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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Grid Desires, or How to Tame a Three-Headed Dragon

Review by Safet HadžiMuhamedović

Yearnings in the Meantime: 'Normal Lives' and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex

by Stef Jansen

Berghahn Books, 2015

Hopes have histories – they may turn into yearnings.

(p. 168)

When the spatiotemporal anchors of daily lives begin to disintegrate, they may become the backbone of not only the structural, but also the moral dissatisfaction with the present. The emphasis placed on the absence of these life-frames, the desire for their return, congeals into a novel, affective and discursive, political request. Detailing the qualities of such expectations in one Sarajevo suburb, *Yearnings in the Meantime* confirms Stef Jansen's position as the leading anthropologist working in Bosnia. This focused and thoroughly researched monograph builds upon his earlier concerns with the temporality of home, nationalism, borders and migration. First and foremost, it reads as a convincing 'critique from within' of the contemporary Bosnian political system, a never-ending transition rooted in the Dayton Agreement, which is said to have officially ended the 1990s war. From this vantage point, Jansen is then able to raise important questions for the anthropology of the state, developing a case for a shift away from what he calls the 'libertarian paradigm', which 'posits the state predominantly as an imposed externality' and/or 'documents people's resilience in opposition to, or oblivious to, statecraft thus conceived' (p. 105).

Dobrinja, the spatial backdrop of the book, is a neighbourhood of late-Yugoslav apartment blocks in suburban Sarajevo, built, for the most part, shortly before and after the 1984 Winter Olympic Games.

Since the ceremonial ratification of the peace accords at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, the suburb remained divided by the 'inter-entity' border, which imbued an ethnonational logic into the project of a 'multi-ethnonational' state. The experimental concoction followed the lines of the brutal ethnic engineering and resulted in 'three largely nationally homogenised fiefdoms' (p. 195), which Jansen analytically distances from the remembered/expected 'normality', by referring to it as 'Dayton BiH'. He locates the refusal of this 'Dayton BiH' in both the popular and elite political discourses, but demonstrates how they significantly diverge. The popular Dobrinja position against it lies in the lament/request for 'normal lives' in a 'normal state'. On the other hand, the political state structures are partly maintained, despite the popular dissatisfaction, by way of blaming the predicament of 'Dayton BiH' in which consensus is beyond reach (pp. 197-8). This critique, contextualised and nuanced, is a far cry from Robert Hayden's contentious support for the dissolution of the state based on 'what people are willing to accept' (2002: 219). Jansen shows how the same individuals who dismiss Dayton BiH structures may become co-opted into its perpetuation.

The once Olympic, now divided Dobrinja was thus seen to represent the heyday of the old state and the troubles of the new one. To understand why its inhabitants diagnosed their lives as the *abnormal, not-quite-postwar Dayton BiH Meantime* (pp. 174, 183), Jansen turns to several stations of Dobrinja's 'emic histories'. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the diagnosis of the *Dayton affliction* (also rendered as 'Daytonitis') through two main 'symptoms', the lack of system and the lack of forward movement. The comparative frameworks for both of these absences are found in the 'histories of hope', the memories of 'gridded' and 'forward-moving' lives in the socialist Yugoslavia, but also the resistance to the sudden dissipation of 'grids' during the wartime, a 'will to grid' as it were. Jansen is careful not to portray the Dobrinja yearnings for 'normal lives' as merely a nostalgia for socialism. They rather 'shaped up on the intersection of the "ought" and the "was"' (p. 163) ... 'the intersection of both histories of hope (i.e., futures once had, both thwarted and fulfilled) and projected normative paths' (p. 49).

The book is organised into three parts, the first two dealing respectively with the configurations of 'normal lives' and the 'Daytonitis' affliction in Dobrinja. The third part discusses the uncanny coexistence of yearning for a 'normal' state and the co-optation into the Dayton political constellation. Jansen does an excellent job of leading the reader through the everyday drama of 'immobile' Dayton BiH suburb, its bus stops, wages and pensions, schooling and local council meetings. The clearly written and organised manuscript makes every attempt to open this otherwise dense information to wider audiences. The ethnographic content is an illustrative argument in itself, and we are warned not

to expect:

stories of spectacular wartime suffering, resistance or revolutionary struggles. The nonspectacular, frustratingly unchanging predicament of living in the Dayton Meantime featured centrally in how people tried to make political sense of their lives. (p. 42)

The most evocative and analytically valuable of these everyday situations, discussed in Chapter 2, is the image of people waiting for the public transport whose erratic schedule becomes one of the many metaphors for the abnormality of the state. This allows Jansen to discuss the discourse of normality and the affective positions that simultaneously draw on the socialist past and project a futurity beyond the 'Dayton Meantime'. He links such small instances of waiting to a 'form of meta-waiting for the movement statecraft was supposed to entail' (p. 16).

Grid desire

Anthropology has recognised the importance of the 'bottom-up' understanding of the state and located governmentality in the mundane encounters between people and stately routines (cf. Sharma and Gupta 2006: 11-14). What happens when the 'eyes of the state' are not an obstacle to, but the main request of popular dissent? Jansen introduces the notion of *gridding*, an orientation towards the various 'ordering structures' of the state in the Dobrinja inhabitants' references to 'normal lives'. His concern with 'grids' speaks to the work of James Scott, but makes a significant variation to the theme. Rather than emphasising the governmentality of imposing state geometries and their evasion (p. 104), he locates in Dobrinja a yearning for the return of the normalising effects that the state structures are seen to have had on daily lives and expectations from the future. I see this concept of 'grid desire' as the book's central theoretical contribution, for which he notes:

A decade and a half after the war, rather than displaying outrage against high modernist tendencies to 'see like a state', Dobrinjci still desired more than the occasional eye contact with it. Can we please see the state, they wondered, and, especially, can the state please see us? They were clamouring for legibility and thus called forth the state as a 'hope-generating machine' through desires for protection and possibility. (p. 154)

This conundrum is developed into a critique of the anthropological project. Jansen proposes that anthropologists of the state have 'become experts in grid evasion' (p. 107), under the umbrella of what he calls the 'libertarian paradigm', which is lodged between an approach to the state as imposed order and the parallel hope of counteracting it by highlighting bodies of knowledge not fully compatible with the state (p. 105). Ultimately, he argues, it 'facilitates the replication of people's hope against the state in the search for our discipline's continued relevance' (p. 106). The example of Dobrinja points to a

seemingly paradoxical situation where a desire for the ('normal') state becomes a resistance to the 'Dayton BiH', which is, for better or for worse, also some kind of state. 'Dayton BiH' produces its own grids too, albeit ones widely perceived as deficient, abnormal and almost imponderable. The organigram of the government institutions (p. 140) partly reveals the labyrinthine body of this 'three-headed' Dayton monster. Its grids also aim to standardise, particularly in ethnonational terms. Jansen's interlocutors then do seem to be resisting these ordering schemes, but they do it 'with a barrage of language of stateness in cafés, at the barber's and in trolleybuses' (p. 130).

Ungridding (beyond the state)

The remembered 'normality', as linked to the structural possibilities provided by the state, became obvious with the 'shock of sudden ungridding' (p. 114). Chapter 3 discusses the wartime disruption of 'grids' and struggles to retain some 'sense of normality' by re-establishing them. Here, Jansen makes use of some very effective archival material, such as the wartime logbook of a local school (p. 118). As the grids came to a halt, the inhabitants of Dobrinja 'became conscious of the "temporal structure" that had – largely unnoticed – governed their mundane practices' (p. 101).

I should note that my reading of *Yearnings in the Meantime* is also a comparative effort, as the book was fresh off the press when I completed my doctoral thesis, which examined the practices of waiting in the Field of Gacko, a landscape in the southeastern Bosnian highlands (2016). There, too, the temporal structures of 'normal lives' suddenly gained stronger affective and discursive dimensions. Let me briefly introduce some fascinating similarities between Dobrinja and Gacko, which reveal the theoretical potential of 'ungridding' and 'grid desire', but also draw important lines of distinction to contextualise Jansen's contribution.

The rural Gacko, arguably, did not 'see' much of the Yugoslav state, but it was torn out of a different 'grid' in the early 1990s. Whereas the Dobrinja inhabitants became aware of and yearned for the daily rhythms facilitated by the state and its provisions, the people of Gacko turned to the traditional calendar, its rituals and festivals, as well as the communication and movement they enabled. In both places, this awareness first required what Sara Ahmed has called *moments of disorientation* – 'bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground' (2006: 157). As in Dobrinja, the absences in Gacko affectively revealed the supporting structures of life, which were carefully idealised into a desired image of being in the world. Normal lives, Jansen notes, 'appear only as an absence, as the affectively overcharged object of evocations of what "was" and what "ought to be"' (p.

43). Of course people waited for the bus in the Yugoslav Dobrinja (p. 79), just as Gacko's subsistence economy bore its own significant hardships. However, the past was remembered selectively to carve out a position against the present political predicament.

Recently, after our flights from the Sarajevo Airport were cancelled due to (yet another) prolonged period of severe smog, my friend Belma remarked: 'Obviously, Sarajevo always had a problem with smog, yet, while everyone is aware of that, they all somehow manage to blame the state and its corrupt politicians'. Collective 'selective memory' is thus employed as a political argument, and Jansen's book speaks to this process. In Dobrinja, the normality of Yugoslav grids was summoned to destabilise the normalising process of 'Dayton BiH' gridding. Although its unpredictable public transport became a routine experience, people still 'insisted that this should be seen as "an unusual state of affairs"' (p. 70). This alliance between the past and the future against the present was visible in the Field of Gacko too, where people anchored their 'normality' in the celebrations of George's and Elijah's days, which were shared by the Gurbeti, the Muslims and the Serbs. They waited to wait for George and Elijah like they once did, just as the people of Dobrinja waited to wait for the bus like they once did. The political qualities of such waiting and 'nonresistance' in Dobrinja are examined in Chapter 6.

Jansen does not attempt to draw conclusions pertinent to spaces other than this fieldwork location, which I do not see as a shortfall. The situation would be unduly complicated by the inclusion of a rural or a *differently* urban locale. He admits that gridding does not have to be linked with statecraft (p. 73), as well as that his approach privileges 'secular spatiotemoralities' (p. 186). For the people of Dobrinja, he fittingly argues that the '[s]ocialist self-management had shaped the rhythms and trajectories of their lives more so than those of, say, many Bosnians in villages or in the old Sarajevo *mahale*' (167). I have shown that the temporal structures in rural Gacko were maintained through taskscapes, rituals, festivities, sworn kinship and household visitations (2016), while others have written on the importance of the neighbourhood rhythms (see Sorabji 2008). These different spaces were also tenanted by different 'ghosts'. Jansen notes the bodily movements through landscapes of ruination, 'amongst such landmarks of Yugoslav socialist forward movement' (p. 182) and I would have enjoyed a more developed discussion of the affective potential of these remnants (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2012).

Another line of distinction between the different 'Dayton BiH' geographies is to be found in the approaches to identitarian discourses. Jansen notes:

Ultimately, a lament of the demise of Sarajevo multiculturalism and an insistence on its

persistence are two sides of the same coin. Likewise, an ‘orthodox’ focus on differences between people affiliated with nationality groupings and a ‘heterodox’ one on fluid, hybrid positionings that bridge those differences both remain within the identitarian doxa of Dayton BiH (Bourdieu 1982: 133). In both approaches, a unidimensional emphasis on questions of (ethno)national ‘culture’ makes its inhabitants appear predominantly, or even exclusively, in the identitarian register institutionalised in the Dayton configuration and consolidated in much foreign media reporting. (p. 11)

Most of the ‘ethnies’ constitutionalised through Dayton have had well over a century to ‘brew’ through various political systems. The socialist Yugoslav ethnic provisions in particular have been unevenly amalgamated onto religious communities. I have noticed that ethnonyms in rural Bosnia have often been reworked into a shorthand for the religious communities. A ritual of one community often does not make sense without the other. Elijah’s Day, for example, is primarily known for being shared by Serbs and Muslims. It would be unfair to claim that their ‘fluid, hybrid positionings’ are simply confirmations of the Dayton constellation. ‘Syncretic’ and shared traditions, like the Gacko calendar, can teach us that continuity does not always have to resist change.

The Dayton dragon

The second part of the book explains the dissatisfaction with ‘Dayton BiH’, felt as an absence of a system and a spatiotemporal entrapment. Its structural dispersion and elusiveness made petitions to the state extremely difficult (p. 137). The inhabitants of Dobrinja felt that ‘they were collectively stuck in a Dayton Meantime’ (p. 161), without the grids needed to move forward. Jansen shows that the Dayton ruling class was reproduced through this elusiveness and a web of hegemonic dependencies. The ‘ordinary people’, the same ones who opposed Dayton, were, willy-nilly, co-opted into its structures (see Chapter 6).

Symbolically captained by the three-headed presidency, with each head claiming representation over one ‘constitutive’ ethnonational group, Dayton evokes the most ominous Indo-European cosmological threat, the three-headed dragon. It is difficult to subdue. If only one head is severed, another one will grow in its place. The successful act of slaying, however, is productive: it allows time to resume. With it, the annual cycle opens its doors to vernal fertility, to the reproduction of humans and their landscapes. In Gacko, and throughout the Balkans, the intricate rituals on the sixth of May used to mark George’s defiance of the beast.

In Jansen's accounts, people of Dobrinja perceived Dayton BiH as an obstacle to collective movement (p. 174). As an analogy to the dragons of the traditional calendars elsewhere, Dayton was the reign of the (three-headed) presidency, which forestalled the progression of time. The time Dobrinja yearned for was the advancement of socialist modernity instead of a cosmic cycle. Jansen observes:

It was living-in-Dayton BiH that constituted their predicament, they impressed on me, for it reduced people to 'surviving', entrapped in BiH's borders and suspended in the Meantime. As opposed to 'normal lives', which would entail spatiotemporal forward movement, it was living in a waiting room, without it being quite clear what the waiting was for and how long it would last. (p. 185)

Suburban Dobrinja should grasp the lessons of rural Gacko. The demanding pursuit of taming the dragon, of whatever provenance, first requires a re-establishment of the basic temporal grids and a ritual invocation of the future. The chthonic being, however, needs to be slayed so that (normal, any) life may continue.

Fieldwork for *Yearnings in the Meantime* was chiefly conducted between 2008 and 2010, whilst the Preface and Epilogue also discuss the more recent popular uprisings and the establishments of citizen assemblies (plenums) across Bosnia. A more comprehensive inclusion of latter developments would also have to reflect the growing demarcation of the political margins in Dobrinja, as with the erection of Gavriilo Princip's statue by the Republika Srpska officials to mark the centenary of the 1914 assassinations. Judging by Jansen's prolific and consistent scholarship so far, we will not have to wait long to witness a further treatment of this matter.

In the end, perhaps contrary to the author's plan, the book does *give* hope for the anthropological project. Its arguments are pertinent not only to the understanding of the spatiotemporal fractures so palpable in Bosnia, but also to our engagement with the state and, I would argue, with a much more diverse world of 'grid loss' and 'grid desire'.

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