

Book Review:

## Socioeconomic Justice: International Intervention and Transition in Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina

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*Socioeconomic Justice: International Intervention and Transition in Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina*, by Daniela Lai, 2020, Cambridge University Press.

More than studying the 2014 mobilisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), *Socioeconomic Justice: International Intervention and Transition in Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina* shares with them in an effort to reframe wartime and post-war BiH away from issues of ethnicity into the realm of socioeconomic justice. To understand the protests' claims to 'social justice', Lai convincingly argues, we need to 'analyse the role that socioeconomic violence plays in war, how post-conflict communities deal with it, and how socioeconomic justice claims stemming from the war turn into social justice struggles' (p. 3).

The book combines a political economy lens with an understanding of justice as a contested concept and practice. While the particular 'target' of the book is the transitional justice scholarship that is slow to engage with socioeconomic issues, questioning definitions of justice also counters more general understandings of 'what matters' in BiH, and post-conflict politics and scholarship more broadly.

The book consists of seven chapters and an appendix. The Introduction reviews the transitional justice literature and clarifies the main contributions of the book: demonstrating the relevance of socioeconomic violence in war; redefining justice to be a process of contestation, social mobilisation, and struggle; and bridging the gap between scholarship on justice and political economy in intervention contexts.

The author addresses theorisation of socioeconomic violence and justice in Chapter 2 by drawing from discussions on transformative justice, the work of Nancy Fraser, and literature that deals with the practice of human rights and international justice 'from below'. Lai uses Fraser as a source of 'theoretical and linguistic tools to recognise and analyse alternative conceptions of justice' (p. 27). Here, Lai connects debates on transitional justice, social justice, and human rights to both move justice 'beyond' transition and develop a way to theorise it 'in the realm of ordinary people' (p. 18). Chapter 2 also introduces the particular understanding of 'international intervention' and reviews its unfolding in BiH by focussing on two types of international actors: those involved in setting up and implementing transitional justice mechanisms (most prominently the ICTY, but also projects carried out by a wider range of actors such as the OSCE, UNDP, and UNHCR) and economic actors like the International Monetary Fund and The World Bank.

Chapter 3 highlights the importance of temporality in how people experience the post-war and post-socialist conditions the country finds itself in. It specifically focuses on political economy before, during, and after the war, while Chapter 4 investigates the international dimension of socioeconomic justice in transitional contexts and thus applies the 'justice-and-political economy' approach. Lai regards the above-mentioned sets of international actors as important in two processes. First, they introduce a narrow definition of 'transitional justice' that obscures the socioeconomic dimensions of war and post-war and makes it difficult to make justice claims based on it. The strength of the chapter lies in reviewing particular responses to violence, some of

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which included socioeconomic *remedies*, but still ignored socioeconomic *violence* (p 67). Second, these actors promote economic reforms that often worsen the socioeconomic situation: labour laws and social policy, privatisation and industrial policy, macroeconomic policy. The review of these processes demonstrates the neoliberal orientation of post-war reconstruction beyond the nowadays common, but far less detailed, critiques.

Chapters 5-7 investigate the above issues in Prijedor and Zenica. Chapter 5 looks at how communities experienced socioeconomic violence during the war, and Chapter 6 focuses on how socioeconomic injustice is transformed into post-war justice claims brought forward by communities themselves. The differences between Prijedor and Zenica relate to the place of ethnicity in wartime and post-war processes. As chapter 5 details, in Prijedor, socioeconomic violence was a component of a wider strategy of ethnic cleansing of non-Serb populations, while deprivation in Zenica was mostly unconnected to interethnic violence.

In Chapter 6, we see how justice claims developed differently: while people in Prijedor could use the ethnic framing to some, albeit very limited, extent in addressing socioeconomic concerns, the people in Zenica were completely left out of transitional justice discourses and mechanisms. The role of international actors (and the justice interventions they support and implement) in shaping these claims is not understood as 'setting norms' that are later 'localised' (as in much of the existing literature). Instead, Lai shows how they 'selectively acknowledge injustice', thus 'distorting the socioeconomic justice claims put forward by affected communities'. It is a process of 'metaphorical "occupation" of post-war justice initiatives' that shapes 'how people perceive, use, and rework conceptions of justice when thinking about how to get justice for themselves and their communities' (p 121). This leads to a somewhat paradoxical situation in which the communities in Prijedor can gain some benefit from orthodox understandings of transitional justice, while people in Zenica are more able to make progressive claims and develop alternative conceptions of justice, precisely due to their lack of inclusion in conventional narratives.

Chapter 7 shows how socioeconomic justice can inspire grassroots mobilisation by looking at the 2014 protests that started as a demand for unpaid salaries, but quickly turned to a country-wide outcry against political and economic corruption, unemployment, and the 'post-Dayton' state of the country. The chapter discusses the protests and demonstrates how alternative justice claims can become a grassroots mobilisation of social justice. Here, Lai interprets the protests not just as a tool for activists, but a lived experience through which people came to see themselves as bearers of justice claims. This has important effects on how justice is conceptualised: the subjects here are not victims, but claim-making citizens. The second part of the chapter is perhaps less optimistic as it reviews how international actors reacted: while they offered socioeconomic remedies, they were unable to frame them as justice issues. The protesters and the book itself, however, do exactly that, as they 'redefine the concept of justice itself against the constraints of Bosnia's transitional conditions' (p. 160).

The concluding chapter first highlights theoretical and analytical contributions and ponders how to rethink accountability to include international actors, including economic actors, and thus highlights the echoes that struggles can have in global discussions. This is the case with the focus on both political *and* economic democratisation that we have seen in BiH and that remains relevant for progressive politics globally.

The Appendix addresses the methodological underpinning of the book, specifically how the orientation towards marginalised communities was practised during the research. Importantly, Lai here makes a strong case for once again moving beyond well-researched issues. Here, this does not only mean away from issues of ethnicity, but also from particular spaces which have been over-researched in the last 20 years, thus misconstruing the 'Bosnian case' based on a particularly Sarajevo-based and NGO perspective.

The book is impressive in how effectively it intervenes in transitional justice literature. Such intervention, however, is less radical for those not coming from literatures and positions where

justice is so clearly and strongly delimited from socioeconomic issues. There are other avenues the rich empirical and conceptual discussion can lead to. I will mention three.

First, I was left wondering what the processes examined say about the more general critiques of international interventions as depoliticising and neoliberal projects? Specifically, the book touches on the division between civil society building and grassroots organising but does not develop this line in conversation with the impressive literature on the topic, both within South East Europe and globally. Second, more nuanced questions about the protests are left unexplored. Can they be interpreted as a sort of austerity from below, given the strong resentment of the public sector that is observed not only in BiH, but also the region? And third, by discussing the mining and steel industries and the pollution and labour they are entangled with, the book taps into a new direction of research on South East Europe as a site of extraction, of both natural resources and labour. How might demands for labour work alongside environmental efforts, or how might the critiques of working conditions mesh with the increasing understanding of neoliberalism as excluding some communities, even from exploitation?

Accordingly, the book's main audience are students, researchers, and practitioners working in the fields of transitional justice and human rights. Those studying and working in statebuilding, peacebuilding, and development interventions more generally will also benefit greatly from the book, while it will be absolutely crucial reading for anyone interested in BiH and Balkan politics. The book will be valuable to those thinking about the ways in which researchers interact with their objects of analysis in social science: it shows that scholarly work is a part of the intervention in the region (Lai reflects on this in the Appendix) as it participates in diagnosing problems and designing solutions. Here, the book offers us its most urgent contribution: alternative categories of analysis and conceptual frameworks that allow us to approach societies that experienced war beyond their post-conflict framing.

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