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Objects Supporting/Resisting a Democracy and Resisting an Occupation: Two Sides of the Same Coin—Kosovo and The Occupied Territories

Rory J. Conces*

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

I thought I knew all there was to know about evocative objects, at least as much as I needed to know to talk about ordinary (political) ontology. But I was very wrong, as wrong as I could ever be. I didn’t know much about those objects. And maybe I still don’t, even after spending a chunk of my life in Bosnia and Kosovo and immersed in their ethnic divisions and enclaves. What I concluded from my Balkan experience was that since peace and democracy building were the ultimate goals for the region, the divisiveness of ethnic enclaves and the objects that sustain them had to be defeated. In my mind, those enclaves and objects were absolutely counterproductive. Nothing good could ever come from them. “Good-for-nothings!” But the world is much messier and bigger than the Balkans. After thinking less about the Balkans and more about other contentious realities, primarily The Occupied Territories (but also Ukraine), I came to the sudden realization that I had been thinking of the divisiveness of enclaves and evocative objects solely in terms of whether

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they support peace and democracy building and totally neglected how they could act as forms of resistance. Evocative objects are at work in both building and resistance. In a sense, they are two sides of the same coin. It also became apparent that the resistance being promoted by enclaves and the evocative objects that support them, does not play out in the same way in every contentious reality. It is hard not to pick up on resistance, no matter where and how it operates. The Serb resistance in Kosovo pushes back on an Albanian-led parliamentary representative democratic republic, which has drawn ethnic minorities into various levels of the government, whereas the Palestinian resistance in The Occupied Territories, is resistance against a decades long occupation that has attempted to erase the Palestinian presence. Arguably they are very different sorts of contentious realities and resistances.

**EVOCA TIVE OBJECTS SUPPORTING/RESISTING A DEMOCRACY (KOSOVO)**

Many objects that we surround ourselves with are ordinary and useful, but usually not possessing special meaning and invoking powerful emotions in us. But those that do are called “evocative.” We decorate our homes and adorn our bodies with them, including photos of family members, bracelets and rings given to us by people we love. They are important to us as individuals.

However, some objects (like flags) are evocative for members of groups, such as those that resonate with members of ethnonationalist groups (like the ethnic Albanians and Serbs of Kosovo). But those flags are evocative in radically different ways depending on who is observing them. In other words, object evocativity is observer-sensitive. Take, for example, the double-headed eagle flag of Albania and the tri-color of Serbia. The very sight of the state flag of Serbia near Crkva Sv. Nikole (Church of St. Nickolas) in the Taslixhe I neighborhood of Pristina is likely to resonate very negatively for many ethnic Albanians, while it is likely to have the opposite affect for many of those who worship in that Orthodox church. Similarly, the many Albanian flags found along M25-2 between the capital and the Serb enclave of Gračanica elicit a welcoming feeling for ethnic Albanians but they make some residents of that enclave very wary of using that road. Friendly images versus enemy images are simultaneously at work attracting some and repelling others. These are the centripetal and centrifugal effects on people that sustain ethnic enclaves.
These enclaves are the antithesis of the sort of integration and interaction that are the hallmark of a multiethnic society that is peaceful, harmonious, and deliberatively democratic. This turn toward an engaging (deliberative) democracy with its discursive, critical, and dialogical elements is crucial in severing the stranglehold of ethnonationalism on a populace. The absorbing of new views, enlarging perspectives, rethinking assumptions and modifying judgments needs to be undertaken by the politicians, bureaucrats, and technocrats within the Assembly Building and the Rilindja Building in Pristina, as well as by the ordinary folk who reside in neighborhoods scattered across Kosovo.

As recent events have shown, there remains a great deal of work to be done before peace, harmony, and democracy are sustainable in Kosovo. One word encapsulates the Serb presence in Kosovo: ‘resistance’ (‘otpor’). Serb resistance was best exemplified by the events that surrounded the four mayoral and two municipal elections that took place in the Serb-majority municipalities of Leposavić, North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, and Zvečan on April 23. Resistance came in the form of a boycott by the largest Serb political party in Kosovo, the Serb List. As expected, the election had extremely poor voter turnout with less than 4% of those eligible having voted, resulting in all the elected heads of those elections being Albanian. Police were called in to secure government buildings and to escort the elected officials to their offices, which led to clashes between the KFOR troops and “special” police, and the Serb protestors. Such altercations (boycotts, police actions, demonstrations, clashes) are nothing new in Kosovo. They have been fixtures of Kosovo’s political landscape for years. But recent events have led some, like Aleksandar Arsenijević, a Serb politico in Kosovo, to claim that “People see it as an occupation.” Such a claim is misleading given that there has been a concerted effort by the Albanian-led government in Kosovo to include minorities in the government. A quick glance at Kosovo’s Constitution and electoral process casts doubt on the veracity of the occupation thesis. For example, there are many minority political parties that are vying to secure some of the 20 seats of the 120 seat Assembly that are reserved for national minorities (i.e., Serbs [10 seats], Romani, Ashkali, Egyptians, Turks, Gorani, and Bosniaks). And that is in a country with a population of about 93% ethnic Albanian. The April election boycott does not cast doubt on the attempt to build more inclusive governance in Kosovo, but it does the exact opposite indicating a choice by some not to take advantage of the opportunity to be included in the ongoing democracy building project.
But for engagement to spread in Kosovo, its enclaves and plural monoethnic (ethnic diversity but little integration and interaction) society need to change. Dismantling the ethnic enclaves is the catalyst for this change. The key is to find ways to bring people into closer proximity with one another, in order to enhance understanding, and most importantly, to create experiences of empathy, compassion, and care. Yet creating these interactive laboratories of discovery are not remedies for all the ills that plague Kosovo.

I do agree with the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, when he writes about the limits of neighborhood. The gist of his message is that we might not like what we find. Surely, this is not news to anyone. Which one of us can honestly claim that we have liked all of our neighbors? “I can’t!” But this does not mean that neighbors who do not like each other cannot become co-participants in a fledgling deliberative democracy. At least becoming neighbors indicates a certain degree of integration (and probably interaction), and perhaps the increased likelihood for deliberative engagements. That is what is missing to a great extent in Kosovo.

**OBJECTS RESISTING AN OCCUPATION: THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES (THE WEST BANK)**

In an occupation, evocative objects and the enclaves that resonate along ethnonational lines, on the one hand, can help to resist the occupier, who is attempting to erase or squash the identity, culture, and self-determination of a subjugated people, by creating and sustaining a “safe” haven (enclave) for the subjugated. According to the American legal scholar Cass Sunstein, “a special advantage of...‘enclave deliberation’ is that it promotes the development of positions that would otherwise be invisible, silenced, or squelched in general debate.” Obviously, I take this a bit further than Sunstein. On the other hand, objects can also be used by the occupier to further hinder opportunities for interaction between the different peoples, especially since there is no interest in creating an all-inclusive democracy.

As the Canadian scholar Kenneth Christie writes in his perceptive discussion of a seminal policy paper by B’Tselem (the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights), “Israel has managed to manipulate and control the space in which Israelis and Palestinians live.... The Israeli state has completed this taking over and occupying of millions of...
Objects Supporting/Resisting a Democracy

Dunams of land and creating Jewish-only communities, while placing...Palestinians into small enclaves...Movement is engineered through restrictions on Palestinian subjects, and political engineering excludes millions of Palestinians from participating in the processes that determine their lives and futures while holding them under [a 55-year] military occupation.” Israeli state and settler violence, property damage (including the demolition of schools), and denial of services makes life extremely difficult for Palestinians, forcing many to relocate from one place to another. This encapsulates much of the plight of the Palestinians in The Occupied Territories. It is not a matter of being able to live in relative peace in an enclave with opportunities for democratic participation (with some semblance of self-determination), like what occurs in Kosovo. In the West Bank it is a matter of disconnecting the Palestinian from the land by whatever means available in order for Israeli settlers to expand their presence. As it stands, it is a zero-sum game.

It is also notable that the Israeli state’s efforts to subvert the Palestinian presence are not confined to The Occupied Territories but also show up in its effort to eliminate the symbolic presence of the Palestinian people within Israel. In January of 2023, Israel’s national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, ordered police to ban Palestinian flags from public places. (This is likely to be tested in court, but the recent undermining of judicial power in Israel might make such a test a moot point.) But the red, green, and white flag continues to be ever present in the Palestinian communities throughout the West Bank, like the presence of the blue and white flag of Israel in settler communities.

Ethnic Serbs are in a much better position in Kosovo, than the Palestinians in The Occupied Territories. The former are supported in many ways by the Kosovo state, whereas the latter are under continual threat by the state of Israel and Israeli settlers. A democracy building project, albeit inadequate, is found in Kosovo, but it is absent in The Occupied Territories. I still think that peace and democracy building are important goals to achieve. But I now recognize that resistance can sometimes play a role in that building.