

# On Not Moving Well Enough

## Temporal Reasoning in Sarajevo Yearnings for “Normal Lives”

by Stef Jansen

In this article I investigate ethnographically how people in the outskirts of Sarajevo attempted to reason their way through a widespread sense of persistent “pattering in place” in postwar, postsocialist, post-Yugoslav Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosna i Hercegovina [BiH]). Concerns with household futures were explicitly contextualized within the everyday geopolitics of life in a semiprotectorate presumably on the “Road into Europe.” Rather than conceiving of their predicament in terms of “crisis,” my interlocutors diagnosed and criticized spatiotemporal entrapment through a politicizing understanding of the nesting of these different scales. Yet this politicization ultimately had depoliticizing effects, encouraging waiting rather than collective action. At this particular historical conjuncture, I have discerned an economy of temporal reasoning where yearnings for what were called “normal lives” evoked linear, forward movement as an imperative. Acknowledging that yearnings have their own histories, I investigate how a specific valuation of existential mobility along linear temporal templates shaped up at the intersection of, on the one hand, past futures—recalled from lives in Yugoslav socialist BiH and during the 1992–1995 war—and, on the other hand, futures projected as part of BiH’s ongoing “Road into Europe.”

“I don’t expect anything spectacular here,” Miss A, a 34-year-old web developer said in 2008, 13 years after the official end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosna i Hercegovina [BiH]). “I think that simply too much. . . . I don’t know, how many years have passed, 20 years, I don’t know how many years since the war. . . . The same things are happening to me.” Sighing, she continued: “I talk with the same people, discuss the same problems. So I don’t think that something specific can happen that would improve the situation. . . . I am so desperate and embittered, I don’t know what to say.” During my research in Dobrinja, an outlying apartment complex in BiH’s capital Sarajevo, the frequency of utterances such as that of Miss A sharply underlined the play of temporality in horizons of expectation (Kosseleck 1985 [1979]: 273) and in perceived possibilities to articulate and act on certain hopes for the future.<sup>1</sup> Struck by ubiquitous evocations of painful stagnation, I became especially interested in trying to “sense the political” (Navaro-Yashin 2003) in such temporal reasoning.

Generalizing from developments in economics and Christianity, Guyer (2007) has detected a tendency toward a particular template of temporality in the contemporary United States. Temporal reasoning, she finds, is increasingly suspended between short-term miniprojects and evocations of a distant, totally different future. Caught in the interval, the

“near future,” the temporal horizon for the “organisation and midterm reasoning” of collective action, is reinhabited by conceptions of time as “punctuated rather than enduring” (Guyer 2007:416). At least since Bourdieu’s (1979) study of subproletarianized Kabyle in late colonial Algeria, examples of such “enforced presentism” and “fantasy futurism” (Guyer 2007:410) abound in the ethnographic record. Yet Guyer draws attention to the fact that particular regimes of temporal reasoning may prevail—that is, come to function as largely hegemonic—at particular historical conjunctures. Her diagnosis resonates with a broader contemporary sense of disillusion with collective, political hope (see Miyazaki 2006). Similarly, Ferguson’s (1999) “ethnography of decline” in the Zambian Copperbelt foregrounds the afterlives of modernist temporal regimes, showing how hopes themselves have histories. Alerting us to the coexistence of different modes of temporal reasoning, his study nevertheless rests, like Guyer’s, on the insight that such relative hegemonies have real effects. Ferguson thus embeds the sense of “abjection” he encountered in Zambia in modernist templates that continued to haunt future orientations.

In this article I address ethnographically questions raised in this literature from a “semiperipheral” spatiotemporal vantage point in the European Union’s (EU’s) “immediate outside” (Jansen 2009; Spasić 2013). I investigate how specific temporal reasonings in Dobrinja converged at the intersection of, on the one hand, past futures—recalled from lives in Yu-

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1. Research was concentrated in two 7-month periods in 2008 and 2010.

goslav socialist BiH and during the 1992–1995 war—and, on the other hand, futures projected as part of BiH’s “Road into Europe.” In a situation experienced as sustained stagnation, how did household livelihood practices relate to collective future projections? How did people diagnose their predicament? What was the place of politics therein? Following the lead of my interlocutors, I focus on an economy of temporal reasoning structured around the value of linear, forward movement deployed by people to make sense of thwarted hopes for what were considered “normal lives.”

### Chasing, Surviving, and Not Moving Well Enough

Going by what they said they were doing, people in Dobrinja spent an awful lot of time “chasing” things (infin. *ganjati*). They chased medical test results, certified copies of documents, visas, stipends, loans, permissions, and so forth. Like its English and Brazilian-Portuguese equivalents (cf. de L’Estoile 2014), *ganjati* literally refers to a sustained physical pursuit. Its most common metaphorical use in BiH concerned engagements with the “hope-generating machine” (Nuijten 2003) of bureaucratic institutions, generally considered needlessly demanding, inefficient, confusing, and slow. Using the term *ganjati* implied that one believed—on balance—that a certain set of activities might lead to a certain objective, yet it often left open the possibility that they might not. There was frequent uncertainty about the precise procedure, and usually it was difficult to estimate when the objective might be reached (Brković 2012).

Despite its goal-oriented structure, chasing thus defied fully rational planning, and while its trajectory might be extended, its actual practices functioned on short-term horizons. Saying one was chasing something implied one was busy, but despite the verb’s implications of active, sustained movement, in practice one intermittently made phone calls, visited offices, and filled in forms, while mostly one waited. The term colonized domains beyond bureaucracy, too (e.g., “chasing a job”), and what united different practices and states into chasing was shared temporal reasoning over an extended period: *ganjati* took place under the sign of a fragile hope, in need of permanent rekindling, that one was moving forward.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, chasing always denoted a sense that one’s forward movement was not fast and smooth enough. In fact, the need to chase, or to chase so much, was itself seen as a symptom of broader inadequate movement. Its short-term horizon was thus widely experienced as enforced presentism.

The term “chasing” flagged patterns seen to structure the pursuit of many mundane projects in BiH. This was often

articulated through a distinction between “living” and “surviving.” In the words of Miss A, whose quotation kicked off this text,

Life is hard [*teško se živi*, lit. “one lives difficultly”] . . . for most people. We have lost that middle layer, people who have permanent employment. People who are living very difficultly, they are actually surviving [*preživljavaju*]. Whatever you try to do, to achieve for yourself, I don’t know, for your child, in whichever segment of life, you run into all kinds of walls.

References to “surviving” (*preživljavanje*; also *životarenje*) thus denote a sense that in current BiH conditions, one was condemned to chase in order to approach the degree of smooth movement that normal “living” required.

Loosely based on research among immigrants and white racists in Australia, Hage (2009) has written that notions of a viable life “presuppose[s] a form of imaginary mobility, a sense that one is ‘going somewhere’” (97). After Bourdieu (2003), he proposes a focus on “the self as it is moving into a higher capacity to act” (Hage 2002:152) and on its opposite: a “sense of entrapment, of having nowhere to go” (Hage 2003: 20), a feeling of not moving “well enough” (Hage 2009:99). Configuring unequal “existential mobilities” in a political economy of hope, Hage identified “mobility envy” among white Australians: until recently relatively satisfied, he says, they now increasingly felt they were “not going anywhere” and resented the comparative movement of others—for example, immigrants.

In Dobrinja, too, I found inequalities in how well people were moving—and in how well they felt they were moving. Some were more successful in their chasing than others, and, more importantly, some were less reliant on it than others and thus less condemned to “survive” and more able to “live.” Some struggled to meet subsistence needs until their next monthly paycheck, pension, or benefit payment. Many ingeniously assembled resources to approximate what they considered to be adequate conditions for their households. Most were dissatisfied with their living standards and wary that they might get worse.<sup>3</sup> A minority were content with their households’ situation, but they systematically qualified this as “only materially” and “only relative to most others in BiH.” In an economy of forward movement, many of the latter saw this as precarious, potentially the “peak of a negative career” (Bourdieu 1979:62), and some explicitly measured their current movement against an imagined continuation of remembered prewar trajectories. This was possible even for young people. Reaching back to the prewar movement of his parents, Mr. B, a single 29-year-old professional and a civic activist, said,

2. Sometimes a couple that was finding it hard to conceive was said to be “chasing a child” (*ganjati dijete*). Referring to someone as “chasing university” (*ganjati fakultet*) evoked less acts of studying and more those of signing up for exams and visiting professors’ offices to collect confirmed, signed marks in one’s report.

3. Dobrinja was part of Canton Sarajevo, which registered relatively higher average wages than anywhere else in BiH, but this was still under €500 a month. Unemployment was rampant, and average pensions were under €200 (figures for 2008). The last official figure (2007) for a four-member household “basket” for food and hygiene only was €270.

My parents were not poor before, and, well, they were going upward, so I could have had a better quality of life, not very much, but perhaps a third better. . . . Personally speaking, I think that everything . . . regardless of the fact that I also try to fight for the common good, for some other people, that I personally will continue to swim relatively well. So I don't have big fears, although it is uncertain of course, as always.

Despite differential assessments of one's own "swimming," I found that acknowledgments of unequal movement were overshadowed by a pervasive sense of shared stagnation. Projecting their resentment outward against the overlapping categories of politicians, tycoons, and *mafijaši*, who were seen to move at everyone else's expense, all my interlocutors felt that they were "not moving well enough." And long before I arrived with my anthropological tools of contextualization, my Dobrinja interlocutors themselves linked their household trajectories to collective movement in a broader economy of possibilities. They did so spontaneously when trying to make sense of their predicaments and even more so when asked about their expectations and plans. I thus found a pervasive sense of inadequate movement on the polity scale: BiH itself, it turned out, was "not moving well enough." "Are we going anywhere?" my interlocutors wondered. "When will things start moving?"

Mr. B's careful confidence that he would continue "to swim relatively well" in the given conditions implies that movement was seen as at least partly determined by external forces. If the collective movement of BiH provided the waters in which people in Dobrinja swam, its currents were considered deeply unfavorable. Some felt they were moving relatively okay (for now) despite poor collective BiH movement, whereas most felt they moved badly because of it. Surveys show that this sense of inadequate movement—on the household and on the polity scale—was a defining trait of the historical conjuncture in BiH, shared by most of its inhabitants across gender, national, and urban-rural divisions.<sup>4</sup> The work of such a horizon of expectation was perhaps most sharply visible in matters concerning emigration and return. On a Sarajevo visit from her new life in Western Europe, Mrs. C, a 35-year-old web designer and mother of one, told me that unlike most Bosnians abroad, she wished to return. After a pause she added "I *would* return . . . if only I felt things were improving [*da stvari idu na bolje*, lit. 'going toward better']." Meanwhile, Mr. D, 34, a machine technician who worked as a security guard, was trying to organize emigration with his girlfriend. "I don't see the point of life here," he said, "because this is

just surviving. So you have no back at all [*nikakva leđa*], some protection from the state to organize a family, children . . . because there's no chance, here and now, there's no place for a family."

This man had volunteered in a paramilitary formation even before all-out war and had then spent 4 years in the BiH army. Like many ex-combatants, he bitterly pointed out that he had "received nothing" from the state he had fought for. "During the war," he said, "when we did look a little forward, we saw a future, we saw all that could be organized. But, well, the end of the war and the years after that really turned around such views of the future in me, so I really don't have any vision of a future, of my future in this country."

How had people's engagement with the future "turned around"? Reaching back into Dobrinja's short history through informal conversations and interviews, I now reconstruct emic histories of yearning for movement from the 1980s until 2008–2010.<sup>5</sup>

### Movement and Former "Normal Lives"

A key resource through which my interlocutors tried to make sense of their predicament in 2008–2010 consisted of recollections of "normal lives" in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). According to these stories, what was hope's Yugoslav history? The evaluations of prewar lives I gathered in Dobrinja were unanimously positive. Major themes were, unsurprisingly, precisely those at the center of current dissatisfaction: employment, living standards, social welfare—all embedded in a "functioning system," an "ordered state." Contrary to Western images of socialist one-party states, many mentioned the nonpolitical character of everyday life and, especially, "freedom" (from physical danger, from worry, and to enjoy life). Additional features of previous "normal lives" that regularly emerged were relative social equality, international harmony, consumption, coastal holidays, and foreign travel with the SFRY passport. Most importantly for my analysis here and in sharp contrast with current precariousness, my interlocutors recalled lives in which one could reasonably expect to achieve everything associated with "normal lives" in a process of smooth reproduction.<sup>6</sup> Asked about their expectations in the 1980s, many only said that they had not expected what actually had happened in the 1990s. Others provided a little more detail. "We were happy," said Mrs. E, a 55-year-old seamstress, married mother of two: "Simply, we had work, we had a flat, and we had a future. . . . I had a

4. In a 2007 survey, only a third of all respondents across BiH expected things to get better on a personal level, while some 60% thought they were unchanged from a year previously (UNDP 2007). These scores correlated with income but not with national or religious affiliation. Asked about the situation in BiH more generally, almost 90% assessed it as "quite bad" or "very bad," some 70% saw no change compared with a year ago, and about 50% expected no change within the next year.

5. In addition to observation in schools, public transportation, and local authorities, my research included 30 recorded in-depth interviews with a variety of people who had lived in Dobrinja from before the war (so between around 30 and 75 years old), carried out in 2008. Questions focused on "normal lives," everyday statecraft, and the future. All translations are mine.

6. Elsewhere I have ethnographically documented the importance of precariousness in postwar, postsocialist BiH (Jansen 2008) and of hope for the state, and its infrastructural promise of predictability, in wartime and postwar Dobrinja (Jansen 2014, 2015).

certain [*sigurnu*] future and I thought, God, I will guide my children. My children will go further. I was happy. I was happy, I believed in the future and in certainty, you know.” Similarly, Mrs. F, 49, an unemployed typist, married mother of two, said,

It was normal. I didn’t think about political stuff at all. . . . We had it good. I had it good. How would it not be good? I got a flat. I had a job. A flat, a car. I had everything. . . . It was much, much, much better than this now. . . . It wasn’t stressful. Now it’s stressful. Now it’s stressful to go to the corner shop. At the time, I don’t know, it was steadier [*staloženije*].

Rather than being condemned to chase “surviving,” then, in the remembered “normal lives” these people indicated, the SFRY institutional framework had facilitated movement toward a “certain future,” particularly through work and housing. In Mr. D’s words above, it had provided “a back.” Previous “normal lives” did therefore not simply feature as a static baseline from where movement was assessed, but they themselves were recalled as containing movement. Mrs. G, a retired sales manager of 64, married mother of two, said,

I looked at the future . . . and all I imagined, all that I thought would come, it really was all realized, materially and psychologically. It all happened in a positive direction. And you knew your child would get a job when completing [an education]. . . . So, since I had a flat and all I wished for, all that an ordinary person can afford, my wish was that my children would complete school, start working, get married, and so on. All those wishes of mine eventually collapsed, when the war came.

Mrs. G’s two sons did complete school, got married, and had jobs, but both of them lived in the United States, contrary to her expectation of continuation. She thus mourned a form of familiar temporal coherence (Han 2011) that had been cut off by war. Similarly, Mr. H, an accountant of 51, married father of two, said he had thought “that all would run along its normal course, that life would further . . . , when Tito died in 1980, that it would all function completely normally. But it came to a turnaround, war broke out, and everything went totally upside down.” Hence, the emphasis on reproduction of “normal lives” did not imply a desire for cyclical repetition but a prolongation of an upward trajectory, a linear model of continued improvement. In the words of Mrs. I, 59, a retired technical draftsman, widowed mother of two, “I hoped I would reach my pension. . . . It was important to me, my family, how I would school [my children] . . . to move in the direction in which we had started moving [*da idemo pravcem kojim smo krenuli*].” Or Mr. J, an electrician of 43, married father of one, said, “I thought that life would continue as it was. Like, everything was going toward . . . that it would get better. And then, well, 1992 happened. Then everything turned upside down.” Those whose own “normal life”—adult version—had not shaped up yet in those days

could evoke similar expectations of the reproduction of forward movement via their parents. “I hoped for a normal life,” said Mr. D, the security guard who was 22 at the outbreak of war, “to find work when I would complete school, to work, like my parents, that’s normal, to fight for something, for your family, I mean to organize a family. . . . And then such thoughts were cut off by the war.” In this way, younger people often emphasized the interruption of an incipient trajectory: just as they were about to “take off,” their flight was broken.

My Dobrinja interlocutors, from pensioners to those around 30, thus tried to make sense of their current predicament through recollections of movement in previous “normal lives” that had suddenly been cut off. They remembered a past that had a future—steady, certain, normal. Most understood this past future as largely apolitical. While some recalled their engagements in party and workplace organizations, no one mentioned a radiant communist future. Yet they did narrate achieved and expected 1980s household movement as embedded in collective movement and tried to make sense of their current “far worse” predicaments in the same way (cf. Pine 2014). In doing so, they selectively omitted the chasing that had no doubt been part of their previous lives. Even when probed about unemployment and periodic shortages in the 1980s—which no one mentioned spontaneously—this was brushed aside as a small discomfort that had perhaps hit other people but not oneself. Moreover, although I knew it (and they knew it), few acknowledged that most people in Dobrinja now had access to more and technologically more advanced goods than then. Yet most felt worse off. In this economy of existential mobility, then, worries about “surviving” did not concern physical survival or material wealth per se but a brutal end to the movement associated with “normal lives” with no relaunch on the horizon.

If all this resonated with findings from my previous studies in the post-Yugoslav states since 1996, it seemed especially prevalent in my Dobrinja research. Why? Let me offer two tentative explanations, a demographic one and a temporal one.

First, my interlocutors were long-term Dobrinja residents. In the 1980s almost all of them had been allocated residence rights to their first (or a better) flat through their work organizations, which had financed the construction of this apartment complex. Mostly originating from other parts of Sarajevo, they comprised skilled workers, teachers, technical experts, and so forth. In class terms, notoriously difficult to transpose straightforwardly to socialist states, they had occupied working-class and middle-class positions. On aggregate, this population had not been especially wealthy, yet it had been particularly well inserted into Yugoslav institutional currents of provision. Socialist self-management had shaped the rhythms and trajectories of their lives more so than those of, say, most Bosnians in villages or in the old Sarajevo *mahale* (hillside neighborhoods around the city center, mainly consisting of private houses). The 1991 census found no absolute

majority of any national grouping among Dobrinja's 32,000 inhabitants and a high percentage of so-called mixed marriages. Despite the prewar and wartime exodus of most people declaring Serbian nationality, the suburb remained less nationally homogenized than most other places in BiH. In the 2008 and 2010 elections, the then oppositional Social Democratic Party (Socijaldemokratska partija [SDP])<sup>7</sup>—with a less ethnationally defined program than most other parties in BiH—attracted more votes than any other party in almost all of its 29 electoral wards. Altogether, these long-term Dobrinja residents thus shared a sociological profile that made it particularly likely they would contrast current stagnation with smooth 1980s movement.

A second reason for the particular prevalence of the concern with movement in my Dobrinja research lies in the timing of my study. Thirteen years had elapsed since the guns fell silent, and people felt they were still moving inadequately. Yearnings have histories, and frustration had accumulated. I now explore this dimension in detail.

### The "O" of "Over"

During the 1992–1995 war, Dobrinja had been besieged by Serbian nationalist forces. How had my interlocutors related to the future when "everything turned upside down"? They recalled extreme enforced presentism and simply stated, "I hoped my children would survive," or, as the saying goes, "to save my living head" (*da sačuvam živu glavu*). Mr. K, an engineer who was in his teens at the time, said,

We didn't hope for anything because everything was oriented toward day-to-day survival . . . get water, collect humanitarian aid, simply actions that would carry us from minute to minute, from hour to hour, and not being burdened by what would happen tomorrow, and what this—altogether—could mean. So, [not] where do I see myself, what will things be like in a year's time, which faculty will I enroll in, no normal thoughts at all.

However, after such initial statements, there were indications that people had desperately longed for an end to the violence and for much more beyond that. Such recollections now featured mainly as painful testaments to one's past naïveté and to the cruelty of history. Many bitterly remembered their initial expectation that the violence would be a short pathological interruption of normal movement. Others went further. Asked whether he had any hopes during the war, Mr. B, who had also been in his teens during the siege, said, "Of course . . . I still cry because I had them." He recalled he had anxiously waited for a "big party" suited to a "proper liberation," and he continued,

That's one thing that never happened. And then, I don't know, I had a feeling, probably like everyone because of the stories they told us, that we had potential for everything

imaginable, that as soon as this would stop everything would start moving . . . that the things I missed, which I longed for badly, would come and that everything would in that same second return to normal. It was like, okay, everything will stop and something will happen and we'll all be happy. . . . I still carried this image of the end of something, like a war, that it would be something great, spectacular, and that people would charge up with positive energy and everything would go as it should. Which, of course, did not have any chance of actually happening, that things would return to normal, nothing exaggerated.

Men who had fought in the war also recalled thinking ahead, occasionally at least, about the moment when they would collectively pick up the pieces and move forward. Here the rhythms of peace negotiations served to emphasize non-fulfillment. Mr. J, a 43-year-old electrician, married father of one, said,

We had no future at all. We didn't hope for anything. Whenever we could, when someone had a generator that worked, we watched our news on someone's TV, our 15 minutes news bulletin. Actually, we did live in some hope: there were continuous promises by some foreigners, Americans, Europeans, that it would quickly . . . last briefly, that our Alija Izetbegović and Karadžić and, what was he called, the Croatian president at the time, would come to an agreement. And all the time we hoped, we waited for some dates, that until 12 August . . . that it would be announced: "That's it." We were promised all kinds of things, but I never especially . . . I didn't believe it could stop, and when it did stop, I didn't believe it had stopped.

Similarly, the wartime entries of the diary kept by the director of the emergency secondary school in besieged Dobrinja (Jansen 2014) contained regular references to peace negotiations, cease-fires, and the reluctance of "the world" to intervene. Occasional expressions of timid, qualified hope were always followed by bitter statements of disappointment. In late 1995, when negotiations in Dayton (United States) did actually end the violence, this was not even mentioned in the diary.

Yet to understand the sense of inadequate current movement in the emic yearnings I gathered in Dobrinja, the immediate postwar period is crucial. Of course, there was relief. People remember counting their blessings in so far as their family had survived intact. Some now recalled euphoric expectations, and even most sceptics said they had believed things could, and would, only get better. As with references to wartime yearnings, the narrative structure of those recollections was almost uniform across the board: an initial statement of hope for movement (sometimes for "catching up") followed by the word "however" (*međutim*) and then an evocation of crushing disappointment. Those who detailed the early postwar years in Dobrinja painted a bleak picture of material and social devastation, partly attributed to its

7. The SDP was the main successor party to the League of Communists of BiH.

proximity to the former siege line, now a boundary zone between the two entities of BiH, which had become a major node in black-market trafficking of all sorts and of heroin in particular. Yet when discussing those years, most of my interlocutors focused on their growing realization that the end of the war was not only less spectacular than expected ("It was just the shooting that stopped") but that it seemed to be less and less deserving of being defined as an end at all. I could not put it better than hairdresser Mrs. L, 55:

"It's over," I said, "come on, let's move toward better things." However, of that "over" there isn't even an "o" ("*Gotovo je, rekoh, hajmo, idemo bolje. Međutim od tog gotovo nema g*"). . . . So I honestly don't know, all this seems somewhat forced to me. Look at that end itself, there's something there that's not clean to me.

BiH's new constitution—significantly, an annex to the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement—consolidated the results of the war in a labyrinthine institutional structure that revolved around the national representation of three "constitutive peoples" in a nominally sovereign BiH under foreign supervision. This reinforced views of the period of war itself as "lost time" for forward movement. Mr. M, 47, an electrician, married father of one, served in the BiH army for the full 4 years. When asked how the war ended for him, he said,

It was stupid. I don't even know how it started, why it started. So many people were killed, so many wounded. I lost eight members of my close family, my brother lost both legs. Now when I think, it was all stupidity. All of it, in fact, is now as it was before the war: we have to live, to communicate, to talk, to socialize, to work. So some great stupidity . . . a time that passed in vain. A great emptiness in our lives.

### Pattering in Place at the Dead Point

Emic histories of yearning for movement, I argue, are key to grasping the sense of stagnation that I encountered in Dobrinja 13 years after the end of the war. As we saw, people felt reduced to surviving through permanent chasing, itself considered the product of inadequate polity movement. A range of spatiotemporal metaphors circulated to evoke the sense that Dayton BiH itself was "going nowhere": "We are pattering in place" (*tapkamo u/na mjestu*), my interlocutors said; "we are turning around in a circle" (*vrtime se u krug*), "nothing starts moving from the dead point" (*ništa se ne pokreće s mrtve tačke*). Parallel to Ferguson's (1999) "ethnography of decline," I now attempt to construct an ethnography of "pattering in place" to address this valuation of forward movement.

People in Dobrinja had adapted their mundane practices to long-lasting stagnation, and most saw no end at the horizon. But while they accepted, reluctantly, that their predicament—which, emically, is rarely referred to as a "crisis"—had become usual for them, they did not consider it normal. Nor did they categorize the prosperity of their former "normal

lives" as an exceptional period of stability and predictability. A global view might show it to be an anomalous blip in history, but for them that period happened to be the first—and best—part of their lives, fondly remembered not as exceptional but as normal. They felt robbed of it by the war, and, although average material conditions in Sarajevo had recovered somewhat since war's end in 1995, they felt they were pattering in place at a low point. Positing Western European populations, who they thought were still moving pretty well, as the reference group, my interlocutors thus attributed their predicament mainly to an extreme exception: war.<sup>8</sup> While clearly also subject to global political-economic reconfigurations, their lives remained for the time being marked as "Dayton," that is, not quite postwar and therefore abnormal. The refusal to normalize thus occurred through contrasts with previous "normal lives" and by embedding their predicaments in BiH's political impasse.

Drawing on her research in the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Navaro-Yashin (2003) urges us to resist "normalising" anthropological approaches that study a sustained experience of "emergency" through notions of "culture or social structure" (120). Instead, she argues, our writing must faithfully render the sense of disruption, the catastrophe under the pretence of normality. When, as in the TRNC, a regime of temporal reasoning keeps "life on hold," Navaro-Yashin (2003) says, we should show how such contexts are contingently "carved out as 'place' through specific historical agencies" (120). In Dobrinja I, too, found a prevailing sense of "life kept on hold," and I, too, want to "sense the political" in this experience. Yet instead of assembling, like Navaro-Yashin, sensory evocations of war trauma in the "dead zone" of BiH, I work through my interlocutors' own attempts to make sense (including political sense) of the "dead point" at which they felt stuck. My analysis therefore relies mainly on conversations and interviews in which people were invited to reason their way through their predicament.<sup>9</sup> Which "historical agencies" did my interlocutors consider to be "carving out" Dayton BiH as a "place"?

### The "Road into Europe"

A young Dobrinja woman once compared "Dayton" to a brutal football game in which the referee had blown his whistle and everyone was magically fixed in their positions. Fifteen

8. In the 2007 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) survey, respondents were asked to suggest a country that could serve as a model for BiH's future development. 30.2% said BiH needed no model, 21.7% mentioned Switzerland, 10.6% Germany, 10.0% Slovenia, and 7% Sweden. The United States came way down the ranking, and no one referred to any of the former Warsaw Pact states that had moved from Soviet socialism to EU membership. As we shall see, in everyday geopolitical commentary, comparisons with the latter states were used mainly to lament BiH's current place in the world (see also Jansen 2009).

9. As in Ferguson's (1999) Zambian Copperbelt study, I found that, often, "greater ethnographic knowledge revealed only that, in the end, matters were as unclear to 'the locals' as they were to me" (208).

years later, she said, they were all still standing there. The referee—the so-called international community—was still present, too. The Office of the High Representative retained considerable powers of intervention in BiH, but apart from ritually endorsing the existence of Dayton BiH as a sovereign international subject, it now rarely used the whistle. While it had “stopped the shooting,” most of my interlocutors in Dobrinja now saw “Dayton” as a major part of the problem, failing to provide a proper break with the war and preventing the establishment of a “functioning state” as a platform for renewed collective movement. The referee did, however, relentlessly remind them of the need for such movement, or more precisely, of the only legitimate path that could avoid a reverse movement back to war: the path toward membership in the EU, often referred to as *Put u Evropu* (the Road into Europe).

In my Dobrinja research, the EU was rarely mentioned. Most of my interlocutors referred to desired future trajectories in general terms, emphasizing the need for decreasing unemployment, for rooting out corruption, for establishing discipline—all embedded in the master trope of a “functioning” or “orderly” state. Occasional references to EU integration were directly anchored in this. “I really don’t know when things will get better,” said Mr. N, a retired professor of around 60, father of two sons, “Perhaps, but only perhaps, things will get slightly better if we move toward the EU because then they will be forced to change certain things, to make a functioning system, and not just to think about how to fill their pockets.” I suggest that the paucity of references to the EU was due to the fact that the imperative of European integration functioned largely as a metadiscourse that did not require explication. Playing on the acronym for their state’s name, many cars in Dobrinja carried a blue-and-yellow country plate saying “i ja BiH u Evropu” (I, too, would like to move into Europe; fig. 1). Opinion polls in BiH returned vast majorities in favor of EU membership, and BiH’s largely segregated public spheres were permeated with the imperative of the “Road into Europe.”<sup>10</sup> Ruling and opposition politicians, foreign intervention personnel, and their EU and U.S. chiefs and almost all NGOs subscribed to this. All major media supported it.

I am not suggesting that there was mass support for concrete EU policies in BiH, but in Sarajevo at least, hardly anyone projected desirable polity futures outside of this framework. It set the terms of debate: policies were presented as steps forward on the “Road into Europe,” and opponents



Figure 1. Country plate reading “I, too, would like to move into Europe.”

rejected them because of their perceived inadequacy in those same terms. This discourse seeped into everyday talk, too: people would point out a problem in their surroundings and sarcastically sigh and say, “Yeah, like that, we’ll move into Europe!” (*Ovako ćemo u Evropu!*). This relative hegemony was thickened by its multiple avatars: alongside the path to EU membership, there were requirements such as changing border controls as part of the “road map” for visa liberalization, making food safety standards compatible with EU import regulations, or refurbishing football stadiums along Union of European Football Associations rules. The “Road into Europe” was thus built around a normative model of progress, often with measurable performance indicators monitored by EU institutions, the Council of Europe, NGOs, and others. As in a computer game, every next “level” could only be acceded cumulatively. Long before “continuous assessment” was introduced in BiH higher education—yes, as part of “Bologna” reforms—the country itself was subject to it.

In principle, the “Road into Europe” thus seemed to contain all the ingredients to serve as a remedy for the suspension of Dayton BiH, structuring engagements with the “near future” around a set of milestones that could provide the yearned-for collective movement from the “dead point.” On the above evidence, one would be tempted to think it worked. Yet I suggest that the insistence on normative forward movement and the ubiquitous EU campaigns promoting the role of “citizens” in it did not make the “Road into Europe” into an effective mobilizing device in everyday terms. I now draw out three reasons for this.

First, the “Road into Europe” was structured around the ranking of polities, all on the move, and media coverage was saturated with league tables. Because BiH always came out unsatisfactorily, this relentlessly reinforced the sense of “pattering in place.” Because of their role in the war, Serbia and Croatia were particularly relevant others, but the EU accession of former Warsaw Pact states was also evoked as proof of BiH’s humiliating inadequate movement (Jansen 2009). And

10. In a 2009 survey, over 70% of the BiH population said they would vote for BiH membership in the EU in a referendum, with figures over 80% among Bosniaks (Šalaj 2009:54). Asked “what or where will BiH be in 20 year’s time?” over 70% of the UNDP survey respondents answered “in the EU” (UNDP 2007). Noting such unusually uniform answers to an open question, the study’s authors are startled that “respondents interpreted the question as virtually exclusively oriented towards ‘where’ rather than ‘what.’” Leaving aside the poor wording of the question, I am surprised by their surprise.

the list went beyond that. For example, an article in a Sarajevo daily was titled "BiH Worse than Kenya, Better than Fiji: According to a Report by the Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal, BiH comes 104th out of 179 countries" (*Oslobođenje* 2012:22). Only in the body of the text did one learn that the table concerned (unexplained) "levels of economic freedom." Headed by Hong Kong, the top ten included only two European states (Switzerland and Ireland). Although Europe was always held up as BiH's reference group, this passed without comment. Then, noting that BiH came 38th out of 43 European countries, the article sarcastically added, "On this ladder, our country, with 57.3 points (0.2 point less than last year), comes under Kenya, Zambia, Cambodia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Egypt, and so on, but we are—look at that!—better than Fiji" (*Oslobođenje* 2012:22).

Ubiquitous in media reporting, such commentary indicated that the key lay not in any substantial criteria for such "ladders" (let alone in the neoconservative ideology of the Heritage Foundation) but in the act of ranking itself. And this merely confirmed what my interlocutors knew already: they were not moving well enough. A particularly eloquent outcry of this frustration was provided in a magazine article by the musician Samir Šestan, subtitled "Broken time-machine":

While we move with the speed of a snail on Lexaurin, the world does not stand still. So that, while we are formally moving forward (although we are actually more running in circles), the slowness of our movement in relation to all others means that we increasingly lag behind. In fact, instead of reducing it, this government increases the gap between us and the rest of the world. Only thus is it possible that even the countries who were behind us immediately after the war meanwhile become unreachable exemplars and that we are on the bottom of Europe. And in world terms in the category of notorious losers. . . . In the meantime, children die, pensioners dig through rubbish containers, unemployment is dramatic, collective refugee centers are still active, the economy dies under crazy public spending, the state is falling apart, and we—hurt, maddened, and instigated by mafia media—scream at Europe from whom we expect salvation. (Šestan 2010:19)

This screaming at Europe for salvation leads us to a second reason for the weak mobilizing capacity of the discourse of the "Road into Europe" in everyday lives. This one is related to people's perceptions of EU enlargement itself. Despite the sequential, progressive form of the discourse of the "Road into Europe," most of my interlocutors believed this clear-cut conditionality was undone by double standards or at least by ambiguity. Every inauguration of a new government in a "big" Western state elicited concerns about possible implications for BiH's forward movement. In Dobrinja, comparisons with Serbia were especially crucial, but over time, suspicion grew that the EU might not take in new members for the foreseeable future regardless of "progress" in aspiring candidate states. The goal posts, my interlocutors thus felt, were

being shifted, rendering the "steps" of the "Road into Europe" less than solid.

This leads me to identify—admittedly more speculatively—a third factor. Guyer (2007) argues that the "near future," between the immediate present and a fantasy future, is becoming increasingly "punctuated" by dates that are "qualitatively different" rather than "quantitatively cumulative . . . position[s] in a sequence or a cycle" (416). Her examples concern debt payments, temporal limits on legal claims, "use-by" dates, contract terms, commemoration events, peace-keeping forces, and the signing of treaties. All these kinds of dates were relevant in Dobrinja lives, but not in a uniform manner. On the one hand, in household livelihood practices, much chasing was punctuated by the interplay of date regimes of salary, pension, or benefit payments with those of utility bills. The former were themselves often irregular because of their dependence on the date regimes of precarious state budgets. Here people tried to coordinate their actions and yearnings with collective calendars (Glennie and Thrift 1996). On the other hand, the myriad politics of which they were citizens were governed by yearly cycles of commemorations—particularly of wartime events—but also by seemingly more "cumulative" dates for government formation, budget approval, policy implementation, legal reform, and so forth. Many of the latter were anchored in the conditionality of the "Road into Europe." Yet in a pattern that had already characterized the punctuation of the war period by negotiation deadlines, my interlocutors found that time and again, such dates on the "Road into Europe" failed to prove "quantitatively cumulative." Rather than "starting to move things from the dead point," they were experienced as merely "qualitatively different." To name just one example, for years, people yearned for visa-free travel into the Schengen zone, and when it arrived in 2010, well, it just arrived.

### Waiting and the Refusal to Normalize

While insisting on the links between household and polity movement, people in Dobrinja engaged with these in very different ways. In household projects, the temporal reasoning of enforced presentism and a punctuated near future led them to continually engage in "chasing" (which included much waiting). Yet with regard to questions of polity, the same patterns facilitated a low level of reasoned engagement in collective action for the "near future." With the partial exception of a few political-party and NGO activists, most of my interlocutors did nothing to coordinate their actions and yearnings with the date regimes of the "Road into Europe." And why would they? In this figure of fantasy futurism, the imperative of forward movement remained, but its regime of temporal reasoning led them to see their proper role as one of waiting.

In a newspaper interview, a Sarajevo University professor commented on people's "despair that nothing is moving from the dead point." Blaming politicians, he also compared or-



dinary citizens with ostriches, “sticking their heads in the sand and refusing to see the real situation” (*Oslobođenje* 2008:5). My Dobrinja interlocutors, however, saw the “real situation” in similar terms as the professor: they yearned for forward movement and considered it conditional on a change in BiH power constellations.<sup>11</sup> But that would itself be movement. So while they had a diagnosis of the political crisis, they revealed no cure for it, let alone one led by “ordinary citizens.” Occasional references were made to the opposition SDP or to a “strong hand,” but most of my interlocutors resorted to vague evocations of giving youth a chance and developing proper values regarding work, order, parenting, and so forth. For most, “politics” remained a domain reserved for immoral politicians (see Spasić and Birešev 2012).

We thus come full circle. People in Dobrinja were deeply concerned with forward movement as a condition for “normal lives.” They “sensed the political” in their own experiences of “not moving well enough,” embedding it in collective movement on the polity scale. And in this way, they ended up disabling their own potential political subjectivity. How can we understand this paradoxically depoliticizing effect of people’s insistence on bringing politics into the equation?

In his 2005 research in Romania, Hartman (2007) found that people’s key reference point for “transition” was Europe/the West. Yet far from projecting a unilinear development toward Western-style liberal-democratic capitalism, they left open the definition of the yearned-for “normality to come.” The latter could not be measured by performance indicators but was projected as a flawless state of “living decently,” which Hartman (2007), after Žižek, labels “the utopian object of impossible Fullness” (208). He found no evocations of past “normal lives” but an experience of the present as “prenormal transition time.” Hartman detects a comforting dimension in this fantasy futurism: the continuous deferral of the utopian object of normality placed it beyond proof or doubt and protected people against disappointment.

Let us relate this back to questions of movement. Hage (2009) speaks of the generalization and intensification of a sense of existential immobility in the “permanent crisis” of the 2000s. Highlighting Australian celebrations of endurance of “stuckedness,” he identifies an ambivalence in the “normalizing” discourse of “waiting out the crisis.” Including both “subjections to the elements or to certain social conditions and at the same time a braving of these conditions,” he argues that this discourse serves as “a governmental tool that encourages a mode of restraint, self-control and self-government” (Hage 2009:102). In BiH, many popular sayings reflected this, from “shut up and suffer/endure” (*šuti i trpi*) or “don’t make waves” (*ne talasaj*) to “Mujo [the proverbial

ordinary Bosnian] has weathered worse things than this” (*izdržao je Mujo i gore*). The specter of violence was crucial: “just let there be no shooting” (*samo nek’ ne puca*), people said, declaring all alternatives to be superior. Yet such exhortations to restraint coexisted, I found, with frequent articulations of yearnings for forward movement and criticism of the “politics” that prevented this. Because the movement of past “normal lives” was recalled in a critique of current predicaments, both discourses—one centered on endurance and one on the imperative of collective movement—functioned simultaneously as comforting (perhaps tranquilizing) demobilizers and as vehicles for a critical refusal of normalization.

Most of my interlocutors who remembered the 1980s in Dobrinja seemed to approach the projected normative movement of the “Road into Europe” in what we could call a “knowing” way. It was as if they tried to show me that, if nothing else, they knew very well what proper forward looking movement should look like. They recalled a past that had a future—more precisely, a past in which collective movement was remembered to have facilitated a “certain” future on the household scale. Nostalgic, modernist, petit bourgeois as they may be, a political consideration of the future in BiH, I contend, must acknowledge such yearnings. In particular, people’s recollections of “normal lives” evoked how movement was embodied in material products of collective labor that had allowed them to feel it: apartments, workplaces, schools, hospitals, railways, bridges, and so on. Living among such landmarks of Yugoslav socialist forward movement—many now ruined or incapacitated—they were caught in the interplay of the projected normative movement of the “Road into Europe” and the suspension of the Dayton constitutional setup. Sure, massive financial aid had flowed in for postwar construction, some of it invested precisely in housing, schools, bridges, and so on. Yet my Dobrinja interlocutors did not “feel” those investments as part of a tangible collective future-oriented project. All over the country, billboards depicting children under EU iconography announced that “It is time for us to turn toward the future.” But behind the children they portrayed European Union Force soldiers, whose presence was meant to be legitimized by these billboards. For my interlocutors, this undermined the rhetoric of an incipient future by reinforcing the sense that their lives were still mainly after something, namely after war. Yet as we saw, even this “after” was ambiguous, as the “o” of “over” remained disputed and lives were still understood as not quite “postwar.” They were lives at the Dayton “dead point.”

## On Linearity

I conclude with a note on conventional anthropology’s uneasy position concerning the prominence of linearity in temporal reasonings such as the ones I found in Dobrinja. As so often in BiH, self-deprecating humor provides a good entry. So here is a joke about Mujo, who returns from a visit to Sweden.

11. The UNDP survey indicates that it was precisely because few people believed that BiH had internal political forces that were able and willing “to move things from the dead point” that the discourse of a “Road into Europe” appeared as a welcome reminder of the need and desire for forward movement while also allowing a distance from politics (UNDP 2007; cf. Greenberg 2010, 2011 on Serbia).

MUJO. Suljo, it's amazing, Sweden is 20 years behind us!  
 SULJO. (*Incredulously.*) What do you mean, mate, Sweden behind us!?  
 MUJO. Yes, 20 years behind! They're still living well!

This joke crystallizes the normative valuation of linear forward movement I found in yearnings for “normal lives” and in critical diagnoses in Dobrinja in 2008–2010. My interlocutors were concerned with how well they were equipped—as a household and as a polity—to inscribe themselves, at least, in movements toward progressively rising living standards, the establishment of a “functioning state,” and ascendance to a dignified “place in the world” (Jansen 2009). This should not be confused, however, with teleological “transition” models from “totalitarianism” to “freedom.” Instead, it was a domesticated modernist template bereft of optimism in which people yearned for “normal lives,” both remembered and projected.

How do we study this anthropologically? In a cultural relativist tradition, anthropologists tend to focus on the oppressive workings of such modernist temporal reasoning, usually attributed to elites, and to reveal (and revel in) resilient subaltern alternatives such as cyclical temporality (Connerton 1989; Munn 1992). Yet I found that while cyclical temporal reasoning features in some post-Yugoslav cultural production, it was largely absent from mundane formulations of critique or alternatives. For many in Dobrinja, its association with nationalism, therefore with war, and therefore with today's predicament, made it an unlikely source of critical inspiration.<sup>12</sup> “Running in circles,” both at the Dayton “dead point” and as part of a representation of BiH as a place of recurring violence, was what people yearned to escape from. For example, Mrs. O, a primary school teacher, married mother of two, repeated the common line that “every fifty years we have war here.” Yet minutes later, when critically diagnosing the situation in BiH, she complained: “We are always late, always late!”

Confronted with such ubiquitous evocations of linear forward movement, I did not discern a subaltern culture of temporality. Instead, I traced people's attempts to reason their way through a predicament they themselves found disorienting. Suspended at a not quite postwar “dead point,” my

interlocutors relied on the imperative of forward movement to shift the attention away from cultural otherness to an economy of (unequal) movement. Heeding their “aspiration to overcome categorical subordination” (Ferguson 2006:20), my analytical approach followed their lead and was therefore confronted with the same paradox they encountered: bringing in politics at every step of the investigation, we end up, together, with a diagnosis of paralyzed political subjectivity. Like Miss A, I, too, “don't know what to say.”

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust for financial support, to Melina Sadiković for research assistance, and to the organizers and participants of the Wenner-Gren symposium “Crisis, Value, and Hope: Rethinking the Economy” in Sintra, Portugal, 2012.

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12. I am aware that my approach risks privileging temporal reasoning of what David Harvey (2000) calls “secular spatiotemporalities” (194). Alternatives (e.g., those related to religion) were at play in Dobrinja, and they did underlay some critiques of the current situation. Yet in my research they always appeared alongside “secular” ones, and, most importantly, not one single person brought them up spontaneously to diagnose or criticize. I asked about hopes and fears, about expectations and the future, and everyone, it turned out, constructed their answers around “secular” forward movement without ever mentioning other modes of temporal reasoning. This, of course, may have to do with my positioning as a highly educated Western European, but I would be reluctant to attribute it only to that. Instead, I read it as an indication of the normative power of the trope of forward movement in people's attempts to make (political) sense of their predicament.

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