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PARADOXES OF PROJECT SUBJECTIVITY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION AND RECONFIGURATIONS OF WORK

Abstract

This paper analyses the relationship between international intervention in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and reconfigurations of labor. Positioned primarily against permanent publicly-funded jobs, still widely regarded as a norm, short-term project-based employment under the umbrella of a postwar humanitarian, peacebuilding, democratizing intervention is marked by specific forms of precarity, living from project to project (along with certain degree of privilege). Based on qualitative research amongst people engaged in internationally funded projects, the study asks: what changes has such employment produced in understandings of work as such, life trajectories and subjectivity?¹

Keywords: project-based employment, international intervention, precarity, post-fordist affect, yearning for 'normal life', neoliberal agency

"IT'S BEAUTIFUL. FIRST, WHAT SHALL I SAY, REALLY, I think everybody needs to find courage to forfeit certain things in order to feel benefits." (Sara).²

"IT'S GENERALLY A BIG PROBLEM THAT A SIGNIFICANT PART OF CIVIL SOCIETY (4s) ASKS ITSELF EVERY DAY if it's time to quit. Really! Now, now, to leave behind what I'm doing, it doesn't matter that I do great things, that I need to quit, since I can't bear it anymore, I don't have patience any more, AND ALSO BECAUSE my family and my friends, and all around me DON'T HAVE ANY PATIENCE FOR ME ANYMORE, BECAUSE THIS WAY OF LIFE AFFECTS ALL AROUND US... I mean, I don't have, I don't have (...) our risk has an expiry date." (Sara).³

Multiple and fast changes across the globe during the last couple of decades have not left the domain of work untouched. Deregulation,

flexibilization and transformation of traditional work relations have inspired social scientists to address this topic from a variety of perspectives, primarily that of the precarization of work. Still, precarization does not mark work only, but life in general and forms of subjectivity, producing what Annalisa Murgia calls *social precariousness* (2015: 14).

In her study about local interpreters who used to work for international agencies during war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) (1992-1995) Catherine Baker (2014) pointed out how employees of international agencies make up a rather underrepresented and unrecognized sector of workers both in studies and in public policies. Baker locates the reason for this in the dominant approach to BiH as a postconflict country instead of one that is characterized, at least in parallel, by postsocialist transformations. Within that dominant approach this group of people is actually overrepresented in wider terms in peacebuilding studies, where they are taken as a voice of 'the local', 'the international' or both of them. The lack of any approaches to them as workers could be additionally ascribed to the transitory and temporary dimension of their work. But what when this temporariness lasts for decades, when some people who used to work in this sector have meanwhile even retired? It is on this group of people, local workers on internationally funded short-term projects under the umbrella of peacebuilding, democratization and EU integration that my research focuses.

Clearly, changes in employment relations and their impact on social life and social processes are not particular to BiH. They shape up as part of global processes that are particularly visible in Sarajevo, the capital of BiH, characterized by multiple formal transitions within the last twenty-five years, offering us the possibility to study these changes within specific temporal determinations of 'before' and 'after'. Thus, this paper analyses short-term project-based employment in a specific Western-funded 'civil sector' and in international governmental organizations (IGOs) in Sarajevo from the perspective of those local workers in light of several anthropological discussions: those of precarity, of post-fordist affect, of yearnings for 'normal lives' and of neoliberal subjectivity. With some people working and living in that way for twenty-five years, my study asks: What changes did project-based employment produce in understandings of work as such, of life trajectories and of subjectivity? How do these people deal with work insecurity? Should we consider local workers in this sector, both in NGOs and in international organizations, a distinct social group? How did international intervention come to be inscribed

into their lives over the years? And finally, have they become used to insecurity and readapted their life according to some new trajectory, or do they attempt to follow 'normative' patterns of social reproduction? Have they perhaps developed back-up strategies and innovative adaptations to deal with precarity?⁴

Elaborating on Baker's study, broadening the research population and the length of their engagement, which in my study mainly encompasses post-war years, my primary data consist of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in 2017 with people in Sarajevo who had by then worked for more than ten years on internationally-funded projects, mainly in managerial and specialist positions.⁵ I targeted managerial or specialist positions rather than (more numerous) administrative/support staff mainly because their expertise and experience makes these people well-qualified for certain permanent jobs in public institutions. In this way this crystallizes the perceived differences between the two sectors. The age of my interlocutors was 36 to 60, with majority of them in their mid-forties. Additionally, I rely on my own experience of 22 years of project-based employment in Sarajevo, mainly outside of this particular sector, but still sharing many similarities.

As illustrated by the introductory quotations, throughout this paper I will emphasize *tensions* and how these people identify them, deal with them, when giving meaning to their work and lives in these conditions. Sara whose quote I used in the epigraph is in her late thirties and moved to Sarajevo fourteen years ago. She did her MA in Sarajevo, worked at a university on a project basis for a couple of years and then established a human rights NGO which she runs until today. She now considers her previous work in academia, also on casual contracts, to be maximally secure in comparison to her current work. The tension in the opening quotes between positive and negative sides of precarious work can be found in almost all interviews I collected.

After a sketch of the historical conditions in which this sector emerged and contextualization of post-fordist affect within BiH, the paper is organized around so-called 'positive' and 'negative' sides of this kind of work from the perspective of my interlocutors. At the end, I explore their strategies to 'survive' and 'flourish' in this sector.

Historical Conditions in which this Sector of Employment Emerged in Contemporary BiH

Up to 1991, Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the republics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Its declaration of independence was followed by a war that lasted 1992 to 1995. The conflict ended, militarily, but not politically, with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, mediated by the international community. The presence of the international community in post-war life took many forms: from military troops, over humanitarian missions, to development agencies and political representatives within the Office of High Representative in BiH (OHR). OHR is the leading organization for civilian aspects of peace implementation in the country which, due to its mandate and its way of acting, has often been perceived as enacting a kind of protectorate in BiH.

Accordingly, for the last twenty-three years, post-war reconstruction through democratization, peacebuilding and EU accession processes has been led by the very present international community in BiH. Numerous local NGOs were funded through international donations, expanding particularly from 2000 onwards.⁶ Enormous amounts of money, or to be more precise, the highest amount per capita ever (Puljek-Shank and Verkoren 2017: 185) have been spent on post-war reconstruction, in particular, human rights, return, reconciliation, free media, rule of law and judicial reform, physical reconstruction, gender equality, youth programs, etc. On the whole this followed neoliberal ideology and was geared towards a market economy. What was largely neglected, and largely left unregulated, is the field of labor (and social welfare). This, of course, is the basis on which people usually build their lives. Indeed, BiH is not only going through post-war reconstruction, but also through post-socialist transformations. This happened in parallel and is rarely addressed as such, although at least half of those previously employed in now destroyed, looted and technologically obsolete enterprises lost their jobs, or were kept in a status of 'waiting' for decades with minimum, irregular or no salaries. As a consequence, BiH has a huge unemployment rate, more than 40% (or 27% according to ILO). Thus, overall, the results of intervention are considered unsatisfactory not only by the BiH population, but by much of the international community and civil society as well.

The recruitment of local people in international agencies and the promotion of the development of civil society started quite early (during the war) and was intensified from the early post-war years onwards. Some

locals kept working there until today, moving from one international organization to another, or remaining in the same one. After a while, a significant part of them moved to local NGOs, or took part in founding them. These NGOs were often initiated by some international agency and secured funding from them for a certain period. As Samson (2003) notes, the development of civil society in the Balkans is both an *aim* and a *tool* to convey democracy (with the NGO projected as a model of democracy). My study thus focuses on a social group that is a product of (Western) funding for civil society building, including the promotion of neoliberal subjectivities in contrast to a socialist 'legacy'.⁷

Short-term project-based employment is the rule in this civil sector. And this is in contrast to a widespread aspiration to attain secure contracts. People remember such secure employment from SFRJ and, still today, permanent contracts are widely present in the public sector, which is still the most desirable domain for employment for most people in BiH.

Specificities of Post-fordist Affect in BiH

As a consequence of the global, neoliberal precarization of work during the last couple of decades yearning for lost job security and life predictability seems universal. Not only did many people actually lose security, predictability and lives they were used to, but this dire prospect has now become a threat for many more people: almost everyone could potentially 'fall' into the group that Guy Standing (2011) calls the 'precariat'. Standing defines the 'precariat' as a broad and growing group of people who share a precarious/insecure mode of living, from those nostalgic for previous forms of work and life to those moving and searching for new forms of it.

Anthropological critiques show that precariousness is not some novel situation – this impression of novelty is in significant measure a product of the global North, while many people in the global South always lived in forms of precarity. Catherine Baker also points out that degrees of precarity (or degrees of privilege) are not fully shared, but determined by gender, race, ethnonational belonging, migrational status etc. What is still often shared, according to Baker, is "a sense of disruption to the life course and an inability to predict our future" (Baker, 2014: 95). This resonates with Muehlebach and Shoshan's conception of 'post-fordist affect' (2012) that in their view is not specific to western economies, as it is often perceived. While it is often associated with western middle classes, they state that it

can be found much beyond that, even in places where fordism as such never existed.

No matter whether fordism is taken as a rule or exception of capitalist economies (Neilson & Rossiter 2009), my previous research demonstrated that in post-socialist BiH many features of such post-fordist affect can be found (Čengić 2017). It can be said that in BiH fordism provides an imaginative field in which dreams of 'normal life' (Jansen 2015) and social reproduction (as it used to be or is supposed to have been before) are invested. Of course, such investments, and indeed the way in which current working and living conditions are defined as 'precarious', are context-specific. The standards of what a 'normal life' should be are still to a large degree drawn from recollections of pre-war socialist life, a life that people feel was taken away from them during the war. Twenty-three years later, they still feel it has not returned. As Maček (2009) shows, even during the war, where everything was 'abnormal' people used to imitate 'normal life', resisting the war and trying to 'remain human'. In my previous research I traced how regaining 'normal life' is considered as a kind of minimum debt to be paid to BiH citizens (Čengić 2017), something they feel entitled to as human beings. Some elements that constitute 'normal life' include: "secure employment, living standards, social welfare, relative social equality, socializing connected to travel and leisure, consumption, inter-ethnic co-existence, and particularly importantly, an expectation of unproblematic reproduction of such a life" (Jansen 2014: S76–S77). The fact that the past is possibly idealized in these accounts, or that these standards of living were not achieved in the same measure by all, or that such a life never even existed, does not undermine the status of 'normal life' as an aspirational standard for most people in BiH.

Negative Side: Contractual or *de facto* Precarity?

At first sight, it may seem that post-fordist affect or yearning for 'normal life' is not applicable to locals working for at least a decade on internationally funded short-term projects. What is specific to this experience of precarity of my interlocutors in internationally supervised BiH? What kind of post-fordist affect do they display (if any)?

It can be said that the lives of my interlocutors are marked by either contractual or *de facto* precarity. Let's first take a close look into the kind of contracts they have.

All of them are engaged on project-dependent contracts. Some are on **casual contracts** without any social benefits; some are on **fixed-term contracts** with social benefits, but without redundancy payments; some are on **international fixed-term contracts** (e.g., with UN health and pension benefits); finally, some are on **permanent contracts** (with social benefits and redundancy payments), but even these are de facto dependent on a permanent search for project funding to actually implement them⁸. Interlocutors state that the maximum period of job security they have had was one to three years, while the average is six months in IGOs and one year in NGOs. Although most of them have an employment record of 15-20 years without any or any significant interruption, they actually moved between organizations on average 4-5 times (mostly from international organizations to local NGOs), or from project to project within an organization. This means continuous work on project writing (NGOs) or re-applications for jobs (IGOs). My interlocutors told me that the current rate of success with project applications is about 5-6%.

How do we interpret these figures? How do my interlocutors experience this? When asked to reflect on their work trajectories in interviews, they deplored the problems of contractual precarity. This was perhaps emphasized most of all by Haris, a man in his late forties, who has worked in international organizations for more than twenty years. Right after the war (in his mid twenties) he was a recently demobilized soldier and he started to work for an international organization in Sarajevo. First, he worked as a driver, then he moved to a position as project assistant, then he had the opportunity to work as an 'international' in Vienna. He returned to Sarajevo and continued his project-based work until today, changing many projects and international organizations during that period, every time subject to re-application. He says that his longest contract ever was for three years (once), while many of them were for three months. Haris expresses his concern in the following way:

I was in constant fear of temporariness, I still am today... That became clearest to me in Vienna, where I lived for 6 and half years. I enjoyed it, but I always thought it was temporary... From buying furniture, not having a car, but I travelled a lot, that was a positive . . . And the rest, it all was on a temporary basis . . . today I would never . . . but that experience, I learned that . . . And a really important thing is that, after all, we live in BiH . . . I always laugh when they ask me in a job interview where I see myself in 5 years . . . are we talking about Bosnia or about Austria? . . . In Bosnia I don't know where I see myself in 5 years, I don't know if I will prolong my contract, if I will have a job. .

At least two issues seem to me important here. First, Haris deploys a certain exceptionalism of BiH in relation to western countries when it is about predicting the future. Leaving aside how exceptional this really is, it has to be said that virtually everyone would agree that BiH really does not provide societal hope, in Ghassan Hage's terms (2003), where people would feel entitled to claim a part of it. This could partly be ascribed to changes on the global level, but also to the politically and economically fragile post-war and post-socialist life in BiH which does not provide any tools for the creation of continuity. Second, although this quote is about work and life precarity, in some measure it balances things out and hints at advantages of this kind of work as well. In this particular case, this is about visiting and experiencing foreign countries; in some other interviews some other advantages are mentioned. It is important to add here that Haris states that he never tried to find employment in some other sector.

For now, we can say that in the current conditions of BiH, with mass unemployment, my interlocutors perceive precarity as undesirable but largely inevitable. They deplore many problems of precarity, but what is striking is that they also identify a number of factors that, in their experience, 'compensate' for these problems, that 'make it worth it' to remain to work in this sector rather than try to get secure employment in the public sector⁹. In the next section I will focus on those factors.

Positive Sides for Remaining within the Sector

What makes it worth for my interlocutors to engage in such project-based employment, despite the problems they associate with it? I distilled from the interviews some positive factors that they identify in their project-based work, factors that they consider important to their motivation to remain in this sector (usually explicitly or implicitly compared to secure employment in the public sector). They are interrelated but I will group them here under three main headings: a) the qualities of the work itself; b) the value of the work; and c) the kind of social self it allows. Let's look at qualities first.

a) The qualities of the work itself

Let me introduce this topic with the story of Alma, a woman in her late forties whose professional path is rather specific. Namely, her NGO engagement started during the war, in her mid twenties, in her hometown

of Tuzla, where she worked for a newly established association working with women victims of war rape. After the war, she said, she was rather exhausted and suffered a lot of health problems. She moved to less stressful work in a government ministry. She worked there for 10 years, achieving a managing position in one of the branches of the ministry with a permanent contract. But in parallel she worked with a lot of civil society associations, completed a MA and in the mid-2000s decided to leave the ministry, saying that she realized that it did not allow her any creativity, that it was boring, that she could complete her job in a few hours. She joined some NGOs that she previously collaborated with. Today, she is the head of an NGO dealing with peacebuilding, she has a 'permanent' contract (but one dependent on projects) and she also collaborates with some local and foreign universities on an occasional basis (teaching and doing research work). Alma describes the quality of this kind of work in the following way:

This informal education opened totally new horizons for me, new ways to get to know the world. Then I realized that what I knew before is actually... just one little bit, which more was limiting than providing me freedom. Only when I entered the non-governmental sector, only with this new knowledge, experiences, skills I learned, only then I realized that there is a whole range of other worlds that offer you extraordinary possibilities to work on yourself, first of all, and to use that capacity to strengthen capacities that you didn't even knew you had. You get an opportunity to show your ability in some situations in which you never thought you would... you would be so successful or you would know to do those things in that way.

In this way, other interlocutors too identify qualities in the work they did itself, on a day-to-day basis and over longer-term trajectories. They include, for example, facing challenges all the time (which push you further); professionalism by high standards; room for creativity; for freely expressing your opinion; to be 'what you really are'; possibilities for learning, professional development and self-realization; to discover many other worlds along this one and widen your horizons; to be able to perceive the world from the margins.

As we can see most of these qualities are about *self-realization*. Importantly, in today's BiH, each of them is implicitly understood as opposed to the public sector. Particularly the state administration is considered a place of non-creativity, rigidity, closedness, ethnonationalism, etc. This is very well illustrated in the continuation of Alma's quotation:

I am really grateful for that opportunity since it opened the way for me to come out of that box, that box and that way of thinking in which we were 'molded' till then in our Bosnian and Yugoslav framework. So, it opened new horizons, new ways of thinking, ways to use what I knew from before, to combine it with other fields, that step forward was key, key to me.

As we can see, this experience of freedom is very much epistemological, dependent on access to specific knowledge and specific ways of explaining social reality.

Let us consider now which additional factors, related to the context of the work, contribute to the sense of freedom. These are: **time flexibility** (among other things this allowed some of my interlocutors to complete their studies while working (BA; MA; PhD), but also to combine many other engagements with 'their main job'), **important skills and knowledge** gained through trainings (often involving travel abroad), and something we could call '**being your own boss**'. And while more will be said about the first and the second below, let me now address the latter feature of this kind of work.

Most interlocutors see 'being your own boss' as a form of creativity while implementing all phases of a project cycle, from an idea to the realization. This kind of freedom/autonomy is actually based on one's own fundraising and self-responsibility for one's salary. This can be interpreted as a maximalization of self-responsibility for one's own future or, as Wendy Brown calls it, "the capacity for 'self-care'" (Brown 2006 in Gershon 2011: 539). Mirza, who is not formally in a managing position within a local NGO, does feel he is his own boss. He explains this in the following way: "before I always worked FOR SOMEBODY else, in projects that somebody else created. Now, I have freedom TO WRITE MY OWN PROJECTS and then to CHANGE them through its REALIZATION, and not to play according to rules." Asked whether he considers himself to be someone who works for foreigners, he says: "No, I think those who work for foreigners are those who work in American embassy, OSCE, UNDP etc. (...). I don't work for foreigners, I sell to them my product, I work only for myself."

What we find here is a kind of inverted capitalistic market logic, where donors are presented as customers and NGOs as sellers of their products. Anyhow, it seems to me that asymmetrical power relations between donors and NGOs are displaced/transformed or consciously subverted here, to create an opposite or at least *less* asymmetrical relation that seems

to provide dignity to the kind of neoliberal agency that Ilana Gershon describes as ‘people as business’ (2011:539).

Self-realization is maybe the most appreciated feature of this kind of work. Let’s see what further makes it worth for people to be engaged in this sector.

b) Value of the work

A second positive dimension of project-based work concerns the VALUE that this work produces. They believe they can effect social change, help those who need it, and provide important services that are otherwise lacking in society.

A significant part of wider society would not agree with this. Indeed, many studies (e.g., IBHI 2012, Puljek-Shank and Verkoren 2017) demonstrate that this kind of work enjoys quite a low degree of local legitimacy. Criticisms (or self-criticisms) of civil society work is present amongst my interlocutors too. Demonstrating her disappointment with BiH civil society, Bojana said:

I think I’m personally part of this lack of success as well, that I helped with our ‘humanitarian assistance’, our taking over what the state should do, that we actually prolonged the agony, and gave them (the political elite) the possibility to be what they really are. If we didn’t do the work that the state should do, we would have had social unrest earlier, we would have fluctuations in the government earlier. But no, we are like a mother who doesn’t allow her son to grow up, you know.

Like in some other cases, this account relies on a liberal perception of civil society, as opposed to the state.¹⁰ And it is interesting to see that this critique targets exactly those kinds of activities that are actually favored by the general population. Indeed, the study by Puljek-Shank and Verkoren demonstrates that the highest level of local support is given to those NGOs ‘solving concrete problems and addressing everyday needs’ (2017: 192). In other words, the broader population appreciates NGOs that in significant measure take responsibility for activities that were previously conducted by public institutions, instead of being a watchdog of the state.

However, even if my interlocutors may be disappointed overall with “what has been achieved during the last twenty years”, this does not mean they consider their work non-meaningful or socially irrelevant. Quite the

contrary! Bojana, the same person who previously expressed criticism of the functioning of civil society, says that if she would be born again, she would again make the same decisions.

Further, although their work is clearly their source of livelihood, of income, all those in local NGOs suggest that there is a part of their work that cannot be remunerated. We can guess that they allude to an activist dimension of their work, considered inherent to civil society. But what does this consist of in their accounts? It is mainly referred to as a level of commitment that lasts twenty-four hours a day, that does not know weekends, holidays, etc. In my impression this is always presented as valuable beyond any salary. It is precisely this 'working/commitment surplus' that made it so difficult to encourage interviewees to stop acting as representatives of NGOs and to start talking about their experiences as workers. From this perspective, questions about their livelihoods somehow trivialized something that is usually understood qualitatively as priceless. To a degree, this kind of work/commitment surplus resonates with what Muehlebach (2011) explores as 'affective labor' (unpaid voluntary work). In her case such work was promoted by the Italian government after early post-fordist job-losses. In BiH, in contrast, it is a product of international intervention and its ambiguous role in civil society building. Namely, there are numerous contradictions between the international discourse of expectations of civil society (to have a 'grassroots' civil society which would be corrective of the state, to promote voluntarism and activism) and its way of working and procedures which in significant measure depoliticize any kind of civil society work, threaten the sustainability of grassroots initiatives (through donor agendas, complex applications and reporting procedures), and focus on developing a professionalized NGO sector – a kind of substitute for missing social services.

c) Social self

I now move to the third characteristic of project-based work that 'makes it worth it' for my interlocutors. This concerns the SOCIAL SELF that such work allows them to develop/maintain. Let me identify some particularly important dimensions of this.

First, the civil sector and international organizations that I explored are seen as **non-contaminated by ethnonationalism** in terms of recruitment and day-to-day functioning. This is then opposed to the importance of ethnonationalism outside of it and serves as an important feature in the

reasons why my interlocutors feel good in this sector. Although, like in the rest of BiH, the demographic structure of Sarajevo has significantly changed, it can still be considered relatively multiethnic, at least in a spirit of togetherness and yearning for previous inter-ethnic coexistence. Two employment sectors are in fact still quite multiethnic: the state administration and international organizations/civil society. But there is a sharp contrast between them. We could say that within the first one – state administration—you are recruited primarily as a Serb, a Croat or a Bosniak (along required qualifications). In contrast, you enter the civil sector precisely in order *not* to be recruited in that way.

According to many of my interlocutors, ethnic-based recruitment in the state administration is ‘shameful’. This, they say, is one of the major reasons why they never tried to get a job there. One of the youngest participants, who works for an international organization, says that his friend called him to be director in some state administration unit, saying: “We need a Croat.” He tells me this with astonishment, saying he immediately refused, that he can’t believe that they called him just because of that, when he is not qualified at all. He added that he would never like to work in the state administration, to get a job that way. When I asked if he thought that it was different in international organizations, he said yes. He thinks that there, even if ethnic identity is important to somebody, you do not express it, because a conflict or insult on that basis would be punished with job-loss. A similar kind of attitude can be found in local NGOs as well. Bojana, head of a local NGO, says that she and her husband consciously decided “not to be BUDŽETLIJE (people who are funded through public budget), even if they would go hungry”. In her view this kind of employment, particularly employment in the state administration, supports and reproduces ethno-politics, perceived as major source of political problems.

Another way in which my interlocutors consider the project-based sector to facilitate a specific social self is through a **strong open-ness to influences from ‘The World’**. The World, here, actually mainly means the West. This openness is then opposed to what they consider provincialism outside this sector.

Contrary to the stereotypical image of a closed socialist country, there is a dominant image among the BiH population that Yugoslavia was a very ‘open country’. Many of my interlocutors even considered starting to work in the internationally-funded project-based sector a kind of ‘re-opening’ to the ‘world’ after the war/siege of the city. Jasmina describes it in the following way:

...You know, you're not anymore, you've exhausted everything that you can pull out of yourself during 4 years of war, you know, that kind of struggle, as long as you're alive and you stay normal and now a new world arrives, and I have no idea what's happening, I mean, CDs, new films, music (sigh of excitement).

In addition, my interlocutors contrast the international context in which they work, often seen as a space of cosmopolitanism and openness, to ethno-nationalism and to the increasing closedness of post-war BiH society. In Jasmina's understanding Sarajevo is changing in very conservative directions that are unfamiliar to her. Her work in the UN, among other benefits, provides a kind of refuge from that, but in parallel also a kind of substitute for life as it once used to be. Jasmina said that somehow she remained in pre-war time or in the time right after the war, when there was huge optimism that society would be rebuilt and rehabilitated. Now, she says, she can see that the situation is even worse than in 1996.

Interlocutors display cosmopolitan lifestyles. They have colleagues and often friends around the world. They are in continuous contact with them through social media, both privately and professionally. Many are up-to-date on the political situation, locally and internationally. They like international cuisine and healthy food habits and try to integrate them in the lives as much as possible. What they like most is travel. They go abroad on both private and business trips, very often combining them, and get to know people and places. Many say that due to the war they have friends all around the world and they try to find opportunities to visit them. On the whole they do not mention problems with visa (as the rest of population would), and the 'world' appears as a place that is not only worth seeing (touristically, as before), but also as a place where you imagine yourself living. In that way, they are citizens of the world.

Some authors exploring civil society in neighboring Croatia and Serbia consider workers in this sector a part of a globalised middle class (Vetta 2012, Samson 2003, Stubbs 1997). They point to their globally shared cosmopolitan life style, cultural capital, language skills, networking. Also, they find significant measures of class continuity with the previous generation. Within this study, the latter is only partly true. And while the issue of their entry into this sector is a separate research topic, for now it can be said that in most cases information about available jobs came through friends, that according to many their English language skills at

that time were basic, that recruitment at that time (mid- to late-90s) was not so selective as it is today, and that their salary at that time fed and supported whole families since, in the public sector, there was no salaries at all during and just after the war.

To conclude this section, we can say that despite contractual insecurity, my interlocutors express strong valuations of forms of cultural and social capital that their work facilitates. In certain ways they perceive this lifestyle as a continuity of their imagined pre-war 'normal life', so yearned for by most of the population. But access to such a life style, activities and sense of social self is also restricted in terms of *economic* capital. So, what do interlocutors say about this?

Economic Aspect: Merit vs. Social Equality

Strikingly, in the interviews, my interlocutors only very rarely addressed the economic dimension of their work. Very few of them mentioned it spontaneously, even though all of them derived their entire income from this work. Although I did not pose direct questions about salaries, I rely on two interlocutors who disclosed them in the interviews, on my previous work on projects in BiH, and on three other studies, one in BiH and two in Serbia (Baker 2014; Vetta 2012, Marek 2015). I estimate that the average monthly net salary of my interlocutors (not counting additional engagements and contracts) ranges from a bit bigger to significantly bigger than the average salary in Canton Sarajevo. There are significant differences between those on permanent and fixed-term contracts on the one hand and those on casual contracts, whose monthly income is unsteady and often below the average. Asked what they can afford for themselves and their families with their income, most respond it allows them 'a normal ordinary life'. By this they refer to basic existence for their closer family and often support for parents, an apartment and a car (often bought on credit or with a private loan), holidays (several times during the year due to flexible work times), travels abroad, socializing, food and drink outside. Finally, some interlocutors say that they live in a rented apartment and they are not able even to afford basic survival (pay their bills), and some others say that they live very well in comparison to most of population.

It is important to note that, despite job insecurity, almost all interlocutors who had families formed partnership/marriages during their project work

and many of them have children. In half of these cases partners/spouses are engaged in project work as well. None of them state that this had been an obstacle for family plans, except for obtaining bank loans to buy an apartment, which they nevertheless still succeeded to do. Still, one director of an organization with casual contracts says that her colleagues do not have children and that those who do have them went somewhere else 'for a better life'.

One question I asked in the interviews concerned the perception amongst some in BiH society that those who work in NGOs and IGOs are privileged. Some participants found this a very provocative question. So how do different interlocutors reply to this 'provocation'?

Before being asked this question, Bojana spontaneously says that she just recently noticed how much working for foreign money changed people working in the civil sector. She adds:

We are a caste in itself, you know, at some point some Norwegian, some American paid tax so that I could sit here and "tell you clever stuff" at half past nine, right. Who is checking my time sheet, who is asking me "where you are and why are you not in the office?" You know, it is privileged.

Two more participants compare themselves with the average person in BiH who lives a difficult life and they confirm the proposition that they were comparatively privileged.

Some interlocutors balance positive and negative sides of this kind of work, mainly immaterial advantages and insecurity. Many respondents from local NGOs reply by shifting this proposition to people working in international organizations, defining them as 'higher class', for example:

People who rapidly changed after they got a job in international organizations: they speak great English, they have holidays in Indonesia, they live some kind of Western system of life and they look down at the rest of us as stupid Bosnians and Herzegovinians, I don't know, a few hundred or a few thousand such people have gotten really rich that way and they don't understand ordinary people anymore.

Some also say that this distinction is not fully tenable since there are people from international organizations who are also project dependent, and there are also people in the local sector who capitalized very well on the fact that they entered the market early (more than twenty years ago).

Some interlocutors say that they are not privileged in any case, expressing anger that society always pushes comparisons with those who live in worse conditions and saying that socially disadvantaged groups would not feel any better if they could not pay their bills. Some make comparisons to their previous lives, to how it used to be within their primary family, saying that in those days they had more than now. Finally, one interlocutor, the one who works in the private sector on a project-basis, angrily suggests that anybody who thinks he is privileged can try and compete on the market.

At least two issues seem important to me here: first, an implicit insistence that all they have was earned with ‘blood, sweat and tears’, and thus deserved, and second, a perception that only some ‘minor, socially disadvantaged groups’ have economic difficulties in BiH.

Although most of my interlocutors who started working right after the war say that this was mainly financially motivated and somehow accidental (from a professional point of view), they would not say that for their working trajectory today. Instead, they focus on their qualifications, achievements and development. They mention attending numerous capacity building trainings, which they consider extremely important for their professional development and orientation. Accordingly, particularly those employed in local NGOs see themselves and their organizations as professionals in a specific field. In addition, while they do not emphasize this, almost all of them have completed higher education. Ten hold MAs and two have PhD degrees. Overall, they suggest that they built an organizational and personal CV during the last 10-20 years, and are therefore deserving of funding. Additionally, the fact that you have to continually fundraise for your own job probably facilitates its perception as less secure, but more expensive. Finally, relying on my experience of project-work in this sector I would add that people may also consider their salaries relatively insignificant because they compare them with those of their international colleagues, who they occasionally criticize for lack of knowledge and qualifications (“they’re just throwing us crumb”).

Some interlocutors mention that there are many disadvantaged groups in BiH who live badly (e.g., Dragan states: “particular groups of people WHICH WERE DISADVANTAGED, AND THEY ARE STILL DISADVANTAGED, if not even in the worse situation, like physically disabled persons, women, children, old people, minorities, citizens IN GENERAL are discriminated.”). They explain how they try to help them as much as possible, either through their work or individually. However,

what they seem to fail to grasp is that structural disadvantage produces economic disadvantage. If we would put together all these so-called 'disadvantaged groups' and others beyond them, we are talking perhaps about 70% of the BiH population that is either already poor or on the verge of 'falling' into this group. Within and above this group are: those who keep up an image of 'normality' with remittances from abroad, those with multiple financial debts, who do not have money to pay their bills or are not heated at all, those who wait for specialist medical examination for a year in public health services since they do not have money to pay for private services. As Michael Pugh notes, the majority of poor people in BiH are not the unemployed, but those who are employed and have families and children, often without a salary (2005: 456). In BiH today, can we still talk in categories of 'disadvantaged groups'? And who says that only they are disadvantaged? Who produces that knowledge? It is not a coincidence that these questions are neglected in donor programs (see e.g., IBHI 2012), influenced as they are by neoliberalising agendas. Quite early on in Croatia, Paul Stubbs (1997) noticed that social equality, promoted so much during socialist times, was not part of any donor program and that the professionalization of NGOs imposed by international funding made it impossible for any grass roots initiative to survive.

To conclude this section, much of the reasoning of my interlocutors about the economic dimension of their work are also in line with precisely the kind of neoliberalising changes that the international supervision promotes in BiH. This includes an internalization of self-responsibility, a lack of awareness and of nuanced knowledge about social inequality within society, and/or an understanding that social inequality is *legitimate* if it is based on merit (i.e., a largely implicit meritocratic ideology).

Some authors exploring civil society in the Balkans see these workers as earning well above civil servant salaries in respective countries (Vetta 2012, Samson 2003). Marek Mikuš, on the basis of his research in Serbia, challenges this, referring to salary figures quite comparable to the ones that I provided as relatively unspectacular, and emphasizing that these people do not have economic resources of their own, but they are wage earners engaged on internationally funded projects. His further arguments against seeing these people as an economic elite are that these figures mainly relate to top positions, while the majority of NGO workers are on casual contracts, in permanent insecurity and earning close to the average salary in Serbia or often less (Mikuš 2015: 48). Although this is more or less true for civil society in BiH, as we have seen this permanent

insecurity is not what is prevailing in their narratives (at least not among the majority of them).

Due to internalized insecurity, with few exceptions, it would be difficult to see this group as some revolutionary class – a multitude in Hardt and Negri's terms (2004). This is not even what Standing (2011) refers as 'precariat', as a class in the making (at least not the majority of them). Sure, this group has elements of 'precariat', but also some elements even of 'proficians', quite high up in Standing's pyramid of working positions, just below the 'salarial' (2011). The most important feature that is missing to qualify them as a collective subject is any kind of collective organization around precarity. In my interpretation this is prevented by an internalization of self-responsibility for their own livelihood, which is not perceived as an imposition, but transformed, as we saw, to an advantage of this kind of work (within wider societal employment options). In a study of war-time interpreters working for international military forces in BiH and Kosovo, Catherine Baker comes to the rather similar conclusion. Questioning their 'precariat' status, she introduced, but also queried, an additional or alternative conception of them as 'projectariat' which is at the same time a privileged elite (2014: 92). Her analysis does not solve this tension, and nor does mine. What I can say in accordance with Mikuš's findings is that my interlocutors can be defined in terms of "precarization – an ongoing and uneven process rather than fixed condition – of a middle class faction defined by an articulation of the NGO organizational form, liberal political identity, high education, and global cultural capital." (2015: 49). My interlocutors have diverse contracts, levels and regularities of income, but what they share are risks, insecurity and an impossibility of long-term planning. As one of my interlocutors says: "...yes, normal life needs to go on, but ALL DECISIONS, EVEN THOSE THAT ARE NORMAL are actually risky decisions".

Let's see now how 'normal life' goes on for my interlocutors, or what they rely on in imagining their future.

Project Logic and Accumulated Continuity

Most interlocutors associate the kind of work they do with young age and state that when they started, they didn't think it would last so long. Still, meanwhile they accumulated 15 to 20 years of experience in this field with no or only very short interruptions. They found this exhausting, they

experienced and are still experiencing crises, and it remained insecure, but almost none of them plan to leave it. If neoliberal agency is “a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed” (Martin in Gershon 2011: 539), how is this applicable to them, or, in other words, what factors does their ‘accumulated continuity’ rely on?

I found several mutually intersecting factors:

A first important factor consists of their **personal and organizational CV** (qualifications, skills and experience). Una, head of a human rights organization who for twenty years has worked on economic and social rights, says that the stable structure in her life is her CV. At the same time, that same CV is also that which prevents her from looking for a job in another sector. Others emphasized their organizational CV, so to say, establishing a profile for their organization in a certain field, which is an asset in application processes. To create security for a certain period, you also have to have good **project writing skills and you need to combine several projects at the same time**. Mirza perceives this sector like any other market and critically contemplates the project logic, but at the same time he uses it. He says: “You learn how to write and speak in that language. (...) And simultaneously, well, look, I succeeded to build in some internal distance in that very language, and then I critically appropriate it”. Dragan says that you always need to combine several projects and to calculate them so that they do not start at the same time. And in order to be successful, project needs to be perfectly written, according to Damir. However, many say that the outcome is often determined less by the quality and more by geographical distribution and connections “from the local level to Brussels”. With this we arrive at the asset of **social capital**, the importance of which all interlocutors emphasize and proudly display. This includes lobbying mechanisms with donors. Social capital also includes collaborators and often people who share a professional/educational backgrounds and value systems. Three interlocutors who previously didn’t live in Sarajevo are particularly proud of the social capital they gained. Another factor mentioned by them is the **time spent in an organization or in the sector in general**. Haris considers his 6 years working for the same IGO abroad as a factor that prevented him getting a permanent contract and having a proper career in BiH. This is because he was absent in the early 2000s, when the transfer from international to national positions happened. So, Haris feels he came to the market with his qualifications too late. So does Ivan, one of the youngest interlocutors who in 1996 was just

15 years old. Finally, we have something that seems somewhat irrational, but important. It consists of **optimism that time will bring something good**. Sara, who has been working on casual contracts for years, says that there are often crises with funding, but they always somehow get solved. And knowledge about that helps her a lot. This was expressed in a similar way by Dunja, who says that within the sector some illusion of security has been created that some new project will be found, allowing continuation. She continues: "EVEN I HAVE IT AND ALWAYS THINK, well, something will turn up, and, the craziest thing is, something does always turn up".

While trying to produce continuity, many of my interlocutors experienced crises. In significant measure, circulating from one organization to another (on average four times, or from two to nine times) can be interpreted as transfer due to the end of the previous project or even the closure of the organization. Emina, a local NGO director looked back on fifteen years of relatively stable funding (with re-application every two to three years to the same donor). Recently she was suddenly confronted with the termination of funding. She explains this was a very difficult situation, with ten persons in the organization living off this work that believed in what they did and did not see themselves anywhere else in the future. She continues: "As if you wake up from a wonderful dream that you, that you, you know, first it was very hard, you climb to the third step up, and you fall back to the ground floor". Her husband, who had worked on a casual basis for 10 years, lost his job at the same time. And they had three outstanding bank loans.

The hopes of my interlocutors are often invested in a more secure job, mainly the existing one. Although most would like to be less dependent, for the foreseeable future they still count mainly on foreign funding. Some are developing plans to access other sources of possible funding: further professionalization and offering private services, finding individual donors, or minimal state funding (negotiations about which they are pessimistic about in advance due to non-transparent procedures and monopolies of some organizations (see IBHI 2012)). The key reason for these other plans is the decrease in available funding and the amount of work needed to secure any of it. But they also say they are tired of fitting into donor agendas, of being nice to people who often know less than they do, of starting all public appearances with the sentence "with the support of our donors". All this is articulated particularly strongly by some interlocutors who talk in the 'I' form more than others, and who demonstrate a concern with how project dependence and donor agendas are weakening their

activist role (failing to address ‘real societal problems’). Some of them already invested some work in that direction (separating their ‘project work’ as a source of livelihood from pro bono engagement in very grass roots activities), while some hope to be able to do it. Some of their ideas are even less secure than their current engagement.

The temporal reasoning I have presented here relies to a large degree on the project logic, as well. This logic does not include complete closure. Projects exist in order to be continued, or to provide a basis for the next project. Thus, to return to the question of aspirations to ‘normal lives’, my interlocutors have a desire for a non-problematic reproduction of a life that improves over time, but, unlike in previous times, they have no expectation that the state will provide conditions for that.¹¹ Such expectations of the state do not belong to this newly created neoliberal agency – that of a flexible self-responsible person that should proactively ensure her or his life and existence.¹² To a significant degree, this resonates with Gershon’s conception of neoliberal agency. Referring to Brown, she states:

According to the neoliberal perspective, to prosper,¹³ one must engage with risk. All neoliberal social strategies center on this. Managing risk frames how neoliberal agents are oriented toward the future. And it is implicit in this orientation that neoliberal agents are responsible for their own futures – they supposedly fashion their own futures through their decisions. By the same token, regardless of their disadvantages and the unequal playing field actors are maximally responsible for their failures. (Gershon 2011: 540).

Still, the lives that my interlocutors strive to reproduce do not rely on a cut with previous lives either. In their understanding, there should be a degree a continuation with previous lives, but in dramatically changed conditions.

Concluding Remarks: Paradoxes of ‘Project’ Subjectivity in Contemporary BiH

This paper analyzed short-term project-based employment in the specific Western-funded ‘civil sector’ and in international organizations in BiH from the perspective of their local workers and in light of anthropological discussions of precarity, post-fordist affect and yearnings for ‘normal lives’.

It would seem that, unlike the majority of the BiH population, this group does not display much post-fordist affect or yearnings for 'normal lives', at least not in terms of its main component of secure employment. But this is only partly true. In fact, as I have shown throughout this paper, there is a tension.

To a large degree, the aspirations of my interlocutors do reflect broader standards of what would constitute a 'normal life' and they work hard to produce the kind of continuity that is supposed to be central to such a life. Yet the channels they use to try to achieve this imply that they have given up on real hopes for the fordist type of 'job security' that is widely perceived as the key element of remembered 'normal lives'.

A related tension emerges in terms of commitments to social change. On the one hand, my interlocutors project an 'activist' self, working beyond economic calculus to contribute to the betterment of society in ways that seem critical of neoliberalism. But on the other hand, their employment trajectories and orientations are *de facto* largely in line with neoliberal understandings of self and society.

Such tensions can be interpreted with wider societal conditions of BiH. However, they have to be also understood in the context of the foreign intervention/supervision of BiH, and its neoliberal forces, which themselves come with tensions. While promoting aspirations to prosperous and stable lives, this intervention simultaneously advances the notion that people should not feel entitled to them. While promoting altruistic and corrective values for 'civil society', it also fosters depoliticized, entrepreneurial subjectivities that are forward-looking, risk-taking, opportunity-creating, flexible, not relying on 'old' fordist guarantees of security. In the complex BiH political and social context, perhaps neoliberal templates of subjectivity are *seductive* to my interlocutors, particularly in terms of the self-realization they promise compared to remembered 'normal lives'. They present themselves as possibly more inclusive, more open than past fordist disciplining structures, and also more centered on the process of self-development, but in today's BiH they seem incapable to produce much actual (visible) social change.

We find an awareness of such (unresolved) tensions in the understandings and self-positionings of some of my interlocutors who do not display a dogmatic view of donor agendas or of the project logic in general. They are even critical about neoliberalising effects of the international intervention. Still, the actual strategies they employ *do* remain within the project logic. Sometimes they critically appropriate this for

their own meaningful purposes, sometimes they talk about it ironically, sometimes they use them for subversive purposes.

Finally, I identified strategies with which they handled their precarious employment status over the years. They developed their *assets*, such as CV building, learning skills, accumulating social capital, time spent in the sector, optimism etc. This leads to a paradox, because in that way, and very much in line with notions of neoliberal agency, they actively seek to produce, as far as possible, degrees of continuity (i.e., some degree of security) in conditions of that are marked by precarity / non-continuity / temporariness.

NOTES

- ¹ I express my gratitude to Stef Jansen for fruitful conversations, useful comments while reviewing the draft version of this research paper and proofreading of it.
- ² All personal names are pseudonyms.
- ³ Transcription of interviews followed symbols available at: EESE 7/98 Lingua Franca English Characteristics of successful non-native-/non-native-speaker discourse, Christiane Meierkord (Erfurt), <http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic98/meierk/transc.html>.
- ⁴ This text presents a preliminary, broad analysis of the empirical data, written in 2018, during the NEC Fellowship. A journal article based on this analysis, was published in 2022. in *Focaal. Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2022.081804>
- ⁵ I express my deep gratitude to my interlocutors.
- ⁶ In 2009 there were over 12,000 registered civil society organizations in BiH. 91% of them were founded after 1991 and an estimated 54% of them are active (Puljek-Shank and Verkoren 2017: 191). Still, it has to be noted that this overall number comprises many kinds of associations that this study does not focus on. 15,9 % of active associations are based in Sarajevo (IBHI 2012: 3).
- ⁷ It is necessary to note that Western funded NGOs are dominant, but are not the only ones active in BiH.
- ⁸ Locals on permanent contract in IGOs are an exception.
- ⁹ No statistics about those who left this sector for more stable work and lives are available.
- ¹⁰ On the basis of research in Serbia, Theodora Vetta warns that the work of NGOs can't be seen through that opposition anymore. The focus of neoliberal policies is on the privatization of state services (which the state itself promotes to meet EU conditionality) and NGOs are often seen as the best transitional carriers in situations of state withdrawal (2012: 174–177).
- ¹¹ A least two interrelated factors need to be added to this: they consider the current BiH political context incompatible with their values (in particular ethnic based recruitment in the state administration) and they display low trust in the current state of the welfare system, which, despite major changes, is still formally 'public' (e.g., health care or pensions).
- ¹² This template of agency can also be found in other sectors.
- ¹³ And I would add: in BiH today 'to survive'.

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