

CREATIVE NEGOTIATIONS
**CONCEPTS AND PRACTICE OF INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES,
DISPLACED PEOPLE AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN CROATIA**

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INTRODUCTION

My topic is really one word: 'integration'; but it is a word which, I want to suggest, is fraught with difficulties for researchers and practitioners seeking to develop democratic practice in terms of social development in Croatia, in the context of a mixture of three elements: war and territorial aggression; large-scale forced migration; and post-communist transition. Underpinning all of these is the development of forms of ethnicised nationalism which, however one is to conceive them, clearly deconstruct particular notions of community and construct others perhaps less amenable to the integrationist project. For me, ethnicised nationalism is a specific process taking both ethnic belonging and national belonging, neither of which are problematic in themselves, and merging them into an exclusive and exclusionary political project. Identity, that most complex and shifting of entities is, thereby, fixed in an absolutist mode. Much of this paper, and of my work in general, is concerned with the importance of recognising multiple and shifting identities and, therefore, with rejecting what Paul Gilroy¹ has termed 'ethnic absolutism' which, in its notion of fixed identities and cultures, would see 'integration' as little more than an exchange between them.

I want to suggest that the concept of 'integration' can be useful but that it risks being a top-down discourse like others such as 'humanitarian aid' and 'psycho-social projects'. By thinking through the dis-integrative aspects of both of these discourses we can, perhaps, find some starting points for more democratic forms of intervention. It must be stated at the outset that, despite the large numbers of initiatives in Croatia, from global and supranational organisations, and from foreign and Croatian NGOs, very few initiatives work with all three groups: refugees, displaced people and local communities. A few projects are beginning to recognise this as an issue and to promote communication and co-operation between the different groups. The problem is, however, that there is little clear conceptual framework or discussion of practical strategies. I am worried that 'integration' could become another 'buzz-word', a 'flavour of the month', not unlike the other models I will criticise here. I want to raise some tentative questions, hopefully in a provocative way, to stimulate discussion and dialogue.

¹ cf Gilroy P. (1987) *There Ain't No Black and in the Union Jack*. Hutchinson, and
Gilroy P. (1993) *Small Acts: thoughts on the politics of black cultures*. Serpent's Tail.

My concern is, primarily, with what I want to term 'social praxis', forms of intervention by 'helpers', particularly in the NGO sector, rather than addressing in any detail the macro-level issues which Barbara Harrell-Bond has discussed most eloquently². As a result of this, I risk being seen as overly critical of well-intentioned people, and of failing to emphasise the structural and political constraints under which they work. However, as Vesna Bošnjak has argued³, the role of professionals and other helpers as 'change agents' is all the more critical in conditions which are unfavourable. This is certainly the case in Croatia which faces all of the problems of post-communist transition, of uncertainty, of economic hardship, and of conflicts over basic values, at the same time as it bears the costs of war, occupation and large-scale forced migration. The commitment to integrative practices, in the face of structures which set real limits, can seem a little like putting ones finger in the hole in the dam. In a sense, then, my paper is also about the role of social researchers and our obligations to move beyond narrow, disciplinary, boundaries, to produce reflexive, and useful, knowledge, linked to and indeed, breaking down somewhat, the distinction between 'theory' and 'practice'.

DIS-INTEGRATIVE DISCOURSES: 'Humanitarian Aid' and 'Psycho-Social Projects'.

This attempt to develop social praxis has underpinned my work in Croatia since May 1993 which has included, as well as research, work in a collective centre and as a supervisor with Croatian NGO Suncokret. Part of this, together with Nina Pečnik, has involved a critique of discourses of 'humanitarian aid' and 'psycho-social support' as currently practised in Croatia⁴. Of course, this is not meant as critique for its own sake, but to inform alternatives based on more developmental and democratic models.

'Humanitarian Aid'

Our critique of 'humanitarian aid', of course, echoes Barbara Harrell-Bond and other's critiques of the 'relief model'⁵. In terms of the question of integration, the key point is that different goods and services are provided or delivered by different agencies to different groups. Humanitarian aid is category-based provision (with the dominant categories being refugees, displaced people, and 'social cases') rather than needs-based provision. This is problematic even if it were not also demeaning, patronising and dehumanising. It serves, primarily, then to dis-integrate, to promote competition, tension and misunderstanding between groups.

As Barbara Harrell-Bond has suggested, the relief model sees refuge as temporary and as a burden for the so-called host society, rather than as an opportunity. In this way, practices are less about social development than about what I want to term the territorialization of social control, with many restrictions on where forced migrants can live, on their movement and, of course, on their rights to education, employment,

² Harrell-Bond B. (1995) Paper presented to this conference.

³ Bošnjak V. (1994) From the Margins to the Mainstream: Change Agents' Contribution to Societal Restructuring. unpub m/s

⁴ Pečnik N. and Stubbs P. (forthcoming) Working with Refugees and Displaced People in Croatia: from dependency to development? in University of Reading Agricultural Extension and Development Studies Bulletin.

⁵Harrell-Bond B. (1993) From Dependency to Development in War Report 22.

and health and welfare services. The wider political, and media, construction of refugees as a burden, of course, can also fuel informal attempts to maintain this territorialization, including attacks by local young people on refugees and displaced people.

This process is not, and cannot be, total. As an example, I am aware, as many of you will be, of the existence of a new retail sector in which forced migrants sell humanitarian aid in local markets. The authorities were so concerned to stop this in one town in Croatia that they forbade forced migrants to leave the collective centres before 10 am. The people then simply gave the aid to local people they knew to sell, a highly integrative thing to do. And of course, people get around the restrictions on employment, too, but this is to miss the point which is that integration is underpinned by social and employment rights which are not available to all at the moment in Croatia. Instead of promoting valid and valuable roles for forced migrants within local communities, the relief model constructs passivity and separation. In the process, it fails to promote the development of a local infrastructure. There are similar effects, of course, for professionals - with many social workers, for example, able to earn higher money working for foreign NGOs with refugees and displaced persons rather than working in the often stultifying atmosphere of Centres for Social Work.

'Psycho-Social Projects'

There are equally dis-integrating effects to be found as a result of the proliferation of psycho-social projects in Croatia, which tend to be underpinned by particular psychological models of war trauma and of post-traumatic stress disorder (or PTSD). The dominance of psycho-social projects here is a complex phenomenon and, in part at least, is a response to the fact that 'humanitarian aid' meets only the most basic of needs. However, elsewhere, I have argued that the emphasis on the psycho-social has done little to empower ordinary people and, in fact, has served only to increase the power of foreign (and some local) psychologists and psychiatrists⁶. In terms of integration, again, we have a discourse which actively dis-integrates, through the construction of 'vulnerable groups' needing expert help. Membership of these groups is, of course, decided by the experts and may well have little meaning to the people selected. More importantly, by being classified as belonging to such a group, one's experience is disconnected or de-linked from that of others with whom you do see yourself as having links, or with groups with whom you could have links which might facilitate integration. In this way, the experiences of 'women and children' are dissociated from the wider family and community context, and loss as a result of witnessing particular events is disconnected from other losses experienced by people who, perhaps, have not experienced flight and exile but who, nevertheless, feel the impact of the wars deeply.

The ways in which psycho-social projects tend to reduce people to cases, expressions of hurt and pain to symptoms, and processes of healing to treatment, strikes me as problematic. The attempt to integrate, to promote communication between different communities, must be important in reducing a sense of isolation which forced migrants face. Surely this is a more valuable investment than highly individualised

⁶Soroya B. and Stubbs P. (1995) War Trauma and Professional Dominance: psycho-social discourses in Croatia. unpub m/s.

psychotherapy, since it promotes community building as a part of recovery. And yet I see very little evidence of psycho-social projects getting engaged in this work.

My reason for addressing these discourses at some length is, actually, to bring out certain commonalities which, I want to suggest, are at the centre of their dis-integrating tendencies. Firstly, as I have already suggested, both discourses are 'top-down' in the sense that they involve things being done to people, by people who know best. I cannot help feeling that the rewards, the value of them, tend to accrue more to those doing the work - publicity through a nice photograph, or a prestigious article about a particular therapy - rather than to those who are meant to be helped. Secondly, the aggregations of social groups on which these discourses rely are, also, produced by outsiders and not by the people themselves. As such they caricature and select convenient elements from everyday life rather than working with its complexities. Above all, there is a partial reading of the continuities and discontinuities between people who are artificially divided into these categories. 'Humanitarian Aid' and 'Psycho-social projects' stress the discontinuities between 'recipients of aid' or 'traumatised people' and the rest of the community. These categorisations are, often, also, 'ethnicised' as in the suggestion, in a recent ECTF publication, that all forced migrants in so-called 'mixed marriages' are traumatised as a result of this⁷. These are crude notions of human life which, I think, all of the papers at this conference, from ethnologists, ethnographers, and anthropologists, suggest are inadequate for social praxis. The emphasis has to be on a longer-term perspective in which any interventions are based on an appreciation of everyday life and a genuine attempt to understand people's needs and wants. However, I also believe that, in situations of forced migration, the impact of political and institutional factors to everyday life is all the greater and must not be neglected. It is from this that we can begin to think about more progressive practice in terms of integration. This is also, of course, not to neglect the macro-level context of the importance of a needs-based social policy, anti-discriminatory legislation, and so on.

DEFINING INTEGRATION

I want to talk about definitions of 'integration', although I am not convinced that we can consider this in the abstract. I increasingly think -since I submitted the summary three months ago, even - that the term 'integration' is used to cover just too many things, and faces certain problems, which might mean we have to use a number of other terms instead. However, I have tried to adapt and develop Barbara Harrell-Bond's definition in her excellent book 'Imposing Aid'. She defines integration as:

"... a situation in which host and refugee communities are able to co-exist, sharing the same resources - both economic and social - with no greater mutual conflict than that which exists within the host community." ⁸

As a succinct definition, the above has much to recommend it. Above all it is a resource-based definition which indicates the necessity of seeing integration as a key element of social policy, of decisions about who gets what within a society. In

⁷ Agger I, Buus Jensen S, and Jacobs M. (1995) Under War Conditions: what defines a psycho-social project. in Agger I. (ed) Psycho-Social Projects Under War Conditions. ECTF.

⁸ Harrell-Bond B. (1986) *Imposing Aid: emergency assistance to refugees*. Oxford University Press

addition, it focuses on questions of co-existence and of reducing conflicts, without a naive view of the possibility of the absence of conflict, nor a romanticised (and often nationalistic) notion of host communities as homogeneous and conflict-free.

In developing my definition I wanted to include something of the sense of forced migrants adding something to a society, to the development of new values and understandings, which I pick up from so much of Barbara Harrell-Bond's work. Without pushing the point too far, it is important in this situation to acknowledge that whilst notions of 'host' and 'refugee communities' have a politico-legal truth, the 'guests' who are refugees used to live in the same country and had rights, relatively unhindered, to visit, work, and live in the towns and cities in which they are now forced migrants. I say this only because this might have implications in terms of 'integration' which do not fit in other societies. The advantage of speaking the same language should also, of course, be noted. Another point which is often forgotten is that some eighty per cent of forced migrants here live, not in large collective centres, but in 'private accomodation'. This is often seen as aiding integration; however, there is evidence that, instead, there has been a collectivisation of poverty in which the difficult material circumstances forced migrants face are extended to the households in which they live⁹.

I also think that the issue of territorialisation, of the right to freedom of movement, to sharing the same space, and to face only the same degree of social control as the rest of the community, is important. Of course, I am thinking of restrictions of movement which exist but, also, the 'double jeopardy' of being deported because of having committed a crime which, were you a citizen of the country concerned, would have produced only a minor sentence. The political and cultural aspects of 'integration' can also be included, in addition to the economic and the social. Surely, the process of attempting to equalise, to share, and thereby to develop new forms of relating across difference, is valuable and valid. Hence, my very tentative definition of 'integration; which may not stand up to critical scrutiny for very long:

"Integration refers to the attempt to facilitate a sharing of resources - economic and social, an equalising of rights - political and territorial, and the development of cultural exchanges and new cultural forms, between forced migrants and all other members of a society. At the local level, the process of integration involves all sections of the community in minimising social distance, and facilitating communication and co-operation, through creative negotiations which produce new social meanings."

INTEGRATION, CULTURE AND SOCIAL PRAXIS

I think that the definition might help to conceptualise the different forms which integration might take, distinguishing between different levels of practice, and encouraging increasing self-awareness of how integrative processes may be supported. Thinking about the practices of one Croatian NGO with which I have been closely associated, there is a great deal of experience which relates to issues raised by

⁹ Ellis S. (1994) An Evaluation of Shelter Projects and Policies for Refugees and Displaced Persons Within the Republic of Croatia. unpub m/s, University of Luton, UK.

this definition. Its very name, *Suncokret*, which is Croatian for Sunflower, indicates that in its work in collective centres it was always about new cultural meanings and promoting creativity. Suncokret has used, and continues to use, foreign volunteers, not as experts but as people who show solidarity, adding something to the context in which refugees and displaced people interpret their experience and portray themselves, in this case as representatives of a culture, as well as providing an expression that difference can be celebrated and provide richness.

Increasingly, and probably coinciding with an increasing awareness of the need for longer-term, and more Croatian and Bosnian, workers, Suncokret has branched out from only working in collective centres and has sought to work with local communities, too. There are at least four different kinds of work which we might see as 'integrative'. One, which we have heard something of at this conference, is those artistic projects which are a form of communication between communities be they theatre, video, photography, or newspaper projects. Some of these are projects by refugees and displaced people which are made available to be viewed, read, and commented on, by local people. Increasingly, however, the emphasis is on more collaborative ventures and joint projects.

Secondly, in one or two localities, Suncokret has opened community centres in which different groups can meet on an informal basis and many of the creative activities which usually take place in the collective centres are also made available to local people. The choice of location of such centres, the preparation work, and so on, is complex and has to be based on challenging the notion of territorialisation I referred to in my definition. The third area of work is skills training, for example in word processing, which is open to refugees, displaced people and local communities and, often, is based on a collaboration with local educational institutions. Finally, Suncokret has tried to involve local people as much as possible in its work, as language teachers, sports coaches and so on, and has found that these people can also play a key role in promoting integrative activities.

One of the issues which I have been thinking a lot about, not least since I received advance information about the conference, is the issue of music. The role of music as integrative has, perhaps, not been explored enough. I have been thinking about my own work in a kindergarten in a collective centre where we did not want to simply confuse young children some of whose first words, following a summer spent with large numbers of volunteers from Catalonia in Spain, were actually Catalan. On the other hand, we still wanted to celebrate richness and diversity and see the presence of foreign volunteers as an opportunity. One of the women working in the kindergarten came up with the idea of guest foreign volunteers each week. Very quickly, the children knew seven or eight different language versions of 'Frere Jacques', and I can still remember it in Finnish. Suncokret has so often been about new cultural meanings - as in Nina Pečnik's story of a new song 'Posušje Blues' made up by people, including foreign volunteers, in one of the least hospitable camps in Hercegovina. To the tune of Marley's 'No Woman, No Cry' the song begins 'Nema Vode, Nema Struje', which means 'no water, no electricity'. This 'bricolage' to borrow from Dick Hebdidge's 'Subculture'¹⁰ which, I learnt recently, was translated here in the 1980's, is one way in which people make sense of their experiences. It forms a

¹⁰ Hebdidge R. (1982) *Subculture: the meaning of style*. Methuen.

way into, together with discussions of the 'whatever happened to' variety about Yugoslav rock bands of the 80's, questions of belonging and identity in more complex ways than might first appear.

There are no set formulas which can be introduced to produce 'integration'. There is only the hard slog of continually re-assessing and reflecting on what worked and what didn't, with some possible pointers for the future. Above all, 'integration' is useless if it is not built upon genuinely participatory approaches in which people own what is happening and want to make links rather than feel pushed so that it will look good in the project report at the end of the year. This emphasis on the informal, on a slow, step by step approach, and on participation as an absolute pre-requisite, does not sit easily with a donor-led environment in which projects are made to look for quick and identifiable end results - a neat video, a well-presented newspaper, a polished theatre performance, or whatever. The task of the committed social researcher, then, becomes not one of elaborating more and more complex variables, but of facilitating this process of reflexivity, and helping all involved in a project to understand the process of change. Increasingly, I do believe that there are lessons which can be learnt from 'successful' attempts at 'integration', and some useful skills and techniques, but that this has to be underpinned by certain principles, including a distrust of 'expert-led' certainties and a reluctance only to accept the dominant political context as a given.

CONCLUSIONS

Finally, rather than make some points in summary or conclusion, I want to raise one issue for discussion which has, perhaps, been implicit, rather than explicit, throughout my paper. That is the vexed question of 'the national' and 'the folkloric' which I am afraid I see as in danger of bordering on 'ethnic absolutism'. I share Paul Gilroy's definition of culture as '... a radically unfinished social process of self-definition and transformation'¹¹ rather than as some absolute, fixed, and frozen essence through which people can be separated off from each other into specific locations which are seen as impermeable. This is not to deny the importance of 'national' characteristics but rather, to assert that they are only one amongst many sources of identity and we must not forget, as the oft-quoted but little read Benedict Anderson has asserted, that nations are 'imagined communities'¹². Of course, right here, and right now, to be 'Croatian' or 'Bosnian' is redolent with meanings. But there are also meanings from past, but recent, belonging to a different nation, Yugoslavia and, dare I suggest, some globalised and commercialised meanings - Levi's Jeans, Santa Barbara or Beverley Hills, and Nirvana for example - which are relevant to the themes of this conference. It all raises the complex question of what is 'community': some would argue that 'women' are a community for example; and I myself am increasingly involved in the 'virtual' community of email which I think also has something to contribute to new forms of cultural meaning, too. I worry that there is not enough talk about 'popular culture' because that would contaminate pure, folk, forms. And I worry that in this silence, much that is of value in producing new senses of the national, and of the transcendence of nationalism, may be lost. The issue of integration is one part of the attempt to preserve notions of multi-ethnicity, and of the right to complex identities, which are so much under threat as we speak.

¹¹ Gilroy P. (1993) op cit p 61.

¹² Anderson B. (1983) *Imagined Communities*. Verso.