

# When a bridge is not a bridge

By Michael Ignatieff

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In 1557, when Suleiman the Magnificent ruled in Constantinople and the sway of the Ottoman Empire extended as far north as Budapest, an Ottoman engineer named Hajrudin came to the city of Mostar, in southwestern Bosnia, to build a bridge across the Neretva River. Engineers like Hajrudin built bathhouses in Budapest, mosques in Sarajevo and bridges over all the rivers in the empire. The bridge he completed over the Neretva in 1566 had an economic and perhaps a political purpose: to solidify the link between Ottoman possessions and the hinterland of Ragusa, a wealthy city-state on the Adriatic coast, now known as Dubrovnik.

Hajrudin seems to have worked with a small team of local stonemasons and with a craftsman or two from Constantinople. They quarried the stone from a spot outside the town and dragged it down to the riverbank on sleds pulled by draft animals. They cut it into shape with saws and used iron clamps and molten lead poured into seams cut into the blocks to hold the bridge span together, and by the time they finished, they had created a thin, soaring structure of exceptional beauty.

This beauty seems to have ensured its survival. When the Ottomans were driven out of Bosnia in the 1870's, the bridge was not torn down, even though it was no longer wide enough for big loads and certainly not for the automobiles that began to penetrate this remote part of Europe. The bridge endured through the First World War, when the Serbs and Austro-Hungarians fought in the region, and it survived the Second World War, through all the furious partisan combat that convulsed Bosnia. In Tito's Yugoslavia, the bridge's beauty made it famous, and by the 1960's and 70's tour buses would bring people from all over southern Europe to see it.

I saw the bridge once in my childhood. In 1959, my family and I drove through Bosnia in a heavy black Buick. My diary of the trip is full of excruciating 12-year-old thoughts, but even a 12-year-old could see how beautiful Mostar's Old Bridge, or Starn Most, was. It was made of aged white stone, and it soared over the rushing blue water below, and it seemed impossibly delicate, too thin to take the weight of a horse or a man. But it bore all the weights put upon it, and we crossed to and fro, visiting the mosques and bazaar stalls that clustered on the Muslim side and the Roman Catholic churches, Viennese-- style pastry shops and municipal offices on the Croatian side.

Calling them Muslim and Croatian sides of the river isn't really correct. While the two populations did live separately, there was also substantial intermarriage, and Croats and Muslims were to be found on both sides of the Neretva, together with a smaller population of Serbs. The 120,000 citizens of Mostar did think of themselves as a single community, sharing a city and a bridge.

In 1992 madness descended upon the townspeople of Mostar. Madness, at least, is how they talk about it now. At first, Croats and Muslims joined together against the Bosnian Serbs; then the Croats turned on the Muslims, driving them across the river. At the time, of course, it all seemed if not sane, then at least necessary, to divide into two warring camps, to defend yourself and to drive your neighbors across the river. The madness went on into 1993 and 1994. Muslim and Croatian militias composed of young men who often had been in the same class at school rained fire on one another, at first across the river, then street by street and finally house by house. Ten years later, you can still see how crazy it was from the way the buildings have been taken apart, not in big chunks by artillery or mortars but chipped apart, bullet by bullet, by small-arms fire at point-blank range. By the time it was over, the city was divided in two: Muslims driven out of the Croatian side and Croats driven out of the Muslim side and nothing but gunfire across the river between them.

During this time, a particular act of madness occurred that people still find painful to talk about. On Nov. 9, 1993, an artillery unit, from the Croatian side of the city, that had been firing for two days managed to bring down the Old Bridge. An amateur cameraman recorded the scene. On the footage, you see a puff of smoke and the soaring vault drops, like a dead beast, into the river.

You could put the destruction of the Old Bridge down to the crazy vandalism of war, but that still leaves you some explaining to do. The word "Mostar" is derived from a word for "bridge keeper," and the Old Bridge, along with six other bridges built to span the Neretva, were what held the town together. So destroying the oldest and most beautiful of them (the other bridges were badly damaged, too) was not just a piece of barbarism. It was also a perverse act of self-mutilation.

Everybody knows who did it, by the way. The artillery commander still lives in Mostar, on the Croatian side.

In "Heart of Darkness," Joseph Conrad remarks that empire, when observed close up, is not a pretty sight. What redeems it, he says, is only the idea. The reconstruction of the Balkans by Western governments, led by the United States, has always been an imperial project, driven by a clear, if reluctantly grasped, imperative to replace the collapsed Communist state of Tito's era with a new architecture of states that would bring stability to a combustible corner of Europe. Why else would there be 12,000 troops in Bosnia and thousands more in Kosovo under the command of American generals, together with experts from many nations investing billions in an otherwise forgettable corner of the continent? The aim is to integrate the Balkan peninsula -- eventually - into the European Union and in the meantime to reduce the flow of its major exports: crime, refugees and drugs.

Yet this is not all that is at stake. Nation building would lack all soulfulness if it were just about creating stability in zones important to Western interests. The idea that redeems nation building is the spiritual component, assisting former enemies to reconcile, to bind up their wounds and transcend a painful past. This is what gives the imperial project its moral allure.

In Mostar, the locals took some time to realize that what the internationals wanted for their investment was a show of reconciliation. Even after a cease-fire in 1994, the hatred on both sides remained intense and visceral. Men of military age, 17 or older, were banned from crossing to the other side. In January 1996, when a Muslim boy defied the ban and drove across to see a Croatian girl who had been a neighbor of his before his family was driven out, he was shot in the back by the Croatian Police and died, slumped over the wheel of his car as he crossed the bridge back onto the Muslim side.

It wasn't until a couple of years ago that Croats and Muslims agreed with one another: it was time to rebuild the Old Bridge. This change of heart may have had to do with both sides realizing that the division of the city no longer made sense. In Mostar, there are two of everything: bus services, hospitals and garbage-collection companies, even so called universities. Duplication is bankrupting the city. Besides, the internationals that foot the bills are tired of the Mostar impasse and want to go home. So the change of heart about the bridge is not a sign of some grand new spirit of reconciliation. It is just that people decided to be practical.

Naturally the man the locals have found to lead the team to rebuild the Old Bridge is neither Croat nor Muslim. He is a middle-aged French *ingenieur des ponts et chaussées*, Gilles Pequeux, a rumped and modest figure who has lived in Mostar on and off since 1995. When he first arrived, the Muslims and Serbs were still fighting in the rest of Bosnia, while in the city itself there was a German mayor, appointed by the European Union, who was struggling, mostly in vain, to get both sides of the river to work together. The seven bridges across the Neretva were down, and Pequeux was given the job of rebuilding them.

He was told that it was impossible to hire crews from both sides of the river, but he went ahead anyway, and soon Croatian and Muslim workmen were struggling together in the cold water of the Neretva, sinking the pilings to support the bridges that rose and reconnected both sides of the town. Bridge building, as Pequeux sees it, doesn't have to wait for hatreds to cool. He just built the bridges and waited for people to use them. At first, nobody did. The Croats would sit in the cafes on one side, and the Muslims would sit in the cafes on the other. You could be in big trouble if you fraternized. But now, seven years later, there is a lot of traffic across the bridges, and shoals of teenagers eddy to and fro, at least until darkness falls.

The Old Bridge, the one whose destruction carries the heaviest memories of anger and pain, has been the last one to be repaired. Pequeux has watched with bemusement at the way a bridge nobody wanted to talk about is now suddenly a subject on everybody's lips. A few years ago, the Turkish president flew into Mostar and promised Turkish

money to rebuild it. It was, he said, a symbol of the Ottoman, Muslim and Turkish influence in Europe. He did not need to add that the Turkish government is campaigning for entry to the European Union. The problem for the Turks is that the Europeans don't exactly remember the Ottoman yoke as a golden age. The Germans especially don't want Turkey in the club, since it would mean even more Turkish immigration. So the Europeans decided that they, too, would help rebuild the bridge if only to keep the Turks from taking over the whole project. There is some irony in the fact that Europeans want both to keep the Turks out and to rebuild the bridge as a symbol of its multicultural and Muslim heritage.

Six billion dollars was committed to Bosnian reconstruction after the Dayton accords that ended the war in 1995. The roads, bridges and schools are rebuilt, and the power is back online. Red-tiled roofs are back on most houses, but inside the minds of the inhabitants, there remain fears, memories and hatreds still too deep for healing. In the seven years of peace, these emotions have mostly produced political paralysis. Bosnia is divided into three entities : Republika Srpska, a sickle-shaped belt of land bordering Serbia and reaching right to the outskirts of Sarajevo; a federation for the Croats and the Muslims; and a third level of government, the national institutions of Bosnia-Herzegovina. No small country has more levels of government, more politicians and more possibilities for corruption, extortion or impasse. A couple of years ago, the Bosnian Parliament spent a week debating whether the front page of the passport carried by all citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina should list the ethnic entity they come from and, if so, how high the lettering for that line should be. In the end, the high representative, an international official who functions as a kind of viceroy, had to step in and decide because the three sides were deadlocked.

BOSNIA AFTER DAYTON offered laboratory conditions in which to experiment with reconciliation. Now the money is almost spent, and Western governments are heading for the exits. The United Nations mission to train the police will be finishing up at the end of this year. "We are declaring victory and going home," one U.N. official told me. International disillusionment is palpable. Instead of flowing toward reconstruction, much of the international money has ended up in the wrong pockets. The Jaguars, Audis and BMW's parked outside the Serbian government building in Banja Luka would look good outside a fancy New York nightclub. Throughout Bosnia, rule of law is next to nonexistent because most of the prosecutors, judges and court officials, together with most of Bosnia's civil and criminal law, remain holdovers from the old Communist system. Mostar is still ruled by people who rose to power during the years of war and madness.

Leaders from both communities meet mainly for photo opportunities with visiting foreign dignitaries. Otherwise, they do not fraternize. Yet they have learned that funds for Mostar will dry up unless displays of multiethnic cooperation are forthcoming. What better display could there be of Mostar turning over a new page than for politicians from both sides to pose together on a reconstructed bridge?

So reconstruction has not even commenced, and yet the project is already carrying some heavy symbolic loads. It has become a metaphor, a bridge from the past to the future, a bridge between Croats and Muslims, a bridge between the internationals and the locals and a bridge between the Muslim world and Europe. The problem with all the metaphors is that the promised reconciliation hasn't actually occurred. Yes, people cross from one side to the other. But they still live completely separate lives. When. Traumatized people fail to play out our script of reconciliation, we tend to blame them rather than our own wishful thinking. Bosnians of all ethnic groups would be shallow creatures indeed if they did not hold onto memory and pain. Yet we are impatient with their memory, impatient with their reluctance to be reconciled. We are in a hurry. We are leaving, in part, because they have failed to provide us with the requisite happy ending.

The rebuilding of the Mostar Bridge is one last chance for a happy ending, a metaphor as important to the internationals as it is to the locals. The result of all this metaphor mongering, as the French engineer realizes, is that everybody wants the bridge rebuilt by tomorrow morning. And it is here that Pequeux has dug his heels in. He says it may take a year yet. His studies are not finished. He hasn't trained his craftsmen. Nobody can understand these delays, but from where he sits, in a faux Ottoman house a stone's throw from the forlorn stumps of the bridge, it seems that everybody, the Turks, the Europeans, the locals, are so much more interested in the bridge as bearer of their loads of illusion that they don't actually care about rebuilding it properly.

IF YOU WANT the real thing, it takes time, Pequeux says. You have to study what Hajrudin had in mind. You have to find the old plans, in the Ottoman libraries in Istanbul. You can't just work from photographs. You have to establish where the original stone came from. You have to figure out how it was cut and how they used molten lead to bond the ironwork that held the stones in place. He takes you down to the Neretva gorge, and you stand below where the bridge used to be, and there are pieces of the Old Bridge littered about, and he can tell you where each piece used to fit, and how it was cut, and point out the mason's marks. This Frenchman's devotion to historical accuracy is a kind of love, notable because - and this comes as a shock - Pequeux has never actually seen the bridge. By the time he reached Mostar in 1995, it had been lying in pieces in the river for nearly two years. So that when I told him that I had seen it as a child, a fleeting look of longing crossed his face.

There is also for Pequeux a growing respect for his fellow bridge builders, four centuries back. Pequeux has discovered that two completely different ways of cutting stone, one European and the other Ottoman, were used on the bridge. The cutters from Constantinople, to judge from etchings of the time and from the marks of their saws in the stone, cut straight on, while the Europeans approached the stone sideways. No one knows why these two civilizations did a common task so differently, but both civilizations mark the stones of the bridge.

Pequeux decided that the only way to do the job properly was to persuade the French government to finance a school of stonecutters in Mostar to teach a new generation these two old ways of cutting stone. French stonemasons are currently training Croats and Muslims to work stone in the old way in a building on the Croatian side. When the bridge goes up, they will do it the way Hajrudin did. Pequeux wants them to understand that the beauty of the original lay in its imperfections, in the misjudgments, in the millimeters of missed connections between the stones that vaulted the 95 feet from one side to the other. Beauty, the engineer says, is built from mistakes.

So, I say, gesturing at all the loose stone gathered on the riverbank below the bridge, you are going to put these back up exactly where they were? Pequeux looks disappointed. I haven't understood. "We are not going to use just the old stones. It's not going to be the Old Bridge. It's going to be a new bridge."

"A new Old Bridge," I venture.

Exactly like the Old Bridge, yes, but a new one. "Un nouveau vieux pont."

He walks me back to my hotel through the Croatian part of Mostar, past the front-line areas where the small-arms fighting was so intense house to house, wall to wall even - that no one could tell who was shooting whom. On one pockmarked wall there is a spray-painted sentence in English: "How do you sleep?"

Mostar is the last thing to keep us awake at night. Our need for noble victims and happy endings suggests that we are more interested in ourselves than we are in the places like Bosnia that Americans have taken up as causes. This may be the imperial kernel at the heart of our interest in reconstruction and nation building. For what is empire but the desire to imprint our values on another people? Imperialism is a narcissistic enterprise, and narcissism is doomed to disillusion. Whatever other people want to be, they do not want to be forced to be us. It is an imperial mistake to suppose that we can change their hearts and minds. It is their memory, their trauma, not ours, and intervention is not therapy. We can help them rebuild the bridge. Whether they actually use it to heal a city is up to them.

The bridge project will cost about \$10 million, and when it is finished, maybe next year, maybe later, big shots will come and have their pictures taken, and the tour buses will resume, and the trinket sellers will have a market, and Mostar will proclaim itself reunited. But the man who has made it possible, the *ingenieur des ponts et chaussées*, is not so sure that his bridge will bear the symbolic weight it will be asked to carry. It will be a *nouveau vieux pont*, because there is really no way back to the bridge that Hajrudin built, just as there is no way back to the way Mostar was before the madness came. The bridge project, the engineer realizes, raises one of the central questions about nation building. How do you build bridges between people? How do you help people to heal? Can outsiders actually do much at all? And what about the power of beauty? The hardest part about the Mostar story is that the beauty of the bridge did not

save it from madness. We do want to believe that beauty can help people resist the call of death and division. Only time will tell if beauty will be given a second chance.

Michael Ignatieff, a frequent contributor to the magazine, is the Carr Professor of human rights and director of the Carr Center at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.