

Book Reviews

Larissa Vettters. 2019. *Prozesse des State Building in Bosnien-Herzegowina. Eine Verwaltungsethnographie*, Baden-Baden: Nomos (Edition Sigma). 429 pp., ISBN: 978-3-8487-4297-4 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-8452-8559-7 (eBook), € 89.00

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In the first half of the 17th century, Evliya Çelebi, an Ottoman writer famous for his prosaic travel literature, described how he entered Mostar, a city whose name literally translates as “bridge-keeper”. Deeply impressed by the architectural legacy of Mimar Hayruddin’s Old Bridge (*Stari Most*) built in 1566, he wrote: “[it] is like a rainbow arch soaring up to the skies, extending from one cliff to the other. [...] I, a poor and miserable slave of God, have passed through 16 countries, but I have never seen such a high bridge. It is thrown from rock to rock as high as the sky.”¹

After repeated bombardment, Mostar’s *Stari Most* or Old Bridge, spanning the Neretva River, collapsed on 9 November 1993. According to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), it was deliberately destroyed by the Croatian Defense Council, the main military formation of the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosna, an unrecognized entity that existed in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1991 and 1996. The Bosniak, Croat, and Serb Mostarians were soon to become the three constituent peoples of Bosnia-Herzegovina, through the Dayton Peace Accords of 21 November 1995. When the stones of the *Stari Most* fell into the Neretva River, it was televised, providing Europe’s history of genocide and uricide (182) with another symbol. Neighbors had turned into enemies. Citizens of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had slowly transformed into members of ethnic groups. Schoolyards were converted into jails. Humans were dehumanized—and a state failed (Chapter 4.2).

Shortly after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed, which officially put an end to the three-and-a-half-year-long war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the reconstruction of the bridge, a UNESCO World Heritage site, was initiated. At the same time, there was a whole state to build. The international community, consisting both of governmental and non-governmental organizations, attempted

¹ Quoted in Dodds, J. D. 1998. “Hearts and Stones.” *Aramco World* 49 (5): 2–9, 5, <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199805/hearts.and.stones.htm> (accessed 3 January 2022).

to establish a government in Bosnia-Herzegovina, to create a consensus-oriented democracy, and help the administration begin work with formerly hostile groups who were now cobbled together as neighbors once again, with urban and rural populations being grouped according to ethnic categories (37).

Mostar's local government, comprising local civil servants as well as international administrators, were to serve as mediators bridging the gaps in the societal order which was fragmented along ethnonational lines (312). While the international community tried to implement concepts of state-making, the local ethnic communities engaged in an exercise of "place-making." The municipal administration showed their capacity to negotiate legal gray areas, regulations, and also informal modes of relating. They enacted this "social space making" by means of solidarity, as *Larissa Vettters* argues in her compelling "administration ethnography."

Based on intermittent field work between 2004 (the year the rebuilt *Stari Most* was inaugurated) and 2008, the author analyzes, in her administrative-anthropological journey to Mostar, how local civil servants have tried to build trust and rebuild their fragmented municipality. Drawing on participant observation and interviews, Vettters explains how a model of consensus democracy will fail by default here, given that it upholds ethnonational differences and thus fosters fragmentation (46). She shows how Mostar's civil servants tried and failed to introduce a working consensus-oriented model. Sometimes, they failed a little less, if the existing social networks were activated on the basis of informal ties and gift-based economic favor exchange. They used traditionally established forms of relating, exchanging goods, donating time, and neighborly care. They also opted to bend regulations or draw sharp lines of legality—depending on who was on the other end of the phone, or who it was that had knocked on the office door.

Vettters' analysis lowers the hopes of external interventions succeeding in the state-building context. Her account of a fragmented "consensus democracy" in a postwar setting, in times when identity politics is on the rise worldwide and consensual concepts about democracy are fragmenting, challenges any idea of state-building based on constituent differences in ethnicity or religion. She deconstructs universalist approaches to democracy and state-making, unveiling the deep crisis such administrative concepts evoke when they claim to build consensus in an ethnically fragmented society. At the same time, she describes the promising pathways that are taken by local civil servants, such as those in Mostar, who in their everyday work manage to apply a concept of solidarity, against all odds.

Larissa Vettters builds a high bridge to connect the deep and vast valley that lies between normative and interpretative academic disciplines. Like the architect of the *Stari Most*, Mimar Hayruddin, she herself constructs arches of several

dimensions. In her analysis of administrative organization and its implementation in Mostar, she successfully merges two academic discourses with very different epistemic goals: one oriented towards establishing norms for government, the other aimed at interpreting practices. In addition, while she examines Mostar from the position of an international scholar, she does succeed in “going native” on two levels—she manages to understand the local citizens’ perspective and she displays profound ethnographic competence in mastering juridical administrative language.

Vetters successfully translates anthropological knowledge into juridical language, thereby showing that it is possible to find the words to connect disciplines whose epistemes are seemingly worlds apart. In building this impressive theoretical and narrative architecture between different disciplines, she opens an interdisciplinary space of negotiation and exchange. As an anthropologist, she describes with utmost micro-analytical precision the practice of juridical and administrative work. Through empirical observation she develops rigorous theoretical concepts of politics and administration. With care and perseverance, she manages to provide these very different epistemic worlds with a mutual understanding. This work of disciplinary translation is sometimes dry, leaning toward repetitiveness, especially to ethnographers, who are usually prone to emphasize their narrative capacities. But when it comes to law and administration, and to an ethnographic approach that engages with the concepts of state-building and state order that are in global circulation, this language is spot on. Vetters successfully finds a way to touch her imagined readers, be they public administration scholars, politicians, lawyers—or anthropologists.

Vetters undoubtedly succeeds in her aim to build a transdisciplinary space of reflection (384). Rarely do we come across such a well-informed work which manages to bring together two facets in one form, addressing the different cultural *habiti* of two academic disciplines with such ease. Reading her chiseled sentences, which she carves from juridical normativity, it is clear that this is the kind of talk that civil servants and politicians hear and have to deal with. Vetters departs from her “exotic background” (5), sometimes to such an extent that we no longer recognize her language as that of an anthropologist – she becomes an administrative scholar. Beyond the rigidity of legal framings she immerses her readers in a tale of betrayal, hope, compassion, and lived solidarity with the smile and sparkling eyes of the ethnographer, as a traveling mediator, as a funambulist dancing across bridges.