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First As Tragedy, Then As Teleology

The Politics/People Dichotomy in the Ethnography of Post-Yugoslav Nationalization

Stef Jansen

Abstract: Ethnographers working in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been at the forefront of the struggle against the identitarianism that dominates scholarship and policymaking regarding the country. Tirelessly foregrounding patterns of life that exceed, contradict, complicate or are oblivious to questions thus framed, we have—unsurprisingly—paid a price for this contribution: explorations of the appeal of nationalism are left mostly to others. This article identifies an emic and etic politics/people paradigm that facilitates our timidity to register the ways in which “ordinary people” may enact nationalist subjectivity. Seeking to retain the paradigm’s strengths, I call for a recalibration of how we understand it to function and explore conceptual tools to make this work. Starting from two cases of “foot soldier narratives,” I suggest that hegemony theory can help us trace not only how people are subjected to nationalization but also how they may seek subjectification through it.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnography, hegemony, nationalism/nationalization, paradigm, subjectivity

Ethnographic work on the post-Yugoslav states has demonstrated the fallacies of the identitarian, exclusively national prism that dominates many nonethnographic understandings of the region. Ethnographers have uncovered the importance of nonnational cleavages, their articulation with national divisions, and, increasingly, the entanglement of reconstruction after the war—much of which was legitimated in nationalist terms—with post–Cold War transformations. In the process, however, we have done less to account for the *appeal* of nationalism in the early 1990s, allowing others to dominate knowledge production on this issue. Focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), this article identifies an emic and etic dichotomous paradigm of “politics” and “ordinary people” that reinforces this. To complement existing strengths of ethnographic work on BiH, it seeks to contribute to the development of tools to *also* register and analyze nonelite enactments of nationalism, recovering the notion of politics as a peopled process through a recalibration of our paradigm. Conceiving of “ordinary people” as potentially both objects and subjects of nationalization, I suggest, we can further enhance the critical contribution of ethnography.

How (Not) to Recount a Tragedy

To crystallize my argument on the workings of the politics/people dichotomy, I rely on a narrow selection of ethnographic material gathered in two different studies,¹ with a focus on two households displaced from Central BiH: a Croatian couple who moved into a “Serbian-owned” house in Croatia (research in 1997–1998), and a Serbian couple who moved into “Bosniak-owned” accommodation in Republika Srpska, BiH (research in 2000–2001).²

Bijelo, Croatia, 1997–1998

In a village I call Bijelo, Jozo and Nada Ljubić, an elderly couple, had made the house they occupied inhabitable with UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) plastic sheeting and improvised brickwork. Through the windows, they looked out over dozens of half-burned ruins of houses and a devastated school, the overgrown remnants of a Partisan monument, and a damaged,

unused orthodox church. Limited economic activity in Bijelo was concentrated in a timber mill and some agriculture, hindered by minefields. Previously predominantly Serbian-inhabited, the village now housed some Serbian returnees, Croatian refugees from BiH, relocated Croats from other parts of Croatia, and some others. The Serbian owners of the house in which the Ljubićs lived had fled ahead of the 1995 Oluja offensive by the Croatian Army, which ended the four-year existence of the para-state "Serbian Republic Krajina." In this region nationalist euphoria at Croatian independence in 1991 had been quelled brutally in the early days of the war, when its inhabitants were expelled in a collaborative operation by local Serbs, the increasingly Serbian-dominated Yugoslav People's Army, and paramilitary units from Serbia. Looting and destruction ensued and some elderly Croats who stayed put were killed. Most Serbs remained in what was now Serbian Republic Krajina, joined by others who had fled other parts of Croatia. The 1995 Oluja offensive then integrated the area into the Republic of Croatia—this time almost all Serbian inhabitants fled and their abandoned houses were looted and burned. I heard no reports here of the murders that accompanied Oluja elsewhere; the few Serbs who stayed were imprisoned in a nearby town and later released. By 1997–1998, only a few (elderly, largely female) Serbs had returned. Some suffered violent attacks, and verbal harassment was common. Omnipresent national symbolry, discriminatory employment policies and state assistance, and an aggressive police presence left no doubt that this territory had been integrated into the Croatian state.

The Ljubićs, like other Bosnian Croats, had come to Bijelo after the war. Local authorities allocated empty Serbian-owned houses to them, or pretended not to notice that they occupied them, combining the provision of emergency accommodation with nationalist population engineering. The Ljubićs had their own experiences of war in Central Bosnia, where the main military conflicts had pitted the Croatian Defense Council (HVO) against the Army of the Republic BiH (ARBiH), here strongly Bosniak-dominated. Yet they shared many everyday practices with the majority of "local" Croats. With minor exceptions, they did not communicate with Serbian returnees and treated their discrimination as routine. "Local" Croats expressed some resentment at the "primitivism" of Croatian refugees from BiH, whom they suspected of abusing humanitarian and welfare resources. Yet this did not lead to rapprochement between people of different nationalities. In fact, it seemed to encourage refugees from BiH to emphasize their loyalty to the Croatian cause even more ardently.

Insofar as they narrated the war at all, both "local" and Bosnian Croats relied on formulaic stories involving collective, national actors. Telling silences emphasized victimization through selective vagueness. Instead of concrete, chronological accounts, people presented me with sweeping, nationally disambiguated narratives populated by "Croats," "Serbs," and, among those from BiH, "Muslims." They left no place for a process of nationalization—the intensification of (ethno)nationality's salience in social practice: if "ordinary people," including the speakers themselves, featured at all, their experiences as victims tended to illustrate general points in a national drama, incorporating them as always-already nationals. With regard to present living conditions, most narratives constructed a dichotomy of benevolent state authorities and atomized households awaiting the fruits of their sacrifices. "The state will take care of all that," the Ljubićs argued, "but we can't expect results overnight." They occasionally praised certain politicians, but more frequently they evoked the very blessing of *having* one's own state (i.e., "nation-state") and the superiority of nationalized polities per se. Vaguely referring to what they saw as the tragedy that had befallen the Croatian nation in BiH, they keenly emphasized the successful establishment of a "national order of things" (Malkki 1995). Finally, they said, they were "svoji na svome" (one's own on one's own [land]). This phrase was ubiquitous in Croatian nationalist rhetoric to refer to the establishment of a nation-state for and of Croats. The Ljubićs had lived in a "mixed" area in Central Bosnia all their lives and had never spent a considerable period of time in Croatia before. Yet Nada explained: "Here things are good. We always felt that nostalgia for our own state, for our own Croatia. We are glad to be amongst our own people. It is better to be with one's own."

Like others, the Ljubićs rarely talked about their own wartime experiences in any detail. Yet, unlike most, they did occasionally dwell explicitly on them. For example, when probed about the events that led the Ljubićs to flee BiH, Nada stated:

Back in Bosnia, in the very beginning, we watched television. . . . You must have seen it as well, how the Serbs were destroying Vukovar.³ My God, it was horrible. They were burning and looting and killing. So we arranged with the Muslims to chase out our Serbs. Later, the Mudžahedini turned against us. They wanted a fundamentalist state. And they drove us out.

Bijeljina, BiH, 2000–2001

A few years after my research in Croatia, I ethnographically investigated home-making among returnees, stayees, and displaced persons (DPs) in Northeast BiH. At that time, Bijeljina, in Republika Srpska (RS), the Serbian-dominated entity of BiH, saw a trickle of Bosniak returnees, mostly concentrated in enclaves. The town also housed tens of thousands of Serbian DPs who had settled there during or just after the 1992–1995 war and who displayed little or no interest in returning to their previous places of residence. Matija and Dušica Đukić, both in their early forties, were among them. With their teenage daughter, they occupied a flat of a displaced Bosniak household. As in Croatia, this occurred as part of both accommodation policies and demographic engineering by nationalist authorities. Maintaining a sharp contrast with what he described as his own forced escape, Matija always implied that Bijeljina Bosniaks had left voluntarily, although it was in this town that paramilitary units from Serbia waged one of the first widely mediated campaigns of ethnic cleansing in 1992. By the end of the war, less than 1 percent of all Bosniaks remained in Bijeljina. While in 2000–2001 the municipal authorities occasionally announced the evictions of Serbian DP occupants to implement the return of Bosniaks, in fact they counted on their electoral support, and obstructed return in either direction. There were some violent attacks on Bosniak returnees and their life was further made difficult by discrimination and harassment, abetted by the nonintervention of RS police and the continuing presence of war criminals in official positions. Bijeljina was known as both a nationalist stronghold and a black market hotspot. Dušica was an administrator in a local firm, while Matija produced Serbian orthodox religious imagery, some of which he sold but much of which adorned the undamaged, small flat. Yet, like the Ljubićs in Bijelo, the Đukićs rarely mentioned their socioeconomic predicament beyond generic lamentations that blamed it on national others, with whom they maintained little or no communication.

Matija Đukić's vague and selective narrative of the recent war didactically aimed to correct what he assumed had to be anti-Serbian prejudice on my part. He reeled off a sweeping recitation of nationalist historiography with disambiguated nations as its collective, transgenerational actors. Nationalization, again, did not feature: people were presented as always-already nationals. The 1992–1995 war only emerged occasionally, in a narrative that depicted the Serbian nation as engaged in a centuries-long defensive struggle against perfidious others: Croats, Albanians, Westerners, and especially Muslims, whether as Turks or as Mudžahedini. Matija lamented the loss of "Serbian lands," rather than bemoaning personal losses of people, jobs, or property. He thus cast himself as just one representative of the Serbian nation and his family's fate in the past war as just one episode in a much longer tragedy of national suffering. Before the war, the Đukićs had lived in a municipality with a Muslim majority. Probed on the circumstances of their displacement, Matija said "the Muslims" had been "out to massacre them" and that they had been lucky to have escaped just in time with "much appreciated" coach transport organized by HVO. The Đukićs had fled to the Sarajevo suburbs controlled by the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), where they spent the war years. When the 1995 Dayton Agreement reintegrated these sectors into Sarajevo, held by ARBiH, they joined the exodus of Serbs and settled in Bijeljina. Matija's retrospective narrative of the 1990s war was based on the premise that *the* Muslims, this time as fundamentalists, had yet again wanted to commit genocide on *the* Serbs, who had therefore been forced, yet again, to defend themselves. RS was then an incomplete but nevertheless worthy product of the Serbian need to be *svoj na svome*—

not a nation-state, nor part of Serbia, but the closest possible to it in the given geopolitical circumstances—and the Đukićs stated that they were just that in Bijeljina. They resisted eviction, maintaining that return to Central Bosnia would imply “a genocidal fate.” They were adamant that Serbs would never again be forced to live “under the Muslims,” narrating, like the Ljubićs, the national homogenization of populations in polities as a benefit of the war.

Narratives such as that of the Ljubićs and the Đukićs do not feature prominently in ethnographic writing on the post-Yugoslav context. Why? In the next two sections I suggest that our timidity to register them is related to a paradigm that diverts us from trying to make sense of such enactments of nationalism.

A Solidly Grounded Politics/People Dichotomy

In a reflective piece on the war in BiH, Tone Bringa (2002) starts with a sober assessment of prewar inter-national relations, dismissing both evocations of ancient hatreds and celebrations of harmonious coexistence. In national terms, she states, BiH's inhabitants historically lived “along a continuum of degrees of intimacies” (2002: 217). These collapsed with the disintegration of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, when competing elites mounted campaigns to nationalize “their” constituent populations and to recalibrate relations between them to their advantage. Despite the presence of personal and transmitted rememberings of inter-national hostility, Bringa argues, such efforts did not find immediate support among people with different national backgrounds (Bringa 2002: 215–216). Rather than welcoming such campaigns as realizations of a national essence suppressed in Yugoslav times, she states, “ordinary Bosnians” initially experienced them as impositions by political elites. In this view, nationalist politicians first had to actively make “their” people into nationals, to implicate them in their projects and to “disengage people—that is to silence their opposition” (Bringa 2002: 218). These campaigns of nationalization, particularly through mass media, revolved around fear and the need to defend oneself against national others. The manipulation of fear, through lies, exaggeration, and selectivity, was thus the “most important tool” for elites, who created “a siege mentality” in preparation for war (Bringa 2002: 216). A crucial component was the minority/majority axis, with competing elites arguing that to live as a national minority in a particular polity would entail becoming a victim of discrimination at best and of genocide at worst. The subsequent outbreak of war then convinced most people that this was indeed the case.

In the temporal logic of Bringa's argument, first there were nationalist politicians, and only then did national homogenization, fear, and a perceived need for national defense become dominant among “ordinary Bosnians.” Hence, far from being a reflection of the deeply rooted affinities of those “ordinary people,” as so often assumed in writings positing the importance of “cultural memory,” Bringa sees nationalization as a product of active manipulation by elites. Let me spell out the paradigm at work here:

1. Nationalization in the lead-up to war involved two discrete categories: “political elites” and “ordinary people” (I shall call this the “politics/people dichotomy”).
2. This dichotomy functions vertically: political elites are posited as located *above* “ordinary people.” The link between the two is detected in a manipulative process of nationalization exacted by dominant politicians onto “their” subordinated people, and in threatened or actual violence toward “theirs” and “national others” (organized differentially in the national idiom).
3. The vertical functioning of the dichotomy model is unidirectional, from top to bottom. The subjects of nationalization are active political elites, who act upon passive people (its objects-targets), full stop. No two-way traffic.

Bringa's text is not ethnographically argued but it builds on her 1980s research experience in a Central Bosnian village (Bringa 1995) and on her work for the documentary *We Are All Neighbours*, shot just before and after its Bosniak inhabitants were expelled by HVO units. As I disentangled the paradigm of a unidirectionally, vertically functioning dichotomy from Bringa's essay, I increasingly came to realize that—to a degree—it may be detected in some of my own work on BiH too. In fact, while her text is a particularly forceful rendering of it, I think this paradigm constitutes one of the implicit epistemological starting points for an important strand of recent ethnographic writing on BiH. This, of course, is not to say that “ordinary people” only ever emerge as passive objects-targets of nationalization in our work. Among others, Torsten Kolind (2008), Elissa Helms (2013), Xavier Bougarel (2007), and Larisa Kurtović (2011) have discussed people's enactments of nationalism. Like my own work, such writings often focus on the strategic dimension of such enactments well after the war. Yet when we refer back to the process of *prewar and wartime nationalization*, “ordinary people” appear mainly as objects-targets. Ivana Maček's study of besieged Sarajevo complicates this picture when describing the “soldier mode of perceiving the war,” which includes a degree of nationalization by “ordinary people” (2009: 191–217). Yet while she shows that this mode coexisted simultaneously or alternately with two other modes, Maček also notes that the heightened presence of the “soldier” mode often appeared in a sequence, bookmarked by the “civilian” and “deserter” modes. Overall, her analysis conceives of the “soldier mode” mainly as reactive and temporary. As in other ethnographic writing on BiH, then, Maček's focus is ultimately on being targeted by, and sometimes on resisting, nationalization.

The paradigm I discuss here—with its strengths and weaknesses—is not equally present in all ethnographic work on BiH. And rarely is it spelled out as clearly and consistently as in Bringa's essay. Yet I do contend that when writing about or invoking the early 1990s, we tend to conceive of “ordinary people” in BiH predominantly as objects-targets of nationalism and pay less attention to their potential role as its subjects-enactors. As I noted, this is true for much of my own work too. I therefore write this article predominantly as a reflective, self-critical exercise and invite colleagues to consider to what extent it is relevant to their own writings on BiH or elsewhere.

What are the attractions of the unidirectional, vertical dichotomy for ethnographic studies of BiH? I now detect three interrelated grounds for our use of it, arguing that they are solid grounds indeed.

A first ground is that much of it resonates with available evidence. No account of the outbreak of war can ignore strategic elite actions of nationalization and the confusion and fear that reigned among many “ordinary people.” Journalistic and court investigations as well as political analyses of the early 1990s demonstrate the importance of intentional action on the part of post-Yugoslav nationalist elites and highlight how “ordinary people” were objects-targets of such action. While there were discrepancies in logistical capacities and access to arms, as well as in the degree of calculated exclusivism and military violence, most observers agree that all nationalist parties waged campaigns of nationalization in search of legitimacy among the “ordinary people” they considered “their own.”⁴

A second ground for our reliance on the unidirectionally, vertically functioning dichotomy concerns knowledge production on the post-Yugoslav states. Most ethnography on the region is written *against* an interpretative framework that pervades Western media representations of and political decision making on Southeast Europe. This framework attributes atavistic hatreds to nations whose irreconcilable differences are deemed characteristic of a timeless, violent Balkan sphere. Such Balkanist views are doubly essentialist: they rely on a reified model of nations as always-already existing historical actors and they quarantine violence as an inherently Balkan phenomenon. In contrast, ethnographic work in the region tends to follow Cornelia Sorabji's (1995) summarizing statement that these were “very modern wars” in which campaigns were waged to imprint nationalist order onto the post-Yugoslav terrain. As Bringa's essay exemplifies so clearly, in such an anti-exoticist reading, the dichotomy emerges as a powerful heuristic tool. Rather than seeing

“ordinary people” as nationals who self-evidently act nationally, our anti-essentialist approach emphasizes the process of *nationalization*: nationalism is then understood mainly as a mobilizing instrument that elites deploy to homogenize constituencies. Debates on the *relative* responsibility of competing elites for nationalization continue. Yet few ethnographers collect material that allows assessments of intentionality among elite actors, nor do we see it as our primary task to trace the sequence of prewar and war events and to attribute responsibility on that basis. Our studies tend to unfold on a different scale and according to a different logic. Still, most of us wish to present our material, even on postwar phenomena, within a framework that resonates with what we have come to accept as the most plausible accounts of 1990s events. Since few of us have primary observational material on the lead-up to the war and on the war itself, we then rely on accounts by journalists, court and human rights investigators, and others. The strengths of ethnography lie elsewhere. Much of our work concerns nonelite practice, and with regard to past experiences we focus on how people make sense of them and how this informs their lives at the time of research. In postwar ethnographic research, then, primary material on nationalization consists mainly of *retrospective interpretations* by our interlocutors.

And here, even when the unidirectionally, vertically functioning dichotomy is not a self-consciously selected analytical tool for ethnographers, its structure *does* pervade many of our writings for a third reason too: namely, that this paradigm almost seamlessly reflects widespread emic representations of a chasm between *politika* (politics) and *narod* (ordinary people).⁵ Most of our interlocutors imagine these two in a vertical, unidirectional relationship to each other: *politika*, the subject, stands above and acts upon “ordinary people,” the object-target it seeks to govern, exploit, transform, and so forth. In BiH, this dichotomy is central to many people’s attempts to make sense of their predicaments. Emic narratives on the *appeal* of nationalism in the early 1990s are thus infrequent and at best formulaic. Ethnographers therefore rarely encounter people’s recollections of their own prewar or wartime nationalist subjectivity in terms of intentional action. Far more commonly, interlocutors will tell us generically about their victimization by others (who may be said to have been nationalized by *their* politics) and about the need for defensive *reaction* to *their* nationalism. In addition, rather than recounting nationalism’s appeal, many are more likely to narrate their *resistance* to being nationalized themselves. In a situation where postwar precariousness includes uncertainty about the current political setup, this is especially prevalent among people who during the war engaged in or sought protection from ARBiH. They position themselves as Bosnians in favor of BiH statehood. Many of them, but certainly not all, identify with the Bosniak nation. It is among this category of people that most ethnographic research has been conducted—reinforcing all three grounds for the prevalence of the unidirectionally, vertically functioning dichotomy. In aggregate, people in this category are most likely of all to recall having been taken by surprise at the outbreak of the war and least likely to recount nationalist subjectivity with regard to the early 1990s. Partly, this may be due to their (correct) assumption that ethnographers tend to be critical of nationalism, but this expectation is also embedded in a wider sense (particularly strong among those who favor a BiH state) that openly advocating nationalist positions undermines one’s claims to being a decent, cultured person. It is with their narratives that the politics/people dichotomy is most compatible.⁶

All in all, then, the recollections of the lead-up to war that ethnographers most frequently encounter represent “ordinary people” as being overcome by *politika*. Insofar as they address them, sometimes people also condemn nationalization campaigns that targeted speakers themselves and the gullibility of their fellow nationals. Yet, more often, such narratives allude to the nationalist politics that interpellated national *others*. Stating that “ordinary people” were overcome by *politika* thus still allows for a differential emphasis: “they” were nationalized to a greater degree than “we” were, and “we” have mainly suffered the effects of “their” nationalism (see also Cowan and Brown 2000: 7; Helms 2013).

So this is a third ground for the frequent ethnographic reliance on the unidirectionally, vertically functioning politics/people dichotomy in our accounts of the early 1990s: when we represent “ordinary people” predominantly as the objects of nationalization, not as subjects of nationalism, we faithfully reflect the emic understandings we encounter most frequently.

Intentional Action beyond Resistance

But where does that paradigm leave us with regard to explicit positionings in terms of nationalist subjectivity? All ethnographers know these *also* exist. In this text, I foreground such narratives, collected from people who in the early 1990s would have qualified as Bringa’s “ordinary Bosnians,” but who—at least at the time of research—rejected this label. The Ljubićs and the Đukićs self-identified as Croats and Serbs, respectively, and decidedly not also as “Bosnians.” Both had fled their prewar places of residence in Central Bosnia when they came under control of ARBiH. Both considered the tragedy that overcame them to be the result of the politics of Bosniaks, who they continued to call Muslims and depicted as fundamentalists in pursuit of an Islamic state. They hailed from near where Bringa worked, but I have not conducted research there and I do not assess the plausibility of my interlocutors’ or of Bringa’s narration of events there. I note also that their retrospective narratives are certainly not representative for *all* displaced Serbs and Croats from Central Bosnia, nor are they to be found *only* among Serbs, Croats, or DPs. My focus is purposively thematic rather than categorical: tracing declarations of strong loyalty to nationalism, I revisit the functioning of the politics/people dichotomy both emically and etically.

How then can this dichotomy help us make sense of the narratives of the Ljubićs and the Đukićs? Let us return to Bringa’s essay. In the early 1990s, she argues, “ordinary Bosnians” were targeted by nationalist manipulation inciting fears concerning national others:

it becomes almost impossible to resist, because . . . national identity becomes the only relevant identity, nationalism the only relevant discourse, and people who resist are exiled, treated as traitors, or forced to become accomplices to crimes committed in the name of the group. (Bringa 2002: 218)

The question of resistance, emerging from Bringa’s essay with regard to the outbreak of war, is also applicable to the retrospective narratives in this text. Did “ordinary people” like the Ljubićs and the Đukićs narrate their story in nationalist terms because they found it “impossible to resist?” Gradations of possibilities to resist nationalization pose important questions of responsibility but I wish to draw attention to the analytical gaze *itself* that places resistance at the center. This very focus on the degree to which resistance to top-down nationalization is/was possible takes the unidirectionality of the politics/people dichotomy to its extreme: the only way in which actions of “ordinary people” appear on the analytical radar here is if they are resistant to the *politika* that overcame them. A relative lack of resistance then comes to be read as a relative lack of intentional action. Instead, I ask *where* we should look when seeking to detect people’s capacity for intentional action. Is, as the unidirectional, vertical understanding of the politics/people dichotomous paradigm implies, acquiescence with nationalism a symptom of a lack of intentional action? Do people either resist or not act at all? Where in this paradigm is the place of the Ljubićs and the Đukićs, with their emic narratives that keenly enact nationalist discourse?

In Bijelo and in Bijeljina, attacks on and harassment of national others did occur, yet their presence was met more frequently with indifference. Reflecting the directionality of the above analytical gaze, the closing of national ranks was represented predominantly as *non-action*. Sweeping historical accounts peopled by mutually opposed, disambiguated collective national actors (nations) held sway both when discussing one’s own predicament and that of others. Many represented the national others around them as exponents of such nations and their difficulties as just deserts for the actions attributed to those nations. References to past intimacy with national others were often incorporated into stories of naivety and betrayal. Some, like the Đukićs and the

Ljubićs, did not refer to such prewar intimacy at all.⁷ Indeed, their definition of being *svoji na svome* rested on the undesirability of such intimacy and on the superiority of nationally homogeneous polities. Such particularly militant retrospective narratives passionately asserted the idea that, in Bringa's words, "national identity [was] the only relevant identity and nationalism the only relevant discourse." Crucially, and going beyond Bringa's representation, they argued that *this was a good thing*. Far from suppressing their subjectivity, they insisted, this was what it was to be free, to be *svoj na svome*.

Foot Soldiers Emerging from History

In their engagements with me, the Đukićs and the Ljubićs did not emerge from these narratives as objects-targets of nationalization. According to their story, as "ordinary people," they had not needed to be nationalized in the early 1990s because they had been national subjects already. These two couples retrospectively narrated themselves both as victims of others *and* as intentional subjects-enactors in relation to wartime events and their political outcomes. They recalled the war as something imposed on them by national others while *also* emphasizing its status as an ultimately glorious episode of national history. History here became entirely and essentially national and the experiences of "ordinary people"—including their own—emerged as relevant only insofar as they were cast in that register. These narratives involved a depoliticization of history in two ways. First, we find a radical denial of the contingency of history. Second, history is elevated above *politika*: these teleological narratives of national liberation contained a display of loyalty to a national cause much purer than any *politika*. I shall call this History with a capital H.

The story was thus told as one with a direction, even as one that had to happen, albeit not necessarily in the way it did. And the speakers positioned themselves not just in alignment with History, but as subjects-enactors whose actions had allowed it to unfold. These deliberate, forceful positionings as representatives of the nation inscribed those speakers into History, all the while retaining a distance from the corruption by *politika* that characterizes history. In this way, the teleological notion of History provides the conditions of existence for a subject position that I shall refer to as the "foot soldier." Foot soldiers are minor actors in the unfolding of History, and are clearly at a distance from its shiny yet risky centers. They remain out of the spotlight and, like cogs in a machine, they are expendable but collectively essential to the functioning of the machine precisely through their conforming behavior. Using their losses as proof of involvement, foot soldiers can retrospectively share in the glory of the struggle and in its fruits: the product of the machine of History is, to however small an extent, also the result of *their* work. In their interaction with me, it was the narration itself that opened up this possibility of enactment for the Ljubićs and the Đukićs. They actively conformed with nationalist politics to the point where they, to a large extent, narratively immersed their selves into teleological national History *in order to then emerge on the other side as foot soldiers*.

The possibility for such enactments as part of a teleological narrative of History, by its very logic, depends on the current circumstances, which are reformulated as its Goal (cf. Malkki 1995). We thus find differences of degree between the functioning of the teleology among the displaced "ordinary people" in this text according to their belonging to different nations and their current residence in Croatia or in RS (BiH).

For the Ljubićs, the war had produced a Croatian state that was overwhelmingly Croatian-inhabited and politically defined as the state of the Croatian nation. The omnipresent Croatian nationalist rhetoric that interpellated them represented the "Motherland War" as the crowning phase of a "thousand-year" Croatian struggle for national liberation. This discourse coexisted with an insistence that the war was a strictly defensive effort imposed on peace-loving Croats by Serbian expansionism. The teleological narrative of History could thus be mobilized by Croats in Bijelo, even if, like the Ljubićs, they had come there from BiH. Clearly, there was some friction for the latter: the Goal could presumably have been a much larger Croatian state, which would have included their

home village in Central Bosnia. But it did not, and Nada Ljubić made sure to position herself in congruence with the Goal of the teleology: she was glad to be in her “own state,” in her “own Croatia,” among her “own people.”

The Đukićs, like other Serbs in Bijeljina, were interpellated by a nationalist rhetoric that similarly attempted to incorporate defense and a centuries-long struggle for national liberation crowned by the establishment of RS. Here the paradox was reflected by the official term for the war: “Defensive-Fatherland War.” Serbian nationalism in the early 1990s primarily aimed to maintain Serbs in one state: initially this involved a pro-Yugoslav rhetoric, and later the emphasis shifted to RS as a Serbian “state” itself. The Dayton Agreement did not recognize RS statehood but cemented much of its sovereignty within BiH. This status, and the perception of an uncertain future for this polity setup, rendered teleological narratives less mobilizable for Serbs in RS. Yet Matija Đukić *did* recite a tale of Serbian defense and liberation and of the righteousness of RS as a Serbian polity produced by it. Not quite a “nation-state,” he considered RS the best approximation in the current geopolitical moment: overwhelmingly cleansed of non-Serbs, effectively wielding considerable sovereignty within BiH, and drenched in Serbian national symbolism, it thus came to function as a Goal of History. As with the Ljubićs, the Đukićs prewar place of residence, which they considered to be part of the “Serbian lands,” fell outside of this polity.⁸

The narratives presented in this text insisted that the war effort of one’s own nation had been defensive, yet also that it had allowed History to fulfill itself through the creation of “nation-states” (or, failing that, a “nation-entity”) in which everyone could be *svoj na svome*. They were recounted to me by people who fled their prewar places of residence in Central Bosnia, which had not been incorporated in “their” polity. These people resisted return, coexistence with national others, and communication with the few who lived around them. The Ljubićs and the Đukićs now declared to be *svoji na svome* in nationally homogenized Croatian and Serbian polities, where they lived in markedly worse material circumstances than they had before the war. In addition to the problems they shared with others, their predicament as DPs included a particularly sharp precariousness: they did not know if they would be able to continue to live in the accommodation they currently occupied. Yet while they might complain about *politika* in generic terms, they did not thereby reject the respective nationalist projects that interpellated them. On the contrary, they squarely positioned themselves as supportive of the war efforts that had contributed to their fate and of the elites that had led them. In their retrospective narratives, on the one hand they portrayed these efforts as defensive struggles that had prevented an even worse fate, and on the other hand, teleologically, as catalysts for the unfolding of History. What could have been told as personal tragedy, was cast as national teleology.

Hegemony and the Politics/People Dichotomy as Etic Framework

These emic foot soldier narratives do not break with the politics/people dichotomous paradigm, nor with the assumption that it works vertically. Yet when the Ljubićs and the Đukićs depoliticize history into teleological History, they nevertheless reestablish it as a peopled process from which they emerge as intentional actors. This intentional action does not take the shape of resistance—the only form of intentional action on the part of “ordinary people” that the unidirectional, vertical deployment of the politics/people paradigm allows us to register—but of enactment as foot soldiering, a role beyond the more widely reported one of merely objects-targets of nationalization. In sum, these narratives maintain the verticality of the paradigm, but they reduce its unidirectionality, after first decontaminating history from politics in its more earthly meaning.

Since ethnography draws on its subjects’ own understandings, the question then emerges: what can we learn from this emic framework to fine-tune our etic paradigm? How can we be alert to the active dimension in this process? Retaining the strengths of this paradigm, solidly grounded as it is, how vertical and how unidirectional should we make *our* dichotomy in order to make ethnographic sense of these enactments?

Following nationalist explanations such as those of the Ljubićs and the Đukićs themselves, we could detect a straightforward expression here of an authentic national ontology that had been suppressed in socialist Yugoslavia and that was allowed to finally emerge in the 1990s. Little intentional action, then: nationals, it is assumed, will be nationals. Thankfully, most ethnographers refrain from approaching nationalism through its own essentializing categories and, in any case, it would be difficult to verify this through retrospective narratives. The more popular alternative among ethnographers working in BiH, however, also runs into problems. The narratives in this text could be understood as a vindication of the analytical deployment of the politics/people dichotomy in its extreme unidirectional, vertical form: these “ordinary people” would then be seen as being so successfully manipulated by nationalizing politics that they were totally unable to resist it. We find no resistance, and therefore we conclude that there is no intentional action. This, as I have shown, would leave us without effective analytical tools to make sense of the enactments of the Ljubićs and the Đukićs.

This conundrum resonates with more general problems in the analysis of nationalism. Studies of nationalist violence often rely on a degree of inference and struggle to explain the *appeal* of nationalization (Brubaker and Laitlin 1998: 443). Yet, in addition to detailed studies of individual trajectories (e.g., Loizos 1988), anthropologists working elsewhere have developed ways to address this issue. They have focused, for example, on the suture that enactments of violence promises in the organization of masculine jouissance (Hansen 1996), on subject-formation in nationalist interpellation (Finlayson 1996), on the certainty nationalist violence creates in uncertainty among previous intimates (Appadurai 1998), on the resonance of mobilization for violence with national ontology embedded in ritual and everyday practice (Kapferer 1988), and on practical compliance by rank-and-file soldiers based on the compatibility of their collateral goals with nationalist discourse (McKenna 1996).

Broadening the scope from violence per se to nationalization processes, here I suggest that we try to integrate the strengths of such approaches into a dynamic conceptualization of hegemonizing projects, understood not primarily as matters of belief or consent, but as the ongoing formation of a framework of common sense by unequally positioned actors (Roseberry 1994). People's retrospective enactments of History as foot soldiers can then be seen as signs of the relative success of nationalist hegemonizing projects. In early 1990s BiH, a national grammar of practice and representation really did become the default one for many people in many circumstances. And, as we saw, I believe that our tendency to explain this in terms of nationalization, approached etically through a dichotomy in which “ordinary people” feature mainly as its objects-targets, is solidly grounded. Clearly, in the early 1990s, to different degrees “ordinary people” *were* objects of nationalization. Yet I suggest this does not exclude that—to different degrees—they could *also* be its subjects. The foot soldier enactments in this text can then be read as one possible form of intentional action, allowing people to formulate trajectories through which they can retrospectively emerge as subjects. In the circumstances—which were, needless to say, not of their own choosing—insisting on “national identity [as] the only relevant identity and nationalism [as] the only relevant discourse” can *itself* be a form of intentional action on the part of “ordinary people.”

For our etic analysis, then, I propose a reworked use of the politics/people dichotomy. Retaining its insistence on the contingency of history, this approach remains resolutely anti-essentialist: it does not try to deploy the national categories and the teleology of the narratives of the Ljubićs and the Đukićs as analytical tools, but analyzes them as effective dimensions of performative utterances. Yet I do take a lead from those narratives in another way: I retain the basic structure of the politics/people dichotomy, including its verticality, but, like the Ljubićs and the Đukićs, I suggest we reduce its unidirectionality. This approach continues to conceptualize the work of interpellation in nationalization predominantly as a “vertical” elite-led process but it creates a place in the analysis for “ordinary people” as more than merely its objects-targets. It allows us to trace how they actively respond to such interpellation in ways ranging from open resistance, over

avoidance, to silent conformism, to enthusiastic enactment. Crucially, it facilitates investigation of how, in the process, they become particular subjects.

Yet a problem remains. Does the term “active responding” not reproduce the unidirectional top-down explanation, whereas the focus on subjectification seems to suggest the opposite? The revised politics/people dichotomy etic framework I propose may be seen to favor a circular explanation, and therefore to display a reluctance to address the question of where these hegemonizing projects of nationalization *started*: with politics or with people? The retrospective nature of the narratives through which ethnographers usually approach the war in BiH does not, of course, allow any firm statements on events in the period recalled. In the recollections of the Ljubićs and the Đukićs, which decontaminated History from its impure politics, this question simply does not arise as relevant. In true nationalist fashion, these foot soldier enactments posit nations as the actors of history, and the speakers as nationals fully immersed in those nations and deriving their subjectivity from them. There is no hegemonizing project for them, only an unfolding of History. Now, perhaps, as Bringa’s approach suggests, the Ljubićs and the Đukićs had actually initially felt uncomfortable with the nationalization of life. Perhaps they had even resisted it to some degree, and mourned the loss of intimacy with national others, rather than having celebrated segregation as a desirable step toward national liberation. Perhaps they still did so in conversations with other people; and perhaps their patterns of interaction were not quite as mononational in my absence. Perhaps then, speaking to me after the war, they reformulated their personal narratives to fit with nationalist historiography. This is possible, but I will never know it for sure. Yet this ignorance on my part is not a claim to neutrality. The hegemony theory I propose in order to interpret these performative utterances *does* reflect particular understandings of events in that period. So, unlike the Ljubićs and the Đukićs, in my etic framework I must confront the question: whose hegemonizing projects are they? This question forces one to spell out one’s broader understandings of the early 1990s in the (post-)Yugoslav states. So let me spell out mine.

To gain insights into that period, I complement ethnographic research in the sociality produced by the war in BiH, including retrospective narratives about its outbreak and course, with other sources, such as Bringa’s documentary *We Are All Neighbours*, a longtime favorite in my teaching, and document-based investigations. In contrast to nationalist claims of organic legitimacy, such records indicate that nationalization processes did not predominantly originate spontaneously among “ordinary people” but that they were first and foremost vehicles of interpellation for political elites. Relentless reiterations of national ontology in media reports, sermons, and political speeches, alongside its materialization through institutional measures, increasingly established the rules of the game in national terms. Crucially, nationalization campaigns by the three main nationalist parties in BiH were elite-instigated processes that both *mobilized* “ordinary people” as nationals and *demobilized* them by discrediting any antagonism that articulated political subjectivities in nonnational terms (see Gagnon [2004] on Serbia and Croatia). If it was in “politics” that such campaigns started, many “ordinary people” did enact nationalism. The first post-Yugoslav elections in BiH, for example, saw mass “foot soldier” participation at rallies, campaigns, and ballots (Anđelić 2005). Some, of course, resisted. Some tried to resist. Yet regardless of their reasons, the historical record shows that others *were* mobilized and enacted nationalism as foot soldiers. Some grasped the opportunities on offer. Some, no doubt, relished the sense and significance unleashed and the hope it opened up for them.

I suspect that few ethnographers working in BiH would deny this. People tell us about it—usually implicating others. Much less frequently they do so in the first person, like the Ljubićs and the Đukićs. Yet we have a tendency to underemphasize this dimension of recent history (Hayden 2007) and to rely on a more unidirectional functioning of the politics/people vertical dichotomy. This helps us to analyze (and possibly counteract) the demobilization that occurs through nationalization, but it hinders our understanding of the mobilization it involved.

A Speculative Excursus on the Big Questions

During my postwar research, the national grammar of practice and representation—now thoroughly institutionalized—continued to weigh heavily on the terms of the debate in BiH and in the neighboring states. Yet demobilization had become much more prominent than mobilization. In contrast to the cases of the Ljubićs and the Đukićs, many other enactments of nationalism started in the hopeful “foot soldier” mode but ended with statements of disillusionment. While people cherished the notion that History had finally unfolded until its Goal—the establishment of a “nation-state,” or something close enough to it for the moment—they deplored the *politika* that had hijacked History, and reduced it to history again. National liberation, then, remained pure in principle, but its product—a polity—was considered to be contaminated by the interest-driven behavior of politicians.

By retaining, even years after the war, a positive evaluation of those who presented themselves as the leaders of their national struggle, the cases of the Ljubićs and the Đukićs thus represent particularly strong enactments of nationalism. They did not criticize “their” nationalist politicians, nor did they depict their actions as *politika*. If we reject both nationalist explanations and notions of totally successful elite manipulation, but treat these narratives as performative utterances that involve intentional action, the question remains: why, surrounded by the rubble of their lives, did these people so enthusiastically enact nationalism in their conversations with me? This question poses a serious conundrum for many ethnographers, torn between empathy with our interlocutors, our own refusal of nationalist essentialism, intimate familiarity with the suffering it brought in BiH, and the contrast between some people’s confident claims to the goodness of History and their living circumstances. The answer necessarily remains a subject of speculation, but I do not wish to avoid the question.

As a contribution to the speculation, I suggest that emerging as foot soldiers from recitations of the contradictory mantra of defense *and* national liberation as a teleological fulfillment of History may have helped the Ljubićs and the Đukićs to manage their predicament with regard to past, present, and future in a particular social configuration. During my research in Croatia and BiH, nationality was indeed institutionalized as the dominant organizing logic of political legitimacy. In those circumstances, “foot soldier” enactments represented the establishment of a nationalized polity as the key condition for one’s own existential fulfillment. Calculation by “ordinary people” surely played a role: with these retrospective narratives the Ljubićs and the Đukićs could maximize material interests and minimize losses, for example, by occupying other people’s houses, claiming resources, and being on the stronger side of relations of nationalist discrimination. They knew that I was aware of this and, in the process, could recast these material interests as expressions of selfless loyalty and sacrifice for the nation, part of a necessary and inherently good unfolding of History.

Yet let us not reduce foot soldier enactments to material interests only. In his work on communist activists in Italy, Alessandro Portelli has argued, “by saying that history was ‘good’, we claim that we have made something out of ourselves” (1988: 53). Likewise, I suggest, foot soldier enactment of History could endow people’s predicaments with sense and significance. Relying predominantly on what Liisa Malkki has called a mythicohistorical mode of narration, it is concerned “with the reconstitution of a moral order of the world” (1995: 55–56) and with one’s place in it. Nationalization’s appeal, then, should be understood at least partly as rooted in its capacity to project hope and self-realization for some. As Renata Salecl has pointed out, nationalism constructs “a symbolic space in which we can appear likeable to ourselves,” a discourse organized “in such a way that it leaves space open to be filled by images of our ideal ego” (1992: 57). Perhaps not exactly “ideal,” in the circumstances, one attractive image may be that of a national foot soldier as a subject of History.

To the Ljubićs and the Đukićs this foot soldier image could be a source of justifications and perhaps rationalizations for actions that would otherwise be more fraught: a radical relinquishing of their former home, including its possible inter-national intimacies; indifference in the face of the

harsher predicaments of national others around them; discriminatory acts toward the latter. Emerging as a foot soldier from teleological national History might allow people to do so without cumbersome soul searching on complicated, painful, and potentially unsettling matters. It could mean they avoid confronting competing claims, such as those formulated in human rights discourses that they might expect me to champion. More important, I think, it might allow them stoicism in the face of competing codes of social behavior that they *themselves* might hold up in other circumstances, such as common decency, property, compassion, or solidarity. If this is the case, foot soldiering might be a coping strategy that facilitates survival, navigation of an inhospitable and complex moral landscape, and reduction of the confrontation with loss. Crucially, I speculate, casting tragedy as teleology might protect one from the otherwise widespread feeling that the war was all for nothing, which would render personal losses meaningless. It attributes a positive meaning to the dynamics that led to that loss, and indeed, to an extent, to that loss itself.

Beyond the Comfort Zone

Our tireless insistence that the lives of the people we work with involve much that a unidimensional national-identitarian prism simply cannot register remains a crucial and necessary critical contribution of ethnographies of BiH. I believe we should continue this work. Yet our emphasis on “ordinary people” being the objects of nationalist “politics,” I suggest, has also allowed much of the analysis of nationalization in the early 1990s to become defined by other, nonethnographic approaches. As we saw, one ground for the dichotomous paradigm that facilitates this concerns the politics of knowledge production: it suits our anti-Balkanist positionings. To conclude, let me locate my proposed recalibration of our framework in relation to this issue.

As a critique of analyses that seek comfort in cordoning post-Yugoslav violence off in a Balkanist mirage of tribal hatreds and/or in essentializing nations as historical actors, the anti-Balkanist, “modern reading” of the war in BiH is enduringly on target. In my view it is still the best approach available. Yet I propose to fine-tune it by reducing its unidirectional deployment. Otherwise the modern reading itself risks becoming a comfort zone allowing us to cling to reassuring beliefs about violence, politics, and, ultimately, human nature. With regard to nationalism, this modern comfort zone product is structured precisely around a unidirectional deployment of the vertical politics/people dichotomy. Not wishing to conceive of the post-Yugoslav region as a place of perennial hatred, nor of its inhabitants as culturally evil or wild, we tend to locate the active component of nationalism overwhelmingly in the zone of “politics.” In that way we can engage in detached critique of political elites *and* in empathy with “ordinary people.” To me there is nothing wrong with that if it involves a full-specter humanist account, accounting for people’s actions, capacities, and proclivities across the board. Yet we should resist the lure of a comfortable, selective humanist combination of top-down denunciatory explanation of what we consider to be undesirable phenomena (nationalism, violence, essentialism) with bottom-up celebratory investigation of what we see as desirable processes (such as the resistance of “ordinary people” to the above). If we go down that route, we have our cake and eat it too.

Explicit and forceful enactments of nationalism by “ordinary people” then become difficult to integrate, and even to register. Of course, many retrospective narratives and considerable documentary evidence confirm the unidirectional vertical politics/people dichotomy as an experiential reality for many people in BiH. But does this mean it is appropriate as our etic analytical framework too? While we may legitimately point to the leading figures in competing elites as the prime instigators of, the main players in, and the main beneficiaries of nationalization, this only explains one level of the events, albeit a crucial one. Most ethnographers tend to work with people who position themselves with regard to nationalization as “objects” (predominantly as “objects-victims” of the nationalism of others), whereas we find little about people who (also) consider themselves its enactors. Yet even if we stay, modestly ethnographical, within the everyday nationalization of social relations, we must recognize that it posits *two* categorical subjects—a

national *we* and national *others*—and we must take up the challenge to account not only for people's potential experiences as the latter (i.e., as "objects-victims" of the nationalism of others) but also as the former (i.e., as "objects-targets" of nationalizing interpellation and thus potentially as its "subjects-enactors"). In addition to "ordinary people's" resistance to or avoidance of nationalist politics, this would mean we also theorize enactments of nationalism in terms of subjectivity and practice. We would thus trace the degree to which people are subjected to nationalization but also the degree to which they seek subjectification through it. These questions force us out of the modern comfort zone, but they are too important to ignore. If we do not deal with them, they will remain the domain of those with more essentialist analytical tools and approaches.

Moreover, just as our critique of the tendency to read all things post-Yugoslav through a national prism retains its political importance, so a more developed ethnographic alertness to nationalist subjectivity contains emancipatory potential. Recognizing a degree of intentional action in enactments of nationalism also allows us to better account for resistance against it. Investigating how certain people at certain times feel enticed to enact nationalist subjectivity—to the point even of foot soldiering in History—may increase our ability to account for those (possibly the same people) who at other times enacted solidarity regardless of national divisions. In political terms, this can help us understand and try to promote conditions that make this a potential route of action for more people.

Stef Jansen is senior lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Manchester. Based on ethnographic research in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1996, he seeks to contribute to a critical anthropology of the making of home and hope with regard to place, nation, and postsocialist state transformations. In addition to a series of articles and chapters he has published *Yearnings in the Meantime: "Normal Lives" and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex* (Berghahn, 2015), *Struggles for Home: Violence, Hope and the Movement of People* (Berghahn, 2008, coedited with Staffan Löfving) and *Antinacionalizam: etnografija otpora u Zagrebu i u Beogradu* (XX Vek, 2005).

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Notes

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¹ For more ethnographic detail on the research in Croatia, see also Jansen (2002, 2006); on Northeast BiH, see, for example, Jansen (2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2011). The latter research was supported by the Leverhulme Trust and the Toyota Foundation. Names are pseudonyms, translations are mine. I follow local linguistic use and employ the term "national" where many English-language sources prefer "ethnic."

² During my research the preferred label of self-description by the people in question was *Bošnjaci* (Bosniaks), sometimes used alongside the pre-1993 term *Muslimani*.

³ After its destruction in 1991, Vukovar, a town in Northeast Croatia, came to occupy a central position in Croatian nationalism as an icon of Serbian aggression and Croatian suffering and sacrifice.

⁴ Bringa's discussion of nationalization campaigns deploys generic labels such as "ordinary Bosnians," presumably including people interpellated by any of the three major nationalist parties. Yet her examples overwhelmingly concern Serbian nationalism, with some reference to its Croatian counterpart. This emphasis does correctly reflect the relative capacity and intensity of nationalist exclusivism in the competing state-making projects for BiH, yet it seems unlikely that Bringa, whose research mainly involved Bosniaks, and whose wartime documentary focused on their expulsion as *Bosniaks*, did not come across any Bosniak nationalism. Her decision to leave it undiscussed may partly be due the fact that her main argument concerns the use of the terms "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide."

⁵ On *politika*, see, for example, Kolind (2008), Helms (2013), and Jansen (2010). As in many other languages, the term *narod* may refer to "a people" (nation), to "the people" (body politic), and to "people" (ordinary, nonelite actors). This polysemy is eminently exploitable by political projects. I focus here on how the three can be interwoven in nonelite use.

⁶ Sometimes there is some slippage here between pro-BiH inclusivism and Bosniak nationalist rhetoric, yet we should not discount actual differences in strategy and military capacity of the armed formations: the harsh aggregate figures on record show that people in this category were by far the most likely to be victimized by the nationalist politics of others.

⁷ Nada Ljubić's reference to "our Serbs" may indicate a previous degree of intimacy but the way she integrates it into her account reduces them to an embodiment of "the Serbian nation," who should be expelled to prevent them from doing what Serbs did in Vukovar.

⁸ Perhaps because this friction surrounding the Goal of History was greater than in Croatia, I found it common for other Serbs in Northeast RS, including many who ardently enacted national categories, to *also* insist that the war had been unnecessary, that it had been caused by *politika* (including global geopolitics), that "ordinary people" had been misled into it. This reflects the vertical, unidirectional politics/people dichotomous model of manipulation, but, again, this is then attributed mainly to nationally other "ordinary people." *They* were misled, and *we* were victimized.