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## The Politics of Simulation. Fake Repairs in a Serbian Industrial Town

**Abstract.** The author explores reparations of urban sites in Bor, a copper processing town in eastern Serbia. She looks at recent attempts at reparations carried out by an industrial company in the context of the town's and the company's 'revival'. She explores ethnographically how the reparations were seen as deceptions, temporary, partial, fake, and superficial, but simultaneously praised as 'at least something'. The author argues that this ambivalence, which consisted of simultaneous positive and negative dispositions towards the promise the repairs held, resulted in people's involvement in the 'politics of simulation' of the town's and the copper company's 'revival'. She also shows how through people's hope for order, and through their hope of being moral state subjects, the state became an object of emotional investment.

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### Introduction

While Bor, a copper processing town in eastern Serbia, was once a symbol of socialist industrial prosperity and modernism, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s (and further into the 2000s) it became a metaphor for postsocialist crisis, a heavily polluted environment, and a devastated town. The town depended (and still does) on the fortunes of a copper processing company, *Rudarsko topioničarski basen Bor* (Mining and Smelter Basin Bor, RTB Bor). It seemed that privatization of this rundown, state-run company in the 2000s would ultimately lead to the bankruptcy and downfall of the whole town, characterized by a mono-structural economy. During this period, the devastation of the company took on material form in the urban landscape, with various shades of grey dominating the urbanscape.

Nevertheless, there was the prospect of a revival in the company's fortunes after 2000, followed by large foreign and state investments in 2010, due to the rise of the copper prices on the global market. While I was in the field, between

August 2012 and September 2013, I witnessed some of the material reflections of these promises. Bor was officially regaining its 'old glow', from the socialist times, through a material, cultural, social, economic, and also symbolic revitalization. The renovation of many sites had preceded my arrival to Bor, including the painting of facades, repair of public lighting and roads, building a zoo, new fountains, the renovation of the Hotel Jezero on the near Bor Lake, the scattering of the objects from the open-air mining museum, and other initiatives of this kind.

During my stay in the town, I could see how people's encounters with these material renovations more often than not evoked ambivalence with regard to the promises the repairs held. By focusing on people's encounters with these reparations, as particular sites of affective engagement, I look at a particular moment of political promise that brought a new horizon of hope for a better life, which evoked the simultaneous embracement and criticism of the reparations carried out in the town by the company and the municipality. The following vignette illustrates how people considered the repairs to be fake or deceit, but which, at the same time, succeeded in providing them with a feeling of being 'good enough'.

In winter 2013, I talked to Milorad, an activist from the workers' union. Milorad was affectionately mocking the head director of the company, seen by many citizens as an autocratic person who held total power over the town. Milorad mentioned one 'achievement' that particularly annoyed him: this was an 'Aqua Park' behind the sports centre. The Aqua Park had been built to enhance the space behind the centre, which had been a wide and empty field before the intervention. The Aqua Park resembled a small, shallow, artificial pond with a thin geyser in the middle. For Milorad, the Aqua Park was 'fake', a fraud:

'You cannot swim in it, and instead that is what an Aqua Park is supposed to be. What kind of Aqua Park is it? Aqua Park [...] it is more of a swamp (*baruština*).'

The name 'Aqua Park' was given by the local media. I also heard from one of my older interlocutors, who worked for RTB, that he and his colleagues called it 'The head director's puddle', while they referred to the way in which all the endeavours at the 'revival' of the town and of the company had been ascribed to just one powerful person—namely the head director, who was also one of the main politicians in the local government. Despite such criticisms, Milorad agreed that this investment enhanced the space. According to him, it was an ugly wasteland, but 'now it at least looks like something' (*barem sad liči na nešto*). This 'sort of' Aqua Park was criticized many times by my interlocutors—the way it was positioned, how it did not work properly, and so on. Milorad's opinion was shared by many, and belonged to the list of 'things done in the town' that were criticized but also praised for being 'at least something'.

Milorad's affective reaction over what he described as a 'puddle' is paradigmatic of people's continuous affective preoccupation with how material reparations were carried out, sponsored by the company and the municipality to induce new life to the town after having been in decay and neglected for decades. I argue that this ambivalence, consisting of simultaneous positive and negative dispositions towards the promise the repairs held, contributed to people's involvement in the 'politics of simulation' of the town's and the company's 'revival'. Through people's hope for order, maintaining their hope, and their hope of being moral and state subjects, the state became an object of emotional investment.

My data stem from ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Bor, where I carried out participant observation in public places and at events especially related to the company's attempts to instil hope in the local community. I conducted informal and semi-structured interviews with the company's workers in various positions, their families, journalists, and representatives of municipal bodies. I spent time with older women who had been laid off from the plants, their families, and young adults who yearned for jobs at RTB, among others. I tried to understand the experiences of people who had different encounters with the attempts to revitalize and transform everyday life in Bor.

### **The Revival and 'Not Quite' Repairs**

The town of Bor and the copper processing company experienced a golden, prosperous period during the unique Yugoslav self-managed socialism, when Bor gained its urbanized infrastructure due to rapid industrial expansion, urbanization, and modernization conjointly promoted by the socialist regime. By the beginning of the 1990s, this giant industrial conglomerate employed around 20,000 people from across Yugoslavia, paying salaries that were among the highest in the country. The company has historically been, and still is, substantially anchored within the town's social and political life, prosperity, and development. Copper production in Bor until the mid-1980s was close to the production of copper in developed countries,<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that poor concentration of copper ore was characteristic of this mine. During the 1990s and after 2000, the production drastically dropped. The company is today the only producer of copper and precious metals in Serbia.

The image of a 'hopeless place', on the periphery of Serbia, impoverished and dilapidated, was especially strong after 2000, following the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime, when state support declined, the technology became severely outdated, the copper price was low, many workers were laid off, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ninoslav Cvetanović, *Bakar u Svetu (Copper in the world)*, Bor 2005, 160.

salaries were low. The town was dogged by a reputation in the media and among the citizens of Serbia as an abandoned, hopeless, forgotten, dirty, deserted, peripheral, marginal, hazardous, and/or heavily polluted place. It was also a symbol of postsocialist 'devastation', becoming synonymous with the enduring, 'unsuccessful', and suspicious privatizations of the socially owned enterprises in Serbia. After the end of Milošević's regime in October 2000, there were rumours that the whole company might be sold and closed down, along with all its subsidiaries. This period represented an almost an unspeakable experience in Bor. Due to decades of neglect and lack of investment, the facades of the buildings were all black and tarnished from pollution, no cultural events were organized, and unused and shattered buildings of the formerly socially owned companies, which had been badly privatized, gave an eerie feeling to one walking down the streets. The citizens used such expressions as 'greyness', 'darkness', 'depression', 'people walking like zombies', and 'deserted streets' to describe their town in the past. Such a description of a town in decay reflected the hopelessness that people faced back then.

In 2010, elections were approaching, and the acting Serbian government decided to increase support for the company and put privatization on hold. This was also a populist measure to attract more voters, as both the appearance and the fortunes of the whole town and its mono-structural economy were dependent on the company. The official revival of the company and the town started after 2011. At the point when I was in the field, the salaries at RTB were extremely high compared to the national average, which in March 2012 was a monthly 40,562 dinars (approximately £ 269).<sup>2</sup> The company started once again to be regarded as the most desirable employer in town, for all generations. During my stay in the field, in a town of 48,615 inhabitants, RTB employed approximately 5,000 workers, which was, however, much fewer than when the 'whole town' had been working there, during the socialist period.<sup>3</sup>

In Bor, there was a very specific political configuration. The senior managers of the company were at the same time significant party-political figures, who were involved, directly or indirectly, in the municipal institutions and had an active role in municipal decision-making. This is why the omnipresent state-like company pervaded everyday life, from managing district heating to providing employment in both the private and public sectors. The investments into the

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<sup>2</sup> RTB Bor: Plata 600 evra. Doprinosi? (RTB Bor: Salary 600 Euros. Contributions?), *B92*, 4 March 2012, [https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/srbija.php?yyyy=2012&mm=03&dd=04&nav\\_id=587761](https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/srbija.php?yyyy=2012&mm=03&dd=04&nav_id=587761); Prosečna plata u Srbiji 40.562 dinara (Average Salary in Serbia 40,562 dinars), *Novosti*, 27 April 2012. <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/aktuelno.239.html:377424-Prosečna-plata-u-Srbiji-40562-dinara>.

<sup>3</sup> This number is according to RTB representation in the local media.

town's renovation were done through investments by the company, and in a very blurred and non-transparent manner.

During my stay, people were surrounded by a vast lack of clarity. Many things were ambiguous and vague. I will give a couple of examples of such ambiguities my interlocutors frequently encountered. For instance, unlike the claims that the revival of the company would catalyse social and economic development by increasing employment, the export of copper, and so on, they referred to some unofficial estimation that suggested it would not be possible to realize such anticipations. The company was an oversized 'dinosaur' from the socialist period, incredibly indebted, with outdated technology, and a poor concentration of copper in the ore, and with around two thousand five hundred more employees than it actually needed. According to such estimations, my interlocutors continued, it would be impossible for the company to compete on the global market. The sources of these estimates were usually counteracted by the company's public relations department, who claimed in the media that these analyses were either attempts to politically discredit the new managers (who were, at the same time, local politicians) or part of a malicious negative outlook on Bor aimed at preventing this peripheral town from building a positive image. In addition, the 'revival' itself was a matter of contention. A search for the 'real' facts that may have been concealed or manipulated would be impossible here and, perhaps, unnecessary. But it is essential to note that the ambivalence of my interlocutors was played out against the backdrop of various ambiguities that they encountered in their everyday lives.

The material revival in and of Bor was part and parcel of the self-representation of RTB. Under the new management, the material revival was taking place within the programme 'For a Prettier Bor', a joint campaign of RTB Bor and the municipality.<sup>4</sup> The goal was to enhance the 'potentials' of Bor. Shoring up the infrastructure and provision of new or refurbished sites were represented by the company as 'donations' and/or social responsibility towards the community. The construction of the 'new' idea of the town by the company and the town officials had the goal of making it appear a liveable and enjoyable town again, with an emphasis on its industrial history. The 'new' idea sought to create a continuity with the capitalist (presocialist) history of Bor, such as through making prominent the local heroes from its past. At the same, the revitalized symbols of socialism were enmeshed in this imagery, such as the mining siren, which evoked a certain nostalgia for the good times, or through refurbishing the tarnished, grey facades of the buildings built during socialism.

A lot of people with whom I had conversations, regardless of their age, occupation, gender, or whether they worked for the company or not, claimed

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<sup>4</sup> J. Stanojević, *Nova životna energija grada (New life energy of the city)*, *Kolektiv* 62, (2011), 20-21.

that the appearance of the town could not be compared to the 'situation' only two or three years earlier. Some renovations of Bor and shoring up of the infrastructure were necessary, as some facades were tremendously dirty from pollution; buildings had started to fall apart, and sidewalks were cracked due to decades of neglect. As alluded to above, it was a matter of dispute among citizens between interpreting the material signs of change as deceit or a fake repair, and the official representation as representing the 'revival' of both the company and the town.

My interlocutors often criticized the repairs, mostly targeting their legal, administrative, institutional, material, or even aesthetic domain. Criticisms of how RTB avoided legal procedures, or how all renovations and construction works were done without public procurements, were common. According to many, inappropriate locations were selected for new leisure sites without respect for the town's urban spatial plan, as in the case of the newly built zoo, which did not have a proper construction permit and was built in the middle of a residential area. New 'things' in the town were sometimes regarded as superfluous, such as one sturdy traffic light in the main street, which some interpreted as a means of money laundering by the local officials (the company and municipality). On the other hand, there were also positive receptions of the revival, and in the hope that was invested here.

For instance, during my first months in Bor, when I was trying to find an appropriate ethnographic niche in which to situate myself in the fieldsite, I ended up in Lidija's office. Lidija was a woman in her mid-thirties who had just had a baby and ran one of the very few active civil society organizations in Bor. I knew Lidija from my first, preliminary visit to the town. While smoking and sipping Turkish coffee, she told me how the town had changed since my last visit. She said that Bor had 'turned out so much for the better' because a very capable man had become the head of the company — a man who actually knew what needed to be done. She explained that the head director of RTB had been politically 'taken off and put back' many times (by the government and political parties) and had also been one of the directors during Milošević's time. According to Lidija, Bor had started to look much more attractive thanks to him. After that, she started to list all the things that had been 'done in the town' — the new fountain, the zoo, and so on. She told me that 'they put a bit of make-up on the town' (*malo su našminkali grad*) and then explained, 'When you saw Bor from the distance, only various shades from grey to black could be seen. Today, those are multi-coloured buildings'. I smiled a bit and she reacted:

'Perhaps it might look funny to you, but the town is now much prettier [...] it is much more pleasant now when you pass through the town. And the objects from the mining museum have been scattered throughout the boulevard. Now when one walks down the street, one can see the whole history of Bor.'

Lidija continued to speak in one breath, as she usually did:

'The town used to be all dilapidated and decayed, but it is not like that anymore. And the people who work for RTB are much more content: they have monthly salaries of 700 euros, and it wasn't like that before. And you can feel the liveliness again, lots of people in the streets [...] the smile is back on people's faces.'

She explained that the mine had started to work again, that the price of copper was very high and 'favourable', and that the state had invested in the development of the industry: 'New workplaces are being opened. The zoo is hiring. The hotel has not been working for ten years and now it is working again.' After a while, she showed me an e-mail she had received that morning from the local tourist office, which offered a two-day tour of Bor. She commented that such an offer was great, because it showed that Bor was becoming a 'tourist attraction' that in the future would include the development of mining tourism.

Even though *šminka*, make-up, might have also denoted cosmetic and hence superficial or temporary changes, Lidija used it to express a positive and optimistic evaluation of Bor's recent material transformation. But there were people, like Milorad, who emphasized that even though it was 'about time' to paint the awfully dirty buildings, they also highlighted the substandard work carried out during the renovation and construction. There were also people who were much more sceptical about it, pointing out the illegitimately implemented (irregular) improvements by the corrupt and self-serving RTB leadership, arguing that material renovations were not or were not 'authentically' (or 'genuinely') 'for the common good'.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus mostly on 'the things done' in the town and those attempts to enhance the town's appearance that were seen as deceptive and partial, but nonetheless for the same people as representing 'at least something'. These are significant, because they reveal a mismatch between the 'proper' ways in which people thought 'things' should have been done or should have looked like, and the actual material outcomes, which failed to meet certain standards. Such repairs were seen as make-up, deception, temporary, partial, fake, or superficial—indicating a feeling that the repaired objects were not quite what they once were. The following two ethnographic illustrations illuminate such discrepancies and the normative ideas employed, calling into question the authenticity of the intentions behind the material interventions.

According to many of my interlocutors, some facades had been partially, but not fully, refurbished. The problem with the painted facades of the buildings built during the 1960s, during Bor's socialist 'Golden Age', and located in the old town centre, close to the smelting plant chimney, was not so much the choice of colours (screaming bright yellow, orange, and green/turquoise colours) but rather the superficial manner of the refurbishment. I heard from Kosta that 'they' (meaning the company who had invested in the refurbishment

of the town) had done it very quickly, in a rush, two years earlier because some government politicians were coming to Bor on Miners' Day (6 August). I was sitting with Kosta and his parents in their nicely decorated apartment in the *Sedmospratnica* ('seven-storey building'), whose façade had been repainted in yellow and green. Kosta spoke about the refurbishment: 'It was all tarnished and facades were black from the smoke. But when you paint, you first need to put a base for painting, right? First the undercoat, then the colour.' He claimed that only one layer of colour had been applied, clearly indicating that things had been done hastily to satisfy short-term aesthetic and ostensible renovation. 'And since the undercoat paint was not put on, the paint has already started to crumble.' Kosta started almost to shout, but he was smiling at the same time.

In addition, the refurbishments were not holistic. One problem was, for example, that the rain gutters on the *Sedmospratnica* were old and ruined and had not been changed since the building was built. 'How can you renovate the building and leave those things out?' Kosta's father, an engineer who worked for RTB for over twenty-five years, became involved in our conversation. And now, both said, there were parts where the rainwater was not diverted from the wall and was destroying the new paint. Kosta and his parents were also dissatisfied with the fact that only the facades had been refurbished, while the shabby interior of their building had been ignored. They all laughed and it seemed they were amused by the situation. They told me that everything around them had been done in a similar manner. They even asked me to look through their kitchen window, which looked directly onto Trg Oslobođenja, a square where a shopping mall 'Belgrade' (*robna kuća Beograd*), a big modernist building, was situated. The red colour from the upper part of the newly repainted façade of the shopping mall was cracked and falling off, only a couple of years after it had been refurbished.

In addition to the partial and superficial refurbishments, the theatre was also a 'questionable' intervention. Ivana, a thirty-year-old architect who had recently returned from Belgrade after eleven years of studying and living there, had started a job in a private company that cooperated with RTB. She told me in a cynical tone that the head director had placed a huge sign with metal letters spelling out 'The Theatre of Bor' on the entrance to the Music School. Ivana contended that he had placed the big Cyrillic sign 'overnight', a year earlier. Like most of my interlocutors, she did not refer to this particular institution as a theatre. She explained that the institution was actually a music school:

'It's not a theatre. I mean, we have a music hall, a very good music hall with almost 350 seats, and it belongs to the Music School. The Centre for Culture sometimes brings theatre companies from Serbia. But a local theatre does not exist.'

She also said to me that this was the head director's idea, to outcompete the rival neighbouring city, Negotin, a larger administrative centre, which had a 'real'



theatre. However, even though the theatre did not seem to be very genuine, Ivana (like many others) still appreciated the fact that she had been able to see performances of some well-known theatre companies from Belgrade that had recently started to perform in Bor under the sponsorship of RTB, as part of the 'revival'.

### **The Make-Up and 'At Least Something'**

People's encounters with the material renovations, which they at the same time embraced and criticized, seemed to reveal simultaneous positive and negative dispositions towards the promise the repairs held. The conversation I had with Janko, a man in his fifties who worked at RTB headquarters, illustrates that ambivalence well. I met Janko one morning, and we had a chat about a public affair involving the reconstruction of the old smelting factory, which had been stopped due to the lack of some official state documents. Janko commented on the accusations of the local media that RTB had not followed all the regulations: 'While you wait for the system and everything else to change, your life goes by.' I asked him if that 'logic' could also apply to the recent renovations in the town and the accusations about their deficiency. He explained that, despite everything, 'now at least we have something'. Janko's qualification of 'at least something' was actually frequently repeated to me by various people. Janko assumed and accepted that at present 'business' was transacted in a very grey area (nepotism, money laundering, etc.) and that such a 'system' needed to change and be 'ordered'. This resonated with the idea, widespread among my interlocutors, that social relations, the state, and morality were 'out of order'. For Janko, such 'disorderliness' appeared inevitable, since a 'normal' social order seemed impossible to achieve any time soon. 'At least something' offered a satisfactory compromise in his view of the future of his town at any given moment. Such ambivalence and temporal orientation (to get things as quickly as possible) were frequent regarding people's encounters with the renewed, but still crumbling or inadequate, urban landscape.

Except for Lidija from the civil society organization, all the examples of the things that were 'not quite what they were' (the Aqua Park, the seven-floor building, the theatre) seemed to refer to the material transformations as *šminka* (make-up) in the negative sense: insufficient and shallow, explicitly staged for a quick, non-lasting effect. The criticisms indicated that the material transformations were marked by temporary effects, sometimes not even being what they were supposed to be; they were not quite what they were, or they were not fully there yet. The 'things done' with their '*pro tempore*' effects were situated in the now, done for the time being, and seen as temporary expedients instead of 'proper' solutions. Even though the examples of 'things not quite what they were'

implied that the change was not a 'proper' one, but rather a calculated strategy to provide only the appearance of transformation and potential progress, they also included some positive evaluations. For instance, the presence of the theatre as an indicator of modernity and urbanity was important for young architect, Ivana. For her, it was still better to have a theatre that was not an actual one (a substitute, an *ersatz*) than to have none; it would be very costly to build a new one, and it would take time as well, hence it would involve much waiting. In what follows I will turn to how and why such *ersatz* objects were significant in my interlocutors' maintenance of their hope.

### Maintaining Hope

My interlocutors' sense of anticipation involved hope as a part of their ambivalence with regards to their futures. My material from Bor resonates with what Stef Jansen recently proposed in his reflections on hope, which he marked as 'a positively charged but disappointable disposition' (because of the uncertainty of outcome) and a future-oriented disposition or affect (as a set of dispositions).<sup>5</sup> Hence, while hope refers to a more optimistic disposition towards the future (being hopeful), ambivalence here refers to a more doubtful disposition, or rather to an attitude both positive (optimistic) and negative (pessimistic) (expecting both good and bad, leaning both ways, feeling 'in between') towards the future.<sup>6</sup>

For those who embraced and criticized at the same time, 'fake' referred to approximated ideals, which became 'at least something' or 'good enough', 'similar enough', a sort of something 'as opposed to being 'absolutely something', the objectification of the ideal.<sup>7</sup> While the objects were seen as though they were in constant construction or in continuous need of renovation, by perpetually indicating an imaginable goal (and while remaining unfinished) 'the things that were not quite what they were', as 'at least something', suggested 'development as forever', to use Ssorin-Chaikov's terminology.<sup>8</sup> The dream of modernity was embedded in material enhancements, just as in socialist times, as a sign

<sup>5</sup> Stef Jansen, For a Relational, Historical Ethnography of Hope. Indeterminacy and Determination in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Meantime, *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2016), 447-464, DOI: 10.1080/02757206.2016.1201481. All internet sources were accessed on 24 January 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Deana Jovanović, Prosperous Pollutants. Bargaining with Risks and Forging Hopes in an Industrial Town in Eastern Serbia, *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology*, Special Issue 2016, 1-15, DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2016.1169205; see also Deana Jovanović, Anthropology and the Study of Contradictions, *HAAU. Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 3 (2016), 1-6, <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.14318/hau6.3.002>.

<sup>7</sup> Magdalena Crăciun, Rethinking Fakes, Authenticating Selves, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no. 4 (2012), 846-863, 860, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9655.2012.01795.x.

<sup>8</sup> See Nikolai V. Ssorin-Chaikov, *The Social Life of the State in Subarctic Siberia*, Stanford/CA 2003.

of a promising future. The material renovations, here as 'signs of movement towards modernity', served to denote the idea 'looks like progress'.<sup>9</sup> 'Things that are not quite what they were' represented a minimum amount of change; 'at least something' seemed to imply a stopgap solution. Even when my interlocutors doubted the genuine intentions behind the renovations, they still acknowledged them as a (poor) substitute (the *ersatz*) for the 'real', like the theatre that was not one. Such *ersatz* material objects enabled people to continue to fantasize, desire, and to maintain their hope. Hence, 'at least something' provided them with a feeling that progress and a future in Bor were still possible, and that the potentially abundant future and vibrant sociality could happen (again).

Even though 'the things' were not achieved in the 'right order', Kosta and my other interlocutors demanded more paint, more thorough interventions, they demanded more investment, and they wanted things to be even more visible. Even Kosta's girlfriend, who was very critical, thought that the zoo was not visible enough if its purpose was to show the 'new face' of Bor. Thus, their criticisms were all attached to the material images that did not 'rob the "modern" images of their attractiveness'.<sup>10</sup> The ambivalence here shows people's awareness of all kinds of limits, but it suggests that this limited material revival could come to stand in for the 'real thing'. My interlocutors perceived limited signs as potential steps in a larger, truer process of revival. Therefore, they did not criticize the renovations via straightforward rejection, rather they criticized it as insufficient. All the criticisms relied on the same modernist narrative of progress on which the whole idea of renovation was based.

Recent studies on Serbia show that lack of agency is a characteristic that has decisively shaped political subjectivities in Serbia.<sup>11</sup> In her analysis of citizenship, agency, and public spaces that have been reconfigured since the end of socialism in Jagodina, a medium-sized industrial town in central Serbia, Tanja Petrović found that there were political consequences to the town's remaking, where she also found 'erasure of participation, agency and anonymity as underlying notions of citizenship'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, my informants also felt a reduced ability to negotiate their own agency and to understand themselves as social actors participating in a public sphere. However, the partial or fake repairs

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<sup>9</sup> Ssorin-Chaikov, *The Social Life of the State in Subarctic Siberia*, 132.

<sup>10</sup> Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border. Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia*, Ithaca/NY 2006, 207.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Greenberg, *On the Road to Normal. Negotiating Agency and State Sovereignty in Post-Socialist Serbia*. *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 1 (2011), 88-100, DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-1433.2010.01308.x; Jessica Greenberg, *After the Revolution. Youth, Democracy, and the Politics of Disappointment in Serbia*, Stanford/CA 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Tanja Petrović, *Divided Modernities. Citizenship, Agency and Public Spaces in a Central Serbian Town*, *Etnološka tribina. Godišnjak Hrvatskog etnološkog društva* 46, no. 39 (2016), 115-125, 121, DOI: 10.15378/1848-9540.2016.39.03.

enabled them to feel at least some agency, exactly because of the different contexts of the 'revival' in which my interlocutors were embedded. In fact, people like Janko and Kosta's father felt some agency, which made them *feel* that the prospects of their town, and their personal lives, could turn out for the better. Lidija from the NGO sector believed that the 'revival' contributed to the development of her projects, and she felt that something was going forward, although far from perfect.

As I have shown, the renovated objects were sites for the articulation of hope and disappointment, important for legitimization, contestation, and criticism of social values. Nevertheless, in order to understand people's hopes, it is necessary to understand the role of past experiences in formulating the 'norms' by which these hopes have been constructed. It is necessary to point out that the yearnings of the *Borani* (the people in Bor) for the 'normal' was structured against and in between the evaluations of two different potential imagined futures. On the one hand, there were the expectations of the 'good life' during socialism, where the promised future had played an important role in their navigation of the present. The socialist 'golden' period was remembered by my interlocutors as a period that enabled material prosperity, social security, chances for employment, and equal access to the company's benefits. On the other hand, there were the horrifying *potential* futures that people vividly recalled from the 2000s. The citizens resented the first signs of privatization of the company, which could have resulted in the closure of the whole industrial complex. Evaluating these two potentialities, 'at least something' in Bor became fairly appealing.

Here, James Ferguson's idea on expectations of modernity can help to better understand the sense of disenchantment that was especially relevant for the 'Borani's' expectations of the future. It was the basis of my interlocutors' ambivalence. Ferguson argues that the copper mines in Zambia were a strategic place to understand modernist narratives in times of crisis during the 1980s. According to him, anticipations and expectations constructed towards the modernity 'promised' to the community contributed to experiences of 'disconnection' during the decline/crisis. He contends that the collapse of the modernization project in Zambia pushed people 'out from the place that they once occupied'.<sup>13</sup> By feeling 'abjected', people started to perceive themselves as having been expelled from the promised path. In the context of the postsocialist transformation of Bor and the socialist-modernist industrial project, which once brought the promise of prosperity to the community (and some experience of such prosperity), the notion of 'disconnection' is still relevant in understanding everyday life there. The economic stagnation and a sudden destabilization of the modernization myth implied not merely an economic crisis but also a crisis

<sup>13</sup> James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity. Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian, Copperbelt*, London et al. 1999, 236.

of meaning. The promise was lost that such prosperity of the community was accessible to almost everybody. This notion of abjection mattered, as did the moment of unpredictability, and the prediction of possible collapse of economic and social life that might happen ‘tomorrow’, not only to the individuals but also to the collective, was equally important for my interlocutors. The life of the town and of the people used to be brought into question—it was a matter not only of individual continuity but also of a collective future. A ‘social death’ was always on the verge that one could anticipate. The period when the local society was ‘dead’, entangled with a sense of impending collapse, uncertainty, unpredictability, abandonment, and abjection, has remained materialized in many buildings that have not been renovated. Hence, different potential/alternative futures (more potentially disastrous for some) were read onto the half-dilapidated material surfaces in the town that still existed; this further influenced people to incorporate the motif of ‘at least something’ and embrace *ersatz* in maintaining their hope.

Faced with a decayed town and ‘different shades from grey to black’ (Lidija), the new things, even when they were ‘things which were not what they were’, represented a minimal degree of satisfaction of peoples’ desires, needs, and expectations. ‘Greyness’, as an emic metaphor for the early 2000s, can then be contrasted with the images that Lidija presented to me, which she considered to be representative of the new, revived Bor: smiling people in the streets and liveliness that could now be felt *again*. This is why, to the other people too, the renovations and new ‘things’ as ‘at least something’ and the *ersatz* objects could offer a sense that Bor would continue to exist in the future—they evoked and maintained hope and offered ‘at least some’ agency.

### The ‘Politics of Simulation’

In Bor, people often ‘saw through’ the material renovations, while they pointed out the gap between appearances (surface) and reality (depth). By valorizing the material renovations and talking about the ‘order’ of things, they also employed normative ideals concerning how things should have been done, or what they should have looked like. The embedding of normative ideas in the material ‘order’ is nothing new, of course. Citizens in post-Soviet cities, for example, including officials, bureaucrats, and urban planners, often raised normative ideas (imbued with moral values) concerning urban material appearances that they perceived as pertaining to ‘Western’ and/or ‘European’ ideals.<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> On normative ideas embedded in the urban material ‘order’ cf. Krisztina Fehérváry, ‘American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a ‘Normal’ Life in Postsocialist Hungary’, *Ethnos* 67, no. 3 (2002), 369–400, DOI: 10.1080/0014184022000031211; Victor Buchli, ‘Astana. Materiality and the City’, in: Catherine Alexander / Victor Buchli / Caroline Hum-

frequent insistence on ordering was measured not only in relation to people's aspirations towards an idea of an ordered, European/Western state.<sup>15</sup> It was geared also towards the normative standards stemming from their socialist past, which had entailed a much more ordered state that they remembered, or, according to modernist aspirations in the past, a belief that Bor never fully lived up to expectations, perhaps. On top of all that, people insisted that 'those in power' should respect what they considered to be the basic rules, whether in the domain of the general rules of masonry, or in respecting urban plans and other state and local laws and legislation. Hence, they spoke about respecting rules that already existed, and what is more, these were regulations that were expected to be respected by the 'regulators' themselves: the state and the company. Those who were legitimate actors in the renovation—the company—were said to promote impaired, immoral, political, and social relationships that contributed to 'the decline of standards' in the town. For Kosta and Milorad, the encounter with the repaired objects labelled as fake, irregular, inauthentic, and substandard almost awakened anxiety over how they perceived their own, and more generally, integrity, credibility, competence, and moral judgement.

Through their encounters with the material reparations, my interlocutors constituted themselves as moral and competent individuals, sometimes perceiving themselves as being even more competent than the people in charge of the town. By ascribing a 'fake' status to the repaired objects, my informants posited themselves as having higher moral grounds than the 'system' in charge—the state and the company, which they accused, never of sanctioning but instead tolerating, and even enabling, RTB's infringements of myriad laws and rules.<sup>16</sup>

Through people's hope for such 'order', their hope of being moral and state subjects, and by maintaining their hope through *ersatz*, the state (and the company) became the object of emotional investment.<sup>17</sup> In fact, ambivalence and hope in Bor were implicated in a variety of everyday encounters 'between citi-

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phrey, eds, *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, London 2007, 40-70; Mateusz Laszczkowski, *Building the Future. Construction, Temporality, and Politics in Astana*, *Focaal. Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 60, no. 1 (2011), 77-92, DOI: 10.3167/fcl.2011.600107.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Greenberg, *On the Road to Normal*, 88-100.

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of morality in relation to the state and effective blend of nonchalance and failure in a Serbian firm cf. Ivan Rajković, *For an Anthropology of the Demoralized. State Pay, Mock-Labour, and Unfreedom in a Serbian firm*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, December 2017, DOI: 10.1111/1467-9655.12751.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Mateusz Laszczkowski, *State Building(s). Built Forms, Materiality, and the State in Astana*, in: Madeleine Reeves / Johan Rasanayagam / Judith Beyer, eds, *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia. Performing Politics*, Bloomington/ID 2014, 149-172; Stef Jansen, *Yearnings in the Meantime. 'Normal Lives' and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex*, New York 2015; Madeleine Reeves, *Fixing the Border. On the Affective Life of the State in Southern Kyrgyzstan*, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 5 (2011), 905-923, DOI: 10.1068/d18610.

zens, state agents and the dispersed material traces of state power'.<sup>18</sup> Through people's encounters with the repairs we could also see people's affective and practical investments in ordering statecraft, i.e. their hope for the state.<sup>19</sup> Hence, hope appeared as 'one of the many affective registers that animate "the state"', a locus of affective investment.<sup>20</sup> Through its industrial proxy (the company that refurbished the town), the state became 'hope-generating',<sup>21</sup> and that it is 'the hope invested in it by people that gives some coherence to myriads of state practices'.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the ethnography here also shows how 'state effects' emerged and how they were reproduced, not through the coercive force of the state, but through political overlapping between the company and the state.<sup>23</sup> To be more precise, they were produced through the overlap between the managerial industrial elite and the official municipal political authority in the town. Hence, the 'state effects' emerged through the affective engagements of 'ordinary' citizens in their encounter with the repaired material fabric of their town and in relation to the state and state-like instances. Hope and ambivalence in Bor were not just 'an epiphenomenon of political life—an outcome of state practice or a consequence of particular techniques of governance', but they appeared 'as constitutive of the political itself'.<sup>24</sup>

The material repairs, which carried moral, social, emotional, and affective attachments, (and *because* they carried such attachments), had power to constitute the 'politics of simulation' of the town's revival.<sup>25</sup> The practices of ascribing 'fakes' to material repairs should not be seen as acts of 'resistance' by the citizens of Bor, or as evidence of how they avoided statecraft,<sup>26</sup> or as 'acts of

<sup>18</sup> Mateusz Laszczkowski / Madeleine Reeves, Affective States. Entanglements, Suspensions, Suspensions, *Social Analysis* 59, no. 4 (2015), 1-14, 7, DOI: 10.3167/sa.2015.590401.

<sup>19</sup> Stef Jansen, Yearnings in the Meantime. 'Normal Lives' and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex, New York 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Laszczkowski / Reeves, Affective States, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Monique Nuijten, Power, Community and the State. The Political Anthropology of Organisation in Mexico, London 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Stef Jansen, Hope and the State in the Anthropology of Home. Preliminary Notes, *Ethnologia Europaea* 39, no. 1 (2009), 54-60, 59. Cf. Penelope Harvey, The Materiality of State-Effects. An Ethnography of a Road in the Peruvian Andes, in: Christian Krohn-Hansen / Knut G. Nustad, eds, State Formation. Anthropological Perspectives, London et al. 2005, 123-141; Penelope Harvey / Hannah Knox, The Enchantments of Infrastructure, *Mobilities* 7, no. 4 (2012), 521-536, DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2012.718935.

<sup>23</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalisation, *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2001), 125-138, DOI: 10.1086/318437.

<sup>24</sup> Laszczkowski / Reeves, Affective States, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ingolfur Blühdorn, Sustaining the Unsustainable. Symbolic Politics and the Politics of Simulation, *Environmental politics* 16, no. 2 (2007), 251-275, DOI: 10.1080/09644010701211759.

<sup>26</sup> Stef Jansen, Hope For/Against the State. Gridding in a Besieged Sarajevo Suburb, *Ethnos* 79, no. 2 (2014), 238-260, 238, DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2012.743469.

defiance or passive insubordination',<sup>27</sup> which were the dominant approaches to studying the state in anthropology. In addition, these ethnographic examples do not speak about subversion of the 'hegemonic' regimes, while the subjects acted 'as if' they respected the disciplinary aspects, and instead maintained to undermine it.<sup>28</sup> Rather, they showed something quite different: the 'fake' was a quality ascribed to the final outcomes produced by those 'in power', while my interlocutors became involved and complicit in the production of the 'politics of simulation' of the town's and the company's revival.

The 'revival' of the town, which was based on the promise of 'economic growth', including the ways in which the town went through some material transformations, resembles the idea of the entrepreneurial city, which has been a preoccupation of urban geographers for decades. Scholars who explored the transformation of Western cities indicated a specific reorientation of urban governance to the idea of the entrepreneurial city.<sup>29</sup> They pointed to the shift of urban governance away from the local provision of welfare and services to stances that foster and encourage local development and economic growth. By showing how the public sector increasingly takes over the characteristics of the private sector in an entrepreneurial way (i.e. risk-taking, motivation by profit, promotion, redevelopment as revitalization, marketing of the cities) in order to generate wealth and power, scholars showed how cities today serve the interests of the urban elites. Even though Bor's attempt to revitalize the town might remind of such a 'trend', the urban transformations here occurred in a different context. The attempt to remodel the town did not serve the new regimes of capital accumulation, as much as the needs of raising the company's popularity to help the managers of the company win electoral votes and gain or maintain political power in the municipality. Hence, such remodelling served the industrial company to appear as the proxy state, rather than to produce the 'good' capital unfettered by the state. As the 'growth' and the 'revival' were contested and highly ambiguous in the community, the ambivalences with regard to futures were fostered in the framework of 'politics of simulations'.

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen / Finn Stepputat, Introduction. States of Imagination, in: Thomas Blom Hansen / Finn Stepputat, eds, States of Imagination. Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State, Durham et al. 2001, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Lisa Wedeen, Ambiguities of Domination. Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria, Chicago/IL 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. David Harvey, From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism. The Transformation of Urban Governance in Late Capitalism, *Geografiska Annaler* 71, no.1, (1989), 3-17; John Logan / Harvey Molotch, Urban Fortunes. The Political Economy of Place, Berkeley/CA 1987; Edward W. Soja, Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory, London / New York 1989.



## Concluding Words

In this paper, I have ethnographically explored people's encounters with reparations of urban sites in a copper processing town in Serbia. I have shown how ambiguities and the context of dependency on the company, among other things, fostered ambivalence towards the promise such repairs held. I have argued that ambivalence, which consisted of simultaneous positive and negative dispositions towards the promises, contributed to people's involvement in the 'politics of simulation' of the town's and of the company's 'revival'. I have shown how material reparations evoked people's hope for order, their hope of being moral and state subjects, while at the same time, through maintenance of hope and ambivalence, the state became the object of emotional investment.

Concluding, I shall point out several contributions this paper makes. Firstly, the paper contributes to anthropological debates on the state, by showing how people's encounters with the reparations were their affective and practical investments in and for the state—and not against it, as the dominant approaches to the state have emphasized—and how ambivalence, as a disposition with regard to futures, constituted the political itself. Secondly, this paper addresses the effects of new industrial 'growth' after the postsocialist upheaval, thereby casting a different light on Serbia from the mainstream of studies. I consider the recent development as a particular time and chronology of the industrial town of Bor, in contrast to contemporary studies of Serbia that have located experiences of 'the great fall'<sup>30</sup> and 'suspended normality'<sup>31</sup>, as well as the impossibility of acting as moral agents in the period of the 1990s.<sup>32</sup> Instead, this paper locates a 'dramatic fall from grace'<sup>33</sup> long after Serbia entered the democratic 'transition' after 2000. And last but not least, unlike studies of major disruption of industrial development,<sup>34</sup> or of postsocialist contexts in Europe that merely deal with the industrial decline,<sup>35</sup> this study offers an insight into another 'rise' after the industrial decline and urban deterioration. Even if this 'rise' is considered 'fake', it still offers a 'good enough' feeling for its citizens.

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<sup>30</sup> Marina Simić, Locating Cosmopolitanism. Practicing Popular Culture in Post-Socialist Serbia, *Der Donauraum* 50, no. 3-4 (2010), 345-363, <https://doi.org/10.7767/dnrm.2010.50.34.345>.

<sup>31</sup> Stef Jansen, Antinacionalizam. Etnografija otpora u Beogradu i Zagrebu (Antinationalism. Ethnography of resistance in Zagreb and Belgrade), Belgrade 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Greenberg, On the Road to Normal, 88-100; Greenberg, After the Revolution.

<sup>33</sup> Stef Jansen, After the Red Passport. Towards an Anthropology of the Everyday Geopolitics of Entrapment in the EU's 'Immediate Outside', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 4 (2009), 815-832, 826, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01586.x.

<sup>34</sup> Ferguson, Expectations of Modernity.

<sup>35</sup> David Kideckel, Getting By in Postsocialist Romania. Labor, the Body and Working-Class Culture, Bloomington/IN 2008.

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