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Isabelle Delpla, *La Justice des gens. Enquêtes dans la Bosnie des nouvelles après-guerres*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014. 530 pp. ISBN: 978-2-7535-2885-7

Isabelle Delpla has written an important book. The fruit of over a decade of field research, sustained intellectual immersion in Bosnia’s society and politics, and philosophical reflections on the ‘new postwar’ and international justice, *La justice des gens* presents scholars of the region with a particularly enriching and thought-provoking read. Challenging well established trends in International Relations theory (both the ubiquitous ‘new wars’ thesis and the more interest-based Realist approaches), post-structuralist explanations centred around notions of subjectivity and biopolitics, as well as many of the liberal assumptions of the relatively new field of ‘transitional justice’, Delpla’s book provides an empirically rich and nuanced understanding of the Bosnian postwar reality. *La justice des gens* highlights the complexities of Bosnians’ responses to international intervention in the region, the material difficulties and moral ambiguities of their everyday existence, and their multiple engagements with notions of justice and morality, represented in the first instance by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Divided into four inter-linked parts—on humanitarian assistance, returns of displaced persons (particularly minority returns), victim associations, and witnesses for the ICTY—Delpla explores the meanings of ‘justice’ for ordinary Bosnians and the frequent mismatch between international and local understandings of various forms of external intervention in Bosnia.

The first section of the book highlights the plurality of the Bosnians’ experiences of humantarian assistance during and after the war—something that is often absent from the international debate about the problems of aid. Delpla shows how aid affects both perceptions of self-worth and social hierarchies in Bosnia, and explains the often cynical attitudes of locals towards donor organizations and states. She also provides a sociological account of local employees of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), examining the frequent absence of humanitarian motives among that cohort, as well as the rivalries present among different organizations. According to Delpla, one of the most important effects of international aid in Bosnia has not been the forging of a new humanitarian morality underpinning the construction of civil society, but the creation of an emergent social elite preoccupied mainly with gaining lucrative jobs, countering boredom, having regular occasions to meet and amassing funding from international donors (pp. 92-93). These findings are contrasted with the attitudes prevalent among many victim associations and witnesses for the ICTY prosecution, where notions of morality can play an important role in decisions to testify.

When discussing local understandings of humanitarianism, Delpla highlights the importance of regional variation of the wartime experience—particularly that of international intervention—as an important and often neglected factor. Much of her comparative work focuses on the regions of Prijedor and Srebrenica, where such experience contrasted quite significantly. In Prijedor, many of Delpla’s interlocutors praised the role played by foreign journalists in bringing to the world’s attention the detention camps and the massive abuses of human rights that took place there, eventually leading to international pressure and the closure of the camps. In Srebrenica, by contrast, the prime experience of wartime international intervention was the failure of the UN to prevent the 1995 massacre of over 7,000 Bosniak men, usually interpreted in the Bosniak community as complicity in genocide rather than just a failure of omission. Delpla convincingly argues that such regional differences determine Bosnians’ postwar attitudes towards international justice, as well as views of the ‘international community’ and humanitarianism more generally.

Regional variation is also important in Bosnians’ decisions to return to areas from which they were ‘ethnically cleansed’ during the war—the focus of the second part of the book. While all ‘minority returnees’ face similar obstacles everywhere, Delpla highlights the contrast between Prijedor, which has seen a high rate of Bosniak return, and Srebrenica, where such returns have been significantly lower. Whereas in Prijedor, the affirmation of the postwar right to return represented an extension of the wartime military effort to counter Serb ethnic cleansing and recapture the area, in Srebrenica the main right claimed by victim associations has been the right not to return (p. 186). One explanation for this difference can be found in the socio-economic profile of the displaced persons themselves: the returnees to Prijedor included many members of the educated, professional local elite, who embraced the political agenda of the main Bosniak parties to reverse ethnic cleansing. In contrast, for the Bosniak women of Srebrenica—now without their menfolk, often less educated, and generally more dependent on the state—the return to a municipality that was now part of the Serb-controlled entity Republika Sprska (RS) held out fewer prospects than remaining in Sarajevo. Yet, here too, Delpla warns, we need to nuance and extend our understandings of minority returns to include the dead—whom the women of Srebrenica have consistently fought to bury in the locality, as a form of preserving the memory of the Bosniaks’ onetime existence in Srebrenica (p. 193).

The book’s third section, on victim associations, presents an overview of various groups and networks for civilian victims of war, former camp inmates and missing persons. After identifying these associations as legal entitites, based on criteria defined by international conventions, Delpla discusses their activism and their varied levels of political connectedness, access to media and public prominence leading to considerable rivalry among them. The militancy of the Mothers of Srebrenica association, as well as their extensive and continuous media exposure and their close links with the main Bosniak party, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), have thus generated considerable mistrust and resentment among other Srebrenica victim groups, leading to accusations of despotic behaviour and even fraud (p. 283). Such rivalries are also echoed in the criticisms of the ICTY for recognizing only the 1995 Srebrenica massacre as genocide but not the Serb actions in other municipalities (pp. 301-6). Expanding on some of her earlier writings, Delpla also notes the very important practical aspects of victim association activism, notably the importance of recognition of victim status for access to state pensions, compensation, disability and unemployment allowance, and other forms of social security. She argues that the victims’ cooperation with the authorities in the Bosnia vs Serbia genocide case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) was motivated to a significant degree by the desire to secure reparations from Serbia—a hope that was dashed when the ICJ verdict came out, acquitting Serbia of genocide (p. 324). Clearly, the political sociology of victim associations presented in *La justice de gens* provides a sober antidote to the mythmaking around victims that pervades some of the literature, as well as the tendency to examine such groups through the psychological framework of trauma—something that Delpla openly challenges, without at the same time undermining the genuine suffering people experienced during the war (p. 304).

Notions of ‘truth’ and ‘justice’ particularly come to the fore in the last section of the book, focused on the reception of international criminal justice and an analysis of witnesses at the ICTY both for the prosecution and the defence. Critical of the emphasis on reconciliation in much of the English-language scholarship and in the ICTY’s own discourse, Delpla lucidly notes that Bosnians themselves view the term with considerable suspicion because of its vagueness and opacity, similarly rejecting any talk of amnesty, forgiveness, or a South African-style ‘truth and reconciliation’ process (pp. 352-55). The emphasis among Bosnians is firmly on ‘justice’ and this provides the focus of the last part of the book. As Delpla argues, clearly the ethno-national dimension cannot be ignored: Bosniaks look to international justice to confirm their own narrative of ‘aggression [by Serbia against Bosnia] and genocide [by Serbs of Bosniaks]’, as part of the political effort to destroy the Republika Srpska and reunify Bosnia (p. 336), while Bosnian Serbs generally insist on their narrative of a ‘civil war’ in which their own disproportionate crimes are minimized and their ‘ethnically cleansed’ proto-state is legitimized. Yet, once again, it is important not to be limited by this ethno-national framework: justice is apprehended in Bosnia largely through local lenses. This is partly a reflection of the variations in the crimes and extent of ethnic cleansing perpetrated in different regions of Bosnia, and partly it showcases the importance of local understandings of justice. Victims focus overwhelmingly on crimes perpetrated in their own municipality and it is also on this level that they denounce impunity and denial; they find little comfort in judgments for crimes committed against their co-nationals in other municipalities (p. 334). This helps us achieve a more nuanced understanding of the reception of the ICTY in Bosnia—something that has been at the forefront of the scholarship on international justice.

For most of the book, it is the voice of Bosniak community that comes through most clearly. However, Delpla’s discussion of ICTY witnesses focuses largely on Bosnian Serbs—those indicted by the tribunal or called to testify as witnesses for the defence. This choice is different from the more usual emphasis on victim-witnesses in the literature, and allows Delpla to explore the implications of defence testimony both for those being judged and for the witnesses themselves. Delpla notes that, while victim-witnesses for the prosecution usually tend to belong to quite a homogenous cohort, the main characteristic of the defence witnesses is their heterogeneity (p. 403). Motivations to testify diverge; some individuals do so because of their presence at crime scenes and are thus called up, others have family or personal links to the accused or do it out of a sense of social obligation. Delpla’s encounters with many of these individuals are difficult and she often doesn’t manage to get beyond the litany of nationalist lamentations, crude denial and attempts at psychological distancing from the crimes. Delpla’s exasperation with her interlocutors (p. 409) is understandable and her point that in many cases individual witnesses had more to lose than to gain by testifying (by disclosing their own role and proximity to the crimes committed) is apt (p. 423). Sometimes she comes across individuals who exhibit a genuine sense of remorse, particularly if they were eyewitnesses to crimes (p. 429). All in all, Delpla’s findings raise more questions than they answer regarding the pervasiveness of denial, the success of the political authorities in enforcing a hegemonic discourse about the war, the nature of the social links that are reconstructed between some Serbs and Bosniaks, or the space for dissent within the Bosnian Serb communities. What her analysis indicates is that perhaps a good starting point for such investigations is the municipal level, rather than the broader national or regional one.

*La justice des gens* is a brave and an original book, challenging many preconceptions about the Bosnian postwar experience, the meanings of victimhood and the possibilities of external intervention in what are fundamentally local—in many ways even individual—processes of rebuilding communities through the achievement of justice and the restoration of a moral order. There are glimmers of hope in her book: the absence of vengefulness among many Bosniaks, the individual acts of bravery of Serbs who disclose the location of graves or the fate of missing persons or of Bosniaks who choose to testify for the defence of local Serbs at the ICTY despite the social stigma incurred, the presence of private counter-narratives of mutual aid even in the darkest times of the war... Without mythologizing international justice or presenting an overly optimistic vision of its impact, Delpla shows that it nevertheless remains central for processes of social reconstruction in Bosnia.

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