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On Stereotypes and Bosnia

Lejla Panjeta

In modern times where the world is bombarded by media and other peoples' perceptions of reality, stereotypes are the tools for processing experience and human communication. We costume and dress up our perceptions communicating through simplified schemes for decoding the significances of the notions in the world that surround us. The mind performs operations to simplify the reality by framing the new experiences into an existing stereotype. Doing so, the information directed to us is generalized, deleted, or deformed in order to fit into the images of our already formed reality. Reality is perceived in groups of signs that have society's stamp of approval.

How much freedom do we have to think freely? Is our knowledge only a grouped pool of stereotypes? Do we just costume and dress up our perceptions communicating through simplified schemes for decoding significances in the notions of the world that surround us?

Islamophobia in Europe and United States labels Bosnia and Herzegovina as a dangerous country in which it is assumed that the majority of the country's population is Muslim. Forty percent of the country's population is of Muslim nationality; the rest of the population has Christian and Jewish origins. In Paris, more Muslims live than in the entire territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to CIAWFB in 2000, the Muslim population in Paris was 4.082.222. In the United Kingdom, there are more religious practitioners of Islam with the British passport (1.579.229) than Bosniaks who abide by the religious customs of Islam. In the United States, live 9.992.860 Muslims, twice the entire population of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Diplomats and all kinds of people come to Bosnia to search for interesting and "never before" experienced things. Most of them come prepared with information obtained from Wikipedia or the media during the war. One of the most bizarre theories about the origins of the name Bosnia was presented by a high-ranking diplomat in the presence of the Expert Associate for Culture for the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to this diplomat, whose name cannot be mentioned, Islam arrived in Bosnia in the 7th century, when Bosnian pilgrims went to see a new prophet in Mecca. They returned barefoot, whence comes the word Bosnia (in Bosnian barefoot is spelled *bos*). The statement has the same credibility as a theory that would connect Bosnia's origins to the name brand BOSS.

What is confusing for foreign scholars and politicians is that the “high culture” and “low culture” dramatized in Ivo Andrić’s *Letter from 1920* do not correspond. “High culture” is what you read in mainstream media, politics, and diplomatic relations, where “low culture” is what actually happens within the culture on the ground. For example, the Muslim would give a piece of the ritual meat to his Serb neighbor. The Catholic would bring eggs to his Muslim, Serb, and Jewish friends for Easter. The Orthodox Serb would share the ritual lunch for Christmas with his Muslim or Croatian families. Religiously and ethnically mixed marriages were and still are common. Within a city block in Sarajevo, the bells of the church ring along with the Muslim prayer from the mosque. The actual culture on the ground, the “low culture,” has no problems when it comes to differences.

It is the “high culture” that is trying to invent the differences by manipulating perceptions of others. This is done for the purposes of political and military power and various competing claims on the territory of Bosnia, which is situated in the center of southeast Europe on the crossroad of cultures and historically important trade routes. The dividing line of the Catholic and Orthodox Church and the historical boundary of the Roman Empire goes through Bosnia. The center for defense of former Yugoslavia was mainly set up around the center of the country that was the territory of Bosnia. High interests are at stake when it comes to this piece of the European continent, but they do not correspond with the actual relations among ordinary people that inhabit this country. Often arriving with prejudice and misleading information about the culture and religion in Bosnia and Herzegovina, foreigners on either a temporary stay or working permanently in the country have a peculiar angle of observation, which acquired experiences in the country do not necessarily change because they do not fit into the stereotyped costumes and scenery.

Any human communication is basically persuasive by nature. We simplify the notions about the world that surround us and put them in perspective based on our previous knowledge and experience – determined by education, our parents or teachers’ points of view, and the realities on which the media directs our focus. Therefore our communication is ruled by stereotypes, connotations, and changing denotations. Some meanings of the signs and symbols can have such a powerful effect triggered by beliefs in their powers that even today they can start controversies or patriotic electricity with the mass population. In some cases stereotypes can be very dangerous. Masses are easily manipulated through stereotyped mythology and their symbols. People are killed or have been prepared to kill and die for some symbols of patriotic or religious nature. Unconscious stereotypes powered by archetypical mythology patterns give people the feeling of belonging, security, domination, and power.

The two popular figures for jokes about Bosnians are Suljo, Mujo and his wife Fata. These Muslim names of characters are stereotyped visions of Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia. The attributes depicted in the jokes are stupidity, laziness, and savagery. The jokes are darkly humored and contain much irony. Sometimes it is not possible to translate them because of presumptions of cultural background. A general knowledge is often necessary for their full understanding. They are comparable to jokes made about policemen or blondes, which are stereotypical and derogative. Here are the couple of examples.

Mujo goes to the famous prophet. The prophet lays the hand on him and says: "You will walk!" Mujo turns around and thinks the prophet is an idiot because he already is walking. He goes to the parking lot and his Golf (the type of car that Bosnians love the most) is not there.

When asked if he believes in love at first sight, Mujo said: "Of course I do. Do you think I would marry my wife if I looked at her twice."

Mujo complains to his friend Suljo: I came home last night and found Fata in bed with a Japanese guy."

Suljo: "So, what did you do?"

Mujo: "Nothing, how the hell can I speak Japanese".

While humor can be a healthy and intelligent way of understanding and simplifying reality, if it is repetitive and accumulative, without counter perceptions on the subject that are resisted, then the stereotypes can become the sole perceptions, that is, they can become facts.

Nationalist aspirations are based on a simple principle: Facts are converted to lies. Truth is blurred by the mixture of fact and opinion or simply ignored and not given media and thus public attention. The strategy of re-framing through an acceptance of stereotypes discounts the individual and becomes the group's liability. This is a proven method for manipulating the population after major conflicts, wars and social instability. Forming a stereotype describing the other's being or notion of self with negative connotation makes a consequential difference based on the division between the stereotyped notion and the one perceived. Stereotypes are connected to archetypes of "The Other" that form tribal mythology of centralization and survival. This is a method for creation of the politics of endangerment that in the end creates fear and triggers conflict. In this "blurry" world the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina currently live as well as the visitors and diplomats who are acquainted with Bosnia and Herzegovina through the media or semi-reliable information on the Internet.

The deconstruction of stereotypes is necessary for the construction of a culture of dialogue and tolerance.

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