

## **The Eros of Identity**

A Bosnian was applying for a job.  
“Weren’t you, Bosnians, too lazy?” asked the employer.  
“Oh, no” said the Bosnian, “It is the Montenegrins who are lazy. We are the stupid ones.”

The Balkan imaginary reemerged suddenly after the end of the Cold war. Before, the region had been divided between different types of phantasms. Some saw it as the confirmation of the communist theories of miraculous industrialization and urbanization of backward rural societies. Others projected on the south of the peninsula the noble defense of the free world against Soviet barbarism. Yet others saw in Yugoslav self-management and non-aligned politics some third way between Stalinism and capitalism. Even tiny Albania had its fans, a dissident fraction of the Maoists, who had their bookstore in the Latin Quarter and claimed that Enver Hoxha was the only leader having remained true to the communist ideal.

Encouraged by the attention (often accompanied by substantial economic and military aid from the respective geopolitical sponsors) the Balkan countries raced to occupy the place of some big Other’s desire. Thus Romania, expecting western loans, exalted its supposed Latin origins; Bulgaria noisily affirmed it was the most faithful Slav brother of Russia and silently re-exported Soviet oil; Greece, applying for EC membership, posed solemnly as the cradle of European civilization.

With the end of the ideological era the Balkans slipped back to what they had been before the war, that is a periphery of Europe: at best, a virgin frontier land to civilize, at worst a ghetto to contain unwanted populations from emigrating to the West<sup>1</sup>. The Balkans responded quickly by internalizing this new status quo of the imaginary. Thus the new identitarian debate in the 90-s was largely dominated by the question of whether to be or not to be Balkan.

It has become a commonplace in the last decades to say that oriental identities are constructed by the gaze of the western other.<sup>2</sup> The internalization of that prestigious other becomes the “content” of the local self-representation strategies aiming at both seducing and defying this same other. In fact, identity is always a negotiation between assigned and accepted attributes<sup>3</sup>. The erotic tension – or shall we say, the structural discrepancy<sup>4</sup> - between those is an essential part of inter-community relationship. Misapprehension of the other, voluntary or not is part of the interaction: too much hermeneutics risks to undermine identitarian formations and the human relations they imply<sup>5</sup>. Consider the child that is told he/she is nice in order to make them be nice; consider the use of stereotypes and clichés used in the “war of the sexes”.

In the case of semi-dependant states as those in the Balkans, national actors are constantly thorn between the need, on the one hand, to fit into the schemes of the geopolitical sponsors, abiding by general keywords, norms and narratives, on the other, to differentiate themselves and acquire an existence of their own in the universal imaginary of modernity. The balance between those is rather delicate, as too much compliance with rules blurs the image of the country and makes it difficult to “sell” it internationally, but too much identity risks to make it drop out of the system of world exchange. In the 90s, the “good pupil of transition” Bulgaria was an example of the first tendency, Serbia, having challenged the West into a real war, of the second.

In fact, the technology of identity-building was accomplished by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has been since at the disposal of every nation-state wishing to affirm itself, as “there is nothing more international than national identities” (Thiesse, 1999). Those include not only the establishment of institutions of sovereignty<sup>6</sup> as parliaments, schools and armies, but also imaginary productions like great ancestors and myths of origins, literary heritage and museums, centralized folklore and typical national landscapes. The dimension of imitation is thus one of the most striking characteristics of modernity.<sup>7</sup> To put it in Lacanian terms, identification runs on two levels: on the level of the imaginary you identify with a specific object you want to

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<sup>1</sup> The last example of this attitude was the hasty creation of the Kosovo protectorate (or whatever we decide to call it), done, among other reasons, in order to have somewhere to send back the Albanian refugees from Western Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said’s *construction* of the Orient, Larry Wolff’s *invention* of Eastern Europe, Maria Todorova’s *imagining* the Balkans.

<sup>3</sup> “My identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others” Taylor, 1991: 48.

<sup>4</sup> Melucci underlines the “gap”, the “unresolved tension”, between self-definitions and definitions by others (1996: 32). Cf. also Dunn, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that mutual understanding between men and groups is impossible, but rather that such understanding necessarily goes beyond identity.

<sup>6</sup> The reason for such uniformity is the need of mutual recognition in a world-system that gets much closer interrelated. The 19<sup>th</sup> is, among other things, the century of diplomacy.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, as it has been often pointed out that, on the level of collective as well as individual identities, European culture privileges opposition and challenge as a paradoxical way of integrating into the norm; you become like the others in pursuing your own “authentic” particularity.

be, whereas on the level of the symbolic you also identify with the gaze (or the subject of the gaze, the rule this gaze imposes) creating the field in which identification takes place.<sup>8</sup>

On the first level, the group identifies to the object of desire produced by the universalized modern cultural scene. The object is desired not because of its own qualities, but because others desire it, and this accounts for the mimetic violence that accompanies necessarily the process.<sup>9</sup> Identity building under the conditions of delayed modernization will thus imply ferocious competition over minor differences, over-investing one's own attributes and aggressively ignoring those of the competitors<sup>10</sup>. On the second, that we could call the level of meta- or framework identity, the group identifies with the (international) field itself where national identities are produced and the rule of the game that characterizes it.

The situation becomes even more confused because both levels of identification are subject to historical change where older figures of self-image do not disappear, but persist entering in strange constellations with the new ones. Thus imaginary interaction becomes extremely complex and the very notion of identity – problematic, as different identitarian strategies coexist, contradict each other and enter into complex interrelations. In this sense it is not sufficient to criticize “essentialist” usage of identity, but to interpret complex situations of imaginary interaction. In general, I prefer not to use the term “essentializing”, as it supposes that there is some type of iconicity that would *not* be essentialist, that some sort of playful feeling of arbitrariness of the sign could protect us from taking too seriously the attributes assigned to the other or ourselves. It seems to me that every time we assign an image to someone we do the same thing: reduce his/her/our existential richness, imprison him/her/ourselves into the eternal ideality of the sign. The effect of arbitrariness – of irony, of relativization – seems to be a secondary effect of the multiplication of contradicting attributes, of mastering the subtleties of the identitarian language<sup>11</sup>. Essentialization and de-essentialization appear thus to be situated on rather different levels: the first being basically linked to the way the sign operates, the second – a sophisticated cultural strategy, limited in time and space. One way of relativizing (or de-essentializing, if one wishes) is simply juxtaposing concrete identity-constructions in time and space.

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In the classical century of nation building, the fundamental attribute of the national myth is its eternity. Being ancient is considered the most prestigious attribute of the imagined community, legitimizing between other things the possession of territories and the rule over people.

The race towards ancientness, in the Balkans, was certainly launched by the Greek national movement, having captured the desire of romantic Europe and privatized the classical heritage of Antiquity. No Balkan country will escape the temptation to dig some obscure ancestors that would be at least as ancient as the ancient Greeks – Illyrians, Thracians, Dacians, etc. One of the paradoxes of the community feeling is that historical truth is of secondary importance: the symbolic war over ancestors itself makes nationals stick together, exclude traitors, recognize who “we” and “the others” are.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, representing the Balkan nations as eternal substance encounters one major difficulty, which is the gap separating their modern states from the supposed glory of their ancestors. Thus the major problem confronting identity builders was *continuity*. Konstantinos Papanicolaou, professor of history at Athens University was the first to develop, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the interpretation of Greek history as a single continuum: ancient, medieval, modern. Nevertheless the practice of “progomoplexia” (worship of ancestors) and “arkhaiolatria” (adoration of antiquity) was not obvious in a culture where the Orthodox Church had already once broken away from pagan practices. It had now to swallow the introduction, by patriots, of ancient names (like Achilles) that started to replace the Christian ones.

Establishing historical continuity will be particularly difficult in a country like Bulgaria the existence of which was suspended by five centuries of Ottoman rule. The founding text of the national revival is the “Slav-Bulgarian History” in 1762 written by the Athon monk Paisii, that begins with Adam and then proceeds to put together the scattered accounts about the

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<sup>8</sup> This distinction proceeds from the juxtaposition, by Lacan, of the *Idealich* (the mirror image of the I invested by the libido of an essentially narcissistic nature), and *Ichideal* (the Ego ideal, constructed through the symbolic function of language and situated to the side of castration, renouncement, the rule, which will be developed by Freud into the Superego). Cf. also Zizek, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> According the theory of Girard, the more equal the positions that aspire towards the same object, the greater the violence resulting from the competition. The relative similarity of the Balkan countries makes it tempting to apply this contested model (Girard, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Ignatieff, developing Freud's notion of “narcissism of minor differences”, underlines the incapacity of nationalists in the post-Yugoslav space to see or hear anything but their own sufferings in a sort of narcissism of pain (Ignatieff, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> What should happen could be compared to the passage from the literary “work”, conceived as having a telos, a center, a privileged interpretation, an author, to “text”, a space where different meanings and voices coexist and intermingle (Barthes, 1994). The “civilization process” in the sphere of identity would imply the overcoming of hierarchies and establishing such a dialogical space of coexistence of identitarian strategies.

<sup>12</sup> For instance it is less important to know, whether ancient Macedonia has anything to do with modern Greeks or Macedonians. But the emotions that it provokes and the linguistic rituals that surround it (e.g. the taboos, the apparent disgust, the obligatory indignation, etc.) are certainly an essential part of those two national identities.

“very glorious deeds of the first in our race” (Paisii, 1972: 12). His principal enemies are not the Ottomans, but rather the Greeks, and to some extent the Serbs, who are said to mock Bulgarians for not having a history of their own. But one should not be ashamed to be Bulgarian and to speak one’s native tongue, as we too have had our glorious kings and even Greeks came to pay them tribute. It will be even more difficult for the intellectuals in Macedonia, that appeared on the map as late as 1945; they undertook the difficult task of bridging the gaps between the ancient kingdom of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC, the short rule of the Bulgarian king Samuel of the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> and their contemporary Socialist Yugoslav republic.

The Greek national revival presents one other example to be followed throughout the Balkans, which is the invention, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of an artificial language, purified of foreign imports and rather difficult to understand by the common man, that was supposed to prove the direct link between the prestigious antiquity and the poor modern Balkanic nation. The obstinacy in imposing the “katharevousa” reached its climax during the dictatorship of the colonels (1967-1974), which finally discredited the undertaking and brought about the officialization of the “demotiki” (“popular”) as late as 1976.

Language reform was as important to Romanian intellectuals and political elites who, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century discovered their roots in the Roman empire that had occupied Dacia for as short a period as a century and a half. In fact the only link they had to it was the romanized language they spoke, so changing the alphabet from Cyrillic to the Roman script, replacing Slavonic in the Church service by Latin and purging Slav words (the reform took place officially in 1859). The emblematic national historian Nicolae Iorga would argue in the 20s, that Slav influences are “superficial”, you could well speak Romanian hardly ever using Slavic words (Iorga, 1923: 11). The ideological sense of this creation of a “oriental latinity” is to well distinguish the not quite consolidated national identity from the one of the Balkan competitors.

Late differentiation though language from above remains a permanent trait of the region. Let us note that when the new Bulgarian state adopted its official language in 1879, it chose the eastern dialects that are the most removed from Serbian; when the official Macedonian was established in 1945, it was based on the most “autochthonous” Western dialects, rather than the northern ones, similar to the neighboring Serbian, or the eastern ones, gradually shading into Bulgarian.<sup>13</sup> With the remarkable exception of Serbo-Croatian, promoted by the artisans of Yugoslavism, centrifugal linguistic forces have always been stronger than centripetal ones. (Let us note that one of the first results of the breakup of Yugoslavia was the publication, in Croatia, of a “Dictionary of differences”, helping patriots to use the words and expressions that would differentiate them from their eastern neighbors.)

Let us also note that the empire itself repeated the pattern of nation inventing of its former provinces in what might seem an accelerated-motion pace. The Kemalist revolution, aiming at transforming the rests of the Ottoman empire into a modern nation-state, would not miss the occasion to develop, in the 30s the “Turkish history thesis”, arguing that Turks had contributed to civilization long before Ottoman times, as well to launch the search for ancient ancestors among peoples like the Hittites. This imaginary activity was accompanied by the break away from Arabic script and the introduction of a Latin alphabet, adapted to the Turkish language. A linguistic theory was developed about the so-called the “sun-language” a kind of pure Turkish, close to the contemporary vernacular and free of all Arabic and Persian imports, was said to be an ancient language, that had played a central role in the development of civilization.

A number of similarities in this regional pattern of identity-construction seem worthwhile considering. For instance, the tendency to “privatize” historic heritage and fight over it with neighbors. National identity becomes some kind of competition, as differentiation takes place on the universal scene of desire, established by modernity. On the other hand, young nations without uninterrupted traditions tend to consider heritage as conspicuous source of prestige rather than cultural effort and self-limitation. This makes competition even more ferocious, as everyone is in a similar position (political will, state institutions, intellectual activity...) with respect to the identity emblems the content of which is of lesser interest. The Balkans have become notorious with the symbolic wars over heritage. Alexander the Great is disputed between Macedonia and Greece<sup>14</sup>, Cyrille and Methodius – between Greece, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia, the Thracian culture – between Bulgaria and Romania, etc.

Most of these emblems of identity have but little relation to the present local cultural practices and are the product of the big western Other’s desire. We can illustrate this by the story of the reinvention of the Olympic games. The passionate lecture of the German professor Curtius on the question came to the knowledge of the rich merchant Zappas, who thought it was a good idea to try to revive the games. King Otto I was also interested of doing something about the image of the poor country he had found himself in. But there was no real tradition of modern sport and competition in Greece at the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first couple of games were a disaster. When the baron Coubertin started to work for the establishing of modern international Olympic games, he nevertheless faced a stubborn resistance on the part of the Greeks who saw the trademark of the games as their property. Finally the event was negotiated in the format we have it today: Greece has a

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<sup>13</sup> The imaginary part of the operation consisted in the claim that modern Macedonian was the legitimate heir of the old Slavonic dialect that had been spoken around Thessalonika and that was supposed to be the language of the saint brothers Cyril and Methodius, on which the Slavonic Church service would be based.

<sup>14</sup> As well as the name of Macedonia itself, considered, by Greeks, to be an essential part of their identity foundation.

particular place in the symbolic arrangement (fire comes from Olympus, Greek athletes march in first), but the organization, financing and participation is international.

In the same way one could ask in what way modern Romania is influenced by their Dacian ancestors, what is the link between the ancient Hittites and the nation-state of Kemal, or where in modern Albania one could see a trace of the noble Illyrians. Troy would not have been discovered by the Turks, who did not care a damn about it, nevertheless it has become since a powerful symbolic resource for the country. In a way, antiquity is like oil: a western company discovers it, then young nation-states nationalize it and start selling it back to the West.

The superficial character of the production of national “identity kits” is of course a universal phenomenon; as Herzfeld - interpreting Anderson - has it, national identity is iconic, it presupposes the passage from a social relation to icon, from something more complex to something simpler (Herzfeld, 1997, 1992; Anderson, 1983). In fact, simplification is an essential aspect of identification: in order to “handle” – through metonym and metaphor - the complex other ego reduces him/her to what Freud called the unique trait (*einzigiger Zug*) designing the way in which his patient Dora identified unconsciously to her father in imitating his cough (Freud, 1997). The other aspect of this is the well-known paradox of memory: you have to forget in order to remember<sup>15</sup>, memory is necessarily a rearrangement of the past, an introduction of hierarchies, of repressing and glorifying. On the Balkans, those two universal aspects of identity-formation are enforced by a very speedy “catch-up-with-Europe” modernization from above, as well as by the traumatic character of nation-building itself having to cope with several centuries of stateless survival-oriented existence under the Ottomans and with the foreign interventions, having been necessary to create practically all the modern states in the region. The result is the substitution of proximity by remoteness. The immediate past of the centuries inside the Ottoman Empire, that has shaped profoundly the entire life and culture of the region, is repressed, and the icon of some distant ages of glory are invested with national pride<sup>16</sup> even if their link to the present is often problematic. This same psychosocial pattern is repeated each time some other “shameful” period of history is left behind and new political elites enter the public scene. For instance, decommunization in Bulgaria started by doing away if not banishing 45 years of cultural production and coming back to prewar “golden” years.

The other particularity already hinted at is what we might call the Byronic complex: the predominant role of foreign gaze and approval in the construction of identities. The complex of indebtedness to the West is being constantly turned upside-down, so that there is no nation in the region, which would not have, at one moment, produced some idea on what they have *given* to the world and civilization. This is due to the ambiguous character of the gift itself<sup>17</sup>, which is not only an object of desire but also a menace. Gifts have to be returned, as debt is one of the accessories of power. Nevertheless, some of them - like the gift of life as the one from parents to children - are impossible to return and become the backbone of the traditional ideology of domination. By the same token, the gift of national sovereignty done by the Great powers to the Balkan peoples - even before they have constituted themselves as subjects of their own history! - becomes a symbolic burden. Paying back those geopolitical benefactors by obedience only prolongs this state of symbolic submission. A radical way to escape from it and nullify debt is to invent a *preceding* gift that reduces the generous foreign gesture to a mere payback. Thus, if Greece was the cradle of civilization Europe merely pays back its duty by helping it recreate its state. If Russia was civilized and christianized through the gift of Cyrillic alphabet and writings, it was simply obliged to liberate the Slav nations in the Balkans.<sup>18</sup>

The strategy of debt-inventing, launched by the Greek national revival, when philhellene committees for the support of the Greek national cause were disseminated throughout Europe, has thrived ever since. Its usefulness could be illustrated by the debate over Greek accession to the EC, in 1980, when in the British Parliament an official of Foreign office said, Greek entry would be seen as “fitting repayment by Europe of today of the cultural and political debt we all owe to Greek heritage almost 3 thousand years old” (Clogg, 1992: 2). In the same vein, post-communist discourse underlines the obligation of the West to help Eastern Europe, because it abandoned it at Yalta. (“Nice restores the historical injustice of Yalta” declared Bulgarian Prime minister after the summit having affirmed EU enlargement 11.12.2000). After NATO’s bombardment of Serbia, it has become a common place to say that the West is bound to reconstruct the country; i.e. all future help was in anticipation interpreted as payback, rather than gift.

Geopolitical dependence makes of foreign approval the basic factor for the legitimizing internal political, economic or cultural positions. The consequence is a general split of attitudes towards the West and the division of intelligentsia into

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. for instance Auge, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> The Greek for this: *ethnikos egoismos*.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ditcher, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> After the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-29, Serbia became an internationally recognized autonomous principality under Turkish suzerainty and Russian protection. Bulgaria acquired the same statute after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878. Consider the following schoolbook verse by the 19<sup>th</sup> century national poet of Bulgaria Ivan Vazov: “We too have given something to the world, to all Slavs, an alphabet so that they could read”. All terms of this proposition are obviously ideological constructions: who are *we*? (Bulgarian nation is projected back into the 9<sup>th</sup> century), what means “given”? (the creation of the alphabet was commissioned by the Byzantine authorities), etc.

Indigenists and Westerners<sup>19</sup>, a phenomenon that has been best observed in the first state to be modernized by force and from above, Russia. One less obvious effect of this split on the level of the imaginary is a strange coexistence of some deadly seriousness about national heritage and its reified into cheap mass products for quick consumption by tourists.<sup>20</sup> This schizophrenic state of affairs is to be seen, for instance, with respect to orthodox Christianity: on one hand, it is being cherished even by non-believers and ferociously defended against all criticism and comparison, on the other, monasteries are transformed into hotels and souvenir selling centers.<sup>21</sup>

This split is to be seen in the overall relation to heritage. Throughout the Balkans you have two completely separated itineraries of tourism: one for foreigners, the other for nationals<sup>22</sup>. Thus in Istanbul Turkish groups of schoolchildren, soldiers and retired pay tribute to the neobaroque Dolmabahçe palace, symbol of modern statehood, whereas foreign tourists line up to see the harem of the ancient Topkapi; in Athenes the Parthenon attracts pilgrims from all around the world, whereas the patriotic war-museum is of interest mainly to local visitors. In this schizophrenic split between the “convertible” value of ancient heritage and modern history, used only to for the purpose of national education, a third point is about to develop: the one of Orthodox/Byzantine heritage. Being of less curiosity to western tourists (Byzantium also seems have a slightly negative connotation in Catholic cultures), such sites represents an enormous interest for other visitors from orthodox countries, and especially the rich “new Russians” in search for cultural origins. The industry of “religious tourism” looks thus for alternative strategies of occupying the place of the other’s desire.

Modernity can be defined as a culture that allows itself to *chose* among ancestors: Plato or the fathers of the Church? Imitate the ancients or the moderns? Follow Germanic or classical mythology? The more distant the ancestors are, the easier it is to use them in the present. In the Balkans, it was again the Greeks that set the example in playing upon the different keyboards of the past: Athens when it came to legitimize democracy, Sparta when military rule or dictatorship was looking for identitarian roots in the past; antiquity when seducing the West, Byzantium, when addressing Russia. In the same way the Romanian intelligentsia since the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been divided between the Latinist and the Dacianist tendencies, that is between the emphasis put on the supposed Roman or Dacian origins of the Romanian nation. As an example, the growing isolation of Ceausescu’s regime would be accompanied with a rise of the Dacian indigenist tendencies.<sup>23</sup>

In Bulgaria the official pillars of identity are three. The Protobulgarians are warriors, having defeated the superpower Byzantium and established a state on its land in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Their singularity makes them a perfect emblem of nationalists, sovereignists, irredentists and the like. The national pantheon represents the Slavs as industrious, egalitarian, freedom-loving people, useful in times of pro-Russian orientation or construction of socialism<sup>24</sup>. The Thracian ancestors (ancient, wise, peaceful) were canonized as late as the 70s, maybe not without some relation to the new orientation towards peaceful coexistence and the need of recognition from the West (cf. Iliev, 1998). This heritage is imaginary, as it is difficult to see what influence on modern Bulgarian culture has been produced by the Protobulgarian khans. Its ideological function is to break the continuity of the real cultural tradition, inherited of the Byzantine and Ottoman empires<sup>25</sup>. Such break, essentially political in its nature, seems to be at the core of collective identities (Laclau, 1994); it is difference that founds identity.

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The identitarian eroticism is most obvious in national-stereotype jokes, quite developed in such multicultural area as the Balkans. And if communism transposed national stereotyping onto the Comecon space<sup>26</sup>, within the Yugoslav federation it never lost its impact. There was also a more somber, “political” (or shall we say politico-paranoid) dimension of this. The loudly promoted brotherly relations between the republics were unofficially interpreted in terms of who-owes-what and who-

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<sup>19</sup> For Romania, see Verdery, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> All countries from the region have started to develop the tourist industry since the 60s, the only exception being Albania, which started opening up to the world as late as 1992.

<sup>21</sup> On the road from Sofia down to Greece you see a big advertisement “icon” of the Christ-Redeemer, with a flesh underneath pointing to the temple behind and saying in Bulgarian and Greek: “Church souvenirs, 50 meters.”

<sup>22</sup> In most of those countries, the entrance in museums is different for locals and foreigners, the latter being asked to pay several times more.

<sup>23</sup> Ceausescu’s indigenous anti-Slav nationalism, backing his political declarations and ensuring him large popular support, was generously awarded by the West. Romania was admitted to the GATT in 1971, to the IMF in 1972, obtained trade preferences from the EC and the status of most favored nation from the US in 1973. (Cf. Verdery, 1991, 1996)

<sup>24</sup> A couple of decades before the liberation of country, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Russian slavophile Iuri Venelin encourages the Bulgarians to gather historical and ethnographical evidence for their Slav origin, as at that time Russian public opinion was modeled by Karamzine, who thought they were Tatars; and this would certainly not favor a Russian intervention on their behalf (Venelin, 1942).

<sup>25</sup> Byzantine heritage accounts for Christian-orthodox tradition, the Ottoman one has deeply marked all aspects of everyday life.

<sup>26</sup> It was after the breakup of the Comecon Balkan that stereotyping has begun to reappear.

exploits-whom: was it the rich (like Slovenia) who helped the poor (like Macedonia) by the redistribution of national product, or is it the undeveloped who are exploited by the industrialized through an unequal exchange? The pseudo-dissident Memorandum of the Serbian academy of Science (1986), having become a milestone in the rise of nationalism, is a testimony of such “we-give-more-than-we-take” phantasm.<sup>27</sup>

National identities are closely linked to what Goffman (1982)<sup>28</sup> calls “team-performance”. In the Balkans, a very high level of solidarity is expected of the national in front of foreigners when questions of symbolic importance to the imagined community are approached. Under communism and the different Balkan dictatorships the act of “presenting a bad image of the country” was often considered to be a crime and could be punished by prison or reeducation camp. After the change in the 80-s the pressure on the individual was obviously diminished, but did not disappear. It could be best observed in the cases of the sacred taboos, that each Balkan national culture has imposed upon itself and that produce the linguistic rituals of belonging or not-belonging. The name “Republic of Macedonia” should not be pronounced by a real Greek, a Bulgarian should deny the existence of a Macedonian language, a Turk should never admit the occurrence of the Armenian genocide<sup>29</sup>, etc.

Pushing the other into some presumed identity is not only an aesthetic activity; on the Balkans it has a political pretension. In declaring one’s eastern neighbor hopelessly Balkanic, Orthodox, Moslem the national ideologue seems to throw away ballast and come closer to the heavens of modernity, currently called “Europe”. Thus the dissolution of former Yugoslavia has often been seen as motivated by the promise of “entering” Europe. Seeing Euro-modernity as a *telos*, nations interpret identity construction as a kind of competition, expressing thus the deep ambivalence of the process of identification.<sup>30</sup> The tacit resistance to regional cooperation, stated as prerequisite for foreign aid in the 90s is another example of such ambivalent identification. On one hand, the individual countries are afraid to be tucked away in Balkan identity<sup>31</sup>, on the other, they seem to feel modernization to be some kind of zero sum game where there are, by definition, winners and losers. Along with the numerous examples of the age of classical nation-statehood, the rivalry between Bulgaria and Romania, two candidate countries for membership of the EU, has been astonishing: the Bulgarian government invested its entire energy to be dissociated from such coupling. In December 2000, when the Council of ministers announced the future abolishment of visas for Bulgaria, no one tried to hide their joy of the fact that “we are ahead of Bucharest”. On the other hand, the democratic turn in Serbia was meet in Sofia not without some anguish: “they will get now all the attention from the West”; some observers suggested that Serbia will be now added to our Balkan package and “we shall have to move on together with it”.

If we want to play on words we could say that the surest sign of Balkan identity is the resistance to Balkan identity. The nation-builders of the region devote themselves to breaking away from regional culture; thus Iorga will affirm that “The Romanians are more neighbors to Paris than to Belgrade and Sofia” (Iorga, 1923: 10). The more distant and imaginary the ancestors (Illyrians, Dacians, Hittites...), the easiest it is to create the myth of absolute autochthony and dissociate yourself from the regional context<sup>32</sup>. In fact, the markers of national identity are produced as if mainly to be presented to the big western Other, who is supposed to adjudge you are better than the rest. If borders are drawn by foreign politicians and generals, it will be foreign public opinion that will appreciate the “progress” made by the individual countries and draw the lines between national cultures.

In other words the intentional self-invention is directed towards “catching up with historical delay” in the process of modernization; since the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Balkan countries have been desperately trying to negotiate an image of rapid change, compliance to standards and the acquisition of all attributes of European nation-states. (This could explain Todorova’s accurate observation that, if the Orient has been constructed as the irreducible Other, the Balkans have internalized the position of bridge, crossroads, region condemned to eternal transition; Todorova, 1997.)

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<sup>27</sup> Serbs are said to be exposed to “genocide” in Kosovo, to be unjustly accused of being “oppressors, centralists, and policemen” even though “they had borne the greatest sacrifices”, Serbia’s economy to be subjected to unfair terms of trade” (Memorandum, 1995: 119, 122-3, 120).

<sup>28</sup> Even if he does not actually use the term identity, Goffman could be useful understanding the complex way in which one’s social “character” is the result of the interaction of fact, cultural convention, conscious and unconscious performance and reception/interpretation on the part of the other. One’s socio-cultural mask is permanently negotiated, it is part of his/her relations to others.

<sup>29</sup> A couple of years ago a Turkish patriot designed a virus that got activated whenever you typed the expression “Armenian genocide” on your computer and destroyed your hard disk.

<sup>30</sup> Freud writes in 1923 that “the identification with the father acquires a hostile coloring, and starts to look like a desire to replace him so that the boy takes his place besides the mother”. This ambivalent character of identification is there since the very beginning, as it is a further the development of the oral organization of the libido that assimilates the object in destroying it (Freud, 1953-1966).

<sup>31</sup> Two examples of refusing to be part of the Balkans were given by the presidents Tujman and Constantinescu.

<sup>32</sup> One aspect of this is the voluntary neglect for the other. “Nationalism is the transformation of identity into narcissism... Nationalist language – speaking about oneself rather than the others... The problem, to use H.M. Enzensberger’s useful term, is *autism*: groups so enclosed in their own circle of self-righteous victimhood, or so locked into their own myths or rituals of violence, that they can’t listen, can’t hear, can’t learn from anybody outside themselves. [What frightens is the] “you don’t understand” aspect of identity politics” (Ignatieff, 1994: 69, 97).

The strategic goal of national high cultural productions<sup>33</sup> is to create discontinuity and well distinguish each national culture from its neighbors. (In the Balkans, more than anywhere else, comparatism is a political engagement!) As elsewhere in the world, this contrasts with the relative homogeneity of everyday culture that does not stop at state frontiers. Throughout the region one will find the same way of making coffee or burek, of playing music or belly-dancing, of swearing or bodily behavior. This dramatic clash of, what has been called “identity-from-above” and “identity-from-bellow”<sup>34</sup> is maybe the most characteristic side of the region. In fact, high culture is constructed precisely in the process of repressing all traces of local culture considered as degrading, oriental, body-centered, amorphous etc. Such sort of self-disciplining that national elites like best to offer to the gaze of the western Other. It is through binary tension between presentable and shameful aspects that we could understand identitarian constructions.<sup>35</sup> The official high norm is to be understood in its dynamic tension with what it represses, norm and transgression form one system and presuppose each other.

What makes the erotics of identity even more complicated is that the standards imposed by that foreign gaze are changing. Thus, besides the different *objects* of national desire there is the periodical change of the *rule of the game* itself producing those objects. Those changes could be classified into three big waves of modernization.

Historically first, came the desire to catch up with the rest of the *civilized peoples* by founding national institutions: real - as parliaments, armies, opera houses, and museums; imaginary - as prestigious ancestors, national literature (possibly recognized internationally by a Nobel prize laureate), linguistic and folkloristic homogeneity. After World War I the world changed; it was now the *developed states* that launched a model of industrialization, urbanization and mass culture, but also of ideological purity generating a whole range of regimes, starting from the extreme right of Metaxas and Antonescu and ending with Hoxha's orthodox Stalinism. The third wave came about in the 80s with the neo-liberal world of Thatcher and Reagan and culminated in the fall of the Berlin wall. All of a sudden the poor Balkan nations had to take one more turn: development and smoking factories had become obsolete and national homogeneity started to be seen with a bad eye by international institutions concerned with things like human rights. The aspiration towards the standards of the *normal countries* was no longer motivated by the wish to be free or to produce like them, but to consume like they do.<sup>36</sup>

In this new world, the binary tension producing the effect of identity tends to be reversed; the universal and the particular seem to have changed places - the culture of chronic deficit of modern universality<sup>37</sup> is replaced by one of chronic demand of the local and particular. The shameful multiethnic character of the region, inherited of the Ottoman millet system, has curiously become a symbolic resource.<sup>38</sup> Cities like Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Sarajevo or Plovdiv host international institutions, conferences, or simply tourists by staging their multicultural tradition; in the web-presentation of Bucharest the leading metaphor of “rhapsody” is used to suggest the free intermingling of peoples, cultures and traditions. Multiculturalism is pushed to what Goffman called the “front”, as the Western sponsors and protectors have started to see it as something authentic and valuable; national homogeneity is repressed into the “back” of identity, as it is being seen as linked to arbitrary violence and selfishness. Strategies of self-representation start to change directions: it is no longer based on the universal breaking away from the particular, but on the aestheticized local resisting to the impersonal global.

The change, that has affected the entire planet, is again to be felt strongest in the Balkans, where identity is conceived as a natural resource attracting foreign geopolitical “investors”. Victimary capitals (post-communist countries, then Bosnia, Kosovo) are moneyed on the media market; thus it was the bloody succession of wars in former Yugoslavia that changed the attitude towards the region, obliging the EU to adopt a quicker procedure of integrating it, developing the Stability pact for financial aid, etc. Modernist figures of universalism, having come out of the region like Ionesco, Kristeva or Angelopoulos are being replaced by exclusive resellers of local color like Ismail Kadare, Goran Bregovic or Emir Kusturitsa. As to economy, the brief attempt at industrialization is rapidly abandoned in the post-modern era assigning the region to develop the sectors of leisure, cuisine, exoticism. Heroic modernization sacrificing the particular to the universal does no longer interest anyone: instead the foreign gaze will privilege all that was repressed before, specificity. And if it did not exist, we would have to invent it.

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<sup>33</sup> Even folklore, largely used under communism, can be considered as part of such high national culture, as it was the result of a rigorous politics of observation, filtering, control if not invention of practices supposed to create the desired image of the people's artistic genius.

<sup>34</sup> Cornel West, 1992: 20-23.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Herzfeld, 1992. We could also apply the Goffmanian terms of “front” and “back” in describing national identities (Goffman, 1982).

<sup>36</sup> “Previously identity forming was based on family and work, now it is based on consumption” (Dunn, 1998: 64).

<sup>37</sup> Where identity could be seen as “a reservoir of civilization deficiencies” (Kiossev, 1998: 12).

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