

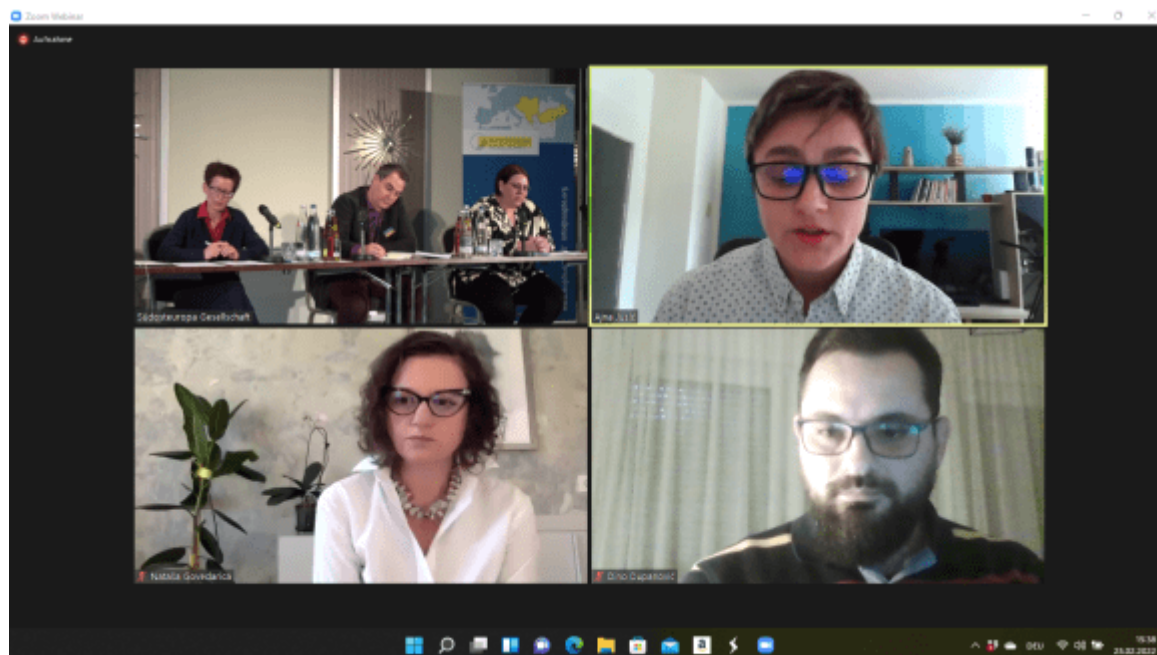


Youth in truth and fiction

Description

On February 25th, Emina Haye and Thomas Schad from our blog & book project *Bosnia in Berlin* (BiB) had the occasion to present the project at the annual Scientific Advisory Board meeting of the [Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft \(SOG\)](#) in Berlin. The SOG, seated in Munich, is one of the flagships in the field of Southeast European studies, political, economic, cultural and academic counseling in the German speaking countries. It is institutionally supported by the German Federal Foreign Office. The public symposium titled **30 Years After the Beginning of the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina: What Does It Mean to Rely on the Young Generation?**, which was our stage, was organized by **Dr. Heike Karge** from the University of Regensburg ([program in English](#)).

Before us, three panelists from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia participated and shared their invaluable research projects and activist work with us: **Dino Dupanovi?** from Biha? (BiH), who is a PhD student at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Sarajevo, whose topic was *Srebrenica: The Paradigm of Bosniak Suffering*; **Ajna Jusi?** from Sarajevo, who is a core activists of the NGO *Zaboravljena djeca rata* (*The forgotten children of war*), who dismantles – in her courageous and impressive work – the taboo of children born out of rape during the Bosnian war; and **Nataša Govedarica** from Belgrade, who works in the NGO *forumZFD* (*Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst*, originating from Germany), presenting her work on socially engaged theatre (and culture, more broadly) as a platform for dealing with the past.



Source: Screenshot, taken by Aldina ?emernica.

In this contribution, we present one part of our presentation – and we hope to present you (hopefully soon) a more detailed report and video link. The following presentation, by **Thomas Schad**, mainly tackles and discusses the **trope of youth**, as introduced in the following section, which also framed the symposium in the introductory paragraph of its program:

A few days before taking office as the new High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt appealed to the public at the end of July 2021 to „put the focus on the young generation [in Bosnia and Herzegovina], the EU, the High Representative and everyone together. Because relying only on the graying gentlemen will not be enough. I bet on the young generation!“

[Source: SOG](#)

Introduction

Before I shall come back to our project Bosnia in Berlin and how I would situate it under the umbrella of the leading question of what it means to place the emphasis on youth, I would first like to challenge, in a somewhat provocative way, the frame of this symposium. This frame is, as I understood it, the trust in the agency of ‚youth‘ as the agents of hope and a better future. I will not only discuss the *frame*, but also ask for the agency of the other agents *inside the picture*: the not-so-young, the grown-ups, the adults, and even the elders. But since Bosnia in Berlin is a literary project, and since we are trained scholars, I will also approach the truth-seeking mission that is inherent to both science and essayistic literature. I hope to demonstrate why literature and culture deserve all our attention and support – although we have already heard more than convincing arguments, especially in Nataša’s presentation.

Youth: a beautiful frame for a complicated picture

I feel entitled and also urged to question that frame, as I cannot consider myself a ‚young‘ person: I am 42 years old. However, this allows me to look back to at least 22 years of a perspective on youth empowerment in Bosnia and Germany: Right after school, I went to Bosnia and worked for the German youth association Schüler Helfen Leben (SHL) and the Campaign for Conscientious Objection (Kampanja za Prigovor Savjesti). One of my first tasks, in the year 2000, was to co-organize a youth summit with a very prominent and important guest-speaker: Wolfgang Petritsch, then High Representative of the International Community. And guess what he said: nearly the same as present-day High Representative Christian Schmidt. He highlighted the role of the youth as the future leaders of the country. We all, including myself, were really charmed and happy about these words – because hey! – the future was our’s!



Picture: Advisory Board Meeting of SOG on 25th February 2022, taken by Thomas Schad.

One could say that it is an evergreen to depict the youth as the real saviors of their own future. The probably most eminent, recent examples of this kind of rhetoric youth empowerment also resonates in Barack Obama’s and Angela Merkel’s speeches at the International Climate Summit in Glasgow, last year. And as we know, Greta Thunberg – as a representative of „the youth“ – was not pleased with the whole performance. So it’s time for some critical questions: What about all the empowered youth from back then? From twenty or thirty years ago? They are now grown-ups, adults, or even elders. So we should evaluate where all the past youth empowerment has lead to.

When I look back and forth, I can, of course, see some impressively fortunate and succesful cases of

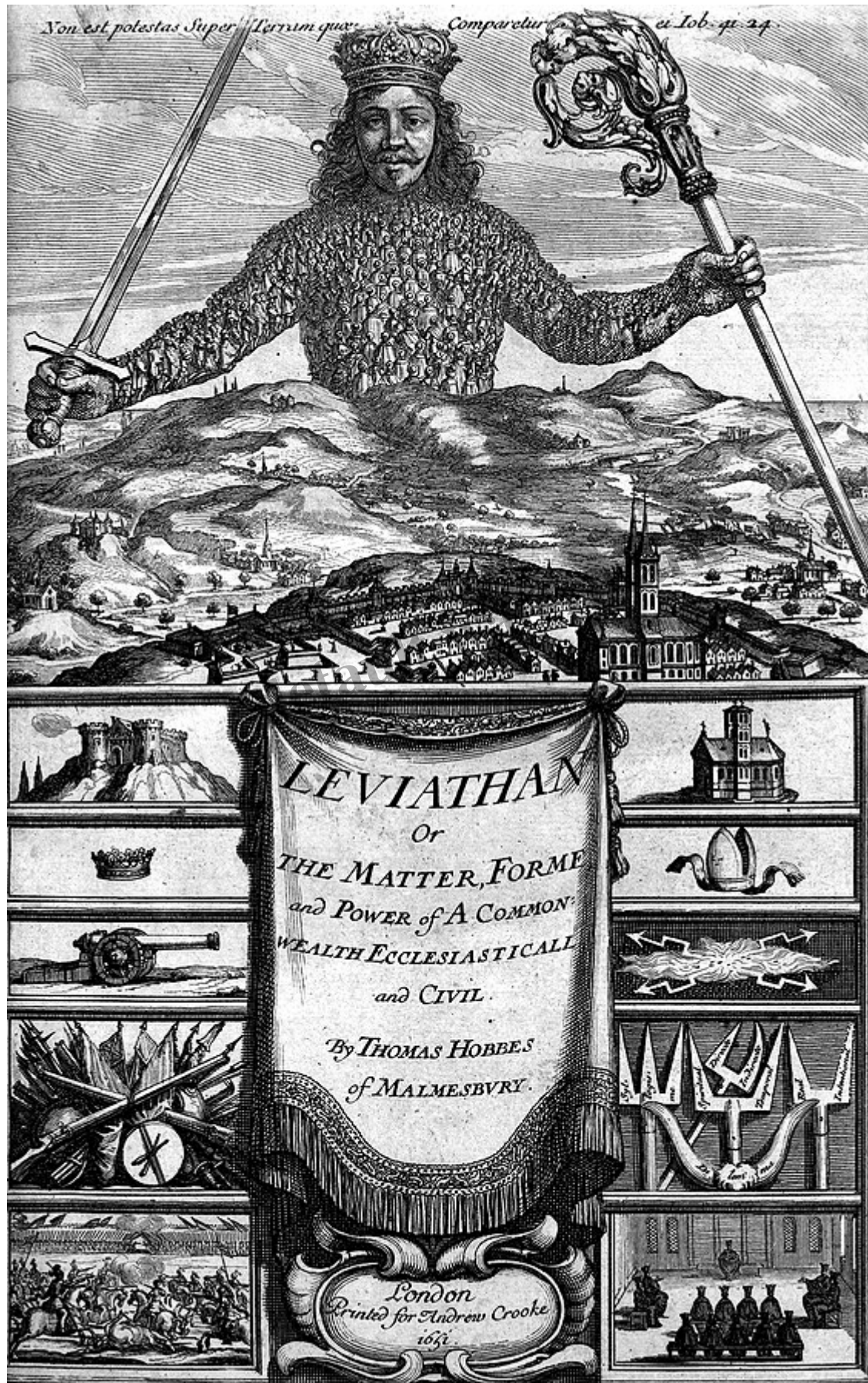
empowered youth. But below the line, I can also see a project that has failed by and large – at least, when the current state of the arts of statehood in BiH is in question, which is under constant attack. We all know that emigration is a big problem: many young people literally flee the country, and a glimpse at the facebook group *odliv mozgova* – braindrain – with its nearly 30.000 members will illustrate best what I mean. And, of course: they all have their reasons.

However, the relationship between youth and future today is more (de-)pressing than in the early 2000s, when the general mood was characterized by the all-encompassing hope and belief that things would necessarily get better: Today, all kind of future first confronts the meta-catastrophe of climate change – which is why I am, frankly speaking, very concerned whenever the solution to our problems is projected onto youth and into the future. The progressive catastrophe of climate change urges us to act at present — and not (only) in future.

The truth-seeking mission of science and literature

Science is a truth-seeking mission, and science is also what the Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft is after – which is why I shall readdress the question of the relationship between the *literary* project of Bosnien in Berlin, and *science* – as science is mostly understood as a positivist, *non-fictional* (non-literary) approach to proven facts.

„*The biggest truth*“, as writer Lana Bastašić was quoted a few days ago in the Sarajevan *Oslobođenje*, “*can sometimes be found in the biggest fiction*“. And here, I would like to remind us of the *constructive* role of fiction as utopia that would later – though, in a modified way – turn reality, and even science. If we only think of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*: with the Leviathan, Hobbes used a mythological (literary, biblical) figure, which helped him to develop a theory of the political, of the state and of the sovereign of the state as the body politic – which was later enshrined by political science as science and scientific thought (*Hobbes fancied adults, not the youth*). In that way, literature can work as an incubator of science.



Picture: Unknown author, Public domain, [via Wikimedia Commons](#)

Yet, literature is also often needed to tell a truth that is too fresh to be told in a non-narrative, non-fictional, non-literary way. Think about stories where the protagonists are still alive and when naming them can be painful, risky for one or both sides, or even dangerous. In the case of Bosnien in Berlin, we have two contributions which were written as theatre pieces, while in other cases, real names were replaced by aliases. Also think of the great movie *Aida, Quo Vadis?* By Jasmila Žbanić, which is told from a fictional figure's perspective, but which also is a very truthful story; also think of Susan Sontag's staging *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo under siege – a literary Godot who never comes and correlates with the figurative International Community which never really intervenes.

A third reason why literature is an important field for truth-seeking and science is that it does not only allow us to explore, to contextualize and to construct stories – but also to deconstruct, to fragment, and perhaps to better see *the elephant in the room*. Literary stories can be analyzed like historiography or the story in history – as Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin have suggested. According to them, fragmentation is the best way to reveal the pathology in the course of history, which sometimes also becomes apparent when we say „look, it happened again“, or „history repeats itself“ (*and you can read similar statements these days in the newspapers and on online platforms, when you turn your eye to the Russian invasion of Ukraine*). And there is a method for fragmentation: trope or metaphor analysis.

A leading trope or metaphor, which so to speak repeats itself, comes alongside with ‚youth‘. Of course, I am not saying that emphasizing youth is a pathology; yet, the metaphors which are often associated with ‚youth‘ – like the vegetational metaphor of growth, maturity, and sovereignty – are very complex semantic units, which can be understood and deciphered in different ways. They deserve, from time to time, critical re-evaluation, in order not to petrify and become the fixed frame of discourse, which nobody is supposed to touch and to challenge. For instance, in some out-dated visions of the future, the course of time is envisioned in the metaphor of growth: the youth is understood as the blossom of life, which will ultimately bear ripe fruit. But with climate change, this all is very questionable: what if snow falls on the blossom, on the fruit – to quote from the famous sevdalinka *Snijeg pade na behar na vo?e*. And perhaps, as a side-thought, a new sevdalinka should be written on heat and drought.

There are other pitfalls which should be avoided when addressing the youth, and I already mentioned the problem with time. Secondly, if we suppose that young people will, tomorrow, settle everything much better than the present-day midagers or older adults, this may obscure the real share of agency, wealth, power, and responsibility. I shall conclude here, but not in despair or hopelessness, because I honestly believe in the transformative power of science as a truth-seeking process and science as the systematic language of critique – no matter how poorly academia often treats academics.

Emina Haye, Nadira Musić und Thomas Schad teilen sich die Aufgaben der Redaktion und sind hauptverantwortlich für die Inhalte sowie Hauptansprechpartner*innen für Projektinteressierte und Mitwirkende. **Aldina Ćemernica, Snežana Stanković und Sabrina Halilović** sind Gründungsmitglieder und Autor:innen des Kernteams. [MEHR](#)

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