his or her message can provide meaning (Konnikova 2016).

Writing about liminality, Horvath (2013) claims that liminal situations are characterized by periods of uncertainty, anguish and existential fear often generated by those who hold power. Fear defines BiH's liminal situation, where even The Office of High Representative (henceforth OHR)[3] is incapable of crossing the thresholds of the liminal state of being. Unlike Turner's

[3] Based in BiH, the OHR is an international organization created in 1995 by the International Community. Its purpose was to oversee the implementation of the DPA and ensure that the country

(1969) concept of threshold as a process defined by alpha and omega, we should therefore think of liminality as a continuous navigation in a state of uncertainty and social tensions, where the same political figures or ideologies are routinely chosen and confirmed by the electorate. The Gramscian definition of hegemony is inapplicable at the national level of contemporary BiH governance. The on-going presence of the OHR is sustained by what might best be referred to as the 'Imagined International Community' (Anderson 2006). The OHR exits without the approval of the majority of the local population and aims to withdraw from the country leaving behind a super-partes dominant cultural hegemony to run the state in accordance with international peace standards. Few BiH citizens are willing to compromise for such OHR ambitions; none seek a single political hegemony. As a result, the country remains in a state of liminality — a 'frozen peace' — that does not seek ethno-political integration and instead celebrates the political other.

People in BiH do not accept systems of dominance passively; resistance is here a crucial response to attempts to establish hegemonic processes. Thus, the researcher needs to consider the schisms that are integral to power by virtue of discrepancies between what is said and what is done. Notably, this entails determining when SB citizens, and indeed BiH-Croats, recognize the legitimacy of the rule of law (Pardo 2000) and when they are complicit with the stratified corruption that they criticise various BiH governments for perpetrating (Pardo 2018). As this study of stigmas and hegemonic power indicates, in such a situation, reflection is the best way for BiH-Croats to proceed in the politically liminal (Pardo 2004: 37). This involvement is part of a generalised mode of exchange (ibid : 40) which becomes evident especially when sections of the populace refuse to accept anything approximating to an established nation state. In this situation, there arises an abstract nation state that people speak about, while accepting that local Big Men (usually entrepreneurs with political affiliations) are more convenient and capable symbols of the political system. Such figures are prominent in the competing ethno-political groups and thus become figures to laud or hate depending on one's political perspective. They bring things to the table, including sport clubs; therefore, it is important to bring out how those who are the focus of this research — the BiH-Croats of SB — understand and explain who they are and what consequences they might have.

The primary identity of the SB/BiH-Croats is that of being a people who share the Catholic religion. This carries huge implications because the significance of what we can term the 'will of the people' is more significant than the rule of law and, as many have realised, faith supersedes logic in many circumstances (Geertz 1972). As Laclau reasoned, the 'people' stands above notions of social class or structural arrangement, arguing that 'populist traditions are far from being arbitrary and they cannot be modified at will. They are the residue of unique and irreducible historical experiences and, as such, constitute a more solid durable structure of meanings than the social structure itself' (1977: 167). BiH people seek populist leaders. This process, as Germani (1962) has argued, is most evident when societies go through the transition

evolved into a peaceful and viable democracy. It is made up of diplomats from countries that contributed to peace and development in BiH. Some of the staff are hired from within BiH.

stages of economic development, but also reveals a synchronism of pre-capitalist and modern formations.

Beneath this sentiment, religion resides as the understated political underscore of BiH society. Worship is crucial to all matters of BiH life. The nation is sectarian and the clerics of two of the three dominant religions debate and denounce the legitimacy of the BiH government. In this mosaic, ethno-religious interests are inseparable from religious power. The separation of State and Church is difficult to establish because Islam is a theocracy and the doctrines of Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism look beyond the nation state to their ultimate figure on earth. According to most SB men and women, local power and the status quo are reproduced via public entertainments — much of which have a Catholic footprint — and the quintessential civic/religious celebrations that are central in SB. The majority of SB citizens argue that political hegemony in BiH is exercised by the Bosniaks via their dominance in the majority of political and legislative assemblies. Through bureaucratisation and governmentality, they argue, the Bosniaks attempt to introduce Islamic customs to the nation, while influencing in any way they can the economy to the advantage of the Islamic population.

In this study, however, attention was also paid to the interaction between micro-processes at the community level and macro-processes at the regional and national level in BiH in order to grasp complex and dynamic urban processes (Pardo and Parto 2018). Citizens living in towns with a Bosniak majority, as well as Bosniak nationalists, generally argue that Croats, the smallest of the three-constituent people, have adequate proportional representation in various institutions and should not have equal power to Bosniaks, who are a majoritarian group. The Serbs claim that the 'Croat Question' of inequality is not their challenge, but they are eager to join an alliance with the Croats to oppose Bosniak rule. Balancing power is difficult in any multi-ethnic society, and BiH does not have a straightforward solution for creating an equal political structure.

The Balance of Power and Local Trust

For more than a century, central governments have failed to comprehend the needs and interests of SB residents; as a result, SB has never been seen as trustworthy. In such a situation, SB people resort to local political actors. Even though such local political hegemons are viewed as corrupt, locals generally assume that these local Croat ethno-nationalist leaders care more about the local level than the central state and will strive to act in their best interests. Such mechanisms are not only important for government; SB citizens trust local courts, police, banks and civic services more than the national counterparts of these institutions.

Despite their reputation for fraud, patronage and cronyism, and their perceived inability to raise living standards for the majority, the local hegemonies of West Herzegovina, namely the Croatian ethno-nationalist political parties (which have been in power since the 1990s), continue to receive via the ballot box the legitimacy and consensus of 'their' people. Apart from their promises of job creation and the promotion of the Croat cause in all its guises, they are renowned and respected for their willingness to fund nationalist communal practices, such as banquets and music festivals where war-heroes are celebrated, and are appreciated for their

enthusiasm for BiH-Croat football clubs and other sport clubs that promote ethno-civic pride. At such events, political figures are invited to give speeches which invariably emphasize the negative socio-economic consequences if the electorate vote for non-partisan parties. Their speeches are usually laden with the exaltation of local culture and values and with promises of a brighter future where the working and middle classes will cooperate for economic success in a de-centralised independent Croat political entity.

Power in BiH thus appears to be reproductive. Here reproductive power is viewed as the transfer of power within a very small circle of people who share the same ideologies or economic ties, thereby denying the emergence of new rulers (Langman 2015). Reproductive power also means that across generations people vote for those who hold the same ideology. This functionalist view of power favours the groups that hold power, but there are some reflexive elements of power that may appear to be in contradiction with this view. It is worth remembering, however, that contradictions are omnipresent in political discourse and are indeed part of human existence; they become particularly evident when strong beliefs are at stake.

Like Bosniaks and BiH Serbs, SB inhabitants tend to sustain the reproduction of power and ideology, as well as continuing support for ethno-nationalist ideas. During inter-ethnic sporting events or political meetings, some SB people may chant Croatian nationalist songs in order to provoke 'the other', and in some circumstances they may physically confront 'them'. However, it should be noted that, on occasion, certain individuals across BiH, particularly younger people, band together regardless of ethnicity against injustices and inequalities and seek avenues for political reform. This inter-ethnic youth gather in schools, pubs and theatres to debate reform and advocate politics alternative to those in place. In this light, we could employ Bourdieu's concept of habitus and/or Gramsci's concept of hegemony to describe processes of accommodation rather than simply opposition to existing social institutions (Glassman 2011). Both concepts imply the possibility of resistance to both local hegemonies and unjust political structure which produces stigmas. In our analysis, it is crucial to remember that while some stigmas are intended to condemn, others are meant to celebrate, but all have political resonance and hold consequences in terms of power.

Conclusions: Living in the Liminal and Seeking for a Solution

Building peace in BiH has proven difficult. The DPA left behind a country divided into ethno-municipalities, each led by its own ethno-political elite. The national and cantonal legislatures have devolved into political echo chambers. In such circumstances, blame for any community misfortune is easily assigned; the perpetrator is the ethnic other. This occurs in SB, as it does in all other BiH cities and villages. Isolated and under threat, the respective communities emphasise their shared cultural ancestors, icons, cultures and identities. Their dissimilar economic contexts continue to be a source of frustration for projects promoting a sense of shared citizenship (Hobsbawm 1994). In line with stigma being associated with notions of trust and reliability, ordinary citizens stigmatize others in order to claim an ideologically superior social and ethical position (Gazzah 2008). The failure of the Yugoslav self-management project

demonstrates that historical differences are difficult to overcome. Furthermore, we discover that power and economic models are frequently reproductive, and that both structures and agencies are loaded with ethno-political significance that resists or restricts change. Ideas aimed at deconstructing such power structures and improving social relations have long existed, but their applicability is frequently dependent on the strength of historical legacies and the structural and bureaucratic make-up of a region.

Some SB residents argue that a greater number of coexisting projects, particularly inter-ethnic business and transportation, would help to develop livelihoods and contribute to reconciliation. Such initiatives exist but are poorly coordinated and lack a long-term strategy (Haider 2009). More focused efforts are needed to promote civil society, and while SB citizens as well as Bosniaks and Serbs living in other urban centres, agree that ordinary people can play their part in building a civil society, for them it is politicians who have the responsibility to produce integration and a sense of community. Politicians, on the other hand, frequently perpetuate stigmas, inequalities and fear of the ethnic other in order to promote parochial ethno-political voting and keep BiH in a state of perpetual liminality. This situation ensures the status quo, and the associated socio-economic power. Few politicians are willing to promote an integrated BiH while respecting the country's cultural diversity; instead, many advocate referendums for separation or threaten a new conflict. Words and slogans are uttered on all sides in the country and abroad (see photograph below), but no political party pursues concrete solutions.

Photo. In January 2022, approximately 50 members of the BiH diaspora gathered in Rome's Piazza Santi Apostoli (Saint Apostles Square) to stage a protest for peace and true reconciliation in their country, and raise international awareness of the possibility of a new BiH conflict in the 21st century. The location is 600 metres from the 'Campidoglio Hill', where are the Rome's Municipal Council and the Basilica of St Mary of the Altar of Heaven, which holds the mortal remains of Queen Catherina of Bosnia (1425-1478). Considered 'Blessed' by the Catholic Church, the Queen is a trans-ethnic symbol, primarily amongst Croats and Bosniaks. As with the rest of BiH medieval history, both groups tend to claim her exclusively as their own. When in Rome, Široki Brijeg citizens often pay homage and pray to her. (Photo by Author).

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