GREECE AND THE BALKANS

Identities, Perceptions and Cultural Encounters since the Enlightenment

edited by
DIMITRIS TZIOVAS

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Chapter 18

Must We Keep Talking about "the Balkans"?

Vassilis Lambropoulos*

Is there anything to say about the Balkans today? Undoubtedly, a lot has been published about the region in the last few years. Journalists like James Pettifer have described its ethnic variety; historians like Mark Mazower its evolution since the decline of the Ottoman Empire; commentators like Misha Glenny its ethno-religious complexities; travellers like Robert Kaplan its internal conflicts; political scientists like Samuel Huntington its socio-cultural identity; intellectual historians like Maria Todorova and cultural critics like Vesna Goldsworthy its discursive invention and circulation; and philosophers like Slavoj Žižek its phantasmic image.

At this point, most academic and highbrow writers seem to agree on a few basic points: that the idea of the Balkans is a relatively recent geo-political construct; that the borders of the area are elusive and represent an imaginary mapping; that Western talk about the Balkans has been a form of intra-European Orientalism; that within the Balkans nobody admits to being Balkan but thinks that everyone else is; and that a better understanding of the region has a lot to teach the post-Cold War multicultural world. Given this broad consensus, is there anything to say about the Balkans—that is, not about the local people and cultures but the Balkans as such?

If your audience is comprised of those who report for the media or write for think tanks, those who work for governments or advise them on policy, or those who make global economic or religious decisions, then the answer is an unqualified "Yes". For the complex and measured views of most of the writers mentioned above need to be disseminated among members of the so-called "international community", who often lack the expertise, experience, or insight of those who look at the larger picture and who have studied the history and languages of the region. Indeed, and to the extent that the Balkans remain a focal point of tension and concern in international

^{*} I am grateful to Katherine Fleming, Petros Haritatos, Gail Holst, Gregory Jusdanis, Yannis Karavidas, Artemis Leontis, Peter Murphy, and Dimitris Tziovas for their challenging comments.

relations, peace, and justice, those who address policy makers and reporters still have a lot of work ahead of them in order to present a fair picture of the area's past and present, and to avoid two-dimensional views like those of Kaplan and Huntingon influencing decision making. But for the rest of us who are not aspiring to engage directly with the policy community, is there anything to say about "the Balkans", other than repeat the charge that they represent an orientalizing ideological construct?

Greece and the Balkans

We know that certain regions have appealed to the imagination of the world and assumed figurative power. For example, in this regard, there is not a lot to say about Scandinavia, sub-Saharan Africa, or Central Asia while, by contrast, there is a lot to be said about Central Europe, the Caribbean, and the Far East. This does not mean that the first three areas lack cultural, strategic, or economic significance. It means that the others have greater explanatory potential in that, beyond their own regional importance, they can be used in a variety of ways (symbolic, allegorical, interpretive, etc.) to illuminate situations that are geographically or historically removed from their own.

Take an example from the Balkan neighbourhood. Over the centuries, the Mediterranean has acquired the status of an important analytical tool as it has been often used figuratively (as a model, analogy, parallel, etc.) in the examination of other parts of the world. To be sure, there is an imaginary Mediterranean of fiction, travel, painting, music, or decoration. But there is also a reflective Mediterranean one discovers in essays, treatises, speculations, philosophical representations, and scholarly rumination. Because this latter Mediterranean is reflective, it is also transportable and adaptable to other places and times, and can help us make better sense of them. Mediterraneanness is a distinct quality many have tried to define as well as attribute to other sites and phenomena. The same can be said about the Caribbean and the Far East but not Scandinavia. Although the latter has produced a wealth of artistic imagery and cultural fantasy (together with an interesting model of social democracy), it has not provoked the kind of general reflection that elevates a particular place to a topos, a space broadly available for shared rumination and deliberation. People continue to enjoy visiting Scandinavia but not reckoning with it.

The same applies to the Balkans. People refer to them, travel to them, investigate them, chronicle them but do not claim that they are learning something positive about the human condition from them, something that can be generalized, applied or appropriated elsewhere. The only Balkan idea in circulation, the only view of the Balkans that has acquired discursive currency, is "balkanization", which refers to the centrifugal dissolution of a region and the division among its antagonistic entities. There is no Balkanness. The idea of the Balkans is coterminous with that of their locus no matter how that may be defined. In the end, the Balkans remains a location, a static concept. This is because the Balkans have not found their way into

any speculative genres such as the essay, the meditation, the philosophical poem, or art criticism.

One major reason is that, in contrast, say, to the Caribbean or Central Europe, local intellectuals and artists have not made a concerted effort to abstract their region from its special history and place, and give it some transcendent significance. They have illustrated its uniqueness but never proposed why this inimitable uniqueness should be of interest to anyone other than the natives and the specialists. Slavoj Žižek, Julia Kristeva, and Nicos Mouzelis have not done for the Balkans what Franz Fanon did for the Maghreb, Édouard Glissant for the Caribbean, Edward Said for the Arab world, Milan Kundera for Central Europe, Amartya Sen for South East Asia, or Carlos Fuentes for Latin America. Not that they should. But if they do not perceive a larger entity and meaning, why should anyone else? It seems that in the Balkans the strong interest in the material and the concrete has not been willing or able to surpass the mountainous horizon.

Interestingly, the same can be said about intellectuals from outside the Balkans, even those with the friendliest and most enlightened dispositions. Over the last three centuries we have been admonished by writers of all persuasions to become more Hellenic, Roman, Hebraic, American, or Japanese in our manners, thoughts, or beliefs. Nobody has proposed becoming more Balkan, even if they thought that we needed to understand the region's history better or respect its singularity more. People may be drawn to the region by curiosity, profit, or plunder but not by philosophy. That is why we do not have a theory of the Balkans. In that sense, there is nothing to say about the Balkans except, obviously, how inimitably,

stubbornly, self-destructively Balkan they are.

But why is there no Balkan theory of either native or foreign origin? One simple explanation is that for both Balkan and non-Balkan alike there is no such thing as the Balkans to be surveyed, theorized, and elaborated. And of course, neither is there a rule saying that all places should be treated this way. However, one would think that, for a place that has been so heavily interpreted, decoded, and reinscribed for over a century, theory would be at least one form of intellectual resistance. The causes of its absence may lie deeper. In order to have a theory, you need access to a port city. You need the flow of the open water that can take you elsewhere, give you a critical distance, and bring you back. You need the vistas of the river or the sea that entice you with other shores and other flows. The port city unfolds a world that is cosmopolitan in that it entertains multiple reasons and overlapping routes. Its level is commensurate with the human measure. Height may provide panoramas but not prospects; outlook but not vision. There is a common perception that mountains afford the best views. The Balkans belie this perception. The panorama of the mountain obstructs the view and hinders theory because it bespeaks origin, descent, independence but its pledge is entirely indigenous and local.

Within the age-old Balkan search for identity there has been a fierce struggle going on between the port and the hilltop, the sea and the mountain, the stream and the land. Sometimes the flow prevails and it draws into its currents entire communities looking for knowledge, justice, or measure. At other times, the roots prevail and they comfort networks of villages with a sense of stability, continuity, and autochthony. And at other times still, when people are no longer content with their locality but are still scared of the stream, they build bridges to create a terrestrial flow, one that can take them across rivers from one hill to the next.

It is because most of the time the mountain has dominated the Balkans, casting its dark shadow on the cities, that the aquatic horizon has become narrow and gray, if not inaccessible, and the theoretical view impossible. Not that the Balkans lacks ports. This is far from the case, as everyone well knows. Many of the region's extraordinary cities used to be open to the drifts of the world as trade, music, religion, ethnicity, and performance travelled from shore to shore and appealed to eager audiences. Those cities were awash with culture, commerce, and communication. But then gradually the land took over. Urban energy was directed more to history, origins, church, and folklore. The citizen became first a local and later a native. Representation took priority over administration, aesthetics over politics. Finally, people began speaking in a single language, one they considered their own.

Above all, art was called upon to serve this dramatic transformation and give expression to the new distinct identity as travelling players were replaced by national theatres. The genres and discourses of aesthetics were mobilized to capture and depict the natural beauty and fierce independence of the mountains, the sublime summit of heritage. And that they did with passionate eloquence and great distinction while at the same time often questioning their new-found role and doubting the authenticity of the panoramic view. Both trends are still evident in Balkan cinema or fiction, to mention two representative examples that have won international recognition.

This is not to blame nation-formation, independence movements, the Ottoman past, the bourgeoisie of the periphery, or any other particular phenomenon for the distinct Balkan isolationism. The people of the region grappled with the challenges of modernity in brave and sometimes original ways. As some commentators have noted, their struggles prefigure tortuous processes of modernization elsewhere in the world and have not lost their urgency. The goal of this description is not to point a finger, although this too needs to be done soon, but rather to take a first, phenomenological overview of the situation as it appears to those who are puzzled by the absence of a Balkan philosophical position.

Artistic achievements in the area have been many and varied, especially in literature and film. They have also reached an appreciative audience beyond geographical and linguistic borders. But where is Balkan criticism? literary

theory? aesthetics? ethics? feminism? post-colonialism? scholarship in the human and the social sciences? What kind of outside audience have they reached? It seems that their concerns as well as distribution have remained intractably local, or rather, to be more precise, Balkan. They have crossed borders and have attracted interlocutors but only within the region. Recently, Balkan conferences, workshops, fora, prizes, exchanges, and the like have multiplied. Cultural and academic co-operation among the neighbouring countries has flourished. Still, it has remained a regional phenomenon with no outside impact as participants try to find out from each other whether there is a Balkan quality that they share or pursue together. The Balkan rivers seem to have lost their way to the sea.

Outside interest has been correspondingly limited. Despite appreciation for Balkan arts, there have been no major theoretical or philosophical statements arguing for an extended, paradigmatic significance of the region, even by those who portray it as a victim of Western and/or Eastern imperialism. Nobody has discovered in it some relevance worthy of outside notice. The Balkans is not understood as part of a world historical entity woven into a civilizational canvas from which lessons about the human condition can be derived because the canvas supersedes the region. The significance of the place is that of an instance (usually a negative one), not of a measure; that of a limit, not a compass; that of division, not connection. This is, again, because the Balkan formation in circulation everywhere is inward-looking, land-based, liberation-driven. It is activated by dreams of deliverance, not programmes of governance. The Balkans constitute a place, not a project. To that extent, right now there is nothing to say about the Balkans.

There was, of course, a period in distant memory when things looked very different. During the rich Balkan Enlightenment, nomoscopic questions of governance, philosophical issues of public virtue, political explorations of autonomy, and architectural arrangements of urban life gained remarkable prominence. That treasure house of civic practice, aesthetic inquiry, legal theory, and moral essay has been revisited sporadically over the years by intellectuals and other small communities in need of alternative sources and models. It might be beneficial to take another look at that lost legacy, this time, though, in a more systematic manner. For example, as a first step, a coordinated endeavour to print or reprint major documents of the era might be worth the effort.

Aside from that, however, at least at this juncture in time, there may be no point in talking about the Balkans in terms other than that of ideology critique—that is, in order to criticize and take apart dominant representations of the idea in the arts, media, policies, and cultural geographies. The only thing we can do with the Balkans is dismantle them. Those interested in constructive approaches might instead turn their attention away from what keeps people in the same place to what makes

them travel and mingle; away from borders to flows; away from battlegrounds to ports; away from fidelity to liberty; and let the cultures of the long-suffering region sail the long-winded rivers and the navigable seas all around them. It may be time for the Balkan people to come down from their strongholds and contemplate the aquatic horizon again—time to practise theory, to reflect in foreign languages, to reactivate portal connections, to set foot on other shores. It is in order to inspire the Balkans to abandon destiny for destination, to dissolve themselves into the Herodotean journey, and discover theory for themselves that we must no longer talk about them.

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