

harbor ethnically conceived and managed populations, while leaving the interconnected histories, economic solidarities, and hybrid lives socially marginalized and politically uncultivated" (185).

This rich ethnography's moving epilogue addresses the popular uprisings that swept through Bosnia in February 2014, explicitly rejecting the ethnonationalist political elite. With slogans like "We are Hungry in Three Languages," protesters evoked a transethnic *narod*. Because formal institutions were utterly incapable of addressing their needs, and could only see them as members of ethnic collectivities, Hromadžić notes that protesters had no choice but to take the streets. In this, Bosnia-Herzegovina, so often treated as exceptional, may be like much of the world today.

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Cultures of Democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria: How Ideas Shape Publics. By James Dawson. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. xii, 212 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Tables. \$119.95, hard bound.

James Dawson has identified a gap in the literature on postcommunist southeastern Europe: even though Bulgaria and Serbia are neighboring countries, they are rarely compared. It is this lacuna that he intends to fill, and his study offers one methodological argument and one empirical claim: that quantitative comparisons of democracies (such as by Freedom House) which consistently rank Bulgaria's democratization as above Serbia's are misleading. Hence what is necessary are qualitative explorations of democratic culture that seek to determine whether social practices actually contribute to the creation of pluralistic public spheres and liberal democratic citizenship. It is precisely this line of research that the author pursues, and his main empirical claim is that "the Serbian public sphere [is] clearly more contested, pluralist and (at the margins) more liberal relative to Bulgaria" (i).

The book is divided in five chapters, a conclusion and a postscript. Chapter one contains Dawson's critique of Freedom House's approach, and a discussion of the set of normative criteria—derived from the work of political theorists such as Arendt, Habermas, Mouffe and Wedeen—which should inform qualitative studies of contemporary democracies. Chapter two provides an outline of "the comparative ethnology of public spheres," the method Dawson uses in order to go beyond "formalistic measurements" (33). There is also a brief description of his data-gathering strategies, and preliminary information about the locales where he carried out his field work, including Niš (Serbia) and Plovdiv (Bulgaria). In chapter three the author narrates the major political developments in the two countries from the 1970s to the late 2000s and alleges that what emerged in Serbia is vibrant pluralism grounded in "distinct philosophical platforms" whereas what materialized in Bulgaria is a vacuous "mathematical pluralism" (65). Chapters four and five purport to investigate, respectively, "public sphere pluralism in Niš" (97), and the "the absence of public sphere pluralism in Plovdiv" (133). In the conclusion, Dawson explains Serbia's superior liberal-democratic performance with reference to the two countries' communist past: while Tito's regime facilitated the rise of liberal sub-cultures in former Yugoslavia, Zhivkov's repressive dictatorship stifled such developments in Bulgaria. In the postscript, he examines developments that occurred after he completed his fieldwork in 2011.

Dawson's project is promising, but it is marred by two major problems. The first is the lack of a comprehensive comparative framework. Arguably, the theorists he engages with in chapter one may help us determine whether the behavior of citizens

and politicians falls short of liberal-democratic ideals, but they put forward few interpretative clues or methodological guidelines as to how existing democracies might be compared. Dawson acknowledges the need to distinguish “more democratic practices from less democratic ones” (14), but his book contains no systematic discussion of the analytical criteria to be deployed in that pursuit. His conclusions seem to be grounded into a mixture of overconfidence in his own judgement and the questionable assumption that the facts speak for themselves. Here is an example of his rhetorical effort at persuasion: “On the basis of my fieldwork, I can simply report that the Serbian public sphere as observed in Niš is considerably more prominent than that in Plovdiv” (57).

The second problem is that his empirical evidence is never presented in an orderly fashion. The book contains no methodological appendix; who the author’s respondents are and what they have actually said are topics addressed in a very cavalier manner. Chapters four and five, which were supposed to summarize this information, are diluted by lengthy digressions on the general characteristics of the two national political cultures, and by prolonged polemics with other authors. At times it seems, therefore, that Dawson resorts to deliberate cherry-picking: his analysis is reduced to somewhat random juxtapositions of selectively chosen fragmentary quotes from “liberal” Serbs and “illiberal” Bulgarians—a dubious strategy that undermines the heuristic value of his comparative generalizations. Moreover, there is clearly a disjuncture between the facts he reports and the inferences he makes. Dawson acknowledges that during the Slobodan Milošević era, “in Serbia . . . actors openly hostile to liberal democratic principles gained more power and influence” (62), and as a result “civil society groups [were] marginalized from the mainstream media and political power” (77), whereas in Bulgaria there is “less evidence of illiberal excesses” (93) and the country’s president, Petar Stoyanov, “articulated . . . a decidedly liberal vision of political and social life” (86). Still, he insists that it is in Serbia and not in Bulgaria that liberal values became more deeply entrenched. Likewise, in the postscript he asserts that in the aftermath of the 2012–2014 electoral cycle in Serbia, an increasingly authoritarian regime has been shaping up, whereas in Bulgaria the allegedly anemic civil society was able to rally behind a set of distinctly liberal demands for more accountability, transparency and participatory decision-making, and to force the resignations of two compromised cabinets, Boyko Borissov’s in 2013 and Plamen Oresharski’s in 2014. These developments obviously contradict the book’s main thesis—and yet he refuses to modify his categorical verdict: “I argue that . . . illiberal democracy in Bulgaria has not been decisively overturned . . . and that liberal-cosmopolitan activism in Serbia has not been extinguished” (185). In view of the data he himself adduces, such conclusions seem contrived.

What this book demonstrates is that occasionally the ambition to challenge well established scholarly opinions is not matched by methodological sophistication and the ability to come to grips with complex and contradictory evidence. Readers prone to cling to the preconceived notion that the further east from Vienna one travels, the uglier things get, will be reassured by Dawson’s study. The rest will find it disappointingly simplistic.

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