

## The Blind Spot of Balkanism

*Elizabeta Sheleva*

### Abstract

This chapter argues against a hidden orientalism, or balkanism, which has paradoxically been revealed in Maria Todorova's highly influential book *Imagining the Balkans* (1997). Despite this, the very book in question remains well known and has been widely acclaimed for its' imagological turn, which has proposed a new operative tool, or key term, in order to design the discursive space a hitherto unrecognized of, internal European colonialism towards the Balkans. The treatment of Macedonia in Todorova's theoretical "bestseller" confirms the incorporated effect of both a historically and culturally grounded neglect as well as a hidden orientalizing of the Macedonian Other. In other words, the presence of a blind spot at the very core of balkanism, overshadowing its declarative emancipatory approach, otherwise implemented in the book. The process of the perpetual "othering" of Macedonia can be recognized this time through the tendency of Todorova's book to (re)present and describe Macedonia, using simply the perspective of a landscape, whilst unconsciously or, rather, intentionally omitting its historical, and also its contemporary achievements. More precisely, Macedonia's prominent authors and their work, referring to the topic of Balkan, in the domain of art and culture, which today are also well known abroad. This process of "landscapization" or exoticizing is already recognized as one of the fundamentally colonizing discursive strategies, thereby justifying its paternalist attitude of dominance over the exotic Other. Therefore, we hope that the author, for the sake of true post-colonial objectivity and open-mindedness, could take into consideration our academic objection and compensate for it, by simply adding the names, as well as the creative contribution of Macedonian authors, artists and intellectuals, in future editions of her book.

**Key words:** Balkanism, Orientalism, nesting Orientalism, the Other, E. Said, M. Todorova, cultural imperialism, Macedonia.

“The East has always existed as an elastic and ambiguous concept. Everyone has had one’s own Orient, pertaining to space or time, most often to both. The perception of the Orient has been, therefore, relational, depending on the normative value set and the observation point.” (Todorova, 2010, p. 12)

This chapter aims to open up a dialogic, academic and principled discussion on Maria Todorova’s *Imagining the Balkans*, a work of great importance for promoting a new imagological category that serves as a tool for intercultural analysis, labelled as balkanism. Since it was first published in English in 1997, the book *Imagining the Balkans* instigated a series of papers and thoughts, whilst establishing itself as referent groundwork for all prevailing debates on the Balkans. An eloquent example, that shows how balkanism has been adopted as an unavoidable analytical tool when the actual situations are in question, has been demonstrated by a number of political articles, published nine years after the publication of the first edition of Todorova’s book; such as Chirjakovich (2006); and Frchkovski (2006). My initial contact with this work took place in 1998 whilst translating a chapter of Rastko Mochnik’s “Theory for Our Times” called “Balkans through images”. Consequently, I read the Serbian edition of Todorova’s book with a great deal of enthusiasm, delight and admiration, for it finally enabled a cultural reinterpretation and rehabilitation of Balkan identity through the prism of the new, de-colonializing imagology, which under the expression of Orientalism had initially been introduced by Edward Said.

The Macedonian translation of this important book came out, rather symptomatically, in 2001, which was to be a historically significant year for the newly independent Macedonian state, due to the Macedonian and Albanian conflict and the establishment of the *Ohrid Framework Agreement*.

In spite of all this, what really interests me about *Imagining the Balkans* is the kind of representation Macedonia has received in this extensive text. By this, I do not mean the archaic and the “traveloguesque” treatment that Macedonia has had in the past, but rather the on-going and “epistemological” discourse of Macedonia, “administered” by the author of this book herself, the Bulgarian-born historian Maria Todorova! I ask myself this out of purely academic reasons, because as an academic who deals in this area I am deeply concerned and intrigued by the very “academic correctness” of Todorova’s book; as well as by any other book that is vitally bound to and versed in precisely this cultural, as well as epistemological space. So, a brief cursory walk through the index of terms and bibliographical citations will show that from among the plethora of Macedonian historians only Aleksandar Matkovski (1992) and Hristo Andonov Poljanski (1966) are enumerated as referential names.

Macedonia itself as a geographical space is mentioned a few times, mainly in travelogues by authors from the English-speaking area: amongst whom eminently indicative examples that stand out are the entries from 1907 about the medical physician Tsveta Boyova and her work with the Macedonian troops in Shtip (Todorova, p. 20); and from 1921 about Macedonia as a

terrorist region – as in the case of the abduction of Miss Stone – together with the observations on the astute and natural aptitude of the Macedonian populace towards barbarism (Todorova, p. 172). As an indispensable illustration we shall only mention the entry about Doctor Tsveta Boyova from 1907, designed as Maria Todorova herself favours:

The one woman who excited Smith's imagination did so because of qualities ostensibly held as masculine in this period, despite his insistence that she was 'feminine to the core'. She was the Bulgarian Tsveta Boyova, born in a Macedonian village, who had graduated in medicine from the University of Sofia and, after having lost her husband, father, and two brothers in a Turkish raid had offered her services as nurse and doctor to the Macedonian bands. Smith was enchanted to be served a three-course meal by a woman who, lacking enough silverware washed it after each course. (...) Describing her as a *sui generis* Joan of Arc, Smith was evidently taken by the indefinable quality of Boyova. (Todorova, 2009, p. 15)

The "exiguous" ethnic discrepancy over the "Bulgarian woman" born in a Macedonian village may be noticed in passing! Furthermore, note the curious comment about her having a transgender nature, or better still the characterization of her personality at the same time as 'feminine to the core' and in possession of 'typical male qualities' (and within that eminently embedded in masculinity as a regulative gendered attribute of balkanism).

Nevertheless, in a chapter entitled "Balkans as Self-designation" in Todorova's book, there is an elaboration of analytical textual citations and analysis of all Balkan intellectuals and authors *with the exclusion/exception of only the Macedonian ones!* However, this inset has no intention whatsoever to heat up the notorious argument over identities, which have been quiescently or bluntly held between Macedonian and Bulgarian authors. Macedonia has already actualised and affirmed its own referential and relevant cultural identity that is not liable to any additional abnegation or validation. Regardless, it succumbs to the scarcely ideologically naïve or innocent act of connivance, evasion and disregard, in whose motives I would like to principally engage.

Scholarship has for a long time affirmed that each and every perception and recognition of identity itself, implicitly brings out its valorisation and its acknowledgement. These are the key assumptions in the process of the verification and legitimization of a certain individual or national identity. Therefore, the very connivance and evasion of facts, individuals, opinions, and works of art from Macedonian contemporary cultural history, which are preferentially connected with the Balkans as a self-designation, as stated in Todorova's book, results in a temporal "delay" of Macedonia in the past, and on the other hand her valuable, culturally-productive naturalization, after it is previously reduced to a mere geographical term.

Macedonia in Todorova's text continues to dwell and function as the author's "own Orient", as a fundamental cultural Other, and even more as balkanism's ultimate spot. Macedonia is the

last referential border whose existence conserves “the northern border fighter’s ideology”, specific for the mentality of Balkans, as described by Rastko Mochnik in his book *Theory for Our Time*. Macedonia is the crucial, epistemological indicator that even the anti-balkanist ideology is not immune to the tendencies of a still functional, inner or latent orientalism or the reproduction, nesting and upgrading of the Orient as Milica Bakic-Heyden (2002) claims it in her study of “Nesting Orientalism”.

Todorova’s treatment of Macedonia in her theoretical best-seller precisely confirms the embedded effect of the cultural-historical unconsciousness, as well as the hidden orientalization of the Macedonian Other, that discredits an otherwise valuable balkanist discourse from within, whilst revealing its cognitive and theoretical incoherency and counter-productive “blind spot”. Avoiding, or neglecting someone’s cultural visibility, both in public discourse, as well, as in academic papers, in itself points to one more curious reference, indicative for recognizing a certain model of the “politics of representation”, namely the non-visibility of contemporary Macedonian intellectuals as well as artists. Considering this, the recent discourse on balkanism, unexpectedly reveals the internal or conceptual blindness of its author, including the perseverance of her hidden, or crypto-colonialism. In other words, Macedonia remains the last notable case of the strategy of oriental Othering of the Balkans, which still reigns in the discursive, as well as in a cultural context, revealing otherwise hidden contradictions of balkanism’s seemingly emancipatory discourse, as originally conceived by Maria Todorova.

Therefore, whenever Macedonia is at stake, the “Imaginary Balkans” principal and programmatic plea, for overruling and exposing the Balkans as an imagological Otherness of Europe, is denounced as a purely declarative and unfinished task. Todorova’s book, paradoxically, proves how stoical the functional matrix of the institution of the Balkans is. According to Rastko Mochnik, the relational pattern of the “Balkan cross” is marked by the feature of servility in the vertical, hierarchical relations towards the big European Other and, as a consequence, the feature of animosity in the horizontal, mutual relations towards the small, Balkan Other, the neighbour.

As the feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti attests, the proclamation of the Other is in itself an hierarchical operation, whilst the Other is an hierarchical category. Therefore, the once proclaimed Other obeys certain consequences just because of its hetero-position. The Other is subjected to orientalization and, according to Anastasia Karakasidou, altogether, to a more or less expressed, degree of barbarity. Since antiquity, the discourse on barbarity has been based on the symbolic geographical premise of barbarity, as “a condition of the Eastern neighbour”, as defined by Neal Ascherson (1997) in his article which studies the ancient, Hellenic origins of discursive “framing” of the phenomenon of barbarism as a counter-culture of the unintelligible other.

In conclusion, the book about the “Imaginary Balkans” administers an orientalization of Macedonia that regularly confirms the above-cited extract, signed by Todorova herself,

meaning that “everyone has their own Orient”. The Orient’s location is consequently primarily relational, though, less in a geographical than in a cultural-historical, politically ideological or pragmatic sense! The very orientalization itself can, to a certain extent, be an unconscious act, but it essentially derives from the need for self-positioning and self-legitimizing, contrary to the “other side” of the Oriental Otherness that is in itself perceived as being less desirable and is considered to be culturally inferior, or, irrelevant.

The act of orientalization in Todorova’s work effectuates in a manner that minimizes or reduces Macedonia to a level where it is just presented as a geographical concept or indicator, whilst her abundant cultural history and contemporary understanding are not even considered as being relevant to the debate over balkanism. In other words, even this, basically emancipatory book does not remain immune to the Balkan temptation, to keep the patronizing voice over the other, proclaiming it in a way, that once was ironically formulated by Rastko Mochnik in his Sartrean sentence: “Balkan – that is [the] Others”. If nothing more, that alone proves the epistemological premises of the post-colonial criticism, that “all scientific projects —including the modern ones — are situational”, or, in the words of Sandra Harding, locally situated or predetermined systems of knowledge.

World scholarship (as a knowledge system) is therefore exceedingly careful today with regard to the insight into the undeniable situated-ness of knowledge and, moreover, the essential role played by the politics of knowledge. The so-called epistemological standpoint insists on one basic principle, that there is no such thing as a neutral observation, nor such a possibility as innocent eyes.

Furthermore, in the preparatory process for this chapter, one more argument also appeared, that could be briefly noted at the end of our discussion. Namely, the recently published, co-authored book by Svetlana Slapšak and Marina Matešić *Gender and Balkan*, which opens another, pretty seminal point with regard to the reconsideration of balkanism, or Balkan orientalism, regarding its indicative gender positioning and attribution. According to both authors, a gender-sensitive approach to these Balkan travelogues, written not only by male but even more so, by female European writers, points in addition to an as yet neglected type of colonialism. It is that of gender colonialism, also inscribed and, more or less conceived, in these paradigmatic works, which constitute the narrative on balkanism.

Aside from this improved gender sensitive reading of balkanism, the above-mentioned authors also consider the presence of *crypto-colonialism* in the mutual, politically enforced relations of Balkan cultures, supporting the fundamental processes of recent national re-inventing, re-building or, simply, re-branding of Balkan cultures and newly established states. Being recognised or identified as “oriental” as someone’s determining cultural feature is differently perceived and evaluated in the West, unlike in the East. What proves to be a curiosity issue for the West appears to be a traumatic one for the Balkans. Therefore, the Balkans try to deny their oriental, or Balkan attributes, in order to re-establish a new, more desirable and westernized national identity. Balkan orientalism serves to fulfil one’s,

politically opportune and desirable identitarian shift, in order to meet the actual, conjunctural demands of contemporary national re-branding.

To conclude: the discussion on the profoundly “situational” premises of the actual politics of knowledge is necessary, not only here, over in the Balkans, but all around the globe, because the rest of the theoreticians and academics are by default deeply influenced by it in each of their appearances in their homeland, or abroad. Such an epistemological standpoint relativizes and epistemologically contextualizes each individual theoretical voice at large, indispensably taking care of the influence of the, at all times, concrete pragmatics and politics of knowledge over their articulation process. World authorities, even from our area of studies, do not stay immune to their thorough and regulative impact.

Therefore, even with the self-proclaimed against balkanism as a hidden tool of imagological colonization, Todorova’s book is not yet de-colonized enough. It regards Macedonia simply as an “eroticized” and pretty much irrelevant cultural space, taking into account only its natural landscapes, while ignoring its internationally renowned artists and academics as contemporary “representatives” of Macedonia’s point of view. Thus, what remains for us is the commitment to programmatically overcoming the still abiding and counter-productive academic subalternity.

We, the scholars coming from and living in the Balkans, like it or not, are pretty determined by the fact, that we are obliged to double-write about the Balkan; in that, we write differently for the locals and respectively for the “foreigners”. Also, the rhetoric that we commonly use is preferably adapted or conditioned in relation to its (further) reader, recipient and audience, be it a Balkan or a European and Western one. So, it is of vital importance, and it will remain as our further duty, to commonly recognize, articulate and consciously follow the strategic purposes and interests of our specific “local epistemology” and our micro-politics of knowledge, as it used to be done perfectly in past centuries, on the behalf of Western scholarship and its well-grounded, socio-political interests.

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