

#### Zitierhinweis

Duijzings, Ger: review of: Stef Jansen, *Yearnings in the Meantime. 'Normal Lives' and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex*, New York: Berghahn, 2018, in: *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 66 (2018), 4, p. 594-596, <https://recensio-stag.lorax.syslab.com/r/026dedd8711b49008b90ee444eff1a0c>



#### copyright

Dieser Beitrag kann vom Nutzer zu eigenen nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken heruntergeladen und/oder ausgedruckt werden. Darüber hinausgehende Nutzungen sind ohne weitere Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber nur im Rahmen der gesetzlichen Schrankenbestimmungen (§§ 44a-63a UrhG) zulässig.

**Stef Jansen, *Yearnings in the Meantime.***

**'Normal Lives' and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex**, New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2018 (Hardback 2015). 262 pp., ISBN 978-1-78533-821-2 (Paperback), £ 24.00

The malaise in post-Dayton Bosnia has rarely been depicted in such vivid detail and analysed so eloquently as in Stef Jansen's monograph. Being an 'ethnographic study of statecraft' (8) it shows the effects of the Dayton framework for the everyday lives of the inhabitants of an apartment complex at the outskirts of Sarajevo, in Dobrinja. It was built during the 1970s and 1980s, providing a state socialist housing scheme to the then middle class, and accommodating visitors of the Sarajevo Winter Olympics in 1984. During the early 1990s, it was close to the frontlines, encircled by Serb forces, and cut off from the rest of Sarajevo, thus suffering from the violence of the war.

A dozen or so years later, when Jansen carried out his research, the situation had not improved much, '[i]t was just the shooting that [had] stopped' (171). People had not returned to their 'normal lives' as they had been prior to the war; they lived now in a dysfunctional country, where citizens have difficulties soliciting the state for elementary services such as obtaining a pension, or being able to report a burglary. Jansen describes their yearning for a 'normal state' as they remembered it from socialist times. The 'meantime', as the author calls it, this state of limbo and stagnation, is also a *mean* time, rife with precarious living, in-

security and lack of perspective, a condition which he labels 'Daytonitis' (18).

The ethnography is based on fieldwork carried out between 2008 and 2010. Dozens of residents were interviewed, and they are cited at length, describing how they perceive their lives after the war. Instead of speaking about 'identities', people were more preoccupied with the practical aspects of securing their lives. One of the book's key strengths is indeed that it ignores the ethnonational divisions that have been dominant in the literature on Bosnia, because 'interlocutors themselves did not foreground them' (11). Instead, Jansen shows that the population is extremely critical of the political 'caste', 'barking' at corrupt politicians, which has however only occasionally led to massive street protests. Popular discontent bemoans the failure of 'statecraft' (what the state 'does' by providing public services) which is far more important to citizens than 'statehood' (whom the state represents in identity terms). In order to define statecraft, Jansen proposes the notion of 'gridding', which is the building of infrastructures needed to deliver important public services. He sees 'gridding' as a never-ending and incremental process of organising, which the state does to calibrate the routines and everyday lives of citizens, involving regularity, standardisation, and coordination.

Jansen shows that 'gridding' should not only be understood as a top-down expansion of the state but also as a bottom-up demand. He criticises the libertarian penchant in anthropology that depicts the state as an external force imposing its grids over

subjects who resist and subvert the state's power through 'grid evasion'. If anything, in Dobrinja, there is 'grid desire': people yearn for a proper state, wanting the state back in their lives to allow for an unfolding of 'normal lives' as they knew from before. In Jansen's analysis, top-down and bottom-up gridding processes go hand in hand (if happening on the citizens' own terms). 'Grid desire' includes the wish for 'vertical encompassment' into broader state structures, of 'upward and outward gridding'. He avoids, surprisingly, the notion of a 'public sphere', I assume because there is little scope for deliberation as the 'public services' are simply not working.

The first three chapters are grouped together under the heading 'Figuring Normal Lives', showing how citizens express their yearning for a 'normal life' in a situation considered as abnormal (the 'is') and point in the direction of desired but unreachable standards (the 'ought'). The socialist past (the 'was'), where life was 'normal', is idealised. War destroyed that normality. The securities that the socialist state afforded, suddenly evaporated. Jansen's interlocutors continue to long for that state, unwilling to accept the neoliberal tenets of labour market flexibilisation, to seize the emergent possibilities or to search for alternatives, as what they want (back) is regularity, predictability and security. Jansen admits that he found his interlocutors sometimes 'painfully petit bourgeois' (56).

The second chapter ('Waiting for a Bus'), for example, deals with the declining public transport, which is seen as an essential element of local statecraft. Even if this was initially not Jansen's focus, public transport quickly emerged as a fruitful field for ethnographic observation, as the unreliable service, old and badly maintained buses and trams, and uncultured behaviour were often referred to as symbolising the state's

'abnormality'. The next chapter describes the wartime schooling system organised by parents and teachers to sustain some degree of normality, providing an excellent example of 'bottom-up gridding'. It was part of a much broader range of grassroots activities coordinated by the authorities, which are positively remembered as strong symbols of resilience and solidarity under war duress, standing in contrast to rising economic inequalities and the 'messed up values' of today.

The following chapters present people's diagnosis of current pathologies, which the author calls 'Daytonitis': it includes the 'lack of a system' (128), notions of abandonment and entrapment, of 'being stuck' outside of Europe. Chapter 4 documents Bosnia's 'labyrinthine administrative-territorial structure' (5), which makes navigating the state difficult—not only for its citizens but also for politicians and local authorities. The state is simultaneously excessively absent and present, outsourcing many of its tasks to a plethora of international organisations, NGOs, and private agencies. Confusion reigns as to who is responsible, reinforced by the duplication of official roles, institutions, and bodies at the various administrative (state, entity, cantonal, and municipal) levels. In the eyes of Jansen's interlocutors, the sole purpose of these complex governance structures is to offer secure employment to a large and privileged group of people. Incompetent and 'thieving' politicians thereby strip the state of its assets, without giving anything back. Yet people are aware that they themselves contribute to this situation, by not paying utility bills, for example, or disrespecting civic values, adding moral failure to the pre-existing structural failure. The next chapter focuses on the ubiquitous stagnation, the 'not moving forward'. Time is wasted due to bureaucratic obstacles and

impenetrable institutional forces, leading to exasperation and entrapment in the 'meantime'.

The last part of the book explores how citizens engage with politicians, being complicit in fact in terms of keeping the ruling caste in power. They accept the (front and backdoor) invitations by corrupt politicians to receive limited but 'hard to decline' benefits that help them to achieve their life projects. Instead of taking to the streets, citizens cancel out their political subjectivity. Even though the author points at the occasional protests (in 2013 and 2014), the tone of his analysis remains pessimistic: the population is complacent in its symbiotic relationship with the political caste, accepting a small piece of the cake, or just a few crumbs, in exchange for their votes.

Interestingly, participation in elections and membership in political parties is not as low as one would expect. This may be a form of continuity with the socialist period, when party loyalty was rewarded with material perks and privileges. Citizens still insert themselves into *politika* as recipients of clientelist allocations. In this context, Jansen refers to political scientist Achille Mbembe's idea of 'conviviality', the promiscuous and performative relationships existing between rulers and ruled as in the case of sub-Saharan Africa. The politicians' fiefdoms can be seen as publicly funded 'refectories', where citizens join the rulers' tables to receive resources that the public was dispossessed of in return.

The epilogue provides a glimpse of hope, describing forms of civic action that are genuinely public in orientation: here belong things like the collective shovelling of snow under extreme weather conditions, as people used to do during the 1984 Winter Olympics, as well as protests demanding the state to create unique personal identification numbers for all citizens, holding the

state to account and trying to bring an end to the culture of conviviality.

The book is essential reading for those interested in the interactions between citizens and state in Southeastern Europe. The author is at his best when describing contemporary realities in Bosnia. His frequent theoretical excursions are sometimes a bit tedious, not always in dialogue with the material he presents. Also lacking is the regional comparison (only Romania is mentioned briefly), which is an obvious flaw as Jansen wants to 'avoid entrenching Yugoslav exceptionalism' (40). Focussing almost exclusively on Bosnian realities, disregarding obvious parallels elsewhere, produces blind spots that run through the scholarship on the former Yugoslavia. Also Jansen's treatment of the processes of privatisation (or 'dispossession') could have been more probing, as it focusses on the political elites and ignores the fact that ordinary citizens were amongst the key beneficiaries, becoming owners of their apartments in which they had been living as tenants before (mentioned on page 6). I could not suppress a feeling of bewilderment, asking myself: why did Bosnia have to go through this war if the lives of its citizens had been so absolutely 'normal'?! The war did not emerge out of nowhere, even if until the very end Dobrinja remained an island of relative peace and prosperity, well inserted into the socialist grids of provision, as Jansen writes. Here people continued to believe in a socialist future, closing their eyes to the dark clouds gathering over their country during the 1980s: living in the 'meantime' also seems to imply a lack of reflection (and introspection) on how people sacrificed their 'normal life' on the altar of nationalist politics.

Ger Duijzings (Regensburg)