The post-oriental condition

Serbs and Turks revisited

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30 December 2005

The Balkans and Turkey are a space on the borders of Europe marking a cultural encounter with the oriental. Constituted as an undeclared enemy, this object of anxiety acts as a catalyst for collective cohesion, eliciting mythic narratives calling for exclusion from the symbolic realm of the European community.

But the invincible concern for the other human in his destitution and in his lack of resources, in his nakedness, in his status or lack of status, this concern escapes the doubtful finality of ideologies. The seeking out of the other human, however distant, is already a relationship with this other human, a relation in all its directness, which is already proximity. How tautological is it to speak of “getting close to the neighbour (l’approche du prochain)?

Immanuel Levinas [1]

Even the last ounce of his flesh moves and crawls around in the same direction as if the Turk was alive and walking about.

Ivo Andric [2]

I would like to revisit an old neighbourhood, the one whose roads are still paved with cobblestones, a place where time is measured in many different calendars, a location where Europe stops and thinks about its beginnings and its ends. This imaginary space contains multitudes of pasts clouded by the mists of the orient, mists that continue to partially envelop the peripheral identities Europe proper tries so hard to distance itself from. The locations in south eastern Europe are marked by the obfuscation of temporal origins and the confusion of future horizons due to their borderline position between the former Ottoman dominion and the forgotten origins of Europe. These locations are marked by a certain “Balkanism”, identified by Maria Todorova as a discourse where Europe perceives its own inadequacies. [3] Unlike Edward Said’s “orientalism”, a discourse presenting an unalterable alterity of Arab and Turk for historical memory and political engagement, “Balkanism” is a space emerging on the borders of Europe as a
mark of cultural encounter with the oriental. It is perennially in the blind spot of Europe as it races westward, a location where hybridization with the cultures rooted in Islam marks Europe itself with a sign of the oriental.

**The masculine wound**

Danilo Kis noticed the predicament of Balkan cultures whose leading intellectuals were dealt an unusual sentence by their own nation: to constantly drag around an old concert piano on one shoulder and a dead horse on the other. “Every possible tune that was played on the piano is on his shoulders, and all those who rode the horse in victory or defeat are on his shoulders as well, all the meanings and allusions unknown to the world at large, all the wars, all the epics, all the epic heroes.” [4] The oriental burden of traumatic memories has never found the proper way of integrating itself within the new national imaginary; instead, it has inhabited the dark recesses of minor European cultures and their literary articulations as a burden of the past originating in the wounding of the masculine pride. The historical origin of sadistic cruelty embodied in the figure of Count Dracula is also post-oriental, since the historical Vlad Tsepesh allegedly learned the art of torture while being tortured himself in Ottoman captivity. The sadomasochist circulation of violence is culturally coded as the vampiric presence of an alien entity within the proper body of its uncivilized negative. [5]

The perpetual return to life of the ancient creature of memory emanates from a cultural scar whose healing informs the Balkan return to Europe. Serb national identity is the effect of the original loss of sovereignty in the battle of Kosovo; it is grounded in the healing of that original wound, which is compulsively reopened by Serb heroes to confirm one is still among the living. Codified in the dominant popular culture of heroic singing, this burden of the national imaginary was inscribed by Vuk Karadzic into the foundation of the literary canon of the new Balkan nation as it was returning to Europe during the nineteenth century.

The notion of linguistic purity was never part of Vuk’s nationalism, since he was fully aware of the cultural variations in the Balkan region. However, the hybrid nature of the communal identity was assimilated to the overwhelming cult of heroic masculinity, which dominated all other discourses through its populist appeal to the original masculine wounding at Kosovo. The civic cultural model, which was dominant among the urban Serbs under the Habsburg administration, proved to be unusable in the construction of the new Serbian identity, since it emphasized good manners and common sense, not blood and revenge against the former oriental master. The model initiated by Dositej Obradovic as a belated enlightenment for the emergent nation was based on individual responsibility within a cosmopolitan community, regardless of the diverse religious roots of the Balkan ingredient cultures.

The post-oriental condition of the Serbs and other Balkan nations offers a unique possibility for the study of effects of domination as a metaphor for the narrative trajectory of national emergence of the subject. The imaginary component of the post-oriental condition is the Gothic imaginary, a constant dark background colouring the performance of individual literary and cultural identities. The local cult of wounded masculinity was ensconced in such ambiguous figures as Marko Kraljevic, a problematic hero torn between Ottoman vassal and rebel, whose exploits tell the story of identity
After orientalism

Edward Said’s notion of orientalism does not take into account the possibility of a role reversal between the dominant and the subaltern, where the oriental is interpellated with the subject as the dominant abject, preserved within the Balkan identity as its negative, yet vital part. This interpellation comes with modernity as ideological state apparatus structures the Balkan subject as simultaneously peripheral and central to Europe. As a cultural location, the Balkans are visualized by European centres as a transitory space between Europe and Asia, a location where the boundaries are blurred and European margins begin to collapse into the oriental ones, merging with each other to form a mix perfectly captured in a Spanish word for fruit salad: macedonia. The salad of ingredients is homonymous with a name of a minute Balkan state once part of Yugoslavia, the ethnoscape of imponderable heterogeneity, where Europe’s anxieties about the orient are sharpened since its proper identity always hangs on the interminable question: Where does the West end and the East begin?

Imagined as a secret ingredient of cultural identity of the new national configurations sprouting from the ashes of the Ottoman empire during that long nineteenth century, Balkan identities are always an effect of their desire to come back to Europe and modernity by brushing off ancient oriental habits. “The Ottoman Empire”, writes Said, “had long since settled into (for Europe) a comfortable senescence, to be inscribed in the nineteenth century as ‘the Eastern Question.’” [6] Something very old was refusing to die in the European orient, inscribed deeply in the imaginary of the continent as a barrier to progress and modernity, a pestilence akin to an eighteenth century vampiric plague. The Eastern Question is about the oriental alien within, a question that has not yet found a satisfactory final solution. The conflicted origin of independent Balkan nations rests on this insistent question Europe asks of its own oriental horizon within. Europe has been under the condition symptomatic of this collective lessening of proper identity due to the marginal status of territories symbolically regained from the orient. Currently, a different type of medieval turn forces a war against the Orient of a more proper kind. After the Madrid and London bombings, the post-oriental condition spreads towards Europe proper, already noticeable in the media reports on the new security measures inspired by the threat of terrorism coded as a covert Islamic presence within.

Serbian Europe

The presence of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans has historically been represented as “a scarecrow that could be painted only with dark and bloody colours, something that could not be quietly talked about or coolly thought about.” [7] The transcription of oral tradition to boost the emergence from submission to the Ottoman authority is simultaneous with secularization, as peripheral modernities are produced in the Balkans through the epic machinery that solders the discourses of myth and history for the emergent national cultures. For example, the supreme secular monument of Serbian national literature is the guslar’s ritual mourning of a collective trauma of Kosovo, the
loss of worldly power to abject domination and the imaginary gain of freedom in the holy
canon of tribal martyrdom. Mikhail Bakhtin’s characterization of the epic as an official
genre that does not tolerate the intrusion of discourses of the “other” constitutes the
political unconscious, a silence of the already sacrificed as a condition of communal
identity. The silence of the nation is interrupted by periodic outbursts of male wailing for
a time before time, before the forced submission to the Ottoman power in the
monumental time of the Kosovo myth. The masochistic tenor of the national imaginary is
tied to an equally virtual sadism that concedes high moral codes to the silent approval of
genocidal rage and terror in the name of survival of the collective body of those tied to
the same mythic temporality.

The enormous temporal gap between this edifying time of the heroic epic and the present
situation of the performer and his audience, the proverbial epic distance, is thus “filled
with national tradition” which mediates between the heroes, events and sites of the past
and present recipient of this narrative truth of the emergent people. [8] The unrepeatable
event of past history is converted into a perpetual return to the traumatic loss, a
collective monument of writing emerging from the Kosovo crypt. The performance of the
epic singer translates the memory of the original loss into a word sung in remembering
the wholeness and power of his people. The martyrdom of the nation is disseminated by
the emergent culture as a silent background upon which the dominant discourse develops
its particular ethnogenetic narratives. A small nation finds itself within this imperative
form of ideology, a dominant interpellation embedded in the perception of Europe as an
idea.

The oriental within

Deconstructing Carl Schmitt’s authoritarian political position, Jacques Derrida writes:
“Defending Europe against Islam, [in Carl Schmitt] considered as a non-European
invader of Europe, is then more than a war among other wars, more than a political war.
Indeed, strictly speaking, this would be not a war but a combat with the political at stake,
a struggle for politics.” [9] It seems that the oriental threatens the end of politics and a
submission to a struggle closer to the natural law, a power so alien that it threatens
Europe as a sign of modernity and democracy. Europe is a fortress justified in excluding
and subduing the oriental within.

The post-oriental condition envelops Europe as a force outside the realm of its proper
symbolic boundary, where the contamination of its legal and cultural foundations
encounter an alien zone, embodied in the discourse of Balkanism marked by the many
returns of the painful past. The emergent European nations in this transitional zone of
culture are struggling to resist this negative vision European identity fails to recognize as
its own, partly due to its own multiple imperial and colonial roots. The torturer-victim
narrative of smaller Balkan nations is now invoked in the midst of Europe in the guise of
an Islamic suicide bomber. Balkan ethnicities had already interpellated the vision of this
particular “scarecrow”, serving as an index of fear against which national identities have
erected their particular version of the nation’s greatness. As Ottoman power
disintegrated and Ataturk led Turkey into secular identity, similar traumas of modernity
continued to haunt the centre of the former empire too, instituting the divided national
body, affecting transition from Islamic roots to the military enforcement of the
enlightenment paradigm.
Still outside the political boundary, the European neighbours take part in an ongoing migration of cultures unconcerned with the agonistic memories of one’s collective origins in ancient and medieval times. That the story of origins is complicated is best felt exactly in Istanbul, where the ruins of Constantinople, itself a simulacrum of displaced Rome, meets an ambiguous alterity of its Islamic conquerors. It used to be a location whose centrality coincided with the decline of the Roman Empire, a site of initial displacement of the imagined European centre eastward from Rome to the future Byzantium. Defying all simplified narratives about the beginnings and ends of Europe, the East is already part of Europe before it is even historically aware of itself.

The alterity scarecrow is a simulacrum of a human being constructed to instil collective fear and warn the other of the boundary where the proper begins to mark the difference between species. This object of anxiety and fear acts as a catalyst for a sense of collective cohesion against the generalized alterity of the oriental within, eliciting mythic narratives calling for exclusion from the symbolic realm of the European community. The oriental within is constituted as an undeclared enemy charged with backwardness, lack of proper cultural manners, and always ready to be the first to resort to violence. Yet Europe itself is steeped in the post-oriental condition, rising as a self-declared fortress of human rights and material wealth against the background of alien subjects seeking recognition as Agamben’s vita nuda. [10] This creature of temporal delay is founded on this exception. “Law is made of nothing but what it manages to capture inside itself through the inclusive exclusion of the exceptio: it nourishes itself on this exception and is a dead letter without it.” Both Turkey and the Balkans are imagined on the basis of this legal “inclusive exclusion”, exemplary of the post-oriental condition underlying discourses of modernity and progress.

Post scriptum

As we walk out of this imaginary cobblestoned space immersed in the semi-darkness of an older temporal order, let me draw your attention to a group of elderly women sitting in silence on their wooden benches. They are looking at the huge plum tree in the centre of the yard, under which a group of old men are sitting, and almost imperceptibly shaking their heads.

This article is based on a contribution to the panel discussion, “(Re)sounding empires. Old neighbours, new conflicts?”, which took place at the 18th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in Istanbul from 4 to 7 November 2005.

Footnotes


3. See Maria Todorova, Imagining the Balkans, Oxford: Oxford UP 1997

5. See Tomislav Z. Longinovic, Vampires Like Us, Belgrade: Belgrade Circle 2005


7. Ivo Andric, The Influence of Islamic Rule, 253


Published 30 December 2005

Original in English
First published in
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