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 EUST 110.00: The Nation State in Europe  
 January 14, 2017

### Reflection Paper Assignment

The film “We Are All Neighbours”, directed by Debbie Christie, depicts the lives of several Bosnian villagers during a war in what was formerly the multi-national state of Yugoslavia with the accompaniment of the anthropologist Tone Bringa. In my opinion, the documentary also depicts the way in which ethnic nationalism emerges from the dissolved Yugoslavian state and forever separates and destroys families and civil communities that had no conception of ethnic nationalism beforehand. The filmmaker presents this process and shows the changing attitudes of the village’s inhabitants as the war draws closer. Originally believing that they can get along regardless of their origins, people learn to assert their national identities in order to survive. This ultimately leads to the dehumanization of human beings and an almost permanent loss of trust and security between neighbors.

The initial part of the film shows that many of the Muslim inhabitants of the village, some of whom were later killed by the Croats, believed in an inclusive and liberally-minded society. When the anthropologist asks about life in the village, the woman Nusreta essentially says that tolerance and loyalty to shared values and needs have prevailed despite the daily reminders of warfare in the distance. Saying that there are “three nations” as well as Romanies and Jews, Nusreta implies that the nation itself is defined by ethnicity and shared heritage (how is this implied – some of these categories are religious. What difference does that make? Does it make it “ethnic”?) Her contention that “no sane person would commit atrocities here” implies that any rational person would agree that the ability of civic nationalism to exist depends on

mutual trust in an orderly society and the knowledge that people of different nations must get along in order not to perish (how is this “civic”?). For her, it is reasonable that they would continue to exist as they had for the past five-hundred years (certainly they weren’t civic nationalists 500 years ago?).

Throughout Nusreta’s narrative there is the belief that dividing people by ethnicity is a toxic practice because it allows people to justify genocide (give evidence for this assertion). She believes that the Serbian perpetrators of ethnic warfare are ideological “extremists” and that the Serbs themselves will be ashamed of their extremists and will have to bring them to justice. Evidently Nusreta believes that the Serbs must look inward at their wrongdoings and recognize that they cannot justify making value judgments on others’ lives. She also implies that without justice, the evil acts perpetrated by ethnic nationalists will continue to intensify. Despite the news of the killing of Muslims by the Croat Defense Force, she still believes that they will reconcile at some point in the future because they will have to live together afterwards.

As the war continues in the distance, the anthropologist talks to two neighbors – one Muslim, one Catholic – who are dividing their food equally between themselves. They understand themselves not as representatives of vast, separate nations but as people who belong to one civic community. One of them states that there is no difference between Catholics and Muslims except for the fact that they have different ways of praying to God. God himself is invoked not to aid in the defeat of another nation but to restore peace and prosperity between nations. The inhabitants of the village behave similarly; they show concern for their neighbors as well as for their children. A certain villager Sabina is appalled to hear the terms “our people” or “their people” because such distinctions were not important even a short time ago. It is only

when they are forced (by whom?) to acquire national identities that decades of friendship are degraded and people begin to withdraw into their separate nations and cease to greet each other.

In the past, all the people saw themselves as Yugoslavs with differences only in religion. Politics were of little concern to them. But times have changed since the banishment of nationalism under communism in Yugoslavia. The presence of advancing nationalist armies has created a general anxiety about the future and has made people mistrustful and afraid to travel to work or the market of Kiseljak. The people begin to draw themselves closer, and a mother is seen embracing her child. In the film, as Bosnia prepares to be split into ten districts, people must define themselves by the illusory and invented concepts of Croatian or Bosnian depending on whether they are Catholic or Muslim respectively (this should make you question the idea that these are “ethnic” identifiers!). A sort of banal nationalism (Billig) is invoked as divisive language begins to be used and old Bosnian songs play on the radio. With imagined communities (Anderson) such as the Bosnians or the Croats serving as their justifications, neighbors can kill each other in the name of millions of people they do not actually know (ok – how do we get from the folk songs to the killing?). Since every Catholic is associated with the same group of Croats who are doing the burning and killing and therefore takes the blame, the community in the village becomes broken and divided (isn’t it the other way around? The villagers are forced to associate with the perpetrators and the victims?).

As the Croat military imposes their authority on the village, ethnic nationalism becomes an involuntary means of survival for both the Muslim majority and Catholic minority as each nation – Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia (when and how did they become “nations”?)– struggles to regain a sense of security by any means. Although Nuriya, the husband of Nusreta, disagrees

with what the Bosnian presidency wants and believes that Karadzic is not acting in his best interest, he decides to join the Bosnian army because he has involuntarily become loyal to the nation of Bosnia (no, that's not why he joins the army, he joins the army because he wants to defend his home and family. There is a big difference between these two motivations).

When violence breaks out in the village, we see the dehumanizing effects of ethnic nationalism on neighboring people as well as some acknowledgement that the average Croatian or Bosnian citizen is not responsible for the numerous war crimes that are occurring. One Catholic man's statement that the perpetrators of the atrocities oftentimes do not belong to any side makes the implication that one is not ethnically bound by blood to be responsible for every reprehensible act that has been committed by one's race (how does "race" come into it?).

Despite these contentions, divisive language begins to be used more frequently. An "us" versus "them" mentality becomes more commonplace – for example, the people refer to a boy who stepped on a mine as "their" people, allowing them to dehumanize the boy and thus trivialize the loss of a human life.

The villagers' changing way of referring to each other reflects changes in their fundamental viewpoints regarding the ability of different nations, or ethnic groups, to coexist. Near the end of the film, Nusreta starts to say that "we" cannot live with "them", the Catholics, anymore. She cites the violence that broke out in their village and the atrocities committed against them by their Catholic neighbors and fellow Croats alike as reasons for this changed perspective. This changed and divisive mentality enables her to become hostile to an entire group of people with whom she had previously been friends.

Essentially, the film shows how under the right circumstances, friends and neighbors are capable of murder and other base actions without remorse. It tells us that an ethnic group, however it is defined, is not morally superior to others, and documents how ethnically nationalistic behavior, an inherent part of human nature (where in the movie, is it ever shown as , “inherent”?), affects people’s lives. Demonstrating how many villagers lose their lives’ achievements, the filmmaker shows that those warmongers who destroy homes and possessions and take ethnic territory (what is that exactly?) are myopic; they experience short-term gains but ultimately destroy the foundation of trust and social stability that is necessary for people to want to contribute to their community and build homes and lives together.

You had a good stab at the prompt and analyzing the film. You also use good examples from the dialogue, yet very often the evidence you cite goes directly counter of what you yourself are saying in the paper. It seems that you decided from the outset that what you were looking at was a form of “ethnic” nationalism – an assertion you do not substantiate and that is very difficult to substantiate with evidence from the film. Similarly, what characterizes the village prior to the war isn’t “civic” nationalism either. Early on you mention that religious identifies are important to the identity of villagers but that doesn’t make them “ethnicities”, or represent anything that is “inherent” in people. All the evidence points in the direction of nationalist identifiers as being consciously created by elites that is to a great extent forced on people who do not assume it voluntarily or out of some pre-existing sense of “ethnic” kinship or feeling of kinship. Rather than imposing a conceptual apparatus that doesn’t fit the evidence you need to treat these concepts more critically and approach the evidence with an open mind.



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## Bibliography

Granada Television and Debbie Christie. *We Are All Neighbours - Visnjica (Kiseljak) '93*.

February 17, 2012. <https://youtu.be/uip50amKMdw>.