



Post-Socialist Neoliberalism and the Ethnography of Uncertainty

A Review of the Volume

Brković, Čarna: *Managing Ambiguity: How Clientelism,
Citizenship and Power Shape Personhood
in Bosnia and Herzegovina*¹

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Bosnia has always been in the focus of sociological and ethnographic research, providing rich empirical material in numerous domains from political science through nationalism studies to history. Also, based on this research, a vast number of theories were developed regarding informality, clientelism, the consequences of power sharing, interethnic relations, conflict and conflict management, or the image and memory of the Balkans. Similarly, in the past almost 30 years, a vast number of literature focused on the consequences of post-socialist transition, asking questions regarding how Central and Eastern European countries managed to overcome the challenges of post-socialism and what were the peculiarities of transition to capitalism and democracy in the region.

Managing Ambiguity: How Clientelism, Citizenship and Power Shape Personhood in Bosnia and Herzegovina by Čarna Brković continues and breaks with this tradition at the same time. On the one hand, relying on exquisite empirical material, she continues the finest anthropological tradition that focuses on the complex concept of favours, informality, and clientelism. By putting it in the context of the state welfare system, it presents how these shape social and power relations in a Bosnian town. On the other hand, with theoretical thoroughness, she rejects the Central and Eastern European specificity and the groundedness in post-communist transition, criticizes the orientalizing aspects of research in the topic, and formulates general conclusions on the challenges of the globally observable neoliberal transformation of the state.

1 Edited by Berghahn Books, New York, 2017.

The main argument of the book is that, contrary to the common discourses on clientelism and informality, “veze” and “stele” – specific Bosnian forms of clientelism – are not pre-democratic practices that will disappear with the consolidation of democracy but are well embedded in the neoliberal state institution and are fostered by the ambiguities and uncertainties generated by neoliberal reforms regarding welfare. In other words, clientelism and the globalized form of flexible governance are not contradictory to each other but mutually constitutive. Inasmuch as the state withdraws from different social domains, responsibility is passed on to the local community and the myriad of actors representing it. Without a clear description of responsibilities, ambiguity and uncertainty are growing, leaving room for clientelist relationality to take over.

Furthermore, the book develops a new theoretical approach to favours. In the anthropological literature, favour is approached from three perspectives (for a detailed account, see Chapter 2 of the book). The first one argues that informality is a systemic response to the shortages generated by post-socialist transformation, and, as soon as CEE countries are ‘modernized’, it will gradually disappear. The second, called by many a moral perspective, argues that informality survives in CEE countries because people intentionally reject the ‘official ways of doing things’, and through informal practices they generate a sense of pride and self-worth, thus defining themselves as moral beings. A third, culturalist explanation argues that favours are deeply embedded in the Balkan identity. According to Brković, all three discourses reiterate a sharp distinction between the East and the West and reify an orientaling image of Central and Eastern Europe; however, some elements of these approaches can be used to build a new approach on how favours appear in the neoliberal context.

In her opinion, favours are a systemic response to social realities but not in the orientaling way presented in the literature but more related to the changing aspects of the neoliberal state and citizenship. Also, the material – interest-driven – and its moral – identity-forming – aspects of clientelism cannot be separated but analytically as people use their social world and networks both to fulfil their claims and to find their place in society.

The book develops these concepts and arguments on three levels. In the first part, it presents how the Bosnian system of favours is linked to personhood. In the second part, it deals with the specificities of the new neoliberal reforms regarding the citizen and citizenship, while in the final, third part, it analyses how these two concepts are related to power. In the following sections, for the sake of the argument, I will first discuss citizenship and then the aspects related to personhood.

Brković’s conception of the neoliberal state can be included in a series of authors that describe changes through the Foucauldian concept of governmentality. According to this, power is generated not only by the different rules and

regulations of the state but the dominant ideologies that shape society.² In the neoliberal context, this means two things. First, because of the growing critiques of the welfare state, the state withdraws from the administration of the welfare system, and, second, it introduces the ethos of empowerment and community.³ Consequently, it avoids taking responsibility in resolving the situation of the needy and places responsibility on the person and the local community. More exactly, to resolve their problem, the person cannot rely on the state anymore, they need to become proactive and to find partners for their endeavours. Similarly, instead of being the responsibility of the state, welfare relies more and more on voluntary work, philanthropy, and the cooperation of local community actors.

This spread of the neoliberal model involves several problems. First, as Brković points out sharply, 'local community' is both used as an institution to be created and one empowered at the same time. In other words, the citizen faces ambiguity as it is not clear who is responsible for what, what are the things people are entitled to, and what exactly their rights are. While the socialist welfare system offered a clear guidance for the citizens on whom they should turn to, in this new model, the actors' involvement is shaped by a mixture of formal legal framework, private willingness, and sense of vocation. Second, ambiguity becomes not a temporary status but the norm, where people need to make use of every resource they have to resolve their problems. As their most available resource is their social network and a system of favours, the lines between public and private, responsibility and philanthropy are blurred.

The second pillar of the argument is related to the consistency of the 'veze' and 'stele' system in Bosnia and Herzegovina (see chapters 1 and 2 of the book). Brković argues that this is not only interest-driven, sustained by the deficiencies of the state, but it has implications for the identity of the person and the social personhood it develops. In her conception, social personhood is shaped by the connections and relations a person develops. More exactly, by using connections and favours, the person places themselves on the map of social relations and reproduces existing power relations and hierarchies. In this framework, pursuing interest and identity formation cannot be separated. People build their connections and use their social identities to resolve their problems but also to construct their social identity: knowing others means finding out the others' identity and knowing one's place in the society.

The two concepts – neoliberal citizenship and social personhood – shape power relations in several ways. Most accounts on favours and clientelism emphasize its

2 For more on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, see: Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne, and Nikolas Rose (eds). (1996). *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and Rationalities of Government*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press or Thomas Lemke (2002). *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*. *Rethinking Marxism* 14(3): 49–64.

3 Nikolas Rose. (1996). *Governing 'Advanced' Liberal*. In: Barry et al. (eds), *Foucault and Political Reason*.

reciprocal nature. However, the system described by Brković is not reciprocal at all. Ambiguity can be manipulated to reproduce positions of power. As she puts it: ‘decision-makers and providers of social protection are able to influence when and how much a particular service is a matter of their professional duty and when and how much it is a matter of their personal goodwill to do a favour’ (p. 16). As the neoliberal restructuring has strengthened this duality – social protection as both a citizenship right and a social gift –, it created the possibility for people with different social, political, public, and private positions to navigate and in some cases manage ambiguity and to exchange their influence to political power. These relationships cannot be described by the existing concept of patronage as there is no centralized state apparatus from which resources would be redistributed. In this context, there are a myriad of locally and nationally existing positions and resources distributed unequally within society. In this context, power relations are shaped by people who manage to dominate the social world of favours, keep more than one position, and become less dependent on others. Even in this context, their power is fragile as they need to constantly invest in their personal relations and prove their unavoidability in the domain. In addition to this, Brković constructs another type of power relation. Similar to how Rose develops the concept of empowerment as a form of social control,⁴ Brković, by drawing on the Foucauldian concepts of panopticon, uses the concept of *moveopticon* to describe how a person trapped in the welfare system becomes controlled. In a world where there is no clear boundary between rights and favours, public and private, where information is dispersed and there are no institutions and actors that control all of it, to resolve their problem, a person needs to be constantly on the move, needs to look for newer and newer relations and utilize newer and newer possibilities. Although most people are aware of the flaws of the system, they want to get things done and thus need to play by the rules of the game and intentionally or unintentionally reify the existing power relations.

All in all, Brković constructs a convincing argument on how ‘veze’ and ‘stele’, the Bosnian system of favours, can fit in and become a constituting element of the post-socialist neoliberal state, but, as mentioned earlier, her argument goes beyond these local specificities. She argues that these processes can be fitted in a global change in power relations, as their neoliberal undertakings are not only Eastern European specificities but are emphatically present in Western post-welfare states as well. Nonetheless, this could be true, but still the characteristics regarding how the formal and informal elements, ‘state’ and ‘what is not the state’ (p. 78), fit together in this context is very much Eastern European and post-communist. Brković argues that ambiguity is a result of the neoliberal reforms, but she also mentions that it is amplified by several institutional and systemic elements that are specific to Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular and Eastern Europe

4 Rose. Governing “advanced” liberal democracies

in general. The most important of these are the institutional setting and the involvement of the international community. First, Bosnia is a divided country, where policy and decision-making capacities are decentralized. As the author puts it, the social protection system can be radically different from region to region, even from town to town (p. 77). This lack of central guidelines amplifies ambiguity, leaving room for local political actors to manoeuvre and helping them to manage the existing ambiguity even more. Second, in the 1990s, several international actors appeared in Eastern Europe, which engaged themselves in peace building, strengthening democracy, and other similar activities. However, as Brković herself observes, these activities were rather ambiguous both as their objective and their implementation. In many cases, these programmes did not target the countries but only small communities (pp. 99–101). Furthermore, these programmes and policies were sometimes deflected by local elites and used instrumentally to strengthen their power.⁵ In other words, they contributed to the ambiguity already encoded into the system and strengthening the path-dependent linkage between favours and the neoliberal welfare system. Brković does not offer a convincing explanation of why one should disregard these specificities; thus, the question remains: is there a general trend of ‘informalization’ and a shift in global power relations, or this type of strong linkage prevails only because of the specific institutional context where it has developed?

5 A similar point is made by Martin Brusis regarding the instrumental use of EU regional policy in several Central and Eastern European countries (Martin Brusis 2005). The Instrumental Use of European Union Conditionality: Regionalization in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *East European Politics and Societies* 19(2): 291–316.