İSTANBUL BİLGİ ÜNİVERSİTESİ

Returnees and Stayers

The return to a transformed society in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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ABSTRACT

Returning displaced persons and refugees have expressed difficulties concerning the homecoming to the post-war society of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Returnees have experienced a sense of alienation due to the pre-war identification with the society as not comparable to the transformed post-war society. The objective of this paper was to describe the transformation of the Bosnian society during the war which began in 1992 and came to an end with the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1996 in order to understand possible difficulties returnees are being met by. The method was of a qualitative nature and context related. The emic perspective, the direct individual experience, has a central role through the paper. Theories of the creation of new social bonds in a war-context (Maček 2000) and further the importance of being there (Povrzanović 2002) have been used to understand the transformation of the home community. The results show that the social relations in the society changed drastically and further was a strong "we" based on feelings of solidarity and trust created in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war, which created an "other", the "other" referring to the people that had fled the war. From this we can draw the conclusion that during post-war reconciliation processes not only a reconciliation between the warring parties must be taken into account, but also a further understanding of the social gaps between stayers and returnees in order to build up a war-torn society effectively.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina broke out in 1992 leading to the siege of Sarajevo by Serbian forces between the years of 1992-1996. During the war, 100.000 – 150.000 people lost their lives and another 2.100.000 was displaced.

The war came to an end in 1995 due to the Dayton Peace Agreement. According to the agreement all refugees and IDP's had the right to return and were further supported by UNHCR in financial support and the reconstruction of houses (Bougarel et al 2007:3ff).

The current total number of returnees to / within Bosnia and Herzegovina is 1,026,692 (UNHCR 2008).

1.1.   *Stating the problem and the objectives*

According to Stefansson (2004(1):172), questions of return migration have largely been lacking within the field of international migration. Returning refugees are often faced by difficulties at the "home-coming" regarding the integration into the society. Returnees often feel alienated, which is explained by the discriminatory nature that the returning migrants are met by of the people that stayed behind during the siege.

> The repatriation discourse does not pay attention […] to questions of time and changes that can take place for the refugee, in the country of origin, and the relationship between the two. (ibid.)

The objective of this paper is to investigate and describe the transformation of the Bosnian, mainly the Sarajevan, society during the war in order to understand the problems which might be faced upon return by refugees and displaced persons. The aim is to discuss how the relation between returnees and stayers are of a complex

nature due to the intense societal transformation in the home community during the conflict.

The question to be answered is as follows:

- *How can the understanding of the transformation of societal ties and the importance of place be of relevance in understanding possible problems between returnees and the home community upon return?*

1.2. Method and theory

The paper has its point of departure through an anthropological perspective, with the individual in focus and her/his different experiences in a certain situation. Through the paper, the emic perspective, the view from the inside, will be aimed to have a central role. The research paper is of a qualitative nature as it is context-related and further aims at understanding the transformation occurring in a specific case and situation.

The theory being used is the creation of new social ties in a war torn society and further the importance of place and belonging. Maček (2000) describes how the Sarajevan society transformed and new social ties were created as an act of survival and further due to an urge of keeping the sense of the everyday-life. Further is the theory of Povrzanović (2002) used as it discusses the meaning of place as intensifying due to a war context and the importance of "being there".

These theories are to be applied on the problem statement which describes the returnees' sense of being alienated upon return.

1.3.   Delimitations and Outline

The paper is narrowed down by limiting the focus to the analysis of the home-society and not the transformation of the refugee / displaced persons identity and experience during the war. As the paper aims to have an emic perspective, a study consisting of direct interviews may have been preferable, though is this kind of method not suitable to the scope of the paper, which makes the reliance on secondary sources a must.

Chapter 2 presents the problems documented that are being faced by refugees and displaced persons upon return to the home community. Following chapter concerns the transformation of social ties in the home community. Chapter 4 refers to the importance of place and "being there". The final chapter concludes the paper as well as gives additional thoughts and remarks of the author.

2. COMING "HOME"

With the establishment of the Dayton agreement, the return of displaced persons was seen as a prerequisite to post-war recovery. Jansen (2006:180) argues that the policy of the agreement can be seen as viewing the situation as people natural belonging to a collectivity and a certain area. Several (however not all) displaced persons opposed returning "home" due to the radical transformation both of themselves as well as the place called "home". The displaced persons urged for the return to the pre-war life, more than stressing the return to a certain place. "Home" was not merely a physical place, but a social space of relationships (Jansen 2006:184f). The displaced persons urged for the return to a "normal life", however what they connected and related to was based in the context of the pre-war life (ibid.:191).

The same discussion is to be found in the work of Stefansson (2004(2):56f) as he states that returnees to Bosnia realized that a transformation has taken place, both concerning themselves as well as in their "home" community. One returnee from Germany explained the relationship between returnees and stayers as following:

> We have all changed. [..] There are not many common themes between us anymore. […] When there are no common themes to talk about then it's better not to have contact, to stay in your own world. (ibid.:179)

Returnees to Bosnia have expressed their problems concerning the difficulties of integrating in the society, and foremost with the persons who stayed behind. A social distance had been created between returnees and stayers wish was unleashed upon return. The distance was experienced between relatives, friends and former neighbors and the social interaction between the persons was difficult to recreate (Stefansson 2004(2):64). This results in difficulties upon return in trying to find the sense of "home".

The problem can be understood as a difficulty of identification. The displaced persons identified with their "home" in Bosnia and Herzegovina as it was shaped prior to the war. After the war the vital foundations of identification were lost, as was the base of personal identification. A distance was further created between those who stayed and those who left. This results in difficulties upon return in trying to find the sense of "home".

Following chapter will scrutinize the societal transformation in order to understand the difficulties in "coming home" and the gap created between former friends, families and neighbors.

3. FRIENDS AND FAMILIES - LOST AND CREATED

In her book *The War Within: Everyday Life in Sarajevo under Siege,* Ivana Maček (2000) describes through an ethnographical viewpoint the individual experience of the everyday life of the Sarajevan inhabitants under siege. Maček (2000:106) describes the strategies of survival due to the rupture of everyday life and the social changes and new identifications erupting. The new bounds created in Sarajevo are being referred to as a change of solidarity as help was founded from people you did not expect, and further referred to as a "change of norms for social relations". Maček (2000:141) refers to the intense new established relationships as "war friendship". Ties were based on socializing as a result of surviving and keeping the sense of every-day normality.

The intensification of bonds was taking place due to the lived life in a society struck by war as people were to a large extent reliant on each other to survive under the difficult circumstances. Social relationships were established more rapidly in comparison to the pre-war context due to the need of establishing new ties and contacts. As a result of this, friendship and solidarity were transformed to a large extent and in a short period of time (ibid.:105).

Friendship and family ties were also ruptured. As the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was based on an ethnic division, family members and former friends from different ethnic groups were alienated from each other. As for example one of Macek's interview-partner who expressed revelation concerning her classmate which due to her/his ethnicity decided to leave Sarajevo.

> I was very surprised, because, do you understand, it is not simple when you spend your time with someone for five years, constantly together, every day. You sat together at lectures, and seminars. (ibid.:121)

Marriages were put under pressure due to the war. Either the marriage could grow stronger, or it could result in divorce. Especially mixed marriages (between Serbs and Muslims) were put under intense pressure as ethnic belonging became a crucial factor as the war intensified. Mixed marriages could be an obstacle before the outbreak of the war, however not in the same extent. In Sarajevo nationalism grew strong and sometimes the only possibility for persons within a mixed marriage to stay together was to leave the town (ibid.:115ff).

Following quote is from a woman in a mixed marriage who decided to leave Sarajevo during the war and settle in California.

> There were situations, as I told you, where these mixed marriages had a hard time. The primitive people around them could say that they were the fifth column [traitors]. (ibid.)

Due to the intense migration, also neighbors left and came. The neighbors often established strong bonds to each other. They relied upon each other and created a mutual trust. This intense relationship was not only out of material reasons, but also a social act. They visited each other, drank coffee, socialized and it made time pass. The social interaction created a sense of preventing loneliness and further formed a sense of security (ibid.:125f). .

During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina friends and families were lost, due to e.g. death, escape or the pressure the war put on the relationship, but close relationships were also created. Social interaction was important in order of material necessities and security as well as maintaining a sense of everyday life and normality.

4. BEING THERE

In *Violence and the Re-discovery of Place*, Maja Povrzanović (2002:1) argues that a society stricken by war creates a stronger relation to a certain place. In her research she has interviewed inhabitants of the town of Dubrovnik, Croatia, under siege and their personal experience of life in a war-context. Povrzanović (ibid.) states that what surprised her during her research were the narratives of the individuals when it comes to stressing the importance and love to the town, and further the narratives of the creation of strong ties to all people in the region.

Povrzanović (2002:1f) argues that during war, the importance of place transforms into a more intense feeling of belonging. The maintenance of the everyday normality in Dubrovnik was further highly stressed. This was due to the inhabitants' refuse of letting the town transform into a place of war. Dubrovnik can be said to have played the role as anchor to the inhabitants' identity (ibid.: 12f).

Povrzanović (2002:13) further describes the outcome of the love to the town and the importance of being there as "[i]n November 1991, the *others* for people in Dubrovnik were even their closest family members who had left the town only a month before […]".

From the experiences in Dubrovnik, connections can be drawn to the Sarajevan context, where the importance of place and the importance of "being there" occurred as well.

In the work of Maček (2000:111), one interview partner, a young woman, decided not to leave due to possible difficulties of returning. She believed that it would be difficult

to return as it would be as if she had abandoned home. She felt as she had to "be there".

> Because, as I said, wherever I go I would always wish to come back, and to come back with my conscience. Knowing that I didn't run away. […] But in a way, I condemn those who could have made their contribution, but left with the idea of coming back when everything settles down. Letting someone else work for them, losing their life for them. [...] I still think that people should come back if they want to, but they should not expect to come before me, to come back to their work and push me out. Because I was here when it was hardest and I saved that place. (ibid.)

To leave the home community was often seen by the stayers as disloyalty and an act of betrayal. Maček (2000:145) refers to songs written during the war with following lyrics

> Sarajevan raja,
> while Bosnian cities burned
> You were far away
> when it was difficult
> You left Sarajevo

From this we can draw the conclusion that "being there", experience the war from the centre, was a crucial factor to be identified as a person of the "we"-group during the Bosnian war. This further established a division based on the physical location and created a distance between those who stayed and those who left which can be illustrated by following quotation after refugees and displaced persons had return.

> They cannot understand us completely, nor can we understand them. They had it hard in one way, and we in another. Isn't it so? And I suppose that you can't completely understand anyone until you experience it yourself. But in any case, I think that however difficult it was for them, and it surely was, it couldn't have been as difficult as it was for us. If nothing else, they knew that their lives were not threatened, and ours were threatened all the time. (Maček 2000:137)

5. CONCLUSION

Through this paper we have seen how a transformation of the Bosnian society took place during the war. Upon return, refugees and displaced persons often feel alienated as they lack a sense of identification with the "new" shape of the society, as the identification with the pre-war society is not comparative to the post-war community.

Tension between the returnees and the stayers are further created due to the different experiences of war, as having being situated in different physical places. The lost of friends and the extension and establishment of new relationships is one factor of the transformed society concerning social interaction.

Another factor is the importance of "being there". Those who fled the country during the war were seen as betrayers to the families as friends, as well as being disloyal to their home community.

Taken this into account we can see how a strong "we" was created due to the intense friendships created and the importance of "being there". The construction of "we" further created a construction of the "other". The "others" were they who were not there, who did not experience the war from the centre, but from the periphery. This together explains why returnees felt alienated upon return and why they experienced the homecoming as a return to an alien place.

What I want to stress with this paper is the importance of considering the reconciliation process in post-conflict societies by not merely focusing on the procedure of settle the dispute between the direct conflicting sides, but also put the social gaps that are the outcome of war and the return of refugees and displaced persons into account. The return of refugees and displaced persons is a complex

process. It is not merely about reconstruction of older identities and social bonds, but also a construction of the two.

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