CONCLUSION

As I am writing these lines (January 1999), war is again raging in Kosovo after a short winter break. As in Bosnia, the violence seems to take away hope of further coexistence between Serbs and Albanians, if there was any chance left after so many years of ethnic polarisation and segregation. In 1990, a year before war in the former Yugoslavia erupted, Kosovo already exemplified the paradigm of a segregated society, where ethnic communities live entirely separated, in parallel worlds, with as little contact as possible. Similar processes of ethnic unmixing and national homogenisation were soon repeated elsewhere, albeit in much more violent fashion, leading to results that seem to be irreversible: Bosnia-Herzegovina has been practically divided into three, Croatia has driven out almost all Serbs, and Serbia has expelled most Croats and many of its other non-Serbian inhabitants.

These developments have led to great human suffering, and it is this suffering that has given new impetus to the notions of national victimisation, at the hands of neighbours or more distant political forces (such as the old Habsburg and Ottoman imperia in previous times, or the world’s superpowers nowadays). Serbian nationalism is the most paranoid in this respect, but it is certainly not unique: Albanian nationalist politicians and activists from Kosovo have also presented their people to the outside world as a wronged and victimised nation which has been the object and never the subject of history. Each nation and ethnic group in the former Yugoslavia has its own catalogues (often quite literally) of victims, of atrocities, of destruction and endured injustices, but none seems to have the capacity to grieve for the hurts of others. As two journalists exclaimed: "To work in former Yugoslavia is to enter a world of parallel truths. Wherever you go, you encounter the same resolute conviction that everything that has befallen the region is always someone else’s fault, except one’s own side. (...) Each nation has embraced a separate orthodoxy in which it is uniquely the victim and never the perpetrator" (Silber & Little 1993:390-391). Although these myths of suffering reflect real historical experiences —of oppression and exploitation, of violence and existential insecurity, and of peoples’ lack of
control over their own lives— they are politically abused to justify further violence, making people insensitive to the suffering they inflict upon others.

I certainly do not want to play down the amount of suffering that has been the fate, in particular, of the Albanians in Kosovo: for most of this century, and especially in the last ten years, it is the Albanian population which has been at the receiving end of political oppression, police violence and grave human rights violations. For almost a year their villages have been destroyed and many have been killed or expelled from their houses. Yet it would be incorrect to blame only the Serbs for what went wrong in the province or to say that the Kosovo conundrum has caused suffering only among Albanians. Serbs, Montenegrins, Turks, Muslims, and Gypsies (whose daily misery in terms of social and economic deprivation and discrimination is mostly deemed irrelevant by the main parties) have had their share as well. It is just as incorrect and dangerous to maintain, as nationalist Serbian politicians and media have done since the second half of the 1980s, that it is only ‘we’ who do the suffering. We have seen to what results this led. The hate campaign in the Serbian media directed against the Kosovo Albanians—who were accused of raping Serbian women, of waging a demographic war against the Serbs, of ethnically cleansing the province and committing genocide (see Kullashi 1997)— and later against the Croats and Muslims, prepared some Serbs to repay in kind.

In the end, many of Kosovo’s problems are not ethnic in origin, they have been ethnicised: by politicians who want easy political gain and by populations who have learned to be deeply suspicious of ‘others’, especially if these ‘others’ belong to another ethnic group. Although ethnic and nationalist discourses lead to self-fulfilling prophesies, it is my view that most of Kosovo’s problems need primarily to be understood in political, social and economic terms if one wants to solve anything at all (Horvat 1988). One of the most burning problems is the lack of a democratic political culture, both among the Albanians in Kosovo and the Serbs in Serbia. Amongst the Albanians nationalist discipline and internal factionalism has led to forms of political and ethnic intolerance; the establishment of a genuine pluralist democratic culture will be the main and most difficult task after the Kosovo issue is solved, whatever the solution is. In Serbia, the situation seems to be even worse: Milošević’s regime has transformed Serbia into a country dominated by populism, nationalist resentment, paranoia, xenophobia, and readiness to use violence.
I am trying to be an optimist. The Kosovo myth seems to have lost much of its power, especially after the end of violence in Bosnia. Even with regard to present-day events in Kosovo, where the myth’s use is most appropriate (at least in theory), its rhetoric appears bleak and exhausted. Its extensive political utilisation at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s has solved nothing and has only brought Kosovo’s secession nearer. As some Serbian intellectuals have remarked, the myth has become grotesque: Serbs in Serbia are not willing to sacrifice themselves for Kosovo, and Serbs in Kosovo sell their land and houses to Albanian buyers, yielding to the high prices offered to them (see for instance Krstić 1994:162-174). Widespread corruption of the Serbian authorities in Kosovo, and the fact that many Serbian officials have benefited from ‘co-operating’ with Albanian businessmen, has made the Kosovo myth —especially where it calls on Serbs to sacrifice earthly values for the sake of higher principles— more or less hollow. The myth has been discredited by those who have utilised and manipulated it most. Recent events, which have only accelerated the Serb exodus from Kosovo, have made the failure of official Serbian policy in Kosovo complete.

While almost all Serb politicians share the idea that Serbian rule over the province is an almost inalienable and sacrosanct Serbian right —even among the liberal Belgrade opposition and the leaders of the student movement this idea is predominant— it is my own experience that many ordinary Serbs appear to be less adamant and more pragmatic. They are indifferent to the ‘teachings’ of the Kosovo myth, they are too much occupied with their daily struggle to survive, and they do not really care what will happen to Kosovo: they only know they do not want to go and fight there. These are predominantly the urban and more moderate and democratically minded segments of Serbian society, which have lost all hope after the mass demonstrations against Milošević’s regime in the Winter of 1996-1997 ended in huge disappointment. Now they have become apathetic, invisible and voiceless. An immense number of young educated people have voted with their feet and left the country, a huge exodus which has continued unabatedly and which in the end will be much more consequential for Serbia than the exodus of Serbs from Kosovo.

One of the (positive) lessons I would like to draw here is that the political utility and productivity of myths such as the Kosovo myth is limited. While they can provide a considerable mobilising and homogenising force in periods of crisis, the capacity to captivate the masses
diminishes after they fail to provide guidance when circumstances do not change for the better. As we see in Serbia, certain segments of the population may turn away from these nationalist myths and look in other directions. As Fredrik Barth writes, individuals usually participate in several and often discrepant ‘universes of discourse’ at the same time, with varying intensity or depth (Barth 1989:130), and here seems to lie some hope for the future. Until recently, the Kosovo myth has been dominating political discourse in Serbia, yet it has certainly not been the only one on offer: there are several other accounts —on what Serbia was, what Serbia is, and what Serbia will be— which will one day surface and compete for political preference. The idea of a modern and democratic Serbia is one of them.

I am not arguing here against myth per se, but against particular myths that propagate revenge and exclusivism, which sacralise the nation and demonise others. People cannot do without myths: even in the West, where politics is supposedly based on rational and secular principles, myths play an important role (Hosking & Schöpflin 1997). They are not just ‘untruthful’ fabrications or ‘false’ representations of reality, they also serve positive functions, i.e. they create order out of chaos and show us what direction to take. As myths are an indispensable part of society we should adopt a much more nuanced and appreciative approach to modern-day (political) myths. We should study them comparatively, and judge them on the basis of universalist values like compassion and tolerance.

In this book I have not only studied Balkan myths, I have also challenged dominant western myths about the Balkans, particularly those pertaining to the phenomena of ethnic conflict and violence in the region. Although most chapters could be read as ethnographic ‘snap-shots’ of processes of identification in peripheral places and among marginal populations, they together shed light on larger issues. In the first place, they show that the common western view of the wars in the former Yugoslavia as conflicts evolving around ancient and irreconcilable animosities, between fixed and clearly demarcated ethnic groups, is largely illusory. This image of old and ‘tribal’ hatreds has to be seen with great scepticism: people are constantly (trans)forming their identities, they tend to unite (or hide) behind various and ever changing banners, often disregarding and cross-cutting other boundaries. As Jenkins has formulated it, “[h]uman society is best seen as an ongoing and overlapping kaleidoscope of ‘group-ness’, rather than a ‘plural’ system of separate groups” (Jenkins 1997:51). In periods of political change people may shift their identity, or —more
fundamentally— reformulate the ways they form groups and identify with others. Particular identities (such as the ethnic or religious ones) matter sometimes and sometimes matter not at all, depending on political, historical and other circumstances. As some authors have rightfully argued (see for instance Sorabji 1993:33 and Denitch 1994:6), the West has only identified and acknowledged the ethnic ones. By understanding the conflict in the former Yugoslavia exclusively in ethnic terms, it has contributed to the triumph of nationalist forces and has encouraged the use of ethnic principles in organising political and social life.

Another lesson I would like to draw is that ideas of connectedness, oneness and coherence which are often attached to the concept of culture, and the essentialist and relativist understanding of ‘cultures’ as bounded, unique and permanent (which is nowadays most poignantly expressed in Huntington’s notion of clashing civilisations, see Huntington 1993) is not very appropriate ethnographically. As we can see from my work, cultural praxis in the Balkans can best be described as mixed, heterogeneous, contradictory, fragmented and incoherent (or ‘creolised’ to use the most fashionable post-modern term), at least from the point of view of national and religious orthodoxies. The centres of political and religious power have tried to overcome this situation: they have attempted to eradicate these elements of mixture and multiple ethnic and religious ‘orientations’, and have pressed for clear-cut single identities, with or without violent means, and mostly with varying and limited success. It seems that our western concept of identity, denoting personal ‘integrity’ and ‘oneness’ which is stable and fixed, is not the rule but rather the exception; it is probably the result of a long historical process of societal integration and nation-state formation.

In many parts of the former Yugoslavia ethnic and religious identities have been ambivalent and unstable until quite recently, and the recent wars have been attempts to eliminate these ambiguities. This is a third lesson I would like to draw: instead of seeing the violence in the Balkans as irrational, as tribal, as archaic, as something that is ingrained in the culture and psyche of Balkan inhabitants, I would like to suggest that the violence has profoundly rational dimensions and is primarily ‘European’ in origin: it is a European ideal, that of the nation state, which has been the objective of most of this violence, of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and other forms of ‘ethno-demographic engineering’, which were practised in all parts of the former Yugoslavia. From that point of view also the most brutal and so-called ‘irrational’ violence can be explained rationally, as Todorova
notes. Even if there has been a level of irrationality involved on the part of the actual perpetrators—who often have been convicted criminals or hooligans recruited into paramilitary units to do the ‘dirty’ work (Čolović 1996)—this has been made functional at a higher (political or military) level. In Bosnia, through the extreme violence people were scared away, and the cleansing of ‘undesired’ populations was accomplished in a swift and efficient way (Todorova 1997a:137-138).

In other respects as well, the violence had rational dimensions: it served important tasks in homogenising the population, in establishing undivided loyalties, unambiguous identities, and clear boundaries out of a situation of mixture perceived by many nationalists as one of ‘impurity’ and ‘contamination’. Violence draws clear boundaries, and as Bax has noted for western Herzegovina, it substitutes locally and regionally based identities with national ones: violence is thus not simply a sign of disintegration and ‘barbarisation’, but also a force of integration (Bax 1998). My own research in Letnica has also shown that through violence the ambiguities and complexities of local identities are pushed to the background and that ‘ethnoscapes’ are simplified in the course of this process (cf. Karakasidou 1997). The late Gellner has described this process in an extremely vivid way:

“...consider the history of the national principle; or consider two ethnographic maps, one drawn up before the age of nationalism, and the other after the principle of nationalism had done much of its work. The first map resembles a painting of Kokoschka. The riot of diverse points of colour is such that no clear pattern can be discerned in any detail, though the picture as a whole does have one. A great diversity and plurality and complexity characterizes all distinct parts of the whole; the minute social groups, which are the atoms of which the picture is composed, have complex and ambiguous and multiple relations to many cultures; some through speech, others through their dominant faith, another still through a variant faith or set of practices, a fourth through administrative loyalty, and so forth. When it comes to painting the political system, the complexity is not less great than in the sphere of culture. Obedience for one purpose and in one context is not necessarily the same as obedience for some other end or in some other season. Look now instead at the ethnographic and political map of an area of the modern world. It resembles not Kokoschka, but, say, Modigliani. There is very little shading; neat flat surfaces are clearly separated from each other, it is generally plain where one begins and another ends, and there is little ambiguity or overlap. Shifting from the map to the reality mapped, we see that an overwhelming part of political authority has been concentrated in the hands of one kind of institution, a reasonably large and well-centralized state. In general, each such state presides over, maintains, and is identified with, one kind of culture, one style of communication, which prevails within its borders and is dependent for its perpetuation on a centralized educational system supervised by and often actually run by the state in question, which monopolizes legitimate
culture almost as much as it does legitimate violence, or perhaps more so” (Gellner 1983:139-140).

I think that this (as well as much of my own research) should remind us of the fact that all claims to the effect that fragmented and creolised identities in this era of globalisation are ‘new’ and ‘post-modern’ somehow distort the picture (cf. Jenkins 1997:51). A view from the Balkans shows that they are not new, that they are also or perhaps primarily ‘pre-modern’, and that the modernist project of creating nation states is still a very important force in the world.

I hope that I have shown the kind of contribution anthropology —and particularly ethnography— can make to understand the events in Kosovo and the rest of the former Yugoslavia. The anthropological approach applied in this study is identifiable in the perspective ‘from below’, looking at wider developments from the viewpoint of small communities which have been affected by events and decisions that are far beyond their control. Because of its method of participant observation and its focus on the grassroots level of social life, anthropology is capable —more than other disciplines— of uncovering the important local dimensions of larger events. It can thus offer a healthy corrective to the top-down approach that characterises many studies of Southeast European politics, and it is able to put question marks to the models produced by western scholars and indigenous intellectuals. In this book, the anthropological imagination is also visible in the attention paid to phenomena that are often regarded as ‘unusual’ and ‘marginal’: in this respect my approach is quite different from mainstream studies on Kosovo, which usually adopt the basic Serbian-Albanian opposition as the main framework of reference. I have chosen not to follow these well-trodden paths and to concentrate on topics that usually escape the attention of those authors. I believe that anthropology can offer many additional insights — simply by entering small and unknown side-paths— which in the end have diagnostic importance.