

Balkanism Revisited: Overcoming the Old Western Stigma of the Balkans

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Abstract

At various points in history the Balkans were a vivid locus of intersection among different cultures, religions, civilizations, and ideologies. The view of this region as a threshold of contact and mixture fuels opposing discursive practices either to champion a Balkan cultural pre-eminence or to justify its exclusion from Europe. Though claimed by the local nations as 'the cradle of civilization', for Western imagining the region has featured as "part of Europe, yet not of it" (Mazower, 2000). In view of the Ottoman legacy, the West has construed the Balkans as an ambiguous borderland, not as an oriental Other but rather as "an incomplete self" (Todorova, 1997) which is denied "an access in the European sphere of modernity" (Norris, 1999). This negative demi-orientalizing discourse - called 'Balkanism' by Todorova (1997) - which stigmatized the Balkans as a vortex of stagnation and violence has been thought to fade away with the integration of the Balkan countries into the European Union. Still, a recent term, 'Western Balkans', invented as a seeming mask of political correctness, seems to testify to a prevailing stigma and to the obstacles to the process of European integration. This paper reflects on this stigma, suggesting that the European integration of the Balkans may not be simply subsumed to their strained acculturation within the imagined Western paradigm. Instead, the embracing of the Balkan cultural legacies and identities can mean a new vision of Europe as a perichorectic project where different cultures do not blend but coinhere.

Keywords: Balkans, Balkanism, Western Balkans, Europe, identity, acculturation, perichoresis.

Introduction

There is always some ambiguity when conceptualising the Balkans. At various points in history the region was a vivid locus of intersection among cultures, religions, civilizations, and ideologies. This view of the Balkans as a threshold of contact and intercultural exchange fuels contesting discursive practices either to champion a cultural pre-eminence of the Balkans or to justify their exclusion from Europe. Local nations tend to perceive the Balkans as a ‘cradle of civilizations’. This is an image of a locus of cultural cornucopia from which Europe – through Antiquity – has received a fundamental dimension of its identity (Stoianovich, 1994). For Western imagining, on the other hand, the region has featured as ‘part of Europe, yet not of it’ (Mazower, 2000). In view of the Byzantine legacy, but especially the Ottoman legacy, the West has construed the Balkans as an ambiguous borderland; not as an oriental Other but rather as “an incomplete self” (Todorova, 1997) which is denied “an access in the European sphere of modernity” (Norris, 1999). This stigmatising discourse which constructs the Balkans as a European alter ego and projects it as a vortex of stagnation and violence was thought to fade away with the integration of the countries of South East Europe into the European Union. Still, a recent term, ‘Western Balkans’, invented as a seeming mask of political correctness, seems to testify to a prevailing stigma and to the obstacles to the completion of the process of European integration.

This paper offers reflections on this stigma, suggesting that without full and non-condescending acceptance of Balkan cultural legacies and identities the promise of the European project may never be complete. At the onset, we briefly refer to the invention of Europe itself. Next, we consider how the Balkans have been conceptualized in response to the negative Western discourse on the region. Finally, we propose a new term – *perichoresis* – which could help us conceive better the interpenetration of cultures in the Balkans and contribute to a new vision of Europe as a cultural project wherein different identities do not blend but coinhere.

The Invention of Europe

Following the end of the Cold War, European integration became a sort of substitutive ideology for the post-communist societies of Eastern Europe. Such a prospect meant not only an economic prosperity and political stability, but also a hope for an end to the cultural divides on the continent. This is particularly true of the Balkans. However, the EU stalled the enlargement process and the recent migration crisis has posed an old question with a new fervency: What do we talk about when we talk about Europe?

In his study *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality*, Gerard Delanty reminds us that Europe was a cultural construct, produced out of historic conflicts and cultural contradictions rather than around an essential unity and principle of inclusion. The idea of Europe was an “ideology of intellectuals and the political class” (Delanty, 1995, p. 6). Over the centuries it

was developed within five discourses: “the discourse of Christendom, the Enlightenment discourse of civilization, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century discourse of culture, the Cold War discourse after 1945 and the contemporary conflict between the discourses of Fortress Europe and that of a Social or Citizens’ Europe” (Delanty, 1995, pp. 13-14). What remained essential to this invention of Europe, holds Delanty, was the self-affirmation in the face of opposition to Islam or the Orient externally and to the ambivalent borderlands internally. He makes a distinction between the Balkans as a borderland to the Muslim world of Ottomans, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the lands in-between like Poland, the Baltic Republics, the former Czechoslovakia and Hungary, which separated Germany and Russia. For Delanty (1995), the Balkans were “the dividing line of two civilizations, the point of collision between Europe and Asia” (p. 49).

In another study, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Larry Wolff discerns that the division of Europe between the West and the East is a product of the Enlightenment, which replaced the Renaissance’s conceptual estrangement between the South and the North. (Following the economic crises since 2008 and the inequalities among the EU member states, one wonders if the North – South division would not become relevant once again.) Intellectual centres in Western Europe, argues Wolff (1994, p. 4), associated themselves with the new notion of ‘civilization’, which necessitated “its complementary other half”. So Eastern Europe (including the Balkans) was not constructed as an oriental other, but as an ambiguous “half” of Europe which mediated between the West and the Orient.

Conceptualising ‘the Balkans’

This notion of an ambiguous part of Europe has been further developed into various attempts to conceptualize the Balkans, each evolving around major historical legacies: Antiquity, Byzantium, the Ottoman conquest, and communism.

In the course of continuous though not always straightforward historic developments, Western Europe became a centre of geopolitical power and it appropriated the ancient Greek heritage as its constitutive aspect. “We Europeans are the children of Hellas”, thus H.A.L. Fisher (1935, p. 1) begins his *History of Europe*, echoing an earlier Romantic exclamation by P. B. Shelley. It is worth mentioning, however, that for the contemporaries of the ancient playwrights like Aeschylus or Euripides, Europe was circumscribed to the geographic boundaries of mainland Greece, Macedonia, and perhaps a few other parts of the Balkan peninsula; but anything northwest of this area, or what we nowadays call Western Europe, was equally if not more barbarous to them than the Orient itself.

So too was the case of Christianity. A defining event took place in Macedonia; following a vision, St. Paul decided to cross from Asia, baptising in Philippi the first Christian in Europe – a hospitable woman named Lydia (Acts 16: 9-15). Ever since, so maintains Fisher (1935), Europe means Christendom. However, despite the grandeur of Byzantium that was erected

as the Christian Eastern Roman Empire, Western Europe never assumed its legacy. The Great Schism between the Western and Eastern churches, which climaxed in 1054, brought a divided political and cultural perception. Delineated as a sphere of Eastern Orthodoxy, Byzantium was turned into an obscure rival of Western rulers who acknowledged Roman Catholic jurisdiction. The Ottoman expansion and the fall of Constantinople in 1453 marked the perception to the extreme: the Balkans, almost overlapping with the boundaries of Byzantine influence on the European continent, became a place of 'oriental intrusion', polluted by 'infidels' and therefore considered a threat to Europe 'proper'. The rift was replicated in the twentieth century once again: The Habsburg and Ottoman empires ceased to exist, but 'Western democracies' took a stance against the 'communist East'. The concept of an irredeemably divided Europe seems to eclipse even the end of the communist era.

And so, once again, the question whether the Balkans were permissible into Europe echoes Samuel Huntington's vision of an imminent "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1993; 1996). He holds that there is a cultural rift between Western Christianity, on the one hand, and Orthodox Christianity and Islam, on the other. Huntington's portrayal of the Balkans as a European "fault line" of global division seems to still inspire the re-emergence of stereotypes about the Balkan countries (Huntington, 1996, p. 160); though his main premise runs short of a conceivable geopolitical materialization given that Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and of late Montenegro have all become NATO members.

Responses to Balkanism

Michael Herzfeld (2002) notes that there is a paradoxical yet "inexorable logic" where the Balkan political leaders and intellectuals are concerned: "the more they protest, the more they confirm" (p. xi). He himself is acclaimed for elucidating the "burden of otherness" (Herzfeld, 1987, p. 1) in his major study *Anthropology through the Looking-glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe*, which explores self-perceptions of modern Greeks in relation to their ancient heritage. Hellenism, says Herzfeld (1987), is an idealized cultural fundament of Europe. Yet, the image of "Hellenism fallen from grace" contributed to the imposition of marginal identity to modern Greeks as the mechanisms of a Western Eurocentric vision turned them into "aboriginal Europeans" who embody "the European ideal fallen to the evil corruption of anti-Europe" (Herzfeld, 1987, p. 49). Likewise, Herzfeld seems to suggest, the insistent claim that the Balkans belong to Europe only acknowledges the lack of recognition from which the Balkans continue to suffer. Making a brief parenthesis on the divergent opinions of several scholars (most of whom come from or by origin are related to the Balkans), we therefore consider the question: how to jettison the old Western stigma of the Balkans?

In her influential study *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Todorova (1997), a Bulgarian historian teaching at American universities since the late 1980s, defined "balkanism" as a western discourse which constructed the Balkans as an "imputed ambiguity" and "incomplete self" of

Europe (pp. 15-18). Despite the schism between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the Balkans formed an integral part of the European Christian sphere, therefore standing in opposition to Islam. Of the two legacies that shaped the fate of the peninsula – Byzantine and Ottoman, Todorova considers the latter to be held responsible for the name of the region as well as for most of the stereotypes it invokes. The Balkans, she asserts, “are tantamount to their Ottoman legacy” (Todorova, 1997, p. 13). Hence, the process of modernization (also referred to as ‘europeanization’ or ‘westernization’) means definite riddance of the Ottoman legacy. Ironically, what we witness today, says Todorova (1997, p. 13), is “an advanced stage of the end of the Balkans”. To put it briefly, Todorova implies that modernization leads to a fading of the Ottoman imprint, which in turn makes the Balkans once again fit for equal status within their European type.

An implicit revision of Todorova’s claim comes from Milica Bakić-Hayden. In her paper “What’s So Byzantine About the Balkans?” she reminds us that some negative elements attributed to the Balkans do not solely originate in the Western perception of the Ottoman legacy, but can be traced in the image of Byzantium cherished by the West (Bakić-Hayden, 2002, p. 62). The West, one may infer, constructed the Balkans by adding its perception of the Ottoman legacy to an already fomented mistrust towards imagined Byzantine inheritors. (This is further argued in Angelov, 2003). And if such was the case in the past, then to recognize “reality as inherently ambivalent”, concludes Bakić-Hayden (2002), “may be precisely what contemporary Europe needs ... in order to come to terms with its various selves, including its ‘Balkan self’” (p. 74). Furthermore, Traian Stoianovich, an American historian who was born in Macedonia, in his extensive study *Balkan Worlds: The First and Last Europe* (1994), maintains that the Balkans lodge five cultural areas or archaic cultures which were subjected to influence and change in two distinct processes: first, “orientalization” which came about with the imposition of Ottoman rule; and second, “rationalization”, which happened at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a new cultural transfer towards the Enlightenment project (p. 323). Whereas ‘orientalization’ has faded away, Stoianovich believes that ‘rationalization’ has a dominant influence. He argues that the process of rationalization implies a sheer imposition of capitalism and threatens to obliterate the cultural richness in the Balkans. So, we find in Stoianovich two focal ideas. Firstly, he sees the Balkans as “the first Europe” which cradles distinct cultures dating back to the Neolithic era, yet shaped and enriched during the classical antiquity and Byzantium. Secondly, he prognosticates that to exclude the Balkan cultures from modern Europe would be the “suicide of Europe itself” (Stoianovich, 1994, p. 3). In a word, Stoianovich believes that the failure to place culture (rather than money) as a European foundation means there would be no future Europe.

Dušan I. Bjelić (2002) reminds us of a similar view citing Slavoj Žižek (1993) who argued that much of the recent Balkan atrocities do not originate in the past, but “should be attributed to the inner logic of Western capitalism” as liberal democracies of the West tend to “channel

internal vindictiveness onto the periphery” and thus remain “superficially purified” and self-content (cited in Bjelić, 2002, p. 9).

Finally, we evoke Julia Kristeva’s attempt to reflect on the Balkan stigma. Born in Bulgaria, but educated in France where she has lived for over forty years, Kristeva admits to sharing the opinion of Huntington whilst endeavouring to assess the achievements and deficits of the three Christian strands in Europe in relation to the fundamental idea of the free subject. Unlike Huntington, however, she argues that “the Orthodox experience of subjectivity and freedom might ... complete, stimulate, and enrich Western experience”, as well as benefit in return (Kristeva, 2000, p. 117). According to her, Orthodoxy cannot provide for performance and critical reason, but it can deliver values such as interdependence and participation. Europe would not be complete, concludes Kristeva, if we do not “federate the diverse currents of Christianity” (Kristeva, 2000, p. 159). Despite Kristeva’s West-East stereotypical binary oppositions which are based on a misconception about the fundamental concepts and values developed within the Byzantine tradition, her ultimate suggestion seems to correspond with the appeal of Pope John Paul II (1995) that “the Church must breathe with her two lungs”, not with one only.

Perichoresis and Its Implications

In the footsteps of Todorova (2002, p. 76), we could agree that the existing “mental map of a bifurcated civilization” should be replaced by a general *longue durée* framework for understanding the Balkan past and the emergence of modernity and nationalism. In such a perspective, the “conventional assumption that ideas like the Enlightenment, national self-determination, individual liberties, and so on were and are organic to the west, whereas in the east they are transplanted on alien soil” can be convincingly dismissed (Todorova, 2005, p. 154). In other words, we can speak of the imputed Balkan legacies as parts of a natural evolutionary process comparable – again, in a *longue durée* perspective – to the rest of Europe.

However, to understand the process of non-hegemonic acculturation on the continent, we suggest another concept – *perichoresis*. In Byzantine philosophy, *perichoresis* (Greek περιχωρησις) was originally employed to describe the unity and interpenetration of two natures, divine and human, in Christ, and later on to explain the relation among the three hypostases within the Holy Trinity. Transposing it to sociocultural contexts, we propose the notion of *perichoresis* to designate the preserving and affirming of a distinct identity while partaking in a process of acculturation. The key suggestion here is that cultures can coinhere and change without necessarily losing their difference in identity.

The term, thus, grasps the simultaneous reality of oneness and plurality where being one does not mean being melted or undistinguishable, and being distinguishable does not mean being divided. For instance, the Macedonian scholar Stefan Sandzhkoski (1993) uses the term to explain the appropriation of the Byzantine culture by the Slavs. He argues that the

mode of cultural translation used by St. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples was such that interwove "Rome and its sense for organization and the managing of time; Athens and its philosophical and mysteriological legacy; and Jerusalem with its biblical historicism and messianism" (Sandzhkoski, 1993, p. 79). Hence, the transculturation of the Slavs meant an affirmation of their identity in relation to the Byzantine subject as alterity, both remaining distinguishable yet ('organically') sharing in a mutually negotiated change.

To conclude: in a foreseeable future, Europe can overcome its own bifurcation by embracing the Balkan legacies and identities as its very own. To do so, however, Europe should be fashioned after the nonhegemonic model of transculturation, which we call a *perichorectic situation*. In a word, in the era of globalization, a Europe of internal convergence is possible only as a perichoresis of cultures.

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