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## **The Working Group `Jokes, War, and Genocide` Emancipating the Modes of Commemoration**

### **The unidentified**

Like in a mass grave,  
everyone has died of one's own death,  
apparently,  
love  
of the same thing  
What is his collar bone doing  
next to this frontal bone  
And what will he look like  
Reassembled from different parts  
When the day of resurrection  
comes

It is a particular question  
From what will we reassemble ourselves  
If again  
we decide to love one another  
There is no prior order of things  
The same things can be assembled in different ways  
Targeted reduction semantics  
grammar  
communication  
a man gives a lecture  
about things that have nothing to do with the above

He doesn't know that everything in life  
Is one and the same thing  
Like the clothes-line in the yard stretched from end to end  
On which only infrequently  
is the laundry changed.

This poem, written by a Bosnian woman poet Jozefina Dautbegović, gives the image of Bosnia today-as a mass grave of the dead and the living. At the same time, it introduces a new perspective and a new question: a particular question of 'us' reassembling ourselves.

Likening Bosnia to a mass grave of the dead and the living, its particular question spoke of a decision of love and of reassembling of ourselves, in the

context where the mass graves are discovered and excavated mortal remains are put together.

For me, this particular poem made it possible to discover the joke.

But how is this poem the image of Bosnia today?

Why is Bosnia and Herzegovina today a mass grave of the dead and the living?

Bosnian society is presently locating, exhuming, identifying and re-burying its dead. After the war, there are still around 10 000 missing persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina buried in hidden mass graves. Practices and experiences surrounding the missing persons confront the horrific past and the shapeless future in the present whose metonym is a mass grave. Each day in this country bodily remains are exhumed, counted, re-associated, managed, and consecrated as *ethnic* remains.

This is done through the strategic collaboration of: forensic science; multiculturalist post-conflict management with its politics of reconciliation; and religious ritual-an uncouth alliance between the Scientist, the Bureaucrat, and the Priest. In doing so, the Scientist, the Bureaucrat, and the Priest assume the perspective of the perpetrator of the crime. For it is in the fantasy of the perpetrator that the executed person is the ethnic *other*.

In the public domain, those who survived can only mourn their loved ones as ethnic victims, themselves being politically reduced solely to members of an ethnic group.

The so-called peacebuilding, carried out by the international agencies and adopted by many national civil society groups for the purposes of receiving the much-needed funds, promotes multiculturalist politics as the panacea.

Multiculturalist politics reduces social conflict to a friction among many identities, recasting cultural, religious and ethnic differences as 'sites of conflict that need to be attenuated and managed through the practice of tolerance'.<sup>1</sup> In the discourse of tolerance, what is taken as a given is that each ethnic victim has her or his own micro story, each ethnic group has its own "destiny," and what is promoted as life is actually the image of life led on parallel tracks, in one never-intersecting apartheid.

Such peacebuilding is also carried out in the context of the dominant revisionism, which attempts to equate fascism with the communism of World War II, just as it claims, as revisionists would have it, that all 'sides' were equally guilty during the war of the 1990s -, the war in which people fought to the point of extermination, but who now have to be reconciled and who need to tolerate one another. The ethno-nationalist elites who are carrying out the

transition into capitalism and making profit out of bloody capital, as well as the revisionists, argue that, ultimately, the war of the 1990s was only a civil war.

So, in reality, very few people insist that the projects behind genocide and clandestine mass graves were political projects and should be examined and condemned as such.

In such a context, the surviving ethnic victims mourn the dead ethnic victims, whilst the elites who fought the wars and got rich in the chase for the capital through genocide remain in power. Thus, the local and international management of loss continues the logic of the executioner, and genocide becomes genocide in perpetuity. In this regime of governance, what is produced is the subject-the ethnic victim, it matters little whether dead or alive,

How to move beyond this production of victimhood, or rather beyond this produced decorum of victimhood? What does it mean to claim that 'the experience and impact of genocide is not the fate of a victim who must then learn to subsequently adapt, to survive, as a perennial and anonymous sign of its irreversible incarceration' as the Working Group 'Jokes, War, and Genocide' claims?

In other words, how do we materialise hope after mass grave?

First, it means to claim is that suffering, which results from war and genocide, is the effect of societal injustice and as such a public matter *par excellence*; the second is that, in relation to this suffering, the emancipated process of becoming a subject can only take place when freed from the shackles of a victimised position, or any other position that is merely focused on the interests of any particular identity.

But, what kind of life was produced amidst the overwhelming production of death in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995? In the centre of this production of death one hears an obscene laughter of the ethno-capitalist, who has profited on death and who continues to laugh as he continues to extract more value from death itself. This ethno-capitalist laughs just like the capitalist who laughs when extracting surplus value from labour, when he converts money into capital.

Opposed to this obscene laughter of the ethno-capitalist is the anxious laughter after the joke about war and genocide has been told. This anxious laughter is an interval in the laughter of the ethno-capitalist, reminding us that this obscene laughter is not all that exists. The joke about war and genocide interrupts the stalemate of the post-war period in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is always a matter of risk and decision if, when and to whom to tell the joke about war and genocide. Such joke is a very economical means of opening a critical discussion around the topics, which are seldom discussed in public, as well as of creating space to discuss the unease created by these jokes.

The Working group 'Jokes, war and genocide' was set up in 2012 in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to explore the jokes about war and genocide as specific forms of witnessing. In doing so, the group has posited that '[t]he jokes we have collected and analysed testify to the *unconscious* of war and genocide, which is located in jokes, and our task is to explore that unconscious part'.<sup>2</sup> The unconscious of the war and genocide that the group has encountered in its work has been the predominant denial, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of the existence of the jokes on genocide. Moreover, the main objection that has been raised was the conjunction 'AND' being put between 'joke' and 'genocide'. Therefore, in July 2015, the group has posited the following:

We have come together in this working group to acknowledge the existence of the joke on genocide. In his 1905 text *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious*, Freud's analysis of the structure and psychical purposes of jokes allows us to posit the joke on genocide as a commemorative practice. Freud proposes a distinction that continues to be crucial for our work; the joke is made, and the comic is found. This pluralisation of commemorative register problematizes the dominant regimes of commemorating genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina today, and promotes the joke as engaging and exiting the repetition of grievance and affect, which robs the victim of the capacity to grieve. In other words, the joke constructs a new position from which a subject can mourn a loss and lay a melancholic identification to rest.<sup>3</sup>

Freud's proposition, that the joke as 'the most social of all the mental functions that aim at a yield of pleasure' is created in the language, whereas the comic is always found in the situation<sup>4</sup> is crucial for the group's work. Such a structural analysis allows us to posit jokes as a mode of commemoration for war and genocide. It is through this pluralization of commemorative registers that the joke allows us to problematize the dominant commemorative practices found in Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

The dominant commemorative practices insist on the ethnification of the victim, rendering any other metaphorization of terms like Srebrenica-the privileged signifier of the Bosnian genocide-impossible. The subject is demarcated always exclusively ethnic, thus causing it to disavow its own past. Through such an ethnification victims become included into a reified imagined past that was never their own, whilst being entwined in the privatization logic that followed the war.<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin in his thesis VI on the philosophy of history writes:

*To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool for the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away*

*from conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subdue of the Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.<sup>6</sup>*

This quote pinpoints the stalemate that dominant commemorative practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina create today. Freud claims that the joke liberates pleasure by getting rid of inhibitions. Jokes either strengthen the purpose that they serve, by assisting them with impulses that are kept suppressed, or they put themselves entirely at the service of suppressed purposes. The suppression that the Working Group has encountered in its work go along the lines of labelling 'joke and genocide' as insulting, or pejorative, or impossible. In order to understand this, I propose to start from the title of Freud's book, particularly from the conjunction 'AND'. This conjunction draws attention to the two mutually linked dimensions in Freud's work on jokes: the dimension of subjectivity and the dimension of discourse. Central in the interplay between these two dimensions-as that which knots these two dimensions-is pleasure that the joke produces, in the displacement and condensation of signifiers in our speech.

This pleasure rests on the simultaneous authorising of the joke in the dimension of subjectivity and the dimension of discourse. Thus Freud writes<sup>7</sup> '... only what I allow to be a joke is a joke...But if a joke admits of this doubt, the reason can only be that it has a façade...in the contemplation of which one person is satiated while another may try to peer behind it. A suspicion may arise, moreover, that this façade is intended to dazzle the examining eye and that these stories have something to conceal.'

Pleasure is produced as slippage between these two dimensions, joke being at the same time in the domains of sense and non-sense: 'Anyone who has allowed the truth to slip out in an unguarded moment is in fact glad to be free of pretense.'

Freud introduces the 'principle of assistance' as the mobilisation of pleasure in jokes, as fore-pleasure that produces new pleasure by lifting suppressions and repressions.

A joke has its stages: it begins as a play in free use of words and thoughts; encountering its sanction by reason as non-sensical, it changes into jest to retain sources of pleasure and be able to achieve fresh pleasure from the liberation of non-sense; then it comes to the help of thoughts to strengthen them against critical judgment by 'principle of confusion of sources of pleasure'; and finally, it comes to the help of major purposes that are combatting suppression, in order to lift their internal inhibitions by the principle of 'fore-pleasure'.

Why is the syntagm 'joke and genocide' a novelty in speech about genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina? First, it functions as a joke itself, by connecting the furthest scenes of representation; second, it highlights the dimensions of subjectivity and discourse; and third, the conjunction AND points to the pleasure that is present in the interplay between subjectivity and discourse.

The putting of the conjunction AND between *joke* and *genocide* precipitates the crisis in the dominant regimes that manage the speech about genocide. The crises bespeak of the possibility of a decision; it is a risk and a choice. AND is a signifying conjunction. The joke-in its outset as a free use of words and thoughts-cracks open the managed set of signifiers around 'genocide'. It introduces both sense and nonsense around 'genocide'; in the horizon of need and demand, which is characteristic of every speech, a joke communicates to the discourse (Other) 'some-sense' (façade), it continues the displacement of signifiers, it places a demand of sense. The nonsense in a joke is 'voided of every kind of need'. It is the place for the subject, who introduces non-sense, (and also the 'confusion of the sources of pleasure'). In this nonsense, the 'subject is the one who communicates the novelty of the joke' in the dominant discourse. We could also perceive jokes on war and genocide as a profanation in the sense that they enable the speech itself to be liberated through its desacralization,<sup>8</sup> returning it to common use from the sphere of the sacred.<sup>9</sup>

Now, we can arrive at the proper identification of the objections the Working Group has encountered in its work in the claims that 'AND' cannot be put between jokes AND genocide because it makes it pejorative.

[*pejorative*-to worsen downward, to the ground, stumble]

The discourse is grounded, worsened by the nonsense of the joke; speech is liberated from communication. And this reveals the progression of subjectivity in the joke.

New social bond, in the direction of which the joke about war and genocide points us, is possible. The joke reminds us that in the face of the anonymity of the victim stands the proper name of the subject. In the passage to the subject, the joke also reminds us, even the closed circuit of the commemoration must be engaged in order to be traversed. In other words, the joke reminds us that genocide can be mourned.

To illustrate this, here is one of the responses to the jokes that we have collected and analysed:

'This is horrible. It's a very sensitive topic because I am a member of the family of victims. Honestly, these kinds of jokes, although insulting, cannot hurt me because I think such jokes are part of a latent campaign to lie about or lessen the genocide...

*How do you feel when you hear such a joke?*

'Betrayed! But at the same time I realize that the person who tells it is so stupid that there is no point to enter into an argument...they are hopeless cases...I am a bit taken aback by the question ... but however, this is shameful and terrible. This way of speaking should NEVER be thought of by people living here. Why mock anything? I have never liked the jokes about the Holocaust or the jokes about children with special needs. This is the point of fearing God.'

If anything, jokes on genocide cannot be said to be lying about or denying genocide; quite the opposite, these jokes make us confront genocide all too closely, albeit through a certain distance that the joke creates.

It seems apposite to conclude with another response, this time by Šejla Šehabović, a Bosnian woman writer. Having herself participated in one of our public classrooms, she took up the invitation to work with us on the material we have collected and analysed. Particularly inspired by this previous response, this is an excerpt of the text she wrote:

'There was a moment at which, having heard the responses of the audience, I felt a complete defeat... What was so defeating in this response? What frightened me? The other respondents also expressed their desire to ban, ignore or despise the telling of jokes on genocide. The content of this response was therefore not the reason why I felt defeated. *The language* that was used in the response is for me terrifying. Because the respondent did not say: my father, brother, and uncle were killed; I suffered greatly; I am sad; I am alone; I am afraid...He said he was a member of the family of victims. In our language, to be a member of anything means to be removed from one's personal experience and feelings. This meager language of news reports disables any possibility of a person relating anything to another. The expressions such as the *latent campaign* or the *point of God fearing* are learned, repeated so many times that they say nothing about the one who uses them. This does not mean that horrible and unsayable feelings of loss disappear. Quite the contrary. The inability to speak your own words about the pain, repeating phrases used in TV reports, petrified expressions, ossified language, talk precisely about the trauma that has not been talked about. Instead of the speech about pain, the man repeats Betrayal! And NEVER! That is why this man despises, and why he pronounces people hopeless. And nothing is ever hopeless. That is why I think it is highly valuable to think about that which is inappropriate. Nothing appropriate, tasteful and correct can enable a human being to use human language. In the end I would like to record what I felt when in our meeting I heard several jokes on the genocide in Srebrenica. I laughed, several times. I felt like weeping, several times. I thought one should be silent about this, several times. Then, I thought several times that these jokes should be told and retold over and over again. That some people must not enjoy this. That some people have to enjoy this. That it is a lie that we all do not enjoy the crime at least a little bit. That the truth

about the crime can only be told in this way. That I have the right to feel all of this simultaneously and that at any moment I have the right to call on others for any of these feelings...<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Wendy. 2006. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Statement of the Working Group Jokes, war and genocide' June 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Statement of the Working Group Jokes, war and genocide' July 2015.

<sup>4</sup> See: Freud, S. *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious*.

<sup>5</sup> Here I refer to the constitutional changes made in 1994, where socially-owned property ('*društvena svojina*') becomes state-owned in order to facilitate privatization, whilst discursively erasing traces of labour, commonality and solidarity that produced such property

<sup>6</sup> See: Benjamin, W. *Illuminations*. Schocken Books, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> "Jokes and their relation to the Unconscious", chapter 3: "The Purpose of the Jokes", page 105/106,

<sup>8</sup> For this desacralisation, see Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah," in: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (eds.), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Routledge, New York, 1992, p. 219.

<sup>9</sup> To profane, according to Agamben, means 'to return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred' but which is not a mere restoration of a 'natural use' of that which was removed. Profanation, for Agamben, is not limited to the abolition of the form of separation 'in order to regain an uncontaminated use that lies either beyond or before it' (Agamben, G. (2007) *Profanations*, Zone Books, Brooklyn, New York, p. 85). The activity that results from profanation becomes 'a pure means, that is, a praxis that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its relationship to an end; it has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself as such, as a means without an end. The creation of new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative' (ibid., 86).