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## THEORY, AFFECT, MOVEMENT: NEW DIRECTIONS IN ACTIVIST SCHOLARSHIP

Majstorović Danijela (2021), *Discourse and Affect in Postsocialist Bosnia and Herzegovina: Peripheral Selves*, Palgrave.

Danijela Majstorović's recently published monograph *Discourse and Affect in Postsocialist Bosnia and Herzegovina: Peripheral Selves* presents a brilliant fusion of scholarship and activism and contributes both to our understandings of historical and contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina and the desires of its citizens for social change and social justice from a cultural studies perspective. It brings feminist, Marxist and post-colonial thought together in highly productive ways, refusing simple determinisms and one-dimensional logics to produce an account that is wide-ranging, reflexive, intellectually honest and, above all, rooted in struggles against injustice, oppression and hatred.

In structuring my review in the light of this general statement, I want to focus on three things: first, in terms of Majstorović's treatment of theory; second, the immense contribution that the book makes to an innovative, and important, activist scholarship; and, thirdly, the book's reinforcement of the importance of the decolonial option whilst skilfully debunking some of the sacred cows of much of what passes for post-colonial thought.

In terms of theory, I think we can safely say that the author loves theory but she loves it for the work it enables her to do and never for its own sake. In a book launch for Catherine Baker's *mistresspiece* "Race and the Yugoslav Region"<sup>2</sup> I suggested that what was going on in her book was a sort of "structured generosity" in terms of the care taken to cite the source of every idea. Danijela Majstorović does something similar, and although I am guessing, I think this is out of a real sense that all ideas are a product of collective intelligence and, indeed, emerge out of practical, everyday,

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<sup>2</sup> Baker, Catherine. 2018. *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-conflict, Postcolonial?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

struggles. Ideas do not belong to individual theorists and, of course, who gets to be defined as a theorist and how, is a product of the profound inequalities of the academic field itself.

In so doing, the author makes a major contribution to what the feminist geographer Cindi Katz calls “minor theory”<sup>3</sup>, theory that is rooted firmly in the particular, the everyday, the practical and the local. Minor theory is at ease with the contingent, the fluid, and the relational. Major theory pretends to speak to the universal, is full of grand narratives, and even grander obfuscations. For Katz, minor theory grapples with the impossibility of ever grasping “the totality of the impulses and operations of power” but tries anyway, not least by making sure that human (and sometimes non-human) agency is always brought into the mix.

Katz’s point that the structure of grand theory is masculinist, even if not all its protagonists are men, takes us to the heart of Majstorović’s feminist approach to theory. Shannon Mattern, who I urge all of you to follow on twitter<sup>4</sup> – if we will stay on twitter - where she builds collaborative curricula around certain concepts (the last one was the concept of “repair”), writes in her brilliant essay “Theoretical Humility”<sup>5</sup> of “small t theory” as “models to help us make sense of things, frameworks to help us ask questions” ... made by “groups of people who develop their ideas collaboratively over time, through processes that likely won’t bring glory to any of them” in contrast to the “Great man model that still pervades the theory economy”. Danijela Majstorović, rather, uses theory in the way Wendy Brown hopes it will be used, as “candles to light a room”<sup>6</sup> not as a weapon to wage war on other theorists. Theory is struggle, we must struggle with theory; theory is borne of struggle, and able to be judged in terms of how it illuminates our struggles.

This takes me neatly to my second point which is the wonderfully intimate and dialectical relationship between theory and practice in relation to activism to be found within the book. As someone who aspires to activist scholarship, I think Majstorović raises the bar considerably, in a good way. She never, for a moment, imposes the rigid grids of “social movement studies” to the activist causes she discusses in the book. At the same time, she refuses to hide behind mere “thick description”. Instead, and I have no idea how instinctive and intuitive this was, we

<sup>3</sup>Katz, Cindi. 1996. „Towards Minor Theory“. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14(4): 487–499.

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<sup>5</sup>Mattern, Shannon. 2012. “Theoretical humility,” *Words in Space*, May, <https://wordsin.space.net/2012/05/07/theoretical-humility/>.

<sup>6</sup>Brown, Wendy. 2019. “In Conversation,” in *Critical Dialogues: thinking together in turbulent times*, ed. John Clarke (Bristol: Policy Press, 2019), 53–68.

get “inside the skin” of activist struggles; indeed, not unlike Bojan Bilić tries to do in his own work on LGBTIQ+ struggles<sup>7</sup>, she shows the scars of struggle on the skins, and in the psyches, of herself and her comrades.

We are taken on a journey as much of feeling as of analysis; indeed, feeling is treated as analysis, or at least as part of the analysis, and not in any sense, prior or lesser. To put it crudely, the author does not choose her case studies; rather, her case studies choose her. How much less would we learn about the three engagements discussed in the book in terms of discourses, affects and assemblages – the Banja Luka Social Centre dealing with memory politics and social justice, the feminist festival BLASFEM and the *Justice for David and Dženan* movement – if they were treated to a comparative dissection within social movement studies? I also think, again I am not even sure how intentional this is and, in a sense, it does not matter, Majstorović in her book shatters the intellectual pessimism of much engaged social science on Bosnia-Herzegovina which tends to group around one or more of the following assertions:

- there have been no progressive struggles worth mentioning since the plenums;
- what we need is a new Dayton (and Euro-Atlantic rescue);
- the kleptocrats have turned people into apolitical subjects content to find individualistic survival paths.

She shows us another BiH, a BiH otherwise, a BiH consisting of collective “gestures of desire” in Lola Olufemi’s resonant phrase, a glimpse of “worlds we seek to build”. Olufemi suggests:

“The otherwise is a linguistic stand-in for a stance against; it is a posture, the layered echoes of a gesture. I promise you that no approximations will be made. Only pleas, wishes, frantic screams, notes on strategy, contributions in different registers. Substitute the otherwise for that thing that keeps you alive, or the ferocity with which you detest this world. Some call it the communist horizon (this implies some distance between us and the future), others call it prefiguration (the future in our actions), others ‘the worlds we seek to build’ (desire desire desire)– any name will do. The otherwise requires a commitment to not knowing. Are you ready for that?”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Bilić, Bojan. 2016. „Europeanisation, LGBT Activism, and Non-Heteronormativity in the Post-Yugoslav Space“ in Bojan Bilić (ed.) *LGBT Activism and Europeanisation in the Post-Yugoslav Space*. Palgrave MacMillan, 1–22.

<sup>8</sup> Olufemi, Lola. 2021. *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*. Hajar Press.

Finally, perhaps where I am closest to the author in this book is the attempt to take ideas of decoloniality seriously without lapsing into some of the excesses of postcolonial thought. I recognise a kindred spirit here, who believes that slaloming “between the posts” is necessary but slippery! Others knock down some of the slalom poles accidentally, as a side effect of their scholarship or, even, quite deliberately. Let me move from the metaphoric to the specific, although I will not name names. The epistemic violence of three sorts of flattenings worries me:

- one is the ignoring, marginalising or folding into the (authoritarian imperialistic) Soviet space of socialist Yugoslavia. I know some of us obsess to the point of becoming annoying about Yugoslav exceptionalism but there is a qualitative difference that those who focus on different spaces ought to be more sensitive about and not say, even if they think it: “oh god, the bloody Yugo crowd again”;
- the second is the flattening of history to that of the *longue durée* ... assuming we can move from the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present without pausing for breath, suggesting that the colonial story is epochal and never conjunctural – in the process folding (variegated) imperialisms, colonialisms, neo-colonialisms and the like into a single narrative;
- the third is a kind of binary bind in which any acts of solidarity between the so-called Second and Third World are either condemned as instrumental or, although this is rarer, fetishised as ideals to aspire to.

Danijela Majstorović’s careful reading of BiH as “a nonconventional, hybrid type of colony beset by many contradictions, including different racialisation strategies and complex forms of exploitation” is not unique but is still far from common in the literature and yet it opens up really important research horizons. Reading struggles within BiH within an anti-colonial optic without claiming any equivalence across anti-colonial struggles precisely enables Majstorović in the book to address socialist Yugoslavia’s anticolonial legacies in terms of contradictions. She brings to life, I think, my call for “conjunctural translation” based on a renewed internationalist ethics<sup>9</sup>, in ways that help me to understand that this has to be pluriversal and multi-localled, never merely global or cosmopolitan.

I know one is always supposed to add some constructive criticism at the end of such reviews. This is not easy to do. If I have one concern it is that *Peripheral Selves*

<sup>9</sup> Stubbs, Paul. 2020. „The Emancipatory Afterlives of Non-Aligned Internationalism“, *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, January, web: <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/41631/the-emancipatory-afterlives-of-non-aligned-internationalism>

contains a number of books condensed into one. I think the condensing works, but I am looking forward to the expanded afterlives of this book. The range of meanings, the ambiguities of *sevdalinka* can be grasped through attending one concert by Damir Imamović but his own journey is much broader than that, you need to attend many, and different, concerts and lectures of Damir Imamović. In addition, as he always acknowledges, taking the time to absorb oneself in other *sevdalinka* journeys, sometimes but not always intersecting, is definitely worth it. Following the debts to other writers Majstorović acknowledges in her book, and following what she follows the book with, will also very much be worth it.