

FILM REVIEW: “RETURNING HOME: REVIVAL OF A BOSNIAN VILLAGE” TONE BRINGA (PRODUCER, ANTHROPOLOGIST) WITH PETER LOIZOS (CONSULTANT)

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Tone Bringa’s “Returning Home: Revival of a Bosnian Village” chronicles the return of several Muslim (Bosniac) families to their homes in the once ethnically mixed village in Central Bosnia from which they were expelled in 1993 during the Bosnian war. This is also the village where Bringa conducted 15 months of field research in the late 1980’s (Bringa 1995). The film is a sequel to the 1993 Granada Television production, “We Are All Neighbors,” an excellent, though chilling account of the breakdown of neighborly relations and friendships between Muslims (Bosniacs) and Catholics (Croats) in the village as fighting between Croat HVO forces and the (Muslim-dominated) Bosnian Army moves closer and the Muslims are eventually expelled.

In three visits from 1999-2001, “Returning Home” chronicles the process of return through the experiences of Muslim returnees and some of the Croats displaced by Muslim forces who have taken temporary refuge in the Muslims’ houses. Nusreta, the wife of the couple Bringa followed in the first film, reappears. She is unusually fortunate in that she has been working and saving money to supplement the rebuilding of her house by a foreign aid agency. The case of Tifija, an older woman from the village, illustrates the lot of most displaced persons (DPs) who are barely making ends meet and whose houses are not initially designated for reconstruction by the aid agencies. As we follow the would-be returnees, some of the enormous complexities and problems of refugee return come into focus. We see how each return is linked to the fate of a chain of other families; for one family to reclaim its house or flat, another must relinquish it, assuming the house of the second family is not being occupied by someone else or was not totally destroyed. The role of foreign aid agencies in rebuilding houses is presented as a blessing for those whose homes are rebuilt but a source of frustration for those denied such aid. Unfortunately, however, no representatives of the aid agencies are interviewed, nor do we see them interacting with any of their would-be beneficiaries. This aspect is thus left

insufficiently explored, as is the larger role of the international community in setting policy and influencing (or not) return in post-war Bosnia.

The main thrust of the film is to highlight the bonds of solidarity that have grown up between Muslim returnees and the Croat DPs staying in the village awaiting the reconstruction of their own houses. Although each group has reason to distrust members of the other group, these women express solidarity with each other on the basis of their common experiences as victims of ethnic cleansing. These bonds are reinforced through coffee hospitality and expressions of good will through the stressing of common values that transcend religious (read: ethnic) differences.

Despite these overtures, however, the narratives of those interviewed reflect a sense of unease. It is as if people are trying desperately to hold onto the possibility of living together with ethnic “others,” to reinforce to themselves and others that they have nothing to do with the nationalist politics that have torn their communities apart, even while they are consumed by the nearly inescapable “us/them” way. Despite these overtures, however, the narratives of those interviewed reflect a sense of unease. It is as if people are trying desperately to hold onto the possibility of living together with ethnic “others,” to reinforce to themselves and others that they have nothing to do with the nationalist politics that have torn their communities apart, even while they are consumed by the nearly inescapable “us/them” way of thinking about social relations and politics that has engulfed Bosnia since the war began. Nusreta is clear that she would not return to the village if it were in “their” hands, meaning Croat control. The joint Muslim-Croat police patrols are key to the returnees’ sense of security (and presumably also for the Croat stayees). Similarly, when Tifija finally returns to the village, she giddily tells Bringa that, with the help of the police, she “kicked out” the Croat

who had been occupying her house. The goodwill towards fellow DPs of different ethnic groups is thus tempered by the continued mistrust between (Muslim) DPs/returnees and those (Croats) who stayed or refuse to leave areas under Croat control (and may have participated in the expulsions).

In this light, there is a curious absence of attention to the Croats who stayed in the village, even for those who have not seen “We Are All Neighbors” in which several village Croats appear. We do get a few hints about the village Croats when Bringa asks Nusreta about the reception from their Croat neighbors: they only greet the Muslims in the street but have not welcomed them back. Aside from this exchange, however, the only interaction with Croats in the film is with the Croat DPs. The film ends with Bringa’s voice explaining that the Muslim and Croat communities have been brought back into proximity but remain socially distant. Unlike the first film, however, it does not explore the dynamics of that distance. It is understandable, considering Bringa’s long-term relationship with the Muslim families she studied in the 1980’s and all that has happened in the 1990’s, for her to sympathize with the Muslims, also the clear victims in this village and in the nearby market town of Kiseljak. Perhaps her relations with the village Croats have thus become strained. This is a constant risk anthropologists take in forging relationships with those they study. Yet it would have been more satisfying to this reviewer had this film sought to explain that absence or explore the consequences of the anthropologist’s positionality.

The film also focuses heavily on women, although there is no mention of this fact or of specific issues facing women DPs and villagers. (Nor is there any reflection by the women themselves on women’s gendered roles as there was to a small degree in the first film.) Again, this approach stands out most for viewers familiar with the first film which featured Nusreta with her husband, Nuriya, and their children as a family. In the present film, we are introduced only to Nusreta, though we recognize Nuriya in a few scenes; there is likewise no mention of the couple’s children. This is significant because, as one Croat DP laments and as is obvious from the age of the returnees we meet (mostly middle aged to elderly), very few young people are returning to the villages. It would be interesting to know where Nusreta’s

son, who should be nearly 21 by the time she moves back into her house, lives and whether he intends to remain in the village. Given what is happening elsewhere in Bosnia in villages and small towns where DPs are returning to areas of different ethnic control, it is likely that he is remaining in (Bosniac controlled) Visoko or Sarajevo where he has some chance of finding work or continuing his education. Furthermore, we are told at the end of the film that half a million DPs in Bosnia are waiting to return home. It should be remembered that not all DPs do want to return, not only for (nationalist) political reasons but also for practical ones. Indeed, though there are exceptions, it is mostly the elderly and unemployed who are returning to rural areas, subsisting on the products of home gardens and remittances from grown children abroad or in areas of Bosnia under the control of “their” ethnic group. In this light, and given the social gulf which exists, at least for now, between Bosniacs and the Croats who stayed, this film does not exactly show the “revival of a Bosnian village” promised in the subtitle. Like “We Are All Neighbors,” then, the title gives an ironic edge to what is actually depicted in the film.

Finally, as a film production “Returning Home” unfortunately does not reflect the quality of professional filmmaking apparent in “We Are All Neighbors.” To be sure, the film contains several moments of vivid ethnographic detail which is difficult to achieve in written accounts. Yet the viewer has more a feeling of watching purposefully set-up interviews rather than following the normal interactions of people going about their everyday lives. Some of the film’s shortcomings may thus be more due to production decisions rather than anthropological design.

In sum, in its depiction of the perhaps unexpected sense of solidarity being forged between Muslim and Croat DPs, “Returning Home” is a thought-provoking look at the post-war return process from the perspective of those who wish to return. One can perhaps not expect an hour-long documentary to fully cover every element of this process, yet several relevant aspects remain unaddressed. Getting at the wider picture would mean exploring the experiences and feelings of the village Croats who stayed—feelings toward both Muslim returnees and the Croat DPs in their midst, as DP populations are often resented even by those of the same ethnic

background. It would also be revealing to hear from villagers of all ethnic backgrounds who are *not* returning. Likewise, it would be useful to have more on the role of the international community, both in its political and humanitarian aid roles (if these can be separated). Supplemented with such contextual information, the film will be useful in teaching classes on the region, on ethnic reconciliation or the problems of post-war reconstruction. "We Are All Neighbors," however, remains the better film, unfortunately for those of us who are keen to emphasize the cooperative and tolerant aspects of Bosnian social life rather than the equally present divisive hostility which has been magnified and(re)produced by nationalist politics and war.