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Diana Mishkova, Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making

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Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making

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Already from the time he introduced the concept of “Orientalism” to describe the complex paths of “Western” cultural imperialism in the face of what was conceived as “Eastern”, Edward Said stressed that the term did not constitute a signifier that was prominent in one direction only. This was actually the essential contribution of his theoretical intervention: he did not only give weight to the production of stereotypes, literary narratives and historiographical perspectives from the standpoint of the West, but also to their reception by the subaltern. Only the experiential incorporation of stereotypes by the latter, the internalisation of the ideological and cultural dominance of the West in political and daily discourse, along with a sense of continuing inadequacy in relation to the technological/scientific achievements of the West, would give “Orientalism” its true semiotic content.

Precisely on this point an entire discussion developed around the manner in which the “East” responded to this sort of domination: from various versions of anti-Western narratives, particularly during the era of anticolonial movements, to the development of Occidentalist theoretical schemata which, at their root, were responses to the weakness of the “modernisation” of the dominated societies. This discussion was also necessarily reflected in the theoretical contributions regarding the “orientalist” narratives that developed around the Balkans. From Milica Bakić-Hayden’s notion of “nested Orientalisms” and Elli Skopetea’s analyses of the construction of a “familiar East” within the post-Tanzimat environment of the Hamidian era to Maria Todorova’s “Balkanism”, there has been an effort to apply the theoretical reflections regarding Orientalism to the Balkans. In all of these cases, however, one cannot argue that these authors dealt with the “Balkan East” as a passive recipient of Orientalist motifs. And it is particularly interesting when one compares the (ideological, political and cultural) “responses” of the empires of eastern Europe (Ottoman, Romanov and Habsburg) to the onslaught of “Western rationalism” before their simultaneous collapse at the end of the First World War.

This, exactly, is the starting point for Diana Mishkova’s work, which is an effort to reverse the perspective from which the Balkans are perceived: not on the basis of the

dominant narrative of Western travellers, writers, diplomats or, finally, academics, but through discourses constituted by the “native” academic environments and their main representatives. According to Mishkova, this discourse construction from within evolved in the course of four periods: The first was in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, when nation-states acquired a definitive form along with the region’s national academic institutions. Second, the interwar period (when various schemes for a “Balkan federation” and Balkan “collaboration” among these nation-states was discussed), which was marked by their structural stabilisation. Third, the postwar period, when the discussion surrounding defining “the Balkans” was influenced by the Cold War context. And finally, the period after 1989 following the fall of state socialist regimes, during which, as Mishkova correctly observes, there was a rift among the academic perceptions of the Balkans, which had been already articulated in the final chapter of Todorova’s *Imagining the Balkans*, with the interesting title: “Realia – Qu’est-ce qu’il y a de hors-texte?”,¹ between, on the one hand, the constructivist academic perspectives which are based on the logic of a “cultural geography” and, on the other, those which have insisted on the search for the actual historical particularities which characterised the area. While in that chapter, Todorova maintains the balances with the latter aspect, Mishkova attempts to interpret this “hors-texte” again through the prism of “self-definition”, which, in some way, could solve (or better encapsulate) the problem of historical particularity. This “self-definition” concerns the way in which the members of scientific communities and the academic institutions in these countries contributed to the perception of the concept of the Balkans. Whether the Balkans are a *Sonderweg* or a metaphor is the central question that concerns the author throughout the book.

This expansion, of course, mainly takes the form of a comparison of the views of important figures of Balkan intellectual life, rather than the systematic description of established academic seats or university specialisations devoted to Balkan studies. But although some parts of the book appeared previously in edited volumes and journals, Mishkova’s contribution remains useful and thoroughly presented.

In the first chapter, Mishkova reviews the appearance of the term “the Balkans”, “Southeastern Europe” or their alternatives, such as “Turkey-in-Europe” as they can be found in the works of Western scholars who have dealt with the region. In the second chapter, she explores the impact of important figures in different scientific fields. In linguistics, for example, she focuses on the functional character of the concept of “linguistic union” in the common linguistic structures that characterise Balkan languages. Regarding ethnography, she mainly follows the work of Ivan Shishmanov, who attempted to transcend the old nativist models and consider the intercultural influences among the peoples of the Balkans, through the elaboration of the concept of *Les savants balkaniques*. His study of the appearance of different variations of “The Dead Brother’s Song” all over the Balkans

was based on his collaboration with a wide network of Balkan intellectuals like Nikolaos Politis from Greece, Bogdan Hasdeu and Ioan Bianu from Romania and Milan Milićević from Serbia. In geography and anthropogeography studies she deals with the work of Jovan Cvijić on the “psychological investigations” of the Southern Slavs and his insistence on bringing out the peculiarities of the Balkans with their Byzantine cultural underpinning, in contrast to both the “Turco-Oriental” influences of the South and the patriarchal cultural zone of the North. Finally in the epistemological field of history she insists mostly on the connection that Nicolae Iorga makes in his work between the concept of “Southeastern Europe” and the cultural heritage of “Eastern Romanity”, in contrast, indeed, with the “Eurasian” world of Eastern Europe: the notion of “the *Byzance après Byzance*”, according to Mishkova, “brilliantly exemplifies this synthesis of universal and national history” (61).

The third chapter, examining the conflict-ridden interwar period, looks at the role that the Balkans played in the drafting of political plans of either the Balkan Communist Federation or bourgeois liberal politicians like Alexandros Papanastasiou. While the opposition of the two “extremes” of the era unfolded, with the rise of socialist and communist parties, on the one hand, and the imposition of autocratic or fascist regimes, on the other, this same period would see the first institutionalisation of Balkan studies in Sofia, Belgrade and Bucharest. Mishkova’s observation that the majority of historical, linguistic and literary scholars who participated in this venture specialised in the Middle Ages is correct and this applies also to the Greek case, where the two pioneers in Balkan Studies, Konstantinos Amantos and Michael Laskaris, began (the former also ended) their research careers with issues concerning Byzantine history. On this point, Mishkova (in what is perhaps the book’s most interesting chapter), as she does with Iorga, describes the work of intellectuals like Milan Budimir, Petar Skok and Victor Papacostea, who persisted in promoting the cultural unity of the Balkans. In particular, the stance of the last mentioned thinker, that nationalism was a product of the Western civilisation that fragmented this unity, prompts her to regard critically Todorova’s observation that such views were usually expressed by Western intellectuals exactly in order to demonstrate the differences of a region where conditions for an “endemic” development of nationalism did not exist.

However the “transcendent” character of the works of writers like Iorga, Papacostea, as well as Niko Zupanić, even though they are devoted to the cause of “unity”, should prompt us to explore whether they constitute a transformation, at the level of thought, of the hardcore of Balkan nationalism: no nationalism can demonstrate its superiority by insisting on the elements that make it distinct. It shows its superiority, typically, through its inclusion of competing nationalisms within a common ideological/“scientific”/cultural schema in which it plays a leading role: the heritage of the panideologies of the nineteenth century offered numerous solutions to this problem. More specifically, the solution that Iorga offers to the problem of the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people through the elaboration of Byzantium after Byzantium, namely the model of continuity of the empires, Byzantine and Ottoman, as we know, was discussed extensively during the nineteenth century in the context of the late

Ottoman Empire. Its return with Iorga did not have as its goal to connect “national” with “global” history, but rather to reconstitute Romanian national historiography due to specific problems it faced in dealing during periods of the “Slavification” of the Romanian people. For Zupanić, the common Pelasgian substrate of the Balkan peoples was often a solution for all those who, in the nineteenth century, built a model of national autochthony (Georgi Rakovski being a characteristic example). The reference of Cvijić or Papacostea to the common Byzantine autocratic past can strengthen rather than weaken the high points of the dominant national narrative, respectively.² Just as it would be a mistake to overlook the tendency of those intellectuals from the imperial past who defended something that few expected to come to an end so quickly at the start of the twentieth century, so should we be cautious about whether the recourse to theoretical schemata aimed at “transcending” the differences among the Balkan peoples are not simply new and, indeed, forceful versions of the transformed nationalisms of the interwar period. Mishkova, in the last paragraph of this chapter, appears to take seriously the possibility that the schemata of transcendence reproduce the logic of “ethno-cultural nationalism”. But perhaps her analysis should have begun from there: the reinvention of regionalism is not so much the response to the dominant narrative of the West, but to the manner in which the Balkan nationalisms compete over who will attain a better position within the internal game of sovereignty.

In the subsequent chapters (5–7), the author returns to the images (primarily Anglo-French) that Western popular culture produces about the Balkans, along with the works of academic scholars on such issues as Byzantium and Orthodoxy, the Ottoman past or the problem of underdevelopment, which would also become central to discussions of the Cold War era. During this period, when discussion of the contrast between the developed centre (the North) and the underdeveloped periphery (the South) would take the place of the East–West juxtaposition, Balkan studies would be redefined in the context of the new contrast between the First and Second Worlds. The establishment of the International Association for the Study of Southeastern Europe (AIESEE) did not keep its members from developing a different agenda which once more, in reality, reflected not just nationalist discourses, but nation-state strategies. Figures like Nikolay Todorov, Denis Zakythinos and Aleks Buda cultivated not just their own scientific choices regarding the history of the Balkans, but strategic adaptations of national histories within a bipolar context, an era which “drove” the inclusion of Balkan studies into a wider range of studies (area studies), in this case Eastern European studies.

Finally, we could say that the narrative which Mishkova selects to describe the various regionalisations of the Balkans perhaps constitutes an alternative route for understanding the transformations of Balkan nationalism from the era of early to late Orientalism. This is a distinction that those who deal with the phenomenon frequently forget: If the first period is connected with immediate military control of these regions and

their direct economic exploitation, the second developed through the indirect methods of political and economic dependency in strategically important regions of the world. Balkan nationalisms were born in an era of early Orientalism and developed and crystallised in the latter era: they bore within themselves, however, Orientalist motifs and models for understanding the region and their neighbours as well as the dominant players of the game. Perhaps the “beyond” which some are seeking from history and others from discourse analysis is to be found in understanding the organic relationship that connects Orientalism with the emergence of “regional” nationalism. The fact that Mishkova’s book gets us to rethink this central problem makes the book important and worth reading.

¹ Maria Todorova, chap. 7, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009).

² For all the above issues, see Dimitris Stamatopoulos, *Byzantium after the Nation: The Problem of Continuity in Balkan Historiographies* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2021). First published in Greek as *To Βυζάντιο μετά το έθνος: Το πρόβλημα της συνέχειας στις βαλκανικές ιστοριογραφίες* (Athens: Alexandria, 2009).