



★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

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Session I

“Politics of Identity – The Example of Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina”

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I've been asked to provide some input on the theme of “the culture of memory, and its impact on identity building.” In order to do so, I've chosen the city of Mostar, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as a special example of the problems involved in the concept of identity, and its meaning for the city and its history.

Generally speaking, when we hear people talk about the identity of a city, they usually mean its unique qualities, the relatively unchanging “essence” of a city. This is inseparable from the specific history of every city. A city's history can be read in the ways it has developed and been laid out over the years; and it is present in its significant historical buildings. Churches, mosques, palaces, and city halls occupy a special position in the latter category. Yet cities change, and they contain strata of very diverse time periods. Thus, it is not clear which layer of time actually establishes the essential identity of a city, since identity is made up of very different layers of history, and hence, tends to remain diffuse. Also, the symbolism of architecture is not really as lasting as it seems: over the course of decades, the same buildings and structures are always being re-evaluated according to changing standards. It is important to a city's history, and thus to the identity of an urban community, to have structures that always have to be re-negotiated and redefined. The notion of an “unchanging identity” is a fiction, even if it is in the nature of the urban identity to give the appearance of constant, eternal immutability.

However, it is not just the cities themselves that change; their populations do, too. There is immigration and emigration. Cities are also marked by ethnic conflicts and social tensions, by battles over space and its symbolic importance. This becomes particularly apparent in cities after a conflict or war. Cities that find themselves in a state of disarray after a conflict always have recurring, similar problems: populations are exchanged, because many residents flee during armed conflicts. For a variety of reasons, many never return to their hometown. Some find better opportunities elsewhere, or else political conditions have altered so much at home, that a return is not in the best interests of others. Often, the conflicts are not solved, but have simply become imbedded in the city's spaces—the numerous divided cities, from Belfast to Nicosia, Mostar to Beirut, are evidence of this. In addition, rural populations stream into the cities at a high rate. The result is that existing communities are dissolved and new ones are formed out of a hodge-podge of strangers who have not known each other previously, and who have little to do with the city and its history. However, one of the most crucial factors affecting a city after a conflict is the rapid population growth that occurs within the shortest possible period of time, due to the large influx of rural emigrants and returning refugees. Cities like Prishtina or Kabul have had their populations triple or quadruple inside a few years after the arrival of foreign intervention troops. Rapid population growth results in an unregulated, informal construction boom, since there is a strong demand for housing. It is not only the reconstruction of a city, the rebuilding of ruins, which influences the city and its identity in post-conflict situations, but also,

to a great extent, the erection of new urban structures.¹ When it comes to rebuilding, international aid strategies usually tend to neglect the fact that it is the urgently needed new buildings that create the framework for future development and help to shape the city's identity.

As an example of how problematic the concept of identity can be, we can look at Mostar, in Bosnia-Herzegovina.² To refresh our memories: when Yugoslavia disintegrated, armed conflicts began among different populations who were aiming to create ethnically homogenous nations—although the term “ethnic” itself is questionable. All of this

occurred in Mostar. Slavs, who shared a common language and traditions, lived in Mostar. Only their religious practices were different, but in a secular society, that was not of great importance. Additionally, there was a great

deal of “mixing” among the different populations. In 1992 the city was occupied by the Serbian-controlled Yugoslav People's Army and by the Bosnian-Serb paramilitary. Fighting bands of Bosnian-Croats and Bosniaks (also known as the Bosnian Muslims) opposed them successfully and eventually drove out the Serbian military, along with the Serbian population of Mostar. Then, in 1993, more armed conflict ensued, this time between the Bosnian-Croats and the Bosniaks, over who would rule the city; this was not ended until the United States' military intervention in 1994. The city was completely destroyed, and large portions of the population left the city. Of the original twenty thousand Bosnian Serbs, only a thousand still live in Mostar today. The city was and still is divided into two halves, with the Bosnian-Croats on one side and the Bosniaks on the other.

During the Balkan wars, both sides focused their military efforts on forcibly displacing the ethnic group each side defined as the “other.” However, they also aimed to destroy their adversaries' sacred architecture, as well as the buildings that symbolize a multi-ethnic society, such as the library in Sarajevo. To be sure, after peace was concluded in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the sacred architecture was rebuilt, with the support of the international community, but this project also gave rise to the question of how it would be carried out—a question that was frequently politicized. In particular, the influence of the Arabian states on the design of the new mosques is highly controversial, as Azra Aksamija has shown in her discussion of the mosques in Bosnia-Herzegovina.³

Contrary to the goals of the international community, Mostar has not become a “multicultural” city again, but is virtually split into two halves: on one side, there are the Bosniaks (the Bosnian Muslims) and on the other side are the Bosnian-Croats, who are Catholics. The Bosnian-Serbs, who are Orthodox, make up only a small portion of the population and therefore do not exercise significant political power. The international community's strategy is based on the notion that rebuilding the secular buildings and other edifices important to the city's history could restore the conditions that existed in the city before the war. Of course, reconstruction would be accompanied by appropriate policies, which would supposedly create an overridingly “neutral” administration that would be able to guide the city's development. The hope of organizing the various interest groups, or stakeholders, into an equally balanced administrative group, which would then create a binding mission statement for the city's development, foundered on emotional barriers, which were still very strong. Even though a minority of the population was quite willing to overcome the division of the city, most of the inhabitants of Mostar were still influenced by the trauma they had undergone, such as forced displacement, murder of family members, rape, and loss of social status and property. The United Nations' multicultural, ideological aim of achieving mutual respect through acceptance of (supposed) differences was not successful. For example, after the local elections in 2009, it took the two population groups eighteen months to agree upon a mayor.

¹ For more on how a boom in unregulated new construction can destroy a city's existing structure, see Kai Vöckler, *Prishtina is Everywhere. Turbo Urbanism: The Aftermath of a Crisis*, Allison Plath-Moseley, transl. (Amsterdam: Archis, 2008); originally published in German as *Turbo-Urbanismus als Resultat einer Krise*, (Berlin: Parthas, 2008).

² See Regina Bittner, Wilfried Hackenbroich, Kai Vöckler, eds., *UN-Urbanism / UN Urbanism* (Berlin: Jovis 2010).

³ See Azra Aksamija, “Postsozialistische Moscheen,” in: *Bauwelt* 43, 2009.

The reconstruction of historically significant structures, such as the Stari Most, or Old Bridge—an outstanding piece of architecture from the Ottoman period—was supposed to link the present day to the city’s multicultural past. This turned out to be a problematic strategy, since Bosnia-Herzegovina’s checkered history led different groups to perceive the same edifices in different ways. The rebuilt, Ottoman-era section of the city, with the famous bridge, “belonged” to the Bosniak side. Also, the battle lines were not drawn along the Neretva River, as is often erroneously assumed, but along the boulevard further west—in no way did the bridge connect two adversarial parties. Internationally, the bridge in Mostar was frequently confused with the bridge across the Drina in Višegrad, which was described by Ivo Andric, a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. But as a symbol, the bridge as such is practically predestined to represent international rebuilding policy, since the structure itself expresses the idea of unity.

However, the Bosnian-Croats perceived the Stari Most as a piece of Muslim culture, not as part of their own history. Even the project of reconstructing secular buildings on their original sites, which were scattered across the whole city, did not result in the hoped-for tolerance.⁴ Thus, the section of the peace treaty that required the reconstruction of sacred edifices was interpreted quite arbitrarily. While most of the mosques—especially those in the Ottoman-era section of the city, which UNESCO declared a World Heritage Site—limited themselves to exact reconstruction, the Catholic church interpreted the reconstruction of the Franciscan church very freely, adding an oversized bell tower that would symbolically tower over the minarets. Furthermore, a cross over thirty meters high was erected on the neighbouring hillside; visible from all directions, it is clearly a strong attempt to stake a valid claim. Turkey, on the other hand, only signaled its role as a donor by flying the Turkish flag from the minaret of the Mehmed Pasha Mosque, while Saudi Arabia decided to have its name subtly woven in golden letters into the carpets laid out in the mosques it financed.

Even though the reconstruction of the Stari Most was effective on the international political level, as a symbol of reconciliation, international cooperation, and the coexistence of different cultural, ethnic, and religious communities, the local conflicts east and west of the Neretva remained unaffected. The notion that a common identity for the city could be restored by reconstructing historically significant buildings (as is ordained for all post-conflict cities) turned out to be a doubled-edged one in Mostar. The new Stari Most belonged more to the international community than to the city it was meant to reunite. The idea of reconstructing the city to reflect pre-war conditions was already a questionable one, given the massive exchange of populations that had occurred. Surely, however, the economic impact should not be underestimated, since the rebuilt Stari Most also draws more tourists to Mostar. Still, as far as the reconstruction of the city is concerned, it would have made more sense to look for ways of developing the city that would not only benefit all of its inhabitants, but would also not have been burdened by history. For, as we can see from the example of Mostar, “identity” can be a controversial concept and should not be considered self-evident.

⁴ See Giulia Carabelli’s study, done through the Bauhaus Foundation, Dessau, in: Bittner, Hackenbroich, Vöckler 2010 (see note 2).