

## Respect Existence or Expect Resistance

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Civil wars sometimes fade away from exhaustion and sometimes they end through a peace agreement. The bloodletting in Bosnia in the early 1990s ended with the Dayton Accords of 1995. Nobody heard much about Bosnia thereafter until February of 2014 when widespread protests erupted across the country. It quickly became clear to outside observers that the armed conflict of twenty years ago had continued in the form of economic warfare against the citizens of Bosnia.

The pattern in post-war Bosnian of “asset-stripping, budget-skimming and credit-bouncing privatizations,” to use the words of one scholar on the subject, is familiar to those who witnessed the disintegration of post-Soviet Russia under Boris Yeltsin. Bosnia is now owned by 85 oligarchs, worth \$9 billion collectively, who profited immensely from the slaughter and have continued a relentless campaign of privatization of anything that can be appropriated. The Wealth-X oligarchs have seized all possible economic entities and public spaces. Political discourses have been thoroughly monopolised in the guise of various ethno-nationalisms and reform agendas. Even museums and national archives have been expunged out of existence. This utter emptiness, despair and degradation are now being challenged by grassroots gatherings in many cities and towns - the hope and energy of the Bosnian “plenum.”

In de-industrialized Tuzla and other cities, spontaneous plena sprung up early in 2014 in response to the economic warfare inflicted on the people by the established political elites and their Western neo-liberal mentors and advisors. “Plenum” is an old term first used in St. Petersburg in 1905 to denote an assembly of all the members of a group. The English word plenary as in “plenary session” is widely used. More essentially, it is a philosophically pregnant Latin and ancient Greek term meaning “full,” as in the fullness of being and existence. In Bosnia the plena have the direct democratic ethos of the Occupy Wall Street movement, but are much more focussed on local problems and meaningful and indigenous economic reforms. The Tuzla industrial base, which produced such things as salt and detergent for the former Yugoslavian and European markets, has been privatized out of existence. The whole place is so ontically debased that there is nothing else left but for its impoverished citizens to self-deport to the military contract industry in Afghanistan.

Desperation and anger spilled over in Tuzla on February 7, 2014 when protestors burned the main Cantonal Government building. No doubt some of the protestors were goaded into such actions by the criminal economic elites, the so-called *baje*, who retained the monopoly on violence in Tuzla. Then came the torrential rains and devastation of May and the struggle for survival became even more Sisyphean. The greater disaster of present day Bosnia is overwhelmingly human created. A dejected and beaten populace are looking for answers to their economic plight that will certainly not be provided by the oligarchs or the Western privatiser-

advisor class which always seem to show up in these situations and make things worse.

Academy Award winning actor Vanessa Redgrave and her director son Carlo Nero, along with writer and narrator Fred Harrison, catalogue these events in a short documentary called “Bosnia Rising” that was released in screenings at Columbia University in New York City on March 31 and the University of Toronto on April 1, 2015. The New York screening was co-sponsored by the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation and the Harriman Institute, and the one at the University of Toronto by the Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies. Redgrave and Nero also sponsored a book entitled *Unbriable Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Fight for the Commons*, edited by Tuzla activist Damir Arsenijević, who has assembled an impressive array of essays by Bosnian workers involved in the demonstrations, as well as scholars and other observers. Arsenijević has been on the frontlines of the workers’ occupation of the Dita detergent factory in Tuzla, which is featured in the documentary. The Dita occupation is symbolic of the wasteland that the Tuzla region has become. Massive unemployment, factory closures, criminal financings and “accumulation by dispossession” to use the words of writer Jasmin Mujanović, by the monopolist politicians have led to a politics of despair, to a psychology of anger and distrust that will not be easy to remedy.

The documentary takes us, through the eyes of Harrison, to the Dita worker-occupiers and their total betrayal by the econo-political elites over the past ten years or so. The detergent plant is now in a state of advanced decay. Empty, rundown buildings that once housed hundreds of steadily employed workers, are garlanded with weeds and patches of depressing rust. We are shown two boxes of detergent, one for the Czech another for the domestic market. Nothing, obviously, has been produced in this desolate place for some time. The detergent boxes standing as pillars of purity and hope amid the decline.

One might dismissively say this happens everywhere. Economies rise and fall – the inevitable result of globalization and the inability of the Bosnians to be competitive. This is the usual blame-the-victims broad brush. It rings hollow in a country that has received hundreds of millions in post-war direct investment and capital expenditure, that has a well-educated population and is rich in natural resources and other locational advantages. This area was once relatively well off and stable economically. One cannot blame it all on the war which ended twenty years ago. One can only do that if it is understood that the war continued after 1995 in the less detectable and more insidious form of an economic assault by a few against the many.

“Bosnia Rising” presents a remedial twist that is unusual for a short documentary of less than thirty minutes. It does not over-dwell on human degradation and disenfranchisement as if the phenomenology of misery would of itself provide a transparent way out. A solution is offered that cannot be said to be yet another condescending agenda from the powers that be in the West. This is because the solution offered in *Bosnia Rising* is opposed by the political establishment in the West. For that matter the solution proposed by Harrison and Arsenijević is opposed by anyone who benefits from a monopoly privilege and by the tiresome public finance policies pleaded by their vanguard consultancies and windbag advocates.

The key to stopping the carnage in the eyes of some Bosnian activists lies in the subtitle of *Unbribable Bosnia and Herzegovina*. “The Fight for the Commons” invokes the simple principle that the land and natural resources of a country like Bosnia belong to the plenum or all the people. The simple principle of a Wealth-X *baje*, and there are not that many of them, is to do everything possible to prevent that from ever happening. The ideology of privatisation provides the mechanism for dispossessing everyone in the plenum and the roving consultants of modern public finance provide the cover narrative for preventing the pillaged land and natural resources from ever being recovered for the good of the plenum. The language of neo-classical economics, neo-liberalism and neo-oligarchism discolours and disfigures all discourse. Nothing is as it appears. Bosnians are trapped in the lowest levels of Plato’s cave. They were deliberately put there.

Harrison and Arsenijević in “Bosnia Rising” provide an economic model for dispossessing the Wealth-X *baje*. This model has its precursors in classical political economics and especially in the economic philosophy of Henry George (*Progress and Poverty*, 1879) who is its most insightful and systematic exemplar. George argued that there is an identifiable, tectonic force which courses through all economies. This force has been variously labelled economic rent, a natural surplus value, a yield to society over and beyond the inputs of labour and capital which, when privately appropriated, profoundly distorts the workings of economies and their interlocking social and political institutions. Dispossession and privatisation of public resources in Bosnia are the weapons used by the Wealth-X *baje* to capture this economic rent for themselves. The nuances of the mass Bosnian private appropriations give the *baje* a wide range of incomes in the form of rents, royalties, interest, dividends and profits. Henry George focussed on the capture of economic rent, or what today is usually referred to as rent-seeking, for the furthering of the common good. The Bosnian activists and plenum participants are using this strategy to thwart the oligarchic agenda and restore economic security to the workers of Tuzla and indeed of all Bosnia.

The presentations by Redgrave, Nero, Harrison and Arsenijević, and the question and answer fora that followed the screenings of “Bosnia Rising” in New York and Toronto, furnished outsiders with the full swath of Bosnian pseudo-politics, civil society co-optation and dissembling leaders. In Bosnia the few now define all content – economic, political and social. The energy of the plena will continue in its many forms and expressions. The principal theme that came through all the discussions and debates was that until Bosnians reclaim their land and natural resources the civil war of the early 1990s will never end.