

rebooting politics? or, towards a <Ctrl-Alt-Del> for the Dayton Meantime

stef jansen

An IT engineer friend once told me a joke that circulates in his industry. When a car breaks down, the three persons in it compete to provide solutions in line with their expertise. The first one, a mechanic, fiddles with a few screws in the engine, but fails to restart the car. The second one, a chemist, takes a sample of the contents of the tank and adds some high quality petrol, but this does not do the trick either. The third person, an IT engineer, orders everyone to get back into the car. Confused, they obey. He instructs them to open all four doors. They do. Now close all the doors, he says. They turn the key and the car restarts.

This joke plays on the tendency of IT persons to recommend a reboot in dealing with any computer problems. I, for one, tend to follow their advice. When my computer gets stuck in a so-called 'endless loop' – a series of operations that continue infinitely in a self-perpetuating circle – I press the <Ctrl-Alt-Del> combination. This, as far as I understand, does not really intervene in the computing process. Instead it circumvents the problem, disengaging the process that is caught in a loop, and forcing the computer to reboot. I have no idea why or how.

In what follows I propose an interpretation of the 2014 revolt in a series of towns in BiH through this metaphor of an attempted forced reboot. But first I must point out that this essay is itself a political exercise from a particular perspective. I am a social anthropologist who has worked in the post-Yugoslav states for eighteen years. Much of my work seeks to develop an analytical register to discuss Bosnian lives outside of the dominant identitarian paradigm of 'ethnonational conflict' and the normative categories of the liberal 'transitional justice' industry. This is a reflection of my commitment both to an ethnographic prism on concerns as they emerge from people's everyday pursuits of livelihoods and to a political focus, in Nancy Fraser's terms, on matters of redistribution over those of recognition or representation. Since 2008 I have lived in Sarajevo most of the time. It is here that I learned about the revolt. After following the events through the media for a couple of days, I put other duties on hold and became a participant in the Sarajevo protests and plenum. Wary of the damage my presence as a presumed 'foreign mercenary' might do, I mostly remained in the background.

While I participated in several Sarajevo protests before, I soon felt that this revolt was a political event with more emancipatory promise for BiH than any other since the war. My essay, then, is not a detached attempt to detect, generically speaking, *its* emancipatory potential, but it doubles as a reflection on the question *which* emancipatory spark drove me to become part of it.

[one]

A paradox marked my own initial reactions to the revolt. On the one hand, I vaguely felt that something like this was bound to happen some day. Yet this wasn't any kind of prediction and, with regard to the political content of any such outburst, it contained as much fear as hope. On the other hand, if you would have told me at the start of the year that masses of people would take to the streets, that four governments would fall, that thousands would attend plenums, my reaction would have been one of disbelief. If you would have told me that this revolt would crystallise around demands for redistribution, I would have checked if it was the First of April.

This does not mean we were unaware of the existence of socioeconomic concerns. Anyone who wants to know knows that most inhabitants of BiH are worried about unemployment, poverty and a criminal ruling caste. My 2008-10 ethnographic research in a Sarajevo settlement found that people diagnosed BiH's political predicament most prominently in terms of two interrelated symptoms. Firstly, the absence of what they referred to as a 'system' or 'a normal state', they argued, left them to their own devices in the pursuit of their livelihoods. They felt abandoned. Secondly, they bemoaned their existential immobility on the household and societal scales: since the end of the war, as the saying goes, nothing in BiH seemed to be 'moving from the dead point'. These shared concerns amounted to a sense of living in continuous suspension between a war that has not quite ended and a future – widely held to be related to EU accession – that has not quite been embarked upon. I refer to this temporal-political affliction with the term 'Meantime'.

A key axis of reproduction of this Meantime revolves around an 'endless loop' of depoliticisation. For two decades different sections of the ruling caste have largely successfully demobilised any stirrings of political unrest amongst 'their' respective 'constitutive peoples' with calls for closing ranks in the face of outside threats to their 'vital interests'. Within their own fiefdoms, they also offer a degree of shelter in terms of livelihoods through partocratic clientelism, and particularly the allocation of public sector jobs and war-related allowances. This national-clientelistic machine feeds on the constitutional set-up of the country, where everything is organised 'in three'. This is sanctioned by foreign supervision that contributes to the legitimisation of the ruling

caste and further entrenches the loop of depoliticisation with ritual evocations of ever-postponed Euro-Atlantic integration as an overall remedy. In neoliberal fashion, this is presented as a necessary, non-political process that knows no alternative. In the absence of any ideological debate and with a national-clientelistic machine looming over them, it is unsurprising then that most people in BiH are disgusted with *politika*, which to them means party political machinations. Few seem to believe that politics can be anything else. And this, of course, again reinforces depoliticisation and a Meantime that is a mean time indeed.

[two]

Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, I suggest, is useful to conceptualise this endless loop of the Dayton Meantime. Often misunderstood as just another word for domination or for ideological brainwashing, hegemony, in Gramsci's work, concerns a material and symbolic *framework* through which political struggles are waged. This framework shapes the way in which we experience, understand and act upon unequal social configurations. It is never complete, never fully stable. One can speak of a successful hegemonic project to the *extent* that particular forms of struggle, procedures and types of arguments are established as legitimate at a given time. Gramsci makes clear that this is not simply about consciousness and consent – that is, about the degree to which people submit to ideological persuasion. Instead, hegemony concerns the way in which one can both support *and* contest forms of domination. In other words, successful hegemony is less about who is winning in any particular game, but about the 'rules of the game' themselves. Who gets to set them? In whose favour do they work? Hegemonic projects thus include attempts to establish the central terms of the debate, at the expense of alternatives.

In this sense, the foreign-sanctioned national-clientelistic machine in BiH provides material channels to reproduce ruling caste domination and establishes the rules of the game. To a large degree it sets the *register* through which politics can be waged. In the endless loop of the Meantime, non-identitarian inequalities (socioeconomic, gender or other ones) are not considered legitimate parameters for political action. Only demands made in certain terms can be publicly articulated as *political* demands. To be recognised at all, support for *and* contention of the ruling caste must be channelled in identitarian terms or, within the respective fiefdoms, in terms of claims for clientelistic allocation. The same endless loop also runs through some interventions that are in principle directed against ethnonationalism, such as those framed in liberal multiculturalism and human rights discourse as part of the 'transitional justice' paradigm. In the Dayton Meantime,

disagreement on the answers is overshadowed by agreement on what the relevant questions are.

A key implication of the dominance of this register for knowing BiH and acting in it is that any contention is forced into the terms of the (identitarian) legitimacy of the state's very existence and its set-up as stipulated in the Dayton constitution. All roads, in this universe, lead to Dayton. If concerns with redistribution appear, they are processed by the machine. Mostly, they are ignored in favour of 'vital' identitarian priorities. Often they are deflected through putting the blame on ethnonational others. At best, they are postponed until the time of a Grand Solution in terms of statehood and Euro-Atlantic integration. In the Meantime, patience is promoted as the greatest virtue.

[three]

And, suddenly, we have a revolt: widespread discontent with social injustice, hitherto quarantined in kitchens, factory canteens and agencies for the unemployed, spills onto the streets. Most of it is non-violent, but the initial days also see damage to some government and party buildings. Four cantonal governments resign. Plenums, a novel political form, try to channel and articulate this outburst of political energy. For months on end now a good chunk of media content deals with unemployment, poverty and the privatisation process. There was some such coverage before, but less frequently and usually as part of smear campaigns between sections of the ruling caste through the different media they control. Even if the revolt and its reverberations would end here, it had this impact: it forced socio-economic issues on the agenda in a more prominent and more universalist manner than was even thinkable before. Does this in itself solve anything? No, but small victories must be celebrated if we are taking to the long road.

And a long road it will be. The reactions of the different sections of the ruling caste are predictable. Each in their own way, along with some hand-wringing support for the 'justified demands of the citizens', they seek to incorporate the events into the loop. Some try to co-opt the events but most simply intensify their identitarian/statehood rhetoric with regard to what they consider 'their' constitutive people. The rotating foreign members of Dayton BiH's ruling caste stick to their own mantra. To summarise: blah blah, support for freedom of expression, blah blah, violence unacceptable, blah blah, private and public property inviolable, blah blah, politicians in BiH must listen to ordinary citizens, blah blah, find compromise, blah blah, help on the road to Euro-Atlantic integration, blah blah. I don't think I missed anything important.

Even some of the many sympathetic reactions from abroad fall inadvertently prey to the hegemonic logic, hopefully

interpreting the revolt as a sign of trans-ethnonational co-operation. I believe that the question whether this revolt reproduces, transcends or breaks ethnonationalism is a counterproductive reflex which remains within the Dayton Meantime loop. When, for once, BiH is rocked by a political event that escapes the identitarian register, when, for once, we see the contours of a road that may *not* lead to Dayton, let's not reinterpret it in the very terms of the loop itself.

Where then does the key emancipatory potential of the events lay for me? In my selective reading of a multi-layered set of processes (which I have no reason to believe is shared by all or even most participants), I identify an emancipatory spark that can aid a reboot of politics in BiH. Not just any reboot, but one that centres on social justice. This spark, I contend, is immanent in the combination of three dimensions: (a) a public 'No!', (b) a prioritisation of questions of redistribution and (c) mobilisation on the basis of indignation. Note that it is in the coming together of *all three* dimensions that I detect political promise. I now briefly address them in turn.

(a) The revolt could not have occurred without a public display of refusal: a loud and clear 'No!' to the rules of the game in the Dayton Meantime, where the national-clientelist machine serves to ignore, deflect, or, at best, postpone concerns with redistribution. What existed only as submerged, inchoate rage against the section of the ruling caste in one's 'own' fiefdom is now made public in protests and plenums. This time, feverishly pressing <Ctrl-Alt-Del>, we try to avoid being caught in the endless loop. We reject patience as the core virtue of the Meantime. We thus refuse to be drawn into identitarian projections of a Grand Solution on statehood. None of us would deny that the obscenely ineffective Dayton set-up of the country is a serious obstacle for any overall improvement in BiH. But <Ctrl-Alt-Del> circumvents this question, staying clear from the terrain of the ruling caste. We thereby dismiss their invocation of identitarian/statehood questions as a justification for keeping everything else in BiH on stand-by. We show we are seriously sick of waiting. No constitutional complexity, no amount of obstruction by ethnonational others, we scream, exonerates you from your arrogance, criminality, non-work, incompetence and negligence. In my reading, a key challenge here is to retain the insight that this public 'No!' is not a goal in itself. In the Dayton Meantime, it is a necessary means to take on the main goal: prioritisation of questions of redistribution.

b) The revolt energetically seeks to force a reconfiguration of the ranking of priorities in favour of redistribution. The revolt does not simply break up the existing rules to replace it with heterogeneous indeterminacy and the becoming of a new political subject – a multitude, perhaps. In neo-Gramscian terms, it does not merely create a discursive opening but also seeks to construct alternative discursive closures. Much work is invested in working groups to explicitly and tirelessly insist on a *better* register of contention. Here I detect the grains of an alternative hegemonic project: in a field that is colonised

by identitarian/statehood terms, we loudly claim a place for the register of redistribution. We seek to redefine what can be counted as the terms of political struggle in the first place.

Yet while <Ctrl-Alt-Del> is a public 'No!' to the rules of the game of the Dayton Meantime, this does not automatically constitute an attempt to reboot politics. As to be expected, the revolt is permeated with a deep aversion to *politika*. Chants accuse the entire ruling political caste of being 'thieves'. Central symbols for mobilisation are limousines, unlimited mobile phone accounts and allowances that facilitate lives of luxury for politicians while many others struggle to make ends meet. Another key theme is the role of politicians in privatisation and corruption. The revolt is a culmination of exasperation with a ruling caste that controls a vast government apparatus and uses public resources for private pleasure. All this, then, could usher in *further* depoliticisation. Indeed, unsurprisingly, some of the demands formulated on the plenums call for transparency, efficiency, technocratic expertise and individual responsibility in ways that resonate with neoliberal recipes. Here it should be noted that foreign representatives in BiH have long deployed the rhetoric of 'economy, not politics'. These calls for (ideologically unspecified) 'reforms' generally fall within neoliberal priorities encompassed by Euro-Atlantic integration.

Interestingly, and unusually in postwar BiH, the revolt includes very few pleas to the so-called 'International Community'. The privatisations conducted on their insistence and under their auspices are now denounced on the streets and in the plenums. More broadly, even if anti-politics is rife in the revolt, compatibilities with neoliberalism are overshadowed by a focus on redistribution. This mainly emerges in the vocabulary of social justice, solidarity and equality and contains a marked insistence on the responsibility of 'the state' for redistribution. While rarely serving as an explicit ideological resource, the lived experience of Yugoslav socialist self-management is tangibly present.

While this could be dismissed as unproductive nostalgia for paternalist statecraft, and, perhaps a 'politics of envy', I detect an emancipatory spark here too. What we witness here is not the constitution of an unprecedented subject for a new politics of becoming. Overall, while it is certainly not without contradictions, the call for state provision is central to this revolt's <Ctrl-Alt-Del>. In these postwar and postsocialist circumstances, rejecting yearnings for a welfare state would be cruel to those who are paying the greatest price of its dismantling. Moreover, when politics has such a bad name, they play a central role in a potential reboot of politics focused on social justice, saving it from the claws of *politika* but also from the mantras of neoliberalism.

Here, in my view, some key challenges include the extension of the reach of this emancipatory potential to inequalities across the board – rather than just the privileges of *public* officials – and the development of a notion of 'commons' that is not identical to

'the state'. Some ideals of self-management might provide some inspiration here too and, indeed, they appear in copious references to people's entitlement to the use of public resources 'they built' and 'they paid for'. Moreover, the revolt invites us to finally prise open a great taboo, particularly amongst liberal critics of ethnonationalism. What are the *politics* of Euro-Atlantic integration, uncritically held up as a promise for all? To what extent can social justice be considered a priority of the EU or of NATO, in whose member-states inequalities have increased dramatically over the last few decades? What are the specific socioeconomic dynamics of BiH's incorporation into a global neoliberalising order?

c) Much work is being invested in plenums as platforms for direct, participatory democracy. I'm learning a lot from these innovative and risky forms of political engagement. Despite all the difficulties, there is something profoundly hopeful in joining a thousand people who have pressed <Ctrl-Alt-Del> and gathered to set a political agenda, particularly in a context where politics is such a dirty word. And I believe there is real promise in the ad-hoc multiplication of the plenum form in a range of contexts in BiH (and elsewhere). Perhaps I will have the opportunity to take part in this.

Yet while the language of citizenship and of associated rights is present, to me personally the political promise of this revolt is not best identified as 'civic' activism or engagement. Even the plenums, in my view, are first and foremost vehicles to carry an emancipatory spark that goes beyond them. The core mobilising factor of the revolt, I believe, lies in *indignation*. To me, this is extremely valuable. As a common placard reads: 'Man, get angry!' [*Čovječe naljuti se*, a play on a well-known board game called 'Man, don't get angry!']. In this public 'No!' and in the prioritisation of questions of redistribution, indignation is more important than civic duty and it carries a particular emancipatory edge. When we press <Ctrl-Alt-Del>, we do not gently open and close the doors of the rickety BiH car; we fling them open wide and slam them shut with a bang. For those who are most vulnerable to the cruelty of the Dayton Meantime, of course, this indignation primarily concerns the extreme contrasts between their own miserable circumstances and the privileges of the ruling caste. Yet even for them, I believe, and certainly for others, including me, it includes indignation at a society (and a world) that allows and reproduces such inequality, for it is unjust, unnecessary and even offensive to our political being. It doesn't just piss us off. It's also an attack on our dignity and that of all who live in that world.

Here, I believe, we arrive at a challenge for a reboot of *any* politics of social justice, anywhere in the world. If many people feel indignation at glaring inequalities in the world, and if most are capable of feeling it, how can this spark be maintained, channelled and articulated into political projects? In BiH, I believe, the potential of this revolt's attempted <Ctrl-Alt-Del> to reboot a

Jansen S. 2014. 'Re-booting politics? or, towards a <Ctrl-Alt-Del> for the Dayton Meantime'
In: Arsenijević D. (ed) *Unbriable Bosnia and Herzegovina: The fight for the commons*.
Baden Baden / Zagreb: Nomos. 89-96

politics of social justice relies on it remaining true to the indignation that caused it precisely because, in principle, this is global and universal in its potential.