

Σύγκριση/Comparaison/Comparison

Αρ. 33 (2024)



Petros Marazopoulos, The “Balkans” in Modern Greek Culture: Negotiating a term. Foreword by Dimitris Kargiotis, Thessaloniki: Epikentro pubs, 2023

Anna Katsigianni

Copyright © 2025, Anna Katsigianni



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Katsigianni, A. (2025). Petros Marazopoulos, The “Balkans” in Modern Greek Culture: Negotiating a term. Foreword by Dimitris Kargiotis, Thessaloniki: Epikentro pubs, 2023. *Σύγκριση/Comparaison/Comparison*, (33), 386–389. ανακτήθηκε από <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/sygkrisi/article/view/39946>

Petros Marazopoulos, *The “Balkans” in Modern Greek Culture: Negotiating a term*. Foreword by Dimitris Kargiotis, Thessaloniki: Epikentro pubs, 2023

The book by Petros Marazopoulos entitled *The “Balkans” in Modern Greek Culture: Negotiating a term*, is introduced by the comparative studies professor Dimitris Kargiotis. The introduction to the publication, simple and concise, makes clear the ideological and scientific aim of the project, which largely falls within the comparative discipline of iconology or stereotypology.

The aim of the study is to examine the handling and treatment of the term “Balkans” from the early 19th century to the present day. The book is an edited version of Petros Marazopoulos’ doctoral thesis and was published in Thessaloniki by Epikentro Publications in an elegant and very well-edited volume. I note that in the previous year another monograph, by Dimitris Livanios, entitled *Forging Identities: Studies in Religion, Violence and Nationalism in the Balkans (17th -20th centuries)*, with a preface by Paschalis M. Kitromilidis, was also published in English by Epikentro, showing the intense interest in the Balkans, which are now a point of focus in the scientific community, as also indicated by the regularity of conferences on the subject.

Marazopoulos’ book is a synthetic work of reference in the field of comparative, cultural and especially Balkan studies, but also a demanding and original scientific project, with a rich theoretical reflection, which makes use of numerous grammatological documents and mainly literary material from various narrative genres. It is the most comprehensive approach to the Balkan issue available to us in the field of modern Greek cultural studies. As for the term—the word “Balkan”—, it is well known

that there is a whole literature on its ambiguous semantic dimensions. The various negative connotations of the word “Balkan” are largely due, according to the modern Greek view, to the presence of the Turkish factor. The choice of the term “culture” in the title and the handling of the term “Balkan” is explained throughout the monograph and gives us much food for thought.

The book is 353 pages long and is divided into four chapters and a final part containing the conclusions and titled “Instead of an epilogue”. The work is woven using the dialogue as a framework between literature and history. As far as the complex and original structure of the book is concerned, we would first observe that it follows a robust historical scheme by incorporating in it a variety of narrative discourses; the author combines historical periodisation with literary history, that is with mythologisation, or rather with constructions of the Balkan Other, which according to Todorova contains confused elements of identity that echo our other, ‘imperfect self’.

As the representations chosen vary, it could be argued that the volume offers itself to be studied from a historical-political and obviously grammatological perspective within the context of ideological diversity, but also within the context of the eidological diversity of narrative interpretations. It is striking how many different literary genres are used as documentation. The questions posed to the reader touch on a variety of ideological, historical and cultural aspects of the Balkan question.

The examination of this complex and multifaceted issue spans a period

of two centuries. It begins, in the first chapter, with the foundation of the Modern Greek Kingdom and reaches the end of the Greek interwar period, spanning the years 1830-1940.

The coexistence of the Balkan peoples was, of course, enforced under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The most important factor in the formation of a common consciousness among the Balkan peoples was the formation of a common perception of the image of the Ottoman Empire and “Eastern despotism” (this Ottoman Middle Ages that lasted for five hundred years). This unifying perception, the common Balkan denominator, is also evidenced by the representations of the Ottoman Other that are, to a large extent, common in the narratives of the Balkan peoples. The Ottoman becomes the symbol of evil and is demonised. Mythical and legendary heroes as personas represent the cultural traits of the Muslim conquerors. The common goal of throwing off Turkish rule, and Christianity itself, provided the ideological basis of cohesion in the formation of Balkan consciousness and identity. A common attitude was essentially formed among the Balkan peoples, defined mainly by the attainment of independence from the Ottoman Empire, but also by their common historical experiences, memories and search for national and cultural identity.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the cohesive links that united the Balkan peoples, namely Christianity and the need to throw off the Ottoman yoke, were ruptured. And after liberation, in a climate of Romantic nationalism and self-determination, the establishment of a historical genealogy and the search for an ideology to form a national identity, the Greeks turned either to antiquity

or to Western Europe, and hardly at all to the Balkans. In this long period from 1830 to 1940, which lasts 110 years and includes landmark events such as the Balkan wars, different discourses are therefore formulated that capture aspects of the image of the Balkans as a community, from the perspective, for example, of heroic Romanticism, as in the case of Alexandros Rizos Ragavis, Georgios Tertsetis and Georgios Martinellis. The inquiry is also carried out from the perspective of ‘foreigners’; one could cite here the typical example of the Greek Gregorios Stavridis who was naturalised as a Bulgarian under the name Prlicev. The multilingual nationalist Gregorios Stavridis wrote *Armatolos*, one of his best works, which was awarded a prize in a university competition. However, later, after renaming himself Gregor Prlicev, he fought for the establishment of a pan-Slavic language hybrid, and today he is claimed by both the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now North Macedonia) and Bulgaria. The formation of the image of the Balkans is also examined through hybrid travel texts, under the narrative gaze of travelers. In addition, socio-political studies at the turn of the 20th century are also used, in parallel, to form an image of the Balkans.

After the formation of nation states and the Balkan wars, there was no lack of claims for the partitioning of territories and consciences; a national discourse therefore developed, and medieval, Byzantine and national legends were revived, with the example of Penelope Delta being very indicative. Of major importance and weight during this period are also the views of Palamas, who, in the light of Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos’ ethnoromanticism, that is, the unity of the Greek nation, opens up the

horizon of reception of Balkan literature and the Balkan Other.

The fragile balance of power in the Balkans forced, in the past, the Balkan states to join together in a Balkan Alliance. Historians have certainly written about these issues. The idea of establishing a Balkan Federation, the attempts to coordinate (trade) policy on a trans-Balkan level, with regular Balkan conferences, were not very successful, but involved several intellectuals, who conceived, like Rigas, the idea of an ‘indeterminate’ Balkan Republic. Palamas, at different times, commented positively on the idea of a Balkan Federation. He even wrote an essay in which he attributed our inadequate knowledge of Balkan neighbouring languages and the absence of “balkanognosia” (knowledge of the Balkans) and genuine “balkanophilia” to the teaching of languages of the great nations “which stimulate our spirituality”. He recommends to his readers prominent Balkan peers (1935). His poem “Balkan Confederation” (contained in the collection *The ‘Politeia’ and the Solitude*, 1912, which can be read alongside the poem “Anatoli [Orient]”, also of 1912) is an indication of his view of how beneficial the idea of a Federation could prove for the Greek nation.

Equally significant during this period is the perspective of the idiosyncratic nationalist Ion Dragoumis, who advocates a distancing of Greece from the West by pointing to the central role of Greek culture.

In the next chapter, entitled “Balkan ‘Real Socialism’ and the post-communist Balkans, 1944-2018”, Marazopoulos attempts, through travel impressions or post-romantic views of so-called Real Socialism and the post-communist Balkans after the collapse of this version of actually

existing socialism, to highlight the demise of the myths of socialist progress or to delineate the dividing factors between Greece, the Balkans and the West. It was, after all, natural for Greece to turn to its connection with the European Community and to become a fringe of the West, since communism and the mountains separated it politically and economically from its neighbours. Greece therefore maintains an ambivalent position, positioning itself both inside and outside the Balkan area.

After the war and the fall of the socialist republics, the question of “what the Balkans are ideologically” arose again. The search for common narrative structures, points of convergence, intersection and interconnection between the Balkan countries was mainly conducted by reference to a historical past. The historical context dictated various ideological projections or reservations. I mention by way of example some names of writers who compose very characteristic texts for the significance of this period, from the rich narrative material that Marazopoulos quotes and interprets, covering dystopian aspects, representations and constructions of the Balkan space: Giorgos Theotokas, Elli Alexiou, Leonidas Hatziprodromidis, Christos Hartomatsidis, Stavros Tzimas, Telemachos Kotsias, Demosthenes Kurtovik, and so on.

In the third chapter, entitled “Inverse inserted Orientalisms: the relationship between Greece, the Balkans and the West in the modern Greek imaginary”, Orientalism is examined “as a Western system of knowledge and imposition on the East”. More specifically, an assessment is made of the influences and critique of Said’s influential model in contemporary academia. Questions are raised

concerning Maria Todorova's relationship with the application of the Saidian model in Southeastern Europe. This nimble and flexible schema of Inverted Orientalism enables the author to interpret the Greek path to the West, Greece's deviations from it, and what he calls an "exaggerated superiority complex", i.e. the overly positive self-evaluation of Greece and the factors contributing to the formation of this ideology in terms of the imaginary. The position of the Balkans as a geographical designation, the literary places, literary motifs and national portraits of the Balkan peoples in modern Greek thought and literature are also commented on at length. Greece's political, economic, institutional and cultural divergences, despite its geographic proximity, its cultural distance from the Balkans simultaneously highlights its cultural, and more broadly intellectual, affinity with the West.

The fourth chapter, entitled "Ethnic discourse and Macedonia: the legacy of Greek antiquity in the modern Greek state of today and the 'usurpers of history'", highlights the ethnocentric, historiographic approaches to the Macedonian question (1880-1970), the dominant national discourse and a renewing, reformist trend in modern Greek thought of the synchronous present, i.e. during the period from 1980 to 2018. Also, valuable documentary material is traced in the periodical publications put at the service of the national discourse.

The study as a whole offers rich conclusions on the reception of the unstable term "Balkans", characterised by obvious intersections and fluctuations, and also, as already said, offers a rich bibliographical harvest of literary texts (novels, short stories,

poems, travel literature, documents, testimonies), sorted by thematic area, as well as theoretical readings—a bibliography of Greek and foreign-language studies, in the shape of essays and historiographic writings.

In conclusion, we would say that this is an important book, which must be the fruit of many years of research. Petros Marazopoulos' monograph can be considered a milestone in the history of Balkan studies and a starting point for a more substantial deepening of the concept of Balkanism and our image of the Balkan Other, to the extent that it formulates intercultural relations through literary receptions of the "Balkanios"—the inhabitant of the Balkans—not only by reference to texts of the great literary canon but also to lesser-known narratives. The study penetrates all aspects of the reception of the Balkans by tracing the stereotypical constructions and intersections in the articulation of this discourse, which is obviously also influenced by the ideological preferences of the authors. Undoubtedly, Marazopoulos' book is a contribution to the international debate as well, as it formulates "an original theoretical and critical reflection on the broader debate on the Balkans", as Dimitris Kargiotis observes. Moreover, it is a well-written and amply-documented study. Any minor shortcomings—there could, for example, have been a gradation in the influence of the authors examined—pale in comparison to the boldness, originality and successful implementation of this ambitious undertaking.

Anna Katsigianni
University of Patras