

Taking Transitional Justice to the Grassroots: Socioeconomic Justice and International Intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract:

Daniela Lai's book *Socioeconomic Justice* makes a compelling case for the expansion of Transitional Justice mechanisms to include justice claims made within the community in post-war contexts, where jobs and livelihoods are rarely seen as a priority. This book guides us through a maze of international intervention, war-time socioeconomic violence and its lingering effects in peacetime, along with justice claims after the 2014 protests, by studying political economy of war and peace on one side and redefining transitional justice mechanisms on the other.

Hin zur Basis der Übergangsjustiz: Sozioökonomische Gerechtigkeit und internationale Intervention in Bosnien und Herzegowina

German Abstract:

Daniela Lai plädiert in ihrem Buch *Socioeconomic Justice* für eine Ausweitung der Mechanismen der Übergangsjustiz auf Gerechtigkeitsansprüche innerhalb der Gemeinschaft in Nachkriegskontexten, in denen Arbeitsplätze und Lebensunterhalt selten als Priorität angesehen werden. Dieses Buch führt uns durch das Labyrinth der internationalen Intervention, der sozioökonomischen Gewalt während des Krieges und ihrer anhaltenden Auswirkungen in Friedenszeiten sowie der Gerechtigkeitsansprüche nach den Protesten von 2014, indem es einerseits die politische Ökonomie von Krieg und Frieden untersucht und andererseits die Mechanismen der *Transitional Justice* neu definiert.

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At the outset, I would like to acknowledge the importance of this book and at the same time its inherent belatedness. It is some two decades overdue, not because there is something wrong with Daniela Lai's research or the output, on the contrary, it is because Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has been mired in transitional justice (TJ) programs and experimental projects regarding peace and state building, reconciliation etc., many of which have failed to deliver the promised outcomes (see another great recent publication by Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). With the closure of the International Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) as the TJ spearhead in the region, we are left wondering why criminal justice was prioritized over other forms of justice while local communities were left to cope with ramifications of socioeconomic violence on their own.

This is exactly where Lai's book intervenes by "studying justice and human rights as a social practice, where the experiences and claims of communities are put at the centre of scholarly inquiry" (p. 6). *Socioeconomic Justice* argues for an expanded understanding of TJ, one that takes into account how affected communities understand wartime socioeconomic violence and the way it lingers on in the form of post-war socioeconomic injustices. Furthermore, Lai does not neglect the country's postsocialist past, rapid deindustrialization due to wartime destruction and privatizations – warranted and monitored by international institutions. She treats international intervention as a complex network of institutions (p. 41) whose actions Lai critically assesses for their disregard for socioeconomic justice.

The book is divided into eight chapters with an appendix on data collection, ethics and considerations from and of the field, followed by a bibliography and an index. In the introductory chapter, Lai grounds her justice-based exploration of political economy of war and, subsequently, peace in order to tackle persistent socioeconomic grievances. Lai argues for de-centering criminal justice as the main tool of TJ and invites us to look at causes of economic marginalization and long-term effects of socioeconomic violence by studying the claims made within the community. In her words, Lai is interested in how communities *experience* injustice and how they *conceptualize* justice, while offering a critique of “how international actors can affect socioeconomic justice issues in transitional contexts” and whether it can “lead to social mobilization at the grassroots level” (p. 9).

In the second chapter, Lai offers a theoretical background for her approach to justice, introducing Nancy Fraser’s tripartite model (recognition, redistribution and representation) in a move that connects transitional and social justice (p. 19). This chapter starts with an overview of critique of liberal transitional justice concepts, with a separate section for the transformative justice debate (p. 22–24) on which Lai builds her socioeconomic justice approach. In chapter three, Lai situates the country’s political economy at the intersection of two posts (war and socialism). Postsocialist condition is defined as fundamentally a community’s relationship to the past “against which they assess their present condition and aspirations for a just future” (p. 45). On an economic plane, Lai traces the diminishing of the BiH industry to around 5% of its prewar capacity, along with other structural impacts like the shrinking of the workforce (halved by 1998) and displacement of almost half the population, internally or externally.

The fourth chapter offers a critique of political economy of international involvement in post-war BiH, with a perspective on justice that included setting up courts, finding missing persons, defining welfare, reparations, returns and reconstructions, but also numerous conditionalities regarding fiscal prudence, labor laws and economic policy, (de)industrialization and privatizations plans. Lai mostly relies here on expert reports, secondary literature and her interviews with representatives of international organizations in BiH. Chapter five introduces the case studies of Prijedor and Zenica, two mid-sized industrial cities that suffered various degrees of ethnic violence but both saw massive deindustrialization after the 1990’s and no recognition of the socioeconomic violence which occurred during the war and persisted in its aftermath, like access to jobs and welfare. This chapter weaves together theoretical parts of the

argument and community justice claims arising from wartime grievances. In Prijedor the ethnic violence often overshadowed the scope of socioeconomic violence while Zenica's case shows more directly the ramifications of deindustrialization and privatization, as well as the international organizations' complicity in these processes.

Chapter six stresses the "importance of past violence and memories of socialism in shaping claims and mobilizing citizens for social justice outside the conventional frameworks of transitional justice activism" (p. 145), where Lai takes the TJ justice claims to the grassroots level by analyzing public outcries coming out of the 2014 protests and plenums throughout BiH. The concluding chapter reiterates the analytical moves the book makes, stressing once again the justice claims made within the community, which is followed by an appendix – not less valuable for its reflections on the chosen analytical framework for data analyses, details surrounding fieldwork as well as her choices to decenter over-researched communities as well as ethnic identity of her participants. This will be of value for any young researcher, showing the importance of approaching the field innovatively and boldly in order to research a topic often dismissed as irrelevant or unproductive to think about.

While Bosnian protesters of 2014 have been criticized for setting up a 'demand-making machine' through plenum (see *Endnotes*, "Gather Us from among the Nations." Vol. 4, 2015), Lai explores structural inequalities and injustices behind the demands and makes a compelling case for a holistic approach to justice in a society doubly burdened by war and transition. Having come out 25 years after the conflict, *Socioeconomic Justice* gives a great account of how persistent the effects of socioeconomic violence can be if not addressed systematically, or ignored altogether. Therefore, this book is an invaluable source for all those interested in teaching or researching post-conflict or transitional societies, grassroots approaches to justice, critical international relations, as well as political economy of war and peace.