



**Vesna Goldsworthy, Albena Vacheva**

## Not quite European... Scrutinizing the Balkan's neo-colonialism

*Interview with Vesna Goldsworthy*

The interview is provoked by Vesna Goldsworthy's book *Inventing Ruritania. Imperialism of Imagination*. In this book, Goldsworthy examines the complex nature of Balkan culture in the mirror of British literature and examines the Balkans as a marginal area which has offered a refuge to patterns of European neo-colonial behaviour no longer acceptable elsewhere.

### **Balkans as perpetrator and victim of neo-colonial attitudes**

**Albena Vacheva:** My first question is about the parameters and theoretical ideas, foreordaining the main points of your study. When we talk about culture, cultural identity, interaction between cultures, we use a term, which is the centre of many explanations from different points of view. I mean multiculturalism: One of its definitions reads that it is the right of every culture to exist and the right of every member of that culture to identify him(her)self, according to its ideological programmes and values. Reading your book, I noticed that you share the same opinion when you claim that in a cultural plan no nest of cultural or other kind of neo-colonialism should exist. Speaking about multiculturalism, Professor Frank Ellis<sup>1</sup> shares a quite different position, saying "this transformation [nowadays attempts to strengthen multiculturalism's social position] is as radical and revolutionary as the project to establish Communism in the Soviet Union was. Just as every aspect of life had to be brought under political control in order for the commissars to impose their vision of society, the multiculturalists hope to control and dominate every aspect of our lives." Quoting professor Ellis' view I would like to provoke you to think about fundamentalism (in all its forms, including scientific one) which if it is to be recognized as a cultural value (in one culture), will provoke these values that gave birth to and are typical of multiculturalism. After all, where are the borders situated, if there are any borders, beyond which the idea of multiculturalism reaches to its own negation rising up with two possibilities: to force its own values and principles, which fulfil the dialogue between cultures, or to deny the dialogue?

**Vesna Goldsworthy:** This is an extremely difficult question. In Britain and the US, there is now a relatively small but vocal group of right-wing historians who claim that the British, and indeed American imperialism, were and are forces for the good in the world. The eminent young British historian Niall Ferguson<sup>2</sup> has just published a book entitled *Colossus*, which is on every best-seller list in this country. It argues in favour of American imperialism and America's leading role in the world, explaining that, all disadvantages aside, the USA is a good empire and that it should embrace its imperial role rather

than be in denial about it. However, broadly speaking, *Inventing Ruritania* is a critique of neo-colonialism in the Balkans. In the early 1990s, while I was working on this volume and the war was raging in the former Yugoslavia, I observed at first hand the ambivalence with which the Balkans are regarded in the western world. Insufficiently oriental to be considered exotic, and yet always viewed as not-quite European, the Balkans became a repository for all kinds of unacceptable, and often racist feelings, which could no longer be expressed in relation to the Third World. Those who would no longer say that the West was "more civilised than Africa", were all too ready to point out how much more civilised Europe is than the Balkans. This wouldn't bother me so much if it didn't have direct consequences in terms of investment and the speed at which the Balkan countries may be admitted into the profitable Western clubs and organisations. On the other hand, inherent contradictions of multiculturalism and fundamentalism cannot be easily resolved, particularly at the point where one seems to exclude the other. I believe that a multicultural society has to tolerate all kinds of fundamentalist beliefs in its midst, but obviously not those, which incite violence of any kind. What Professor Ellis talks about judging from your quote, seems to be almost some kind of "fundamentalist multiculturalism" which is forcibly imposed. I do not really have an experience of that kind here in Britain.

**A. V.:** You claim that the Balkan "has presented a blank canvas upon which Europe's political unconscious plays out its taboos and hidden anxieties". Discussing the problems of Orientalism and Balkanism, Maria Todorova says that the Orientalism is a discourse of contradistinction, while Balkanism is a discourse of indefiniteness. After this introduction I would like to ask you: Are the Balkans and the Balkan people victims of foreign influences or have they got an active role in the processes of constructing the stereotyped image of the peninsula?

**V. G.:** In this context, the Balkan peoples are both the victims and the perpetrators of the Balkan myth, I am afraid, in a sense that they internalise the dichotomies between Europe and the Balkans, whereby the Balkan peninsula comes to represent some kind of "anti-Europe". It is always "not yet European" or "that which Europe has been long ago". I remember when I was growing up in Belgrade, if someone pushed their way ahead in the post-office queue, other people would say: "What else can you expect from a Balkan person?", implicitly adopting the position of "civilised Europeans". In this binary opposition, "Balkan" behaviour was synonymous with backwardness and primitivism of all kinds, and Europe with everything positive. However, I've often said that the need to deny your own Balkanness is *ipso facto* a characteristic of those belonging to the Balkans. That would apply to quite a number of Hungarians.

Unlike Maria Todorova, perhaps, I am not sure that there is a substantial distinction between the Balkanist and the Orientalist discourse. If one compared representations in English writing of, say, Alexandria and Beirut on the one hand, and Sarajevo, Prishtina or Sofia on the other, one could not really say that the latter were described as more "European" than the former: quite the opposite in fact. But this theme deserves a book in itself.

**A. V.:** In your book you say: "the relevance of this examination to the wider field of cultural studies lies, I believe, in the fact that it draws attention to those marginal and ambiguous areas of the world which have offered refuges to patterns of neo-colonial behaviour no longer acceptable elsewhere." What do you mean when saying "elsewhere"?

**V. G.:** I have sought to explain that in my first reply. The British journalist Michael Nicholson wrote, in a book about Sarajevo entitled *Natasha's Story* and published in 1997: "The ferocity of the Balkan peoples has at times been so primitive that anthropologists have likened them to the Amazon's Yanamamö, one of the world's most savage and primitive tribes". This is precisely the sort of thing an imperialist writer might have penned in the nineteenth century. I have spoken about the attitudes towards the Balkans as a "racism not of colour, but of nuance". The fact that the Balkans are nominally described as European, seems to provide a *carte blanche* for all sorts of patronising attitudes. One UN representative in Kosovo said recently to *The Guardian* that governing Kosovo is like "dressing a child: you give it the trousers of economy, the shirt of education, the jacket of democracy, etc. And all the while, the child wants to run out and play outside in its underpants. If we let it, it could hurt itself". What you see here is a stereotype of wild, child-like Balkans, with the West playing the role of grown up, responsible parents.

Meanwhile, in the Balkans themselves, you have a kind of Freudian "narcissism of small differences", where everyone seems to think that they are somehow better than their neighbours to the South and the East.

**A. V.:** One more question, in connection with the former one: what should politicians, intellectuals, scholars and artists all over the Balkans do to wipe out the existing stereotypes and to create a real image of the Balkans?

**V. G.:** I think that my colleagues in the field of Balkan study have already begun to undermine such stereotypes through a thorough analysis of their origins and the ways they were constructed. The highly publicised works of Maria Todorova, Milica Bakic-Hayden, Alexander Kiossev, and many other scholars, have resulted in a kind of dialogue which has already gone some way towards reclaiming the Balkans back for geography and away from the myth, regardless of whether the Balkans of that myth are attractive or repulsive, or both at the same time.

### **Different receptions to *Inventing Ruritania***

**A. V.:** Your book was published in English language in 1998. Many events took place on the Balkans after the end of your research – there was even a war. Do these doings confirm or disapprove your conclusions?

**V. G.:** I think that the war has in many ways strengthened my conclusions simply by bringing them out into the open. Many of the Ruritanian images I analyse were cited as a kind of shorthand in daily newspapers: it was as though, at the end of the Cold War, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Balkans – the powder keg of Europe – were rediscovered again.

What has become more clear is how – faced with the horrific, and complex reality of the war in the former Yugoslavia – people wanted to hear simple explanations (preferably those exonerating the outsiders from any kind of culpability). "This sort of thing has always gone on in the Balkans and Europe must do something to put an end to it", is perhaps the simplest explanation of all. If the Balkans didn't exist, someone would have invented them during the wars of Yugoslav succession. At the same time, Balkan countries such as Romania and Bulgaria suffered real economic hardship, trying to help the European effort by enforcing economic sanctions against their next door neighbours.

**A. V.:** Your book has been translated into many languages. How has the book been accepted? Have you seen any differences in the Western's and Balkans' scholars' readings and interpretations?

**V. G.:** The reception of *Inventing Ruritania* has been amazing. The book has had over two hundred reviews in some thirty countries. It was on the cover of the *Washington Post Book World* and had whole pages in most of the major British newspapers, and the reviews have largely been very positive. [...] The British reviewers were often nostalgic about all those imaginary countries in the Balkans I described – places such as Kravonia, Vuchinia and Herzoslovakia – because they represented such a part of British upbringing. In the Balkans, the reviewers have often focused on their own individual countries, which is quite understandable. I regret the fact, however, that we in the Balkans know relatively little about each other, and yet often think that our neighbouring countries are not interesting for some reason. When I travelled to Sofia or Bucharest, for example, my Serbian and Croat friends often asked "What are you going to do there?", in a way they wouldn't have about Paris, Lisbon or Copenhagen, for example.

**A. V.:** In the discussions about literary canons we can see that the canon is understood as a system of values, which approbates and confirms some genres and social and cultural patterns in the different educational syllabuses and systems. In the context of Cultural studies, in John Fekete's words<sup>3</sup>, "[contemporary] literary institution is invited to reorganize literary studies as a result of a recognition that literary evaluation is "a complex set of social and cultural activities, central to the very nature of literature" [...] and that the arts must reach new arrangements with both the forms of popular, commercial or mass culture and the practices of critical response, and, in general, with the pluralization of audiences and information processing"<sup>4</sup>. Your research is representative for that shifting from traditional approaches and themes to the new ones. That is why I would like to ask you what kind of difficulties do literary scholars face, when trying to study multiform texts of the so-called mass culture?

**V. G.:** The debate about the so-called literary canon – the high culture versus popular or mass culture – is a very interesting one. Certainly, as a university teacher of English literature, I think about this very often. One of the most popular courses at my university is a course in gothic fiction, which I teach: students simply love reading about vampires, ghosts and the uncanny. It attracts almost a hundred students every year, where a course on 18<sup>th</sup> century English poetry, which is glorious, may attract barely ten. I see it as my task not to make gothic fiction an easy option: to require a lot of background reading in history, philosophy, and literary criticism; but I am still very sad to see that poetry generally has a more difficult time attracting students than the novel. Even those students who choose literature as a field of study tend to prefer contemporary over older, fiction over poetry and often popular culture over the so-called high culture. In terms of research, however, mass-culture interests me in terms of influence it has: why is it for example that many people who know a great deal about Dracula know so little about Romania. If I had a penny for every time I had to explain that Transylvania is a real place rather than the product of Bram Stoker's imagination, I'd be a rich woman.

**A. V.:** According to your observations are there any differences in the ways that Otherness is presented as a value in the "high" and in the "mass" literature?

**V. G.:** I don't think that there is an essential difference in the nature of Otherness, there are obviously different literary strategies, and then there is also a different impact. How many people would have made their way through the thousand-odd pages of Rebecca West's fantastic modernist travel-book on Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, as compared to the many of the imaginary Balkan lands, which are familiar to every British child?

### **Balkan and Suburbia**

**A. V.:** You are one of the authors and director of the Centre for Suburban Studies at Kingston University, London. I would like to ask you to present the Centre – the main idea, goals and its structure.

**V. G.:** I founded the Centre for Suburban Studies at Kingston University with a group of colleagues last year, and was appointed its first director. When it was officially launched in April, I gave seventy interviews in a week, including most of the major British TV and radio channels, which is a reflection of the interest in suburbia in this country, and yet we are the first research centre of this kind in Europe. I was always interested in the study of the city and its representations in literature, and then I turned to that which is neither the city nor the countryside. In Britain the majority of people live in the suburbs – some 60 percent. Everyone wants a house with a garden and very few people, only 4 percent according to opinion polls, wish to live in the city centre. This desire creates endless, sprawling suburbs. In many places you travel from one city to another without ever leaving the suburbs and seeing the open fields. This is what architects call the 100-mile city. The suburbs – from George Orwell's novels to the films such as *American Beauty* – are seen as boring, conformist, even oppressive, but everyone wants to live in them. Our centre will study the life of the suburb from a whole range of different points of view (historical, literary, economic, etc.)

**A. V.:** You said that "In this country [Great Britain], the city and the countryside have their interpreters and defenders, but suburbia is not really represented. We hope the establishment of this centre will go some way towards addressing issues differences between urban and rural ways of life and give suburbia a true sense of identity. If you'll allow me a little joke: is the suburbia something like the Balkans – between East and West?"

**V. G.:** Methodologically, yes, the suburbs are not unlike the Balkans, an oscillating, intractable identity, neither one thing, nor the other. This is why I find it so easy to move from the Balkans to suburbia, and when I tire of one, I find challenge and entertainment in the other.

*This interview was realized with the help of associate professor Nikolay Aretov, co-editor of the Bulgarian edition of Inventing Ruritania published by Kralitsa Mab.*

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Ellis is Professor of Slavic Studies at the University of Leeds, Great Britain. [Editor's note]

<sup>2</sup> Niall Ferguson is Herzog Professor of History at the Stern School of Business, New York University, and a Senior Research Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford. [Editor's note]

<sup>3</sup> John Fekete is Professor of English at Trent University, Canada. [Editor's note]

<sup>4</sup> "Vampire Value, Infinite Art, and Literary Theory" published in *Life After Postmodernism. Essays on Value and Culture*. Montreal: New World Perspectives, CultureTexts Series 1998.

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