“Teaching War and Peace in Bosnia”

One of the biggest obstacles to American students’ understanding of inter-ethnic and sectarian war in multicultural societies is the tendency, exacerbated by both mainstream US media reports and the claims of the combatants, to “simplify” those conflicts into This Group and That Group, and to play up the idea of the fundamental difference, even incompatibility between those groups, and hence the inevitability of the conflict. The reality of most such conflicts, however, is that there is no stark, neat division into Self and Other. Rather, multiplicity, overlap and mutability of identity are a reality of everyday life that has to be brutally suppressed in order to engage in war. Something similar is true for the Aggressor/Victim dichotomy that is also cultivated in order to understand war. The reality is far more complex.

In order for students to not just know the “facts” about such wars, but for them to engage justly and effectively in the pursuit of peace, they need to be able to empathize, critically, with the variety of identities operative in such conflicts, and to learn to negotiate for themselves their fluctuations. The Liberal Arts, we are convinced, aiming as they do at the liberation of the Self, intend not merely critical thinking in an “objective” manner, from above; but rather from within, from personal conviction and commitment.

To that end, the capstone of our two-semester War and Peace in Bosnia program is a 4-week study abroad course in the country, where we study not just the war, but more importantly the people, the cultures. During the preceding semester at home, the students have already gained the book-learning and the background history, so that while in Bosnia and Hercegovina they can focus on meeting with and talking to real people—former combatants, victims, government officials, aid workers, religious and cultural figures. In addition, we invite students to participate in the cultures through food, music, attendance of religious services, in order to understand, to feel, the cultures of the country apart from their role in the conflict. And finally, at the end of the visit, we include several days of service-learning, where our students engage in some kind of “give-back” to the country, e.g. working with children who have lost parents in the war.