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Interfaith Ritual Kinship in a Polyethnic Society: Review of the Film, “The Constitution”

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The Constitution [*Ustav Republike Hrvatske*], a Croatian film written and directed by Rajko Grlić (2016), dramatizes how living together in a society challenged by interethnic hatred and homophobia requires interconnectedness and understanding.¹ Seemingly intractable differences are unexpectedly reconciled at the end of the film through the cultural custom of ritual kinship known as *kum* or godfatherhood. The film’s inspired but natural solution to interethnic conflict and intolerance introduces the subject of this short essay, namely, the unique role and unrecognized importance of interfaith ritual kinship for preserving solidarity and social order in a polyethnic society. Despite the deep wounding of this South Slav heritage, the cultural custom is faintly but tellingly sustained.

Constitution

Constitution, a film that has been awarded the best film at several European film festivals, dramatizes the conflicts between three characters living close to one another in an apartment building in Zagreb.² One character is a Zagreb professor who lectures positively about the Ustaše, the fascist party in Croatia closely complicitous with Nazi atrocities. At home the professor cares for his bed-ridden father, an invalid since World War II, who is missing both legs. A picture of Hitler is hanging on the wall above the father’s bed. A Catholic priest, who knows the father’s history during World War II and sees him as a hero, visits the dying man to give a blessing.

The stern Zagreb professor is a transvestite, dressing as an attractive woman in the evening, walking cautiously through Zagreb, and going to a small bar, where she drinks and mourns the death of her gay partner, an accomplished cellist. His father never accepted his sexual orientation and beat him badly as a boy. The Croatian professor’s first name is Vjeko, a traditional Serbian name.

In the apartment below, Vjeko’s neighbor is a police officer who is a Serb. The police officer’s first name is Ante, a well-known Croatian name. To remain on the police force, Ante must memorize the high-minded precepts in the Constitution of Croatia promising freedom and equality to all citizens regardless of ethnicity and faith.

The mixing of ethnic names among South Slav families is not uncommon. Radovan

Karadžić was the president of Republika Srpska during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina later convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Semezdin Mehmedinović points out that in Sarajevo under the family name Karadžić there are 10 Muslims, 9 Serbs, and 1 Croat. Mehmedinović also notes Vojislav Šešelj, who was also convicted of war crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal, “happens to be the only Serb with such a name since all the other Šešeljs are Croats!” ³ A third character, Maja, is Ante’s wife. A close couple without children, Maja is Catholic and Ante Serbian Orthodox. Ante has trouble memorizing the wordy Constitution he must know to keep his job on the police force. Maja asks the professor to tutor her husband to prepare for his exam in exchange for helping to care for Vjeko’s bed-ridden father. There is conflict between Vjeko and Ante. Vjeko looks down upon Ante because he is Serb. After learning Vjeko is a transvestite, Ante does not accept the professor. Maja gets to know Vjeko, befriends him, and acts as a mediator.

The film dramatizes the hollowness of the constitution Ante must memorize to keep his job as a police officer. The constitution masks the political realities of everyday life, where prejudice, intolerance, and hatred fester. One evening, delinquent youths, who detect and despise Vjeko for his sexual orientation, mug him badly. Ante learns of the crime and takes it upon himself to investigate the attack on his neighbor, which is being ignored by his police colleagues. Ante’s motive is to prove to the professor, who demeans him because he is Serb, not only that he is a good man but that he is a better man. Ante finds the youth who mugged Vjeko and arrests him, heeding the principles of the Constitution he is asked to memorize. The youth whom Ante arrests, however, is the son of a government minister, and Ante is to be fired for making a naive arrest. Vjeko intervenes using his political capital in the government to save Ante’s job. Ante gains prestige with his colleagues after the esteemed professor came to the police station on Ante’s behalf. When Ante acted according to the high-minded principles of the Constitution, it almost cost him his job. The effectiveness of the Constitution for preserving social order and political stability is feeble.

If the Constitution is unable to change prejudice and prevent violent acts based on intolerance, what then does? If nothing else does, in which direction is society headed? This question grips the film’s story. The Constitution provides cover for the hatred in the society toward human beings who do not share the same ethnic or religious background or do not have the same sexual orientation. The film, though, is more than a critique; the film provides a viable solution. The film fills the void the dysfunctional Constitution glosses over.

At the film’s end, Vjeko is contemplating suicide, sitting on a bench known as “Suicide Bench” in Upper Town, Zagreb. The bench over-looks the brightly lighted Cathedral of Zagreb, the tallest building in Zagreb and Croatia as well. Maja anticipated Vjeko’s depression and what he is planning. Maja and Ante run up to the park where Vjeko is sitting holding a gun. Ante takes the pistol from Vjeko, and after some platitudes, Maja instructs Ante to tell Vjeko why they are there. Ante asks Vjeko if he will be *kum*, godfather, for the child Maja and Ante soon plan to adopt. “Mi bi da nam budete kum.” Ante says Maja and he want to have the child baptized, “Mi bi ga krstili.” Vjeko is a transvestite and Croatian ultranationalist. He looks stunned and says no one has ever

called him to be a godfather. "Nikad me nitko nije zvao da budem kum." A meaningful reconciliation is achieved through the ritual kinship tradition known as *kumstvo*,

Kumstvo

The Yugoslav ethnographer, Milenko Filipović wrote, "Ritual kinship of various forms was of great importance among South Slavs in the past because it widened the circle of relatives beyond the family, the clan, and the tribe."⁴ Filipović noted as well, "Such brotherhoods (and sisterhoods) are frequently contracted even at present time by two persons belonging to different nations and faiths." In ethically important ways, interfaith ritual kinship binds people in a polyethnic society.

Habitus

The film's ending is telling. While the legal Constitution does not truly provide a stable foundation for tolerance and acceptance, *habitus* represented in *kumovi* does.⁵ The concept of *habitus* as theorized in the work of Pierre Bourdieu provides a lens through which to view interfaith kinship among South Slavs. Bourdieu calls *habitus* "a whole system of dispositions inculcated by material circumstances of life and by family upbringing."⁶ Interethnic *kumstvo* empowers people to live peacefully together and to trust one another from different ethnic groups. The symbolic message of love and peace shining in the evening from the Cathedral of Zagreb is found, not in the church, but in the social-cultural custom of interfaith *kumstvo*.

Habitus guides Ante and Maja's decision to ask Vjeko to be the sponsor to their adopted child. *Habitus* is not a matter of compliance to an external constraint like the Constitution. Ante and Maja are not following some fixed rule. Pierre Bourdieu writes that *habitus* is "a tendency to generate regulated behaviors apart from any reference to rules."⁷ *Habitus* provides Ante and Maja with a system of schemes rather than rules guiding their choices. Unlike rules, this system of schemes exists "without ever becoming completely and systematically explicit."⁸ Their decision to ask Vjeko to be their *kum* is not based on rational calculation or instrumental reasoning. Bourdieu provides an apt metaphor: Maja and Ante are like a train laying their own tracks.⁹ There is no set of rails in front of them. They lay down their own tracks as their wheels move forward in the polyethnic society in which they live.

The film ends this way: Ante and Maja are planning a weekend trip on Ante's motorcycle before adopting their child. In their apartment, Vjeko admonishes Ante for their decision to road bike at this critically time. "This is extremely irresponsible [To je krajnje neodgovorno]." The *kum* parents the parents, especially when parents are acting like children. Vjeko steps into his new role easily. As Maja and Ante are about to depart on Ante's motorcycle, Ante calls up to Vjeko who is looking out the window from above and holding Ante's small dog that he will dog sit during their trip. Ante announces to Vjeko that they plan to name their child after him. If they adopt a boy, the child's name will be Vjeko. If they adopt a girl, the child's name will be Katarina, the name Vjeko takes when he dresses as a woman.

Interconnectedness and understanding are established through the establishment of interfaith ritual kinship. Kenneth Burke accounts for the irony that ends the film: "True irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him."¹⁰ As the film ends, Maja, Ante, and Vjeko, former enemies, become consubstantial within one another. They need each other and are indebted to each other and not as observers of each other. They contain each other within themselves.

Habits of the Heart

Interethnic ritual kinship in former-Yugoslavia reflects not just the habits of the heart of Serbs, of Croats, or of Bosniaks, but the habits of the heart of South Slavs. Interethnic ritual kinship reflects what is South Slav for South Slavs. Thorstein Veblen distinguishes the habits of the mind, the habits of the fight, and the habits of the heart.¹¹ The Constitution of the State which provides the written template for civic responsibility reflects the habits of the mind. The bellicose antagonism and barbaric prejudices ethnic groups have toward each other reflect the habits of the fight. Interethnic ritual kinship, reflects the habits of the heart. In comparison to the habits of the mind and the habits of the fight, the habits of the heart are weak. In the hierarchy of power within society, the habits of the heart fade into the background and take a back seat. Nevertheless, the habits of the heart, as the film shows, are morally superior to the habits of the mind and the habits of the fight.

Stjepan G. Meštrović writes, "Habits are notoriously difficult to learn as well as unlearn."¹² Despite the habits of the mind reflected in the Constitution and the habits of the fight reflected in the bellicose history of society, the habits of the heart have not been unlearned. The film indicates that these habits of the heart are second nature. The dignity of interethnic ritual kinship serves as a salve and sustains interconnectedness among South Slavs as South Slavs.

In *Waiting for Elijah: Time and Encounter in a Bosnian Landscape*, one of Safet HadžiMuhamedović's informants reports: "It was never really Muslim with Muslim or Serb with Serb, but exclusively Serb-Muslim."¹³ Interethnic *kumstvo* offers *formulae of rapport*. "It is manifested as a reciprocal bonding act" that results in a "relationship of intimacy, affinity, care and trust, reaffirmed through bodily presence in times of joy and sadness."¹⁴ In this way interethnic kinship reflects what is distinctive about South Slav culture

A well-known passage from Audre Lorde helps us formulate the strength of the principle that grounds interethnic ritual kinship:

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference ...is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only

then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening.¹⁵

For the characters in *Constitution*, interdependency was threatening. It was unwanted. What the constitution of the state offered was a mere prescription of tolerance. Its habits of the mind were abstract. “It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives.” In contrast, the cultural custom of interfaith ritual kinship is the door to a socially vibrant human reality. For these habits of the heart, difference is not hostile but, in the words of Lorde, “a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.”¹⁶ The film captures this notion. Vjeko smiles when he hears Ante tell him that they plan to name their adopted child after him, their *kum*, as is the custom, whether a girl or a boy, Katarina or Vjeko.

Notes

1. Rajko Grlić, *The Constitution* [Ustav Republike Hrvatske], (Zagreb: Inter film d.o.o, 2016). [←](#)
2. Best film at BaNeFF, Stockholm; Best Film at 25th Anniversary Raindance Film Festival, London; Grand Prix des Ameriques at the Montreal Film Festival; and Best Feature Film, Grand Jury Prize-Bridging the Borders at SEEfest 2017 Jury Awards. This list of awards is not inclusive. [←](#)
3. Semezdin Mehmedinović, *Sarajevo Blues*, trans. Ammiel Alcalay (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1992), 22. [←](#)
4. Milenko Filipović, “Forms and Functions of Ritual Kinship among South Slavs” *International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences* 1 (1963): 77. [←](#)
5. Filipović, “Forms and Functions,” 80. [←](#)
6. Pierre Bourdieu, “Marriage Strategies as Strategies of Social Reproduction.” In *Family and Society: Selections from the Annales Economies, Societies, Civilizations*, ed. Robert Forster and Orest Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 118. [←](#)
7. Stephen W. Foster, “Reading Pierre Bourdieu” *Cultural Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (1986): 103. [←](#)
8. Ibid., 119. [←](#)
9. Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 56. [←](#)
10. Kenneth Burke, “Irony and Dialectic.” In Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society*, ed. Joseph R. Gusfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 257-58. [←](#)
11. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). [←](#)
12. Stjepan G. Meštrović, *Habits of the Balkan Heart: Social Character and the Fall of Communism* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 85. [←](#)
13. Safet HadžiMuhamedović, *Waiting for Elijah: Time and Encounter in a Bosnian*

Landscape (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 13. [←](#)

14. Ibid., 129-30. [←](#)

15. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” In *Sister Outside: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 96. [←](#)

16. Ibid. [←](#)

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