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## **Space, Place, & Symbol:**

### ***Utilizing Central Places to Understand Intergroup Conflict Dynamics***

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#### **Abstract**

This article will present a new way to capture highly dynamic intergroup differentiation processes. Drawing from experiences collected during several field research visits to Bosnia aimed at assessing Post-Dayton intergroup relations, and inspired by Positioning Theory, it will suggest that one key to understanding how groups interpret the behavior of other groups lies in the meaning these groups ascribe to the place of their interaction. Rules of a place limit the range of actions social agents can choose from, and establish an understanding of 'normal' behavior. This simultaneously positions all other possible acts as outside the local moral order, thus making the right to interpret a central place a favorable position and the interpretation of such a place into a strong positioning act that influences the terms of future interactions. Deciphering the dominant political meanings of central places in which intergroup interactions occur therefore becomes a promising way of understanding intergroup positioning processes. However approximating the meanings local groups ascribe to central places is in need of a thorough interpretational framework. This article will suggest one possible spatial approach to understanding intergroup interactions based on analyzing symbols that are used in the interpretational acts themselves.

#### **Keywords**

positioning theory, group dynamics, conflict, narrative

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## Introduction

It all started with a baffling observation: Why, after so many years of large scale international investments and interventions, as well as similarly large amounts of research, have so many vital problems for Bosnia as a state, society, and country remained unsolved? These problems are yet so central that in recent years there have been calls for further division and violence; dissolution of the social fabric continues to spread, leading to a situation in early 2014 that some observers called ‘the Bosnian Spring’ (International Crisis Group, 2014). The fear that we have not understood conflict in all its dimensions in the local context of Bosnia is growing within the international community once again. Perhaps this lack of understanding is because we are blinded by our old stereotypes, which prevent us from seeing the current dynamics; or maybe the current dynamics are a totally new phenomenon; or maybe the main focus of so many initiatives was pointed at solving the symptomatic issues instead of addressing the underlying problems (see Campbell, 1998; Hansen, 2006). All together, this indicates two things; first, it is necessary to re-engage with the phenomenon of conflict in Bosnia, and second, it is prudent to start with trying to abandon the old paths that currently define our picture of the ‘Powder keg Balkan,’ and of ‘Conflict in Bosnia’ as far as possible.

Setting aside the question of whether we are at all able to successfully bracket our knowledge of the past – one might struggle with this assumption and see that there is no way to experience without interpretation, and that these interpretations remain transfixed on previous limitations – starting fresh necessitates, along with an awareness of the powers the old causalities can unfold on our perspective, a thorough methodology of how to learn from social interactions in Bosnia, through social interactions in Bosnia (Heidegger, 1975; Ricoeur, 1970). Developing such a methodology, however, requires knowledge of where social (intergroup) interactions currently take place; this is challenging especially since starting ‘blank’ strictly has to mean not to assume knowledge of the different groupings that comprise the social realm of Bosnia. My solution here, which was inspired by a research design introduced by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss known as ‘Grounded Theory’, started with broadly observing various social spaces throughout Bosnia; over time I not only learned which groups exist and where they commonly interact, but also came across a way of how to capture and partly decode the meaning groups ascribe to their interactions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

This approach, which utilizes central places and their political use today as gateways into local meaning horizons, sheds light into highly dynamic episodes of intergroup interactions. Although by no means an entirely new concept, successfully tapping into local meaning horizons opens up, as long as we agree that local perceptions shape local actions, new options and alternatives to reducing destructive intergroup conflict potentials. Before we can or should think about solving conflicts in Bosnia or elsewhere based on insights gained through this approach, it is necessary to challenge this theorem and each of its underlying assumptions in a most thorough way. The aim of this paper therefore is to expose my reasoning to challenging critique through opening up my learning process – under the hope that doing so will not only help to improve this theorem, but foster discussions, spark ideas, and inspire new projects leading to a reduction of destructive social conflict potentials in the future.

While this approach was established through years of research on Bosnia, this paper will not attempt to directly address the multiple conflicts that Bosnia is facing today, except where examples are relevant to support the theoretical argument. In other words, what follows is the examination of a theoretical approach derived from reflections on post-Dayton Bosnia, not an analysis of the Bosnian conflict or current social situations. The paper will also not, at this point, make suggestions toward the implementation of this approach in practice, although it is hoped that this can be developed at a later time. In order to fully support a critical assessment of the concept, while highlighting the potential it carries for applications in other cases outside the Bosnian realm, the next pages will offer a re-tracing of some of the essential steps in my learning endeavor, before introducing a key concept called “Forced and Frozen Positions,” followed by a discussion of one way of how to study this particular positioning by utilizing a spatial focus on central places in the social realm of everyday intergroup interactions.

### **Reflections on Conflict and Differentiation Processes**

After a considerable amount of exposure to Post-Dayton Bosnia it became clear to me that neither ethnic, religious, economic or any other kind of essential differences can explain the high level of distrust, insecurity or enmity one can observe dominating many parts of everyday life in Bosnia today. This initial hunch, that looking beyond simple causalities toward the suspicion that differentiation processes may hold the key to understanding current tensions in

Bosnia, was followed by an episode of theoretical engagement trying to find support for ways of operationalizing research in this direction.

This phase was motivated by the hope that finding some kind of well-established theoretical nexus between the process of differentiation and conflict could serve as a basis on which to frame a research hypothesis. As it turned out this nexus was so strong that no clear distinction between both phenomena (the process of differentiation and the conflict) remained valid, while in the same moment the establishment of a new distinction, the one between constructive and destructive differentiation became necessary. To see where the need for this new distinction arises from, the phenomenon of social conflict will be discussed briefly. This discussion, however, is not as my attempt to create any kind of final definition of the phenomenon itself – the value of such a definition remains after all, highly questionable. Given the uncertainty created by Agamben's argument of the unwittnesability of the final suffering, created either in a conflict or by the possibility of our inability to really know what something means for anyone else, the paper will instead consist of a discussion of crucial elements that influence the understanding of conflict on which this study is based (Agamben, 2008). In other words, the grounded and exploratory mindset of this study suggests beginning with a concrete episode of conflict as a basis, and working to extract those elements of conflict believed to be too important to be ignored by any kind of further engagement with this phenomenon thereafter.

Such a concrete episode can be found at the heart of an interview I conducted with a local politician in a café in Sarajevo, in which my conversational 'other' had his own reasons for not sharing the thoughts or memories I had asked for, or for letting me continue with my method of questioning. This situation, classically described as a conflict of interest, highlights that conflict is situated in interaction. Interaction, although it by no means has to be face-to-face interaction, entails a second element of conflict, the element of difference. In a very simplified view of social conflict, conflict appears to be dependent on at least two sets of differences; first, it is in need of at least two different parties of which, second, each is holding a different and to some degree exclusive expectation, perception, belief or stake. The essence of both differences, ranging from race, gender, or any kind of affiliation, to creed, grievance or security claims, does not have to remain stable or even resemble the pictures held by those involved in the conflict. In fact, these differences are constructed, formalized, and demonized

during the interaction – the line is drawn, broadened and challenged, while the parties engage with each other. Conflict, in this way, is in need of difference and as such it seems to be involved in the creation of difference, by creating the distinct ‘me’s’ and ‘you’s’ in an episode of interactions. By taking a closer look at my interviews, not only was difference experienceable, but also the quality on which this difference rested; in other words the meaning of the difference, defining me as an outsider and my opponent as a holder of inside knowledge – at least in my eyes – could be observed. Thus, we can see social conflict as a process of constructing differences and their meanings in terms of creating the status of those involved, or, put simply, as social differentiation process.

These established differences, however, did not disappear after I had left the café, but persisted in my memory. And as part of my memory, they are likely to influence my future interactions as well as the stories I tell about others and myself. In other words, conflict does not just cease to exist, even when only one party might have left, but instead remains ingrained in the memories of interaction, and as such, as some research suggests, becomes a part of our individual or collective identities (Cairns and Roe, 2003). Our conflicts of the past, whether consciously remembered in a moment as such or not, will not only influence our current actions and perceptions, but also our vision of our future (Friedman, 1992; Petritsch and Džihic, 2010). If many of our small and large scale conflicts remain attached to our concepts of selves and personal interests, then conflict seems to be a primary mode of socialization – of our lifelong process of making sense of our position and the position of others in the social realm, while trying to adopt appropriate actions to cater to our interests. Such an understanding of conflict as a primary socializing momentum empowered by the continuous construction of differences – conflict as a form of social being – which creates the realm of action and meaning, however, requires a new distinction in order to allow any understanding of episodes of violence, such as brutal war.

We have to ask, why, if conflict is a primary mode of socialization, we do not feel in conflict, or permanently threatened by every interaction? Or, why did a conflict of interest in which a clear line was drawn and my ability to understand was openly questioned, not culminate in a bar fight, but in a research project? For sure, perceptions of conflicts, as well as individual ways of acting and reacting are different, however, if conflict is such a continuous and omnipresent movens of our daily interactions and we still do not feel ‘in conflict’ all the time, then

our experience with conflict seems to tell us that conflict cannot be ‘bad’ per se, or maybe not simply ‘bad’ at all. As various scholars have argued from different perspectives, it is generally shortsighted to ignore the ‘positive’ side of social conflict (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973; Kriesberg, 2007). Conflict can be a strong stimulus, unleashing waves of creative inventions, consolidating groups, empowering new agents, or inspiring research projects. This, however, should not imply that conflict can simply be ‘good’ either. Quite on the contrary, instead of assuming that conflict can be ‘good’ or ‘bad’, or that there are even two different types of conflict, one ‘good’ and the other ‘bad’, the understanding of conflict as an ongoing socializing force suggests that conflict is neither of the two by definition, but that individual episodes of interaction, certain differentiation processes, will lead to either constructive, or destructive, or maybe even both types of outcomes. Taking it all back to the original interest sparking this discussion, such an understanding of conflict suggests asking the question, “Why do so many of the current differentiation processes lead to destructive outcomes?” instead of asking, “Why is there still so much conflict between groups in post-Dayton Bosnia?”

### **Destructive Outcomes**

Before we can attempt to answer the latter question based on research on the ground in Bosnia, we need to know what exactly to look for; in other words, there is a need for a concept that explains how a differentiation process can create a destructive outcome and what qualifies as a destructive outcome in the first place. With the hope of finding such operationalization, several theories known for their scope on differentiation processes have been examined. Most of them could be found under the label of socio-psychological, or identity based inter-group conflict theories (Tajfel, 1981; Horowitz, 2000; Volkan, 1988; Ross, 2007). These concepts, as different as they are, are united by their ability to explain the linkage between the interests, beliefs or fears held by individuals and the behavior and action of larger social bodies called groups. Setting aside how the individual becomes a member of such a group, through birth, choice or forced assimilation, being a member of a group influences to various degrees the perspectives, meaning horizons and concepts of self and the surrounding others. ‘Others’ here has two meanings; first, it refers to other group members, and second, it is a synonym for everyone outside of the group’s own boundaries. Where the line between group members and outsiders is understood as a relatively clear boundary – a boundary in

many cases constructed through continuous acts of stereotyping of the outside others – the difference between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ often becomes inseparable (Barth, 1969).

Interaction between in- and out-group members in this sense could be understood as a differentiation process, however, as a differentiation process in which differences between ‘we’ and ‘them’, in the form of self-concepts, boundaries and stereotypes, remain pretty stable most of the time. While any change to the stability of difference might qualify as a constructive or destructive outcome of interaction, the question of when a certain change becomes destructive, however, remains a question of perception held by the groups in that particular situation. In other words, if there is at all a universal momentum defining when a differentiation process creates a destructive outcome, finding such a definition under the mindset of collective group identity could only be achieved through an inductive reasoning process, which draws from psycho-analytical interpretations of several situations in which groups have perceived interactions as destructive to their concepts of selves. Setting aside whether such an analysis of the inner psyche of a group can be achieved at all, finding a workable concept of destructive differentiation, based on some kind of shared human perception, would remain a large-scale research project by itself.

This being said, group identities and their boundaries are truly important, and theories emphasizing this connection have a great ability to explain collective actions. However, trying to understand why social differentiation processes sometimes create destructive differences, or trying to find an operational answer as to the definition of a destructive outcome, seems in need of an alternative take on the process of constructing social differences.

### **Positioning Theory**

Such a take can be found with the help of Positioning Theory, another concept that lately has originated in the field of psychology and narrative studies. In contrast to the above-mentioned theories, the heavily interaction-centered concept of Positioning Theory, suggests a move away from the still dominant cause-effect explanations of human behavior, and towards a more inclusive understanding of human actions through a returning of the ‘objects’ under observation into their socio-cultural milieus of origin (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré and Langenhove, 1999; Harré and Moghaddam, 2003b). Since its development, insights from Po-

sitioning Theory have been utilized to find answers to various challenges in different fields of social sciences, and through its shared roots with concepts such as symbolic-interactionism and Foucauldian discourse analysis, its application in several studies concerned with conflicts is not surprising (Tirado and Gálvez, 2008; Moghaddam, Harré, and Lee, 2008). Although many of these current applications of Positioning Theory unveiled important insights into various conflict processes, which simultaneously led to several amendments and concretizations of the concept itself, deepening an understanding of when a differentiation process leads to a destructive differentiation, only a small base portion of Positioning Theory will be needed (Harré et al, 2009).

As discussed above, social conflict does not only require differences, but in the form of a differentiation process, creates, maintains or alters such differences in an interactional process of socialization. The outcome of conflict therefore, can be understood as some kind of difference, which in the concept of Positioning Theory can be translated into a positioning, meaning a relational constellation of two or more positions to each other. Each position is understood as a cluster of rights, duties and obligations, all of which together are forming and reflecting the local moral order under which a distinct positioning takes place. Holding a certain position therefore, must be understood as a limitation to the overall amount of actions an agent could potentially draw from, which automatically makes the holding of certain positions in a distinct situation more appealing than the holding of others (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003a, pp. 4-6). This introduces one of the major differences between positioning and role theory. While both are interaction-based concepts that explain human behavior in relation to each other, Positioning Theory emphasizes the ability of agents to have various positions depending on the situation in which the interaction takes place, as well as on the envisioned goals of the agents for each interaction (Davis and Harré, 1999, pp. 37-45). The general ability to choose a position for a certain episode of interaction, which deliberately or not, always includes an act of positioning of the interactional 'other' does not suggest, however, that either the chosen or the given position will be accepted by the 'other'. While increase in social status or honor are very often the motivations behind certain positioning attempts, the reasons of why a certain position is chosen remains unimportant at this point; instead the question of what happens when a certain positioning is not accepted, or the chosen position not granted, becomes of further interest.

Based on the concept that positioning is an ongoing process, an initially unfavorable position therefore does not have to remain unchallenged and is overall likely to be changed as the episode continues. Whenever the current local moral order makes any alteration, refusal, or challenge of such a forced positioning impossible through the rights, duties, and obligations inscribed in the given position, the differentiation process has created what I call a frozen position (Langenhove and Harré, 1999, pp. 18-28). Here an important clarification of the concepts behind frozen and forced has to be made: While a forced positioning, which shall be characterized through the difference between the chosen and the actual position of an agent, still allows the agent to remain an active part of the differentiation process – active in terms of being able to continue negotiating his or her positioning – a frozen position shall be understood as characterized by its inherent inability to continue active participation in the positioning game based on the locally shared moral order. Frozen positioning does not suggest that, under certain circumstances, such a reduction of agency can not be a positioning willfully chosen, for example the positioning of oneself as insane in a court trial, but that such a willful reduction of agency is an extremely rare case (Langenhove and Harré, 1999, p. 28). Now the question becomes, what is at stake when a differentiation process has created a forced and frozen position at the same time?

### **Forced and Frozen Positions**

First, being positioned in such a way is no longer based on one's choice to give up agency, but a result of actions, which permit free choices and free development under the contemporary moral order. The emphasis on free is important, because losing agency does not mean losing the ability to choose, but rather losing the ability to negotiate the spectrum of choices available to the current position. This being said 'no agency' shall not mean 'no rights, duties, or obligations', but that these characters cannot be altered while continuing to interact on the same local moral order. A classic example for such a positioning is that of a prisoner, who whether he is guilty or not, as soon as he is locked up in a prison cell, is forcefully deprived of his ability to willfully change his social positioning in the larger community. This forceful reduction of agency does not only potentially engender acts of further violence, which might have been the reason for imprisonment in the first place, but also influences his ability to share his opinions, expectations, and beliefs. Even if he could find a way to express himself publically, his thoughts are likely to be less valued than similar thoughts expressed by some-

one currently positioned as a professor, politician or priest. In other words, on the one hand the social status of his position in the eyes of the larger community is too low to be taken seriously, while on the other hand his current position does not allow him to re-negotiate his status. While the example of the prisoner might be a good example to demonstrate the realm of a forced and frozen position, it may not be the best example to highlight why such reduced agency is destructive to anything other than the personal development of the inmate. As soon as we start replacing the prisoner with people sharing certain world views, gender, or skin color and replacing the prison bars with other locally dominant concepts that suggest deprivation of their abilities to choose, alter, or negotiate their individual as well as collective social status, the full scope of what suppressed agency means, in terms of the overall ability for societal development, becomes obvious. Unfortunately the current social realm in Bosnia holds many examples of groups of people whose agency is limited similarly to that of the prisoner.

A prime example of a forced and frozen positioned group – not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but in many other European countries as well – are those currently positioned as Roma. Under the national-political moral order as instituted through the constitution, which is part of the Dayton Agreement, Roma, even those who unquestionably possess Bosnian citizenship, are excluded from running for several of the highest political positions in Bosnia. Not being able to obtain certain positions in a political system does not qualify as a forced and frozen position per se – what makes their current positioning on the political stage into one is that the moral framework (the constitution) effectively can not be altered by them through any rights reserved for them by this moral order. Even if they would form a political party and gain the majority in the next parliamentary elections, the ethnic veto powers reserved for the three groups labeled in the constitution as constituent people of Bosnia (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs), would make any constitutional change that would challenge the rights of these three groups impossible.

Second, it should not be understood that, for one positioned in such a way, no option of repositioning exists; but instead, it should be noted that every action of repositioning taken from a forced and frozen position will have to be an act chosen from a template of actions which is not included in the repertoire already in place in the currently dominant and shared local moral order, anchoring frozen and forced positions. Each attempt to change a frozen and forced position therefore, will be perceived by all others still operating under the dominant

moral order as ‘strange and unexpected’, if not directly as ‘immoral, illegal and threatening’ behavior. In other words, the lack of agency of a forced and frozen position can be understood as having created a situation under which active interaction including all parties can only be continued through actions outside the formerly accepted or agreed moral order. In the case of Roma in Bosnia, this meant that repositioning required actions that challenge the old order – actions that were not derived from rights and duties given to them by the Bosnian constitution, but by the European Union. Representatives of the Roma community bringing their case to the European Court of Human Rights, which subsequently attested in 2008 that the Bosnian constitution violates the European Convention of Human Rights, potentially opened a way for future repositioning, but simultaneously presented a major threat to the accustomed moral order the three dominant political groups in Bosnia have been operating under. This shows that excluding groups by positioning them under the current moral order in a way that deprives their agency is understood as destructive to the process of socialization itself, because the only way of continuing this group’s development lies in abandoning the basis on which former interaction had been made meaningful to everyone involved.

This suggests a very important distinction. Although the ways chosen to abandon a former basis on which differences have been explained can be characterized through aggressive and violent acts, a forced and frozen position shall not be understood as a destructive outcome of a differentiation process because it might lead to occasional acts of violence, but solely because its inherent lack of agency does not allow active participation in the game of negotiating social status based on the current moral order. Making this clear distinction between act and agency, between symptom and cause, is highly important in order to understand the scope behind the concept of ‘destructive’ used in this study.

First, judging any kind of actions as destructive, for example acts of repulsion to the current political order in Bosnia, is understood to not only lack scientific impartiality, but also to position a concept of multiethnic-coexistence as superior in the same moment. Such an enforced outsider vision for Bosnia’s future, however, might in the long run create a forced and frozen positioning by itself. And second, focusing on violent actions is prone to continue an old mistake which rests in the belief that understanding a state of crisis can help us to prevent similar crises in the future. While on the one hand it remains questionable if we can at all understand a disease just by looking at its symptoms, having no symptoms on the other hand cannot be

substituted with ‘there is no disease’. Instead, especially while looking at group positioning processes, groups in this sense can be understood as people sharing a similar position, a forced and frozen positioning, which occur without any kind of observable reaction to it. Knowing that people are generally rather hesitant to break rules, stepping outside of the moral order – or bringing your moral order to the European Court of Human Rights as the Jewish and Roma community did in Bosnia – might be a decision chosen a long time after someone has lost agency. Therefore looking and waiting for symptoms, a mindset that continuously grants Bosnia a relatively stable health with only occasional needs for treatment of minor symptoms, can be seen as a wrong and dangerous perspective. Instead, analyzing current differentiation processes with an eye for situations in which agency is permitted, is understood to be a means capable of detecting situations which, if they remain unaltered, may lead to violent acts of repositioning in the future.

In summary, a frozen and forced position is understood as a destructive outcome of a differentiation process, because none of the actions the current moral order holds for a party positioned in such a way would enable the party to significantly change its position and therefore improve its social status. On the flipside, this suggests that as long as two parties under one moral order can compete about their social status, their positions created through their interaction are very likely to be forced but not frozen. The only way a forced and frozen positioned party could enter such competition would be to challenge the basis on which interaction has been made meaningful for all parties in the past. Such revolutions occasionally can become very violent, however, they may also occur a long time after a forced and frozen position has been created. Conflict potentials in this sense have to be expected to lie hidden in the qualities defining the current positions of groups in Bosnia.

Therefore, the concept of a forced and frozen position is seen as a clear marker for what to look for while analyzing social interactions between groups in Bosnia in order to enrich our understanding about the current social tensions; ‘clear marker’ however shall not suggest that every frozen and forced position will be identifiable through the same distribution of rights, duties and obligations. In fact, every differentiation process can be expected to lead to unique positionings. Capturing this uniqueness of a variety of episodes of social interaction in Bosnia, brings forward one final point – the distinction between theory and practice is necessary. Leaving the theoretical realm of Positioning Theory begins with acknowledging the differ-

ence between a hypothetical interaction of Alter and Ego who meet for the first time, and any episode of interaction as it takes place right now between people in Bosnia. While, let us assume that Ego and Alter have just hatched from their eggs and have never had any kind of social interaction before, the interaction between both of them, as long as both stay alive for long enough, can be assumed to create certain structures and rules for interaction. The interaction between people in Bosnia must be understood as being influenced by such rules and structures created in past interactions.

The memories of interpretations of past interactions, of past positionings, therefore have to be acknowledged as a basis from which the meaning for present and future acts of positioning will be derived. Meaning therefore remains local and is bound to be continuously altered through present and future interactions. In other words, the local historical contexts on which acts are made meaningful are in a permanent state of flux. However, it is precisely those local contexts that have to be understood as ‘real-life’ scales for any judgment concerned with the question of whether a certain interaction has created a forced and frozen positioning or not.

Finally, we have to conclude that in the very moment of interaction between people in Bosnia it is not our outside understanding of that situation which makes it into what it is for those involved, but solely their own interpretations influenced by their histories of past interactions. Although we may have found a promising tool in the theoretical concept of a forced and frozen position, which would allow us an alternative way of interpreting current inter-group tensions in Bosnia, it seems that the old problem, the insecurity of if we truly can understand what something means for someone else – or if we can be certain that the same word really has the same meaning– has reappeared to challenge the final application of that very tool. It had to reappear in order to remind us that this insecurity is an integral part of human interaction, integral in the sense that, despite insecurity, we continue to interact because we believe we can learn to understand each other. This thus makes the ability to learn local meanings into a prerequisite for any successful attempt of analyzing the current positionings; therefore, the development of a theory of learning is the central concern of the following section.

### **Space, Place, and Symbol: Towards a Method of Learning**

The solution to the problems arising out of the decision to ‘not’ know which groups currently exist – based on the suspicion that existing concepts of groups in Bosnia may influence the direction of this study in a way that current dynamics might remain hidden – lies in the social space of Bosnia. Social space, as a tremendous amount of studies at the heart of what became known as the “spatial turn” in the social and human sciences show, engulfs all social processes and meanings and therefore all social concepts, including groups (Warf and Arias, 2009). Looking at the rich academic debate about social space highlights two central points that this study, which focuses on particular social spaces, has to be aware; first, social space does not mean the same for everyone, as the growing amount of concepts defining social space illustrates successfully; and second, all this disagreeing about what space is, or how space shapes our way of understanding ourselves in our relationship to others, indicates that people with different concepts of space interact in one and the same space—in the context of this paper, in an academic space. See for example the controversy about the relationship between space and time between Ernesto Laclau and Doreen Massey and their students (Laclau, 1990; Massey, 1992).

Bringing both to the realm of Bosnia means we have to expect that a middle aged business traveler from Sarajevo in times of internet, fast plane connections and identical coffee shops at all major cities, may understand the world as a global village, while at the same time an old farmer living in rural Herzegovina on one side of the river Neretva with no internet, money or passport to travel, and only the little garden behind his house as a central food source for the whole family, might feel that even the other side of the river is part of a different world. Space, and in this matter, time, are both important concepts to understand the worlds these individuals are living in and the factors that are influencing their ways of interacting with each other. However, both are affected by the space-time compression – or put simply, the speed of life – in a different way, making space and time into individual concepts, based on individual experiences (Massey, 1994, pp. 146-156). This suggests that while we can be fairly certain that every interaction between groups in Bosnia will happen in the social space of Bosnia and be influenced by the concepts of the social space held by each group, we can also be fairly certain that the social space of Bosnia has more than one identity. Therefore, the relaxed and exploratory mindset of this study suggests setting aside all theories and concepts concerned with the wider social space of Bosnia, and instead begin looking at particular so-

cial spaces like the Old Market Place in Sarajevo where the traveler and the farmer – the groups in Bosnia – interact.

Studying such central places of interaction will not only help to identify the current groups, but at the same time provide insights into the meanings they ascribe to that very place. Knowing those meanings will enable us to unveil the current positions not only on that very place, but, as will be described in the next sections, also in the larger social space surrounding those central places. As Jeff Malpas has argued, an understanding of place as foundational to our social experiences, anchors a growing interest in particular spaces in the Bosnia research community (Malpas, 1999; Demick, 2012; Kolind, 2008; Maček, 2000; Bringa, 1995).

### **Central Places**

In order to be able to identify central places as starting points for a study on intergroup relations, some kind of base concept of what constitutes a “central place” becomes necessary. The concept chosen here resembles the common sense of the term ‘place’ with only some minor reductions. First, it describes a place, which has a physical core – a market place one can walk upon – and not just a virtual world. It therefore shall not be set equal to community in general, because a community can exist without physical space in modern times. Second, “central” does not mean someone’s private backyard, but a public park, a market square, a graveyard, and so forth, which is and has been used by the surrounding community. Those places are plentiful, and every village and city will have several which are in use today. “In use” implies they have a function for that community and it is that social function, which regulates the use of the space through the creation of rules. Such rules can range from the demand of appropriate attire to the enforcement of a no parking zone. Setting aside the differences between such rules, what unites them is that every rule of a place influences interaction upon that very place, because even ignoring them will not prevent one getting a parking ticket. Knowing the current rules of engagement of a place therefore, is important for those interacting on it to understand and judge action and behavior, in the same way as it becomes important to every attempt to understand the positionings created through the very acts in and on that locality.

However, capturing these rules is not easy; first, while interactions are regulated or limited by rules, those rules are results from past interactions and therefore have to be expected to be continuously altered and changed by the current interactions. In other words, rules of a place are social constructions and therefore neither static nor unchangeable. And second, places may not have just one ‘identity’ or function with one set of rules to begin with, but maybe even several competing ones (Massey, 1994, pp. 153-156). Under this multiplicity of functions, the political function of places has particular importance for this exploration of social interaction. As we can see in local responses to many recent crisis– from Occupy Wall Street to Tahrir Square– places are central to political expressions, ranging from demonstrations and peaceful parades to massacres and the memorialization of such. Therefore, central places in Bosnia have to be expected to play a crucial role in differentiation processes, as the example of the Kozara Nationalpark in Northwestern Bosnia shall briefly illustrate.

Next to the park’s obvious recreational function, the park’s membership in the EUROPARC Federation already introduces the place into the wider European political arena. With the “Monument to the Revolution (also known as Mrakovica Memorial) standing on the Mrakovica plateau, used as a crest and logo of the Park, yet another political function of the park is introduced; this time putting the specific place of the monument in the center of many of today’s intergroup differentiation processes (Nacionalni Park Kozara, 2013). While in Kozara a famous battle between a truly multicultural Partisan force and Axis forces in World War II took place, the later erected a war memorial to commemorate this Yugoslav moment; the monument holds a new purpose today. A first glimpse of the current purpose can be gained in the exhibition of the park’s museum. The story told through the museum is a story of permanent violent aggression against Serbs, linking Hitler’s terror with pictures of Muslim warriors committing war crimes in the recent war of 1992/95. Together with a newly erected Christian Orthodox cross right in front of the secular Partisan memorial, the influence of the Mrakovica plateau, of the Kozara National Park, on today’s intergroup processes goes far beyond the place itself. While one group sends their school kids on fieldtrips to learn about their heritage and the threats to it by outside forces, others condemn the place as a hoard of nationalist lies (Greiff, 2011, p. 113). Kozara the park, the place, has now a strong political function, influencing how groups interact in Bosnia.

What Kozara Nationalpark highlights is that the political use of places in Bosnia today has a significant impact on differentiation processes not only by defining rules for interaction upon that very place but through influencing actions far outside of its physicality—making an understanding of the current political meanings of those places a promising path towards an understanding of differentiation processes and conflict. The idea that social processes in a particular space can be understood through an examination of the underlying meaning people give to that space of interaction is influenced by the work of Henri Lefebvre. His concept of social space as a construction influenced by spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space, suggests that while the spatial practice (the lived) slowly produces the social space, it is the representation of space (the conceived) which influences this production. Political concepts of a particular place therefore have to be expected to deeply influence interaction upon that place (Lefebvre, 1991). However, understanding the political meaning of a place is more difficult than deciphering its recreational one; first, the political meanings groups ascribe to a place today have to be expected to be deeply intermingled with various other meanings, ranging from economic to spiritual ones; and second, political meanings cannot be as easily deduced from the current political function a place is made to have. In other words, while its current political function might be to support specific claims, mobilize groups, or even justify violence, the reason why a place can be used to achieve such goals lies less in its fresh air or good connection to infrastructure, but mostly in the power of it being a widely recognized symbol. But how does a place become such powerful symbol?

The answer to that question will be explored by highlighting a link between meaning and the power of symbols; this link holds the key to a method of how to learn the current meanings ascribed to a central place, and in doing so will also offer a way to interpret current positionings of groups in and around a specific locality.

### Symbols

Focusing on symbols – as entities of meaning for those who make use of them– to understand human behavior or political dynamics is not a new endeavor. Some of the most influential works for the study on political symbols include Cohen (1976), Edelman (1964), Elder and Cobb (1983), and Mach (1993). In respect to the countries of the former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, a relatively broad research tradition on visual representations exists (For an

overview see Šuber and Karamanić, 2012). In particular, insights gained through research on political symbols have greatly contributed to the understanding of civil unrest and have simultaneously led to a growing consciousness towards symbols in conflicts in general (Kubik, 1994; Kertzer 1996; Wedeen, 1999). Trying to gain a more detailed understanding of the broad variety of functions ethno-national symbols in peace processes can have, I set out in a previous study to analyze and compare different symbol categories and their functions in Bosnia's peace process (Greiff, 2011). Central to this study was the belief that the power of symbols is deeply ingrained in the stories they represent. This understanding of power, as rooted in the myths and memories a certain group has about a symbol, became popular through the works of Anthony Smith who also coined the term for this connection: "myth-symbol-complex." The idea of the myth-symbol-complex can be traced back to John Armstrong's work on nationalism (Armstrong, 1982; Smith, 1988; Smith, 2009).

The most influential adaptation of that concept can be found in John S. Kaufman's "symbolic-politics of ethnic war theory" (Kaufman, 2001, pp. 15-48). Symbols in this concept can become powerful tools through which elites can create fear, and maybe even hatred, because symbols are connected to important stories at the heart of group concepts of self. Threat to a symbol can be perceived as a threat to the group, and lead to emotional responses of the group to that threat. According to that causal logic, the power a symbol can have lies in the thickness of its ties with the group's core myths. The closer the symbol is connected to those important myths, such as the myth of the golden age of a group, the myth of origin, the myth of martyrdom, the more power this symbol can yield (Smith, 1988, pp. 191-192). A similar concept of power as resting in the meaning a group identifies with a symbol can be found in two other highly influential intergroup conflict theories. With some variations, Vamik Volkan and Marc H. Ross see that symbols get their power through the emotions externalized onto them— through experiences with symbols individuals share while growing up in a cultural sphere— a process central to the formation and persistence of the 'group' itself (Ross, 2007; Volkan, 1988; Volkan, 1998). Memories of past emotions stored in symbols can, when the symbol is targeted in political discourses or physical ways, become drivers for mass responses.

Although all three theories agree that the story behind a symbol neither has to be a product of experiences by all members of a group, nor be strictly remembered by each individual to be-

come a powerful group myth, power in all three concepts lies in the shared meaning members of a group ascribed to a symbol; and the bigger and older the emotional baggage of the myth-symbol-complex for a group, the larger the power that can be unleashed through the political use of that very symbol. But is it enough to understand power as resting in the meaning itself—nourished by the group's concept of their past—unleashed through emotions based on memories?

Doubts that the understanding of the power of a symbol in terms of rather simple causalities sufficiently covers the complexity of the connection between a symbol, its meaning, and its political capacities, arose while driving back from the Mrakovica plateau to the town of Kozarac—a town in the Republika Srpska, which, despite the fact that many of its Bosniak inhabitants had left (voluntarily or by force) during the war, is today again a town of predominantly Bosniak inhabitation. Through the return of many refugees, as well as strong ties to a wealthy diaspora, Kozarac has seen many improvements in recent years (Vulliamy, 2012). Next to houses and restaurants, large investments have been made to rebuild the town's old mosques, which as in many places throughout Bosnia, had been strategically targeted during the war. However, it was not a particular mosque, but the old church, which caught this visitor's immediate attention.

### **Power of Symbols**

Central to the town stands a presumably one hundred year old Orthodox church, which to my knowledge had not suffered any large-scale destruction in the war, although it today shows some marks of decay. On the church ground, with its neatly mowed lawn on which children are allowed to play soccer, two objects seem remarkable—because they were unexpected; first, in close proximity to the old church stands a new Orthodox church built in 2001. This new church is neither larger nor in any other observable way significantly different from the old church, which was still in use during my last visit in 2009. Second, a large flag pole showing the flag of the Republika Srpska stands opposite to both churches creating a highly symbolic space, which is then surrounded by a fence bearing a pattern of recurring religious symbols and is illuminated at night through several newly installed flood lights, making the churches stand out in the otherwise dark skyline of Kozarac. Looking at the illuminated staging I started wondering why someone would place two similar churches in such close prox-

imity? Does repetition of a symbol, or more generally connecting one symbol with others, create more power? In the end, is the very act of repeating and connecting the very source of the power of symbols?

The church bells the next morning offered me an answer. Hearing the sound of the bells immediately made me think about the two churches again; this forceful intrusion of the churches into my thoughts highlighted an aspect of the power of symbols I was previously unaware of. And maybe could only be unaware of, because as long as I actively engaged with thinking about symbols, I never had to question their very existence as such to begin with. But what if a symbol only exists as a symbol in the moment someone thinks about it, or is otherwise exposed to it? What does for example the Kosovo Polje— also known as ‘Blackbird Field’— one mythic cradle of Serbdom, mean to a Serb who is not actively thinking about it, or made to remember it (Ćirković, 2004, pp. 82-85). I think in that second the symbol Kosovo Polje, setting aside whether the region of the Kosovo Polje near Priština continues to exist, bears no meaning for them. While a symbol is only a symbol when we think about it, it follows that the power of a symbol can only be unleashed in the moment the symbol is remembered, or in any other ways experienced. Following this line of thought then suggests that the power of a symbol is created in the very moment of it being used as a symbol, and that without use there would be no power.

In other words, the use of a symbol is central to understanding its powers and not its bare existence. However, what qualifies as use depends on the viewpoint, as the following will highlight. While the Union Flag of the United Kingdom flying over Belfast City Hall may not catch the attention of a Northern Irish Protestant as he walks by the building, the act of taking it down one morning becomes the moment that may unleash his concerns and furies (McDonald, 2013). On the other hand the daily use of it may upset the Catholic party, and its being taken down might be seen as a success of their claims, even though the future absence of the flag might not be recognized at one point any longer.

All this suggests is that the use of symbols is not an easy political endeavor, and success in terms of arousing the intended emotions depends on the ‘right’ use of a symbol. One occasion of such a ‘successful’ use of a symbol is Milosević’s use of the Kosovo Polje as a stage and prop for his political campaign in the late 1980s. Looking at the episode in which Milosević

delivers a speech at the 600 year anniversary day of the Battle of Kosovo while standing on Blackbird Field, his successful use of it as a symbolic stage to support his political claims lies in the interpretation of the battle he creates (Sells, 1998, p. XIII). Use of a symbol therefore might be best understood as an act of interpreting, as an act of constructing the meaning of a symbol, or simply as an act of storytelling. Analyzing this particular story reveals that it is not a pure reference to a central myth held by his Serbian audience, but it shows several connections to different myths as well as to current events, fears, and insecurities also held by the audience (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1989; Department of Commerce of the U.S., 1989). This suggests that the political power of a symbol is the result of a 'successful' act of meaning making, and does not lie in the meaning itself— and most definitely not in one core myth.

Creating the meaning of a symbol, however, is not only limited to the act of directly connecting it with stories, but can also involve connections to stories via other symbols, styles, shapes, sounds, acts, and so forth, creating a highly complex, dynamic, and political symbol-story-system. Even new symbols can be successfully integrated through constructing connections to established myths and symbols; in the same way as old symbols can be expected to be re-connected with new stories, as has been highlighted for the Bosnian case by Velikonja (2003). In both cases, it is the act of meaning making, of connecting the symbol, which, if successfully done, creates the power of a symbol in the very moment of its use. In order to be successful, however, the connections will have to remain plausible for the audience. While interpreting the defeat of the Serbian forces at the Battle of the Kosovo Polje as a chosen defeat of the Serbian army— continuing to fight while knowing that they will have to die for a higher cause— creates a powerful picture of martyrdom that can rally masses for future clashes, interpreting the very same defeat as simply caused by a higher power, would very likely not achieve the same result. While the reference to a higher power could theoretically serve as a strategy to justify the defeat as not caused by bad leadership, the reason why the higher power is connected in that particular way lies in the success this particular connection has had in the past to create similar emotions to those intended by Milosević. This interpretation is of course extremely simplified and only intends to highlight that limitations to successful use of a symbol depend on the former use of that very symbol. A closer reading of Milosević's speech unveils that he actually intends to link the Serbian defeat to the divided Serbian lead-

ership, positioning himself in the role of a quasi-dictatorial leader as the only possible option to avoid such a traumatizing defeat in the future.

This highlights that the meaning created in the past limits the possibilities for future use of a symbol for the same group; however, meaning as established through use in the past can be altered through use again. In order to use a symbol in a different context the need for creating a new meaning may arise, which one can observe during larger transition periods of political systems (Forest and Johnson, 2002). Such an alteration will probably not be immediately successful if a totally new meaning is introduced in one large shift, but is very likely to be achieved through a small step-by-step process; making repetitive use of a symbol with slight alteration of the interpretation into a strategy of establishing a new range of possible connections for future use. Repetition, it now appears, is not only important for creating a constant stream of exposure to the symbol, through making us experience it over and over, but repetition also defines a certain trajectory or structure for the symbol's future use. Flying the flag day-by-day is a prerequisite for making a symbolic statement of flying the same flag on half-mast on a particular day or event. The construction of a regular pattern prepares the option of breaking that pattern through opening new ways of how to connect that symbol in the future. Maybe we can even go so far as to suspect that repetitive use of a symbol aims at creating a tacit knowledge of a symbol and what it stands for, which allows certain actions without further thought—because these actions are perceived as totally normal—in the same way as a different way of using that symbol, or even another party using that symbol, immediately awakens the audience's attention. In other words it appears that it is the disruption of the established pattern through an intentional act of connecting the symbol in a different way that creates the powers of that symbol in the very second of its use. In the end, it seems that the better a symbol is prepared to be used through repetitive efforts of meaning making over time—through establishing the rules of the game—the more successfully it can be used to create social responses in a particular episode.

Finally it is clear that the interplay between a symbol, its meaning, and power, is more complicated than the rather static concept of the 'myth-symbol-complex' suggests. Power, we can assume, is not a product of the memories, myths or the symbol itself, but of an act of using a symbol to disrupt or defend an order that was established through its previous use. This shift away from 'power in meaning' to 'power through repetitive acts of meaning making' opens

up a new opportunity to analyze differentiation processes today, because (a) repetitive meaning making in terms of making connections is very likely to leave traces that can help to understand the meaning ascribed to a symbol, and (b) in the moment a symbol is not dependent on ancient tales to become a powerful tool, we can expect a competition over its meaning, or more precisely a competition about the right to make meaning. And it is this competition about meaning making that transforms the act of interpreting a symbol into a positioning act itself, while the very way the meanings are created simultaneously allows insights into the local meanings ascribed to those positionings.

### **Gateway into Local meanings**

(a): Repetitive meaning making in terms of making connections is very likely to leave traces that can help to understand the meaning ascribed to a symbol. In the majority of cases, in order to understand interactions upon a place we have to make the tacit knowledge groups have of a place, with all its social rules and functions, explicit. The way of doing so lies in observing the acts, which create the meaning of the place for the groups to begin with. Knowing that using a place as a symbol requires an interpretation, which is an act of connecting the place to other stories via a plentitude of other symbols, practices, rituals, aesthetic expressions, styles, and so forth, suggests that these connections can become the key to entering into local knowledge.

Returning to the example of the Kozara Monument, some of those connections are rather obvious. The newly erected cross, in a similar way as the flag outside of the church in Kozarac, is an extremely important reference to claims to that place held by a certain group. This is nowadays very common—mainly ethno-national group symbols play a central role in differentiation processes and therefore become helpful indicators, auxiliary symbols, for the attempt of reconstructing the current meanings of a place. The presence of such auxiliary symbols together with descriptions of the place, as can be found not only on a large billboard in front of the monument itself, but also on the National Parks webpage, allow a first impression of the meaning dominating this place today. More facets of the meaning horizon, as well as competing interpretations, can then be found through various other connections. Many of them, however, easily remain hidden from foreigner's eyes and require extensive sensitiza-

tion efforts, which have to start with the assumption that nothing in connection to a central place today is meaningless.

Under this suspicion that potentially everything can hold an important insight into local meaning, even the ribbons of the flower bouquet someone had placed in front of a partisan memorial, will have to be carefully inspected. While the ribbon of the bouquet is held in the Pan-Slavic colors of red-white-and blue, which can reference Yugoslavia as well as many other states, the inscription on the ribbon is only in Cyrillic letters. The presence of Cyrillic, or the absence of the Latin script, the second official alphabet in Bosnia today, might be an important detail enriching our understanding of the local meaning the monument is made to have today. In other words, both the practice of laying down flowers at a monument erected under the previous social and political system, as well as the color and style of the ribbon, tell us a part of a story which together with the primary auxiliary symbols, the graffiti on the backside of the monument, the mandatory school fieldtrips, and even the efforts invested in the upkeep of the place itself, slowly enable us to retrace the meaning of that place.

Widening the focus to the surrounding environment of the place, even more details become evident. While the monument lies in the National Park, the national park itself is part of a region called Bosanska Krajina, or just Krajina, meaning “Frontier Land”. The shortening to Krajina is not just an abbreviation, but a highly political act, similar to efforts of changing many city names after the war, especially those which previously held the word “Bosanska” as part of the name, into “Srpski”. The name of the region, of the park, and of the monument are highly potent indicators for the symbolic meaning of the place. These are such contentious indicators that the highest Bosnian court, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, ruled several times in the past that particular name changes are unconstitutional and have to be undone; which again is yet another interpretation of the particular place (The Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2004).

After all, the creation of the meaning of a central place today leaves various connections to other stories. Besides obvious differences in the medium of the connection, all of these references will have one thing in common—they are meant to be experienced, because only when they are picked up, can the rules of the game be determined. Following these connections, these traces, while trying to carefully piece them together, can finally help to create a solid

approximation of the meaning ascribed to a central place today, thus making the observation of those connections into the primary learning method toward understanding local meanings of a place. In the end it seems that political symbols can become powerful research tools, because the very mechanism of how their power is constructed offers a plentitude of ways to reconstruct their local meanings. The idea of using the connections of symbols with other symbols, acts, rituals, and myths as gateways to understand the meaning of these symbols was inspired by two specific works, one by Pierre Bourdieu and the other by Jean Baudrillard (Bourdieu and others, 2002; Baudrillard, 1996).

(b): In the moment a symbol is not dependent on ancient tales to become a powerful tool, we can expect a competition over its meaning, or more precisely a competition about the right to make meaning.

While it is the political use of a place that makes the meaning a place is designed to have understandable, it is the fact that power depends on use and not on ancient myths that allows a place to become a symbol for every group willing to use it as such. Knowing that use is possible, and the power of successful use of a place as a symbol is far reaching, we can expect to find competition between different groups about the interpretation of a place (Hayden, 2002; Danzer, 2009; Estabrook, 2002). This competition will automatically raise the question of who has the right to interpret that place: a right that in many cases will be obtained by the local elites, or maybe the right, which makes one into a local elite to begin with. Having the right to interpret a central place means having power to influence social differentiation process through not only establishing the rules of engagement on that place, but through a positioning act of the other groups involved. Whoever claims the right to interpret a place through interpreting it, claims in the very second the right to determine the terms of interaction upon that place, thus making the right to interpret into an identifier for a desirable position and the act of meaning making, of interpreting, into a powerful positioning act itself.

Closely observing the competition about the right of interpretation highlights two important points. First, the meaning we get while following one actor, one symbol-story-system, is not 'the' meaning of a place but only 'one' given meaning. In terms of it being a positioning act, such a given meaning has to be understood as chosen positioning, or maybe better as the 'attempt' to create an 'ideal' positioning; 'ideal' because each position can be expected to repre-

sent the 'ideal' distribution of rights and responsibilities as envisioned by one agent, and 'at-tempt' because as long as there is competition, we have to expect that the current positioning of all agents will lie between each of their 'ideal' positionings.

And second, with competition leaving traces on the place itself, slowly the agents, the groups involved in meaning making of a place, start appearing. The groups most heavily competing over the right to deliver the sole interpretation of a place are probably the first to be detected. However, the very fact that they can compete means that their current positions are not frozen under the current local moral order established through their interactions upon that location. Observing both the daily life on a central place, and the daily use of the same place as a means to establish power, can further reveal those groups which are not competing about the right to interpret a place, because they either favor one of the dominant interpretations, or they have no other choice than to 'favor' one of the dominant interpretations. However, whether they choose to follow an existing concept or not, a group which has no right to interpret the space of its very existence, has only limited rights to define the basis on which its social relations obtain their meaning, and therefore is positioned in a very weak way, definitely a forced and very likely frozen position. Finding those who do not use places as political symbols, who are depending on the interpretations of others, through carefully analyzing those 'interpretations of others', can become a promising framework for a study concerned with hidden conflict potentials.

Finding references to the rights and duties of those who are not competing within the interpretations of those who are competing, is not enough, because as long as there is competition, all positions can be expected to be in-between the 'ideal' positions the interpretations are meant to constitute.. Therefore not only do all dominant interpretations have to be examined for their positioning powers towards those groups not engaged in the competition, but also the relationships between the different dominant agents has to be taken into consideration in a thorough cross examination. While for example group A may not position group B in a way that would exclude B from future interactions, groups C and D may do so; in that situation the relationship between A, C, and D becomes a central factor for narrowing down the current positioning of B. This further highlights that only in the case of all competing groups positioning the non-competitors in exactly the same way, will there be a black and white result in terms of specific rights and duties, which can be attributed to the non-competitors. In all

other cases the best interpretation this framework can deliver will be a strong tendency, an educated approximation, to the positionings in place.

### Outlook

In summation of the arguments herein presented, it is believed that we can get a footing into alien cultures through learning from the political acts of using central places as tools to influence the local rules of interaction. This footing in the thick web of interpretations is of course in need of translation. While translating the foreign into the familiar is a prerequisite for analyzing current positions in a particular scenario, it has to be clear that this is no innocent translation from one text into yet another text, but actually an act of constructing text, and therefore an act of constructing meaning (Asas, 1986, pp. 157-160). These meanings, even when they are the result of thorough minded ethnographic fieldwork, will never be entirely correct representations of local realities, but will always remain subjective interpretations (Geertz, 1984; Rosaldo 1986). Such interpretations by nature can never be complete or true to everyone, therefore this paper sought to open up my particular interpretational approach to allow insights into how it attempts to complement our understanding of social conflict in Bosnia, as well as elsewhere (Geertz, 2000, p. 10).

In conclusion, understanding how places become powerful tools highlights one way of learning local meanings ascribed to central places as well as offers a direction toward interpreting the current positions of actors on these spaces. The specific value of the positioning approximation this approach creates lies in its capacity to highlight those who are excluded (forced and frozen) and the ways their exclusion is created even before violence results. Making these circumstances explicit provides space for re-thinking methods of interaction, as well as research on episodes of highly dynamic intergroup conflict. Through enabling us to find actors, acts, and meanings, focusing on central places might become a sufficient starting point for an analysis of present day differentiation processes, especially in those cases in which trying to exclude previous knowledge about a conflict is understood as ethical or maybe the only choice in order to obtain at least a partial understanding of contemporary social dynamics. In particular, the sensitivity of this approach towards hidden conflict potentials might become useful in times of dwindling financial resources and a growing understanding of the benefits of violence prevention measures.

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