Book Review

Ivan Lovrenović, *Bosnia: A Cultural History*, New York University Press, 2001, pp. 254.

Ivan Lovrenović's *Bosnia: A Cultural History* seeks to fill a gap in the literature relating to this newly independent Balkan nation. At the same time, a general history of Bosnia —by a native Bosnian intellectual, moreover— is important for another reason, namely that it presents the history of Bosnia as distinct from the rest of Yugoslavia. The same thing is happening in all the other former Yugoslav republics[1]. Furthermore, the fact that this particular monograph focuses on Bosnia's cultural history reflects the quest for a separate Bosnian identity, another characteristic feature of the recent literature coming out of the former Yugoslav republics.

It must be noted, first of all, that Lovrenović is neither a historian nor an ethnologist, but rather —as he says in his biographical note— a "novelist, essayist and journalist". This explains the deficiencies in his scholarly methodology, as evidenced, for instance, by the absence of references or the summary account of a vast period ranging from prehistoric times to the present day. However, these failings are somewhat mitigated by the lavish illustrations, maps, index, glossary, chronology, and extensive bibliography, as also by the fact that the writer is, after all, focusing on the cultural aspect of Bosnian history.

Although Lovrenović shuns the extreme positions adopted by some of his Balkan confrères, who trace their nations' history back into the depths of antiquity, he does repeat some of the same motifs, and the narrative is dominated by his efforts to locate distinctive "Bosnian" cultural features. Thus, for instance, he asserts in chapter four ("The Early Slav Centuries") that the local Slavonic population preserved archaic forms of social life. Indeed he presents this as unique in the Balkans (p. 40). Rather more debatable is what he says about an "autonomous Bosnian culture" in the Middle Ages, basing his argument on the existence of a specific Church and a specific script, the latter a combination of Cyrillic and Glagolitic which Lovrenović terms *Bosancica*. It

1. See the recent publications: Robert J. Donia and John V. A. Fine Jr., *Bosnia and Hercegovina: A Tradition Betrayed*, Hurst & Co., 1994; James Gow and Cathie Carmichael, *Slovenia and the Slovenes: A Small State and the New Europe*, Hurst & Co., 2000; Branimir Anzulović, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*, Hurst & Co., 1999; Ivo Goldstein, *Croatia: A History* (Eng. tr. Nikolina Jovanović), Hurst & Co., 2001.

was certainly not exclusive to Bosnia, for it was one of the variants of Cyrillic that also appeared in the areas of Serbia and Dalmatia. The same applies to the grave monuments (*stećci*), which are also presented as a specifically Bosnian feature, although they are found in other parts of Yugoslavia and are believed to have been influenced to a great extent by Roman sepulchral monuments[2]. No less contentious is the question of the Bosnian Church, over which opinion has been divided for decades under the influence of more modern cultural and national ideologies. Lovrenović rejects the view that the Bosnian Church was a heretical church which espoused the teachings of the Bogomils, and argues that it was an "independent national" church founded on the teachings of Cyril and Methodius and on the struggle for independence from Rome. He also considers that the Bogomilism theory was fabricated by the nineteenth-century European Romantics, and contends that local contemporary sources contain no evidence that the Church embraced Bogomilism (pp. 51-54). Other scholars who have investigated the subject —such as Fine, Norris, and Cirkovic— reject this view, however. According to them, the Church of Bosnia was established in the mid-thirteenth century and adopted the local heresy, which was strengthened and validated during the struggles against the Hungarian invaders, who fuelled the inhabitants' anti-Catholic sentiments[3].

The question of identity returns in the following chapters, which deal with the Ottoman conquest and Ottoman rule. Specifically, there is a discussion of the inhabitants' use of the term *Bosnjani* to define their national identity (p. 93). However, one cannot speak of "national identity" at that time without strong supporting evidence, and Lovrenović seems to realize this himself, for he subsequently avoids using the term, preferring to speak of "cultural identity" or even "three cultural identities" in the nineteenth century. The result, according to Lovrenović, was an "exceptionally complicated and ambivalent society, characterized on the one hand by cultural and spiritual isolationism, on the other by tolerance for difference as a normal aspect of life" (p. 108)[4]. He asserts that the real quest for a Bosnian identity began after 1950, and was stepped up during the recent civil war (pp. 181-210).

In the final chapter, Lovrenović seeks to define Bosnian identity, with

2. Gavro A. Skrivanić, *Oružje u srednovjekovnoj Srbiji, Bosni i Dubrovniku*, Naučno Delo, 1957.

3. John V. A. Fine Jr., *The Bosnian Church: A New Interpretation. A Study of the Bosnian Church and Its Place in State and Society from the 13th to the 15th Centuries*, Columbia University Press, 1975, p. 150; H. T. Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, Hurst & Co., 1993, pp. 43-47.

4. On the same subject, see *The Development of Spiritual Life in Bosnia Under the Influence of Turkish Rule*, (edited by Z. B. Juricic and J. Loud Durham), NC, 1991.

special reference to the Ottoman period, which conclusively marked the country's history. He disagrees with political historians' attitude to the period as "a spiritual and cultural vacuum, a deplorable and historically unproductive episode", and contrasts this with a cultural approach. The cultural history of the Turkish period, he believes, must start from a twofold cultural consideration of the phenomenon, which was characterized by the co-existence of the various cultural, ethnic, and religious entities: the Moslem Bosnians, the Orthodox Serbs, the Catholic Croats, and the Sephardic Jews. The result, he says, was a "folk culture ... characterized by a high degree of mutuality" (p. 224). Tito's model, by contrast, was based on the combined existence of three nations, Moslem, Serbian, and Croatian; which raises the question of what Bosnia is. A mechanistic group of nations composing a kind of entity? And if it is an entity, how can this be expressed in ethnic terms? Lovrenović believes that this is a pitfall to be avoided. This is the ethnic–political approach, and in this respect Bosnia remains a mystery (p. 225). For this reason, he prefers to adopt a different approach that regards multi-ethnicity and multi-culturality as component parts of Bosnian identity. According to this interpretation, the term "Bosnian" refers not to a nation or a region, but to a cultural process which, according to Lovrenović, has been going on for over a millennium (pp. 226-227).

Apart from its vagueness and its reference to questionable post-modernist theorems, this approach does not necessarily lead to a less unrealistic identity. After all, nations and nationalism are not more contrived structures than any other cultural, social, or ideological paradigms. According to the theorist of nationalism Anthony Smith, "nationalism ... is an ideological movement for attaing and maintaining the autonomy, unity and identity of a nation"[5]. How, then, does this concept differ from the quest for the *Bosnjani*'s identity?

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5. Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, Penguin Books, 1991, p. 74.