HIGHWAYS, ROADBLOCKS AND EMPIRES*

“Building the Balkans” requires the construction of infrastructures, especially highways. In this paper, I look at the construction and obstruction of highway systems in the Balkans as concrete manifestations of metaphors of incorporation and separation. While the infrastructure is mainly tangible, the roadblocks, largely due to ideological positions, are often intangible but very real, and are created as much by the European Union and the US as by the peoples of the Balkans themselves. The basic argument is that infrastructures connect people better than ideologies do, and that putting “values” before more practical linkages (which both the EU and the US are doing) hinders the establishment of normal links between the Balkans peoples. Finally, I add a few words of anticipatory nostalgia for Balkans diversity that may well be threatened by the region’s incorporation into the unifying structures, and ideologies, of the European Union.

KEY WORDS Balkans, infrastructure, highways, roadblocks, ideologies

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After so many years of observing, analyzing and talking about conflicts in the Balkans, there are signs of a more widely held optimism about the Balkans. The commonly used term “the Western Balkans” is an interesting bit of symbolic geography, considering the previously robust trope of the Balkans as being antithetical to anything Western. It is also interesting that one EU policy website refers to the region as a “white hole” on some kinds of maps; “black hole” has been a more frequently used term. That website dealt with plans to develop highways in the region, so the “white hole,” denoting something missing from the map, not only had descriptive salience but also prescriptive relevance: the white hole will be filled as the region’s transportation infrastructure develops.

Some of the positive views of the region stress the growth of market economies. Markets alone, however, are inadequate to build long-lasting social and political relationships. We are all aware of the brisk trade that went on during the wars in ex-Yugoslavia (see Glenny 2008): all kinds of goods passing illegally but very profitably during the international sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, from Albania to Serbia, for example, or Montenegro to Italy; and the Yugoslav border crossings were dangerous mainly because of the huge quantities of gasoline being traded over them in makeshift containers, which, given Balkans smoking practices, could explode at any minute. Croatian forces in Bosnia hired Serb equipment to use against Muslims; the United States hired Turkish aircraft to bring weapons paid for by the Iranians into Croatia and thence to Bosnia, all illegal activity internationally and by US law (Wiebes 2003). After the war, some of the most effective economic ties were illegal ones, so that, for example, at one point in the late 1990s the major cigarette factories in Albania, Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia were all being supplied with filters from a brand-new plant in the “Republika Srpska” when that “entity” was still under international sanctions that banned such trade. Since the plant wasn’t registered anywhere, though, the sanctions were meaningless, there being, officially, no trade to stop. Business, it seems, goes on, but does not necessarily build stable relationships.

On the other hand, it is clear that stable social and political structures do facilitate trade that is more efficient, and if the profit margins are lower than they are in the black market, so is the risk. Increasing trade, in turn, can lead increasing prosperity and increased social and political connections. Such was the idea behind the formation of the European Economic Community, now the European Union.

Yet the “white hole” in the infrastructure of the western Balkans is a reality. There are impediments to trade, and to forging stable political relationships, but there are also now real efforts to fill the gap. In this paper, I want to explore some of the ways that infrastructures for increased trade and increasing cultural, social and political ties are being (re)built in the Balkans region, but I also want to discuss

1 This paper was written before the financial crisis of late 2008.
some of the roadblocks that are slowing down these processes. Further, I will draw some parallels to other places and times. One of the attitudes I find most frustrating in the Balkans is the self-deprecating assertion that things are uniquely bad there – “samo kod nas,” I am told, “only here” or “only we” could do something so politically stupid and/or corrupt; and then hear a story of some kind of corruption or political stupidity that sounds much like Chicago, to say nothing of Washington D.C.. Recalling that some of the less admirable aspects of the Balkans are hardly unique to the region, or to the present, can help us impart some realism into our discussions.

**Roads and Freeways**

Let me start by invoking the Balkans region before it was “the Balkans” but rather the Roman province of Moesia. In July 2007, I made a brief visit to the Roman ruins of Medijana, near Niš. The site is now on the outskirts of the city, but when it was built (3rd century AD) it was about 3 Roman miles (4.5 km) from the Roman town of Naissus, which itself was on the main road to Serdulica, now Sofia. Naissus was the birthplace of the emperor Constantine, who returned there a number of times, and was also visited by other emperors since it was on the main road to the east (Drča 2006). In fact, five major Roman roads converged in Naissus, making the city of critical importance (Syme 1999: 130). The Medijana site consisted of villas, some quite large and ornate, with huge, wonderful, mosaics and waterworks. They were not fortified when built, indicating that they were not expected to be subject to attack; Naissus was, after all, well within the empire, though the villas were later sacked, seriatim, by the Huns, Goths and Slavs as the empire collapsed.

I mention this Roman crossroads at this conference on very contemporary issues to point out the importance of roads within empires. Serious empires, including those of Rome, China, the Ottomans, the Incas and the Aztecs, constructed networks of roads, for communication, trade, and military purposes. If we are talking about building the Balkans anew, we must consider the nature of the infrastructures for doing so, along with the conditions that let such infrastructures be built and operate.

Infrastructures must be continually used, and upgraded, or they fade away. The roads to and from Niš illustrate this phenomenon. Serdulica is still there, as Sofia, about 165 km away, but the road from Niš to Sofia is not a good one. While there is a very fine superhighway between Belgrade and Niš (the damage caused by NATO in 1999 having been quickly repaired), it turns towards Skopje after Niš, and not even that road is finished. It is projected to go through places like Preševo and Bujanovac, names that immediately invoke the geopolitical issues involved in a road
that would connect Serbia and Macedonia through territory within Serbia but almost entirely inhabited, now, by Albanians and adjacent to Kosovo.

But there is no freeway even planned from Niš to Sofia, and not on the Bulgarian side either: the freeways out of Sofia run to the east, towards Edirne, Turkey, though they don’t get even close to that border. In fact, the freeways in Bulgaria do not reach any of the country’s borders. But then neither do those in Romania or Serbia or Croatia – except that in the case of the last two countries, there is a good freeway linking them to each other, and therein lies a tale, but I discuss that below.

Albania and Montenegro have no freeways at all. Bosnia has a very short stretch of freeway squarely in the middle of the country, along the river Bosna, connecting the middle of nowhere with someplace about twenty km from there. Macedonia does have a freeway to the border with Serbia but, as already mentioned, the connecting sector from Niš is not even in the construction stage, much less completed. The Macedonian freeway doesn’t make it to Greece, even though the Greek freeway (E-75) does reach the border. The same E-75 freeway in Serbia does get almost to the Hungarian border but the Hungarians have not built their part, so one struggles north from Szeged. Turkey has built a good road from Istanbul through Edirne to the Bulgarian border but, as mentioned, the Bulgarians haven’t built their part; there is no Greek freeway towards Turkey, though the E-75 through Thessaloniki does get to Macedonia, at Gevgelija. In the west, the E-70 connecting Belgrade and Zagreb was finished a few years ago. This is striking because in the former Yugoslavia, this was the “Highway of Brotherhood and Unity” (autoput bratstva – jedinstva), and, like “brotherhood and unity,” the project was never quite completed while the single country existed.

Looking at the freeway systems of the Balkans, as shown on Google Earth, is revealing. It would appear that these highways were built mainly for internal use, not for facilitating international transport and trade. In those countries where freeways exist, you can use them to go between different cities in the same state; but not easily to get from one state to another. Back to Niš one more time: the 250 km to Belgrade can be easily covered in two hours, but traveling the 165 km to Sofia takes a lot longer. It is hard not to see the lack of freeways from the west to connect with Turkey’s roads to its own borders as symbolic of the lack of desire of the rest of Europe to be linked to Turkey, despite that country’s efforts to facilitate the connections. Basically, it seems that most Balkan states have had little interest in connecting with each other.

There are, of course, technologies other than motor vehicles for getting people from one state to another, notably railroads and airplanes. The railroads in the region run but are clearly not of great priority – much as I love the overnight train between Belgrade and Sofia, for example, it is not fast, nor often on time, and while the
sleeping cars are comfortable enough by my somewhat romantic and old-fashioned standards, the equipment is old. There are no plans to extend high-speed rail service to the Balkans. As for airplanes, it is usually easier to get from any Balkans capital to London, Frankfurt, Vienna or Paris than to any other Balkans capital – except, often enough, via Frankfurt, Vienna or Munich.

Yet roads identified with long-distance travel, linking the major towns of the region, have existed in the region since at least the Roman empire – vide Naissus, after all. In fact, most of the projected freeway “corridors” track the old Roman main roads. And was there a city in the Ottoman Balkans that did not have a Stamboul Gate, marking the road to the imperial capital (in Serbia, still sometimes called Carigrad)?

The question is under what conditions can long-distance roads, and other forms of interlinking infrastructures, be envisioned, constructed, used and maintained? This is at the heart of the matter, because if we are to speak about building the Balkans anew, we need to consider the circumstances under which connections between the region’s various localities and peoples have been fostered on the one hand, broken on the other.

Empires and Infrastructures

It is this question that brings the concept of empires to the fore, because an empire is, among other things, a set of mechanisms to bring separate nations, and usually separate polities, into one cooperative framework for generating, collecting and centralizing wealth. Conflicts between groups of the natives would get in the way of these goals, so the key to running an empire has been to ensure that the subalterns obeyed, the exercise of power in the Foucaultian sense. However much empires may have been internally complex, the goal of imperial rule was not so much divide and conquer as balance and thereby exploit.

Yet the period from 1804 (the first Serbian uprising) through 1918 was one of the mutual contestation, then decline and finally disappearance of the various empires that interfaced in the region, and the modern states are supposed to rest on the self-determination of their peoples (leaving aside the unfortunate by contemporary standards reality that the conflict between peoples, as separate nations within states, has usually, in modern Europe, led to the brutal homogenization of territories through the processes now known, depending mainly on whether one approves of, regretfully accepts, or condemns them in any given case, as population transfers, ethnic cleansing, and genocide [Hayden 1996]). Certainly there are no longer any emperors, or multi-polity entities that can claim, as sovereigns, the allegiance of their subjects. It is difficult to envision “treason” against the European
Union as a crime, though it remains one in the context of the citizens of each still-sovereign member state.

Still, the European Union does manifest a number of the traditional elements of sovereignty in the realm of the regulation of economic activities, and the issuing of money. This last is especially fascinating in regard to political symbolism, because the planners of the Euro currency seem to have combined a good working knowledge of semiotics with the whole-sale acceptance of the concept of “imagined communities” (Umberto Eco meets Benedict Anderson?). That is, the Euro banknotes embody an imagined Europe by incorporating stylized representations of windows, signifying openness, and bridges, signifying connections, as the key European values; but the signifiers are arbitrary, as no real bridges, or windows, may be depicted. In fact, an early design of one of the banknotes was withdrawn when it became clear that it resembled to closely an actual bridge. Thus the symbols of the community are really imagined, in contrast to those of the currencies replaced by the Euro or of those still left in non-Euro countries, since these depict real persons of places seen as symbolically important to each country. Actually, the signified on the Euro bills, too, are arbitrary, since windows may also be closed, and not all connections are beneficial, as epidemiologists, among others, know too well. Diseases follow roadways, railways and now, skyways.

The monetary symbolism is different in our region, modern rather than post-, and employing somewhat less arbitrary signs. Looking only at the banknotes that I happen to have handy, the Bulgarian lev notes carry Ivan Milev (5), Petar Beron (10), and Stefan Stambolov (20); Croatian kuna notes depict Ban Jelačić (20), Ivan Mazurin (100) and Stjepan Radić (200); and Serbian dinars depict Petar Petrović Njegoš (20) and Nikola Tesla (100). These last two indicate some of the complications that can come of putting historical figures onto the money because Tesla was a Serb from Croatia who never lived in Serbia. Newly independent Croatia put him on a postage stamp in 1993 but forces of the same Croatian state burned his ancestral home at about the same time, as had the previous Independent State of Croatia, 1941-45; yet by the 150th anniversary of his birth, the Tesla home was restored and the presidents of both Croatia and Serbia were present. Adding to the competing claims on the scientist, Serbia issued a Tesla stamp, as did the Republika Srpska Krajina (Croatia) and the Republika Srpska (Bosnia) in the early 1990s. For his part, Njegoš, the poet-bishop-prince of Montenegro, was self-consciously one of the founding figures of Serbian literature. How that literary fact squares with the new Montenegrin constitutional declaration that the language there is “Montenegrin” rather than Serbian, I’ll leave to others (ali, “Bog se dragi na Srbe razljuti/ za njihova smrtna sagrešenja….”). But speaking of literature, Ivo Andrić, the only Bosnian to win the Nobel prize for literature, is not on a Bosnian banknote because the Bosniaks object, while Meša Selimović is on the 5 km note – but
Selimović said he wrote Serbian literature and died in Belgrade, and his images of Bosnian multiculturalism are, if anything, more grim than those of Andrić.

I’m reminded of the 2005 international bestseller, The Historian (Kostova 2005), in which Dracula is still active in late-20th Century Europe. He keeps returning because the historians just won’t leave him alone. That is, they keep insisting on studying him, and every time they do so, they thereby bring him back from the (un)dead. [I can’t help noting that in that novel, the protagonist’s father, a historian who unwittingly immerses her in the Dracula drama, is later killed by a landmine in Sarajevo – it seems that those people just never can leave these things alone! Dracula himself, though, is finally killed by an anthropologist, I am happy to say].

I raise the symbolism of the money because a common currency is a mechanism for uniting multiple peoples and polities, and not a new one: the dinar found in parts of our region, and elsewhere throughout the formerly Ottoman empire, is descended in name from the denarius of the Roman empire, taking us back to Medijana: common roads, common currency, as imperial infrastructures. Of course, by the 1990s, there was a movement away from the dinar by the Slovenes (tolar), Croats (kuna) and by the international overseers of Bosnia (konvertibilna marka), a symbolic rejection of the Balkan heritage, among other things, though the Macedonians did not feel that need and keep the denar, while the Slovenes have since gone full European by adopting the Euro. But currencies make perfect carriers of political symbolism because they are useful for other purposes. In Republika Srpska in Bosnia, the konvertibilna marka was introduced when the place functioned with the Deutschmark, and was originally resisted as an attempted imposition of multiculturalism. Thus in December 1999 I heard the wonderful rhetorical question in Banja Luka, “why should we use those Muslim marks [i.e., KM] when we have our own marks already” meaning the Deutschmark. Yet since the KM was completely interchangeable for DM, rejecting the former would have been massively inconvenient, and within a very short time there was no longer resistance to it, though it is doubtful that anybody buys into its symbolism. But they don’t have to buy into the symbolism if the monetary infrastructure works, for utilitarian purposes. After all, few if any of even the most die-hard atheists in the USA try to black out “In God We Trust” on the money.

**Borders and Roadblocks**

Which returns us to the theme of this paper, building the Balkans. What is likely to be most effective is infrastructure that has high utilitarian value: freeways, monetary structures, the elimination of obstructions to interpersonal and economic
interaction. And while one would think that building such infrastructure is at the heart of the process of incorporating the region into the structures of the EU, thus far, at least, it hasn’t always been so. From the start of the Yugoslav conflicts, some of the most important actions by the EU and US have insisted on creating obstacles: borders, between the ex-Yugoslav republics and between most of them and their neighbors. This was striking in 1991: at the very time that the European community was metamorphosing into the EU and removing most borders interior to that European community, the EU was supporting the creation of old-fashioned, guarded, borders in the former Yugoslavia, in places that had not been so divided for generations.

To make matters worse, the imposition of economic sanctions on Serbia from 1992 throughout most of the rest of the decade had greater negative impacts on the rest of the region than on Serbia itself. Certainly those sanctions did not damage the Milošević regime, which instead found ways to profit from their command over crucial resources in an economy of increasing scarcity (see Dinkić 1997). [I recall asking people in Washington in 1993 why, if economic isolation was so threatening to a regime, the formerly socialist countries had imposed sanctions upon themselves for decades, and why the US was doing the job for Slobo that Ceausescu had to do for himself. I never did get an answer, but it may be obvious why my expertise wasn’t much in demand in policy circles]. In the late 1990s, the World Bank acknowledged that international economic sanctions on the Serb-controlled parts of Bosnia had themselves contributed to the lack of economic integration of the country even though such integration was one of the key criteria for Bosnia’s economic development (Hurtic et al 2000: 347-350).

The 1991 borders continue to add to the costs of doing business in the region, and thereby hinder the economic development of the Balkans. Even with the wars over, sanctions lifted, and trade developing between and across the formerly Yugoslav space, the borders are real barriers. While one could now in theory drive the 366 km from Belgrade to Zagreb, at legal speeds, in less than three hours (and who drives legal speeds on a European highway?), the international border will delay you from 15 or 20 minutes to many hours, and that’s if you’re in an automobile. Trucks routinely lose hours there, sometimes days, as they do at the other new borders within the former Yugoslavia.

The fairly obvious response to this situation would be to accelerate the incorporation of the whole Balkans into the structures of the EU. However, there is yet another set of roadblocks stemming from the perhaps smug ideology of the EU, as a union founded on values, and that the non-member Balkan states can only aspire to membership when they adopt these supposedly European values.
“Values” and Roadblocks

The idea that Europe is a community based on common values is certainly at variance with the history of the development from the European Coal and Steel Community, through the Common Market, then the European Economic Community, then the European Community and now the European Union. The development of the EU was based on the premise that the development of common values would follow the development of common interests, especially economic interests. Conditioning economic integration on the adoption of values-driven institutions (e.g. protection of minorities) is thus contrary to the historical development of the EU, as well as to the historical development of most EU member states, which was rather more likely to be based on fierce homogenization than on multiculturalism. Current treatment of minorities in the Balkans often seems to differ little from those in some of the EU member states that proclaim the greatest piety towards human rights. One might well be better off as a Rom in Bulgaria or Serbia than in the Czech Republic, or as a Bosniak in Serbia than a Turk in Germany, and the position of Arabs in France has a lot in common with that of Albanians in Serbia or Serbs in Kosovo.

What especially is not working well is the insistence that the countries of ex-Yugoslavia establish some kind of common understanding of the events of the 1990s, or earlier. By the nature of wars of nationalist wars of secession and the consolidation of ethnic states, there are some fairly major events that simply will not be placed into a common understanding between the public politics and the elites of the contesting nations, for quite a long time if indeed ever. For example, on August 5 of 2007 I had the chance to watch Croatian television’s broadcast of the celebrations in Knin marking the victory of Croatian forces in the “homeland war,” and on Serbian television a documentary on the expulsion of most of the Serbs from Croatia that accompanied that victory. Croatian TV had almost nothing on the latter topic or on the murders of Serbs who stayed, including many elderly people, but the Serbian show had very little on the forcible expulsion of Croats from the “Republic of Srpska Krajina” in 1991. The events of August 1995 in Croatia were simultaneously a disaster for those Serbs who simply wanted to continue living in their ancestral homes in the Krajina region, while at the same time it really was the ultimate event in realizing the dream of a Croatia of, by and for Croats that had driven Croatian nationalist politics from Ante Starčević in the mid-19th century through Franjo Tuđman in the late 20th.

This is not to say that “ancient animosities” must last forever, but rather that no-one should expect them to be assuaged quickly. And this message should not be surprising to anyone who looks at commemorations in American history. To take an example from the American revolution, the first memorial created at Concord,
Massachusetts, 60 years after the first skirmish in the war, referred to the place as the spot where “was made the first forcible resistance to British aggression,” and on which “the first of the Enemy fell.” In 1910, the grave of these “Enemy” was finally marked, with the words that “they died to keep the past upon its throne.” Yet just after World War II, the tenor changed, and the monument placed then refers to the American rather than the British dead, and then says that the British fled and thus “began the separation of two kindred nations, now happily long united in peace.”

It only took 170 years to bring about this happy reunion! Historical memory is still not unified on the other border: a major monument in Mexico City is to the heroes who died trying to defend the city against the invading Americans, in 1847.

But the British after the revolution were far away (or in Canada – about 100,000 Loyalists fled or were driven from the newly independent USA, 4% of the population [Phillips 1999: 322]). Conflicting commemoration of former enemies who were once again fellow-citizens was common in the USA for the century after the Civil War – or, as our late colleague Dennison Rusinow, a native Floridian, always corrected me, the War Between the States, or the War of Northern Aggression. [I should note that as a native New Englander whose triple-great grandfather was in the Union army at Gettysburg, I may not be an unbiased source here]. The “honored dead” referred to by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address were those of the Union Army only – the Confederate dead were not buried in the national cemetery there, and monuments to the Confederate forces at Gettysburg were constructed only decades after those to the Union (1870s – 1880s), the first in 1917 (Virginia), the last in 1982 (Tennessee), and only three formerly Confederate states had erected monuments before the 100th anniversary of the battle, in 1963. As recently as the OPEC oil embargo of 1973, there were bumper stickers saying “Let the Yankee Bastards Freeze!”

All of which is simply to say that the idea of creating a unifying history for these various states is naïve, and contrary to the experience of other parts of the world.

“Justice” as Roadblock

A more seriously counter-productive effort at molding a uniform, officialized history has been the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal (ICTY) to provide “justice” for the crimes committed during the wars in Yugoslavia. My view that this effort is counter-productive is grounded on several considerations:

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2 Thanks to Ann H. Hamilton of Wellesley College for recording these Concord monument texts.
First, the legitimacy of the ICTY has been rejected by most of the people throughout the region, and not just the peoples of the former Yugoslavia. Public opinion polls throughout the region have consistently shown that most people have low opinion of the Tribunal. One reason for this is that the members of each nation think that the purpose of the ICTY is to punish only those who victimized their people, and trust in the Tribunal vanishes as soon as a member of the subject nation is indicted – this happened, for example, among Croats when Croats were indicted, Bosniaks when Bosniaks were indicted, Kosovo Albanians when Kosovo Albanians were indicted. Being indicted has not injured the reputation of political leaders or generals. The prosecution of Milošević was so inept that the Serbian government that had extradited him to the Hague ended direct television broadcasts of the proceedings, while Slobo’s own party demanded that they continue. Similarly, Vojislav Šešelj’s party demanded that his trial be broadcast live, against the wishes of the government. Kosovo Albanian politician Ramush Haradinaj was at least as popular after ICTY indictment as he was before. Croatian General Ante Gotovina may be more popular than President Stipe Mesić, who extradited him to the Hague. Of course, it is widely thought that Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić was assassinated because he was threatening to send paramilitary figures to the Hague.

Nor should this result have been unanticipated, as it was naive to expect any other. The matter was put well by the James Brown Scott, legal advisor to the American delegation at the Versailles peace conference, in an article about why the US delegation had been against the demand of the French and British that the Kaiser be put on trial. Scott (1921: 254) pointed out the complete rejection of the Germans to demands that their military officers be put on trial, saying “we can imagine the feelings of the American people if the fortunes of war had permitted Germany to demand that General Pershing, commander-in-chief of the American armies should be handed over to the enemy.” Another American Civil War referent: perhaps the first person in modern times to be executed for war crimes was Capt. Henry Wirz, the commandant of the Confederate prisoner of war camp at Andersonville, hanged in 1865. In 1909, however, the Daughters of the Confederacy built a monument to him as a “hero-martyr” who had been “judicially murdered” (McPherson 1988: 802). With the possible exception of Nuremberg, it is hard to find war-crimes trials ever being accepted by the nation whose soldiers were tried.

A more subtle reason for the unpopularity of the Tribunal can be seen in a study done in Sarajevo of passersby, mainly Bosniak, in Sarajevo in 2003, in that 70% of respondents thought that they had personally been victims of war crimes. Considering that Sarajevo had 500,000 inhabitants before the war, and that total casualties during it were about 10,000 dead and half of them were military personnel, it would not be possible for 70% of the population to have been victims of what any reasonable court could consider to be war crimes. Since the majority of people really believe that they were victims regardless of the legal provisions
governing war crimes, no court could possibly work to their satisfaction (Hagan 2005). Even the Prosecutor of the ICTY has come to realize that the Tribunal will not gain acceptance in the Balkans. At a meeting in Sarajevo in March 2005, she acknowledged that “The debate on war crimes in the former Yugoslavia is not subsiding. It is present in the daily life and media, and always politicized .... the public is only interested about those suspected or accused, or in politically, not judicially, defined truth.”

Thus perhaps the only more or less unified sentiment in the region that the Tribunal has succeeded in creating is that nobody has faith in it. But it was naïve to think that they ever would. In regard to such historical events there are always a number of cross-cutting elements to “the truth,” and I’m reminded of the comment made by one local expert to representatives of the ICTY’s prosecutor, when asked to testify against defendants of his own nation: “Everything you want me to say is true, but it isn’t our part of the truth” (I should note that the person in question is generally regarded as part of the anti-nationalist elite). Referring again to the former Yugoslavia, which portion of “the truth” can fit universally?

Some have seen the ICTY as following the example of the Nuremberg Tribunal, but the Nuremberg process was quick: the highest ranking German officials and officers were hanged in October 1946, and the tribunal itself ended its work in 1949, less than five years after the end of the war. In contrast, the ICTY issued indictments through March 2005, fourteen years after some of the events concerned, and is scheduled to end its work in 2010, almost twenty years after the Yugoslav wars began, and fifteen years after the end of the Bosnian and Croatian wars, eleven after the Kosovo conflict.

Is it really likely that a court that tries to keep the memory of massacres fresh for twenty years, and that is overwhelmingly mistrusted by the very people to whom it claims to bring justice, is a force for reconciliation and the building of stable political relations in the Balkans? It may be possible to find the disappeared and re-open mass graves years after a conflict is over, as recent efforts to do just that in Chile, Argentina and Mexico show. But the matter may still be touchy. Commemoration of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War did not begin until more than 25 years after the death of Franco (Los Angeles Times, Dec. 8 2004), and removing the last statue of him from Madrid was only accomplished in 2005 (see BBC News, 17 March 2005 and accompanying links). One recent commentator has noted that demands for investigating now the crimes of the Franco era rupture the very basis of the inter-elite agreements that made possible Spain’s peaceful transition from authoritarian rule (Davis 2005). Had the international community taken the principled stand that the major figures of the Franco regime must be punished as soon as the dictator died, it is hard to believe that Spain’s transition would have been peaceful.
Pretensions of “Justice” in Place of Infrastructure

The difference between the economic support given to the UCTY and that given to actually rebuilding the infrastructure of the former Yugoslavia is also illuminating. Justice may be beyond price, but courts cost money, and the ICTY costs a lot of money. While its first annual budget (1993) was modest at $276,0003 by the next year the budget was $11 million. By 2001, the ICTY was budgeted at $96 million, and for 2006-07, $276,474,100. All told, from 1993-2005, ICTY budgets totaled about $1.3 billion. In February 2007 the Tribunal employed 1144 staff members (figures from ICTY web page).

By way of comparison, consider the budgets of other international agencies working to rebuild Bosnia and Herzegovina. The task is immense: according to the World Bank, during the war, production fell by 90%, GDP fell by 80%, and half of the population was displaced; the economy is still only at 70% of its prewar level, with a per capita income of $1540.4 Major actors have been:

*The World Bank:* since 1996, the World Bank has committed $1.1 billion directly to rebuild infrastructure and to promote growth.5 World Bank aid has included $30 million to modernize the educational system, $25 million for the rehabilitation of hospitals and clinics. *Thus,* each year, the ICTY gets about four times the total amount invested by the World Bank in Bosnia’s hospitals and clinics.

*United Nations Development Program (UNDP):* One of the primary UN aid agencies, UNDP spent a total of $163 million in Bosnia between 1996 and 2004. *Comparison to ICTY:* total UNDP expenditures since 1996 are about 60% of the ICTY budget for 2004-05 alone.

*United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR):* More than 600,000 refugees and internally displaced persons remained in the Balkans as of 2004. The primary agency charged with assisting them, UNHCR, had a 2004 budget of $50,356,841 (UNHCR 2004). By 2007, the number of refugees and IDPs in Bosnia was down to 90,000, and the UNHCR budget planning was for about $6.7 million to assist them, or about 2.4% of the amount that the ICTY will spend in handling fewer than 100 cases.

*OSCE:* The OSCE is mandated as the key institution for building democratic political institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Its budget for 2004 was 19 million Euros, or a bit over $20 million. The entire OSCE budget for 2007 is 168 million Euros, less than that of the ICTY. *Comparison to ICTY:* The OSCE mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina has a budget of about 15% of the ICTY.

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3 All budget figures are from http://www.un.org/icty/glance/index.htm.
4 http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/BOSNIAHERZEXTN
5 http://www.worldbank.org/tenthings/ECA/1-bosnia.html
Office of the High Representative (OHR): The Dayton peace agreement that ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina created the OHR to oversee Bosnia’s transition to peace and stability. OHR is the key international civilian institution in Bosnia and is effectively the only governmental authority that reaches all of the country. As of January 2007, OHR’s budget is about 6.6 million Euros with a staff of 46 internationals and about 200 locals. Comparison to the ICTY: the OHR budget is about 3.6% of the annual budget of the ICTY.

Whether “justice” should be valued more than economic and political development is a question that has not, to my knowledge, been asked. But let us imagine what the situation in the “white hole” of the Western Balkans might have been had the $1.3 billion spent on the ICTY, or even half of it, been spent on actually rebuilding the region.

An Empire of Infrastructure and Values?

I said earlier that an empire is a set of mechanisms for bringing separate nations, and states, into a cooperative economic framework. Past empires have stressed loyalty to the Emperor, which the EU certainly does not do; and how many roads actually lead to Brussels? But that last rhetorical question may be part of the answer: not many, because there are so many roads leading so many places. The EU may be more effectively implementing what was once said to be the working principle of Yugoslavia: multi-centered centralism, but doing it with so many centers of so many different kinds of power that, unlike Yugoslavia, the EU can survive.

This imperial structure is not really democratic, and cannot be. Economic infrastructure is often placed at a remove as far as possible from daily politics: think, in the U.S., of the Federal Reserve system and its chairman, or of the regulation of interstate commerce, and disputes arising from interstate commerce, to the Federal government and federal courts. The “democratic deficit” of the EU is famous. The elected European Parliament actually has almost no legislative competence, while effective economic regulation is carried out by bodies that have no more accountability to voters than does the Federal Reserve’s Board of Governors: none whatever.

In place of the Emperor, though, the EU does have those Values (democracy, freedom, social justice, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities) upon which it was supposedly based, even though it was actually based on increasing the economic value of trade. Rather perversely, I think, these Values are now being invoked to justify exclusion of the Western Balkans from the infrastructures that would increase the economic value of trade. With this in mind, I
must question those academic analyses that demand “conditionality,” the meeting of various kinds of moral standards by candidate countries, before EU membership can be granted.

The expansion of infrastructure for transport and communication, though, may have beneficial effects even if EU membership is delayed. The adoption of the standards needed to trade with EU countries takes place long before membership. And it is possible to have the benefits of integration into Europe without joining the EU: cf. Switzerland and Norway.

Whether an empire can be held together by shared “values” is anyone’s guess, and I am, frankly, skeptical. The meanings given to specific “values” can vary and are almost certain to do so over time. It seems that it was no easier to hold together the Kalifat than it was the various Christian empires of Europe, and those in the US who feared a monolithic world communism in the 1950s miscalculated the importance of local factors, thus predicting neither Tito’s break with Stalin in 1948 or the Chinese break from the Soviet Union a decade later. In 2007, the Polish government seemed to be working hard at testing the limits of institutions of “democracy,” with lustration policies that seemed most reminiscent of the McCarthy period in the USA; and the concepts of protection of minorities and of human rights are also being tested in the EU, as they are in the US, in the name of “security.”

An empire of common infrastructure, regulations and standards, though, may have greater durability, since it would be based on facilitating the common activities of people rather than pretending to depend on them thinking in a way that is politically correct. Recall the carry-overs from earlier empires that have given elements of commonality to the peoples of the region: scripts, religious traditions, foods in their variety (every nation has its own version of burek), legal traditions, competing yet for that reason complementary folklore…. If I may cite my Pittsburgh colleague Milica Bakić-Hayden (2006) in a keynote that she gave a couple of years ago on imperial legacies in the Balkans, the constitution of the Balkans peoples lies in their different, and differentiating, manifestations of elements of their common imperial heritages.

**Anticipatory Nostalgia for Diversity**

By the end of this paper, I am afraid that I am sounding rather like a neo-liberal (never a neo-con, please!), in advocating progress through trade and common infrastructure. So perhaps I may don again my anthropological mantle, the one that revels in the differences between peoples and cultures and sees uniformity as the greatest danger to diversity (it might be interesting on some other occasion to debate the conundrum that many folks who claim to honor diversity also are opposed to
many of the cultural practices that distinguish peoples from each other), and engage in some anticipatory nostalgia, for some elements of the diversity that has defined the Balkans through the self-differentiation of its peoples. In doing so I may well be “longing for a past by concentrating on a future yet to arrive,” to adopt a graceful phrase by Esra Ozyurek (2006: 9), though not quite with her analytical bent. She and others have argued that nostalgia is a corollary of neoliberal modernism that creates commodities out of memories, thus creating the desire necessary for consumption.

Yet there may also be utility to seeing nostalgia as an aid to countering uniformity via the elimination of differences, that oft-complained of part of globalization.

Let me be concrete, with food, drink and music. On the food part, one of the less fortunate consequences of the advancement of trade and commerce in the Balkans, as elsewhere, is the rapid disappearance of tasty, fresh local fruits and vegetables for those hardy, cheap but truly awful-tasting hybrids that we see now in the US and western Europe. A common complaint throughout the region over the past decade is that you can’t get good tomatoes any more, and it’s pretty much true, at least in the markets in Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania where I’ve looked. EU standards, one is told; though the cheap tomatoes are often from Turkey, thus illustrating how the frontier of EU regulation and standards moves ahead of membership.

But the triumph of cheap, tasteless tomatoes can be written off purely to market economics. More intriguing is the rapid decline of what used to be one of the diagnostic social commodities of the region, Turkish coffee (or Greek, Cypriot, Serbian, black, boiled, “domestic” or “homemade,” or, least controvertibly, “our” [Bakić-Hayden 2006]). What is interesting to me is that it is increasingly difficult to get it in public in the region. I don’t think that this is because people don’t like it; they still make it at home, and for Balkans visitors to my university’s Center for Russian & East European Studies, one of the happier moments of their stay in the USA comes when we serve real coffee (Turkish/ Greek etc.) from a real džezva. But in restaurants in Balkan cities, one finds increasingly, and by this time in many places almost exclusively, espresso.

Both forms of coffee have partisans but, unlike the tomatoes, this is not a matter of taste in the mouth. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis of the sociology of the judgment of taste argues that decisions of esthetical superiority are not grounded in the objective characteristics of the subject being evaluated, but rather depend on the social status of those who claim to prefer each component of the set. Using this principle, the rapid replacement of Turkish coffee by espresso in public settings in the Balkans reflects the superior status associations of espresso, European rather than Balkan, Italian rather than Turkish. We see similar processes at work in the displacement of indigenous wine grapes with the supposedly more noble ones of
France (though the idea or marketing varietals is from California), but fortunately the Bulgarians still hold their own with mavrud, the Croats with plavac mali (the original zinfandel), the Herzegovinians with žilavka, the Montenegrins with vranac…. Whether these work for export is another matter, but maybe the popularity of these local varieties in the region is a mark of the cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997) that still prevails in the region.

Let me close with a look at the symbolism of music, admitting from the start that this is purely an exercise in interpretation, a bit afield from my usual grounding in empirical social science. The texts to be analyzed are from that grand annual exhibition of European kitsch, the Eurovision Song contest, which everyone bemoans and yet everyone watches.

The surprise winner in 2007 was Marija Šerifović from Serbia, with a song called molitva (prayer). It’s a pretty enough song, but while it is not sung in English, the style is distinctly “western” and otherwise not stylistically distinctive – it could be sung by Celine Dion, were she to learn Serbian. It is certainly not “Balkan” in any identifiable sense other than by language.

The singer is from the Balkans, but with a twist. And here I have to go completely off the tracks of empirical social science, unless we really buy into Balkans conspiracy theories and say that Šerifović’s win was rigged or purposes of political symbolism; but the symbolism is just too good to pass up.

First, Marija Šerifović is a member of the Roma minority, but she’s singing thoroughly non-Roma music – this is not Esma Redžepova. Further she was accompanied by what the British press referred to as “the Sappho squad,” women in men’s suits backing up the singer. The word immediately went out in Belgrade that Marija is a lesbian. Now, is this a dream of a European Balkans, or what? A lesbian Roma woman from Serbia, singing a very non-Balkans song, as winner of the Eurovision Song contest? What a triumph of the EU’s officialized European values! And is this a different, European Serbia, in which a lesbian Roma woman can become a national heroine?

And it is a good song, very well sung (I said earlier that I have old-fashioned and romantic tastes). But the music has not much connection to the Balkans.

On the other hand, the 2006 Eurovision Song contest had a song, this one from Croatia by Severina Vučković, that was very much Balkans in arrangement and sources. The symbolism of it is another matter, however. This music is clearly from the Balkans, and Severina was criticized in Croatia by people who said that the music was Serbian (she and her composer say it is Dalmatian). It has some standard touches of male dominance (Ajde pile moje! ... Opet mala! ... Ajde moja!), but they’re ironic. The incongruity between the singer’s red dress and the traditional men’s costumes is great, and if one follows the words, this is a self-confident young woman mocking guys who approach her (ma znam ja dobro takve kao ti [roughly
“Hey, I know your type only too well”!}), and is clearly leading the band. In the commercial video, her stiletto heels are dominating Zagreb. And the song ends with that nearly universal Balkans linguistic carry-over from the time of Ottoman political, hence Turkish linguistic dominance, Ajde!

It is not exactly that Europeans were looking for ballads that year – Severina lost out to Lordi, a Finnish hard rock/ heavy metal band, with the very consciously sacrilegious song “Hard Rock Hallelujah.” We could analyze the symbolism of that victory some other time. It seems that Europe was not ready and willing to reward an obviously Balkan style, even as a send-up and inversion of traditional images of Balkan male dominance.

The Balkans, on the other hand, as a region seems still to maintain a diversity greater than that in the rest of Europe. Back to music one more time, the biggest pop music festival in Europe is now in Serbia, the Exit Festival every July; yet the Guča festival of Balkans brass bands, also in Serbia every August, is even bigger than that. It is my hope that the infrastructure of the Balkans can be rebuilt without leading to the diminishing of the very differences that make the place interesting, and that let the Balkans, perhaps more than the rest of Europe, make truly manifest the motto of the European Union: “United in Diversity” – but still very diverse.

References