

“THE HISTORIAN IN THE ARCHIVE IS LIKE THE ANTHROPOLOGIST IN THE FIELD”

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR MARIA TODOROVA (UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN)

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Prof. Maria Todorova gave a talk on “What is Useful about the “post-” in East European Studies? On post-colonialism, post-socialism, and historical legacies”, at the Department of Ethnology, Charles University in Prague on May 15th, 2019. At this occasion, we asked her some questions for *Porta Balkanica*.

In the original edition of “Imagining the Balkans” (1997) you were hesitant to associate balkanism directly with orientalism, but in your afterword to the new edition (2009), you admit that there are obvious similarities between the two. So, what is the relationship between balkanism and orientalism?

Actually, I do not think that there is a difference between the two editions as far as Said’s “Orientalism” (1978) is concerned. By introducing the category balkanism, I explicitly demonstrated my inspiration from and homage to Said but, at the same time, invited critical comparison between the two categories and the phenomena they described. There are the obvious similarities: both orientalism and balkanism are power discourses. And yet, I insisted on a crucial difference of their objects of scrutiny (alongside other characteristics like lack of colonial status, differences in the treatment of race, religion and gender): namely, that the Balkans with their geographic and historical concreteness invited a very concrete historical approach to their ontology, whereas the elastic nature of the Orient as described by Said in a generalizing discourse focused almost exclusively on its metaphorical and symbolic nature made

it globally translatable and adopted in post-colonial studies as a whole. There is, of course also the methodological difference between a literary critical approach based on structuralism (or post-structuralism) and a historical one.

What I developed in the second edition is a further juxtaposition to the literature on postcolonialism which, granted, was also inspired and for some started with Said’s “Orientalism.” In a word, I addressed the issue whether balkanism as a discourse could be treated as a concrete historical/geographic version of postcolonial studies? As you know, I answered negatively to it, and this was also the topic of my lecture in Prague, so I am not going to recapitulate its main points but essentially it comes down to my preferential scale of analysis which does not want to see explanatory patterns flattened to a single overarching metanarrative or grand theory – in this case postcolonialism – and prefers to see the complexity of the historical process without, of course, falling into a hopeless empiricism. I also think there is both a cognitive (reductionist) and ethical (self-victimization and nationalism) price to pay in embracing the purported emancipatory mantle of this discourse.

As far as both orientalism and balkanism describe western attitudes and representations, one can add that there is also an internal dynamics within the Balkan region itself with “nesting orientalism” chiefly vis-à-vis the Muslim population and more eastern or less wealthy neighbors (as in the felicitous phrase of Milica Bakić-Hayden for Yugoslavia /1997/) but also “nesting balkanism.”

You have been involved in the discussions about the character of the Balkan family structures (namely 1993, 2001). Do you think different perspectives of family models are associated with different scholar disciplines? (anthropology, history, historical demography)

Without any doubt. This all depends on the preferred (or available) sources that the respective disciplines utilize. Thus, “pure” demographers tend to privilege “big data,” aggregate statistics, censuses, tax registers etc. that yield important patterns that otherwise are difficult to prove. These, however, are not only relatively close in time (the modern era) but can provide only a snapshot, a static picture. This in itself is not dangerous if there is the appropriate recognition of the benefits and shortcomings of the approach, but it becomes deleterious when it is harnessed in political science typologies and modelling (which happened, for example, with the famous John Hajnal line or the extended family, the *zadruga*,



or the pan-European generalization coming out of Paris and Cambridge). Change over time being the central vocation of historians, they are much more sensitive to transformations and qualitative (narrative) sources. Some of the dangers there are the oftentimes too close and uncritical reliance on the written source, as well as overgeneralizations based on the skimpy data of microstudies. Ethnography has for a long time been dominated by kinship relations and this is evident even in the revamped anthropology of today. The close and detailed look on the individual and the group in all its aspects is a privilege that the best practice in the anthropological method can provide, but it cannot of course safely project its findings back in time. Still, these disciplines are sufficiently porous, and it is more than possible to master the methods of the adjacent discipline for a specific task. The best works are so interdisciplinary that it is difficult to discern whether the author is a historian, and anthropologist or a historical demographer by training.

Maria Todorova

Maria Todorova is currently a Professor of History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA). Her courses cover the Ottoman Balkans, European family history, Nationalism, the Cold War, and the history of Eastern Europe. She was born in Sofia and obtained a Ph.D. in history at the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. Until 1988 she taught Balkan history at Sofia university. Later she worked as a lecturer and researcher at Rice University, the Universities of Florida, at Karl-Franzens Universität-Graz in Austria, at the European University Institute of Florence, at Bosphorus University in Istanbul, and at Harvard University. In 2000, prof. Todorova was awarded the prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship; she received the Title of Doctor Honoris Causa from the University of Sofia (2004), the European University Institute in Florence (2006), and Panteion University in Athens (2017).

Prof. Todorova has specialized in Ottoman history, the history of Eastern Europe, nationalism, and historical memory. Apart from this, she was engaged in the study of historical demography of Bulgaria at the end of the Ottoman period, and in the scholarly discussion about “*zadruga*”, the Balkan joint family (1993, 2001). In her *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), translated into many languages, she coined the term “balkanism” to label the way the Balkans has been viewed, described and portrayed by Western observers.

Later, prof. Todorova focused on remembering, and on the interplay between identity and historical memory. The construction and transmission of historical memories, sites of national memories, or mobilization of national identities were elaborated in the edited volume *Balkan Identities. Nation and Memory* (2004) and in the case study of the greatest Bulgaria hero in *Bones of Contention. The Living Archive of Vasil Levski and the Making of Bulgaria National Hero* (2009). A long-term project aimed at the processes of remembering of communism in Eastern Europe resulted in three publications, two having in their first part the title *Remembering communism* (2010, 2014) and one on *Postcommunist Nostalgia* (2010). In her most recent publication, *Scaling the Balkans* (2018), prof. Todorova brings together a number of her published and unpublished texts on the Balkans.

Is there something that the anthropological perspective, with its special focus on fieldwork, contributed to the knowledge about the Balkans?

Very definitely, but I would question that it is mostly because of the field work specifics. Elsewhere I have argued that the historian in the archive is like the anthropologist in the field. There are naturally differences. The archives demand specific expertise from the historian the more back in time s/he goes – paleographic, linguistic, codicological etc. and this labor-intensive preparation can often become an end in itself and fetishizes the archive. On the other hand, a document is not protected from the careful scrutiny of a critical historian; it is passive and cannot defend itself, unlike the living creatures with which the anthropologist deals who can successfully withdraw and hide. Both historians and anthropologist have to be sensitive to different registers of the same language, from dialects, to jargon and argot but anthropologists need to have an array of additional talents – communication skills, patience, tact, etc. In the end, both anthropologists and historians are trying to achieve the “cultural intimacy” that Michael Herzfeld (1996) so eloquently wrote about.

Where anthropology has contributed superbly to Balkan studies (and I am thinking of the work of Michael Herzfeld, Katherine Verdery, Gail Kligman, Gerald Creed and many others, and historians have to learn from them) is in two aspects: first, the fact that anthropology is regulated by a demand to be framed theoretically which brings the Balkan material in direct conversation with trends outside the area and thus de-provincializes it; and secondly, the fact that anthropology has had a tradition of self-reflexivity (notwithstanding some extremes) whereas Balkan history (but also the historical profession in general) is still in the beginning of critically assessing its situatedness and stakes. This has been actually done philosophically but has not yet sipped down to everyday practice.

One of your general scholarly interests is the study of nationalism. What do you think about the applicability of Miroslav Hroch’s explanatory scheme on the Balkans?

I regularly teach a graduate seminar on the theories of nationalism (in a global framework)

and Miroslav Hroch’s work is mandatory reading. Students have to present and write on the Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe (1985), a master achievement. The book was in fact the first one that showed that the difficult exercise of meaningful comparative nationalism was possible; it is extremely important in introducing small nations in the conversation of nationalism; it seamlessly combined intellectual and political history with social transformation. One should not forget that although it came out in English in the mid-1980s and together with Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm (and others) completed the modernist revolution in national studies, Hroch’s work preceded this by at least a decade if not more¹. Students have to read also additional articles, like the one on real and constructed nations or the one on “From National Movement to Fully-Formed Nation,” (1996) which are important and sensitive counterweights to the growing perennialism and ethno-symbolism on the one hand, but also to an almost nihilist attachment to “invention.”

I myself have profitably used Hroch’s scheme – the famous A, B, C phases – in both my work on Bulgarian and more broadly on Balkan nationalism in a comparative way. Not only it is applicable but extremely helpful in elucidating specificities between different cases. The only possible problem is that the model can be used sometimes to make superficial comparisons, but this is not a deficiency of the model but of the uneven knowledge of the ones who apply it.

You know well both the western scholarship on Bulgaria as well as that of your Bulgarian colleagues. What is the difference between them (if any)?

Nowadays, the best authors on both sides would be converging, often indistinguishable, not to say identical. This is mostly the result of education. Even if not coming necessarily from the same institutions with differential facilities and capabili-

¹ The first, German edition was published already in 1969 as Hroch, Miroslav. *Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegung bei den kleinen Völkern Europas. Eine vergleichende Analyse zur gesellschaftlichen Schichtung der patriotischen Gruppen*. Prague: Acta Universitatis Carolinae Philosophica et Historica, Monographia XXIV; (note LJB. MJ).

ties for support and promotion, the literature on which they are weaned, the possibilities for specialization and exchange make this possible. Thus, quality-wise, they would be comparable, although in terms of dissemination the hierarchies follow the asymmetry of the institutions and countries to which they belong.

The next, lower, tier would demonstrate a distinction. Among some western authors one can observe a deficiency in language acquisition which often translates in laziness in the utilization of local archives and libraries and the use of local labor as proxy. It is accompanied with a dose of superiority coming from the better publishing possibilities and the use of English, especially in the case of native speakers. The obverse reaction among Bulgarian scholars of this tier is an understandable defensiveness and capsulation into erudition.

And, finally, the worst tier is characterized by mutual stereotypes and provinciality, although again, the power positions are asymmetrical.

After the liberation of Bulgaria in 1878, many Czechs – intellectuals, entrepreneurs, workers and others – left for Bulgaria and made a career there. Do you have your favourite (one) among them? Why?

I assume there is no Bulgarian who does not know the names of the historian Konstantin Jireček and the artists Ivan Mrkvička and Jaroslav Věšín. Since I studied archaeology, Karel Škorpil and Václav Dobruský have been held in the highest esteem. Although I know about the central role that many Czechs have had as architects, civil engineers and especially musicians, I would have difficulties in naming them. An ironic exception are the brothers Prošek. Jiří Prošek in particular was instrumental in many of the main monuments and architectural planning of Sofia, but the brothers are widely known for their cutting-edge for the time beer factory which was built on the street where I lived – San-Stefano – and existed until very recently.

And yet, my favorite Czech was, in fact, a half-Czech – the late Professor Svetomir Ivanchev (1920-1991), whose mother was Czech from a family of an engineer who had settled in Bulgaria. He and his wife were the closest family friends of my parents and he is mostly known for his wonderful translation of Hašek's Švejk (1948-1955),

episodes of which many Bulgarians of my generation know by heart. He was the most refined human being, in many ways the antipode of Švejk, but I guess it takes an antipode to appreciate and write affirmatively and fearlessly in the language and style of Švejk (this is, of course, mostly the merit of Hašek but, as we know, translation is no less a difficult art).

Is there any topic/issue connected to the Balkans that would be worth studying for historians or other social scientists, but has been neglected so far?

In general, Balkan historiography and social sciences had been for a long time resistant to the modern trends in global scholarship, so there is a lot to be done in this respect. Very fine work is being produced rethinking old paradigms, although, especially in history, the bulk of the production is political history in a national (not necessarily nationalist) vein. This, however, is typical for all historiographies, western ones inclusive.

The significance of topics usually comes with presentist concerns and academic fashions. Thus, in the aftermath of 1989 and the rise of nationalism, but also with the freedom of movement and the discovery of neighbors (the “other”) came a decade (or two) preoccupied with identity and alterity. After that came the transitological obsession in social sciences but also a turn to the everyday. With the advent of comparative history, there appeared and continue to be produced valuable works on different aspects of entanglement of the Balkans with other parts of the world. Today, the environmental sciences turn has not yet caught up with Balkan and Balkanological scholarship but there are interesting beginnings. And, of course, women and gender studies are contested and difficult to penetrate proverbially macho societies and academia. This is something that needs to be developed but needs a wise and tactful strategy to succeed. In all of these but also in the traditional fields, lots more can be achieved.

Your favourite place(s) in the Balkans?

Everything everywhere where there are nice people.

Thank you very much for this interesting exchange!

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