



Evaluation report on the dissertation thesis of Jelena Gajić: “Education of Muslim Girls during the Interwar Era and Socialist Transformation in Yugoslavia”

The author, Jelena Gajić, submitted a dissertation thesis that deals with an important and in the scholarly literature still relatively neglected topic – the education of Muslim girls in the 20th century Yugoslavia, with a particular focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina. The thesis is well-written and provides a detailed account of the conditions that enabled or hindered the diffusion of formal education across Yugoslav society and territory. Although the thesis is formally concerned with education, its overarching objective is to analyse women’s emancipation through education rather than education *per se*. This enables the thesis to be situated within the broader field of literature on social empowerment and subaltern studies. However, the thesis’ conceptual framework is somewhat limited in scope and situatedness in the broader literature, though it must be acknowledged that the author has made considerable progress in this regard.

The empirical analysis, which employs primary archival sources in conjunction with other materials, is comprehensive and detailed. The author examined the impact of agency at different scales on the inclusivity of education (or lack thereof) for Bosnian Muslim girls. Specifically, these are the impact of (changing) political regimes of the state from the late Habsburg era to socialist Yugoslavia; the cross-border diffusion of modernist values and policies, particularly from Turkey and the USSR; the internal divisions within the Yugoslav Muslim population, which manifested as a conflict between progressives and conservatives; and finally the hierarchies within the group of Bosnian Muslim women, attributed to socio-economic and geographical differences in living conditions. As a political geographer specializing (among other things) in feminist geopolitics, I appreciate both the multiscalar design of the thesis and the in-depth research conducted, and findings presented by Jelena Gajić. At the same time, I acknowledge that the author has taken into account most of the suggestions that I proposed in the initial version of the review. In my view, it considerably enhanced the clarity of the arguments and the transparency of the analysis. Nevertheless, there remained several issues that require further attention, e.g. if the author plans to publish the thesis in the form of article(s) – which I recommend.

First, while the interaction between the inclusivity of education (or lack thereof) and religion is described in detail, the possible interaction between education and nationalism(s) should be elaborated more comprehensively, especially in the contexts where education is significantly shaped by nationalist political agendas. In particular, modernism is mentioned in the thesis as an idea that brought progress in the availability of education. But there is also a vast literature

FACULTY OF SCIENCE

Martin Lepič



on nationalism that shows how modernism developed hand in hand with nationalism. This nexus led to the introduction of a standardized mass education for the population, thus meeting the demand for inclusiveness in education, but at the same time developing a form of nationalist indoctrination. The transmission of nationalist ideology through education often reduced it to the teaching of the individual's position within the nation, in which women in particular were projected as bearers of the nation's ethno-demography by delivering new members of the nation. While this may be technically in line with the principle of inclusiveness in education, it does not contribute to women's emancipation. Education in Yugoslavia was influenced by Croatian and Serbian ethnonationalisms as well as Yugoslav state nationalism. Could such nationalist indoctrination in Yugoslavia undermine the link between education and emancipation? I think that this issue should be addressed in both the conceptual and empirical sections of the thesis.

Related to the aforementioned is that, in this thesis, education is mostly considered to be an undifferentiated entity. For this reason, I suggest to the author, if possible given the availability of data, to distinguish qualitatively different forms of education, especially in the interwar period and in wartime Croatia, when the influence of nationalism was at its strongest. It is true that the analysis of textbooks in the later period can do justice to this differentiation, but it should be addressed more explicitly.

With regard to the use of magazines as a source of information, the author amended the text and in the method section described the employment of critical discourse analysis. Although I acknowledge this improvement and agree with the usage of this approach, it should be, in my opinion, also reflected in the empirical section of the thesis, where some parts still remain uncritical in terms of discourse evaluation. A similar argument can be made with regard to another issue. The author made an effort to provide Bosnian Muslim girls and women with agency and describes several initiatives and individuals who were active in promoting girls' education. She also reflects in the conclusion that there is comparatively more focus in the text on the societal "allies" of these girls, i.e. those actors who supported girls' education but did not belong to the group, such as progressive intellectuals (including religious ones), editors of women's magazines, or Tito's partisans. I acknowledge this critical self-reflection, but I still think that more focus on Bosnian Muslim women's direct agency in the empirical part could do better justice to the feminist method of the thesis. On the other hand, it must be said that the author skilfully explains how the social changes brought about by the WWII altered the traditional intra-group hierarchies among Bosnian Muslims, thus enabling progress in the emancipation of Bosnian (and Yugoslav) women in the second half of 20th century.

In conclusion, Jelena Gajić wrote an excellent and interesting thesis which has a unique empirical contribution to the field. Furthermore, she considered and skilfully incorporated most

FACULTY OF SCIENCE

Martin Lepič



FACULTY OF SCIENCE
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of the recommendations from the initial review, such as those pertaining to intersectionality and positionality. For these reasons, I recommend the thesis to be accepted for the PhD defence and suggest evaluating it as having successfully passed the examination.

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