



Maria Todorova. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xi + 257 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-508751-2; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-508750-5.

Reviewed by Gale Stokes (Rice University)
Published on HABSURG (September, 1997)



Imagining the Balkans

It is difficult to imagine a person more qualified to write a book on how terms related to the concept “Balkan” have entered common usage and achieved a certain meaning than Maria Todorova. Professor Todorova was born and brought up in Bulgaria, received a Ph.D. from Sofia University, lived in Greece, studied extensively in Moscow, Leningrad, Paris, and Oxford, speaks fluent German, and presently lives in the United States, where she works in English. In her book she cites sources in English, German, French, Bulgarian, Greek, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, and Russian, and perhaps some I missed. In other words, here is a person who has not only a good finger-tip feel for her native Balkans, but the training, linguistic ability, and intellectual firepower to provide a systematic and enlightening study of how the Balkans are imagined.

Contrary to what someone who had not read her previous work on the subject might initially expect, Todorova argues that Balkanism is not another form of Orientalism, as Milica Bakic-Hayden has proposed.[1] Her reasons are that 1) the Balkans are concrete, whereas the notion of “the Orient” is vague and intangible; 2) Orientalism is a refuge from the alienation of industrialization, a metaphor for the forbidden–feminine, sensual, even sexual. Balkanism, on the other hand, is not forbidden or sensual. It is male, primitive, crude, and disheveled; 3) Balkanism is a transitional concept, something not quite non-European, not a final dichotomy; 4) the self-perception of Balkan peoples is not colonial; 5) Orientalism posits Islam as the other, whereas Balkanism deals with Christian peoples; 6) Orientalism is funda-

mentally racist, categorizing non-white people, whereas Balkanism deals with whites; and 7) Balkan self-identity is itself created against an oriental other.

Having solidly made this point, Todorova goes on to chronicle the emergence of the idea of Balkan, both as a concept of outsiders and as a self-perception of insiders. Her chapters progress in a logical and orderly fashion from the discovery of the Balkans in the early modern period, through varied patterns of perception in the nineteenth century, to the twentieth century invention of “Balkan” and “Balkanization” as negative categories, *schimpfwoerter*, as she calls them. Along the way she provides numerous insights into the construction of categories. For example, she proposes that the discovery of the Balkan Slavs as an oppressed people in the mid to late nineteenth century by British travelers was related to the Victorian discovery of the poor. This suggestive observation is related to two broad patterns of perception she observes during the nineteenth century, the aristocratic and the bourgeois. The former, held early in the nineteenth century, particularly by British travelers, sympathized with the Ottoman ruling class and the power they represented. The bourgeois view tended to sympathize with the Balkan peoples, who were understood to be perhaps backwards, but having the potential, at least, of entering onto the linear highway of progress.

Todorova identifies several milestones in the invention of the Balkans. The most important is the early years of the twentieth century, when the term became associated with violence and political unrest. Events such as

the confusing Macedonian situation, the assassination of Alexander and Draga, the Bosnian crisis, assassinations in the Balkans, the Balkan Wars, and Gavrilo Princip provided the raw material for a perception of the Balkans as turbulent. Less clearly stated is the enormous role played in this perception by the arrogant and condescending temper of the imperialist times. Just at the time of these Balkan events, the imperial powers were at the height of their feeling of superiority to the colonial peoples. In this way there does seem to be a generic relationship between Balkanism and Orientalism, the creation of a stereotypical other. Todorova knows well that Orientalism and Balkanism are not simply “banal ethnocentrism,” as she puts it, but structural elements of expansionist capitalism as it exploded through the world. Nevertheless, she misses an opportunity to reinforce that point just at this crucial milestone in the development of the Balkan idea.

During the Cold War era, Balkanism moderated as the terms Eastern Europe and Southeastern Europe came into vogue. Todorova argues that the German form of the latter term was discredited during World War II, but she does not mention that in the postwar era it returned to respectability both in German (*Suedost Forschungen*, Suedost Institut) and in English (the journal *Southeastern Europe*, for example). During the 1980s, a second formerly discredited term, Central Europe, reemerged as a discursive competitor. Todorova understands “Central Europe” as a political phrase invented by certain intellectuals seeking a counterweight to the term Eastern Europe. They considered the latter designation pejorative because they considered “eastern” to refer to Russia and the Soviet Union, which they claimed had its own, unique historical trajectory that had little to do with their past. Obviously, this analysis grew, in significant measure, out of frustration with the Soviet domination of their countries. Todorova’s objection to the term is that whereas it may have been emancipatory for certain countries *from* Russia, it was not emancipatory *for* the Balkans, which were left entirely out of the discussion. For her “Central Europe” becomes an insidious concept propagated by “secular zealots” who “have excellently internalized the cultural code of politically correct liberalism” (p. 152), but in the process have posited the Balkans yet again as a peripheral other.

Todorova also argues, incorrectly I think, that the concept of Central Europe was not a region-building notion, and that “concrete cooperation failed to materialize” (p. 154). I think what she is referring to is the difficulty of getting intellectuals in various capital cities to interact with one another in a fruitful way, which may well

be true. But the creation of the Central European Free Trade Association, the Central European University, and many bi- and multilateral organizations show that more cooperation is going on now at the political and economic levels in Central Europe than ever before. This is not to say that Todorova is wrong about the dichotomizing function of the idea of Central Europe. The success of Slovenia’s strategy of redefining itself as Central European rather than Balkan demonstrates the community building power of the idea of Central Europe, but at the same time it validates Todorova’s point that the idea has formed itself in part against a Balkan other.

One of Todorova’s most powerful points concerns the Wars of Yugoslav Succession. These wars brought back Balkanism with a vengeance. Even though it was only the Yugoslavs who were involved in the war, journalists called them Balkan wars and restored the term “Balkanization” to its unfortunate preeminence. But Todorova persuasively argues that these wars, rather than invoking processes that are unique to the Balkans—“these people have been fighting each other for hundreds of years”—constitute instead the ultimate Europeanization of the peninsula. Homogenization has been a basic theme of European history, not just in post-French Revolutionary times, but from the crusades, the *reconquista*, the expulsion of Jews from England, and so forth. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the turning of peasants into Frenchmen, the unification of Germany and Italy, the Holocaust, the repositioning of Poland, and the recent hostility to immigrants suggest that the drive to create ethnically homogeneous states is not exclusively a Balkan phenomenon. Furthermore, as Todorova points out, consolidation and homogenization took place in Europe before democratization. The notion of a multicultural state, such as the Dayton accords are attempting to restore to Bosnia, is a very new idea, emblematic of American domination of the international arena and of tendencies of the past generation or so. Until recently, one of the most negative connotations of Balkanism was precisely the ethnic variety of the region, what Joseph Roucek called “the handicap of heterogeneity.”^[2] Middle class notions of order, regularity, and decorum saw ethnic confusion and disorder, not a desirable richness of tradition and cultures.

In the end, the prevalence of essentializing concepts like Balkanism come down to a question of power. People living in strong states sneer, as Todorova puts it, at those living in weak ones. At the same time, however, I think Todorova overdoes it when she argues that the “very existence of the different Balkan states was almost

exclusively regulated by great power considerations” (p. 109). No one would deny the fundamental importance of the great powers both in regulating the international position of the small Balkan states, nor in the enormous impact their political, cultural, and intellectual lives had on the region. But to completely deny any agency to these states is almost surely wrong. They came into existence by the exertions, sacrifices, and follies of many people who believed that they were doing something grand and important, and who in many ways were, whatever the disabilities under which they operated and the disappointments one might feel at some of the outcomes.

Actually, I doubt Todorova would disagree with that point, but the question illuminates one of the problems with her otherwise quite magnificent book—its tendency to overstate, especially when she disagrees with an analysis. Todorova is harshly critical of Samuel Huntington, for example, and his division of the world into competing cultural elements. For Todorova, the difference between a general Western Christianity and a putative Eastern Orthodoxy is not long-standing or theological but a recent construct of political science. This will surprise scholars who have dealt with the *filioque* question or the Council of Florence. If Todorova is suggesting that there is no such thing as a general Western Christianity or a homogeneous Eastern Orthodoxy, one can only agree, as can one with the indisputable fact that Orthodoxy is Christian, not Islamic. But to suggest that the theological difference between eastern and western versions of Christianity is somehow merely an invention of Toynbee and Huntington, presumably in the service of privileging a homogeneous notion of the West, flies in the face of centuries of difference. The *real* divide between Orthodoxy and western Christianity, Todorova argues, is not between cultures, but between rich and poor.[3] Rather than dealing with the problem of why, then, relatively undeveloped countries like Hungary, Croatia, and Slovakia are included within the western cultural camp, she reaches the “inescapable conclusion” that Huntington’s effort is only a mask to protect a rich man’s club. It is true that many have reached this conclusion, but in my view it does not square with the evidence nor with Huntington’s argument.

The final question Todorova’s book implicitly poses is very difficult: how might it be possible to write about difference? The linguistic turn of the past fifteen years, if pursued to its final conclusion, is a philosophy of despair. To totally accept the contingent and constructed quality of reality is to paralyze the writing of history. Todorova does not pursue this tack. She argues that contrasting in-

terpretations can be argued “in moderate and convincing fashion” (p. 165). “It is, of course, not the existence of difference and its depiction that is objectionable,” she writes further, “but how it is interpreted and harnessed in ideological models” (p. 173). But how is one to avoid an ideological model, or, in plainer English, a point of view? Is anything written without one? At the very least, if one is to speak at all, one must use generalizations. We don’t quibble over the use of the term “table,” even though we are aware of the vast varieties of objects that go under that name. But in today’s atmosphere, in which every ethnic, national, and regional term is suffused with an emotional charge, the stakes are much higher. Is there any way to use terms like “The West,” “Balkan,” “Central Europe,” or “Southeast Europe” sensibly, without being accused of implicitly “privileging” something? Or is there another way of speaking in broad terms about regional differences that is more sensitive, more indicative of an author’s realization that these terms contain multitudes? Sometimes, although not often in this book, accusations of “privileging” or “totalizing” or “essentializing” are simply clichés expressing the critic’s disapproval of this or that interpretive stance, offered without argument or proof, as if the accusation in itself is sufficient. But we have to take the chance and do the best we can, not succumbing to either the despair of meaninglessness or the clichés of self defense.

Oxford University Press published Todorova’s book not only because of its erudition, the timely nature of the questions it raises, and the skills of the author in presenting her views, but because they believed it might prove useful in the classroom. I think they were right. The book is full of challenging ideas, forcefully presented opinions, references for further reading, and enlightening observations. It should make for an exciting classroom experience.

Notes:

[1]. Milica Bakic-Hayden, *Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia*, *Slavic Review* 54, 4 (Winter, 1995), pp. 917-31; Internet: <http://ragnar.econ.uiuc.edu/~{ }slavrev/upenn/winter95/milica.html>.

[2]. Joseph S. Roucek, *Balkan Politics: International Relations in No Man’s Land* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1948), pp. 3, 7, as cited by Todorova.

[3]. If we go back to 1054, the traditional date given for the break between the Orthodox and Catholic churches, the rich/poor divide would actually be in the

opposite direction!

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if

proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBERG. For other permission, please contact <reviews@h-net.msu.edu> and <habsburg@ttacs6.ttu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

Citation: Gale Stokes. Review of Todorova, Maria, *Imagining the Balkans*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1320>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.